3
The Amritsar Massacre, 1919–1920

For me the battlefield of France or Amritsar is the same.
To this day women hush their children with the name of
General Dyer.¹

On 13 April 1919, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered a patrol of
Indian troops under his command to fire on a crowd of some 25,000
unarmed Indian men, women, and children in the Jallianwala Bagh
in Amritsar. About ten minutes later, their ammunition virtually spent,
he ordered them to cease shooting. Hundreds of people lay dead, thou-
sands more wounded littered the ground. Dyer led his troops from the
Bagh, leaving the injured to fend for themselves; the curfew imposed
on Amritsar kept would-be rescuers from collecting the dead and get-
ting medical attention for the wounded until the next day. Many died
overnight.

The Amritsar massacre, as it came to be called, provoked a crisis in
British and Indian affairs. For Indian nationalists, it marked the moment
at which home rule within the empire would no longer be enough; nothing
less than independence would do and the “Quit India” move-
ment took off. For Britons in India and at home, it set off a heated
controversy about the nature of British rule—about the nature of British-
ness itself. Emotions ran high as issues of the greatest importance were
debated, revealing a nation profoundly disturbed about the direction it
would take in the aftermath of the Great War.

The Amritsar massacre offers us a window on the workings-out of
trauma on both the individual and the collective level. Dyer’s expla-
nations for his behavior and the justifications offered by his defenders
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betray massive anxieties about their ability to maintain psychic wholeness in the face of an onslaught of terrifying forces—“hundreds of thousands of fanatical natives,” as Commander Bellairs put it, with all the threats of racial, political, and sexual contamination they conjured. These anxieties in turn compelled a nation-wide argument about British identity. The massacre should be seen as a consequence of traumas arising from the war, but it was also productive of trauma in and of itself, which would become manifest in subsequent colonial and domestic clashes over the next ten years.

The massacre at Jallianwallah Bagh followed a series of developments and events in India that resulted in widespread rioting across the subcontinent. In 1917, the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, had told the House of Commons that the government sought to gradually expand self-government in India by increasing the numbers of Indians in every part of the administration. One aspect of the reforms proposed by Montagu and the Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford, entailed giving greater representation to Indians in provincial assemblies, a prospect that generated a great deal of resistance among members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and the provincial governors, chief amongst them Sir Michael O’Dwyer, Governor of the Punjab. O’Dwyer and his colleagues insisted that the reforms would exacerbate the protests and rioting that had broken out in many provinces.

Conditions in the Punjab following the war made life difficult for a broad strata of the Indian population. Wages in industries that had prospered in wartime fell dramatically, catapulting much of the population into debt. The influenza epidemic had struck the Punjab particularly hard, taking up to 25 percent of the population in some villages. Impoverished Punjabis often expressed their distress through protests, creating disorder throughout the province. The Defence of India Act, which had enabled the government to deal harshly with protestors during the war, had lapsed; colonial officials sought and received exceptional new powers to deal with disorder in the Rowlatt Acts, legislation that enabled the Viceroy to suspend due process of law and to imprison Indians without trial. The Rowlatt Acts inflamed Indian public opinion. The goodwill evoked by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms vanished, replaced by anger, disappointment, suspicion, and mistrust. Educated Indians of all political stripes submerged their differences and united against the Rowlatt Acts under Mohandas Gandhi’s satyagraha movement. Demonstrations took place in a number of cities, and rioting broke out in Ahmedabad, Delhi, and a number of Punjab provinces, prompting Lord Meston, an old India hand, to denounce “the new orgy