

102ND ANNIVERSARY OF JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

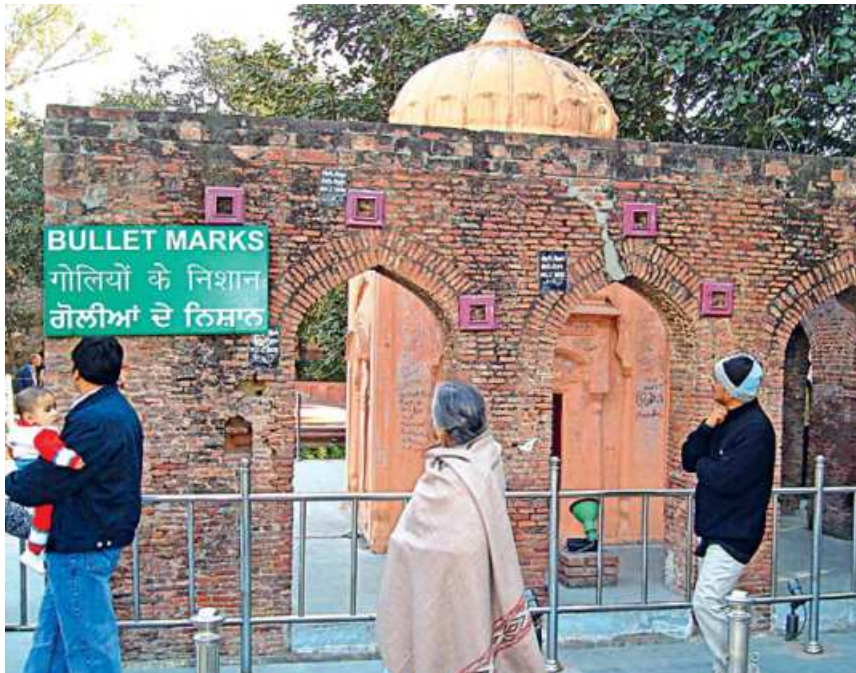
The End of Empire: The meanings of Jallianwala Bagh

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It has often been said that Britain lost its empire the day when, one hundred [two] years ago, 55-year old Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, commanding a regiment of 50 Gurkha and Baluchi riflemen, ordered firing without warning upon an unarmed crowd of over 15,000 and perhaps as many as 20,000 Indians gathered at an enclosure called the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, a stone's throw from the Golden Temple. The entrance to the Bagh was too narrow to admit two armoured cars with mounted machine guns that Dyer had brought with him; perhaps, to compensate for that shortcoming, Dyer directed his troops to fire wherever the crowd was densest. Dyer was not constrained by any conception of "the innocents": women, men, and children were all legitimate targets, and at Dyer's directions the troops deliberately aimed at those desperately seeking to clamber over the walls to safety. Some people doubtless jumped into a deep well, and thus to their death, located at the northern end of the Bagh, on the other side of the Bazar Lakar Mandi. The firing ended only when the troops ran out of ammunition; most of the 1650 rounds met their target, judging from the official tally of 379 dead and some 1,200 wounded. As the narrator Saleem in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* recalls, Dyer told his men: "Good shooting." The Sunday picnic was over, and the

wrote Gandhi in his autobiography, "observed a hartal on that day. It was a most wonderful spectacle." In the Punjab, however, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Michael O'Dwyer did not take kindly to the slightest expression of defiance of colonial authority and saw the "spectacle" as anything but "wonderful". He fancied himself a great upholder of the 'Punjab tradition', or the idea that ordinary Punjabis were simple folk without any interest in politics who had reposed their trust in the government and therefore deserved protection from corrupt urban-based nationalist Indians. The iron hand of the colonial state had saved the Punjab from the "mutiny" of 1857-58 and its corrosive effects and the peasantry of this state, according to the adherents of the 'Punjab tradition', expected the government to preserve "law and order." At a meeting of the Legislative Council in Lahore, O'Dwyer ridiculed the "recent puerile demonstrations against the Rowlatt Acts", describing them as indicative of "how easily the ignorant and credulous people, not one in a thousand of whom knows anything of the measure, can be misled." The agitators, he ominously warned, "have a day of reckoning in store for them."

What transpired in the days just before the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh need not be recounted at length. Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving betrayed the



Portion of a wall in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, Punjab, India, with bullet marks from the Massacre of Amritsar on April 13, 1919.

of colonial discourse.

The Government of the Punjab, in its own report, depicts the assault on Miss Sherwood as the most dastardly act imaginable. The crowd that pursued Miss Sherwood is said in the report to have raised cries of "Kill her, she is English." "The witnesses who are particularly good and have been entirely unshaken in cross-examination", states the report, "prove that towards the end of the chase she was seized by Ahmad Din, who seized her dress and threw her down. His brother, Jilla, pulled off her hat." Her assailants, let it be noted, are named as Muslims; her rescuers would be described as "Hindus": perhaps another attempt, I am tempted to think, to sow division among Indians. Another man "caught her by her hair" and then struck her on the head with one of his shoes. Here, quite unmistakably, one detects the spectre of the Rebellion of 1857-58: nothing had outraged English sentiments more than the assault on Englishwomen, though an inquiry initiated at the behest of the Viceroy, Lord Canning, in the aftermath of the Rebellion had established that no Englishwoman was subjected to sexual assault. Miss Sherwood was certainly at the mercy of her assaulters, and if nothing was more inaccessible to the Indian male than a white woman, here was a rare opportunity to make good that deficiency. In the event, the "savagery" mob which had been shouting 'Victory to Gandhi' [and] 'Victory to Kitchlew' raised

1857-58. Indeed, in the months ahead, the spectre of the Mutiny loomed over the prolific debates about the measures taken by the British to contain the disorders.

1919 was, however, not even remotely akin to 1857, if only because the Indian National Congress was now a formidable organization and, moreover, the British had failed to fully comprehend that politics had entered the phase of plebeian protest. Hundreds of people had been killed in cold blood, all because Dyer, by his own admission, had sought to "teach a lesson" to "wicked" Indians and create a "wide impression" of the costs of defying lawful authority. The idea of "fairness" and the notion that the British had instituted a regime of "law and order" that offered Indians deliverance from "despotism" had long been the principal pillars of colonial rule, and an inquiry into a massacre that threatened to stain the good name of the British was all but inevitable. It came in the form of the Disorders Inquiry Commission, presided over by Lord William Hunter of Scotland. The Commission held hearings over several months, in Lahore, Amritsar, Gujranwala, and various other cities. Both O'Dwyer and Dyer chafed at this inquiry, and many Britishers in India resented the intrusion into Indian affairs from London. The theory of "the man on the spot" was one of the cornerstones of colonial governmentality. Dyer had been confronted with what he perceived

Montagu went on to charge Dyer for "indulging in frightfulness." The grave import of this accusation would not have been lost on his fellow Parliamentarians: "frightfulness" was the English rendering of *schrecklichkeit*, the word first used to describe the terrorism inflicted upon Belgian civilians by the German army in World War I. That an English army officer should stand accused of pursuing the policies of militaristic Germans was an intolerable idea.

The rampant anti-Semitism of the English elite already made Montagu, a practicing Jew, a suspect figure, and his criticisms of Dyer did nothing to endear him to the General's supporters and the defenders of the political authoritarianism associated with the Punjab tradition. Conservatives charged the government with throwing Dyer to the wolves. For every person prepared to critique Dyer, two stood forward to defend him. The Hunter Commission had found him guilty only of an error in judgment, exercising excessive force, and having a somewhat mistaken conception of his duties. Dyer nevertheless could not be permitted to continue in his position, and he was dismissed from the army, even if many senior officers in the Army Council demurred, at half-pay. All this was enough to outrage the English public, for whom, the same Orwell had once remarked, liberty was like the very air they breathed. A hero had been unfairly maligned, and the Morning Post raised funds in support of "The Man Who Saved India." At its closing, the Fund amounted to over 26,000 Pounds, or a little over 1.1 million Pounds in today's currency. The "Butcher of Amritsar" went into luxurious retirement, though arteriosclerosis cut his life short.

There is by now a familiar narrative of the Indian reaction to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Tagore described the incident in a moving letter to the Viceroy where he asked to be relieved of his knighthood as "without parallel in the history of civilized governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote." More than twenty years later, Udham Singh, who was 20 years old at the massacre, sneaked into Caxton Hall in London where O'Dwyer was attending a lecture and shot him dead with a revolver. The day of reckoning that O'Dwyer had spoken of had come, if unexpectedly. What most accounts occlude is a stunning little detail: when captured, and in subsequent police documents, Udham Singh gave his name as Mohamed Singh Azad, so to taunt the British whose entire Indian adventure had been tainted by their willful determination to characterize India as a land of eternal communal tensions. And then there was Gandhi, who with his gift for neologisms coined the word "Dyerism" to signify the repressive apparatus of a state that bears no responsibility to its subjects. It was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the atrocities in the Punjab that, as Gandhi would describe at his trial in 1922, turned him from a "staunch loyalist" and "co-operator" to an "uncompromising disaffectionist" who was convinced that British rule had made "India more helpless than she ever was before, politically and economically."

Much has been made of the fact that during the debate in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill condemned the "slaughter" at the Jallianwala Bagh as an episode "without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire." Churchill of course had a way with words, and so he continued: "It is an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation." But by what measure do we describe the incident as "singular"? As wartime Prime Minister two decades later, Churchill was not merely indifferent to the plight of millions in Bengal facing acute food shortages, but almost certainly precipitated with his callous policies a holocaust that led to the death of three million people. It barely suffices to say that if ever there was an incident of the pot calling the kettle black, this would be it: the monstrosity of it is that Churchill, a dedicated racist his entire life, appears as the guardian of English virtues in this debate. Dyer, on all accounts, remained unrepentant to the end of his life, but was Churchill ever afflicted by remorse? It cannot be said that remorse is part of the story of the Jallianwala Bagh. Remorse, it should be clear, is not part of the lexicon of any colonial state.

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*This is an abridged version. The original article is available at vinaylal.wordpress.com. A part of the article appeared, in a slightly different version, as "100 Years Later: The Many Meanings of Jallianwala Bagh" in *The Hindu* on April 6, 2019.*



People gather at Jallianwala Bagh months after the massacre on Baisakhi day in 1919

men could take pride in their training: "We have done a jolly good thing."

Spring was in the air: April 13 was Baisakhi, and crowds from the city and adjoining countryside were milling around the Golden Temple and the vicinity. But the days immediately preceding had been taxing, ridden with uncertainty and violence. The end of World War I, to which ironically subjugated Indians had contributed with their own blood, brought forth not intimations of greater freedom but repression. A Declaration by Secretary of State Edwin Montagu in August 1917 had provided more than a ray of hope to those Indians were still inclined to believe in the goodwill of the British. It promised, in its most famous line, "Increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration, and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire."

The Montagu Declaration would be followed, in mid-1918, by the "Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms" which led to a minimal increase in Indian franchise and similarly a limited devolution of power to the central and provincial legislative councils. Though British conservatives predictably railed against these concessions, the so-called liberal element in Indian politics grumbled that the reforms amounted to very little. One might say that, as soon as the war was over, the British lion bared its fangs. A committee appointed to inquire into alleged revolutionary conspiracies headed by Justice Rowlatt recommended the suspension of civil liberties, and repressive legislation followed in quick succession. The British resort to preventive detention in an attempt to quell nationalist agitation was captured in the headlines of one Lahore newspaper with the phrase, "no dalil, no vakeel, no appeal."

Mohandas Gandhi, who had returned to India from his twenty-year sojourn in South Africa four years ago, responded to the Rowlatt Acts with a call to the nation to observe a general hartal and so launched himself into national politics. "The whole of India from one end to the other, towns as well as villages,"

fact that truly stoked the anxiety of the British when, in a telegram to O'Dwyer on April 9, he described the Muslims and Hindus of Amritsar as having "united." The British responded to this wholly unwelcome show of solidarity with the arrest and expulsion of two local leaders, Dr. Satyapal and Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, precipitating large demonstrations. Twenty Indians died in police firings; British-owned banks were attacked by crowds. Nothing infuriated the British more, however, than the assault on an Englishwoman, Marcia Sherwood: she was badly beaten but saved by other Indians. The white woman was nothing short of sacred, inviolable, 'untouchable' to the Indian. The men of the ruling colonial elite perceived the loss of her dignity as an affront to them. Their humiliation had to be avenged, and so it was: the street where Miss Sherwood had been assaulted was sealed off and Indians had to crawl if they wished to make their way in or out of the lane. A flogging post was set up to whip sense and discipline into those Indians who might think otherwise.

"It seemed intolerable to me", Dyer was later to write, "that some suitable punishment could not be meted out. Civil law was at an end and I searched my brain for some military punishment to meet the case." Testifying later before the official committee that began its deliberations on the Punjab disturbances more than six months after the incidents in question, Dyer stated that he "also wanted to keep the street what I call sacred." His primary motivation was to punish "the wicked", and though he could have chosen any number of ways to implement his resolve, he "also" wanted to render the street "sacred". But what could Dyer have meant in declaring his resolve to keep the street sacred? And by what reasoning did he seek to uphold the idea of the sacred through the infliction of the gravest form of humiliation upon others? Dyer claimed that he had fired at the Jallianwala Bagh to save lives: if the way to save lives is to kill people, then surely it is not inconceivable that the way to the sacred is through the treacherous path of the profane. Dyer's action in keeping the street where Miss Sherwood was assaulted "sacred" cannot be reduced to an inversion characteristic



PHOTO: WIKI COMMONS.

Colonel Reginald Dyer (acting Brigadier-General) directed his troops to fire wherever the crowd was densest. He was not constrained by any conception of "the innocents": women, men, and children were all legitimate targets.

the cry 'she is dead' and moved on. Then, several days later, Dyer inspected the spot where she "ultimately fell", and ordered a "triangle", or whipping post, to be set up at that spot. Two British pickets were also posted, one at either end of the street, "with orders to allow no Indians to pass, [and] that if they had to pass they must go through on all fours." In the more graphic language of the Congress Committee, "the process consisted in the persons laying flat on their bellies and crawling exactly like reptiles."

Gandhi would go on to describe "the crawling lane" as the site of a national humiliation. Once the firing at the Jallianwala Bagh had stopped, Dyer did not stop to render aid to the wounded. He would later state that no one asked for his help and thus he moved on. The city was under martial law, and what the British described as "disturbances" had rocked other parts of the Punjab. Demonstrators were strafed from the air: this initiated a new phase in colonial warfare, and George Orwell in a scintillating essay noted the corruption of the English language entailed in describing such brutal suppression as "pacification." O'Dwyer, who signaled his approval of the actions taken by Dyer in Amritsar, was quite certain that the Punjab had been saved from a dire situation which recalled the Rebellion of



Udham Singh avenged The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre by assassinating Michael O'Dwyer who was the Governor of Punjab in 1919 and had supported General Dyer's massacre plan.

to be a mutiny-like situation, and as the "man on the spot" he alone knew what was required to create a suitable effect.

The "Punjab Disturbances" would come to occupy a distinct place in the annals of colonial Indian history. The Congress appointed its own committee of inquiry, and it took a much harsher view of British actions than the official Hunter Commission. Much as Indians such as Tilak, Nehru, and Gandhi had demonstrated their mastery of the courtroom, so the Congress showed that they had a command over the inquiry commission both as a form of governance and as a form of knowledge. Indian affairs had never drawn much interest in Parliament, but, quite unusually, the Jallianwala Bagh atrocity and its aftermath were debated vigorously both in the Commons and among the Lords. Secretary of State for India Edwin Montagu opened the proceedings in the Commons with the observation that Dyer had a reputation as an officer whose conduct was "gallant". Montagu was grateful for the service that Dyer had rendered to the Empire. Nevertheless, an officer who justified his actions with the submission that he was prepared to inflict greater casualties if he had the means to do so from none other than a motive "to teach a moral lesson to the whole of the Punjab," was guilty of engaging in "a doctrine of terrorism."