

*Submission For:* The Betty G. Headley Senior Essay Award  
St. Jerome's University: Friday, February 1, 2008  
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**The Martyr and The Murderer**  
*Udham Singh, the Amritsar Massacre*  
*and Memories of Violence in Post-Colonial India*

*Originally Submitted to:* Dr. Daniel Gorman, 17 July 2007  
*Requirement for:* HIST 401A Seminar: Imperialism and Postcolonialism  
*Attached:* Professor's Comments and Final Grade

“I thought it would be doing a jolly lot of good and they would  
realize that they were not to be wicked.”<sup>1</sup>  
*General Reginald Dyer, after firing upon of a crowd of civilians in Amritsar, India, April 1919.*

In a fury after hearing about the British Indian Army’s use of force against unarmed civilians in the northern Punjab city of Amritsar, the Nobel-prize winning Indian intellectual and poet Rabindranath Tagore took up his pen with a determination likely resembling that which guided his artistic endeavors. On 30 May, 1919, Tagore’s pen conjured a now famous letter to the Viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford in which he renounced the knighthood he had earned from the British Crown. It was an unpredictably political move for someone who had devoted his life to societal regeneration through the “awakening of...[India’s] soul,”<sup>2</sup> emerging as a fierce indictment of British policy:

The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who for their so-called insignificance are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human blessings.<sup>3</sup>

The Amritsar Massacre, as it came to be known, exhibited without remorse the chains that still bound the Indian people to colonial subordination. It crushed the dreams of many who had hoped the post-WWI period would be one of liberalization and reform, substituting ambition with a reality of repression and humiliation. Tagore’s act of protest emulates this sense of betrayal, a gesture his biographers insist “restored the self-respect of the nation and gave his people courage and faith at a time when they were sorely needed.”<sup>4</sup> When, in 1974, an independent India took to the streets to celebrate the ‘protector of their dignity’ and the ‘avenger of Amritsar’,<sup>5</sup> however, it was not Tagore’s name they shouted in jubilation, but rather the name of a low-born Sikh orphan who had been executed as a political terrorist and murderer by the British Government thirty-four years earlier. The same event that had inspired Tagore to take up his pen had set the

young Udham Singh on a twenty-one year long quest of rebellion and revenge that culminated in the assassination of former Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab Sir Michael O'Dwyer in March 1940.

The story of Singh's life, and the affirmation within India that his act of vengeance was essential to the retention of the nation's honour, provides a unique vantage point to examine the seriousness of the colonial legacy on the national consciousness. Singh's act was not, at the time, representative of the majority-supported independence movement – it was the product of a vendetta rather than an order from Delhi. Yet the assassin's elevation as a hero and martyr in an independent India is evidence that his action, however excessive and isolated, represented for many a strike against repression as vital as the words of Tagore or even the protests of Mahatmas Gandhi. The adoption of this “extremist fringe” into the pantheon of national heroes provides insight into the need to come to terms with some of the more brutal aspects of the colonial experience in a decolonized state; Udham Singh, in this example, proves to be part of a process in which Indians seek to gain closure following the humiliation and atrocities of the Amritsar Massacre.

The connection between repressive policy and the invigoration of extremist doctrine is well documented within the Indian Independence Movement, but the celebration of martyrdom and murder in post-colonial Indian patriotism is a largely unexamined motif of the Imperial legacy. Udham Singh's transformation from a failed Sikh and obscure terrorist to his historical position as “an Arch Revolutionary, a superb mob orator, a fiery demagogue, [and] an inveterate foe of British Imperialism”<sup>6</sup> typifies the manner in which brutalized societies can find solidarity and recompense through celebrations of violence while wrestling with the burden of a humiliating colonial past.

## **An Oath of Revenge**

In his expansive analysis of European overseas empires, David B. Abernethy approaches the years between 1914 and 1939 as a phase of ‘Unstable Equilibrium’, characterized by the meeting of “powerful forces [working] to consolidate European rule *and* to undermine it.”<sup>7</sup> Central to this assessment is the renewed vigour with which nationalist groups began to assert their rights following the First World War, a result of both the liberating experience offered by military service in Europe and the visible strain exhibited by European empires due to the intensity of the internal conflict. In India, considerable promises for reform expressed by a British administration eager to ensure loyalty during the war were largely forgotten in the exhilaration of victory, stimulating a wave of resentment amongst a population growing weary with the Raj.

The much-touted Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, the seeds of which were planted in an August 1917 statement by Secretary of State for India Edwin Montagu promising “the progressive realization of responsible government in India,”<sup>8</sup> emerged in 1919 as a largely inadequate attempt to develop self-governing institutions in India. Many Indian nationalists criticized it as “poor recompense” for the country’s war sacrifices.<sup>9</sup>

In the Punjab, the north-western province of British India, the sting of disappointment was felt especially. The Punjab had been the “flower of the British Indian Army”,<sup>10</sup> supplying more to the war effort than any other province thanks largely to the determination of its Lieutenant Governor, Sir Michael O’Dwyer, to make his province of 20 million “the shield, the spearhead and the swordhand of India.”<sup>11</sup> In his memoirs, O’Dwyer proudly states that, in the Punjab, “the number of fighting men raised during the four years of war was roughly three hundred and sixty thousand, more than half the

total number raised in India.”<sup>12</sup> Many politicians in the Punjab had come to expect that the British would reward them for their loyalty and sacrifice.

Post-war policy in India, however, was not dominated by ‘progressive’ legislations like the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms but rather by the British government’s anxiety to deal with sedition.<sup>13</sup> Mohandas Gandhi’s accusation that the British had been emboldened rather than humbled by their victory in Europe was confirmed by the 1919 Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, the result of a study into the potential for conspiracy in India led by Sir Sidney Rowlett immediately after the war.<sup>14</sup> The ‘Rowlett Act’ conferred extensive powers on the executive government, permitting restrictions to be placed on “persons suspected of connection with revolutionary...movements.”<sup>15</sup> The legislation was perceived in India as a license for repression and an obviously regressive move on the path towards independence.<sup>16</sup> Abernethy considers the Rowlett Act “an unofficial vote of no confidence in [the Indians’] ability and will to win self-government by peaceful means.”<sup>17</sup> Even O’Dwyer, in retrospect, admitted that the Rowlett Act “gave all the forces openly or secretly hostile to the British Government a pretext for combining in a great effort under Gandhi’s leadership to ‘bring the Government to its knees’.”<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, in response to the Act’s imposition, the nationalist leader Gandhi called for a *hartāl* – a mass protest or strike – throughout the country.<sup>19</sup> India rose in protest, and the Punjab answered Gandhi’s call with huge gatherings, great marches and festivals. In certain parts of the country – most notably Ahmedabad, Delhi and the Punjab city of Amritsar – successive *hartāls* evolved into violent riots. In Amritsar, the imprisonment of Congress spokesmen Dr. Kitchlew and Satya Pal for “leading a most violent anti-Government agitation”<sup>20</sup> provoked uproar among the gathered crowds, and when the Deputy Commissioner of the city ordered his troops to fire at the mob, the path to

insurrection was set. On 10 April, 1919, angry protestors overwhelmed Amritsar, murdering five Europeans and attacking banks and government buildings; on a side-street the head of the City Mission School, Miss Marcella Sherwood, was beaten and left for dead.<sup>21</sup> By April 11<sup>th</sup>, martial law was imposed on the city under the authority of Brigadier-General R.E.H. Dyer.<sup>22</sup>

Sir Michael O'Dwyer, who had been due to retire his position as Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab at the end of the month, was quite evidently frustrated by these developments. In May 1913, when the weathered Irishman had assumed his position, Sikander Singh relates that he had been cautioned by the Viceroy about the province: "there [is] much inflammable material lying about, which requires very careful handling if an explosion [is] to be avoided."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the activity of anti-British movements had been quite constant in the Punjab throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>24</sup> and it was accepted that the "virile instincts"<sup>25</sup> of the Punjabis had to be controlled with a firm hand; O'Dwyer had been more than willing to oblige. When General Dyer arrived in Amritsar in 1919, however, he was confronted "with a crisis of the gravest kind."<sup>26</sup> Dyer's perception of a "determined and organized movement...to submerge and destroy all the Europeans on the spot"<sup>27</sup> was justification enough for coercive pacification, and the British Indian Army were to treat any gathering of four or more people as unlawful assembly.

In an unfortunate coincidence, celebrations were scheduled for the 13<sup>th</sup> of April in honour of the Sikh and Hindu festival of Baisakhi, and large numbers of people from across the Punjab were making the pilgrimage to Amritsar. The crowd, of course, could not claim complete ignorance to the imposition of martial law in the city, but when Dyer stumbled upon a gathering of five thousand Indians at the walled-in Jalianwala Bagh, it was likely not the assembly of "the same mobs which had murdered and looted and burnt

three days previously” that he assumed.<sup>28</sup> The gathering was more likely intended as a peaceful protest, and reports by the administration later showed that Dyer’s unlawful assembly order had been poorly publicized.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the case, when Dyer made the order to fire upon what he saw as “a deliberate challenge to the Government forces,”<sup>30</sup> the majority of the people at Jalianwala Bagh were seated, listening to speakers, playing games and chatting with friends.<sup>31</sup> The callous action that followed is perhaps best described by Dyer himself in a 1920 statement:

I fired and continued to fire until the 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 casualties would have been 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 especially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.<sup>32</sup>

It seems it was only the narrow entrances to the Bagh that had prevented Dyer from utilizing the armoured cars and machine guns he had arrived with.

Having spent some 1650 rounds of ammunition, Dyer’s forces had killed an estimated 379 individuals and wounded 1137 others.<sup>33</sup> Content that “the spirit of the organized mobs was effectively broken,”<sup>34</sup> Dyer ordered his troops to retreat without making any provisions for the wounded. He would later claim that the hospitals were open and the medical officers were waiting: “The wounded only had to apply for help.”<sup>35</sup>

In his study of British reaction to the massacre at Jallainwala Bagh, Derek Sayer quotes the eyewitness account of an Anglo-Indian woman who claimed that “General Dyer’s action alone saved them.”<sup>36</sup> In the fallout of the event, the Brigadier General would not only receive official approval but be promoted.<sup>37</sup> His colleagues, Major-General Benyon among them, would praise “the wisdom of General Dyer’s action,”<sup>38</sup> and

*The Morning Post* would claim that the response at the Bagh had been necessary to protect “the honour of European women.”<sup>39</sup> Sir Michael O’Dwyer, especially, was pleased by the sobering effect produced by Dyer’s action, praising the General for performing “admirably in the face of a very difficult situation.”<sup>40</sup> In 1920, while under scrutiny for the shooting, the then-retired Lieutenant-Governor maintained that the General’s action on 12 April 1919 was “the decisive factor in crushing the rebellion.”<sup>41</sup>

For many Indians, however, Dyer’s action highlighted the extent of their dehumanization under the British Raj. Sayer notes that it was the ‘otherness’ of India that legitimized the actions of Dyer, “enabling their transmutation from what would otherwise be seen as crimes into moral acts.”<sup>42</sup> The Punjab, Gandhi protested, had been “cruelly and barbarously treated,”<sup>43</sup> and Dyer’s abuses would help to inspire the non-cooperation movement which emerged in the 1920s. Brutality, it was quite evident to the Indians, constituted the black heart of colonialism, and the event showcased a need for reform that fuelled the independence movement in years to come.

The successful application of colonialism over complex indigenous cultures, it was accepted by British authorities, demanded more than the tactical use of a ‘big stick’. In India, especially, control had been acquired through a diverse and varied assortment of economic, social and psychological strategies, with the assertion of arms present but usually recognized as a last resort in what was meant to be a system of subtlety. The principle of ‘minimum force’ was accepted as a means to suppress civil disturbance, yet Dyer’s action could hardly be ignored as an exercise in subtlety.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it was not long before the initial acclamation of Dyer by Anglo-Indians was met by an equally forceful denouncement in Britain: on 8 July 1920 Sir Winston Churchill would refer the House of Commons to the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh as “an extraordinary event, a monstrous

event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation.”<sup>45</sup> In 1920, the Hunter Commission was established to investigate the disturbances in the Punjab, stating its purpose as one of telling “the story of this indiscriminate killing of innocent people.”<sup>46</sup> Central to indictments of Dyer was his failure to give warning to the assembly at the Bagh before firing, as well as the routine floggings, mass internments, and abuses of martial law that followed. A dispatch from the Government of India to Secretary of State Montagu claimed Dyer’s action was “indefensible”,<sup>47</sup> accusing him of lacking humanity and going “beyond what any reasonable man could have thought to be necessary.”<sup>48</sup> The event had quickly become an embarrassment for the British, especially in light of Brigadier-General Dyer’s complete lack of remorse, as evidenced in this 1920 interview:

*Q:* What reason had you to suppose that if you had ordered the assembly to leave the Bagh they would not have done so without the necessity of your firing, continued firing for a length of time?

*A:* Yes: I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed them perhaps even without firing.

*Q:* Why did you not adopt that course?

*A:* I could disperse them for some time, then they would all come back and laugh at me, and I considered I would be making myself a fool.<sup>49</sup>

Dyer’s attempt to stabilize British rule in the Punjab soon took the face of a grave miscalculation; in an odd reference to a parallel conflict the Empire was facing at this time, Colonel J.C. Wedgewood remarked that support for Dyer among the Anglo-Indian community was making the Indians “enraged, antagonistic, anti-English and Sinn Fein.”<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, Dyer was forced to resign on 22 March 1920.<sup>51</sup> While some defense was given after the Hunter Commission’s investigation, notably from Lieutenant Colonel Cuthbert James who decried “if your house catches fire, it is no use telling the fireman, after he has put your fire out, that he has used too much water to do it,”<sup>52</sup> Dyer’s career was effectively ruined. *The Morning Post* launched an “Appeal to Patriots” for funds in

support of Dyer, to which Sir Michael O'Dwyer contributed, and in Bengal 6,250 British women petitioned the prime minister for his reinstatement, to no effect.

When Gandhi wrote that “we have no desire for revenge...we want to change the system that produced Dyer,”<sup>53</sup> he was perhaps underestimating the effect the General's systemic violence had had in the Punjab. O'Dwyer, in enlisting Punjabis for the army, had noted that “the strongest appeal to a Punjabi is one to his *izzat* (honour),”<sup>54</sup> and the effect of collective violence on such a society, regardless of their guilt, should not be difficult to predict. Traditional Indian accounts of the massacre maintain that a young Udham Singh, resident of Amritsar, was present at Jallianwala Bagh on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1919, serving water to the gathered crowds. When the firing began, Singh was apparently wounded in the arm, and though Sikh accounts maintain he was virtually paralysed by the injury, the young Indian is held to have helped a woman find and move her dead husband's body.<sup>55</sup> The effect of Dyer's action on Singh was transformative: “his was a proud nation that does not forget an indignity and which could certainly extract *khūn dā badlā khūn* or ‘blood for blood.’”<sup>56</sup> Following the massacre, it is said that Singh traveled to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, immersed himself in the holy ‘Pool of Nectar’, and took a solemn vow to avenge this great offence to his nation's pride with the blood of Sir Michael O'Dwyer.<sup>57</sup>

### **An Alternative Path**

Helen Fein's study of the Amritsar Massacre attempts to explain how groups come to authorize acts of violence towards other groups which would be considered criminal if committed against its own members.<sup>58</sup> While her discussion revolves around British attempts to legitimize the events at Jallianwala Bagh, the same framework can be

used to understand how Udham Singh's oath to kill Sir Michael O'Dwyer came to be considered a logical punishment for the abuses suffered under General Dyer. The dominance of Gandhian nationalism in India has somewhat overshadowed the study of violent revolutionary movements contemporary to the Indian National Congress, yet in the 1920s the threat of armed rebellion was constant in India, most notably in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and especially the Punjab.<sup>59</sup> It is a convenient asset for the historian that most biographies of Udham Singh act doubly as a chronicle of alternatives to Gandhi's methods of non-violence, providing insight into how an act of terrorism would become celebrated as heroic in a country supposedly born from the ideals of peaceful agitation.

Singh was born in 1899 in the Sangrur District of the Punjab, although little else is known about his childhood. Sensationalist accounts of his life describe him impressing the local peasantry with his "manly valour,"<sup>60</sup> or defending his father's goats by fighting off a leopard with an axe.<sup>61</sup> One account of his life reflects that, while homeless after his father's death, he slept on a tank near a Railway Station in Lahore, as if to suggest he had gained some sort of militancy by osmosis.<sup>62</sup> Educated in Amritsar at the Central Khalsa Orphanage, the boy was inculcated with ideas of honour and sacrifice advocated by the Sikh tradition,<sup>63</sup> foreshadowing perhaps the offence he would take to the atrocities of 1919, when, at age 20, it is said he was filled "with hatred against the British."<sup>64</sup>

Following his famous oath at the Golden Temple, it is easier to sketch out the formative influences on Singh's development into an extremist than an actual chronological account of his actions. Researching his life quickly becomes a process of reconciling contradictory and sensationalist accounts, and what little evidence does exist is cased in government documents and questionable oral testimonies. There is, for instance, consensus that he was recruited by the Babbar Akali movement soon after the

massacre and inspired by its manifesto of political assassination, but little evidence to say when and where.<sup>65</sup> His supposed involvement with the Ghadar movement is more certain, confirmed by documents tracking his travels through the United States, yet it is difficult to see how Sikander Singh is confident enough to suggest that he was “under the influence of the Ghadar Party completely [sic] and its motives had a great impact on him.”<sup>66</sup> The Ghadar Movement, which advocated guerilla warfare and terrorism as a means to acquire political freedom, was formed in 1913 by the Punjab diaspora in North America, and would undoubtedly appeal to a young Sikh with ambition to strike against British imperialism. Singh would certainly subscribe to the Ghadar conviction that, “in India, the time will come when rifles and blood will take the place of pen and ink.”<sup>67</sup>

Singh is also said to have spent time in Africa, Germany, and various locations across Europe “taking up...other revolutionary causes aimed at destabilizing British imperial possessions.”<sup>68</sup> B.S. Maighowala, for instance, suggests that Singh worked as a gun-runner for “rebel Irish Chieftans” in the mid 1920s.<sup>69</sup> In 1927, however, the budding revolutionary returned to India and was promptly arrested under the Indian Firearms Act for the possession of two handguns he had presumably smuggled into the country.<sup>70</sup> Interned in Mianwali Prison for a five year sentence, Udham Singh is said to have crossed paths with Bhagat Singh, a prominent Indian Marxist who had been arrested for the murder of a policeman in Lahore. Bhagat Singh appears to be the most influential figure in Udham Singh’s development; indeed, a picture of the Marxist revolutionary was found in his pocket when he was arrested in London in 1940.<sup>71</sup>

Bhagat Singh is best known for his efforts in broadening the independence movement to consider the struggle of peasants and workers against social oppression,<sup>72</sup> yet his path to martyrdom seems to have had the most effect on Udham Singh. Bhagat

Singh had killed a British police officer in 1928 to avenge the death of the Indian nationalist Lajpat Rai, who had been beaten to death at a protest in Lahore.<sup>73</sup> Bhagat Singh was hanged on 23 March 1931, an event that evidently brought great mental torture to Udham Singh.<sup>74</sup> The words of Bhagat Singh, however, characterize the way Udham Singh approached his own oath of revenge in the years that followed: “It is very easy to talk, but to serve the motherland is very difficult. Those who enter the path of serving the motherland have to go through immense pain and agony.”<sup>75</sup>

In late 1931, Udham Singh was released from jail and moved back to Amritsar, where he assumed the name Ram Mohammed Singh Azad, an alias, Sikander Singh claims, meant to emphasize the unity of India.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps it was this return to the setting of the massacre that renewed his determination, but friends relate that whenever Singh spoke of General Dyer, “his eyes became bloodshot with rage.”<sup>77</sup> In 1933, he applied for a British passport in Lahore, and in 1934 he was approved entry to England.

### **“Disgrace of the Nation Wiped Out in Blood”**

In his memoirs, Sir Michael O’Dwyer reflects proudly on the success of martial law in achieving “immediate results in stopping the seditious movement.”<sup>78</sup> The finite nature with which the Lieutenant Governor describes the outcome of General Dyer’s pacification of Amritsar in 1919 reflects a disconnect with the seriousness of his decisions in the Punjab. Indeed, though martial law may prove effective in an immediate sense, the scars it inflicts on the public continue to linger after it is withdrawn. The case is particularly true in Amritsar, where Indian historians maintain that “every possible measure was adopted to humiliate the people and make them look undignified.”<sup>79</sup> General Dyer’s use of force at Jallianwala Bagh was only the beginning; for weeks

following the massacre, Amritsar was subjected to mass internments, public floggings, and indiscriminate punishments. Perhaps most resonant was the infamous ‘crawling order’, which required Indians passing down the lane where Miss Sherwood had been beaten to crawl on all fours, a dehumanizing experience inflicted upon the whole community and exacerbated by the curses and swipes of army officers standing by.<sup>80</sup>

Indians in the presence of Europeans were forced to stand and salute, and schools were routinely emptied for daily marches to counter what Dyer and his officers saw as the subversive influence of education.<sup>81</sup> The Hunter Commission would report on Captain Doveton’s “fancy punishments”, which forced people to recite poems, or touch the ground with their nose in a ritualistically humiliating manner.<sup>82</sup> Derek Sayer relates that, in Lahore, European spectators cheered and urged the cane-wielders to strike harder during the public floggings, underlining the social distance between the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>83</sup> There was hardly any chance that the foreign and isolated Hunter Commission was going to provide proper recompense for the people of the Punjab, and even Rabindranath Tagore’s grand statement could not heal the sores on the hands and feet of the people of Amritsar. Until his quiet death in 1927, General Dyer stood by his statement to the Hunter Commission: “I do not think it a very great inconvenience for them if they had to suffer a little for all that Amritsar had done.”<sup>84</sup>

Sir Michael O’Dwyer, it seems, had never met General Dyer before the Amritsar shooting, and it is clear they were not close even when controversy brought them under the spotlight. Prominent narratives of Udham Singh’s life, however, stress the “heart rending tyranny” of Michael O’Dwyer, claiming that the massacre at Amritsar was his own “pre-meditated plan...to challenge the dignity of the honourable *Punjabis* and to crush the spirit of the people and the freedom movement.”<sup>85</sup> Though allegations of

conspiracy are unsupported in most of the historiography, the Hunter Commission admitted that O'Dwyer "holds practically identical views with those of General Dyer,"<sup>86</sup> and indeed, O'Dwyer would maintain that "loss of life was inevitable when a truculent mob which had already committed murder and rebellion assembled to defy authority":<sup>87</sup>

*Q:* But there is no evidence to show that the assembly there expressed their sympathy with those who had committed murder and arson?

*A:* I think the fact that they had assembled there was enough.<sup>88</sup>

As Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, O'Dwyer had ruled with an iron fist. He had opposed the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, crushed the Ghadar revolution of February 1915, suppressed the Indian press and prevented nationalist activists from entering the Punjab.<sup>89</sup> While his memoirs show he held an immense respect for the people he ruled (he would strongly disapprove of Dyer's decision to impose the crawling order)<sup>90</sup>, they also exhibit his impression that democracy was incompatible with the Indian people, being an ideology "they neither understand nor desire."<sup>91</sup> O'Dwyer was a staunch supporter of Empire, convinced of "the great work of pacification, civilization, and ordered progress which in the past characterized [British] rule in India."<sup>92</sup> It can be argued, indeed, that the Punjab rebellions of 1919 were largely the result of O'Dwyer's refusal to accept the legitimacy of post-War Indian aspirations.

In 1915, while muzzling the Ghadar movement in the Punjab, O'Dwyer had noted the danger of "revolutionaries becoming more desperate as they lost ground, [resorting] more freely than ever to cowardly assassination."<sup>93</sup> Twenty-five years later, while at a meeting of the Royal Central Asian Society at Caxton Hall in London, it is unlikely that O'Dwyer had given much thought to the threat of assassins, perhaps even less likely that he expected he was being sought by an embittered resident of the Punjab for offences committed two decades earlier. Nevertheless, on 13 March 1940, following a lecture by

Sir Percy Sykes, the 75-year old Sir Michael O'Dwyer was shot at close range by an apparently triumphant Udham Singh.<sup>94</sup> Apprehended immediately by Miss Bertha Herring, a sixty-year old member of the society and former ambulance driver, Singh (going by the name Ram Mohammed Singh Azad) seemed quite keen to confess:<sup>95</sup>

I just shot just to make protest. I have seen people starving in India under British Imperialism. I done it, the pistol went off three or four times. I am not sorry for protesting. It was my duty to do so. Put some more. Just for the sake of my country to protest. I do not mind what sentence...I done my duty.<sup>96</sup>

Photographs of the incident show a smiling Udham Singh being escorted out of Caxton Hall by police, with British newspapers eager to decry this “vehement opponent of Imperialism.”<sup>97</sup> *The Tribune* in India, however, portrayed Udham Singh’s seemingly spontaneous and bloodthirsty act as heroic,<sup>98</sup> and the German press seemed delighted to have been provided a tool of propaganda to use against the British, their war-time enemy. News broadcasts from the Nazi regime hailed this “Indian Fighter for Freedom”, citing the murder as evidence that the British “have created somewhere in the world an unbearable tension.”<sup>99</sup> Gandhi, however, was quick to condemn Singh’s action: “such acts have been proved to be injurious to the causes for which they are committed.”<sup>100</sup>

Singh was tried for murder in the Number One Court of the Old Bailey on 4 June 1940, at the height of the British Army’s evacuation of Dunkirk, leading even his counsel to admit “that probably in no other country in the world at this critical hour...would such a murder charge be afforded so calm and fair a trial by a Court of the Empire [the accused had] denounced.”<sup>101</sup> As if to squeeze in as much defiance as possible, Singh had undertaken a hunger strike for the forty-two days since his arrest.<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately for the historian, the transcripts of the trial proceedings are being held by the Home Office under the Official Secrets Act until 2016 due to their “sensitivity”.<sup>103</sup> Sikander Singh’s analysis

of statements that are available, however, claim Udham Singh remained defiant until the last: “I did it because I had a grudge against him. He deserved it. He was the real culprit, he wanted to crush the spirit of my people, so I have crushed him.”<sup>104</sup> If this is the case, it is not hard to believe it took less than a day for the jury to come to a verdict, and on 5 June 1940 Udham Singh was sentenced to death.

When it came to his attention that some Punjabis were collecting money for an appeal, Singh wrote his friend Shiv Singh in London and told him not to bother:

I never afraid of dying so soon I will be getting married with execution. I am not sorry as I am a soldier of my country it is since 10 years when my best friend has left me behind and I am sure after my death I will see him as he is waiting for me it was the 23<sup>rd</sup> and I hope they will hang me on the same date as he was.<sup>105</sup>

His reference in this letter is to Bhagat Singh, who had said similar words to Vijay Kumar Sinha before his execution in 1931: “It would be a calamity if I am spared. If I die, wreathed in smiles, India’s mothers would wish their children to emulate Bhagat Singh and thus, the number of formidable freedom fighters would increase so much that it would be impossible for the satanic powers to stop the march of revolution.”<sup>106</sup> Udham Singh was hanged on 31 July 1940.

### **Singh in the Indian Historical Memory**

Frantz Fanon wrote in 1961 that, “for the colonized, life can only materialize from the rotting cadaver of the colonist.”<sup>107</sup> His *Wretched of the Earth* built on the idea of violence as a cleansing force, which “rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence.”<sup>108</sup> It is a perspective that diverges largely from the peaceful philosophy of Mahatmas Gandhi and the mainstream movement towards Indian independence, yet is particularly suitable for the story of Udham Singh. If one considers, as Bose and Lyons

do, that the Amritsar Massacre functions as a “syndecdoche for extreme colonial brutality” in the Indian historical memory,<sup>109</sup> then the effect of avenging this powerful symbol of British coercive power has the potential of being viewed as a strike against the Imperial foundation itself. While there is no doubt it was General Dyer who was most responsible for the atrocities of 1919, Sir Michael O’Dwyer, as head of province, provided a uniquely effective target to direct unresolved feelings of humiliation, despair, and anger. His elimination had tremendous symbolic value.

Indeed, the British government went to great lengths to prevent information about Udham Singh’s execution from getting out, noting the intention of the accused “to pose as a martyr and play to the gallery by making himself out to be a hero in the cause of Indian freedom.”<sup>110</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by members of the Indian community in Britain in 1940, perhaps as a result of the fear that Singh’s unabashed provocations would be a threat to their position in society.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, in 1988, when a move was made in London to name a street after Udham Singh, many Asians in the community protested because Singh’s name “recalls hatred. This ill-conceived choice will hamper our efforts to foster good race relations.”<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Singh is still recognized as a terrorist by the British administration.

In India, however, the situation is quite different. Udham Singh is known to most as “the patriot who avenged the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.”<sup>113</sup> His historical persona has come to assume “all the traits and characteristics of a hero, undaunted and chivalrous in spirit.”<sup>114</sup> Perhaps most illuminating is Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s statement in 1974 which praised Udham Singh for sacrificing his life “for the independence of the country,” an odd contrast to the 1940 testimony from her father’s newspaper *The National Herald*, which described Singh as “a misguided maniac.”<sup>115</sup> It is evident that Singh’s ‘sacrifice’

for his people has taken a different shape in the historical memory of an independent India, and the reasons behind this provide an illuminating example of how acts of violence can create solidarity in post-colonial societies.

Singh's life story, as evidenced above, is a composite of contradictory narratives warped by a powerful popular narrative "considerably shaped by the discourse of martyrdom in the Sikh tradition."<sup>116</sup> Martyrdom, indeed, has tremendous appeal as a political force due to its spiritual and religious overtones, and Singh's adoption into India's pantheon of patriots may be connected to the popular respect accorded to men and women willing to give their lives for the cause of a nation.<sup>117</sup> Louis Fenech observes that Indira Gandhi's efforts to have Udham Singh's remains returned to India in the 1970s were an attempt to sanction national pride for the Punjab Sikhs' contribution to Indian independence, a means to counter secessionist sentiments in the Punjab and an assertion of an overriding 'Indian identity'.<sup>118</sup> 'Ram Mohammed Singh Azad' provides a unique opportunity to emphasize this sense of unity, and indeed, in 1974, when English authorities released Singh's body with the hope that "this would end any lingering bitterness over Amritsar,"<sup>119</sup> the remains were greeted at New Delhi's International Airport by a crowd of thousands. Members of the ruling Congress Party, the Foreign Minister, and the Chief Minister of the Punjab all attended the event,<sup>120</sup> and Sikander Singh proudly proclaimed that "the protector of their dignity had come back to his motherland and every Indian was feeling proud of it."<sup>121</sup> Udham Singh's casket was paraded across the country under the national tri-coloured flag of India, and he was celebrated as the 'Protector of India's Self-Respect.'<sup>122</sup> The state had apparently appropriated his martyrdom as a symbol of a resilient and unified India, his act of terrorism accepted as a catalyst by which all Indians could feel some satisfaction that

their humiliation under colonial rule had been avenged. His ashes were then sent to sacred sites associated with the Punjab's three major religious traditions – Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism – emblematic of the value 'Singh Azad' provided for the state's message of religious pluralism.<sup>123</sup>

The lack of information regarding Singh's life and personal ideas makes it difficult to assess whether or not this was what the 'avenger of Amritsar' intended when he entered Caxton Hall in March 1940. Was Sir Michael O'Dwyer's murder really the product of a twenty-one year oath to uphold the honour of the Indian nation? Was it a spontaneous act of vengeance, a passionate attempt at personal revenge? Was it an accident? The incongruities of the evidence that *is* available make it even harder to determine. Particularly problematic is the evidence that suggests Udham Singh was a failed Sikh; his attachment to Bhagat Singh, an unabashed atheist, and the decidedly European appearance he assumed after returning to India in 1927 have given trouble to historians eager to attach him to the Khalsa tradition of Sikhism, which demands adherents leave their hair uncut.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the portraits and statues of Udham Singh in Amritsar all present a bearded, turbaned figure barely resembling the smiling face that greeted newspaper photographers at Caxton Hall in 1940. This is but one example of the way Singh's memory has been manipulated by Sikh nationalists eager to align the narrative of the Indian hero's life with the tradition of martyrdom advocated by the Khalsa, a process Fenech calls "history co-opted by heritage."<sup>125</sup> Indeed, *shahids* – martyrs who have met a heroic death – are an integral part of the Sikh identity in India; the daily prayers of many involve the recitation of an ever-growing list of martyrs from centuries of Sikh history.<sup>126</sup> For a religion that largely took the form of a military brotherhood under guru Govind Singh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, great pride can be gained from

the example of a Sikh who opposes “the tyranny of an overwhelming enemy.”<sup>127</sup>

Following the example of his people’s resistance to Mughal tyranny and Muslim persecutions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Udham Singh came to embody the sacrifice so celebrated by his countrymen: “Udham Singh the freedom-fighter kissed the hangmans noose and laid down his life for the motherland and his people.”<sup>128</sup>

The celebration of Udham Singh in the Sikh tradition, whether manipulated or not, proves the potency of the assassin’s act as a strike against tyranny. Indeed, when Indian Army General Vaidya was murdered in 1987 due to his involvement in a 1984 offensive against Sikh militants hiding inside Amritsar’s Golden Temple, his Sikh assassins stated that “by performing our historic task we have reminded you that our heroes like Sukha Singh, Mehtab Singh, [and] Udham Singh are shadowing you tyrants.”<sup>129</sup> Udham Singh exists as a symbol of the Sikh people’s strength against repression, his devotion to his community’s dignity confirmed by his martyrdom. Singh’s martyrdom, framed as a subversive resistance to authority, has built upon the legitimacy offered by the Khalsa tradition in the Punjab to be embraced as a necessary strike against British Imperialism.

Sikander Singh wrote in his 1998 biography of the martyr that Udham Singh was “a hundred year ahead the time [sic]. He was the advocate of nationalism.”<sup>130</sup> He goes so far as to suggest that had Indian political leaders accepted his secular ideology in the very beginning, “India would not have been divided.”<sup>131</sup> In the introduction to a collection of Udham Singh’s letters, Bishan Singh Samundri, too, notes the importance of remembering “the man who was prepared to lay down his life for his country and its people, irrespective of their caste and creed.”<sup>132</sup> Memorials and landmarks celebrate his name across India, and even the English city of Coventry holds an annual sports

tournament named in his honour.<sup>133</sup> In an odd juxtaposition, a statue of ‘Shahid’ Udham Singh wielding a handgun was erected in Amritsar directly in front of the Gandhi Gate, reflecting as it does the diversity of the pantheon of national heroes in India.<sup>134</sup> It is clear that the memory of Udham Singh in India transcends the skeletal details of his life, particularly the seemingly petty and cowardly manner with which he committed his act of vengeance (O’Dwyer was shot in the back), to create for Indians a sense of closure regarding the events in Amritsar in 1919. The depth of humiliation suffered, the amount of blood spilled, and the hopes that were crushed under the foot of General Dyer in 1919 undoubtedly left many starving for retribution, and in this environment only Singh’s demand of blood for blood was acceptable. No amount of Congress-guided criticisms or even Gandhi-led activism could heal the scars suffered at the Jallianwala Bagh.

It is this need for deliverance, this desire to avenge the atrocities experienced under years of British rule, that justifies Udham Singh’s designation as a national hero. It is a testament to the coercive capabilities of British colonialism in India that it could produce a community that would hail a terrorist and a murderer as the protector of its dignity and honour. Singh’s action has been adopted by the Indian people as the work of a great patriot, and indeed, under the portrait of him placed on the Jallianwala Bagh memorial in Amritsar are the words attributed to him during his trial: “What greater honour can be bestowed on me than death for the sake of my motherland?”<sup>135</sup> The assassination of Sir Michael O’Dwyer has been accepted as a crucial aspect of the Indian independence movement, an act of passion meant to validate the “humanity” of the Indian people, their capability to feel, to be offended. Udham Singh’s memory takes the form of a sort of therapy, a release for the anger and aggression stimulated by the humiliation of colonial rule, a valve not offered by the peaceful resistance encouraged

under Gandhian nationalism. Understanding why Singh is celebrated as a national hero is vital to understanding how pervasive British colonialism was in India, and how a myriad of antidotes are necessary to counter the trauma of its legacy.

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Report of the Committee appointed to investigate the disturbances in the Punjab (Hunter Commission)”, 1920: Cmd. 681, p. 116. [henceforth referred to as “Hunter Commission”]
- <sup>2</sup> Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Hampshire, 2005), p. 41.
- <sup>3</sup> Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London, 1962), p. 266.
- <sup>4</sup> Kripalani, p. 266.
- <sup>5</sup> Louis E. Fenech, “Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains: The Way Sikhs Remember Udham Singh ‘Shahid’,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 36:4, 2002, p. 833.
- <sup>6</sup> B.S. Maighowalia, *Sardar Udham Singh* (Hoshiarpur, 1969), p. 13.
- <sup>7</sup> David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires 1415-1980* (New Haven, 2000), p. 104.
- <sup>8</sup> Abernethy, p. 109.
- <sup>9</sup> Derek Sayer, “British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre, 1919-1920,” *Past and Present*, 131, 1991, p. 135.
- <sup>10</sup> Sikander Singh, *Udham Singh: A Saga of the Freedom Movement and Jallianwala Bagh* (Amritsar, 1998), p. 118.
- <sup>11</sup> Sir Michael O’Dwyer, *India As I Knew It: 1885-1925* (London, 1925), p. 213.
- <sup>12</sup> O’Dwyer, p. 215.
- <sup>13</sup> J.S. Grewal and H.K. Puri, “Udham Singh,” in Grewal & Puri (eds.), *Letters of Udham Singh* (Amritsar, 1974), p. 31.
- <sup>14</sup> O’Dwyer, p. 263.
- <sup>15</sup> A.P. Muddiman, “British India,” *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 3:3, 1921, p. 127.
- <sup>16</sup> Maighowalia, p. 15.
- <sup>17</sup> Abernethy, p. 109.
- <sup>18</sup> O’Dwyer, p. 266.
- <sup>19</sup> Sayer, p. 135.
- <sup>20</sup> O’Dwyer, p. 265.
- <sup>21</sup> Sayer, p. 137.
- <sup>22</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 32.
- <sup>23</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 118.
- <sup>24</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 23.
- <sup>25</sup> O’Dwyer, p. 210.
- <sup>26</sup> “Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B (Punjab Disturbances),” 1920: Cmd. 771, p. 6. [hereafter referred to as “Dyer”]
- <sup>27</sup> Dyer, p. 6.
- <sup>28</sup> Dyer, p. 7.
- <sup>29</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 28.
- <sup>30</sup> Dyer, p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgement, 1919-1920* (Honolulu, 1977), p. 20.
- <sup>32</sup> Dyer, p. 10.
- <sup>33</sup> Purmina Bose and Laura Lyons, “Dyer Consequences: The Trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of the ‘Minimum’ Force Debate,” *Boundary 2*, 26:2, 1999, p. 200.
- <sup>34</sup> Dyer, p. 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 31.
- <sup>36</sup> Sayer, p. 138.
- <sup>37</sup> Dyer, p. 5.

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- <sup>38</sup> Dyer, p. 9.
- <sup>39</sup> Sayer, p. 157.
- <sup>40</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 833.
- <sup>41</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> Sayer, p. 139.
- <sup>43</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 33.
- <sup>44</sup> For debate on minimum force, please see Dyer, p. 5, as well as Bose & Lyons, pp. 199-229.
- <sup>45</sup> cited in Bose & Lyons, p. 199.
- <sup>46</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 115.
- <sup>47</sup> "Correspondence between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India on the report of Lord Hunter's Committee," 1920: Cmd. 705, p. 9.
- <sup>48</sup> Dyer, p. 4.
- <sup>49</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 114.
- <sup>50</sup> Commons Debate 1789 as cited in Bose & Lyons, p. 211.
- <sup>51</sup> Dyer, p. 3.
- <sup>52</sup> Commons Debate 1753 as cited in Bose & Lyons, p. 206.
- <sup>53</sup> Sayer, p. 133.
- <sup>54</sup> O'Dwyer, p. 223.
- <sup>55</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 831.
- <sup>56</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 833.
- <sup>57</sup> Maighowalia, p. 23.
- <sup>58</sup> Fein, p. ix.
- <sup>59</sup> Grewal & Puri, pp. 21-22.
- <sup>60</sup> Maighowalia, p. 13.
- <sup>61</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 81.
- <sup>62</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 87.
- <sup>63</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 828.
- <sup>64</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 87.
- <sup>65</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 831.
- <sup>66</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 92.
- <sup>67</sup> 1 November 1913 edition of *The Ghadar Weekly*, as cited in Sikander Singh, p. 65.
- <sup>68</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 832.
- <sup>69</sup> Maighowalia, p. 24.
- <sup>70</sup> Maighowalia, p. 25.
- <sup>71</sup> Bipan Chandra, "Baghat Singh and his Comrades" in Ravi Dayal, ed. *We Fought Together for Freedom* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 140.
- <sup>72</sup> Kuldip Nayar, *The Martyr: Bhagat Singh – Experiments in Revolution* (New Delhi, 2000), p. 8.
- <sup>73</sup> Nayar, p. 7.
- <sup>74</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 107
- <sup>75</sup> cited in Chandra, p. 140.
- <sup>76</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 107.
- <sup>77</sup> 1974 Interview with Swaran Singh and Inder Singh Murari as cited in Grewal & Puri, pp. 97-98.
- <sup>78</sup> O'Dwyer, p. 286.
- <sup>79</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 153.
- <sup>80</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 122.
- <sup>81</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 123.
- <sup>82</sup> Sayer, p. 141.
- <sup>83</sup> Sayer, pp. 141-143.
- <sup>84</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 122.
- <sup>85</sup> Sikander Singh, p. xviii.
- <sup>86</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 114.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> Hunter Commission, p. 115.
- <sup>89</sup> Sayer, p. 136.

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- <sup>90</sup> O'Dwyer "strongly disapproved of [the crawling order] and telephoned to General Benyon to have the order withdrawn as he considered it an improper order," as cited in Hunter Commission, p. 123.
- <sup>91</sup> O'Dwyer, p. 406.
- <sup>92</sup> O'Dwyer, p. 407.
- <sup>93</sup> O'Dwyer, p. 205.
- <sup>94</sup> Hugh Leach, "Murder at Caxton Hall: The Society's Involuntary Legacy to Amritsar," *Asian Affairs*, 29:2, 1998, p. 181.
- <sup>95</sup> Leach, p. 181.
- <sup>96</sup> Statement of Mohamed Singh Azad of 8, Morington Terrace, Regents Park, an engineer aged 37, given on 13 March 1940, as cited in Grewal & Puri, p. 44.
- <sup>97</sup> "The Trial of Udham Singh." *The Times* (London), 2 April 1940, p. 5, col. C.
- <sup>98</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 42.
- <sup>99</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 209 - citing Gov't of India, External Affairs Department, File No. 1940.
- <sup>100</sup> "The Trial of Udham Singh." *The Times* (London), 2 April 1940, p. 5, col. C.
- <sup>101</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>102</sup> "Murder of Sir Michael O'Dwyer: Indian Sentenced to Death." *The Times* (London), 6 June 1940, p. 4, col. B.
- <sup>103</sup> Amit Roy, "Spectrum: Matter of Honour for a Killer or Hero," *The Sunday Times* (London), 10 April 1988.
- <sup>104</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 199.
- <sup>105</sup> Udham Singh, p. 64: DOCUMENT III - letter from Udham Singh in Brixton Prison to Mr. Jahal Singh, 79 Sinclair Road, London W.14 / 30 March 1940.
- <sup>106</sup> Nayar, p. 14.
- <sup>107</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 2004), p. 50.
- <sup>108</sup> Fanon, p. 51.
- <sup>109</sup> Bose & Lyons, pp. 201-202.
- <sup>110</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 45.
- <sup>111</sup> In a letter to Mr. Jahal Singh from Brixton Prison 30 March 1940, Udham Singh notes that "I know many of Indians living in this country are against me." Cited in Udham Singh, p. 64.
- <sup>112</sup> Roy
- <sup>113</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 9.
- <sup>114</sup> Maighowalia, p. 29.
- <sup>115</sup> Michael Hornsby, "Executed Sikh's remains go home," *The Times* (London), 20 July 1974, p. 4.
- <sup>116</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 829.
- <sup>117</sup> Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi, 2000), p. 2.
- <sup>118</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 834.
- <sup>119</sup> Leach, p. 182.
- <sup>120</sup> Hornsby, p. 4.
- <sup>121</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 301.
- <sup>122</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 835.
- <sup>123</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 837.
- <sup>124</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, p. 42.
- <sup>125</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 861.
- <sup>126</sup> Brian Keith Axel, "The Diasporic Imaginary," *Public Culture*, 14:2, 2002, p. 411.
- <sup>127</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, p. 1.
- <sup>128</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 280.
- <sup>129</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, p. xii.
- <sup>130</sup> Sikander Singh, p. 306.
- <sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>132</sup> Grewal & Puri, p. 5.
- <sup>133</sup> Axel, p. 414.
- <sup>134</sup> Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains," p. 859.
- <sup>135</sup> Deepa Alexander, "In Memory of Martyrs," *The Hindu* (India), 13 April 2007.
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