



DEBATE PACK

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Jallianwala Bagh massacre

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 April 2019

2.30pm to 4.00pm

Debate initiated by Bob Blackman MP

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Contents

1.	Background	2
2.	Press Articles	4
3.	Parliamentary material	6
3.1	PQs	6
3.2	Debates	7
3.1	Early Day Motions	9
3.2	Foreign Affairs Committee	10
4.	Further reading	11

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1. Background

The 13 April 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre (also known as the Amritsar massacre) was a notorious episode in the history of British colonialism in India. Britannica provides this [overview](#):

British troops fired on a large crowd of unarmed Indians in an open space known as the Jallianwala Bagh in [Amritsar](#) in the Punjab region (now in [Punjab](#) state) of [India](#), killing several hundred people and wounding many hundreds more. It marked a turning point in India's modern history, in that it left a permanent scar on Indo-British relations and was the prelude to [Mohandas \(Mahatma\) Gandhi](#)'s full commitment to the cause of Indian [nationalism](#) and independence from Britain.

The number of people killed remains disputed. An official inquiry came up with a figure of 379. Other sources claim it was much higher.

Centenary events are planned for 13 April 2019.

During a visit to India in 2013, former PM David Cameron described the massacre as a "[shameful episode in British history](#)".

In 2017, during a visit to India, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, [called](#) on the UK Government to issue a formal apology for the massacre. A number of parliamentarians have been making the same call in recent times – for example, in a Lords debate about the Centenary on 19 February. Wrapping up the debate, FCO Minister Baroness Goldie [said](#):

I have noted the number of noble Lords who have raised the matter of an apology from the Government. [...] I know how passionately that issue is felt. The Government at the time, as we know, roundly condemned the atrocity, but it is the case that no subsequent Government have apologised. I understand that the reason is that Governments have considered that history cannot be rewritten and it is important that we do not get trapped by the past. We must also look forward to the future and do all we can to prevent atrocities happening. Having said that, during oral evidence from the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 31 October 2018, the chair of that committee argued that this year may constitute an appropriate moment for Her Majesty's Government to formally apologise. The Foreign Secretary responded by saying:

"That is a very profound thought; let me reflect on that, but I can understand why that could be a potentially very significant gesture".

The Foreign Secretary is currently doing that—reflecting on the situation—and I can say that the views expressed in this debate are certainly noted and will be conveyed back to the department.

Shashi Tharoor, author of [*Inglorious Empire: What The British Did to India*](#), has [called](#) on the UK Government to use the occasion to issue a broader apology for the “evils of British colonialism” in India.

2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[Regret not enough on Jallianwala massacre, say Indians in UK](#)

Telegraph (India)

Amit Roy

8 April 2019

[They would have laughed](#) [review of Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre, Yale, February 2019]

London Review of Books

Ferdinand Mount

4 April 2019

[100 years of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: The night of the dead](#)

The Indian Express

Divya Goyal

3 April 2019

[Why the British should apologise to India](#)

RT

Shashi Tharoor

3 April 2019

[Row over bid to extend centenary events to cover Ireland and India](#)

Guardian

Ben Quinn

1 April 2019

[The Amritsar massacre: a cold, callous display of colonial evil](#)

Irish Times

Shashi Tharoor

21 January 2019

[Why India should not bother to ask Britain to apologise for Jallianwala Bagh](#)

Scroll.in

Anjali Mody

10 December 2017

[Amritsar massacre: Foreign Office rejects calls to apologise for mass killing of Sikhs by colonial troops](#)

Independent

Molly Fleming

9 December 2017

[For India's Sikhs Amritsar casts a long shadow](#)

Guardian
Amit Chaudhuri
15 January 2014

[Barefoot David Cameron shows respect but no apology for the 'monstrous' Amritsar massacre](#)

Evening Standard
Joe Murphy
20 February 2013

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 PQs

[First World War Commemoration: Pakistan](#)

12 Nov 2018 | 793 c1693

Asked by: Lord Singh of Wimbledon

My Lords, undivided Punjab played a substantial part in the greatest volunteer army in history. One of the reasons that was done was because people were promised a substantial measure of independence following the end of the war. Instead, there was fierce repression under the Rowlatt Act and, following that, in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of several hundred unarmed civilians. We British are justly known for our sense of fair play and justice. Given that, should we not now make an unequivocal apology to the people of the subcontinent?

Answered by: Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth

My Lords, now is the time for the country to come together to commemorate the end of the Great War 100 years ago. That is important. As I indicated, people of different religions from what was then undivided India played a significant role; that contribution is readily acknowledged. That is the measure of what we need to do in the light of the country coming together yesterday. Going forward, we must learn lessons from that on the importance of this being reflected in our national education.

[Engagements](#)

14 Mar 2018 | 637 c848

Asked by: Mr Virendra Sharma

This year, 13 April represents the 99th anniversary of what happened at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, India, known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which more than 1,000 peaceful protesters were murdered by soldiers under the command of General Dyer. Will the Prime Minister join me in commemorating the massacre and meet me and others who are campaigning for this shameful episode to be remembered across the UK?

Answered by: Theresa May | Prime Minister

The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific issue and a very specific point. I will be happy to look at the question he has raised and respond to him in writing.

[Amritsar massacre](#)

04 Nov 1997 | 13985 | 300 c175W

Asked by: Harry Cohen

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received urging him to apologise to the Indian people for the Amritsar massacre of 1918; and if he will make a statement. [13985]

Answering Member: Derek Fatchett | Foreign and Commonwealth Office

There were a number of representations over the 1919 massacre, whether addressed to the Queen or Her Majesty's Government, in advance of Her Majesty's successful visit to Amritsar where the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh laid wreaths at Jallianwala Bagh.

3.2 Debates

[Amritsar Massacre: Centenary](#) [Extract. Only the opening statement is included]

19 February 2019 | 795 cc2221-2238

Lord Loomba (CB)

My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Taylor of Holbeach, for agreeing to our request for this debate. It is a privilege to be able to put this Question to your Lordships, surrounded by so many noble Lords who have pledged their support to encourage the Government to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Amritsar massacre. I hope that the Government will finally realise that now is the time to make amends and offer a formal apology for the atrocities; I will come to that later in my speech. I declare my interest as a member of the Jallianwala Bagh Centenary Commemoration Committee.

Much has been written about what happened on 13 April 1919 in the Jallianwala Bagh. Jallianwala is a place and “bagh” is the Punjabi word for “park”. I myself come from the area of Amritsar and, even though I was not around at that time, I heard many stories passed down the generations, especially through my grandmother. I have also visited the park many times and seen for myself the bullet holes in the walls and the well from which 150 bodies were extracted. Around the park, many stories are written on placards and stones, and it is impossible to come away from the place without tears rolling down your face. It is a shocking event to recall, even after 100 years. As Winston Churchill said during a debate in the other place:

“That is an episode which appears to me to be without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire. It is an event of an entirely different order from any of those tragical occurrences which take place when troops are brought into collision with the civil population. It is an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation”.—[Official Report, Commons, 8/7/1920; col. 1725.]

People, including children, had gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh to protest about the arrest of some of their leaders earlier in the week. Martial law was in force at the time. Brigadier General Dyer took the view that the gathering was not only illegal but an expression of defiance against the authorities. Ordering his soldiers to the spot, he blocked all the exits. The people were trapped like rats, and fired upon without warning or any order to disperse. The firing continued on the crowd until the soldiers ran out of ammunition. It is not clear how many people, including children, died that day. But many who were injured

and died later were not counted—they had been afraid of going to hospital in case they would be arrested for having defied the martial law.

As Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, said in the other place:

“Once you are entitled to have regard neither to the intentions nor to the conduct of a particular gathering, and to shoot and to go on shooting, with all the horrors that were here involved, in order to teach somebody else a lesson, you are embarking on terrorism, to which there is no end”.—[Official Report, Commons, 8/7/1920; col. 1707.]

Those innocent, unarmed civilians who died immediately, and those left to suffer a horrendous and prolonged death, were let down by the very people who should have been protecting them, not opening fire, killing and injuring mindlessly. At the time, many Indians had given of their lives “for King and country” by fighting in the First World War, and had subsequently been promised greater autonomy and freedom from the oppression of British rule. Two years later, however, there was still no sign of this happening and the population was becoming increasingly frustrated. People were beginning to despair of a rule that appeared to be becoming tyrannical and oppressive and were fearful of the future.

Six years ago, David Cameron became the first serving British Prime Minister to pay his respects by visiting Jallianwala Bagh, where he described the massacre as,

“a deeply shameful event in British history”,

but he stopped short of issuing a formal apology, and sidestepped the issue by saying that there had been condemnation at the time from the British Government. While I commend his visit, it was not an adequate response to all the suffering and pain that was inflicted on innocent civilians, unarmed and with no escape, who had every right to gather peacefully.

Winston Churchill, again speaking in the other place, accused General Dyer of resorting to the doctrine of “frightfulness”, saying:

“What I mean by frightfulness is the inflicting of great slaughter or massacre upon a particular crowd of people, with the intention of terrorising not merely the rest of the crowd, but the whole district or the whole country”. —[Official Report, Commons, 8/7/1920; col. 1728.]

It is not difficult to see that this massacre encapsulated what the protests were about: tyranny and oppression; General Dyer confirmed the people’s worst fears. The Jallianwala Bagh incident broke the trust between the people and their rulers and that trust was never restored. What followed was Gandhi’s non-violent lawbreaking movement, which eventually led to the end of the Empire.

Today, things are different. People from the subcontinent have made their homes here in the United Kingdom, and it is a multiracial society. It would be appropriate in my view for a formal apology to be issued by

the Government. The noble Lord, Lord Desai, and I have written to the Prime Minister urging that an apology be made to bring about the closure of this very unfortunate episode. It would be appreciated by the millions of south Asians living in the UK, as well as by the people of India.

[...]

3.1 Early Day Motions

THE AMRITSAR MASSACRE - 13 APRIL 1919

EDM 1868 (session 2017-19)

21 November 2018

Christine Jardine

That this House remembers the Amritsar Massacre, also known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, where troops of the British Indian Army opened fire on a peaceful crowd in the Jallianwala Bagh Gardens of Amritsar, Punjab; notes that official figures given by the British Indian authorities identified 379 dead and 1,100 wounded, with Indian National Congress estimates demonstrating 1,000 dead and 1,500 wounded; further notes that the site has been visited by HM the Queen and former Prime Minister David Cameron; and is saddened that, with the 100th anniversary approaching, no official apology has been issued by the Government.

JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE OF 1919

EDM 413 (session 2017-19)

17 October 2017

Mr Virendra Sharma

That this House recognises the importance of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 for its importance as a turning point in the history of the Raj and British Empire in India; notes that the centenary of this event is approaching and that it is appropriate to commemorate it; further recognises that former Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre as a deeply shameful act; further notes that this event does not represent modern British values; urges the Government to ensure that British children are taught about this shameful period and that modern British values welcome the right to peaceful protest; and further urges the Government formally to apologise in the House and inaugurate a memorial day to commemorate this event.

3.2 Foreign Affairs Committee

[Oral evidence from the Foreign Secretary, HC 538](#) [Extract]

Foreign Affairs Committee

Wednesday 31 October 2018

Q414 Chair: Perhaps, given that next year is the 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, it may be an appropriate moment for Her Majesty's Government to, very appropriately and formally, apologise for what has to be regarded as one of the worst crimes of the colonial period, and perhaps ask for, in this case, very specifically, forgiveness from the Indian people.

Mr Hunt: That is a very profound thought; let me reflect on that, but I can understand why that could be a potentially very significant gesture.

4. Further reading

Debate on [‘Punjab Disturbances: The Case of General Dyer’](#), HL Hansard, 20 July 1920, cols 311–77

Debate on [‘Punjab Disturbances: The Case of General Dyer’](#), HL Hansard, 19 July 1920, cols 222–307

Debate on [‘Army Council and General Dyer’](#), HC Hansard, 8 July 1920, cols 1705–819

William Hunter, [East India \(Disturbances in the Punjab, etc\): Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, 1920](#), Cmd 681, 1920

[Jallianwala Bagh 1919: Punjab under Siege](#)

Exhibition at Manchester Museum, from 11 April 2019 to 2 October 2019

[Indo-British All-Party Parliamentary Group](#)

[A political introduction to India](#), House of Commons Library Research Paper, 07/41, 2 May 2007
(*Section on contrasting views of events at Amritsar in 1919, pp102-105)

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