

Punjab Rebellion and British Rule in India

General Dyer's Amritsar Massacre Stirs Ire of British Writer

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THE issue of the Hunter Report on the Punjab Rebellion was awaited here with great anxiety because of the case of General Dyer and the Amritsar massacre. The rebellion itself covered a wide area and there were risings and rioting and loss of life in many cities, but it was recognized that the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh raised fundamental issues and that British rule in India would be judged in the eyes of the world according to the verdict which the Hunter Committee and the British Government in London passed on it.

There are, in fact, three reports. One is signed by the Chairman of the Committee (Lord Hunter, who is a Scottish judge) and all the Anglo-Indian members, who have important posts of one sort or another in India. One of them, for instance, is a judge of the Calcutta High Court, the second is a secretary of the Indian Government, the third is a Punjab general and the fourth an important business man at Cawnpore. The second, or Minority Report, is the product of the three native Indian members, one of whom sits on the Legislative Council of the United Provinces, while the second is a judge in Bombay and the third is an important barrister in the state of Gwalior. The third report, which is the most notable of all and marks an epoch in Indian Government, is that written by Mr. Montagu, the Indian secretary, on behalf of the British Government as a whole.

It is necessary first to recall the circumstances of the rebellion. In the spring of last year, the Indian Government and the whole of the Anglo-Indian community were in a condition of extreme nervousness. A feverish agitation was spreading all over the country against certain unpopular measures of the Indian Government. Some of the native leaders had organized a great passive resistance movement and when large numbers of persons take to passive resistance, especially among Eastern populations, it is a short step to outbreaks of mob violence. At the same time there were whispers of impending trouble (which speedily arrived) on the Afghan frontier, while the British garrison in India was clamoring to be sent home and demobilized. Passive resistance very soon gave way to violence. In city after city the mob rose and there was widespread pillaging, destruction of railways and telegraphs and murders of Europeans. So it was, among other places, at Amritsar, where also an English nurse, Miss Sherwood, was set upon, beaten and left for dead.

At Amritsar, the civil authorities threw up the sponge. They came to the conclusion that the situation had passed beyond their control. They, therefore, handed over authority to the military in the person of General Dyer, who had a small armed force at his command. General Dyer promptly decided to forbid all meetings of the native population, armed or unarmed, and he had the prohibition made known at various points in the city. How large a section of the population never heard, or heard of, the prohibition it is just as impossible to say as it would be if a similar notice were read at various points in Chicago or in any large American city. General Dyer, however, decided in his own mind that if any meeting were anywhere held he would regard it as a deliberate defiance of his orders and would promptly disperse it by force.

Next morning he heard that a great mass meeting was taking place at Jallianwalla Bagh, a great and closed space where many thousand persons had assembled and from which there was only one narrow exit. There is no dispute as to what actually happened. General Dyer gave evidence before the committee in the frankest manner. It is admitted on all sides that he is a perfectly honest and determined man. Honesty and determination, of course, only add to the evil consequences if a man has an entirely wrong conception of what his duty is. General Dyer proceeded to the Bagh determined that, if he found a crowd there, he would fire upon it and inflict severe punishment in order to make it serve as a terrible example to all rebels—and would-be rebels—in India. The rest follows automatically. He took his troops into the enclosure, drew them up and ordered them to fire. He admitted he would have taken in his armored cars, only they were too big to pass the entrance. When the firing began the crowd began madly to disperse so that it might have been supposed that the object of the shooting was achieved, but General Dyer by no means ordered his troops to cease firing. He made them continue until their ammunition was exhausted. He was, in fact, beyond any doubt or dispute not merely dispersing a mob, ruly or unruly, armed or unarmed, but inflicting a savage lesson on, as he would have said,

the Indian rebels as a whole. In the result he left more than 350 dead on the ground and many wounded. His defenders, of whom there are few in this country, maintain that he saved India from a revolt worse than the Mutiny. His critics believe that he dealt the British cause in India a deadly blow and that we shall be lucky if the severe condemnation of General Dyer by the British Government saves us from the otherwise inevitable consequences.

To complete the story of General Dyer, it is necessary also to mention that certain personal considerations came into his section. He was asked whether he did not think that the crowd would have dispersed had it received a warning, which it did not, that he was about to fire. His reply was that possibly it would have dispersed but that it would have come back again and made him look a fool. It is necessary also to mention that apart from the actual massacre, the action which caused the greatest indignation throughout India was the so-called "crawling order." Every native passing up or down the street in which Miss Sherwood was attacked was ordered to crawl flat on the stomach. Shortly after the order was issued it was canceled by the higher authorities, who had become aware of it, but it had already been put in force and a gross humiliation had been imposed upon many innocent people and so upon the whole Indian population.

In considering the Amritsar massacre it is obvious that a great deal turns upon this question of "making an example" of a particular group or section of persons in order to intimidate the whole population. If we are to make any pretense at all at impartiality we must admit that this is precisely the method which the Germans followed in Belgium. Their "frightfulness" sprang from anxiety and nervousness about their dangerous position in the midst of a suspicious and hostile population. The position of General Dyer and the Anglo-Indian community when the rebellion broke out was of the same kind. The Germans were well aware how difficult would be their position if the whole of Belgium rose against them and they set out deliberately to strike terror into the masses of the Belgian population. The principle followed by General Dyer was, on the admissions of himself and his advocates here, pretty much the same. The Jallianwalla crowd were unarmed but had assembled in defiance of orders. By firing upon them he would not only teach them a lesson but at the same time all other rebels or would-be rebels wherever they might be.

The same would have been true with the "crawling order." The British Government has disposed, once and for all, of that particular piece of intimidation. "The order," it says, "inflicted, as it was, upon persons who had no connection with the crime against Miss Sherwood with the object of impressing upon the public of Amritsar through humiliation of those persons, the enormity of the crime committed by certain individuals of that public, offended against every action of civilized government." It is not possible for any Englishman pretending to be impartial or to govern native races to set up one law for the Germans in Belgium and a very different one for himself in India. What is bad and immoral in principle in the one case is bad and immoral in the other. And, of course, the extenuating circumstances, if there are any, are not on the side of the

"crawling order" because those who enforced it were not occupying a hostile country during time of war but were dealing simply and solely with co-citizens of the British Empire. Unfortunately, too many members of the Anglo-Indian community do not recognize the native Indians as co-citizens and fellow-subjects of the King, but such in fact they are legally and constitutionally, and it is all the more imperative, therefore, that in matters of life and death they should be treated with precisely the same amount of justice and fair dealing as would be given to white British subjects in England or in any of the self-governing Dominions.

The three reports differ very much in tone and emphasis. The Majority Report is the mildest of the three. It does criticize General Dyer for giving no warning to the crowd before he fired and for firing after the crowd began to disperse and it does not agree that his action saved the Punjab and averted a rising like the Mutiny. But there it stops. The Minority are much more severe; they point out that "military necessity" was always the plea by which the Prussian militarists justified their worst outrages and they characterize General Dyer's methods as "inhuman and un-British."

But really it is only the verdict of the British Government, uttered through the Indian secretary, which matters, and that is uncompromisingly on the side of the Minority rather than of the Anglo-Indian Majority. It is well that it is so. Mr. Montagu recalls the principle, which is accepted and acted on in English domestic affairs, that when military aid has to be summoned for the support of civil authority only the minimum amount of force that is necessary must be used. General Dyer admittedly made no attempt to estimate or to apply the minimum necessary and the idea at the back of his head was something absolutely different; he was not in his own mind restoring civil authority but "teaching a lesson" and his mental attitude is sufficiently indicated by his admission that if he could have got his armored cars into Jallianwalla Bagh, he would have used them also.

The Indian secretary says of General Dyer: "His conception of his duty in the circumstances in which he was placed was so fundamentally at variance with that which his Majesty's Government has a right to expect from, and a duty to enforce upon, officers who hold his Majesty's commission, that it is impossible to regard him as fitted to remain entrusted with the responsibilities which his rank and position impose upon him." So General Dyer is relieved of his post in India and has come home, escaping lightly if that be for him the end of the consequences of Jallianwalla Bagh.

The British Government's utterance has done something to vindicate the British name for justice in India. They explicitly repudiate the judgment of the Majority in respect to the execution of martial law and declare that there were officers in the Punjab who, behaving as though they were in a hostile occupied country, inflicted punishments intended to humiliate and cow Indians as a race. Such men they firmly condemn. It is well, indeed, that they should do so, for what moral authority would be retained by a ruling power which admitted or condoned such principles of action? It is astonishing how in all the discussion of the Amritsar episode in this country the central fact has been overlooked. The defenders of General Dyer say, "Yes, it is true that 350 Indians were killed at Jallianwalla Bagh, but the British Raj itself was at stake and not only that but the small Anglo-Indian population, including women and children, were in danger. The massacre was a 'lesson,' terrible indeed, but a lesson which saved the Raj and the Anglo-Indian population."

The answer to such an argument is simply this: "Very well. Grant for a moment that the Anglo-Indian position and population could only be saved by the slaughtering of 350 natives at Amritsar. But in that case the Anglo-Indian position has no more foundation or authority and the Anglo-Indian population should withdraw." You simply cannot justify an alien rule which has to be upheld by the massacre of several hundred natives attending a meeting in defiance of orders. The blessings of British rule, it will be said! But what answer can be made to the Indian who says that he refuses to purchase those or any other alien blessings at the cost of the lives of hundreds of his countrymen. It is a good thing, indeed, if it be not too late, that the British Government has spoken out in order to re-establish the moral authority which the Amritsar tragedy has so gravely weakened.



A splendid photograph of the United States War College, taken from an aeroplane. The War College is situated on the Anacostia River, Washington, D. C.