

# A Portrait of Two Carnages: A Comparative Study between Jallianwala Bagh and Croke Park Massacres

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## Abstract

*This brief article attempts to make a comparative study between the two infamous massacres orchestrated by the British Empire: the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, and the Croke Park Massacre of 1920. By discussing the issues of the identities of the perpetrators and the victims, and also how the martyrs of these massacres are remembered in the present times, this article aims to draw a historical axis connecting the predicaments of Indian and Irish independence movements against colonial despotism. It also highlights the representations of these two incidents in the domain of popular culture, by focusing mainly on the arena of films. The article, which does not initiate a critical historical discussion about the causes and effects of the two massacres, aims to investigate the aftershocks of two genocides driven by imperial despotism, rather than delving into a historical study of the Jallianwala Bagh and Croke Park incidents.*

**Keywords:** British Empire, Bullets, Massacre, Memory, Popular Culture, Reginald Dyer

## Introduction

The mighty fist of the British Empire, which used to boast about its perennially glowing Sun, attained dexterity in silencing the voices of dissent and revolt in its colonies. India and Ireland, the two states suffering from the cancerous warts of British imperialism, have been witnesses to this art of silencing. This article would attempt to make a comparative study between the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, which shook Amritsar, the epicenter of the Indian state of Punjab, and the Bloody Sunday Massacre of Ireland, which took place a year later, in 1920. These two incidents witnessed unpremeditated firings made on the common people by the British forces, which combinedly resulted in the deaths of hundreds. While Bloody Sunday claimed the lives of fourteen people and injured at least sixty civilians in Dublin's Croke Park stadium, the Amritsar chapter of British atrocity had been more notorious; nearly four hundred to a thousand unarmed civilians were gunned to death by the British forces under the command of General Reginald Dyer, while almost fifteen hundred people reeled under excruciating injuries. Apparently, it would be unjust to juxtapose these two events, which varied largely in terms of intensity and death tolls. However, this article will try to connect these two massacres to highlight one point, how India and Ireland, the two protectorates of the British Empire, suffered deep wounds in an uncannily similar manner, against the backdrop of their independence movements. The following sections of the article would navigate arenas like the issue of the identities of the victims and the perpetrators of these two massacres, how the victims are remembered by the two nations in the present times, and how popular culture, especially the film industry, has chosen to commemorate the victims of these imperialistic

genocides. However, this paper would not engage in a close reading and critical historical discussion about the causes and fall out of the two genocidal episodes, the area of discussion would be limited to the aforementioned issues only.

### **The Issue of Identity**

A peaceful political gathering to protest against the arrest of the independence leaders Saifuddin Kitchlew and Satya Paul at the walled garden of Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar on 13 April, 1919 soon turned into a nightmare, when General Dyer surrounded nearly fifteen thousand protesters with his troops. The exit points were blocked, and fifty Indian soldiers fired indiscriminately into the crowd, causing a bloody havoc (McCann). Several civilians were crushed to death in the ensuing stampede, many tried to take refuge in the narrow openings, while the others were mercilessly mowed down by nearly 1650 bullets. Dyer, when enquired later about the massacre by the investigative panel dubbed the Hunter Commission, had replied, "...I considered it my duty to fire on them and to fire well" (Saha).

The scintillating part of this bloody saga is its question of identity. The massacre appears to be a force-field of conflict between the Empire and its oppressed subjects, so a binary could have been drawn between Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab who endorsed the firings, and the victims of the carnage. But the binary collapses, when it is observed, that Indian soldiers from the Gurkha, Baluchi, and Rajput Regiments, under the command of a white general, played the roles of the marauders (Tripathi). This massacre underscores the imperial colonization of the martial faculty of the Indian soldiers, where their nationalistic spirit had been suppressed by their loyalty to the Crown. However, the Amritsar incident helped to turn the tide of nationalism; the massacre nourished the deep-seated anti-imperial sentiment across the country, and it would take another twenty-five years for the Indian soldiers to reverse their loyalty from the Crown to their motherland, when the Indian National Army under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose gave the ultimate war cry against the British Raj.

The Irish War of Independence, which was being spearheaded by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) since 1919 against British domination, took a violent turn on November 21, 1920. Earlier that Sunday morning, some British intelligence personnel had been assassinated by the IRA agents across Dublin in a series of attacks, and eventually, the vengeful British army marched into the Croke Park stadium, where, the officials suspected, a number of assassins had disappeared into a crowd attending a Gaelic football match. In Jallianwala Bagh style, the exit points were closed to conduct a cordon and search operation. Panic soon overwhelmed the crowd, as the army started firing indiscriminately into the crowd ("Bloody Sunday 1920: Croke Park Killings Remembered 100 Years On"). Fourteen lives were shed, including those of three school children, who had flocked to watch the football match between the Gaelic Football team of Dublin and the Tipperary team.

Complexities surface when the identities of the victims are analyzed; the British and the Irish identities and affiliations occasionally overlapped during this mayhem. Johnny McDonnell, the goalkeeper of the Dublin team, had taken part in an IRA assault on the British agents earlier that morning, also the name of Michael Hogan, the Tipperary player, must be mentioned, he was an IRA informant, who was also killed. However, Michael Feery, who was shot dead, was a former British soldier; he was still dressed in his British Army fatigues during his transfer to the hospital. Hogan's comrade in the game, Frank Butler, the Tipperary goalkeeper, was a former British soldier ("Bloody Sunday 1920: Croke Park Killings Remembered 100 Years On"). It becomes conceivable, that the stadium became a chequered floor of variegated identities, and people were united by the spirit of the game against the backdrop of political turmoil, but the bullets did not discriminate between the identities or affiliations, and the massacre took the lives of even those people, who had once owed allegiance to the mighty empire.

### **The Project of Remembrance**

A penetrating look at the efforts that have been made to preserve the memories of the victims of these two infamous genocides in the national consciousness

of India and Ireland is necessary. Kim A Wagner, the author of *Jallianwala Bagh: An Empire of Fear and the Making of the Amritsar Massacre* laments the status of the official memorial built in 1961 to honour the Amritsar victims. In an article published by *The Print*, she shines spotlight over the present situation of the site, “The road leading to Jallianwala Bagh and the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) was turned into something resembling the set of a Bollywood film with fake facades in some vaguely ‘traditional’ style. Garish statues of Punjabi dancers gave the entire area the look and feel of an amusement park, rather than one of the historically most important cities of India, and the holiest site of Sikhs” (Wagner). The memorial and the museum, despite recording the names of the officially announced 379 victims, celebrated the national heroes who were not even present in the vicinity on that fateful day. The mourning site has been translated into a commercial set up with light and sound shows, 3D projections, and most interestingly, a ticket counter that charges the tourists before entering the garden. This “Disneyfication” of the sacred martyrs’ memorial, Wagner observes, has divested it of its soul and purity, and ironically, British dignitaries, who have refused to apologize for the carnage, come to visit this spectacle.

Perhaps a different attitude could be seen in the treatment of the Bloody Sunday victims. Karina Leeson, a relative of the victim William Robinson, observes, “They weren’t just statistics...they were people with families who loved them and who suffered greatly after their loss” (“Bloody Sunday 1920: Croke Park Killings Remembered 100 Years On”). The Irish citizens, unlike the Indians, never converted the essence of the martyrs’ site into a tourists’ memorabilia. Indeed, they have established new gravestones, but the hundred years’ remembrance of that incident, instead of spiraling into a spectacle, focused much more on revisiting the personal experiences of different families of the victims, who had been brought together after hundred years. The victims, who were forgotten by the society, and buried in unmarked graves, are now being given marked gravestones, to inform the people about the violence that unfolded in the midst of jubilation, and the trails of tears it left behind.

## The ‘Popular’ Representations

The machine of popular culture has absorbed the incarnadine contours of these two massacres and translated them into viable cultural products for mass distribution. While the Jallianwala Bagh massacre has received a sufficient amount of limelight from the authors, painters, and filmmakers, the Croke Park chapter has not enjoyed immense popularity, if its media reception is juxtaposed against the amount of attention received by its Indian counterpart. If the domain of celluloid is taken into consideration, the film *Jallian Wala Bagh* (1977), directed by Balraj Tah, remains one of the earliest films to document the atrocious turn of events in the 1919 Punjab. A separate canon of Indian and international films has emerged, which never failed to mention the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as a watershed event moment in the colonial history of India. Richard Attenborough’s Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi* (1982) has meticulously depicted the carnage and its subsequent developments, and this has been carried forward by later films like *Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Midnight’s Children* (2013), to name a few (MyNation). On the contrary, popular culture has not coughed out many films on the Croke Park Massacre; Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* (1996), which bagged the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival provides an excruciating portrayal of the incident, albeit with historical inaccuracies. Another celluloid enterprise, which tried to depict the debacle of humanity at the Croke Park, would be the short film *Bloody Sunday* (2020), directed by Rua Meegan and Trevor Whelan, but it supposedly dwells in the realm of obscurity but for its presence on YouTube, in the channel of the Gaelic Athletic Association, which eulogizes the martyrs with the hashtag “#B100dySunday” (B100dy Sunday - the GAA Remembers). The short film, in a brief span of five minutes, aptly recapitulates the catastrophe in the mind of the audiences on its hundred years anniversary.

## Conclusion

A strange contradiction could be observed if the reception of these two events were scrutinized. While Jallianwala Bagh has been immortalized on the celluloid by a plethora of filmmakers, it remains in

the Indian psyche just as a mundane memorabilia of colonial skulduggery; the cursed garden of Amritsar is now a destination for curious tourists gathering to watch nothing but a historical spectacle as discussed earlier. It has not spread its roots in the collective conscience and consciousness of the citizens, its presence is limited to the vacuum chamber of academia. On the contrary, though the incidents at Croke Park have not been depicted voluminously in the popular culture, they still reverberate in the Irish psychological atmosphere as manifestations of uncompromising nationalism, unjust cruelty of the imperialists, and the celebration of the Irish nationalist zeitgeist under the leaders like Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera, who unabashedly challenged the authority of the Imperial Crown.

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