
First published: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/2228

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).
Next year will mark the centenary of one of the most extreme and brutal displays of colonial power and violence, the so called Amritsar Massacre of 1919. The massacre took place in a public park called Jallianwala Bagh in the city of Amritsar where British Indian army’s Colonel Reginald Dyer on 13 April 1919 ordered his troops to fire on unarmed protestors gathered there. According to the official (but disputed and probably too conservative) account of the British Indian government, 379 people died and 1200 were wounded on this day, and the event often is seen as a turning point in the history of British rule and its legitimacy on the subcontinent. Coincidently, this violent act of oppression happened in the British Indian province of Punjab. In the historiography on British India, it is a commonplace that the Punjab was the ‘Garrison State’, characterised by its (in)famous authoritarian school of administration and the home of various loyal ‘martial races’ filling the ranks of British India’s military forces that in the imperial imagination would secure the stability of the British Raj.

The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh also functions as the introductory point of Mark Condos’ *The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India*. In his book, however, Condos sets out to reassess the image of Punjab and to analyse the province’s authoritarian system of governance and its impact on British India not from the perspective of colonial strength but vulnerability and insecurity, revealing what he calls the ‘dark underside’ of colonialism which he locates in a deeply seated colonial culture of insecurity and fear. Dealing with the actions and thoughts of British colonial administrators, Condos claims that it was ‘a pervasive and constant sense of anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty about the survival of the colonial regime’ (p. 220) that lay at the base of the colonial experience of the British rulers.

*The Insecurity State* consists of five main chapters that, although sometimes overlapping in their narratives, are arranged in chronological order. Chapter one outlines the first 100 years of military and territorial expansion of British rule in India with a focus on the North West of the subcontinent, from the consequential Battle of Plassey in 1757 to the ‘Mutiny’ of Indian soldiers in the services of the East India Company in 1857. The chapter also functions as an introduction to one of the key arguments of Condos; that the British through the whole of their rule on the subcontinent felt this rule to be one of a tiny minority of white colonial administrators surrounded by potentially hostile native subjects. As Condos shows, this feeling was reiterated and cultivated in a ‘culture of insecurity’ that eventually became fundamentally ingrained in the Anglo-Indian mind by the traumatic experiences of the rebellion of 1857. The second chapter describes the ‘pacification’ of Punjab after its annexation into British India in 1849 and particularly the process of integrating the Sikh soldiers of the defeated Sikh Empire into a colonial Punjab. As Condos argues, concerns about the alleged ‘warlike’ nature of the recently subjected people at the new north-western frontier of British India drove the Punjab administrators to seek a relationship both patronising and patriarchal with native groups deemed ‘martial races’, such as the Sikhs. While this integration was achieved quite successfully
through the exceptional recruitment of these groups into the colonial military as well as schemes that favoured and established them as agriculturists, the chapter emphasizes the persistence of fears among the administrators that these ‘domesticated’ martial groups still might rebel someday against their colonial masters. This fear and its consequences are exemplified by Condos in the last part of the chapter where he deals with the Punjab Disturbances of 1907, an agrarian unrest that had sprung up after the introduction of the controversial ‘Punjab Colonization of Land Bill’, and the authorities’ reaction to this.

A specific event and its legal and public aftermath are discussed in the third chapter of the book, namely the outbreak and violent suppression of the so called ‘Kooka uprising’ of 1872, when revolting Sikhs from the Namdhari sect threatened colonial authority. Tracing first the origins of the famous ‘Punjab school’ of governance that was characterized by giving local officials much autonomy and extensive administrate and juridical powers and by its reticence to processes of legal codification in British India in the second half of the 19th century, it then sketches out in detail the events of 1872. The following section analyses how the local and provincial authorities came to react in rather panicky ways to the in fact quite small uprising of bands of radical Sikhs. It shows how the ensuing administrative and public debate oscillated between concerns about the on-going process of legal codification (and the consequential moral legitimacy of colonial rule) and the veneration and defence of the Punjab style of administration that allowed the ‘men on the spot’ to preserve their sovereignty in an environment deemed exceptionally hostile and fragile.

The fourth chapter then deals with the history of a particular piece of legislation, the ‘Murderous Outrages Act’ (MOA) of 1867. It considers its implementation, reception and subsequent adaption for other oppressive acts of legislation. Preceded and influenced by the Moplah Act of 1854, the MOA was a reaction to reoccurring assassinations of and attacks on frontier officials at the North-Western Frontier. It granted British officials extensive rights to try subjects whom the act deemed ‘fanatics’ outside of the normal legal purview. Two aspects of the legislation and its debate are further elaborated by Condos. The first is the contemporary debate on whether the burning of the bodies of these often Muslim ‘fanatics’ was an acceptable measure to show to potential attackers the grave consequences they would face should they be tried, or whether such an act would go too far and undermine the moral legitimacy of the empire in the eyes of its subjects. Secondly, the chapter analyses how the ‘fanatic’ actually was defined in these acts, concluding that is was the elusive and ambiguous definition of the term that made the act the powerful tool it was. Finally, Condos traces the reception of the Act and shows how it reverberated up to the late phase of the British Raj when the MOA Act and similar legislation became heavily attacked by Indian nationalists.

The thesis’ final chapter returns to the topic of military and police recruitment, but this time deals not with service in Punjab and the Indian army but looks at the popularity of Punjabi servicemen in overseas police and military forces. It analyses attempts to regulate this movement of
persons by Indian authorities who were motivated by both a fear of losing potential recruits for their own services and imperial security concerns as Punjabis started to enlist also in the services of foreign powers and even imperial rivals such as the Germans or Russians. The severe anxieties these foreign-employed Punjabis caused among British India’s officials sees Condos manifested in their reactions to the so called Ghadar Movement during the First World War. The Ghadar Movement, a revolutionary movement comprising of mostly Punjabis living in North America, among them many Sikhs and (ex-)soldiers, was made possible by the formation of transnational networks and inter-imperial mobility. Condos argues that, in an atmosphere fuelled by exaggerated fears that went way beyond the actual reach into Punjabi society the Ghadar Movement had, it was the authoritarian Punjab administrative ethos and the lobbying of Punjab officials in response to the Ghadar threat, rather than revolutionary activities in Bengal as previously had been stressed, that led to the notorious Defence of India Act in 1915. In the Ghadar movement Condos, thus, sees a prime example of a pattern he stresses throughout the book, namely that anxiety drove the British administrators to cultivate Punjab as a bastion of imperial security, but that its results (recruitment of Punjabis, fostering of agricultural classes, etc.) eventually came back to them as threats causing further anxieties.

The individual chapters of The Insecurity State differ quite a lot in terms of pace, scope and cogency. Whereas chapter one makes anxiety to a large extent the motor of British imperialism, chapter three uses the concept to explain the actions of particular persons on a particular occasion. Unfortunately, not all these accounts are equally convincing. This has to do to a big extent with the term (or concept) of ‘anxiety’ that Condos puts in the foreground of his argument. It is only a small argumentative step from stating that ‘security concerns’ cause authoritarian legislation to stating that ‘anxieties’ cause authoritarian legislation. Yet the argument (and to some extent originality) of Condos’ book relies mostly on the distinction that the motivation of the British officials described in The Insecurity State was not ‘mere’ security concerns but founded on specific ‘anxieties’. Unfortunately, despite being the crucial term in his study, what ‘anxiety’ actually means as an analytical term and how it qualifies as something different than varying political concerns and personal fears, remains rather vague. There are a few possible qualifiers of ‘anxiety’ that occasionally do show through in the individual chapters of the book, for instance irrationality/emotionality, a disparity between subjective and objective concerns, and the perpetuity and deep-rootedness of these insecurities. However, Condos himself counters these readings and attributes. While the introduction especially dwells on the subjectivity of these colonial anxieties, the individual case studies show that the officials often were driven by concerns that were hardly imaginary. In the book’s conclusion the author presents us with a synthesis that highlights the heterogeneous reasoning and intentions that underlay the policies, attitudes, and episodes described in the book’s various chapters. According to Condos, British officials’ fears (or: anxieties) were mostly neither mere emotional
overreactions nor deliberate fabrications, and officials did assess the possible effects of their actions and policies. The book’s conclusion offers a balanced analysis of imperial fears, oppressive actions/reactions and legal debates, but coincidentally it also partially undermines Condos’ stress on the relevance of distinct ‘anxieties’. What Condos is successfully able to show through his emphasis on ‘anxieties’ is that British officials could draw on a shared memorial culture of fear of rebellion which helped legitimize their actions - whether they were spontaneous or calculated. Still, the argument of the book and the analytical relevance of its key term could have been more persuasive if the author had elaborated more on what the often-referred-to ‘anxiety’ actually means. This could have been accomplished, for example, through a more explicit engagement with the quickly growing field of the history of emotions - to which Condos refers only in a footnote to the second to last sentence of his conclusion – or with other recent works that make use of the term and concept.

The emphasis on anxieties, consequently, works only partially throughout the book. In chapter one, for instance, it leads to a rather reductionist narration of a century of imperial expansion in South Asia, and also in chapter two the argued correlation between annexed Punjab’s pacification and colonial anxieties is not completely convincing. Chapters one and two are not the most original ones and, stripped of the ‘anxiety angle’, remain competent syntheses of rather broad topics that have been dealt with before. It is in the following three chapters where the study really shines. Delving deep into archival material allows Condos to trace official feelings, discussions and policies in often complex and interwoven ways. Here, Condos examines crucial moments and developments of the colonial experience that have hitherto not been sufficiently considered. In particular, chapters four and five have to be highlighted as they very convincingly show one of the main arguments of the book: that policies in the Indian North West had a significant impact on discussions and actual legislation in the centre.

While Condos intends primarily to show the vulnerability of the empire, he also sees his thesis as part of a broader historiographical project that tries to overcome the popular myth that British rule in India was ‘a powerful, confident, and nearly indomitable force’ (p. 10). However, whereas the book undoubtedly succeeds in giving the reader an impression of the sense of vulnerability British officials in the subcontinent may have felt, the study hardly qualifies as a corrective to the narrative of an omnipotent British rule in South Asia. On the contrary, one is tempted to say that the book’s focus on matters of governance and legislation even perpetuates such accounts. While the authoritarian nature of rule in Punjab is explained as driven by insecurities, its reach and capacity is hardly questioned in The Insecurity State. As a related issue, the extremely narrow focus on British high-officials and decision-makers and the omission of Indian figures in the picture Condos draws have to be mentioned. While one might argue that this is due to the purview of the study, it is still somewhat disconcerting that the book is almost completely void of any native, non-British voice or
agency. As a whole, Condos’s work (intentionally or unintentionally) gives the reader the same feeling that he attributes to his historical objects of study: one of isolation where interaction between Anglo-India and the native population hardly occurs and the Indian inhabitants of the subcontinent only appear as ‘the other’; an anonymous and potentially dangerous mass. Such an approach runs the risk of reducing the history of imperialism to a history of the imperialists. Of course, it is not completely fair to criticise this absence in a study specifically on colonial governance and official policies, and there was undoubtedly much effort and concern among Anglo-Indian society to isolate itself from the native population. But still, one wonders whether there would not have been ways to draw a picture that is not that much a reflection of the sentiments of the book’s objects of study, but that – such as, for an example, C. A. Bayly’s famous Empire and Information (1) that deals with similar topics of imperial (in)security – tries to consider the complexities and nuances of the colonial situation and the role and agency of multifariously motivated cooperating, contesting or mediating Indian figures.

Leaving aside what the book misses, there is much to be praised that The Insecurity State provides. While it hardly questions the power of the colonial state, it keeps away from describing it as a triumphant success story. Condos manages to contribute a comprehensive and substantiated explanation of the causes of colonial violence without leaving the impression of absolving the historical figures of imperialism of their often atrocious actions. Convincingly conveying the state of fear many British, especially frontier officials lived in, the study reveals the various insecurities that underlay the ostensible imperial bravado. It shows that particularly Punjab and its authoritarian school of administration was a producer and reservoir of colonial anxieties and ‘a laboratory for a number of practices and ideas that were later exported to the wider empire’ (p. 19) and ironically, although supposed to be means for the protection of colonial security, often fuelled even more concerns. Condos succeeds in reconciling the administrative history of this frontier region with the broader history of British India and the Empire without falling for a narrative of exceptionalism that has hitherto informed many works on the history of Punjab.

Written in an engaging prose and supplemented with occasional evocative narrative interludes and references to current affairs in today’s India and Pakistan, The Insecurity State provides us with a thought-provoking and profound analysis of colonial insecurities, violence and legislation. While it occasionally suffers from an over-use of its under-theorized ‘anxiety’ concept, it offers a fresh angle on governance in (mostly early) colonial Punjab and British India and on the inherent contradiction between imperial power and vulnerability.

Notes
Author's Response

Mark Condos

Michael Phillip Brunner has written a thoughtful response to my book, *The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India*. While Brunner finds many things about the book worthy of praise, he has also provided a measured critique of what he believes to be its more problematic aspects. As such, I will just take a (relatively) brief moment here to respond to some of the issues he has raised in his review. One of Brunner’s central concerns is about the lack of clarity in the way I deploy the term ‘anxiety’ throughout my book. In this respect, I think he is perhaps correct. As I was writing, I initially took my cue from Ranajit Guha’s pioneering essay, ‘Not at home in empire’. In his essay, Guha argues that anxiety was a somewhat obscure, yet persistent, unease about the unfamiliarity and immensity of India felt by the tiny minority of British officials who were tasked with ruling over the subcontinent. According to this definition, ‘anxiety’, by its nature, is something difficult to pin down and define. Guha was clearer when he defined ‘fear’ as something which coalesced around more specific scenarios, such as conspiracies or rebellions. The two concepts are obviously closely related, though distinct. Throughout my book, I tried to explore how British anxieties translated into fears about the vulnerability of the colonial regime, and, often, their own personal safety. In some cases, I am describing very personal and subjective experiences; at other times, I am describing a more generalized, shared feeling of unease and discomfort that pervaded all levels of colonial society. There are some instances, however, where I also use the term ‘anxiety’ according to its more general and commonly-recognized meaning, so there is some slippage at this level. I think the more useful analytical concept that I develop in the book is the idea of a ‘culture of insecurity’, in which the nexus between anxiety, fear, and panic allowed for certain kinds of statecraft that would normally be considered unnecessary or extreme. As I try to make clear, British India’s culture of insecurity was pervasive; it both shaped, and was shaped by, individual experiences and the ‘colonial condition’ of not feeling ‘at home’ in empire, more generally. The crucial argument that I am trying to make in the book concerns the ways in which the British sense of colonial insecurity in India transformed relatively minor threats into something much greater, and this is where I believe that ‘anxiety’ and ‘fear’ are important, yet hitherto overlooked, analytical categories. Fear develops more easily in situations where individuals are tense and anxious, and fear, in turn, can produce ill-judged, even panicked reactions. When Cowan ordered the summary execution of 49 Namdharis in 1872, for example, he claimed he was facing an incipient rebellion, a second ‘Mutiny’. Of course, this was not the case, but what is important is that Cowan believed that it was. The number of British officials and persons killed or wounded by so-called ghazi ‘fanatics’ was relatively small, yet these attacks terrified the
colonial establishment and served as a rallying cry to protect an exposed and vulnerable minority within what was considered to be one the most dangerous parts of the entire British Empire. The extent and effectiveness of the Ghadar Movement in Punjab was also greatly exaggerated by officials like O’Dwyer in order to lobby for increased legal powers (whether this was borne from a genuine concern on his part, or was more of a calculated and cynical attempt to manipulate British insecurity for his own political ends, is harder to say). Thus, while many of the case studies I explore in the book were not just figments of the fevered colonial imagination, as Brunner points out, they did tend to be overblown. Reducing these kinds of assessments to ‘security concerns’ does not adequately capture the way in which British decision-making could be, and indeed often was, coloured by these kinds of irrational and subjective assessments.

Another issue Brunner raises is that my book does not sufficiently challenge the image of omnipotent British rule in India. Instead, he argues that my book actually tends to reinforce this idea. One of the arguments I advance in this book is that colonial insecurity was not just a regressive and reactionary phenomenon, but was actually quite productive for the expanding British colonial regime. From the East India Company’s wars of expansion with India’s Mughal successor states, the maintenance of a powerful military establishment in Punjab, to the creation of draconian legislation, like the Murderous Outrages Act and the Defence of India Act, British India’s culture of colonial insecurity helped to expand the state. On the other hand, however, the growth of this insecurity state also created new problems for India’s colonial rulers. While Punjab’s mighty ‘garrison state’ was undoubtedly essential for the defence of India and the wider British Empire, the British dependence on maintaining the goodwill and loyalty of its important military groups (my book focusses predominantly on Sikhs) also constrained its ability to enact policy as it pleased, making the British profoundly uneasy about anything which might disrupt this delicate military-agrarian political nexus, such as the 1906 Colonization Bill and later the Ghadar Movement. The brutal treatment of the so-called ghazi ‘fanatics’ along the North-West Frontier, which was enabled by the passing of the Murderous Outrages Act, may have given colonial authorities wide-ranging powers to deal with these individuals, but it also appears to have engendered even greater resistance and resentment against the British regime. A useful book by Durba Ghosh, which was published around the same time as my own, shows in vivid relief how the heavy-handed British response to anti-colonial revolutionaries in Bengal produced a similarly vicious feedback cycle, in which the repression of anti-colonial resistance served only to engender greater resistance.(2a) I do not deny that the British colonial state retained the ability to exert a profoundly disruptive (often deadly) force upon its subjects. However, violence and power are not synonymous, and the frequent British reliance on coercive measures (whether gruesome spectacles of public execution or draconian legislation) appear much less to be the actions of a confident state that
can command obedience from its subjects, than manifestations of an absence of such power.
The final significant critique that Brunner raises is about the disconcerting absence of Indian voices in my book. This is a book that set out to analyse British colonial mentalities, and so it necessarily focusses on those (as Brunner himself acknowledges). Nonetheless, as I point out in the book, Indians were often some of the most astute critics of the colonial state’s propensity to panic and exaggerate threats into greater ones in order to expand the state’s coercive arsenal. Following the Punjab disturbances of 1919, the Indian National Congress published a report condemning the ‘panicky’ and heavy-handed British reaction to these events. (3a) This was followed by Pearay Mohan’s *An Imaginary Rebellion and How it was Suppressed* (1920), which was unrelenting in its excoriating takedown of the British handling of the unrest. (4a) Indian reformers, including Vitalbhai Patel and later Sundara Satyamurti worked to repeal the Murderous Outrages Act and other ‘repressive legislation’, while others challenged the British about their propensity to use this law in dubious circumstances. As I note in the book, it is also interesting how some Indian politicians, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, supported the preservation of the Murderous Outrages Act. Whether this was because Jinnah truly believed in the necessity of the law, or whether this was a more calculated realization that any attempt to repeal too many of the colonial state’s coveted coercive powers was doomed to failure, is more difficult to discern (though it is interesting to note that the law was not repealed in post-colonial Pakistan).

On the subject of the Murderous Outrages Act and the so-called ‘fanatics’ it was designed to punish, there is an interesting question about whether it is possible to effectively recover their voices, considering that they were often executed in great haste and tended not to leave behind much in the way of written testimonies, aside from the problematic, colonially-mediated reports produced by British officers themselves. This is an issue I have dealt with in another article that appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. (5a) In it, I argue it is possible to parse the reductive colonial stereotypes and assumptions that shape these sources to glean a more complex picture of what motivated individuals to take up arms against colonial officials. These could range from political acts of resistance, the venting of personal grievances, or genuine religious motivations. The reaction of the local Muslim community to the British practice of incinerating the bodies of dead ‘fanatics’ also provides an important counter-balance to the British belief that they were somehow exploiting a widespread superstition that this would destroy their souls, demonstrating that this was patent nonsense. Though they may have disagreed with their methods, large numbers of the Muslim community nonetheless continued to support the British. Islamic scholars, legal experts and organizations like the Peshawar Islamia Club argued that these attackers were not ‘true’ Muslims, and the Anjuman-i-Islamia issued a *fatwa* against these so-called *ghazis* in 1900.

In the end, it was not my intention to marginalize Indian voices, or to reproduce the same problematic and unfamiliar ‘other’ which was such a
constant source of anxiety for the colonial officials I study. As this was a detailed study of the British mindset, that is where the focus necessarily lay. I think that a productive avenue for future research lies in exploring the phenomena of anxiety and insecurity more broadly within colonial South Asia. Indeed, a colleague of mine who works on early-modern India suggested that these kinds of issues were by no means unique to the British, and, in fact, can be found among India’s Mughal rulers. It would be interesting to study these issues in greater depth to see to what extent colonial anxieties really were ‘colonial’ (as I suggest in my epilogue, both Pakistan and India have shown a marked tendency to operate as insecurity states, and even some Western countries engaged in the so-called ‘War on Terror’).

Criticisms notwithstanding, I am grateful to Brunner for engaging with my arguments and ideas. The goal of this book was to provoke a conversation, and to encourage a reassessment of how we understand the dynamics of colonial rule. If it continues to do so, then I will consider it a success.

Notes

3a) Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (Lahore, 1920).
5a) See Mark Condos, “‘Fanaticism’ and the politics of resistance along the North-West Frontier of British India’, Comparative Studies in Society and History, 58, 3 (2016), 717–45.