The Ajnala Massacre of 1857 and the Politics of Colonial Violence and Commemoration in Contemporary India

Mark Condos

Department of War Studies, King’s College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

In February 2014, an amateur archaeological team unearthed thousands of bones and other remains from an old well in the town of Ajnala, located in the Indian state of Punjab. These remains are believed to belong to 282 Indian sepoys who were summarily executed en masse on 1 August 1857 under the orders of Deputy Commissioner Frederic Cooper, during the height of the Indian Uprising of 1857. The discovery of the bodies has not only rekindled fierce debates about the violent history of the British Empire in India, but also offers an interesting glimpse into some of the ways that Indian history and national identity are currently being remade and negotiated in relation to the colonial past. This article is about the contested historical narrations, memories, and ongoing efforts to commemorate the Ajnala Massacre. It reveals how the history and public memory of colonial violence remain poorly understood, and the ways that calls for the recognition of previously forgotten, absent, or erased memories can prompt difficult and highly politicized discussions about the meaning of history, identity, and politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 August 2021
Accepted 20 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Ajnala; Punjab; Indian uprising of 1857; British Empire; colonial violence

Introduction

On 28 February 2014, an amateur archaeological team led by Surinder Kochhar unearthed the remains of 22 bodies from an old well in the town of Ajnala, located in the Indian state of Punjab. After the first remains were uncovered and pulled out of the well, the traditional Sikh jaikara (“shout of victory”) of “Bole so nihal, Sat Sri Akal!” (“Shout aloud in ecstasy, true is the Great Timeless One!”) resounded through a large crowd that had gathered for the event. Over the next two days, Kochhar and his team excavated thousands of bones, including 90 skulls, 170 jaw bones, and more than 5,000 teeth, as well as bits of jewellery and old coins. According to the residents of Ajnala, these are the remains of 282 Indian soldiers, known as sepoys, who mutinied against their British superiors.

CONTACT

Mark Condos
mark.condos@kcl.ac.uk

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during the Indian Uprising of 1857. On 1 August 1857, British Deputy Commissioner Frederic Cooper summarily executed these sepoys, and had their bodies dumped into the well. Although the residents of Ajnala have demonstrated a renewed interest in uncovering and memorializing this history, the fate of the sepoys was and continues to be generally forgotten by both British and Indian audiences when it comes to commemorating and memorializing the momentous events of the Indian Uprising.

The Indian Uprising of 1857 was one of the most significant anti-colonial revolts of the nineteenth century. Both sides committed atrocities during this conflict, but the British resorted to particularly brutal tactics and exemplary forms of punishment in a desperate attempt to suppress the rebellion and reassert control. They tied rebels and mutineers to mouths of artillery, and literally blew them to pieces. The British also destroyed entire villages, slaughtering civilian populations indiscriminately. Within this catalogue of horrors, the massacre at Ajnala has been brushed aside as yet another example of the violent excesses of British colonial rule. It has also been overshadowed by more well-known and highly politicized colonial atrocities, particularly the infamous Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, whose recent centenary celebrations highlighted how the legacies of British rule are still hotly contested in postcolonial India today. Unlike Ajnala, Amritsar boasts a sacrifice of 1919, whose recent centenary celebrations highlighted how the legacies of British and highly politicized colonial atrocities, particularly the infamous Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, whose recent centenary celebrations highlighted how the legacies of British rule are still hotly contested in postcolonial India today. Unlike Ajnala, Amritsar boasts a prominent “Martyrs’ Memorial” monument, surrounded by gardens, as well as a “Martyrs’ Gallery” and museum, all located on the site of the massacre. In August 2021, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled a highly controversial set of expensive renovations to the Jallianwala Bagh memorial site, including a new sound and light show and embellished murals covering the previously austere and sombre entrance into the site. Although these cosmetic changes drew widespread criticism from historians and others as a form of “Disneyfication,” they reveal how certain aspects of history are given privileged national attention and resources, while others like Ajnala are forgotten (Image 1).
Some of the residents of Ajnala, however, are determined to rectify this commemorative lacuna. Speaking a few days after the discovery of the bodies in 2014, Amarjit Singh Sarkaria, the head of the Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj Managing Committee, which assisted with the excavation, put it this way: “The whole of Ajnala was crying today. Nobody thought about these martyrs for 157 years. They deserve all prayers and will be laid to rest as per faith.” Since unearthing the bodies, Kochhar, the Gurdwara Committee, and other residents of Ajnala have petitioned both the state and central authorities in India to honour these “martyrs” through various commemorative activities, including the construction of a memorial monument and museum. In January of 2015, the Committee laid the foundation stone for a memorial monument situated atop the well in an attempt to reclaim these sepoys from this commemorative neglect and integrate them into India’s national public memory. Yet, their efforts were beset by a number of difficulties. These included a lack of interest from government authorities who are reluctant to fund this endeavour, as well as disputes between Kochhar and the Gurdwara Committee. The commemorative project also involved difficult questions raised by professional

Image 1. The Well at Ajnala. Inside of the well following the excavation. Photo by Harvinder Chandigarh. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Deserves Better. Disneyfication isn’t Preservation,” The Print, 31 August 2021, https://theprint.in/opinion/jallianwala-bagh-victims-memory-deserves-better-disneyfication-isnt-preservation/725084/ (accessed 3 November 2021).

Manjeet Sehgal, “Remains of 100 Indian Soldiers Excavated from Well in Punjab,” India Today, 2 March 2014, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/punjab-well-ajnala-amritsar-remains-martyrs-revolt-of-1857-183315-2014-03-02 (accessed 20 September 2020).

“The Black Hole.”
archaeologists and scientists about whether the remains can be scientifically verified due to the improper methods used to unearth and preserve the remains.\textsuperscript{12}

This article is about the contested historical narrations, memories, and ongoing efforts to commemorate the Ajnala Massacre. It reveals how the history and public memory of colonial violence remain poorly understood, and the ways that calls for the recognition of previously forgotten, absent, or erased memories can prompt difficult and highly politicized discussions about the meaning of history, identity, and politics. Taking inspiration from Shahid Amin’s pioneering study on the Chauri Chaura “riot” of 1922, this article seeks to unpack the Ajnala Massacre as an historical event; a metaphor for colonial and anti-colonial narratives of empire; and as a site of contested memory.\textsuperscript{13} In so doing, it argues that histories and memories of colonial violence are shaped as much by the politics of the present as they are by the scale and nature of the events themselves. The article begins by contextualizing these contestations within the wider “culture wars” currently being fought over the legacies of empire in both Britain and India. From there, the article explores both the facts of the massacre as well as the symbolic meanings attached to it within colonial narratives, particularly those produced by Cooper himself, who was responsible for the first efforts to “memorialize” this event. Next, the article considers how the ongoing efforts by the Sikh inhabitants of Ajnala to obtain wider recognition for the massacre and the sacrifice of these “martyrs” sits uncomfortably at the crossroads of highly contentious debates in India about history, national identity, and commemoration. Indeed, the divergent traditions of remembering and commemorating this massacre reveal not only radical differences between British and Indian commemorative traditions, but they also raise important questions about the ability of memory and history to overcome internal regional and religious differences across postcolonial India today.

**Imperial Memory Wars**

The last several decades have seen a resurgence of interest in the history of European imperialism, and have been characterized by increasingly fierce debates about the violent legacies of empire, decolonization, and the ways both former imperial powers and colonized nations have reoriented and reinvented themselves within the postcolonial present.\textsuperscript{14} Today, these “imperial history wars,” as described by Dane Kennedy, have also become an integral component of the wider culture wars raging across society.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the key battlefields of these culture wars are the physical vestiges of empire: its cities and buildings, street names, and, of course, its monuments. As Dominik Geppert and Frank Lorenz Müller have pointed out, imperial “sites of memory” retain

\textsuperscript{12}“No British was thrown into Kalianwala Khuh,” 9 May 2014, Hindustan Times, https://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/no-british-was-thrown-into-kalianwala-khuh/story-ao32bLd54vUfuMuvpQDgN.html (accessed 8 May 2021).

\textsuperscript{13}See Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{14}Robert Gildea, *Empires of the Mind: The Colonial Past and Politics of the Present* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019); Dane Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

\textsuperscript{15}The ongoing controversy surrounding Nigel Biggar’s “Ethics and Empire” project at Oxford, and the furious response to Bruce Gilley’s article, “The Case for Colonialism,” are two high-profile examples of this: James McDougall and others, “Ethics and Empire: an Open Letter from Oxford Scholars,” *The Conversation*, 19 December 2017: https://theconversation.com/ethics-and-empire-an-open-letter-from-oxford-scholars-89333 (accessed 19 December 2017). There has also been a proliferation of various anti- and pro-colonial polemics, including Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (London: Hurst, 2017); and Jeremy Black, *Imperial Legacies: the British Empire around the World* (New York: Encounter Books, 2019).
continued relevance and a lasting capacity to elicit strong emotional responses from those who experience them.\textsuperscript{16} We can see this quite vividly in the ways that once-dominant Eurocentric historical narratives and commemorative practices are currently being challenged by those seeking to incorporate more diverse perspectives and experiences from groups who have been hitherto marginalized or forgotten. In many cases, these movements directly challenge enduring narratives about the “positive” aspects of imperialism by highlighting instead the violent, brutal, and oppressive practices that sustained empire. In the UK, for example, the removal and replacement of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020 provoked a furious right-wing backlash, prompting Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to vow to “save Britain’s statues from woke militants” and “baying mobs.”\textsuperscript{17}

Since independence in 1947, Indians have removed, relocated, or re-appropriated colonial commemorative monuments and public spaces, while also erecting new memorials to their own national heroes.\textsuperscript{18} In so doing, Indian nationalists have sought to deliberately repudiate what they see as the humiliating colonial narratives of the past, and to replace them with patriotic assertions of postcolonial nationhood. In the case of 1857, individuals who were once vilified by the British as “mutineers,” or “traitors” have been transformed by nationalists into noble “freedom fighters” who fought in the “First War of Independence.” One of the most poignant examples of this process began on 15 August 1947, the day India gained its independence, when a large crowd stormed the Memorial Gardens in the city of Kanpur (Cawnpore) and defaced the iconic angel statue that lay at the heart of the site’s Memorial Well. Completed in 1865 to commemorate the massacre of over a hundred British women and children in July 1857, the Kanpur memorial was widely considered the most sacred and important site of colonial memory in all of India.\textsuperscript{19} For many Indians, however, the memorial and its strict prohibition barring entry to non-Europeans served as a stinging reminder of colonial racial hierarchies and humiliation. In 1948, the memorial was relocated to the grounds of the Memorial Church in the Kanpur Cantonment. The following year, the gardens that surrounded the memorial were also renamed Nana Rao Park, in honour of Nana Sahib, a key rebel leader during 1857 and the alleged mastermind behind the massacre.\textsuperscript{20} For the centenary celebrations of the Uprising in 1957, the city erected a new monument on the exact site

\textsuperscript{16} Dominik Geppert and Frank Lorenz Müller, “Beyond National Memory. Nora’s Lieux de Mémoire across an Imperial World,” in ibid. (eds.), Sites of Memory: Commemorating Colonial Rule in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 4–6.

\textsuperscript{17} “Edward Colston Statue Replaced by Sculpture of Black Lives Matter Protester Jen Reid,” The Guardian, 15 July 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/15/edward-colston-statue-replaced-by-sculpture-of-black-lives-matter-protester (accessed 16 July 2020); Robert Jenrick, “We Will Save Britain’s Statues from the Woke Militants Who Want to Censor Our Past” The Telegraph, 16 January 2021, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/16/will-save-britains-statues-woke-militants-want-censor-past/ (accessed 17 January 2021); “Statues to Get Protection from ‘Baying Mobs,’” BBC News, 17 January 2021: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55693020 (accessed 17 January 2021).

\textsuperscript{18} See, generally, Deborah Cherry, “The Afterlives of Monuments,” South Asian Studies 29, no. 1 (2013): 1–14; and Stephen Heathorn, “The Absent Site of Memory: The Kanpur Memorial Well and the 1957 Centenary Commemoration of the Indian Mutiny,” in Memory, History, and Colonialism, 73–116.

\textsuperscript{19} On the significance of the Cawnpore Massacre and Memorial see: Patrick Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914 (1988; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), chap. 7; Andrew Ward, Our Bones are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacres and the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (London: John Murray, 1996); Lydia Murdoch, “Suppressed Grief: Mourning the Death of British Children and the Memory of the 1857 Indian Rebellion,” Journal of British Studies 51, no. 2 (April 2012): 364–92; and Sebastian Pender, The Commemoration and Memorialisation of the “Indian Mutiny,” 1857–2007 (Unpublished PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, 2014).

\textsuperscript{20} Heathorn, “The Absent Site of Memory,” 73–116.
previously occupied by the Memorial Well. It was dedicated to Tatya Tope, one of the
great heroes of the “First War of Independence.”\textsuperscript{21} In that same year the city of Meerut,
where the Indian Uprising began, also marked the centenary celebrations by erecting a
100-ft white, marble tower, known as the Shaheed Smarak (“Martyrs Memorial”), in
honour of the sepoys who began the “First War of Independence.”

Yet, despite these iconoclastic repudiations of colonial commemorative narratives and
their attendant sites of memory, the overall reaction of Indians towards their colonial past
has been much more ambivalent. As Maria Misra has pointed out, vestiges of the Raj con-
tinue to shape the physical and cultural landscape of India today, and ordinary Indians
treat many prominent colonial symbols and monuments with a combination of indiffer-
ence or even sympathetic nostalgia.\textsuperscript{22} It is also difficult to disentangle attempts to refa-
shion India’s postcolonial national heritage from the complex, intense, and sometimes
violent contests that are currently being fought over its political, cultural, social, linguistic,
and religious character. As Romila Thapar has demonstrated, communal identities and
ideologies have had a profound impact on the writing and interpretation of Indian
history, which has often been mobilized in order to advance contemporary political
goals.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, even attempts to reclaim and refashion colonial monuments and narratives
often take on a majoritarian character in the ways these are communicated to India
audiences.\textsuperscript{24}

To take one obvious example of this at work in the context of Ajnala, the “First War of
Independence” was a term popularized in 1909 by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a right-
wing Hindu nationalist, who later insisted that India belonged to Hindus.\textsuperscript{25} The veneration
by the Hindu right of “freedom fighters” and “martyrs” who fought against the British in
1857 and in the subsequent freedom struggle of the twentieth century, has been intimately
tied up with their wider efforts to exclude other religious and social minorities in India, most
notably Muslims.\textsuperscript{26} History, heritage, and commemoration are being weaponized in order
to propagate an exclusively Hindu vision of Indian culture and nationhood. The ongoing
efforts by the Sikh inhabitants of Ajnala to construct a memorial to the massacred
sepoys must thus be understood in this broader context of building locally-specific nation-
alist narratives that seek to reshape conventional understandings of Indian national identity
and patriotism, both internally and in the face of India’s former colonizers.

\textbf{Mutiny and Massacre: Ajnala as Event and Colonial Metaphor}

The discovery of the bodies at Ajnala helped fuel fierce debates about the violent history
of the British Empire in India. Ajnala has been readily compared to the more well-known
Jallianwala Bagh Massacre at Amritsar.\textsuperscript{27} There, Indian soldiers under the command of

\textsuperscript{21} Maria Misra, Vishnu’s Crowded Temple: India since the Great Rebellion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 6;
Heathorn, “The Absent Site of Memory,” 73–4.
\textsuperscript{22} Maria Misra, “From Nehruvian Neglect to Bollywood Heroes: The Memory of the Raj in Post-war India,” in Geppert and
Müller, Sites of Memory, 187–206.
\textsuperscript{23} Romila Thapar, “Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facts,” Social Scientist 18, no. 6-7 (1990): 4–20; ibid.,
The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History (New Delhi: Aleph, 2014).
\textsuperscript{24} Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 200.
\textsuperscript{25} V.D. Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence (London: s.n., 1909). On the phenomenon of Hindutva, see Christophe
Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s (1993; London: Hurst & Co., 1996).
\textsuperscript{26} Misra, “From Nehruvian Neglect to Bollywood Heroes.”
\textsuperscript{27} “The Black Hole.”
Brigadier-General Reginald E. Dyer opened fire on an unarmed crowd, killing an estimated 379 people and wounding at least 1,200 others. In this reading, it is easy to see Cooper’s actions at Ajnala as part of a much longer tradition of brutal, racialized colonial violence systemic to British rule.  

An alternative perspective, however, insists that these kind of incidents were “exceptional” moments, resulting from erratic actions of individual officers. As the culture wars over the legacies of Britain’s imperial past continue to rage across India and the UK, it seems important to reflect on how the undeniable violence of empire was justified by those who committed and supported these kinds of actions, and how this history has been interpreted and commemorated since. Whereas the inhabitants of Ajnala today are working to have the sepoys recognized as Indian heroes and victims of British cruelty, nineteenth century British audiences saw this event in a much different light. Britons in both India and the metropole widely praised Cooper’s actions as a legitimate and necessary response to the atrocities attributed to Indian rebels. Indeed, Cooper himself attempted to fashion this massacre as a deliberate response to the massacre of British women and children at the hands of Indian rebels in Kanpur in July 1857.

The Indian Uprising began on 10 May 1857, when Indian sepoys stationed in the cantonment town of Meerut in northern India mutinied against their British officers after rumours circulated that the cartridges used for their new Enfield rifles were greased with cow and pig fat. Both Hindus and Muslims saw this as a deliberate attack against their religious customs and cultural traditions, prompting them to rise up and murder their British officers, along with any other European or Christian civilians they encountered, including women and children. The mutineers proceeded to Delhi, and a general uprising erupted as aggrieved peasants and elites alike rose up in a bid to oust their British masters. The sepoys who were killed at Ajnala belonged to the 26th Native Infantry (N.I.) regiment, which was stationed at the Mian Mir (Meean Meer) cantonment, just outside the city of Lahore. On 13 May 1857, fearing spreading disaffection throughout the army, British officers disarmed the 26th, along with several other regiments stationed at Mian Mir. On 30 July, the nearly 635-man strong 26th N.I. rose up and killed their commanding officer, along with the regiment’s sergeant-major, and two Indian officers. The sepoys, along with a band of camp followers, then proceeded north, taking advantage of a large dust storm to conceal their movements.

Immediately following this outbreak, the British despatched soldiers from both Lahore and Amritsar to pursue the mutineers, and enlisted the help of Sikh villagers in hunting down the sepoys. The following day, villagers from the settlement of Dadian (Doodean) spotted the sepoys near the Ravi River and quickly sent word to the tehsildar (revenue collector) of one of the neighbouring districts, a man named Pram Nath.

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28 Wagner, Amritsar 1919; Kim A. Wagner, “‘Calculated to Strike Terror’: The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence,” *Past & Present* 233, no. 1 (November 2016): 185–225.
29 Ferdinand Mount, “They Would Have Laughed,” *London Review of Books* 41, no. 7 (April 2019): 9–12.
30 Ibid., 265.
31 For the complex reasons sepoys mutinied, see: Wagner, The Skull of Alum Bheg.
32 Roberts to Montgomery, 17 August 1857, *Government Records*, vol. 7:1-2 – Punjab: Mutiny Records Correspondence (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1911), pt. 1, para. 2, 387 [hereafter *Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 7*].
33 Introduction by Mr. Montgomery, *Parliamentary Papers* (PP), 1859 (238) XVIII.307, *Papers Relating to Mutiny in Punjab*, 1857, para. 64, 39 [hereafter *Papers Relating to Mutiny in Punjab*].
34 Cooper to Roberts, 5 August 1857, *Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 7*, para. 2, 390.
assembling local policemen and volunteers, Nath’s force attacked the sepoys, around 150 of whom died in the bloody skirmish or drowned trying to escape. The remaining sepoys fled, and about 200 managed to swim across part of the river to a small island. Bloodied, exhausted, and demoralized from their ordeal, most of the sepoys surrendered willingly to Cooper and his men after they arrived on the scene. The sepoys thought they would be tried by court-martial. With the aid of the villagers, Cooper and his men marched the sepoys nearly 10 kilometres to Ajnala, where they were then locked up in the thana (police station) and several other old buildings for the night (Image 2).

Early the next morning, 1 August 1857, Cooper sent his Muslim horsemen back to Amritsar, under the generous pretence of allowing them to celebrate Eid al-Adha. In all likelihood, Cooper’s real motivation for sending away these more experienced Muslim soldiers was that he doubted their loyalty, and feared they might rise up against him when they saw what he had in store for the captured sepoys. Once the Muslim soldiers were gone, Cooper ordered his remaining Sikh troopers to bring the prisoners out in groups of ten. The prisoners were bound together, marched before a firing squad, and summarily executed without a trial or hearing of any kind. By 10 am, 237 sepoys had been killed, and their bodies dumped into a large well by the village sweepers. This left 45 still to be executed, but when Cooper and his men opened up their prison cell, they discovered that almost everyone inside had already died, mostly likely from a combination of heat stroke and suffocation after being locked inside the crowded cell with the only window providing any sort of fresh air tightly closed and barricaded. Cooper later mused how he had inadvertently re-enacted and inverted one of the most infamous massacres in the history of British India: the Black Hole of Calcutta.

Cooper’s actions met with strong approval from both John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of Punjab, and even Governor-General Charles Canning. Robert Montgomery, the Judicial Commissioner of Punjab, personally wrote to Cooper to convey his hearty congratulations for this “success.” When describing the slaughter of the 26th N.I. at Ajnala, Cooper adopted a gloating, self-satisfied tone:

The execution at Ujnalla commenced at daybreak, and the stern spectacle was over in a few hours. Thus, within forty-eight hours from the date of the crime, there fell by the law nearly 500 men. All the crowds of assembled natives, to whom the crime was fully explained, considered the act “righteous,” but incomplete; because the magistrate did not hurl headlong

35 Some sepoys tried to escape from the island, and Cooper estimates that at least 35 drowned in the river: ibid., paras. 14, 16, 391–2.
36 Frederic Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, from the 10th of May until the Fall of Delhi (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1858), 161.
37 Cooper to Roberts, 5 August 1857, Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 7, paras. 27–30, 393–4.
38 Memorandum by Frederic Cooper, enclosed in Cooper to Roberts, 19 February 1858, Government Records, vol. 8:1-2 – Punjab: Mutiny Records Correspondence (Lahore: Punjab Government Press, 1911), pt. 1, para. 15, 274–5 [hereafter Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 8]. There is some discrepancy in the numbers of sepoys who died at Ajnala here. In many cases, the total is given as 282, but in this report, Cooper states the number was 285.
39 Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, 163. For the mythology surrounding this event see: Partha Chatterjee, The Black Hole of Empire: History of a Global Practice of Power (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
40 John Lawrence instructed Robert Montgomery, the Judicial Commissioner, to personally write to Cooper and convey his “especial thanks” for “the very satisfactory manner in which he managed to capture and execute so large a body of mutineers”: Brandreth to Montgomery, 21 August 1857, Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 7, para. 1, 405; Temple to Edmonstone, 25 May 1858, Papers Relating to Mutiny in Punjab, para 57, 20.
41 Qtd. in Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, 168.
into the chasm, the rabble of men, women and children, who had fled miserably with the mutineers: they marvelled at the clemency and the justice of the British.42

We can see here in this passage how Cooper’s destruction of the 26th was conceived of first, and foremost, as a spectacular form of communicative violence designed to instil terror and fear into Indian audiences. Yet rather than being an expression of colonial strength and invincibility, Cooper’s actions – like those of many colonial officials who enacted other kinds of similarly brutal, exemplary violence – can be more convincingly explained as products of weakness, fear, and panic.43 As Robert Montgomery later put it, this was a moment when British power in Punjab was “literally in extremity,” and only the harshest and most severe measures could save it.44 Even so, Cooper was

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42 Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, 163.
43 Wagner, Amritsar 1919; Mark Condos, The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India (Cambridge: CUP, 2017); and Thomas R. Metcalf, Ideologies of the Raj. The New Cambridge History of India, III.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.
44 Statement of Facts Connected with the Execution of the 26th Native Infantry, PP, 1859 (125) XXIII.499, Letter from Sir R. Montgomery to Lord Stanley, April 1859, and Statement of Facts Connect with Execution of 26th Native Infantry, para. 6, 3 [hereafter Letter from Montgomery].
careful to justify this violence by emphasizing its legal and “righteous” character. “The punishment for mutiny is death” was a common refrain uttered by British officers during the Uprising, and was thus deemed the only justification required. As Montgomer pointed out in a letter to Lord Stanley, the newly-minted Secretary of State for India: “they were murderers, mutineers and rebels, in the broadest sense. As such they were taken in flagrante delicto, and for such an offence the punishment of death is adjudged both in law and morals.”

The “righteousness” of Cooper’s actions was further established by his decision to spare the women and children camp followers who had fled with the sepoys. Here, Cooper was alluding to one of the most infamous events of the Indian Uprising: the Kanpur (Cawnpore) Massacre, which had taken place just over two weeks earlier on 15 July. The slaughter of European women and children at Kanpur became the supreme signifier of Indian savagery and barbarism, and provided the most potent emotional rallying cry for the brutal, and often indiscriminate, retributive violence unleashed by the British during the suppression of the Uprising. By emphasizing his decision not to emulate the “fiends” at Kanpur, Cooper sought to establish the moral legitimacy of his own massacre as a legitimate form of justice. At the same time, he also portrayed the executions at Ajnala as a deliberate and carefully choreographed re-enactment and inversion of the Kanpur Massacre. “There is a well at Cawnpore,” he proudly declared, “but there is also one at Ajnala!”

Cooper’s efforts to style the Ajnala Massacre as a response to Kanpur can be seen as part of the first effort to commemorate or memorialize this massacre. By constructing this narrative, Cooper imbued the massacre with a potent symbolic significance. This was not just the just and deserved punishment of mutineers, but was a righteous form of retribution for the crimes and indignities suffered by the British race. Following the executions, Cooper ordered the village sweepers to erect what might be considered the first “monument” to the massacre. After filling in the well with charcoal, lime, and dirt, the sweepers created a large burial mound, in front of which Cooper intended to erect a commemorative stone tablet engraved with the words “the grave of the mutineers” written in Gurumukhi, Persian, and English in order to “long preserve in the pergunnah [district] the record of their just fate.” Although it is not clear whether Cooper ever got around to installing this macabre marquee, he noted with satisfaction how the burial mound could be seen from a great distance away due to its high position along the nearby road. He obviously delighted in the symbolic power of the site, believing it would serve as an enduring monument to British “justice” that would strike terror into the hearts of all who would oppose them. Ultimately, neither Cooper nor his compatriots ever got around to erecting a more polished “monument” to the massacre, but this

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45 Introduction by Mr. Montgomery, Papers Relating to Mutiny in Punjab, para. 65, 39.
46 Statement of Facts Connected with the Execution of the 26th Native Infantry, Letter from Montgomery, para. 5, 3.
47 Jenny Sharpe, Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Women in the Colonial Text (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Ward, Our Bones are Scattered; Gautam Chakravarty, The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For an analysis of the way Indian rebels understood this violence, see Rudrangshu Mukherjee, “‘Satan Let Loose Upon Earth’: The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857,” Past & Present, 128 (Aug. 1990): 92–116.
48 Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, 167.
49 Ibid., paras. 31–2, 394.
50 Ibid.
is hardly surprising. Although Cooper’s actions were widely applauded both in India and the metropole, a minor public scandal erupted in March of 1859 when the Liberal MP, Charles Gilpin, denounced him in Parliament and claimed the massacre represented “almost the very blackest page in the emphatically black book of the Indian rebellion.”

It is important to emphasize that Cooper’s decision to massacre the sepoys of the 26th N.I. at Ajnala was not an isolated incident, but was part of a much wider culture of imperial violence that emphasized the need for strong executive authority and swift, exemplary spectacles of punishment during times of crisis. Writing some years after the incident at Ajnala, Thomas Rice Holmes hit back against those who criticized Cooper’s actions. “For this splendid assumption of responsibility,” Holmes wrote, “Cooper was assailed, as other men of his mettle, both in the East and the West Indies, have been, by the vulgar cries of ignorant humanitarians.” Holmes’ reference to “other men of his mettle” was a nod to Governor Edward Eyre, who had been at the centre of a prolonged, high-profile controversy after his brutal handling of the 1865 Morant Bay Uprising in Jamaica. Although Eyre was ultimately acquitted from any wrongdoing his trial represented something of a turning point when it came to the British public’s acceptance of large-scale, indiscriminate violence being used to suppress colonial revolts and uprisings. Fifteen years after Cooper’s executions at Ajnala, another Punjab officer named John Lambert Cowan offered a similar defence of his decision to summarily execute 49 Namdhari Sikhs (known pejoratively as “Kookas”) by cannonading, following a failed attack by them against the Muslim princely state of Malerkotla. However, whereas Cooper’s actions had been widely supported and ultimately upheld by his superiors in both India and Britain, Cowan found himself severely reprimanded and removed from his position. Following the infamous Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919, General Dyer offered the same defence as Cooper and Cowan, arguing that his actions had been necessary to prevent the horrors of a second “Mutiny” from unfolding. Thus, as Kim Wagner has demonstrated, rather than being exceptional, Jallianwala Bagh was the culmination of this wider logic of colonial violence.

Remembering the Sepoys: Ajnala as Postcolonial Metaphor and Memory

Sites of memory are also sites of forgetting, and those moments where they are neglected, lost, or “lain fallow” are instructive of the need for concealment, or attempts to overcome deep-seated trauma. In the years following the events of 1857, the Ajnala

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51 Hansard, HC Deb. 14 March 1859, vol. 153, col. 146.
52 On British colonial trauma, see: Christopher Herbert, War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Chakravarty, The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination.
53 T.R.E. Holmes, A History of the Indian Mutiny, and of the Disturbances which Accompanied it among the Civil Population (London: H. Allen & Co., 1883), 373.
54 R.W. Kostal, A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law (Oxford: OUP, 2008).
55 Condos, The Insecurity State, chap. 3; and Wagner, “Calculated to Strike Terror.”
56 Wagner, Amritsar 1919; ibid., “Calculated to Strike Terror.”
57 Dominik Geppert and Frank Lorenz Müller, “Beyond National Memory. Nora’s Lieux de Mémoire across an Imperial World,” in ibid. (eds.), Sites of Memory: Commemorating Colonial Rule in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
Massacre gradually faded from collective memory in both Britain and India, but was kept alive, to some extent, at the local level. Following the massacre, the well became known as Kalianwala Khuh ("The Well of the Blacks"). The burial mound erected atop the well was still visible in the early twentieth century, but it had eroded and resembled an elevated sand hill. In 1957, the centenary celebrations for 1857 were even held on this site in the presence of the Chief Minister, Pratap Singh Kairon. In 1972, the residents of Ajnala built a gurdwara (a Sikh place of worship) over the well, and in 2007 the 150th anniversary commemorations of the Uprising were observed at the gurdwara. In 2012, the townspeople of Ajnala formed a committee "to honour the martyrs by disinterring their remains from the well." The committee built a new gurdwara nearby, and petitioned the Government of Punjab, the Archaeological Survey of India, and the central Government of India for assistance with the excavation. Their requests were ignored.

In the absence of any official support, the townspeople began excavation work on 28 February 2014. Following the discovery of the bodies, the committee renamed the well as the Shaheedan da Khu ("The Well of Martyrs") and again petitioned government authorities for support in constructing a memorial and museum in honour of the soldiers.

Although the excavation attracted widespread media attention in India, prompting several government authorities to visit the site, more substantial support never really materialized. The Punjab state government pledged to help construct a memorial and museum, but reportedly invested just Rs. 3 lakhs (roughly £3,150) in the project, meaning the Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj Committee had to assume the responsibility for constructing both the memorial and museum. They have also repeatedly and unsuccessfully petitioned the Punjab state government to grant the sepoy's official status as martyrs, and to be accorded full military honours. In a 2017 interview with The Times of India, the Committee's President, Amarjit Singh Sarkaria, expressed disappointment with the lack of interest from successive state governments to grant them martyr status. "It was due to their sacrifice that we are enjoying the freedom," Sarkaria stated. As of writing this article, the well in Ajnala is still not specifically listed as a protected site, according to the Archaeological Survey of India, but the historic buildings of the Old Tehsil at Ajnala are.

The apparent lack of interest from both the Punjab state government and the Government of India raises a number of questions about why there has been so little support for this commemorative project. From a historical point of view, any attempt by Punjab to celebrate its role in the "First War of Independence" or the Indian freedom struggle more generally is problematic. Unlike the North-Western Provinces and Awadh (what is...
modern-day Uttar Pradesh), which saw widespread and sustained revolts against British authority by aggrieved peasants, dispossessed elites, and rebellious sepoys, there was nothing close to any kind of mass uprising or popular movement in Punjab in 1857–58. The Punjab peasantry, especially the Sikhs from the central Majha region, where Ajnala is situated, shared little sympathy with the Hindustani sepoys who had helped defeat them less than ten years prior in the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–49). On the contrary, Punjabis actively supported the British cause by helping to track down and eliminate mutinous regiments, as in the case of the 26th N.I., or by taking up service with the British forces to retake territories lost to the rebels in the North-Western Provinces and Awadh. The soldiers Cooper used to execute the sepoys of the 26th were recently-recruited Sikhs from the same region, which presents a particularly delicate issue for the Sikhs of Ajnala seeking to commemorate these martyrs. Following the Uprising, Punjab was rewarded for its loyalty, becoming the main recruiting ground for the new Indian Army and the recipient of an array of preferential economic and political policies designed to ensure the province remained the loyal bulwark to British rule that it did until very late in the freedom struggle. In modern-day Pakistan, which inherited the lion’s share of Punjab during Partition in 1947, celebrations of 1857 as the “First War of Independence” are extremely muted, and some Pakistanis actually continue to commemorate certain British figures as “heroes.”

For the reigning right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government of India, the Ajnala Massacre holds little political or ideological interest because the commemoration or mythologization of this history can do little to advance their goal of transforming India into a Hindu Rashtra (nation). Traditionally, the Hindu right has tended to focus on celebrating iconic, Hindu “martyrs” who fought in the cause of freedom – figures like Nana Sahib or the Rani of Jhansi – but the mixed religious backgrounds of the sepoys of the 26th N.I. makes this more complicated. BJP government officials have also shown more interest recently in re-writing India’s ancient history in order to emphasize the cultural and scientific achievements of the ancient Vedic period – sometimes making rather outlandish claims that their Hindu ancestors invented aircraft or cosmetic surgery. Alongside this, the Hindu right has also shown itself to be much more concerned with emphasizing the historical oppression and crimes committed by India’s Muslim Mughal rulers, rather than its British colonial overlords. The fact that the most vocal calls for a commemorative

65 Wagner, The Skull of Alum Bheg.
66 Cooper, The Crisis in the Punjab, 161.
67 Tan Tai Yong, The Garrison State: Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849–1947 (New Delhi and London: Sage, 2005); Ian Talbot, The Punjab and the Raj 1849–1947 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988).
68 Haroon Khalid, “1857 Revolt: Why Pakistan Ignores the Rebels and Honours Three British Officials Instead,” Scroll.in, 20 May 2016, https://scroll.in/article/808375/1857-revolt-why-pakistan-ignores-the-rebels-and-honours-three-british-officials-instead (accessed 23 September 2020).
69 Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, 22–34, 307–16. The recently-released historical epic, Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019) offers a more contemporaneous example of this phenomenon.
70 Most of the sepoys appear to have been Hindus, but there were some Muslims as well: Cooper to Roberts, 5 August 1857, Punjab: Mutiny Records vol. 7, para, 28, 394.
71 Rupam Jain and Tom Lasseter, “By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Aim to Assert their Dominance over India,” Reuters, 6 March 2018, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/ (accessed 4 October 2020); Vinaya Deshpande, “Rishi has Given Guidelines to Make Planes,” The Hindu, 4 January 2015, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/first-man-to-build-and-fly-an-aircraft-was-indian/article6753840.ece (accessed 4 October 2020).
72 The rancorous controversy over the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque, or the vile attacks launched against American scholar Audrey Truschke’s work on the Mughal Emperor Akbar are all examples of this: Vidya Subrahmanian,
monument and museum at Ajnala come from the region’s local Sikh organizations are also unlikely to increase the chances that this project becomes any kind of priority for the current BJP regime. The decision by the Martyrs Memorial Committee to cremate the remains of the sepoys at Ajnala, according to Hindu and Sikh burial customs, is also a somewhat sensitive issue. Some of the sepoys massacred at Ajnala were Muslims, who bury their dead, but it is impossible to differentiate Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim remains. In this sense, the commemorative efforts of the residents of Ajnala seem to have fallen prey, at least in part, to the communal fault lines which have plagued India during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Finally, India has not always shown the greatest concern with preserving its cultural heritage. For years now, the Ministry of Culture and its attendant organizations in charge of preserving and maintaining historic monuments and other cultural artefacts have remained underfunded. Historic sites are threatened by rising levels of pollution and India’s challenging climate, while priceless archival documents have in turn been lost or destroyed due to neglect and lack of training. The appalling human tragedy currently unfolding in India as a result of the global pandemic makes it unlikely that this situation will change any time soon.

Archaeological and forensic analyses of the remains have also cast some doubt on whether these remains belong to the 26th N.I. In 2016, the Punjab Government’s Department of Archaeology and Museums commissioned a team of researchers led by J.S. Sehrawat from Panjab University to conduct a forensic analysis of the human remains and material objects found in the well. The initial report produced by Sehrawat and his team concluded that the material objects found alongside the remains – bracelets, necklaces, arm bands, and coins and medals bearing the likeness of Queen Victoria – strongly suggested that these belonged to the sepoys of the 26th who were executed by Cooper in 1857. However, Sehrawat’s report also noted that “some amateur local historians” believe the remains were victims of Partition violence in 1947, while others believe they belong to victims of other violent episodes separate from either 1857 or 1947. In October of 2017, Sehrawat’s preliminary analysis of the DNA tests on the remains indicated that they belonged to individuals hailing from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. This would tend to confirm the historical narrative, since the sepoys from the 26th N.I. were most likely Purbiyas, who were recruited from these regions.

"Babri Masjid’s Destruction Laid the Foundation of Modi’s New India of Today," The Wire, 6 December 2018, https://thewire.in/politics/babri-masjid-narendra-modi-bjp (accessed 4 October 2020); Audrey Truschke, “Some of the Hate Mail is Chilling: Historian Audrey Truschke on the Backlash to her Aurangzeb Book,” Scroll.in, 25 May 2017, https://scroll.in/article/838539/aurangzeb-is-controversial-because-of-indias-present-not-past-says-audrey-truschke (accessed 27 May 2017).

73 According to Chaman Lal, the Martyrs Memorial Committee was aware of these difficulties, and included rituals from Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim traditions during the cremation ceremony in recognition of this: Chaman Lal, “Honouring the Martyrs 157 Years Later – Cremation of 282 Martyrs on 1st August 2014” (unpublished research paper), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280405241_Ajnala-The_Blackwell_story (accessed 9 May 2021).

74 On the history and legacies of communalism, see: Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India (Delhi: OUP, 1990; David Ludden, ed., Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

75 Maria Thomas, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Heritage Conservation in India,” Quartz India, 18 April 2018, https://qz.com/india/1254201/world-heritage-day-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-of-conserving-history-in-india/ (accessed 4 October 2020); Dinyar Patel, “In India, History Literally Rots Away,” The New York Times, 20 March 2012, https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/in-india-history-literally-rots-away/ (accessed 23 March 2012).

76 Jagmahendar Singh Sehrawat, Raj Kamal Pathak, and Jaspreet Kaur, “Human Remains from Ajnala, India, 2014,” Bioarchaeology of the Near East 10 (2016), 86.

77 Ibid., 83.

78 “The Well of 1857 Truth,” The Tribune, 29 October 2017, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/features/the-well-of-1857-truth-488818 (accessed 28 September 2020).
In 2019, a peer-reviewed study published by Sehrawat and Monika Singh analyzing the dental remains again suggested that these remains came from the sepoys of the 26th N.I.\textsuperscript{79} However, a more comprehensive forensic analysis subsequently performed by Sehrawat and his colleagues has cast some doubt on their earlier findings, suggesting the remains may belong to ethnic groups hailing from modern-day Pakistan and Iran, including Pashtuns.\textsuperscript{80} If the remains do, indeed, belong to groups from these regions, this would undermine both the historical record, as well as the claims by the residents of Ajnala that they should be commemorated as “Indian” heroes. The results of an even more extensive DNA analysis are still forthcoming, but, as Sehrawat and his colleagues have acknowledged, the “non-scientific” methods of excavation used by the amateur team that uncovered the remains has made it quite challenging to analyze them accurately.\textsuperscript{81} As a result, it may not even be possible for existing scientific methods to provide a definitive answer to this question.

In a sense, the remains at Ajnala have become floating signifiers, open to different meanings and significance, depending on who is staking claim to them. For many of the residents of Ajnala, the historical record and archaeological evidence “prove” they are heroes and martyrs from 1857. For scientists, like Sehrawat, the remains only become “legible” and imbued with significance through verifiable, scientific quantification. For government authorities, whether at the state or federal level, these remains only become significant insofar as they can be weaved into the wider historical narratives and identities. At the state level, Punjab’s complicated history with colonialism, particularly the vital role it played in suppressing the Uprising of 1857, makes it somewhat awkward for the government to highlight the province’s role in the “First War of Independence.” As for the lack of resonance with the Central Government, there is little here for the BJP to exploit in order to advance their Hindutva agenda, since the sepoys were from mixed religious backgrounds and were not massacred at the hands of Muslim tyrants. Ultimately, Ajnala demonstrates the difficulties of crafting and imposing coherent, unified narratives of the past in a pluralistic country like India, which has so many complex, sometimes competing, traditions, identities, and histories.

**Conclusion**

A circular memorial now stands atop the well at Ajnala. An inscription written in Gurumukhi reads: “The memorial of 282 martyred soldiers of 1857 when they were killed and dumped here.” A nearby stone marker, adorned in the colours of the Indian national flag reads in English: “Salute to Martyrs of 1857 26 Bengal Inf.” An arched gateway above one of the roads to Ajnala reads *Kaalianwala Shaheedi Khu, Yaadgari Gate* (the “Remembrance Gate of the Martyred”), and a new gurdwara, The Gurdwara of the Martyred and of the Martyred Well, has also been built near the site. Inside the gurdwara, a large collection box decorated in blue rests before the Guru Granth Sahib (the central

\textsuperscript{79} J.S. Sehrawat and Monika Singh, “Forensic Odontological Sex Determination of Ajnala Skeletal Remains Based on the Statistical Equations Generated from the Odontometrics of Known Teeth,” *Forensic Science International: Reports* 1 (November 2019).

\textsuperscript{80} J.S. Sehrawat, Niraj Rai, Wolfram Meier-Augenstein, “Identification of Ajnala Skeletal Remains using Multiple Forensic Anthropological Methods and Techniques: A Bioarchaeological Report,” *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 32 (August 2020), 102434.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
Sikh holy text used for prayers) so that people can donate money for the maintenance of the Shaheedi Khu (the “Martyrs’ Well”). Yet, despite these efforts, the Ajnala Massacre remains largely absent from national memory (Image 3).

How are we to make sense of the Ajnala Massacre, its contested meanings, and as a site of memory? As an event, the massacre was yet another example of the brutal violence that was central to colonial rule. As a metaphor, the shifting meanings and significance attached to the massacre by British and, subsequently, by Indian audiences demonstrate the malleability of historical narratives, and the ways that history is mediated by the politics of the present. The marginalized position of this event within the history of British India reminds us that the systemic violence of empire still remains poorly understood and is often brushed aside as the “exceptional” excesses of a few “bad apples.” Contemporary British audiences are still struggling to come to terms with much more well-known colonial atrocities or instances of brutal callousness, such as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre or the 1943 Bengal famine. So, it remains to be seen whether Ajnala will begin to figure more prominently in these discussions. And, even if it does, the increasingly polarized debates surrounding the legacies of empire do not augur particularly well for the possibility of a more nuanced and critical reckoning with this history. For Indian audiences,

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82 See, for example, the backlash that has accompanied the publication of Sathnam Sanghera, Empireland: How Imperialism has Shaped Modern Britain (London: Viking, 2021).
Ajnala cannot be easily weaponized by either the Hindu Right against its internal enemies, or the Congress and its supporters who have equally nothing to gain from excoriating British rule. Ajnala is also difficult to insert into the already considerably rich historiographical and commemorative traditions of 1857. There are no great heroes, like Mangal Pandey, Nana Sahib, Tatya Tope, or the Rani of Jhansi, to equal the villainy of Cooper and rally the nation. As Shahid Amin reminds us, it is impossible to ever fully escape the hegemonic power of both colonial and nationalist narratives when writing the history of highly politicized events such as this (Image 4).83

As a site of memory, the well at Ajnala has also thus far resisted any fixed, singular meaning. The lack of consensus among locals about who the bodies belong to, coupled with the absence of any kind of authoritative, verifiable scientific analysis to support one particular historical narrative has meant that the bodies have become floating signifiers, empty vessels upon which individuals and groups can ascribe their own meanings and significance. For many of the inhabitants of Ajnala, these are the bodies of heroic martyrs, who died in the cause of Indian freedom, but it is unclear if this particular narrative will gain greater traction or resonance beyond the locality. Recently, Chris Moffat has suggested that history is an inheritance and the figures of the past continue to “haunt” the present, demanding our engagement with it.84 It remains to be seen whether and how the ghosts of the sepoys at Ajnala will be heard.

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank the editors of this special edition, Cynthia Prescott and Janne Lahti, for inviting me to contribute to this volume, and for their incisive editorial commentary. Reeju Ray, Derek Elliott, and Kim Wagner, also all provided helpful and constructive feedback on earlier

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83 Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 118.
84 Chris Moffat, India’s Revolutionary Inheritance: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh (Cambridge: CUP, 2019).
drafts of this piece, while the anonymous reviewers helped me sharpen and clarify aspects of its analysis. Finally, I am grateful for the assistance of Chaman Lal, who shared photographs and reflections from his visit to Ajnala, and also to Satvinder Juss.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributor**

*Mark Condos*, is an historian interested in the intersections between violence, race, and law within the British and French empires. My previous research has examined the relationship between militarism, violence, and state-building in colonial Punjab and along the North-West Frontier of British India. This work explored how colonial anxieties, fears, and vulnerabilities played an important role in determining the authoritarian and often violent practices of the British colonial state. I am currently working on a new project that looks at how concepts of prestige, dignity, and honour informed imperial practices of retributive violence, and the ways that imperial powers attempted to justify these within legal, moral, and other normative frameworks.

**ORCID**

*Mark Condos* ☑️ [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7211-4224](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7211-4224)