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Guilt in the Archive: Photography and the Amritsar Massacre of 1919

Sean Willcock

What role should photographic evidence play in current debates about whether or not Britain should apologise for the historic crimes of empire? This article examines the photographs that emerged from the Amritsar Massacre of 13 April 1919, considering what such documents can tell us about the relationship between atrocity and the imperial project. Colonials working in both official and unofficial capacities turned to photography in their attempt to justify this bloody twentieth-century episode. Such photography addressed colonial debates concerning the scope of moral and legal, individual and collective, and British and Indian culpability for the bloody episode. It is therefore important that we attend to such visual evidence from the vexed standpoint of the massacre's centenary, as the UK is enjoined to apologise for the infamous slaughter of Indian men, women and children.

Keywords: *Amritsar Massacre, India, Narayan Vinayak Virkar (date b/d)*

counterinsurgency, archive, apology, atrocity, war photography, Reginald Mortimer Howgego

This article considers the role of photographic evidence in archiving – and attempting to justify – the Amritsar Massacre that took place under the British Raj on 13 April 1919. No images document the colonial massacre itself, but a number of photographs chronicle the sites upon

which violence occurred, as well as the public punishments of Indian men that took place under the aegis of martial law in the bitter spring of 1919 (figure 1). There has been significant pressure on the United Kingdom to apologise formally for what happened in Amritsar a hundred years ago. Prime Minister Theresa May recently echoed the sentiments of her predecessor, David Cameron, in calling the episode ‘shameful’,¹ but to the disappointment of many Indians – in particular to the descendants of the victims, some of whom were interviewed by the BBC in 2013 – British governments have stopped short of issuing an official apology.² May’s response to the centenary of the massacre – ‘We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused’ – has been criticised by the former High Commissioner of India to the United Kingdom, Navtej Sarna, for its ‘passiveness’ and ‘blandness’: ‘general homilies with hands nicely off and no admission of a larger culpability of racialised colonial violence that underpinned imperialism.’³ At stake in the phrasing of May’s statement is thus not only the nature of the UK’s ethical relationship to its past acts of violence, but a certain conception of the relationship between atrocity and the wider imperial project – that is, whether the massacre should be understood as a regrettable anomaly within the history of the Raj, or as a symptomatic feature of it.

The photographs examined here represent attempts by twentieth-century colonials to navigate this fraught landscape of moral and legal, individual and collective, and British and Indian culpability for the bloody episode of 1919. How might such photographs inform current debates regarding national guilt for this totemic crime of empire? I address this question not only by turning to the photographic archives of the interwar imperial government, but also to a belated postcolonial accounting of the episode. Sixty years on from the atrocity, imperial historians,

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47887322>. Accessed 21 April 2019.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-21519719>. Accessed 30 November 2018.

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/deep-regret-is-simply-not-good-enough/article26810058.ece>

newspaper editors and the BBC began receiving letters from a man who was agitated by reports in which the incident in Amritsar was referred to as a ‘massacre’ – its most common moniker. Objecting to the term, he made a plea of mitigating circumstances, providing an account of the regional turbulence that had preceded Brigadier-General Reginald E. H. Dyer’s notorious order to open fire on a crowd of Indian men, women, and children. Dyer, the letters contended, had been unfairly maligned within the historical record; he had in fact ‘saved India’ (a phrase borrowed from the pro-Dyer campaign run by the *Morning Post* in 1920) with his actions.⁴ ‘How do I know all this?’ asked the outraged epistoler, ‘I was there’ – adding, ‘I have photographs taken in Amritsar [...] which I should be pleased to show anyone interested’.⁵ The author’s assertion that photographic evidence could support such a hardline pro-imperial stance placed a large degree of faith in the medium to help overturn the historical censure of a man who had come to be known as the ‘Butcher of Amritsar’. It thus seems important that we attend to such images from the vexed standpoint of the massacre’s centenary, as the UK is enjoined to apologise for Dyer’s infamous command.

The atrocity that was being defended in such correspondence is best described in Dyer’s own words, given in his account to the Hunter Committee that was set up by the colonial government to investigate the matter:

I fired and continued to fire until the [Indian] 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

⁴ The *Morning Post* called Dyer ‘The Man Who Saved India’, and launched the ‘General Dyer Fund’, raising £26,000. Rudyard Kipling contributed £10. *Morning Post*, 17 July 1920.

⁵ ‘Letter to the editor from Mr Howgego, 23 Woodville Road, Ipswich’, *Evening Star*, 3 October 1980.

From press cutting held alongside photographs in the British Library, PDP/Photo 566.

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.⁶

Dyer was unrepentant, then, arguing that his extraordinary violence served as a necessary spectacle of imperial power, the very extremity of which was an essential part of its pedagogy: the aim was to pacify an entire region with an act of exemplary punishment.⁷ Dyer was operating under conditions of martial law, with the colonial government attempting to get a grip on the growing state of anti-colonial activity in the area. A curfew was in effect, public meetings were banned, and tempers were frayed. A few days before Dyer's bloody intervention, Indian political protestors demanding the release of imprisoned leaders of the Indian independence movement had been fired upon by the British military, causing violent eruptions in which five Europeans were killed. One woman, an English missionary called Miss Marcella Sherwood, was later set upon by an Indian mob, stripped, and beaten. A vengeful Dyer, outraged by this assault, arrived in Amritsar to take control of the fractious city the following day.

In this fraught climate, the peaceful Indian crowd that gathered in the garden enclosure at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April to hear a political speech was not looked on kindly by the Brigadier-General. Upon arrival in the city Dyer had issued a decree that no such congregation should take place. Furious that he had been disobeyed, he took fifty Gurkha troops to the

⁶ Brigadier-General R. E. H. Dyer, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1919–1920: Evidence, iii: Amritsar*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1920, 47.

⁷ My account of the Amritsar Massacre and its significance is indebted to the excellent scholarship of Kim Wagner. See Kim Wagner, “‘Calculated to Strike Terror’: The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence”, *Past and Present*, no. 233 (November 2016), 185–225.

enclosed space and – without warning – ordered them to open fire on the twenty thousand Indians gathered inside. ‘I was going to punish them,’ he later said, ‘I wanted to reduce their *morale*; the *morale* of the rebels’.⁸ As the panicked crowd stampeded towards thin exits or attempted to scale the walls of the enclosure, Dyer took the time to reload and direct fire towards those attempting to escape. The British estimated the dead at 379, with another eleven hundred wounded; the Indian National Congress, however, gave a much higher toll: one thousand dead, and fifteen hundred wounded.⁹ ‘I think it quite possible’, said Dyer in his testimony, ‘that I could have dispersed them perhaps even without firing...[but] then they would all come back and laugh at me, and I considered I would be making myself a fool.’¹⁰

Archiving the Atrocity

In a photographic album produced for the archives of the India Office Record Department shortly after Dyer’s terrible intervention, there is an official survey of sites ‘connected with the unrest and massacre’.¹¹ As Christopher Pinney has written, the imagery is structured around a series of conspicuous absences, forming ‘Atget-like records of a crime that has passed’: abandoned streets, the empty sites of Indian violence, images which, at best, serve as evidence of damaged colonial property.¹² The images overwhelmingly focus on sites of Indian unrest, rather

⁸ Brigadier-General R. E. H. Dyer, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1919–1920: Evidence, iii: Amritsar*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1920, 190.

⁹ Nick Lloyd, *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day*, London: I. B. Taurus 2011, 180.

¹⁰ Brigadier-General R. E. H. Dyer, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1919–1920: Evidence, iii: Amritsar*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1920, 191.

¹¹ *Views of Scenes Connected with the Unrest and Massacre at Amritsar*, Photo 39: 1919, British Library.

¹² Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography to India*, London: British Library 2008, 85.

than on the location of Dyer's shooting. Dyer was later recalled to England, widely condemned for his use of excessive force, and stripped of his command following the massacre. Yet he was not without his sympathisers, especially in colonial circles who shared his dread of the Indian mob. This album was an exercise in exculpation for the British, attempting to harness photography's indexical authority to create a body of evidence that shifted the blame for the atrocity onto an unruly subject population.¹³

Yet a few images from this official album *do* document the site of Dyer's mass killing (figure 2). These are scenes of ghostly absence, but even in their emptiness they are damning – the very geography of the atrocity site served to underpin the extremity of Dyer's response. One of the primary criticisms launched against Dyer was that the Jallianwallah Bagh garden was an enclosed space with only a few narrow exits. As the crowd ran away to escape his fire, Dyer reportedly directed his troops to shoot into those paths.¹⁴ Even in the terse language of the government captions, the word 'narrow' in the description of a photograph showing the corridor leading into the kill zone functions as an implicit criticism of Dyer (figure 3). The walls press into the picture space, articulating a shadowy and claustrophobic passage which, though the caption does not mention it, was where many Indians were forced to clamber in their desperate attempt to escape the guns strafing the congested enclosure behind them.

Taken as a whole, however, these photographs do not dwell overly on Dyer's merciless actions. They highlight supposed Indian provocations for the massacre, but at the same time they serve as a virtual pacification of Amritsar. Many of the photographs, like those of the massacre site itself, are eerily depopulated – an erasure of Indians which, under the murderous

¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴ Lloyd, xxiii.

circumstances, seems to embody the ‘necropolitics’ of empire.¹⁵ Other scenes, however, do admit an Indian presence. ‘Square Opening Out from Carriage Overbridge’ (figure 4) echoes the popular commercial imagery of the Bourne & Shepherd photography studio which operated out of Calcutta, and which dominated the Indian photographic market in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This business thrived on producing such images of immobilised and quiescent Indian figures, which – as generic *staffage* – drew on the tranquil resonances of a picturesque artistic tradition that had been popular with colonials in India since the eighteenth century. Such figures helped to picture the Indian landscape as a manageable and docile space; consequently, picturesque staffage was repeatedly used in paintings and photographs of postconflict sites in India, functioning like an aesthetic balm on the wounds of empire. Gary D. Sampson has described the basic political tenor that such representations had for viewers, noting that, through its correlation with traditions of landscape art that situated figures within a benign pastoral system, Indian staffage helped restore once tumultuous colonial warzones to a comfortingly familiar mode of ‘idyllic calm’.¹⁶ Firmly rooted in European landscape conventions, staffage emerged in the South Asian context as a means of constructing the Indian subject as sedate, indolent and unthreatening – and therefore acquiescent in their own political domination.

The photographs from the Amritsar album therefore partook of a potent and longstanding aesthetic strategy for symbolically pacifying a terrain. Interestingly, however, in the photographs of the site in Amritsar where Miss Sherwood had been violated, the colonial

¹⁵ See Achille Mbembé, ‘Necropolitics’, trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15: 1 (2003), 11–40.

¹⁶ Gary D. Sampson, ‘Unmasking the Colonial Picturesque: Samuel Bourne’s Photographs of Barrackpore Park’, in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, New York, Abingdon, Routledge, 2004, 96.

photographer diverged from the more standard deployment of an adult figure, in favour of using a young Indian boy in the scene (figure 5). This suggests that, even when expressed through the tranquilising conventions of picturesque staffage, the adult Indian male maintained a latent aura of threat, at least when seen in such highly charged contexts. The decision to use a child here functions symbolically to neuter Indian masculinity on the very spot where it had threatened the sanctity of white femininity. The boy's topless body is used as a surrogate for the stripped and violated Englishwoman, demonstrating the spot where she eventually took shelter. He turns away from the camera and into the hollows of this tomb-like opening, a supine posture that holds connotations of death. The shadow of (sexual) violence is cast across this scene in an uncomfortable manner. Children were not exempt from with British feelings of punitive outrage: Indian youths, some as young as thirteen, had been publicly flogged on one of the other spots where an Indian boy was later required to pose, this time fully clothed but with his right arm held up submissively behind his head (figure 6). In these photographs, the violently retributive temperament of the British is focussed on vulnerable child bodies.

This album's emphasis on sites of alleged *Indian* provocation, taken so shortly after the indiscriminate colonial massacre of an Indian crowd, functions to insinuate the general culpability of Indians for the violence they had endured at the hand of Dyer. Given the excessive and arbitrary nature of both the massacre and the public punishments being implemented in the city, it is unlikely that the pictured Indian figures felt completely exempt from imperial violence while their own bodies were being used by a colonial government photographer to document incriminating areas of anticolonial unrest. Indeed, when deployed on sites of violence, Indian staffage like this – with its generic, de-individualised approach to the Indian figure, who merely appears as an embodiment of Indianness rather than as a differentiated subject – is an aesthetic

device that destabilises the boundary between the innocent and the guilty.¹⁷ In times of unrest, when the Indian population began to be looked upon by colonials as an unruly mob, and the spectre of a full-blown insurgency started to loom (‘the countryside is densely populated with a people of an inflammable character’) the undifferentiated nature of staffage contained a dangerous resonance.¹⁸ It registered the vulnerability of the posing bodies and of Indians more broadly to what literature scholar Alex Tickell has described as ‘the fearful misrecognitions of a militia-led colonial society [... which] involve the potential interchangeability of any Indian man with a “mutinous” racial Other who is potentially *beyond* the law as a racially-coded version of *bare life*’.¹⁹

This was the psychological framework within which Dyer was operating: a paranoid way of seeing in which the category of the noncombatant struggled to even come into proper focus, and instead the Indian – or at least the Indian male – was indistinguishable from the insurgent, and ‘the assembly of the crowd [...] was for all practical purposes a declaration of war’.²⁰ There was a perception of collective Indian guilt for the riots: ‘Amritsar city, as a whole, had committed murder and rebellion’, said Dyer during the inquiry.²¹ Upon seeing the peaceful assembly in the Jallianwala Bagh, Dyer saw a prelude to an apocalyptic conflagration for the Raj: ‘It is sufficient to say that I knew that the final crisis had come’.²² Dyer and the colonial

¹⁷ For an elaboration of this analysis, see Sean Willcock, ‘Aesthetic Bodies: Posing on Sites of Violence in India, 1857–1900’, *History of Photography*, 39:2 (2015), 142–59.

¹⁸ *Army: Disturbances in the Punjab. Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B.* [3 July 1920], London, H. M. Stationary Office, 1920, .6.

¹⁹ Alex Tickell, *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830–1947*, New York: Routledge 2012, 92.

²⁰ *Army: Disturbances in the Punjab*, 19.

²¹ *Disorders Inquiry Committee*, 193.

²² *Army: Disturbances in the Punjab*, 7.

establishment more broadly were haunted by previous insurrections to the point where the unrest in Amritsar was not assessed on the basis of the actual level of threat it posed to British rule so much as it was seen in terms of an incendiary history of Anglo-Indian conflict.²³ This counterinsurgency visuality – in which there was a dangerous slippage between civilian and insurgent – was registered by imperial aesthetic practices in which staffage was employed on postconflict locations: those Indian figures were visually suspended between war and peace, placed in accordance with pacifying aesthetic conventions but on sites of violence that served as an inflammatory reminder of a past Indian rebelliousness.

Archival Afterlives

Let us now return to the strange postcolonial afterlife of this event, when, sixty years later, one Reginald Mortimer Howgego – a colonial soldier present during the unrest of 1919 – embarked on a campaign of letter-writing in which he sought to defend the Amritsar Massacre by submitting for consideration his own photographic chronicle of the episode. Howgego had been conscripted to the army at the start of the First World War (1914–1918) at the age of nineteen and deployed in India along the famously violent North West Frontier. During his time there he took photographs of everything from dead bodies to favoured dogs and cloud formations, sending images home to his mother. His collection of photographs shows the centrality of violence to the colonial soldier's everyday life.

In a letter home in September 1917, he wrote about a traumatic month of fighting in Waziristan, detailing the injuries, deaths, and fevers of his fellow soldiers in graphic but deadpan prose, as if the sights had not yet been emotionally processed. It is hard not to feel pity for the

²³ See Wagner, “‘Calculated to Strike Terror’”.

young conscript, whose letters attest to the brutalising nature of warfare in general, and the nature of the ‘savage warfare’ of colonial counterinsurgency in particular, predicated as it was on the belief that ‘uncivilised’ peoples only understood the language of violence and thus had to be pacified by ‘demonstratively brutal’ actions.²⁴ Howgego was drafted at a young age, placed in a position of mortal danger far from home, and required as part of his soldiering to engage in a pitiless method of conflict:

The next morning we had reveille at 4am breakfast at 4-15 and moved off at 5 o’clock to strafe a village. It was a fairly large place, of huts built of mud and wood, all the stuff worth taking was taken back to the camp and the remains burnt. [...] The next day we picqueted again for the road makers and the next we strafed 3 villages.²⁵

Howgego’s casual descriptions to his mother of routinely strafing and burning entire Afghan villages – with its implicit indifference to the distinction between civilians and fighters – show the same malignant colonial sensibility outlined above with regard to Dyer; and it is this sensibility that we glimpse in his photographs from his time in Amritsar two years later.

By the time Howgego began writing to newspaper editors, imperial historians, and the BBC in an attempt to rehabilitate Dyer’s reputation, he was in his eighties. In the mind of this Suffolk retiree, Dyer was ‘a first class soldier condemned by people at home who knew nothing

²⁴ Wagner, “‘Calculated to Strike Terror’”, 222.

²⁵ ‘R. M. Howgego to his mother, dated 11 September 1917’, Mss Eur C 340/2, India Office Records, British Library.

of India, his troops would have done anything and gone anywhere with him'.²⁶ In the British Library, there are papers that came via a local Ipswich archive in which we find Howgego's letters and photographs. Alongside these, there are newspaper clippings of 1970s articles on the events of 1919, with the word 'massacre' underlined. The word was like a trigger for the elderly Howgego. His often cantankerous letters received civil replies from most recipients, with the photographs returned. The strange thing is that historians and editors to whom Howgego wrote were not exactly critical of the British Empire anyway; as one writer said in his letter of response, his own perspective was 'very pro-Imperial'.²⁷

The fact that Howgego sought to exonerate Dyer makes the nature of his photographs surprising: for this is an imagery that chronicles colonial cruelty as much as anything else. The most arresting photograph is captioned simply 'Punishment' (figure 7); it shows a group of soldiers implementing Dyer's controversial 'crawling order', whereby any Indian man wishing to pass down the street on which Miss Sherwood had been assaulted was required to crawl. Dyer intended for this to impress upon the Indian population that the street was now 'holy ground' – a perverse sanctification of the space via the debasement of the Indian male.²⁸ Individual guilt was irrelevant; Indian masculinity as such is targeted here, with each crawling figure acting as a proxy for those who actually committed the offence. In another photograph of the same practice, captioned 'Making a Native Crawl down the Street as Punishment', a soldier jabs something at the anonymous crawling figure, and, in the front righthand corner, we see a whipping post

²⁶ 'Reginald Mortimer Howgego to Alfred Draper, dated 21 October 1978', IOR Mss Eur C 340/8, British Library.

²⁷ 'Graham Lord, Books Editor for *Sunday Express*, to R. M. Howgego, dated 23 June 1978', IOR Mss Eur C 340/8, British Library.

²⁸ *Army: Disturbances in the Punjab*, 17.

(figure 8), which Howgego also photographed in isolation (figure 9). These images show a city in the grips of a humiliating campaign of arbitrary public punishments.

The quality of Howgego's photographs of the 'crawling order' is poor. Faces are indistinct and thus depersonalised: reduced to uniforms, racial markers, postures of dominance and submission; individuals are transformed into ciphers for triumph and subjection. The engulfment of the crawling figure within the granular shadows of the image was likely not intentional, but due to the furtive nature of the image – taken quickly and illicitly by gloating soldiers – as well as the nature of the camera, probably a Vest Pocket Kodak, or VPK, also known as 'The Soldier's Kodak'.²⁹ This was a relatively affordable camera that was convenient for travel, utilising very small negatives which account in part for the lower quality resolution of the images from Amritsar. Yet such techno-material limitations – while not an intentional aspect of the abusive image – nevertheless have ethical implication for the viewer. The effacement functions to dehumanise, refusing the ethical appeal which Emmanuel Levinas locates within the human face.³⁰ As Judith Butler has written on torture photography, 'The question of reconstructing or, indeed, restituting the "humanity" of the victims' is a difficult task when faces are shrouded by hoods or other means.³¹ To be reduced merely to a general icon of suffering or victimhood effectively repeats the depersonalisation of the original act – whereby the man was scrubbed of individuality and made an emblem of criminal Indian masculinity – albeit in a different vein. However, the anonymity also allows us to more easily sidestep the question as to

²⁹ <https://blog.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/the-vest-pocket-kodak-was-the-soldiers-camera/> (accessed 30 November 2018). My thanks to Davy Jones for this identification.

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Ethics and the Face', in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht 1991, 194–211.

³¹ Judith Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', in *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 25 (2007), 956.

whether looking at these abusive photographs straightforwardly perpetuates the original abuse. The Sikh figure is neither completely captured by the photograph, nor completely exposed in his submission. The effacement is thus an ambivalent phenomenon, preventing humanisation but also making sure an identifiable person is not forever pinned to this moment.

Nevertheless, given that Howgego wanted these photographs to be seen by posterity – by historians in particular – we are, when we take account of these images, complying with the wishes of a man who revelled in the debasement of Indians. Some scholars have claimed that looking at such photographs necessarily places us in the position of the perpetrator: we occupy their subject position, reactivating their visual treatment of the victim. As Janina Struk has written on photographs of historic violence, ‘They had no choice but to be photographed. Now they have no choice but to be viewed by posterity. Didn’t they suffer enough the first time around?’³² This issue was also raised in discussion of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs from the Iraq War: that to consume photographs produced by perpetrators of abuse is to be rendered complicit in that abuse. Indeed, it is hard not to view Howgego’s images through the lens of Abu Ghraib, with their crude martial triumphalism, their celebration of the humiliation of brown bodies, their deployment of the camera to document – and even intensify – the punitive ordeal.

Considering Howgego’s diehard pro-Dyer angle, it is odd how casually he includes such images of whipping posts, wounded prisoners shackled in public, and Sikh men crawling down a street while being prodded by a British soldier’s bayonet. It highlights the slippery nature of photographic evidence as it registers across the political spectrum: such scenes would seem to speak precisely to the intemperance of Dyer’s regime in Amritsar, and not to any sort of justification for a mass killing. Yet Howgego did not expect the images to do all the historical

³² Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, London: I. B. Tauris 2005, 216.

work by themselves. Although his letters seem at times indicative of a certain senility, Howgego nevertheless grasped the importance of properly explaining his photographs with reference to his eyewitness narrative, and vice versa. He actively attempted to shape the images' significance for historians, supplementing his photographs with fairly extensive captions and, in his letters, his own story of finding his regiment diverted to Amritsar in April 1919 to deal with the outbreak of social unrest. Some captions are in pencil, faded, and were likely written around the time the photographs were produced. Others are in blue pen and add what he considered to be important information. The word 'riots', as well as information on the previous assault of Miss Sherwood, is given by way of explanation in the crawling order scenes. For the photograph captioned 'whipping post', Howgego added the word 'Riots' in one pen, and then, in another, 'Set up as a deterrent I did not see or hear of it actually in use' (figure 10). Actually, whipping posts were in use.³³

Such palimpsestic descriptions make sense as an attempt to justify or at least contextualise Dyer's actions. Like the government-commissioned photography album examined above, Howgego was mostly interested in highlighting Indian violence ('Events leading up to the shooting, were five Europeans murdered, three banks burned, railway stations burned, trains derailed and tracks destroyed and looting of goods trains').³⁴ In the following line, he added the detail 'Europeans killed' to the blue-pen rewrite of an earlier, faded-pencil sentence: 'National bank burned by rioters and Europeans killed. Myself in charge of escort moving cash from strong room which the rioters failed to open'.³⁵ Yet, as with the government album, we find only

³³ Lloyd, *Amritsar Massacre*, 147.

³⁴ Howgego, 'Letter to the Editor from Mr Howgego', *Evening Star*, 3 October 1980. From press cutting held alongside Howgego's photographs in the British Library, PDP/Photo 566.

³⁵ Howgego, *Photographs of the Riots in Amritsar*, Mss Eur C340, British Library.

images of absence. Among these fairly interchangeable empty crime scenes, it is the photographs of persecuted Indians which really arrest one's attention, ensuring that one carries not with the detritus of Indian riots, but with the severity of colonial martial law. So why include them in this exculpatory campaign?

It is in light of the Abu Ghraib photography that Howgego's invocation of these images perhaps starts to make sense as a plea for the justness of the Amritsar Massacre. In his book *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007), Stephen F. Eisenman situated the iconography of abuse in the Iraqi prison photographs within a longer European art history of the pathos formula, ranging from antiquity to modernity, in which suffering in war is aestheticised, while 'the supposed bestiality of the victim justifies the crushing violence of the oppressor'.³⁶ The Amritsar photographs, it seems, are being used by Howgego to illustrate this cruel visual logic, in which the spectacular debasement of Indian men is seen as confirmation that they deserved such debasement. Yet the triumphalist perspective of the pathos formula is not an inevitable outcome of such imagery; read against this grain, we can perceive not so much a portrait of Indian degradation as (to paraphrase Susie Linfield on Nazi photography) a *self-portrait of colonial degradation*.³⁷ We do not see in these images what the staunch imperialist Howgego wished for us to see, for his perspective was shaped by the vicious counterinsurgency mentality of empire, in which the boundaries between civilian and insurgent, innocent and guilty, were dangerously blurred. Seen outside of Howgego's own particular 'interpretative community', the Indian oppression glimpsed here is not self-justifying.

³⁶ Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, London: Reaktion Books 2007, 101.

³⁷ Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2012, 71.

When we see images like these circulated to historians without concern that they might compromise the author or undermine their campaign to rehabilitate empire, we see a blind, reflexive dehumanisation of the colonised, in which the figure of the Indian lacked any meaningful ethical appeal. These photographs thus reveal the perspective of the frontier warzone, wherein dramatic spectacles of often indiscriminate violence precluded ethical sensitivity towards individuals: ‘counterinsurgency warfare, characterized by unlimited violence against civilian populations invariably projected onto the enemy alone, allows for no [...] recognition of shared humanity’.³⁸ Yet the imagery also reveals the excessive enjoyment taken in counterinsurgency’s strategic violence. This colonial jouissance is evidenced by the sexualised nature of punishments in these photographs, with racial debasement effected through topless and supine Indian boys, public whippings, and prostrate Sikh men with phallic bayonets directed at their backside. Violence of this sort was staged not just to serve as a dispassionate example to unruly elements of the population, but also for the aesthetic consumption of the coloniser. Such an ‘aesthetics of depravity’ and its ‘disturbing pleasures’ arguably stem from the very nature of modern counterinsurgency warfare: enactments of violence create moments of clarity about one’s relative position – which, in the act of aggression, neatly splits into the binary of perpetrator and victim – within a mode of warfare increasingly characterised by an unnerving visual uncertainty regarding who is, and who is not, one’s enemy.³⁹

Conclusion

³⁸ Susan L. Carruthers, ‘Why Can’t We See Insurgents? Enmity, Invisibility, and Counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan’, *Photography and Culture*, 8:2 (2015), 206.

³⁹ See Henry A. Giroux, ‘Disturbing Pleasures: Murderous Images and the Aesthetics of Depravity’, *Third Text*, 26:3 (2012), 259–73.

Howgego's imagery is a product of the imperial archival impulse, but it is not bound to sustain imperial narratives: in attesting to imperial violence, it can also be readily absorbed into the counternarratives that were explicitly built around the *Indian* archiving of Amritsar. In the aftermath of the massacre, an Indian nationalist photographer, Narayan Vinayak Virkar, made images of his compatriots pointing at the bullet marks on the wall against which people had been shot in the Jallianwala Bagh.⁴⁰ Thus, while the massacre occurred because Dyer wanted to extinguish Indian political agency, his exemplary violence and its material traces were ultimately used to help galvanise such politics. The post-independence memorial to those killed in the massacre has kept the bullet-marked walls of the Jallianwala Bagh as testimony to the event. Signage allows one to reconstruct the episode, showing where troops stood, where people fled, and where they were shot. Topiary figures of gun-toting soldiers have even been crafted in the gardens. Such mnemonic devices attempt to make the space speak, revealing a strong desire for visual evidence of the atrocity.

In Howgego's imagery, then, we confront scenes of violence which, oddly, fail to be violent enough, since they show only the more banal aspects of colonial brutality, not those chosen for formal memorialisation – and which now rouse demand for a national apology. In failing to give adequate evidence of the very 'exceptional', extreme violence that was condemned at the time, but instead registering a background atmosphere of imperial sadism, these photographs expose the narrow view of empire that results from a fixation on singular instances of 'aberrant' violence. An apology for the massacre alone would function to eclipse the systemic 'rule of colonial difference' that nourished a climate in which brown bodies lacked not only political enfranchisement or liberal rights, but even the most foundational sort of ethical

⁴⁰ Pinney, *Coming of Photography to India*, 83.

purchase.⁴¹ The very category of an innocent, noncombatant Indian was liable to be placed under erasure within the aesthetic and ethical structures of imperial feeling.

In a strange way, then, these photographs do precisely what Howgego intended for them to do: they alleviate the historical blame on Dyer. Shortly after the massacre, Winston Churchill, then the War Secretary and hardly a man known for squeamishness about colonial bloodshed, called Dyer's shooting 'a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation'.⁴² But it did not stand in such monstrous isolation as Britain would like to think. The 'bad apple' argument that was used with regard to Dyer ignored the culture that nurtured his psychopathic overreaction. These photographs help to disentangle the massacre from individual pathology, situating it within a broader notion of colonial ways of seeing, in which violent spectacles were an object of soldiers' scopophilia as well as an element of military strategy, and where the distinction between civilians and insurgents, innocent and guilty, had grown so blurred in the imperial imaginary that arbitrary punishments did not register as abuses of power for colonials, but could rather be invoked as *excuses* for extraordinary acts of colonial bloodshed.

Captions

Figure 1. Please add according to journal style guide – and if possible, add more details – print from black and white negative, for example?].

⁴¹ Elizabeth Kolsky, 'Codification and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Criminal Procedure in British India', *Law and History Review*, 23: 3 (2005), 631–83.

⁴² Winston Churchill, 'Punjab Disturbances', Commons Sitting of Thursday, 8 July 1920, quoted in Warren Doctor, *Churchill and the Islamic World: Orientalism, Empire and Diplomacy in the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris 2015, 87.

Figure 1. Reginald Mortimer Howgego, *A Wounded Prisoner*, print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 2. Unknown photographer, *View Showing the Location of the Firing Line during the Jallianwala Bagh Shooting*, gelatin silver print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 3. Unknown photographer, *Narrow Entrance Leading to Jallianwala Bagh*, gelatin silver print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 4. Unknown photographer, *Square Opening Out from Carriage Overbridge*, gelatin silver print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 5. Unknown photographer, *Showing Where Miss Sherwood Took Shelter (Where Boy Is Lying)*, gelatin silver print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 6 Unknown photographer, *Scene Where Miss Sherwood Was Beaten for the Second Time*, gelatin silver print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 7. Reginald Mortimer Howgego, *Punishment*, silver gelatin print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 8. Reginald Mortimer Howgego, *Making a Native Crawl down the Street as Punishment*, silver gelatin print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 9. Reginald Mortimer Howgego, *Whipping Post, Amritsar City*, silver gelatin print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.

Figure 10. Reginald Mortimer Howgego, *Whipping Post, Amritsar City* [reverse side], silver gelatin print from black and white negative, 1919. British Library, London.