

From Tudor Ireland to My Lai: Understanding Conspiracy, Information, and Minority Panic in Colonial Massacres

This study explores the conditions and circumstances that underlay the frequent and often horrific massacres that characterized both early modern and modern colonialism and which may be said to persist in the “post-colonial” world. The essay is intended to assist those engaged in the study and teaching of world history who have an interest in colonial violence and might be considering integrating recent research and ideas on the subject into the classroom or their own work. This paper will provide close analysis of colonial massacres in Ireland, North America, India, and Viet Nam, from 1579 to 1968, and it will be argued that in each case the behavior of colonial forces is consistent and largely predictable.

The focus on massacres in the British empire reflects primarily the limitations of the author’s competence, although the massacres considered in this essay do include a broad range of time periods, from 1579 to 1919, along with examples taken from a range of territories and colonies within the British empire, including Ireland, North America, and India. The massacre at My Lai has been selected to suggest that the issues regarding the massacres appear to be remarkably similar across time periods, geography, and the nationalities of the perpetrators,

It should also be remembered that there are several other kinds of colonial massacres and reprisals, including those against slaves and prisoners of war, and there are also massacres that are perpetrated by the colonized populations. This essay focuses primarily on episodes in which a colonizing force employs massacre as a device to either seek revenge against a rebellious indigenous force or, as in the case of the Pequod massacre of 1637 or the Amritsar Massacre of 1919, employ as a preemptive strike against a potentially threatening force.

The principal theme that will be developed in this article is the centrality of the belief in the existence of conspiracies and nefarious plots in the mindset of those

involved in colonial massacre and in the minds of early modern elites generally. From the ideas of Machiavelli to the Gunpowder Plot, a critical tenet of early modern English political thinking was that the stability and proper functioning of society could be shattered by the designs of disaffected men and women. By the mid-sixteenth century, the conspiratorial mindset centered around Catholic, usually Spanish, plots to invade England, often in collaboration with disaffected and dissembling Irish lords. When, in the mid-sixteenth century, the English began to expand into North America, this mindset accompanied them. The security of the colonizers was again threatened by the designs of clearly untrustworthy and savage indigenous populations. This mode of explanation continued beyond the early modern period and, in their minds, divided the world into two groups. On one hand, were the upright and virtuous colonizers whose motives were clear and unambiguous, and, on the other, the devious and dissembling forces among the colonized who pretended loyalty and devotion while plotting revenge.¹

In this essay it will be argued that colonial massacres are usually perpetrated by a badly outnumbered colonizing force, which has been forced to confront rumors or indications of trouble, such as small eruptions of violence, the sound of drums, or unexplained movements or gatherings in a forest or elsewhere by the indigenous population. These actions suggest the possibility of a conspiracy in progress with no real means to distinguish between those in the native population who would remain loyal and those who might be dangerous. The solution which provides the most immediate and reliable means of security is simply to kill them all or to kill as many as can be found.

This mindset was almost certainly the impetus behind the Smerwick Massacre in 1579. In July of that year a papal force of sixty Italian soldiers, raised by the Irish lord James Fitzmaurice and the papal official Nicholas Sanders, and mostly recruited from papal prisons, landed on the western coast of Ireland and began constructing a fort. Fitzmaurice had been given a charge to proclaim the papal bull, *Regnans in Excelsis*, by which Pope Pius IX excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I of England, called upon English Catholics to remove her, and absolved Englishmen from any obligation to obey her. Despite the small size of the invading force, one of the worst fears of English officials in Ireland had been realized, namely, that continental Catholic troops had arrived in Ireland for the purpose of organizing a rebellion against English Protestant authority.² The papal troops were soon joined by a small band of Irish men, women, and children. William Drury, the English deputy in Ireland, ordered Sir Humphrey Gilbert to attack Fitzmaurice with a force recruited from loyal Irish lords. In August 1579, the English imposed a series of harsh measures against the Irish, including a decree from the Lord Chancellor stating that, “leaders of blind folks, harpers and rhymers, and all loose and idle people having no master” were to be summarily executed by martial law.³

More alarming news appeared in September. A force of about six-hundred continental soldiers, led by Colonel Sebastian di San Giuseppe, landed near Smerwick. In early October, Gerald Fitzgerald, the fourteenth earl of Desmond, joined the rebellion. By this time the English officials had dispatched Arthur, Lord Grey de Wilton,

with an army of nearly one thousand men to Smerwick. After a difficult reconnaissance through the south of Ireland, hampered by bad weather, swollen streams, and an embarrassing defeat at Glenmallure, Grey established a camp outside the fort and awaited reinforcements. In early November a fleet of ships commanded by Admiral William Winter arrived, and the siege of Smerwick began. After two days of steady bombardment, negotiations for the surrender of the fort began.

Cold, trapped, and running out of water, the fort's defenders had little chance of breaking the siege, and, according to English witnesses, surrendered unconditionally. On the morning of 10 November 1579 most of the Italian soldiers marched out of the fort under a flag of surrender, begging for water. Upon Grey's order, his men quickly disarmed them and forced them back into the fort. They then rounded up the Irish men, women, and children who remained inside the fort, and began constructing a gallows for the purpose of execution. Some of the women pleaded their bellies. Grey's men executed them anyway. The male captives were offered mercy if they renounced Catholicism. When they refused, they were marched into village of Smerwick to the local blacksmith's shop, where their arms and legs were broken over the blacksmith's forge. They were then left alone to suffer in a shed, deprived of food and water, and subsequently carted back to the fort where they were hanged, drawn, and quartered.⁴



Image 1: The massacre ground today. Dingle Peninsula, County Kerry, Ireland. The copyright on this image is owned by Sharon Loxton and is licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 license at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_fort_at_Dun_an_Oir_\(Fort_del_Oro\)-_geograph.org.uk_-_219399.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_fort_at_Dun_an_Oir_(Fort_del_Oro)-_geograph.org.uk_-_219399.jpg).

Before ordering the torture and execution of the male captives, Grey also ordered his men to kill the Italian captives. This was no simple task. Massacre in the sixteenth century was usually accomplished by swords and poles, with the perpetrators thrusting and slashing their victims, a process usually called “hewing and paunching.” Not only did this require multiple thrusts and slashes to kill most of the victims, but the prisoners usually tried to dodge the thrusts, making the process more unwieldy, especially after the perpetrators had wearied of the process and their blades and points had dulled.

But the atrocities at Smerwick had not concluded. Outside the fort sailors under the command of Admiral William Winter became alarmed that those inside the fort, upon completion of the massacre, would confiscate all the valuables of the slain. Fearing that they would be deprived of their fair share of the booty, the sailors scaled the fort’s wall and joined in the slaughter. As the massacre proceeded, Grey, known to be an ardent Puritan, totaled the number of the victims, and, as he stood among the mutilated bodies of the dead, praised the gallantry of his troops.⁵

In the aftermath of the Desmond Rebellion, the lands of Irish lords who supported the rebellion were confiscated and redistributed to English subjects. One of the recipients was the poet Edmund Spenser, who had been a secretary to Grey and probably witnessed the Smerwick massacre. Spenser would later compose *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, which was received by the Stationer’s Register in 1598. In this work Spenser declared that it was time for English officials in Ireland to recognize that all civilized efforts to bring Ireland under British control had failed. Instead, Spenser proposed raising an army of 11,000 men, fully supplied from England, and issuing an ultimatum to the Irish population demanding their unconditional surrender. After a brief period to allow compliance, the army would commence the destruction of all property, crops, and cattle for the purpose of starving the indigenous population to death. Any who still managed to survive would be transported to different regions of the country to destroy all kinship and family ties. Spenser believed that, given the English experience in Ireland, his plan was virtuous.⁶

Historians of Tudor Ireland have struggled to find meaning in the Smerwick massacre and the numerous other episodes of atrocity that occurred during the Tudor conquest of Ireland. On one level, the cruelty of the Smerwick massacre defies easy understanding. It was one thing to execute rebels, but to take the Irish civilians who had sought refuge in the fort, break their bones and leave them to suffer for hours before executing them seems excessive even by early modern standards. Several have wondered what sort of fractured moral vision could not only justify such cruelty, but also, as in the case of Spenser, view it as virtuous. In 1976, in a ground-breaking work, Nicholas Canny argued that numerous English officials in Ireland behaved in such a manner because they believed, like Spenser, that they were “absolved from any moral responsibility,” and he attributed this behavior to an emerging ideology of scorn and contempt for the Irish population, and most usefully understood in the context of subsequent English enterprises, such as colonization of North America, where comparable atrocities were committed.⁷

While Canny's initial argument was based on close study of the period from 1565 to 1576, in 2007, another historian of early modern Ireland, David Edwards, undertook a more comprehensive study of violence during the Tudor conquest and concluded that it was an appalling tale of violence, massacre, and cruelty waged almost continuously throughout the sixteenth century, and included wars, massacres, campaigns of martial law, even waged against non-combatants, and deliberate attempts to destroy crops and cattle, to starve the indigenous population.⁸

But other historians have pointed out that given the rules governing warfare in the sixteenth century, Grey was probably operating within the military conventions of the time. English witnesses were in agreement that Grey never offered anything besides unconditional surrender. Moreover, since his victims were engaged in rebellion against a lawful ruler, they could not expect mercy.⁹

At the same time, in an important article, Brendan Kane has argued that the violence directed at the Irish should be classified as what he called "ordinary violence." By this phrase, he meant that many of the atrocities and violent episodes that occurred in Ireland were replicated in other parts of the Tudor state against other groups and across the early modern world generally. Kane, drawing upon work by Andy Wood and Krista Kesselring, argued that rebellions in England were usually crushed brutally, suggesting that English violence in Ireland was consistent with English practice elsewhere within the Tudor state.¹⁰

But it should be noted that Smerwick was hardly an isolated episode, and that the English waged war in Ireland with virtually no thought of restraint. The Irish, whether in revolt or not, were almost invariably treated as rebels and conspirators. While Irish soldiers captured by the English or found wounded, were usually killed on the spot, it is also clear that women, children and the aged usually suffered the same fate. In 1566 Sir Henry Sidney led a small force through Armagh and Tyrone, indiscriminately executing the native population and burning the countryside. In 1572, Gilbert's successor, Sir John Perrot, by his own testimony, "killed and hanged both by the laws of this realm, and also by martial law," some 800 persons. In 1574 the Earl of Essex seized over 200 Irish men and women at a Christmas banquet and put them to death. The following year he dispatched Sir Francis Drake to Rathlin Island, which sometimes served as a base for Scottish mercenaries. Drake killed every one of the 600 men, women and children who lived there, even though there was no rebellion, no Scottish mercenaries present, and the women and children were non-combatants. In 1580 English troops marched through Munster, butchering and burning everything in their way. Sir Arthur Chichester and Lord Mountjoy employed the same tactics in Ulster twenty years later. And, in 1602 Sir George Carew, rejecting repeated offers from the defenders of Dunboy Castle to surrender, stormed the castle and executed all the remaining inhabitants.

It is hard to know what to make of these and other episodes in the Tudor reconquest of Ireland. Some of the episodes can be justified by the laws of war, which permitted the execution of rebels. But not all the victims of English retribution were

rebels, and the English often displayed a frightening savagery toward women, children, and other non-combatants.

Fortunately, in the last thirty or so years, the study of violence and massacre has become increasingly sophisticated. Violence has emerged as a valuable analytical category in the sense that violence and responses to it can be shaped by many factors, including ethical codes, collective memory, racial prejudice, and social hierarchies. In 2017 *History and Theory* devoted an entire issue to the study of violence, and in 2020 the Cambridge University Press published an ambitious, four-volume global history violence from pre-history to the present.¹¹

As historians proceeded with the study of violence, it became clear that several distinctions needed to be made between types. These types included the violence sponsored by state, where for the purpose of maintaining order and power became codified into the legal apparatus, the violence that usually accomplished the quashing of rebellions, the waging of religious wars, as well as large-scale, genocidal violence.

The violence that occurred during colonization, however, became an area to which many historians were drawn. It will be argued here that colonial massacres often follow similar patterns. The colonizers initially proclaim their desire to exist in a mutually beneficial enterprise with the colonized, but these aspirations evaporate quickly under the pressure of resistance along with the need to acquire wealth and to compel the native population to help produce it. More important to the colonizers, however, is the need for security. Colonial forces are rarely fully trained and are often forced to fight in unfamiliar territories against persons whose values and methods of resistance they do not understand. The colonized usually react to the unwanted incursions and violence inflicted upon them by waging a guerilla war, involving surprise attacks and massacres, which, unfortunately, only serve to convince the colonizers of the duplicitous nature of the colonized. Under these circumstances the colonizers usually decide that massacre or excessive violence is the only solution. But, regardless of circumstances, they will believe that they are acting defensively.

This point can be demonstrated through a study of the Pequot massacre of 1637. In the early dawn of May 26, 1637, English troops from Connecticut and Massachusetts, supported by Indian allies, surrounded a fortified village held by the Pequot Indians. The colonizers soon forced their way inside and quickly disposed of the few villagers who were already making their way around the village. The invaders then confronted the problem of how to enter the Indian wigwams without exposing themselves to fire or retribution of some sort. Captain John Mason, commander of the English troops, quickly sized up the situation and the dangers it presented, and declared, “we must burn them.” He then seized a hot iron and began setting the wigwams on fire. Fires were also set at each entrance with a trail of powder leading to the center of the village. Within a half hour, the village had burned to the ground. The few natives who had survived the fire were then slaughtered by the colonists and their Indian allies. By the end of the assault roughly four hundred Pequots lay dead, the majority of whom were old men, women, and children.¹²

The attack served its purpose. The power of the Pequots was shattered, and the few surviving Indians fled in terror. Many of them, however, were tracked down and killed by the English pursuers. Others who surrendered were sold into slavery. A year later, the treaty of Hartford deprived the tribe of its lands. In the aftermath of the massacre, Captain John Underhill defended the massacre with biblical precedent. “I would refer you to David’s war, when a people is growne to such a height of blood and sin against God and man, and all confederates in the action, there he hath no respect to persons, but harrowes them, and saves them, and puts them to the sword, and the most terrible death that may bee: sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents... We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.”¹³

It is important to note that in this case colonial observers did not cite the rules of war as justification for the massacre, perhaps because unwarranted assault was not provided for in the laws. Instead, Underhill cited God’s will. But the circumstances and result closely resembled English practice in Ireland, which included the slaughter of non-combatants, the relentless pursuit of survivors, and the execution or enslavement of prisoners.

Similar patterns of violence and retribution were also central to British rule in India, especially in the response to the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857.¹⁴ By this time the British East India Company had controlled India for almost a century, proclaiming itself to be an “Empire of Good Intentions.” One of the keys to its success was its utilization of native troops, known as Sepoys, to maintain order. For much of its early history the company had taken pains to accommodate the religious preferences of the Sepoys, both Hindu and Muslim. The Sepoys dined in separate dining halls and were not required to serve overseas, an assignment considered by many Hindus to be polluting and the company recognized the right of the Sepoys to observe their own religious practices.¹⁵

But in the mid-1850s, the company implemented several reforms that were potentially offensive to the Sepoys. Under the terms of the General Service Act of 1856, newly recruited soldiers would have to accept service overseas. More seriously, in 1857, the company introduced the Enfield rifle, which used cartridges that required the Sepoys to bite off the tips, which were rumored to have been dipped in beef fat, which would be offensive to Hindus, or lard derived from pork, which would be offensive to Muslims. Many of the Sepoys resented this possible affront to their religion, and the new regulations and rifles also added fuel to the simmering resentment on the part of Sepoys about the fairness of other aspects of the East India Company’s treatment of them. These included such things as the difficulty of obtaining promotions, and in general being treated by British officers more like servants than soldiers.¹⁶

But it was the new rifle and the cartridges that provided the immediate spark for the Mutiny. On 29 March 1857 at the Barrackpore parade ground near Calcutta, a Sepoy named Mangal Pandey fired upon British officers rather than use the cartridges. At about the same time, in Meerut, eighty-five Sepoys of the 3rd BLC Regiment refused to use the new cartridges. The men were immediately court-martialed and sentenced to ten

years in prison at hard labor. News of events in Meerut spread rapidly, and another rebellion erupted in Delhi. Officers who tried to quash the rebellion were killed by the mutineers, along with some of their wives and children. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, was proclaimed emperor of all India. The mutineers succeeded in initially repelling company forces and captured several important towns.¹⁷

It was not long, however, before the company was able to muster the support of loyal Indian troops to quash the rebellion. In July company forces laid siege to Delhi and forced its surrender, and, by late September, Bahadur Shah Zafar was arrested, and his son and grandson executed. Elsewhere, as company troops slowly began to subdue the rebellion, they exacted their own retribution against the mutineers, summarily executing thousands of them and hanging their corpses from telegraph poles. Some units adopted a “no-prisoners” policy; others found unique ways to torture and humiliate their captives, forcing many to violate their religious practices and torturing others with hot irons. In the end tens of thousands of Indian men, woman, and children were indiscriminately shot or hanged. Some were even shot out of cannons.¹⁸

In the end the rebellion failed, but it proved to be a turning point in Indian history, leading to the passage of the Government of India Act of 1858 by which the East India Company was dissolved, and the British government assumed control of the governance of India. The army, the financial system, and the administrative apparatus of British rule were reorganized. In November of 1858 Queen Victoria issued a proclamation to all Indians, promising rights similar to those enjoyed by British subjects in other parts of the empire.¹⁹

But, despite the reform program, the Mutiny and the British response to it exposed many of the shortcomings of British rule in India. Despite two centuries of a British presence in India, neither side understood nor trusted the other. After implementing new laws which many of the Sepoys believed were designed to make them Christians, the British were angered by Sepoy resistance and decided they were being confronted with a conspiracy so profound and insidious that it needed to be crushed in a manner that would terrify and intimidate the Indian population.²⁰

The British reaction to the Sepoy Mutiny resembles what we saw in Ireland and in Massachusetts, and perhaps anytime when colonizers encounter resistance from the colonized. Because the colonizing force is usually a minority, its members are acutely aware of how dangerous a predicament they face. In the case of India at the time of the Sepoy Rebellion, a settler population of roughly 200,000 whites attempted to govern an indigenous population of roughly 250 million Indians. The settler minorities in Ireland and in southern New England were not quite as daunting, but the same principle applies; namely, that they are an outnumbered settler population facing what they fear most: an angry colonized population, of whom they cannot be certain how many of them there actually are or how angry they are. They are also aware that the lives of their wives and children are also in danger. This is the nightmare scenario facing almost every colonizer as they go to bed every night.

Many of these themes remain useful for understanding a second notorious massacre in India, the Amritsar Massacre of April, 1919, where colonial troops under British command opened fire on a peaceful gathering of Indians at an enclosed park called Jallianwala Bagh. The Indians had gathered at the park to protest the implementation of the Rowlett Act, which would have granted sweeping powers to British authority to suppress rebellions. The most conspicuous leader of the Indian resistance at the time, Mahatma Gandhi, responded to the British announcement of the Rowlett Act as he usually did, by calling upon the Indian population to resist the non-violently, a call echoed by others, two of whom were arrested by British officials. Several days later, on 13 April, after finding out about the arrests, roughly 15,000 people gathered at Jallianwala Bagh. Some were there to hear speeches about the injustices of the Rowlett Act and to find out how it could be resisted; others were there simply as casual observers. At some point, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer arrived on the scene with a detachment of soldiers to assess the situation. Dyer quickly decided that the gathering posed a serious danger to British authority, even though there had been no recent unrest in Amritsar and the crowd was behaving peacefully. Dyer therefore ordered his men to fire on the crowd. British officials counted a total of 1,650 shots fired by fifty men, and ricocheting bullets also killed or wounded even persons outside the park. By dusk the Bagh was filled with desperate people searching for friends and relatives.²¹

Following the massacre, the British took several steps to ensure that the consequences of even a peaceful demonstration would remain firmly stamped in the Indian consciousness. English officials allowed the bodies of the dead to fester for several days, failed to provide medical assistance to many of the wounded, and imposed martial law, which permitted them to arrest and torture individuals without trial when their complicity was only suspected, but not proven. And, in a final effort to humiliate the Indian population, they forced Indians who wished to pass through the alley where a British woman had been assaulted during the demonstration, to crawl through the alley on their bellies.²²

Although the British punished many Indians for their roles leading up to the massacre, they did not organize an investigative panel until October 1919. And, even then, the investigation commenced only because of pressure from Indian leaders and the press. After a bitter debate, the House of Commons voted to censure Dyer, and he was forced to resign, although, to many, he remained the man who saved India.²³

Kim Wagner, the most recent historian to investigate the Amritsar Massacre, has offered a number of valuable insights, several of which could be applied to the other massacres we have already examined. He contends that, among other things, the massacre was caused by rumors and fears of conspiracy, real or imagined, as well as miscalculations by those in power. More tellingly, he argues, that while British authorities in India had collected reams of intelligence about the potential subversive activities of various Indian leaders, that it did not really matter whether it was in 1857 or

1919; they, like other colonizers, almost always engaged in the same response: strike first, ask questions later.²⁴

In more immediate terms, he doubts that any of the Indians who went to Jallianwala Bagh that day were planning to rebel or that General Dyer went there to massacre people. For Wagner what is essential to interpreting what happened at Amritsar is understanding that each side perceived the situation much differently, and that neither was capable of recognizing the other perspective.²⁵

Wagner also made use of two important, but highly relevant, older studies. The first is *The Great Fear of 1789* published by the great French historian, Georges Lefebvre. Originally published in 1932, Lefebvre's work studied the rural panic that occurred in the early stages of the French Revolution, when the rural peasantry feared that the revolution's early triumphs would be overturned by counter-revolutionary bands, which they usually called "brigands." Lefebvre was able to trace a pattern of panic as rumors of approaching counter-revolutionary forces spread. At virtually every stop, rumors of a violent counter-revolution became increasingly exaggerated, virtually taking command of events. Nothing, not even the absence of actual brigands, could persuade them that the threat was not real.²⁶

The second study cited by Wagner is *Empire and Intelligence Gathering in India, 1780-1870* by C.A. Bayly, who was Dr. Wagner's graduate mentor at Cambridge. In this work, Bayly developed the theme of "information panic" as a crucial aspect in the study of colonial history, by which he meant that the inability of the British to assess the reliability of the intelligence they received meant that the decisions often had to be made on the basis of rumors and immediate impulse. No matter what intelligence they received, British officials almost invariably made the same decision, which was to respond as though a rebellion was in progress, a response which appears to be central to understanding almost every colonial response to perceived danger.²⁷

The points advanced so far may help us understand what is perhaps the most notorious colonial massacre; it is also the massacre that we have the most information about. On the evening of 15 March 1968, the men of Charlie Company, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, American Division, United States Army were briefed by their company commander, Captain Ernest Medina. Medina informed them that the next morning they would enter the village of Son My, in central Viet Nam. Several members of the company remember that Medina told them to "kill everything that moves," on the grounds that anyone who remained in the village was either a Viet Cong rebel or a Viet Cong sympathizer.²⁸

While the members of Charlie Company had been in the field for three months without major losses, they had lost several of their members to mines planted by the Viet Cong. At the same time, they were also aware that villages were often used by the Viet Cong to hide guns and ammunition, and that most casualties inflicted upon American soldiers in Viet Nam came from persons who did not appear to be soldiers. On the morning of the 16th, although they had not encountered a military force or opposing fire, and following a brief barrage of the area, the troops were helicoptered to the village.

After disembarking, they began executing the villagers, almost all of them women, old men, and children.²⁹

Several of the soldiers of Charlie Company tossed grenades into huts without bothering to look inside. One officer grabbed a woman by the hair and shot her at point blank range. As another woman emerged from her hut, carrying a baby, she was shot on the spot. As the child hit the ground, another soldier shot it with his M-16 rifle. Over the next few hours, the men of Charlie Company killed more than 500 unarmed civilians.³⁰

Many of the victims were killed after being forced into a ditch, where Lt. William Calley, the commander of the first platoon of Charlie Company, ordered his men to fire into the ditch. When Private Paul Meadlow told Calley he didn't know they were supposed to kill them, Calley replied "let's kill them," and they fired repeated shots into those in the ditch. When one of the soldiers noticed that some of the women in the ditch had tried to shield their children from the bullets by lying on top of them, and that he could still see victims moving, Calley ordered his men to throw hand grenades into the ditch.³¹

At this point a helicopter pilot named Hugh Thompson, who had witnessed the massacre as he flew over the village, landed his aircraft near the village, thinking that there had been a battle and that he might be able to help the wounded. Upon landing, he quickly realized that he had not arrived in the middle of a battle, but of a massacre. He immediately questioned Calley about what was going on, but Calley informed him it was none of his business. Thompson returned to his aircraft and saw that the soldiers had now turned their fire on another group of civilians that was trying to flee the village, so he landed his helicopter between the soldiers and fleeing villagers, instructing his machine gunners to fire on the soldiers if they tried to impede his rescue effort. In the end Thompson managed to rescue several of the villagers, one of whom was a seriously wounded five-year old boy who was in a state of shock.³²

A curious morality emerged from the first-hand accounts. While Calley had no issues with shooting the defenseless villagers, he was offended by the rapes. "Put your damn pants on," he ordered one of the soldiers who was angered that a Vietnamese woman had refused to perform oral sex on him. What Calley did not say was that immediately afterward he shot a mother and her child.³³ But the rapes continued, and many of the women who were raped by the soldiers also had their bodies mutilated. Some of the soldiers did not participate in any of the activities; others claimed that they fired shots, but deliberately missed. One soldier rescued a crying infant whose mother had been killed. In the end Charlie Company suffered one casualty, a soldier who shot himself in the foot to avoid having to participate. Just three weapons were found in the village, and, on their way out, the troops poisoned wells, slaughtered livestock, and burned the village down, so that even the few who survived would be left with nothing.

Upon his return, Thompson submitted a blistering report of what he had witnessed. Although senior military officials had read Thompson's report and were aware that a large number of civilians had been killed, Charlie Company was permitted to investigate itself. In the report that followed, a predictable whitewash occurred; it was

asserted that while civilian casualties occurred, they were largely accidental, the result of long-range artillery fire, and the allegations of a deliberate cover-up were dismissed by military officials as enemy propaganda.³⁴

Thus, it appeared that the massacre would be swept under the rug. But in 1969 a Viet Nam veteran named Ronald Ridenour, who had heard stories about the massacre and collected testimonies from many of those involved sent a letter to President Nixon and to numerous members of Congress asking for an investigation.³⁵ In the same year a journalist named Seymour Hersh published more details about the massacre from eyewitness testimony. Calley was formally charged and eventually found guilty of premeditated murder. On 31 March 1971 he was sentenced to life in prison at hard labor, along with dismissal from service and forfeiture of pay. He would be eligible for parole in ten years.³⁶

His conviction, however, like that of Dyer, was received with outrage from numerous military observers. Raymond Haft, a retired major general, told reporters that during World War II he had once ordered his men to take no prisoners and that they “shot everything that moved. If the Germans had won, I would have been on trial at Nuremberg.”³⁷ In August 1971 Calley’s sentence was reduced from life to twenty years. In the end he would serve only three and a half years under house arrest, and he was the only participant to serve time for his actions.³⁸ It was also clear that My Lai was not an isolated episode. Other observers, such Jonathan Schell, army medic Jamie Henry, and Marine Lieutenant Philip Caputo witnessed other episodes of violence unleashed against Vietnamese civilians.³⁹

What can we learn about colonial massacre from these narratives? On one hand, the contexts and actions of the participants seem eerily similar across time and space. In most of the cases, the massacres result from the difficulties confronting a small colonizer force, usually facing an enemy that would be hard to identify, or, sensing that there is no reliable way to distinguish those among the native population who might be loyal from those who might be dangerous. Confronted with these difficulties, the perpetrators decide to just kill as many as possible with minimal or no discrimination, and that the rules of war and Christian teaching either do not apply or can be ignored.

It would have been, for example, almost impossible for an East India Company official or a British officer in 1857 to tell the difference between a loyal Sepoy and a rebel, or, in the case of American soldiers in Viet Nam, to tell the difference between a loyal Vietnamese villager and a Viet Cong rebel. The strategy of “kill them all” had multiple benefits. No time or effort had to be expended trying to decide who the real enemies are, and the need for security can be immediately addressed.

Moreover, the pattern is consistent across time. In *After Morality*, the philosopher Alistair MacIntyre declared that in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Stalinist purges, and large-scale genocides in numerous places, the twentieth century could no longer claim adherence to a moral theory.⁴⁰ There is certainly substance to MacIntyre’s argument, but he had clearly never encountered Lord Grey de Wilton, Edmund Spenser, John Underhill, General Dyer, Captain Medina, or Lieutenant Calley. Long before the

twentieth century, colonizers from Ireland to the British Americas, and in India as well as those at My Lai often eagerly killed and mutilated the persons who they were convinced threatened their safety.

There appear to be several related forces at work. We have already discussed “information panic.” But another, seemingly more compelling factor could be called “minority panic.” A colonist in any of places discussed here or a soldier in Viet Nam, would have been acutely aware that not only were they a distinct minority, but that it would in most cases not be possible to distinguish who was friend or foe. From the point of view of the soldier or colonist, one instance of pity during the course of a massacre or misplaced trust in a native who might not actually loyal, could mean death.

Moreover, over half a century ago, the famous American historian Richard Hofstadter published an influential essay, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style in American Politics,” where he argued that fear of conspiracy, as much as class struggle or desire for freedom from oppression, was a force in history. And he cited the histories of the early Masons, the fears of the nineteenth-century Populists, and the widespread conviction of many Americans that there existed an insidious Communist conspiracy to destroy American liberties in the 1950s, as examples of movements driven by fears of conspiracy. By this term Hofstadter did not intend to suggest any medical or clinical significance; he meant only that he was trying to demonstrate that fear of conspiracy could be a force in history.⁴¹

It is also clear that the violence of the soldiers was not mindless or part of some natural inclination toward killing or brutality. Like E.P. Thompson’s moral crowds protesting the conditions of the factory system during the Industrial Revolution, the perpetrators of colonial massacres did not perceive themselves as ruthless killers. Indeed, in times of colonial tension, the ordinary lines between victim and perpetrator became blurred. The colonizers regarded themselves as victims placed in a context where violence was the only way to survive. At the same time, the conditions of colonization thus served to create a culture of violence and retribution, which defined the nature of the enemy while giving meaning and legitimacy to violence. On the colonial frontier conspiracy could be anywhere. Violence in this sense constituted an easily comprehensible language of power and intimidation, as well as the most available and effective way to convey a message of superiority and intimidation. It thus served as a means for a threatened group to seize control of its own destiny.

But rumors and fears of conspiracy also comprise a highly ambiguous discourse, one that can arouse and guide one group while frightening and terrorizing another. And reliance on it also reflects the weakness and vulnerability of the colonizing forces. They were outnumbered and usually isolated, and the forces they did have were poorly trained and undisciplined, and generally inclined to see conspiracy everywhere. As Philip Caputo wrote in his famous novel about Viet Nam, “out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutal state.”⁴² It appears, then, that not much had changed since Smerwick.

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Notes

¹ For some studies along this line, see William Palmer, *The Problem of Ireland in Tudor Foreign Policy, 1485-1603* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994); Caroline Hibbard, *Charles I and the Popish Plot* (Chapel Hill, N.C., : University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Treason in Tudor England: Politics and Paranoia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, 3(July, 1982): 401-41; David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: The Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): and Daniel Lord Smail, "Hatred as a Social Institution in Late Medieval Society," *Speculum* 76, 1(January, 2001): 90-126.

² For good general discussions of the Tudor Conquest. See Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established, 1565-1576* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976; Steven Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors, 1447-1603: English Expansion and Gaelic Revival* (New York: Longman's, 1998); Derek Hirst, *Dominion: England and its Island Neighbors, 1500-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ The National Archives (hereafter TNA) State Papers (hereafter SP) 63/68/23; Order Taken by the Lord Chancellor and Council of Ireland; 9 August 1579.

⁴ Several of the key documents concerning what happened at Smerwick are printed in Hans Claude Hamilton, et al, 11 vols., (London: His Majesty's Printing Office, 1860-1912), 2:lxvii-lxxvii; see also John Hooker, "The Supplie of this Irish Chronicle continued from the death of King Henry the Eight, 1546, until this present year, 1580," in *The Second Volume of Chronicles Conteyning the description, conquest, inhabitation, and troublesome estate of Ireland: first collected by Raphael Holinshed and now recognized, augmented and continued from the death of King Henrie the Eight until the present time of Sir John Perrot, knight, lord deputie: As appeareth in the Supplie... by John Hooker alias Vowell, gent,* ed. Raphael Holinshed (London, 1586).

⁵ The National Archives State Papers (hereafter TNA SP) 63/78/29; Lord Deputy to Queen, 12 November 1580; TNA SP 63/78/30; Lord Deputy to Walsingham, 12 November 1580.

⁶ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maly (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁷ Canny, *Elizabethan Conquest*, 122, 159-163; see also Canny, *Making Ireland British 1580-1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸ David Edwards, "The Escalation of Violence in Sixteenth Century Ireland," in Edwards, Lenihan, and Tait, *Age of Atrocity*, pp. 34-78; and Edwards, "Tudor Ireland: Anglicization, Mass Killing and Security," in *The Routledge History of Genocide*, ed. Cathie Carmichael and Richard C. Maquire (London: Routledge 2015): 9-37; Edwards, "Beyond Reform: Martial Law and the Tudor Reconquest of Ireland," *History/Ireland* 5, 2(1997): 16-21.

⁹ Neil Murphy, "Violence, Colonization, and Henry VIII's Conquest of France, 1544-46," *Past and Present* 223, 1(2016): 20-35; see also Maurice H. Keen, *The Laws of War in the Middle Ages* (London, 1965); John Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe* (Leicester: Fontana, 1985). Geoffrey Parker, "The Etiquette of Atrocity: The Laws of War in Early Modern Europe," in Geoffrey Parker, *Empires, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2003): 143-68.

¹⁰ Brandon Kane, "Ordinary Violence: Ireland as Emergency in the Tudor State," *History* 99, no. 336(2014): 444-467; Krista Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion and the Law: Faith, Politics, and Protest in Elizabethan England* (London: Palgrave, 2007); Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ See *History and Theory*, 55, 4(December, 2017), especially the introductory essay by Philip Dwyer. "Violence and its Histories: Meanings, Methods, and Problems," 7-22. See also Philip Dwyer and Joy Damousi, eds., *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, 4 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). For some classic studies of violence, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," 97-123; and "The Rites of Violence," 152-87; in Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1975); Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper, 1992); R.A. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society in Western Europe, 850-1250* (Oxford and Nel, 1987); David Nirenburg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); and Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Age of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹² For descriptions and analyses of the massacre, see Adam J. Hirsch, “The Collision of Military Cultures in Seventeenth-Century New England,” *Journal of American History* 74, 4(March, 1988): 1187-1212; and Ronald Dale Karr, “Why Should You Be So Furious? The Violence of the Pequot Massacre,” *Journal of American History* 85, 3(December, 1998): 876-909.

¹³ Underhill is quoted in Karr, “Why Should You Be So Furious,” 877.

¹⁴ It should be recognized that the “Sepoy Massacre” was the term applied by British officials and observers in India at the time, along with other titles, such as “the Indian Mutiny,” or “the Great Rebellion.” By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, many Indians, inspired by a sense of Indian nationalism, began to recast the event in nationalist terms, calling it “The First War of Independence,” or employing a similar phrase implying a national inspiration for the rebellion. Instructors approaching the rebellion will need to be sensitive to the issue of nomenclature, since it was never simply a rebellion of the Sepoys, nor did it possess the unity of purpose normally associated with independence movements.

¹⁵ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny* (London: Viking, 2002); John Salisbury, *The Indian Mutiny* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2003).

¹⁶ For a recent critical analysis, see Kim A. Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels: A New History of the Indian Uprising of 1857* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016); idem., “The Marginal Mutiny: The Historiography of the Indian Uprising of the 1857,” *History Compass*, 9/11(2011), 764.

¹⁷ Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels*, 45-60.

¹⁸ Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels*, 221.

¹⁹ Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels*, xv.

²⁰ Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels*, 230-7, 243-5.

²¹ Kim Wagner, *Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

²² Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*, 184-96.

²³ Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*, 240-1

²⁴ Wagner, “Treading Upon Fires: The ‘Mutiny Motif’ and Colonial Anxieties in British India,” *Past and Present*, 218(February, 2013): 193; Wagner, “The Marginal Mutiny: The Historiography of the Indian Uprising of 1857,” *History Compass*, 9/10 2011), 762-4; Wagner, *Rumors and Rebels*, 227-41.

²⁵ Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*, 155-6.

²⁶ Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, trans. Joan White (New York: Pantheon, 1973).

²⁷ C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); see also, Wagner “Treading Upon Fires: The ‘Mutiny Motif,’” 189-97

²⁸ For works on the war in Viet Nam, see William Appy, *The Viet Nam War and Our National Identity* ((New York: Viking, 2015); George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Viet Nam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002); Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA and Viet Nam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013?); for My Lai, specifically, see Howard Jones, *My Lai: Viet Nam, 1968, and the Descent Into Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Viet Nam* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013); and William Alison, *An American Atrocity in the Viet Nam War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). For the meeting the night before the massacre, see Jones, *My Lai*, 41-49.

²⁹ Jones, *My Lai*, 58-70.

³⁰ Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 3.

³¹ Jones, *My Lai*, 63-70; Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 3.

³² Jones, *My Lai*, 87-90, 105-111; Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 3-5.

³³ Jones, *My Lai*, 66; see also Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in the Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 162.

³⁴ Jones, *My Lai*, 135-45.

³⁵ Jones, *My Lai*, 178-84.

³⁶ Jones, *My Lai*, 189.

³⁷ Kendrick Oliver, “Irrationalizing the Massacre at My Lai,” *Journal of American History* 37(2003), 257.

³⁸ Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*, 4.

³⁹ Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 110, 116, 125-6, 136-8.

⁴⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend: University Notre Dame Press, 1981); see also Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

⁴² Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballentyne Books, 1977), xx.