

‘CALCULATED TO STRIKE TERROR’:

THE AMRITSAR MASSACRE AND THE SPECTACLE OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE¹

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I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed and I consider this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral, and widespread effect it was my duty to produce, if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the casualties would be greater in proportion. *It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd;* but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.²

THIS IS HOW Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer explained the reasoning behind his order to fire at point-blank range into a large crowd of Indian civilians gathered in Amritsar, in the Punjab province of India, in April 1919. Britain had emerged victorious from the Great War only to be plunged into a global crisis that radically transformed the very nature of its empire. Unrest in India, Egypt, Ireland and Mesopotamia, and the opening of the Third Afghan War, coincided with a period of profound international destabilisation. In India, the continuation of repressive war-time measures, coercive recruitment practices and economic hardship, caused widespread disillusionment amongst the population in Punjab, many of whom had initially supported the British war-effort. In an attempt to stop the spread of nationalist protests and curb Gandhi’s emergent mass-movement, the British authorities arrested and deported two local nationalist leaders from Amritsar. This pre-emptive move on part of the authorities provoked widespread riots in the city during which scores of Indian protesters were shot down while five Europeans were lynched by angry crowds. A curfew was imposed, public gatherings banned, and order had been restored when, in the afternoon of 13 April, Dyer went to the walled enclosure known as the Jallianwala Bagh to disperse a mass gathering.³ An iconic episode, which bore more than a passing resemblance to a firing-squad on a massive scale, the shooting of hundreds of unarmed Indian civilians at Amritsar stands as a defining moment in the history of India and the British Empire.

Hailed as the event that galvanized the first major anti-colonial nationalist movement, and inexorably set Indian nationalists including Gandhi on the path towards independence, the Amritsar Massacre, however, remains but poorly understood. Similarly to Sharpeville or Bloody Sunday, the event itself has simply become a byword for colonial violence, usually encapsulated by formulaic reference to the 379 civilians killed and more than 1200 wounded by the 1650 bullets fired by the colonial troops over the duration of 10 minutes.⁴ In the recent mammoth-volume, *A World Connecting*, Charles S. Maier thus lists the massacre amongst the litany of

¹ This article has benefited from the comments and suggestions of a number of colleagues, including Jan-Georg Deutsch, Saul Dubow, Colin Jones, Will Jackson, Gavin Rand, Mark Condos, Gajendra Singh, John Pincince, Martin Thomas, Susan Pennybacker, Patrick Longson, and, as always, Julie Hartley. Also thanks to the editors and reviewers of AHR who pushed me to develop the argument considerably.

² Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer to the General Staff, 25 Aug 1919, in *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 203.

³ The most comprehensive account of the massacre remains Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London, 2005).

⁴ These are the official numbers and contemporary Indian estimates are considerably higher, see *Correspondence between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India on the Report of Lord Hunter’s Committee* (London, 1920), and *Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress, vol. I* (Lahore, 1920).

European colonial conflicts of the early twentieth century, describing how ‘General Reginald Dyer famously emptied his machine guns against assembled Indians at Amritsar in 1919’.⁵ This invocation of the massacre, merely as shorthand for colonial brutality, brings to mind Jordanna Bailkin’s poignant observation that ‘there is nothing more banal about colonial projects than their violence’. Making sense of colonial violence, however, is a different matter and this article seeks to understand its forms and functions, ‘rather than’, in Bailkin’s words, ‘simply taking it for granted’.⁶

In most scholarly works, the periodization of the Amritsar Massacre can similarly be said to be taken for granted in a *post hoc* manner. Usually assumed to have been the direct result of the global changes brought about by the First World War, the massacre is often taken as the starting point in studies of decolonization that focusses exclusively on the twentieth century and privileges change over continuity. In his renowned work on the ‘Wilsonian Moment’, for instance, Erez Manela includes a chapter titled ‘From Paris to Amritsar’, implying a more or less direct link between the 1919 Peace Conference and the events at Jallianwala Bagh – a connection that is never substantiated.⁷ In such accounts, the causes behind the massacre are identified exclusively in terms of short-term factors unique to the post-1918 world as a particular historical moment and shaped largely by events outside British India and therefore, ultimately, external to the dynamics of colonial rule.⁸ The violence of decolonization is thus rendered as specific to a particular period rather than its wider historical and cultural context.

In the following, two distinct but interrelated points are made: how to ‘read’ colonial violence, and how to ‘read’ a historical event in the context of the *longue durée*. These points are interrelated in that it is argued that only by recognising the extent to which an event such as the Amritsar Massacre was produced by its historical precedents, rather than just historical contingencies, that we can begin to understand the meaning of its violence. Where most studies of the Amritsar Massacre focus on its aftermath – its political impact and the public debates and legal issues it raised – this article examines the structural dynamics of the event itself as a particularly illuminating instance of colonial violence. In other words, what was the logic behind the Amritsar Massacre – what was the ‘moral effect’ that the shooting of hundreds of civilians was meant to achieve?

ALMOST A CENTURY has passed since the Amritsar Massacre, yet the historiographical debates still revolve around the same basic issues that preoccupied Dyer’s contemporaries. Enjoying the staunch support of his superiors in the Punjab Administration, Dyer’s actions were nevertheless condemned by the British Indian Government. The Governor-General, Lord Chelmsford, and the Secretary of State for India, Montagu, thus set up an inquiry – in part to

⁵ Charles S. Maier, ‘Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood’, in Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870-1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 192. Dyer did not in fact use his machineguns, nor did he ‘empty’ his ammunition.

⁶ Jordanna Bailkin, ‘The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India?’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48, 2 (2006): 463-494, 466.

⁷ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, New York, 2007).

⁸ See also Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (Basingstoke, 2009).

assuage Indian nationalists and to reassure a British public still reeling from the aftershocks of the war. The Hunter Committee, which included both British and Indian members, subsequently condemned Dyer's actions as being a 'misconception of his duty' and he was eventually dismissed from the army. The reception he received upon his return to Britain in 1920, however, reveals the political and social tension of post-war Britain. The conservative newspaper *The Morning Post* famously organized a subscription in support of Dyer and within months thousands of pounds had been collected for the disgraced imperial soldier whom many regarded as a hero betrayed by liberal politicians. Dyer's dismissal was upheld by the House of Commons but not by the House of Lords.⁹

In 1920, the two people who later came to represent the struggle over Britain's withdrawal from India, then Secretary of State Winston Churchill and nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, both contributed to the debate. According to Churchill, the massacre was 'an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'; a description that served to marginalize violence within the grander narrative of British imperialism and allowed for the continuing defence of the Empire.¹⁰ Heading the Indian Congress inquiry, Gandhi on the other hand stated that 'We do not want to punish Dyer. We want to change the system that produced Dyer'.¹¹ For many Indians at the time, the British response to the unrest in Punjab seemed to reveal the true face of empire, which belied in the most dramatic way the expectations of political reforms nurtured during the war. Neatly mirroring the contrast between the *ad hominem* and the systemic explanations, much of the later historiography posits the very same dichotomy. Nigel Collett's mammoth biography of Dyer, *The Butcher of Amritsar*, which remains the key work on the subject, constitute merely the latest example of the (not-so) 'great man' history in which it is argued that:

Dyer stands alone in modern British history. Nowhere in the world since the Indian Mutiny of 1857 have the British turned such violence upon civilian population. Not since 1919 has anything approaching what he did been repeated [...] It is therefore to his life that we must turn for an understanding of one of the most infamous events in Indian and British history, and for an explanation of what it was that persuaded Dyer to act as he did...¹²

In his article on British responses to the massacre, Derek Sayer on the other hand makes quite the opposite argument, stating that: '...what makes most sense of the Amritsar Massacre [...] is the rendering of Indians as children [...] It was the place Indians occupied within their rulers' moral universe [...] which explains why [...] they could be slaughtered for moral effect...'¹³ Sayer was here deliberately challenging the earlier sociological work of Helen Fein, who sought to explain the events of 1919 by invoking a Durkheimian model of colonial society, with 'class' and 'race' as the sole determinants of conflict.¹⁴

While the emphasis on the role of the individual in shaping events leaves room for the reputation of the Empire remaining largely untarnished, the structural interpretation identifies

⁹ Derek Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre 1919-1920', *Past & Present*, 131, 1 (1991): 130-164.

¹⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 131, cc1725 (8 July 1920). See also Purnima Bose, *Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India* (Durham, 2003).

¹¹ Sayer, 133.

¹² Collett, *Introduction*, x.

¹³ Sayer, 163.

¹⁴ Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgement, 1919-20* (Honolulu, 1986).

violence as an intrinsic aspect of imperialism. Indian historians, for whom the massacre is both poignant and politically pertinent, in turn tend to regard the events at Amritsar as the inevitable result of official policy and simply as an expression of racial arrogance. After independence in 1947, the Amritsar Massacre was teleologically refashioned as a key moment in the freedom struggle, and the official memorial pays homage to nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and the sacrifice of the ‘martyrs’ killed at Jallianwala Bagh.¹⁵ It is, however, noteworthy that even those who regard the massacre as more than one man’s actions still find recourse to individualized emotions when explaining the events at Amritsar. The pre-eminent Indian historian on the topic, V.N. Datta, thus concluded his analysis by stating that ‘it is obvious that Dyer was primarily motivated by revenge.’¹⁶ In this intentionalist analysis, the massacre is reduced to a carefully orchestrated act of vengeance and colonial violence seen as an erratic response to nationalist protests.

When considering more closely the primary material relating to the Amritsar Massacre, however, it becomes clear that none of these approaches are on their own credible. One of the most striking features of the evidence available is that there are so few references to contemporary events – considering that the unrest in Punjab was at the heart of what has later been described as the ‘Crisis of Empire’, we might have expected Dyer and his fellow officers to invoke the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland or the unrest in Egypt unravelling at the same time. Yet that did not happen, and the true nature of the challenge facing the British in Punjab was apparently undiscernible to the men on the ground. A few days before the disturbances in Amritsar, the Deputy-Commissioner Irving noted that a serious confrontation was coming but admitted that ‘Who are at the bottom of this I cannot say.’¹⁷ Even the *hartals* or general strikes called by Gandhi in protest against the Rowlatt Acts were not acknowledged by Dyer who explicitly stated that: ‘I should say that the acts that were now committed, that is, the uprooting of railway lines, cutting of telegraph wires, murdering of citizens, etc., was more than *hartals*, and the two had nothing to do with each other.’¹⁸ If the forces being mobilized against the British seemed to be hidden, the seriousness of the situation was certainly not. According to Dyer, he felt himself to be:

...dealing with no mere local disturbance but a rebellion, which, whatever its origin, was aiming at something wide reaching and vastly more serious than local riots and looting [...] Amritsar was in fact the storm centre of a rebellion. The whole Punjaub had its eyes on Amritsar, and the assembly of the crowd that afternoon [*at Jallianwala Bagh*] was for all practical purposes a declaration of war...¹⁹

Under such circumstances, the only appropriate response was the use of force and Dyer’s actions at Jallianwala Bagh reflected commonly held sentiments amongst the British officers involved in the suppression of the disturbances in 1919. The senior officer commanding the British forces in the colonial capital openly stated that: ‘Composed as the crowd was of the scum of Delhi city, I

¹⁵ K.L. Tuteja, ‘Jallianwala Bagh: A Critical Juncture in the Indian National Movement’, *Social Scientist*, 25, 1/2 (Jan.-Feb., 1997): 25-61.

¹⁶ V.N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh* (Ludhiana, 1969), 168. See also Raja Ram, *The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Premeditated Plan* (1969).

¹⁷ Miles Irving to A.J.W. Kitchin, 8 April 1919, *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol VI: Punjab Government and Sir Umar Hayat Khan* (Calcutta, 1920), 3.

¹⁸ Testimony of Dyer before the Hunter Committee, *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 137.

¹⁹ ‘Statement by Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer, C.B.’ (3 July 1920), *Disturbances in the Punjab* (London, 1920), 19.

am of firm opinion that if they had got a bit more firing given them it would have done them a world of good and their attitude would be much more amenable and respectful, as force is the only thing that an Asiatic has any respect for.’²⁰ Dyer pursued this logic to its extreme conclusion at Amritsar, as evinced by his statement quoted at the beginning of this article. The performative logic of the violence was also reiterated and when questioned by the Hunter Committee, Dyer made explicit his reasoning for firing at the assembled crowd at Jallianwala Bagh:

Q. I take it that your idea in taking that action was to strike terror?

A. Call it what you like. I was going to punish them. My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression.

Q. To strike terror not only in the city of Amritsar, but throughout the Punjab?

A. Yes, throughout the Punjab. I wanted to reduce their *morale*; the *morale* of the rebels.

Seeking to justify the notorious ‘crawling order’, which required Indians to move on all fours in the street where the British missionary Miss Sherwood had been attacked, Dyer further explained that ‘My object was not merely to impress the inhabitants, but to appeal to their moral sense in a way which I knew they would understand.’²¹ Accordingly, there was a cultural specificity to the forms of punishment inflicted on the local population by the British at Amritsar; the guilt of the individuals was furthermore less important and the violence was a means to an end – namely the performance of colonial power.

When questioned as to his understanding of the concept of ‘rebellion’, Dyer explained that ‘I apprehended the danger of mutiny, loss of life, riot, bloodshed and all that sort of thing...’²² Throughout his reports and testimony, Dyer referred to the Indian rioters as ‘rebels’ but occasionally slipped into a historically more specific language that invoked the Indian Uprising or ‘Mutiny’ of 1857. This crucial event had occurred some six decades prior to the unrest at Amritsar, yet seemingly retained its relevance throughout the debates of 1919. In his first detailed report on the firing, Dyer had thus legitimized his actions because, as he put it, ‘A mutiny was in fact in full swing’.²³ This revealing *lapsus* was furthermore no mere coincidence or idiosyncrasy and the allusions to 1857 were at times quite explicit. Mr. Irving, for instance, argued that the prospect of Amritsar being invaded by marauding villagers from the surrounding districts posed the greatest danger during the unrest, resulting in the dire prognosis that: ‘we should have had a situation not paralleled since the Mutiny.’ Miss Sherwood, who had been attacked by rioters at Amritsar, openly stated that she was ‘convinced that there was a real rebellion in the Punjab, and that General Dyer saved India and us from a repetition of the miseries and cruelties of 1857.’²⁴ More or less oblique references to the ‘Mutiny’ suffused the official reports and testimonies elicited by the Hunter Committee – a fact that was even

²⁰ ‘Written statement by Brigadier-General D.H. Drake-Brockman, C.M.G. Commanding Delhi Brigade, Delhi, 16 Oct. 1919’, *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol I: Delhi* (Calcutta, 1920), 172. Thanks to Mark Condos for pointing me this source.

²¹ ‘Statement by Dyer’ (3 July 1920), 17.

²² Testimony of Dyer before the Hunter Committee, *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 137.

²³ Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer to the General Staff, 25 Aug 1919, in *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 202.

²⁴ Letter read out in House of Commons by Sir W. Joyson-Hicks, *Hansard*, vol. 131, cc1757 (8 July 1920).

acknowledged in the final report.²⁵ This was furthermore not just a colonial phenomenon and during the lengthy debates in the House of Commons and in the British press during 1919-20, references to 1857 were made time and again by politicians and journalists of all leanings.²⁶

The arguments that Dyer's personality provides the key to his actions or that it was the colonial condition pure and simple that caused the massacre are accordingly inadequate when examining the Amritsar Massacre. Dyer emphatically did not act alone and he was not even the most extreme amongst the British officials at Amritsar; compared to the proposed aerial bombardment of the city, including the Golden Temple, his actions at Jallianwala Bagh seem positively restrained.²⁷ Dyer furthermore enjoyed widespread support from a considerable section of the British in India, many of whom, if not most, shared his views. The model of cultural determinism proposed by the likes of Fein is also not convincing; that the prevailing ideas of paternalism and racial attitudes in British India shaped Dyers actions should be self-evident, though that could be said of most policies and practices within the Empire and thus essentially lacks explanatory purchase. A more refined analysis of the correlation between structure and event is needed to determine why, if a deep-seated colonial mind-set provided the rationale for violence, it was enacted only at particular moments. The British assessment of the threat posed by the unrest and the incessant invocations of '1857' indeed suggests that we need to look beyond the moment, and beyond the man, in order to make sense of the colonial violence at Amritsar. We cannot locate the causes of violence simply in the circumstances of its enactment and by merely describing the sequence of events the erroneous impression is that the Amritsar Massacre was simply a reaction to the threat posed by Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement.

In seeking to avoid what Marshall Sahlins has described as 'the ethnographic cardinal sin of ignoring what the people found important', we must follow Ann Stoler's example and read the Amritsar Massacre 'along the archival grain'.²⁸ At Amritsar on 13 April 1919, Dyer was not responding to the dramatically changed political situation of the post-war Empire, but rather to the spectre of the 'Mutiny'. It is thus to 1857 and the logic of the colonial spectacle of violence during the nineteenth century that we must look in order to understand the Amritsar Massacre.

'THERE WAS A ROAR [...] a bank of white smoke, and a jet and shower of black fragments, sharp and clear, which leaped and bounded in the air; this and a fearful sound from the spectators, as if the reality so far exceeded all previous fancy that it was intolerable; then a dead stillness.' In December 1857, when the uprising in India had been all but suppressed, *The Times* published yet another account from the seemingly endless catalogue of horrors that transpired on the subcontinent that year.²⁹ Under the prosaic caption 'An Indian Execution', the anonymous correspondent described how five *sepoys*, or native troops, were blown from the

²⁵ *Report of the Committee appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc* (London, 1920), 31.

²⁶ See Sayer.

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²⁸ Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago, 2004), 119; Ann L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: thinking Through Colonial Ontologies* (Princeton, 2009).

²⁹ 'An Execution in India', *The Times*, 3 Dec. 1857.

muzzle of cannons for conspiring to mutiny. As the smoke cleared, he proceeded to inspect the scene of the execution:

I walked straight to the scattered and smoking floors before the guns. I came first to an arm, torn off above the elbow, the fist clinched, the bone projecting several inches, bare. Then the ground was sown with red grisly fragments, then a blackhaired head and the other arm still held together...[C]lose by lay the lower half of the body of the next, torn quite in two, and long coils of entrails twined on the ground [...] The troops immediately marched off, and I rode home at speed, and when I dismounted the dogs came and licked my feet.³⁰

At a time when, according to Michel Foucault, modern states had long replaced the spectacle of the scaffold with penal institutions, the British in India still had recourse to exemplary punishment through singularly brutal rites of public executions.³¹ The practice of execution by cannon was originally a Mughal practice, which appears to have been used as late as the twentieth century in Iran and in Afghanistan.³² The physical destruction of the body had a distinct religious function within the cultural context of the Indian sub-continent as it effectively prevented the customary funereal rites of Muslims, as well as Hindus, and the punishment thus extended beyond death. Europeans first encountered this technique during the mid-1700s, and it soon became the favoured means by which to quell mutinies amongst the native troops of the East India Company.³³

Closely following the ritual model provided by judiciary practices in the imperial homeland, the British in India nevertheless favoured hangings when executing criminals. Controlling the symbolism of public executions, however, proved increasingly difficult within a colonial context, and the hanging of hundreds of highway robbers known as ‘Thugs’ during the 1830s had fully exposed the porous nature of colonial rituals of power.³⁴ The ‘Thugs’ signally failed to conform to the expected behaviour of the condemned: they boldly climbed the scaffold and, rather than letting the low-caste executioners touch them, tightened the noose around their own neck and then simply stepped off the platform – effectively taking command of the ritual that was intended to reflect their submission to the legal process of the colonial state.³⁵ British officials had to infer (rather wistfully) the deterrent efficacy of such executions:

...I may venture to say that four out of five [...] executed this season at Saugor have thrown themselves from the drop before it could be struck from under them with a degree of audacious impudence that has removed all doubt of their guilt from the minds of the spectators, and left in their bosoms a feeling of indignation unmixed with any degree of sympathy for their sufferings.³⁶

The truth is that the Indian spectators probably felt nothing of the kind. Similar to widows becoming *sati* by joining their husband’s body on the funeral pyre, criminals about to be executed were commonly believed to be in possession of semi-divine powers: ‘They have a superstition’ wrote one British officer, ‘that a man about to be executed imparts a sanctity to all he touches;

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977). For a more recent work on executions within a non-European context, see Stacey Hynd, *Imperial Gallows: Capital Punishment, Violence and Colonial Rule in Britain’s African Territories c. 1903-1968* (Oxford, 2007).

³² See C.J. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and Sun, or Modern Persia* (London, 1883), 203.

³³ See for instance ‘Extract of the General letter from Bombay,’ 30 April 1780; BL, IOR, Home Misc., H/149 (5): 111.

³⁴ See Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Nineteenth-Century India* (Basingstoke, 2007).

³⁵ H.H. Spry, *Modern India with Illustrations of the Resources and Capabilities of Hindoustan* (London, 1837), 165-168.

³⁶ Sleeman to Smith, 15 Aug. 1832, BC, F/4/1406/55521, APAC.

and in a manner similar to this, he always throws flowers among the crowd, who eagerly scramble for them.³⁷ The British might seek to convince themselves that these executions went according to plan, yet their very own accounts, insisting on the public approval of colonial authority, could not hide their unease about a public ritual the symbolism of which was increasingly slipping out of their control. In the absence of a shared cultural framework, or a legitimate claim to power, the British could never be certain that the ritual of public executions was intelligible to their Indian subjects.³⁸ If convicted murderers could project an image of unbowed piety on the scaffold, the British were even less likely to achieve the intended effect in the execution of high-caste *sepoys*. During moments of crisis, such uncertainty in the very performance of power and authority was little short of disastrous. As regiment after regiment broke out in mutiny across northern India during the summer of 1857, soon coalescing into popular risings that threatened to upend British rule, the colonial state unleashed its entire arsenal of exemplary violence.

The British' main concern was to prevent the spread of rebellion, and it was in that context that the first mass-execution of 40 *sepoys* by cannon was ordered at Peshawar on 13 June 1857. This was only the first of many such mass-executions, but it set a precedent for British violence throughout the uprising. A contemporary British newspaper report elaborated on the cultural specificity of the spectacle enacted at Peshawar:

You must know that this is nearly the only form in which death has any terrors for a native [...] he knows that his body will be blown into a thousand pieces, and that it will be altogether impossible for his relatives, however devoted to him, to be sure of picking up all the fragments of his own particular body; and the thought that perhaps a limb of some one of a different religion to himself might possibly be burned or buried with the remainder of his own body, is agony to him.³⁹

It is thus possible to talk about an 'Orientalization' of colonial violence during 1857, as colonial knowledge was turned against colonial subjects in a form of spiritual warfare that transcended mere physical punishment. British retribution deliberately exploited the *sepoys'* fears of ritual pollution and the mass-executions by cannon enacted this particular logic in a highly instrumental and systematic manner. The rebels were treated as an undifferentiated mass and the revenge of the British was thus defined by its indiscriminate and collective character.⁴⁰ The few critics who objected to such practices had little impact on either official policies or public opinion, mainly due to the fact that the mass-executions were commonly believed to be *the* most effective, if not only, means of maintaining British control. Descriptions of the reaction of Indian spectators were implicitly racialised and invariably made reference to their changing skin-colour as a sure sign that the message had hit home: '...their faces grew ghastly pale as they gazed breathlessly at the awful spectacle.'⁴¹ More than a deterrent spectacle, however, these executions were perceived as uniquely effective in re-establishing colonial rule by bolstering the prestige of the British. In the semi-official history of the 'Mutiny', John Kaye described the impact of the executions at Peshawar:

³⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel Fitzclarence, *Journal of a Route across India, through Egypt, to England* (London, 1819), 157.

³⁸ See also Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi, 1998).

³⁹ 'Blowing from Guns at Peshawur', *Daily News*, 5 Nov. 1857.

⁴⁰ See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, "'Satan Let Loose upon Earth': The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857", *Past and Present*, 128 (Aug. 1994): 92–116.

⁴¹ 'Blowing from Guns at Peshawur', *Daily News*, 5 Nov. 1857.

To our newly-raised levies and to the curious on-lookers from the country, the whole spectacle was a marvel and a mystery. It was a wonderful display of moral force, and it made a deep and abiding impression [...] Among the rude people of the border the audacity thus displayed by the English in the face of pressing danger excited boundless admiration. They had no longer any misgivings with respect to the superiority of a race that could do such great things, calmly and coolly, and with all the formality of an inspection-parade.⁴²

Deliberately leaving out the gory details, Kaye turned the executions into a celebratory demonstration of the virtues of the stalwart British character that underpinned colonial rule and sustained the civilizing mission.⁴³ British accounts of the executions of *sepoys* and rebels were furthermore made morally palatable by consistently invoking *Indian* atrocities, and part of the retributive logic of colonial violence that relied on indigenous practice was thus derived from the aggression ascribed to Indians in what anthropologist Michael Taussig has described as ‘colonial mimesis’.⁴⁴ Execution by cannon could thus be presented as both justified and civilized – or as Lord Roberts put it: ‘Awe inspiring, certainly, but probably the most humane, as being a sure and instantaneous mode of execution.’⁴⁵ Visual representations of executions by cannon, disseminated through the press across the empire, similarly provided an image of a carefully orchestrated military spectacle, indicative of the order that British rule imposed on Indian society.⁴⁶ Apart from the brute language of power and terror, colonial violence and its representation during 1857 thus conveyed a reassuring message to an Anglo-Indian and British audience as well.⁴⁷ This secondary function of colonial violence is clearly reflected in an eyewitness account of an execution in Bombay published in Charles Dickens’ magazine *Household Words* in early 1858:

Those who witnessed the impressive scene will never forget it. The Europeans were scarcely one to a thousand – in fact, they could hardly be seen amongst the myriads of Asiatics; but all appeared as cool and confident as if they had been at a review in Hyde Park. And yet there was scarcely a man present who had not been sleeping with a loaded revolver in his bedchamber for months...⁴⁸

The public execution was in fact described as a perfect reflection of the colonial situation itself, with the British isolated and outnumbered but ultimately triumphant thanks to their resolve and strength of character. In this sense, the executions served to sustain the ‘bluff’ that was colonialism, and shore up the self-confidence of the British in the crucible of rebellion. While the British believed the public executions effectively forced Indians into submission and buttressed their loyalty, it is clear that the bloody spectacles as easily drove Indian troops, and the wider population, away from the colonial rulers.⁴⁹ The supposed efficacy of executions by cannon, however, was far too important for the British authorities to formally acknowledge their ambiguous symbolism and messy reality, let alone condemn the practice. In the House of Commons, Lord Stanley expressed this sentiment in no uncertain terms: ‘Only by great exertions – by the employment of force, by making striking examples, and inspiring terror, could Sir J.

⁴² John Kaye and G. B. Malleson, *History of the Indian Mutiny* (London, 1888–9), II: 369–70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 369, fn.

⁴⁴ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987).

⁴⁵ Field-Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (London, 1897), 68, fn.

⁴⁶ See for instance *Illustrated London News*, 3 Oct. 1857.

⁴⁷ See also Michael G. Vann, ‘Of Pirates, Postcards, and Public Beheadings: The Pedagogic Execution in French Colonial Indochina’, *Historical Reflections*, 36, (Summer, 2010): 39–58.

⁴⁸ Anon. ‘Blown Away!’, *Household Words*, 27 March 1858, 350.

⁴⁹ See for instance Roberts (1897), 69.

Lawrence save the Punjab; and if the Punjab had been lost the whole of India would for the time have been lost with it.⁵⁰ British rule in India, in other words, was sustained by the application of exemplary violence and this became one of the founding narratives of the colonial state in India post-1857. As the uprising was eventually put down, power was transferred in 1858 from the East India Company to the British Crown, heralding what many expected to be a new era of order and tranquillity. Memories of the ‘Mutiny’, however, died hard and 1857 was not to be the last time that British rule in India was so demonstratively maintained by the sword rather than the pen.

YEARS LATER, when the Punjab was yet again shaken by unrest and the colonial authorities believed themselves to be faced by yet another massive outbreak, a British officer took it upon himself to punish the so-called ‘rebels’. Peace had in fact been restored by the time the brutal and indiscriminate punishment was inflicted in a singularly exemplary fashion. The Government initially responded with approval, yet as soon as details of the affair reached the press and the wider public a scandal erupted both in India and in Britain. The affair became a cause for national embarrassment and it was hotly debated in London and throughout the empire. The officer responsible was eventually removed from his post, although there was substantial support for his actions amongst the Anglo-Indian community in particular, and a public collection of funds was later organised for his benefit.

This brief outline of events refers not to the Amritsar Massacre, however, but to the suppression of the so-called ‘Kooka Outbreak’ almost five decades earlier. In January 1872, Deputy Commissioner L. Cowan responded to a minor outbreak amongst the Kuka Sikhs by summarily executing 68 prisoners by cannon in the small principality of Malerkotla in Punjab. The fact that this all but forgotten event anticipated the circumstances surrounding Dyer’s actions in 1919 with such accuracy suggests a level of continuity in the forms and functions of colonial violence that has so far remained unacknowledged in the established historiography.

The Kukas, formally known as Namdharis, were a revivalist sect within Sikhism who became known during the early 1870s for a series of murderous attacks on Muslims in Punjab.⁵¹ After the failed raid on two small towns, Malodh and Malerkotla, the surviving members of a Kuka gang, many of whom were wounded, were captured in mid-January 1872.⁵² The attacks had been desperate undertakings by a motley group of impoverished men; they had no clear plan or strategy and they were certainly not part of a bigger conspiracy or the vanguard of a Kuka rising.⁵³ To the British, however, what became known officially as the ‘Kooka Outbreak’ was little short of a second ‘Mutiny’. Amidst rumours that Kukas were gathering in the thousands for renewed attacks, the British Deputy Commissioner L. Cowan hastened to Malerkotla to deal with the captives.⁵⁴ Although it soon turned out that initial reports of the attacks had hugely

⁵⁰ *Hansard*, vol. 153, cc146-60 (14 March 1859).

⁵¹ W. H. McLeod, ‘The Kukas: A Millenarian Sect of the Punjab’, in G.A. Wood & P.S. O’Connor (eds.), *W.P. Morrell: a Tribute* (Dunedin, 1973), 85-103.

⁵² The main sources for the details of the attacks are to be found in *Copy of Correspondence, or Extracts from Correspondence, relating to the Kooka Outbreak* (1 Aug. 1872), House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (hereafter: *KO*).

⁵³ Forsyth to Griffin, 20 Jan. 1872, *KO*, 20.

⁵⁴ Cowan to Forsyth, 15 Jan. 1872, *KO*, 8.

exaggerated the seriousness of the situation, Cowan nevertheless proposed to execute the prisoners by blowing them from cannon:

...they are open rebels, offering contumacious resistance to constituted authority, and, to prevent the spreading of the disease, it is absolutely necessary that repressive measures should be prompt and stern [...] this insipient insurrection must be stamped out at once.⁵⁵

Cowan immediately went ahead with the mass-execution and when he was joined by his superior, Commissioner and Superintendent T.D. Forsyth, the following day, the remaining prisoners were executed. On 17 and 18 January 1872, a total of 68 Kukas were thus executed at Malerkotla.⁵⁶

Occurring just fifteen years after the ‘Mutiny’, the British response to the ‘Kooka Outbreak’ was very much shaped by the memory 1857. Faced with what he perceived to be ‘an open rebellion’, Cowan had simply followed the example provided by the ‘Mutiny’ – and the link between the two events was further established by his description of the Kukas as ‘rebels’ and through the manner in which he punished them.⁵⁷ In fact, Forsyth claimed that Cowan’s chosen mode of execution was ‘a proceeding warranted by former precedents when large numbers of rebels were thus disposed of in 1857.’⁵⁸ It was furthermore not just the terminology and means of execution that were reminiscent of 1857 – the very rationale provided by Cowan closely mirrored the reasoning that had informed the mass-executions of that year: ‘A rebellion, which might have attained large dimensions, was nipped in the bud, and a terrible and prompt punishment was in my opinion absolutely necessary to prevent the recurrence of a similar rising.’⁵⁹ Invoking the horrors of the past, when British men, women and children had been killed, Cowan and Forsyth both sought to legitimise the execution of the 68 Kukas, but their response also drew on other colonial precedents. Following what appeared to be random attacks on Europeans by Muslim *ghazis* on the North West Frontier, the Murderous Outrages Act of 1867 had enabled the summary execution of such ‘fanatics’ without formal trial or conviction.⁶⁰ The Kuka’s were thus described in terms very similar to those applied by the colonial authorities to Muslim ‘fanatics’, and the official reports were replete with references to their ‘frenzy’ and ‘fanatical fury’.⁶¹

Forsyth in particular was at pains to present a dire image of the threat posed by the Kukas, whose behaviour throughout Punjab he deemed ‘...a sufficient indication that there is some intention of a general rising, and the slightest failure on the part of the authorities to deal promptly with the marauders now caught would be a signal to concealed parties to rush forward.’⁶² Fears of a second ‘Mutiny’ ran deep amongst the British in India and anxieties of a general rising were a common trait in colonial governance after 1857. The fact that Cowan had

⁵⁵ Cowan to Forsyth, 16 Jan. 1872, KO, 11.

⁵⁶ Forsyth to Griffin, 8 April 1872, KO, 50-2.

⁵⁷ Order by Cowan, 18 Jan. 1872, KO, 47.

⁵⁸ Forsyth to Griffin, 19 Jan. 1872, KO, 18.

⁵⁹ Cowan to Forsyth, 17 Jan. 1872 (2), KO, 16.

⁶⁰ M.E. Grant Duff, *Sir Henry Maine: a Brief Memoir of his Life* (London: John Murray, 1892), 259-262. See also Mark Condos, ‘License to Kill: The Murderous Outrages Act and the Rule of Law in Colonial India, 1867-1925’, *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

⁶¹ See for instance Cowan to Forsyth, 15 Jan. 1872, KO, 9.

⁶² Forsyth to Griffin, 19 Jan. 1872, KO, 18.

transgressed his authority and carried out the executions in direct defiance of his superior's order, however, was an altogether different matter. While Cowan enjoyed the tacit support of the Punjab Government, the Governor-General of India did not condone the circumstances surrounding the executions, and within a week of the incident Cowan was suspended pending further inquiries.⁶³

The official response to the outbreak brought to light the tension existing between the Government of Punjab and the central Government of India. The Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, Sir Robert Henry Davies, insisted that the captured Kukas were no ordinary criminals but had forfeited their lives due to the nature of their crimes – 'originating in a carefully stimulated religious fanaticism, they had a political object, every step in the attainment of which threatened the most serious disturbance of the existing order of things.'⁶⁴ Davies' interjection on Cowan's behalf thus invoked the central tenets of the Punjab system, which favoured personal discretion over technical legalism, and true to the spirit of his predecessors during the 'Mutiny', the Lieutenant-Governor even defended Cowan's choice of execution: 'Blowing from a gun is an impressive and merciful manner of execution, well calculated to strike terror into the bystanders.'⁶⁵ The Government decision on the case, however, constituted a direct rebuttal of the proponents of the Punjab system.⁶⁶ Despite the difficult situation in which Cowan found himself, the manner of the execution, 'its excessive and indiscriminate severity', was deemed to be entirely unjustified.⁶⁷ Worst of all, however, was the fact that by the time the executions took place, there were no longer any immediate threats: 'It is in short obvious,' the Governor-General stated, '[...] that his motive in ordering the executions was to prevent a rising which he considered imminent, by an act calculated to strike terror into the whole Kuka sect.'⁶⁸ As a result, Cowan was permanently suspended from his position, while Forsyth was transferred to another province where he would have no authority in matters relating to native states.⁶⁹

The belief that Cowan and Forsyth had through their prompt action saved the lives of many of their compatriots was however widely shared amongst Anglo-Indians and the ardently colonial newspaper *The Englishman* stated that the two 'deserve the best thanks and admiration of the English community in India'.⁷⁰ Once Cowan's dismissal became public knowledge, a subscription was in fact organised by the readers of the newspaper, which reported that 'We learn from various sources that subscriptions are being set on foot at all large stations in Upper India for Mr. L. Cowan, whose summary dismissal has evoked a feeling of universal indignation throughout all classes of the Anglo-Indian community...'⁷¹ Yet the affair affected more than just the Anglo-Indian community – touching upon the very nature and prestige of the British Empire, it was widely debated throughout the imperial metropole, including the House of

⁶³ Bayley to Griffin, 24 Jan. 1872, KO: 17.

⁶⁴ Griffin to Bayley, 7 Feb. 1872, KO, 28.

⁶⁵ Griffin to Bayley, 29 June 1872, quoted in Nahar Singh, *Gooroo Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs: Rebels against the British Power in India* (New Delhi, 1965), II: 81.

⁶⁶ 'Final Orders of General Governor in Council', Bayley to Griffin, 30 April 1872, KO, 54-8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-8. See also Judicial Department to Argyll, 2 May 1872, KO: 26.

⁷⁰ *The Englishman*, 10 Feb. 1872.

⁷¹ 'Letter to the Editor', *The Englishman*, 14 May 1872.

Commons.⁷² Initially opinions were divided, but as more details of the events reached England, attitudes changed and the initial expressions of anxiety concerning the threat posed by the Kukas were increasingly replaced by incredulity.⁷³ The fact remained that no British lives had been lost during the attacks on Malodh and Malerkotla and to many observers the fears of rebellion seemed misplaced and the executions blatantly excessive.⁷⁴ The Kuka affair eventually disappeared from the headlines and, eventually, public memory. Cowan's attempts at rehabilitation failed and he disappeared into obscurity, while Forsyth successfully lobbied the new Governor-General and went on to enjoy an illustrious career within the colonial administration, receiving numerous honours including a knighthood before his death in 1886.⁷⁵ Morally defensible or not, the suppression of the 'Kooka Outbreak' further sustained the lessons of the 'Mutiny' and as such became part of the lore of the Raj.

THE PROCESS OF decolonization following the two World Wars, which saw imperial disengagement and policing give way to counter-insurgency, is usually examined in complete isolation from the pre-1918 period.⁷⁶ Coinciding with widespread unrest in Ireland and in Egypt, the Amritsar Massacre is thus commonly understood in terms of the radically transformed political landscape of the British Empire following the First World War – defined by the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, the 'Wilsonian Moment', and the spread of Pan-Islamism and Bolshevism. As indicated by the title of Alfred Draper's popular account, *The Massacre that Ended the Raj* (1981), the events at Jallianwala Bagh are seen to mark the beginning of the historical process that came to its conclusion in 1947.⁷⁷ As this article has suggested, however, the nature of colonial violence of the early twentieth century was not simply a function of, nor coterminous with, imperial decline after 1919 as Britain sought to hold on to its empire by all means possible. Rather than being the beginning of the end, as it were, the violence of the Amritsar Massacre might better be understood as the final stage of a much longer process. The point is not merely that the massacre was not unprecedented but that we cannot begin to make sense of the events of 13 April 1919 in isolation from these precedents. While it is difficult not to agree with Akira Iriye's claim that 'the Great War proved to be the swan song of empires', this emphasis has, as Harald Fischer-Tiné also points out, been overstated at the expense of continuities and long-term factors.⁷⁸ Conventional periodization has stood in the way of a deeper understanding of the colonial violence across the different stages of British rule in India and too much change has been explained simply by invoking the rupture of the First World War. Colonial violence was not

⁷² See *The Times* and *Pall Mall Gazette* during February-May 1872.

⁷³ See for instance 'India (from our correspondent)', *The Times*, 26 Feb. 1872. See also *ibid.*, 3 April 1872.

⁷⁴ 'The Kooka Massacre', *The Examiner*, 1 June 1872.

⁷⁵ 'This Evening's News: India', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 Aug. 1873; and Ethel Forsyth (ed.) *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Sir Douglas Forsyth, C.B., K.C.S.I., F.R.G.S* (London, 1887).

⁷⁶ Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonization, 1918-1968* (Cambridge, New York, 2006); Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, MA, 2008); and Martin Thomas, Bob Moore, L.J. Butler (eds.), *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London, 2008).

⁷⁷ Alfred Draper, *The Massacre that Ended the Raj* (London, 1981).

⁷⁸ Akira Iriye, 'Beyond Imperialism: The New Internationalism', *Daedalus*, 134, 2 (2005): 108–116, 115; and Harald Fischer-Tiné 'Indian Nationalism and the 'World Forces': Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War', *Journal of Global History*, 2, 03 (November 2007): 325-344, 344.

simply a response to anti-colonial resistance and only at the most superficial level of historical analysis can the Amritsar Massacre be said to have been provoked by the challenge posed by Gandhi and the nationalist movement. In order to examine a complex event such as the Amritsar Massacre it is thus necessary to go beyond the conventional time-frame and instead deploy what might be called ‘thick periodization’: an awareness of, and attention to, the varying temporalities at play within a single event.⁷⁹

The suppression of the ‘Kooka Outbreak’ was never explicitly mentioned during the debates over Dyer’s actions, yet it is impossible not to recognise one as the precursor to the other, and both events as manifestations of a particular colonial mind-set shaped by the legacies of 1857. The disturbances of 10 April 1919, when official buildings were burned and British civilians were attacked and killed by Indian crowds, closely replicated the pattern of anti-colonial violence that constituted such a crucial element in the colonial memories of 1857. The rioters at Amritsar thus inadvertently triggered a response that was overdetermined by the past and the massacre should accordingly be recognised as one of those moments conforming to anthropologist Marshall Sahlins’ concept of the ‘structure of the conjuncture’.⁸⁰ Dyer explicitly invoked his colonial experience when defending his actions before the Army Council back in Britain, in what amounted to a plea of diminished responsibility due to the trauma of the ‘Mutiny’:

But if one dominant motive can be extracted it was the determination to avert from the European women and children and those of the law-abiding Indian community the fate which I was convinced would be theirs, if I did not meet the challenge and produce the required effect to restore order and security [...] Of its force in the mind of an Indian Army officer of thirty-four years’ residence in India I am sure the Army Council have no doubt.⁸¹

Cognisant of their own anxieties, even supporters of Dyer pointed to the continuing impact of 1857 as expressed by Brig. Gen. Herbert Surtees’s comments in the House of Commons:

Whenever the people of India show signs of unrest or of conspiracy or of revolution there rises before the minds of Anglo-Europeans the spectre of the Indian Mutiny and the horrors of Cawnpore, and they are constrained to ask themselves whether the disturbances are only the precursors of a similar revolution. So a greater force is used in quelling disturbances than would be used in other places where British rule is more firmly established.⁸²

It is indeed noticeable that Cowan in 1872 and Dyer in 1919 both referred to the precedents of 1857 in assessing the threat they were facing *and* in legitimizing their response. What I have described elsewhere as the ‘Mutiny’-motif provided both a nightmare scenario as well as a panacea for all local unrest – if the ‘Kooka Outbreak’ and nationalist protests in 1919 had the potential to escalate into full-blown rebellion on a scale similar to the ‘Mutiny’, it was reasoned

⁷⁹ My argument owes a lot to the work of Veena Das, especially *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1995), chapter V, and *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, 2006), chapter VI. See also Charles S. Maier, ‘Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era’, *American Historical Review*, 105, 3 (2000): 807-831; and Harry Harootian, ‘Remembering the Historical Present’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33 (Spring 2007): 471-494.

⁸⁰ Sahlins first developed this concept in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1981). See also William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005).

⁸¹ ‘Statement by Brig.-General R.E.H. Dyer, C.B.’ (3 July 1920), *Disturbances in the Punjab* (London, 1920), 13.

⁸² *Hansard*, vol. 131, cc1777 (8 July 1920).

that they could also be suppressed by the very same means that had saved British rule six decades earlier.⁸³ After 1857, the colonial authorities thus rarely responded to the specific circumstances surrounding local unrest but rather to what they *imagined* that unrest was or could become – hence the consistent disproportionality of colonial state violence. With precedents such as the ‘Mutiny’ in mind, the exponential potential of even small-scale disturbances was boundless, as far as the British were concerned, and the official response inherently excessive. The Amritsar Massacre was accordingly both retributive and pre-emptive – Dyer took revenge for the attacks on Europeans, including a white woman, during the riots three days earlier, but he also acted to prevent a much bigger outbreak that he believed to be insipient.⁸⁴ It was thus the application of a decidedly outdated mode of interpretation that led to the massacre, when, to put it bluntly, Dyer responded to twentieth-century challenges with nineteenth-century methods.

It should be obvious that the blue-print provided by the ‘Mutiny’ was entirely inappropriate to navigate India in the second decade of the twentieth century. Between 1857 and 1919, India had undergone a fundamental transformation and seen the emergence of the first major anti-colonial movement. British rule on the subcontinent had in the decades just prior to the massacre also witnessed the first liberal reforms, however limited, while in Britain itself, support for the Empire was far from uniform. The much-publicized executions of *sepoys* might have been distasteful to most of the British public in 1857, yet they were nevertheless deemed a necessity in the maintenance of the Empire. By 1919, on the other hand, the debates over the Amritsar Massacre divided the nation and left the Empire vulnerable to uncomfortable accusations of ‘Prussianism’ and policies of ‘Frightfulness’.⁸⁵ The challenge to British rule in India had thus changed dramatically during this period; the manner in which colonial officers such as Dyer responded to perceived threat, however, had not. As a critical event *par excellence*, the Amritsar Massacre may thus be described as an anachronism.

IN MOST RECENT STUDIES of colonial violence, the subject has been approached through the framework of law and the legal discourses that at varying moments either problematized or legitimized the brutality of the imperial project.⁸⁶ The focus on law has yielded important insights, but does tend to shy away from the question central to the present analysis: how to ‘read’ colonial violence. In his study of German colonial violence in Africa as ‘total war’, Trutz von Trotha suggests that violence constitutes a universally understood language of power:

Violence is extremely convincing. It is simple and obvious. There are no communication problems. The “language of violence” needs no translation – and this applies particularly to a world in which the colonial conquerors could make themselves understood in their meetings with Africans only when they were accompanied and assisted by

⁸³ Kim A. Wagner, ‘Treading Upon Fires’: The ‘Mutiny’-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India’, *Past & Present*, 218, 1 (February, 2013): 159-197.

⁸⁴ When the safety and ‘honour’ of white women and children were concerned, colonial retribution assumed a particularly brutal character; see Nancy L. Paxton *Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830-1947* (Rutgers U.P., 1999); and Martin Thomas, ‘Colonial Minds and Colonial Violence: The Sétif Uprising and the Savage Economics of Colonialism’, in Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind, v. 2: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (Lincoln and London: 2011), 140-175.

⁸⁵ Jon Lawrence, ‘Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 75, 3 (September 2003): 557-589.

⁸⁶ Apart from Jordanna Bailkin, see also R. W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2008); and Martin J. Wiener, *An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder, and Justice under British Rule, 1870-1935* (Cambridge, 2009); and Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2011).

interpreters. In the language of violence, conquerors can express themselves directly and may also know that they have been understood.⁸⁷

As the cases examined in this article suggests, however, this is a rather naïve understanding of how violence works within a colonial context. Colonial violence was predicated on the assumption that the only language understood by ‘un-civilized’ people was a prompt and forceful response. The perceived necessity of nipping unrest in the bud, invoked by Cowan in 1872, assumed the force of doctrine within British military practice and in Callwell’s classic manual, *Small Wars* from 1896, it was argued that: ‘The lower races are impressionable. They are greatly influenced by a resolute bearing and by a determined course of action.’⁸⁸ In what could have been a direct quotation from Forsyth, Callwell further stated that ‘Uncivilized races attribute leniency to timidity.’⁸⁹ Colonial violence was in fact culturally constructed and the levels of brutality deemed to be necessary within the European empires, were by the same double-standard considered unacceptable in conflicts between ‘civilized’ people. It was precisely because of the perceived need for a culturally specific ‘translation’ of violence that colonial punishment and military campaigns in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were so demonstratively brutal.

The language and mode of analysis derived from Foucault’s discussion of executions, based as it was purely on Western concepts of sovereignty and statehood, is thus also of limited use when applied to the colonial situation. The executions of 1857 were not spectacles of entertainment for the masses, nor were they lessons in citizenship – not least because Indians did not enjoy the status of citizens within the colonial state. Ruling through coercion rather than consent, the British could only ever hope to assert that power, not elicit the approval of the crowd. And where the European sovereign might fear that the crowd identified with the convict on the scaffold, the British in India could simply assume this to be the case – the mass-executions were never intended solely, or even primarily, for the attendant *sepoys*, but by extension for the entire Indian population. Accordingly, these spectacles became occasions for the British to reinforce racialized hierarchy as both native regiments and locals were forcefully gathered to witness the spectacle – invariably and demonstratively covered by the loaded guns of European troops prepared to carry into force the symbolic message of the executions. The colonial execution was thus aimed, sometimes quite literally, at the native spectators (in uniform and without) but operated within a structure of power from which they were specifically excluded. These spectacles furthermore marked the ultimate point of escalation in the application of brute force – beyond the cannon, there was no tool left in the armoury of the colonial state. As a political ritual, the mass-executions were accordingly both performative and constitutive of colonial power.

During moments of crisis, the forms and function of violence in the colonial context did not significantly differ between executions resulting from a legal process, however perfunctory, and the discretionary actions of the ‘man on the spot’. Dyer’s actions closely mimicked the ritual

⁸⁷ Trutz von Trotha, “The Fellows Can Just Starve”: On Wars of “Pacification” in the African Colonies of Imperial Germany and the Concept of “Total War”, in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering & Stig Förster (eds), *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge, 2006), 415-436, 422.

⁸⁸ C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London, 1896; third ed. 1906), 72.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

of formalized punishment and while the Amritsar Massacre was not technically speaking an execution, the logic that underpinned its violence was identical to the colonial rituals of power enacted during 1857 and afterwards. The local confrontation at Amritsar was perceived by Dyer in the light of a bigger existential struggle and the fear that he and his men might be cut off and ambushed in the narrow alleys of Amritsar was the very same fear that the British in India might be overrun. Crucially, the same act saved them all with a single stroke. The Amritsar Massacre was thus ‘calculated to strike terror’ as much as were the mass-executions of sepoys during the ‘Mutiny’ and of Kukas in 1872. The purely instrumental nature of the spectacle of violence as performative rather than punitive was made very clear by Sir John Lawrence prior to the execution of mutineers at Peshawar in June 1857:

In respect to the mutineers of the 55th, they were taken fighting against us, and so far deserve little mercy. But, on full reflection, I would not put them all to death. I do not think that we should be justified in the eyes of the Almighty in doing so. A hundred and twenty men are a large number to put to death. Our object is to make an example to terrify others. I think this object would be effectually gained by destroying from a quarter to a third of them.⁹⁰

Lawrence’s successor sixty years on, Lieutenant-Governor E.D. MacLagan, expressed very similar views during the trial of the rioters who had killed two of the British civilians at Amritsar on 10 April 1919:

The attack was a brutal and unjustifiable crime and all the accused have merited the sentence of death [...] In view, however, of the fact that a considerable number of persons have been sentenced to death for offences committed in Amritsar on this same day, I do not think it necessary in the interest of justice that the whole of the 20 petitioners should be executed.⁹¹

This further suggests that the overwhelming focus on the colonized body, so common to much recent literature on colonial violence, might not always be equally pertinent.⁹² The evidence examined in this article certainly implies that the body of the condemned was less significant as a receptacle of colonial violence than it was simply as a message of colonial power.⁹³

The symbolic significance of Dyer’s actions is further revealed by his remarkable admission in front of the Hunter Committee: ‘I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing but they would have come back again and laughed, and I would have made, what I consider, a fool of myself.’⁹⁴ This statement is strikingly similar to the one found in George Orwell’s famous short-story, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, written about his experience in Burma little more than a decade after Amritsar.⁹⁵ Speaking, as it were, from opposite ends of the

⁹⁰ Quoted in Kaye and Malleon, 367.

⁹¹ Order by MacLagan, 16 June 1919, Punjab State Archives, Home Judicial, f.5315/65, quoted in Taylor Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India, 1919-1956* (London: 2010), 20.

⁹² See E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800-1947* (Cambridge, 2001); and Steven Pierce & Anupama Rao (eds.) *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism* (Durham, 2006).

⁹³ This is also the point on which the argument presented in this article diverges most from that of Rudrangshu Mukherjee, whose discussion of ‘canonizing’ emphasises the colonial state’s relation to the body of the *sepoy*, see Mukherjee, ‘The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857: Reply’, *Past & Present*, 142 (Feb., 1994): 178-189, 184.

⁹⁴ Testimony of Dyer before the Hunter Committee, *Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919-20: Evidence vol III: Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 117.

⁹⁵ ‘A white man mustn’t be frightened in front of ‘natives’; and so, in general, he isn’t frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on

political spectrum, Dyer and Orwell both gave voice to the acute sense of vulnerability that characterised the colonial experience, especially during moments of crisis. The perceived need to maintain British prestige and saving face at all costs thus imbued colonial violence with a crucially performative function. Regardless of the legal context, these spectacles of collective violence were not concerned with the guilt of the individual and there was never any question as to proportionality of the punishment. With the very survival of the colonial state at stake, the function of violence was simply to 'strike terror' and, as Dyer put it, "There could be no question of undue severity'. As a technique of power, violence was at times both a means and an end.⁹⁶

IN A RECENT STUDY of everyday violence in British India, Elizabeth Kolsky has argued that:

...the history of violence in British India cannot be understood by traversing from one cataclysmic event to the next, from the Battle of Plassey to the Uprising of 1857 to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, as the micro-moments betwixt and between these macro-events are where the violence central to the workings of empire can be found.⁹⁷

'Traversing from one cataclysmic event to the next' is nevertheless exactly what this article has done and while quotidian acts of violence may have defined the subaltern experience of colonialism more generally, it is in the study of crises that historians are offered a glimpse, however brief, of the colonial state stripped bare and the spectacle of power expressed in the pure form of brute force. It is, I suggest, moments of crisis that reveal the inner workings of colonial governance, as the British in India enacted extreme forms of violence, not merely to preserve law and order, but in preservation of their own lives. The study of large-scale violence in the colonial sphere is, however, not simply a matter of studying the highlights in the grand narrative of imperialism and anti-colonial struggle as Jonathan Saha has recently suggested.⁹⁸

Considering the forms and functions of colonial violence, there is a much closer relationship between the quotidian and the exceptional than is usually acknowledged. The Amritsar Massacre was not simply a unique event, nor a single example of excess within an otherwise well-functioning liberal colonial state. Rather, it was but the most extreme expression of what Partha Chatterjee has described as the 'rule of colonial difference'.⁹⁹ The Amritsar Massacre might have been unique in its scope, but the same logic that guided Dyer at Jallianwala Bagh also informed his invention of the 'crawling order'. One was a brutal massacre, the other a relatively harmless but very public humiliation, yet both constituted culturally specific displays of colonial power and both were intrinsically collective and implicitly racialized. The entire range of punishment available to the British in India, what Taylor Sherman has described as the 'coercive network', was in fact deployed in Punjab during the disturbances of 1919, from compulsory displays of respect towards Europeans in the street (*salaaming*) to machine-gun strafing from

and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.' George Orwell, 'Shooting an Elephant', *New Writing* (1936).

⁹⁶ See also Mark Mazower, 'Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century', *American Historical Review*, 107, 4 (2002): 1147-1167.

⁹⁷ Kolsky, 2.

⁹⁸ Jonathan Saha, 'Histories of Everyday Violence in British India', *History Compass*, 9, 11 (Oct., 2011): 844-853, 845.

⁹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi, 1994), 10 & 19.

airplanes and armoured trains.¹⁰⁰ Each and every one of these measures was predicated on the bodily alterity and essential ‘othering’ of Indians.

By definition lacking the consent of the governed, the colonial state was intrinsically volatile and may be said to have been in a permanent state of latent crisis. Under colonial rule, the local population never enjoyed the status of subjects and could instead be treated collectively as potential enemies during disturbances. This is what Achille Mbembe referred to when he suggested that ‘the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended – the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of “civilization”.’¹⁰¹ The concept of ‘rule of law’ is thus inherently contradictory within a colonial context and the instances of violence examined in this article belie the notion of the British Empire as a fundamentally liberal empire. A closer examination of the events of 1857, 1872 and 1919 nevertheless reveal that the forms and legitimacy of colonial violence were never uncontested – within the colonial sphere or in the imperial metropole. A feature in the American *Harper’s Weekly* in 1888 made the following observation in reference to a painting by Russian artist Vasily Verestchagin, depicting an execution by cannon in British India:

This scene was a standard British way to settle scores, and continued long after the war of independence in 1857. It was hotly debated in British and Indian newspapers between liberals and conservatives. To the former it was an excess of colonialism, to the latter an essential ingredient.¹⁰²

This ‘excess of colonialism’ caused concern because it belied the ideals of the civilizing mission in such a spectacular manner and made imperialism so hard to defend. Public opinion back in Britain underwent a gradual transformation between 1857 and 1919, and colonial acts of violence, that had barely raised an eyebrow during the ‘Mutiny’, caused an outcry in the aftermath of the First World War.¹⁰³ Violence thus became increasingly difficult to legitimize yet remained an intrinsic aspect of the colonial order, whether it was in the form of everyday beatings and whippings of servants and workers, the sustained use of force during wars of pacification and punitive expeditions, or the brutal and drawn-out conflicts of decolonization. The means by which the Empire was defended did of course undergo a transformation and Cowan and Forsyth’s ill-fated suppression of the ‘Kooka Outbreak’ in 1872 was the last time that the British in India deployed the cannon for executions. As a direct result of the official disavowal of Dyer’s actions in 1920, the British Army furthermore adopted the doctrine of ‘minimum force’ to ensure that only the least amount of force necessary was used during military operations. Yet the doctrine of ‘minimum force’, which informed British imperial policing during the interwar period, and counter-insurgency after 1945, in truth made a virtue out of necessity. Outnumbered and overstretched, the British had to maintain control throughout the Empire by

¹⁰⁰ Sherman, 1-37.

¹⁰¹ Achille Mbembe (trans. Libby Meintjes), ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15, 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40, 24. The theoretical point of reference is of course the work of Carl Schmidt and Giorgio Agamben, but see also Nasser Hussain, *The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law* (Ann Arbor, 2003).

¹⁰² ‘The Verestchagin Exhibition’, *Harper’s Weekly*, 17 November 1888. This well-known painting is often mistaken for a depiction of *sepoy*s being executed during 1857, but is in fact showing the execution of Kukas at Malerkotla in 1872.

¹⁰³ See also Taylor Sherman, ‘Tensions of Colonial Punishment: Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Study of Coercive Networks in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean’, *History Compass*, 7, 3 (2009): 659-677. The perceived legality, or lack thereof, was crucially important in shaping official and public responses to colonial violence.

the limited means at their disposal and the application of force was thus determined by practical constraints as much as strategic and political considerations. For minimum force to be effective it also had to be exemplary and, paradoxically, it thus required the pre-emptive application of extreme force to suppress riots and insurrections before they escalated. In practice, ‘minimum force’ and exemplary violence were not incompatible and neither ‘minimum force’ nor the ‘rule of law’ necessarily entailed restraint.¹⁰⁴ The violence of 1857, 1872 and 1919 was neither the exception nor the rule; it was intermittent but systemic and the function of a colonial order that was never sufficiently strong to do without exemplary punishment or demonstrative violence.¹⁰⁵

It is indeed ironic that the inherent weakness of the colonial state was so dramatically revealed through its performance of absolute power. This contradiction of ‘white power and white vulnerability’¹⁰⁶ was the root cause of exemplary violence within the colonial order as Governor-General Lord Napier poignantly acknowledged when passing his final orders in the Kuka affair in 1872: ‘Summary orders are often taken for acts of vigour, when they are in truth acts of weakness. Such orders frequently show that those who give them doubt their own strength, and are afraid to be merciful to their opponents.’¹⁰⁷ That the use of violence might be counterproductive was even conceded in the final report of the Hunter Committee when Dyer’s rationale for opening fire at Jallianwala Bagh was finally dismissed in 1920: ‘The employment of excessive measures is as likely as not to produce the opposite result to that desired.’¹⁰⁸ Colonial violence ultimately undermined colonial authority, alienated the native population and turned its victims into martyrs of nationalist movements. It is thus noticeable that the sites of colonial violence became central to anti-colonial narratives and function as the locus of postcolonial pilgrimage where former revolutionaries and apologetic Western state-leaders alike pay their obeisance. Not only was colonial violence self-defeating, it has also permanently soured efforts to gloss over the legacies of imperialism in the world of today.

¹⁰⁴ See also Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons, ‘Dyer Consequences: The Trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of the “Minimum” Force Debate’, *boundary 2*, 26, 2 (Summer, 1999): 199-229; and Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ It is beyond the scope of the current article to explore the tactical legacies of colonial violence, but the endurance of its logic is amply documented within the existing literature, see Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford, 2008); David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967* (New York, 2012); and Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, California: 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Michael G. Vann, ‘Fear and Loathing in French Hanoi: Colonial White Images and Imaginings of “Native” Violence’, in Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind, v. 2: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (Lincoln and London: 2011), 52-76, 52.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Final Orders of General Governor in Council’, Bayley to Griffin, 30 April 1872, KO, 55.

¹⁰⁸ *Report of the Committee appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc* (London, 1920), 30-31.