



Figure 0.1 Map of Punjab

Introduction: Fear, Panic, and the Violence of Empire

We cannot be very brave unless we be possessed of a greater fear.
Brigadier-General Reginald E. Dyer, 25 August 1919¹

0.1 Colonial Terror in Punjab

On the afternoon of 13 April 1919, a detachment of Indian Army soldiers opened fire on an unarmed crowd that had gathered in a confined public space known as the Jallianwala Bagh in the Punjabi holy city of Amritsar. No warning was given prior to the commencement of the shooting. Many of those who were not either killed or wounded by the rifle fire were injured or trampled to death during the ensuing struggle to escape through the few narrow exits that led out of the Bagh. Some desperately sought refuge from the firing by jumping into a nearby well, only to end up drowning. A few lucky individuals were able to take cover behind the walls of the well and a small tomb. The firing continued for nearly 10 minutes, and was personally directed by the commanding officer, Brigadier-General Reginald E. Dyer. By the time Dyer gave the order to cease firing, his troops had expended around 1,650 rounds of ammunition, and heaps of bodies lay strewn throughout the Bagh. Dyer and his men then promptly marched off, leaving the wounded and dying to fend for themselves. Though accounts differ as to the precise number of civilians who were killed and injured during the shooting, the official numbers given by the Government of India (GOI) were 379 killed, and 1,200 wounded.²

In many ways, this frightful event could be read as the ultimate expression of colonial power. Indeed, what could be more evocative of the

¹ Qtd in Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 423.

² *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc.* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920), p. 29 [hereafter *Hunter Committee Report*].

brute strength of colonial domination than the ability to inflict such a devastating and indiscriminate slaughter upon its own subjects? On the other hand, however, this raises the question of why such a powerful state would feel the need to demonstrate its authority in this manner. If British rule really was so absolute and unassailable, then why was it necessary to proclaim this through such a spectacular display of violence? In this book I would like to argue that British colonial rule in India was actually a fundamentally anxious and insecure endeavour, and that brute displays of power, like the one described above, were actually manifestations of colonial weakness and vulnerability, rather than strength. The idea that a colonial state capable of inflicting such shocking degrees of violence could ever be considered ‘vulnerable’ or ‘weak’, or that the behaviour of British officials, like Dyer, could have been largely determined by fear and panic may seem deliberately provocative. The very suggestion that imperial overlords could ever be viewed as vulnerable, or even ‘helpless’ in some situations, is deeply unsettling because empires ultimately represented power and dominance, and were often remarkably durable even during times of crisis.³ Nevertheless, it is the central premise of this book that we cannot comprehend fully the violent and authoritarian tendencies of colonialism without a better understanding of how the British experience in India was mediated by an enduring and pervasive sense of anxiety, insecurity, and fear.

Today, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (also known as the Amritsar Massacre) is remembered as one of the most brutal and evil acts perpetrated under British colonial rule.⁴ For many it was the moment when whatever shred of moral credibility the British Empire still possessed was lost. As the Labour politician Colonel Josiah Wedgwood so despairingly put it in Parliament, ‘it has destroyed our reputation throughout the world’.⁵ In addition to drawing unfavourable comparisons to the sorts of ‘Prussian atrocities’ committed during the recent war, Dyer’s indiscriminate shooting provided an awkward and unwelcome reminder of both the ongoing conflict and repression in Ireland and the recent revolution

³ Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum, ‘Helpless Imperialists: Introduction’, in Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (eds.), *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear, and Radicalization* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 7–8.

⁴ Derek Sayer, ‘British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre 1919–1920’, *Past & Present*, 131:1 (May 1991): pp. 130–64.

⁵ ‘You know what will happen’, he continued. ‘All the blackguards in America when they lynch niggers, they will say, “Oh, you did the same in India”. When butcheries take place in Russia, whether it be by White or Red Guard, they will, “We never did anything like what you did in India”; and when we tell the Turks, “You massacred the Armenians”, they will say, “Yes, we wish we had the chance of getting 5,000 of them together, and then of shooting straight”’: *Hansard* HC Deb. 22 December 1919, vol. 123, col. 1232.

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in Egypt.⁶ The massacre was also a watershed moment for the Indian nationalist movement. Moderates, who had previously sought to work with the British in order to bring about gradual changes and reforms from within the colonial system, now began to call for complete independence, and M.K. Gandhi used the public outrage over the massacre to help launch the 1920–2 Non-Cooperation Movement.⁷

Yet nearly a century later, the sheer scale and brutality of the massacre is still difficult to fully comprehend, and debate has raged over how best to explain and interpret Dyer's actions at Jallianwala Bagh.⁸ Some studies have emphasised the individual responsibility of Dyer and sought to understand this tragedy as the excessive response of one man.⁹ More compelling approaches, however, have attempted to understand and situate the massacre within the structural conditions of British colonial rule in India more generally.¹⁰ Nasser Hussain, for instance, has explored how the decision taken by Dyer was reflective of a wider tension between colonial conceptions of sovereignty and the rule of law, while Taylor Sherman has revealed how Dyer's actions were an example of an informal, yet systemic culture of colonial policing and punishment that operated across India.¹¹ More recently, Kim A. Wagner has persuasively demonstrated that Dyer's response was determined in large part

⁶ *Hansard*, HC Deb. 23 February 1920, vol. 125, cols. 1339–455.

⁷ Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857–1947* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), chap. 15.

⁸ For a good summary of these debates, see Kim A. Wagner, "'Calculated to Strike Terror': The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence', *Past & Present*, 233:1 (November 2016): pp. 185–225.

⁹ Shortly after the massacre, Winston Churchill famously claimed that, 'It is an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation': *Hansard* HC Deb. 8 July 1920, vol. 131, col. 1725. As Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons have pointed out, by emphasising the excesses of individual officers and using them scapegoats, both the colonial regime and the wider imperial establishment were essentially able to disavow their own responsibility for the violence: Purnima Bose and Laura Lyons, 'Dyer Consequences: The Trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of the "Minimum" Force Debate', *boundary 2*, 26:2 (1999), p. 202. Nigel Collett's biography of Dyer is an example of this sort of approach: Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar*.

¹⁰ Helen Fein has argued that 'race' and 'class' were the dominant categories that conditioned the violent colonial response to dissidence, while Derek Sayer has more recently argued that it was colonial paternalism and the rendering of Indians as 'naughty children' who needed to be taught a lesson that allowed Dyer to justify his actions: Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgment, 1919–1920* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1977); Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre'.

¹¹ See, respectively, Nasser Hussain, *The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Taylor C. Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

by the traumatic memory of the so-called Indian ‘Mutiny’ of 1857.¹² According to Wagner, enduring narratives of British victimhood and vulnerability during the ‘Mutiny’ gave rise to a ‘colonial culture of fear’ in which the memory or spectre of 1857 served as a powerful shorthand or ‘motif’ that could be invoked again and again by colonial officers as a way of justifying their often harsh, authoritarian measures in order to preserve the safety and security of Britons in India.¹³ As Dyer himself later explained, he saw the crowd at Jallianwala Bagh not as an unarmed mob, but as ‘a rebel army’ that threatened the lives of every European in the city and the very security and stability of the Raj itself.¹⁴

While there is little to suggest that Dyer’s apocalyptic assessment of the situation was anything other than a hyperbolic overreaction, it is clear that many other colonial officials also believed that the situation in Amritsar and elsewhere throughout Punjab during the spring of 1919 presented a very real and critical threat to British rule in India. Prior to the massacre, the province had been rocked by widespread agitation against the GOI’s highly controversial decision to indefinitely extend certain emergency powers that had been granted to it during the First World War under the auspices of what became known as the Rowlatt Act.¹⁵

¹² The nomenclature used to describe the events of 1857 has a fraught and highly politicised history. While the British referred to it as ‘the Mutiny’, the Indian nationalist writer V.D. Savarkar maintained that it was an ‘Indian War of Independence’: V.D. Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence* (London: s.n., 1909). Various other terms, including ‘rebellion’, ‘revolt’, and ‘uprising’ have subsequently been adopted to describe the events of 1857. For a summary of some of the salient shifts in these various representations, see Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), p. 1; Kim A. Wagner, ‘The Marginal Mutiny: The New Historiography of the Indian Uprising of 1857’, *History Compass*, 9:10 (October 2011): pp. 760–6.

¹³ See Kim A. Wagner, “‘Treading Upon Fires’: The “Mutiny”-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India’, *Past & Present*, 218:1 (February 2013): pp. 159–97; Wagner, ‘Calculated to Strike Terror’.

¹⁴ ‘I had, in fact, the rebel army in front of me. I knew, so far as human foresight could go, that if I shirked its challenge and did not then and there crush it, . . . there would infallibly follow that night or next morning a general mob movement both from inside and outside Amritsar which would have destroyed all the European population, including women and children and all my troops, and involved in its ruin the law-abiding Indian population as well’: PP, 1920 (Cmd. 771) XXXIV.677, *Statement by Brig.-General R.E. Dyer, C.B. (Punjab Disturbances)*, p. 12. In his earlier testimony to the Hunter Committee, there were several occasions where Dyer explicitly referred to the ‘mutiny’: *Testimony of Dyer before the Hunter Committee, Disorders Inquiry (Hunter) Committee 1919–20: Evidence vol. III: Amritsar* (Calcutta: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1920), p. 137.

¹⁵ The Rowlatt Act gave the colonial state wide powers to help curb revolutionary activity in India, including the right to imprison individuals suspected of terrorism without trial, the abolition of juries in cases of alleged sedition, and the withdrawal of the right of appeal. It was named after Justice Sidney Rowlatt, the president of the Sedition Committee that was convened in early 1918 to examine ‘the nature and extent of the

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Thousands of Punjabis flocked to protest the new law, and a series of *hartals* (strikes) across the province's major cities and urban areas had quickly brought the province to its knees. On 10 April, these protests turned violent after police fired upon and killed several demonstrators in Amritsar. In retaliation, incensed mobs killed five Europeans; assaulted a female missionary; set fire to banks, churches, and the town hall; and attacked the telegraph office.¹⁶ Lieutenant-Governor Michael O'Dwyer, who remained one of Dyer's most ardent and loyal supporters to the end, later testified to the Hunter Committee that was charged with investigating the massacre that he had 'no hesitation in saying that General Dyer's action that day was the decisive factor in crushing the rebellion, the seriousness of which is only now being generally realised'.¹⁷

Dyer's actions, of course, did not put an end to the disturbances, and the brutal violence he inflicted was also not the last time during the crisis when colonial authorities resorted to spectacular forms of punishment in a desperate attempt to restore order and some semblance of British control. On 14 April, the day after the tragic events at Amritsar, violent riots broke out in Gujranwala. Finding no troops available to help restore order, O'Dwyer despatched Royal Air Force aircraft to subdue the crowds from the air using bombs and machine guns.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Indian rioters in the countryside continued to attack railway stations and destroy telegraph lines, and armed police were called upon to disperse violent protests in Lahore and Lyallpur.¹⁹

criminal conspiracies connected with the revolutionary movement in India'. It was the recommendation of this committee that led to the promulgation of the law: *Report of the Sedition Committee, 1918* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1918). In the words of B.G. Horniman, the editor of the *Bombay Chronicle* and a strong supporter of the Indian nationalist movement, the Rowlatt Act deprived people 'of their most elementary human rights and [was] unparalleled in the laws of any modern civilised State': B.G. Horniman, *Amritsar and Our Duty to India* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), p. 49.

¹⁶ *Punjab Disturbances, April 1919: Compiled from the Civil and Military Gazette*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: The Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1919), p. 9. This pamphlet was compiled from the daily reports on the Punjab Disturbances that appeared in the *Civil and Military Gazette*. It proved so popular that it entered a second round of printing by May of 1919.

¹⁷ *Hunter Committee Report*, p. 31. While the Hunter Committee ultimately condemned Dyer and his actions at Amritsar and rejected the claim by O'Dwyer and others that the disturbances were the result of a pre-mediated and coordinated conspiracy, they conceded that they did constitute an 'open rebellion' against British rule that had justified the imposition of martial law. According to them, 'a movement which had started in rioting and become a rebellion might have rapidly developed into a revolution, and it would have been dangerous and irresponsible of the Punjab authorities not to act as they did': *ibid.*, p. 63. Many others, including those back in Britain, actually praised him as the 'saviour of the Punjab': Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre', pp. 132, 158.

¹⁸ *Punjab Disturbances*, pp. 17, 38.

¹⁹ *Hunter Committee Report*, pp. 147–8.

With his resources stretched to the limit and unable to regain control over what he repeatedly referred to as an open ‘rebellion’ against British rule, O’Dwyer finally declared martial law on 15 April.²⁰ Martial law remained in operation for nearly two months, during which time military authorities arrested and convicted hundreds of individuals implicated in the protests, instituted public floggings, and inflicted various other improvised, abusive, and humiliating punishments designed to denigrate Indians.²¹ In the wake of the disturbances, the GOI praised O’Dwyer and the Punjab Government for their prompt and decisive response to the crisis. In their opinion, O’Dwyer had acted ‘with decision and vigour in a time of great danger’ and quelled ‘a dangerous rising which might have had widespread and disastrous effects on the rest of India’.²² Several years later, O’Dwyer also defended his administration’s handling of the disturbances, praising the courage, steadiness, and discipline of the British officers and soldiers who had helped restore order throughout the province.²³

Despite this glowing outpouring of colonial self-congratulation, contemporary Indian observers came to a very different conclusion about the British handling of the disturbances. The Minority Report endorsed by the Indian members of the Hunter Committee was deeply critical of the government, arguing that both the initial declaration of martial law and its prolonged duration had been entirely unjustifiable.²⁴ A separate

²⁰ Michael O’Dwyer, *India as I Knew It, 1885–1925* (London: Constable, 1925), p. 298. Martial law was initially proclaimed in Amritsar, Lahore, and Gujranwala, but was later extended to Gujrat and Lyallpur. It remained in operation until June, by which time O’Dwyer was satisfied that the ‘rebellion’ had been quelled.

²¹ The most notorious of these was Dyer’s so-called ‘crawling order’ that forced Indians to crawl on their hands and knees through the street where Miss Sherwood, a British missionary, had been attacked in Amritsar: see, *Hunter Committee Report*, pp. 83–5. Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Johnson also earned an infamous reputation for himself during his administration martial law in Lahore. As Horniman put it, ‘He showed not only an intensity but a malignant efficiency in devising means for the terrorisation of the population’: Horniman, *Amritsar and Our Duty to India*, p. 132.

²² ‘Reviewing the situation as a whole’, they continued, ‘we desire to express our great appreciation of the admirable conduct of the troops who were employed in the suppression of the outbreak. Leaving aside individual instances, which have already been noticed, both officers and men acted with admirable restraint under most trying circumstances and the Government of India have nothing but praise and gratitude for the services which they rendered in suppressing disorder and restoring peace of the country’: GOI to Montagu, 3 May 1920, PP, 1920 (705) XXXIV.649, *Correspondence Between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India on the Report of Lord Hunter’s Committee*, no. 1, pp. 20–1.

²³ O’Dwyer, *India as I Knew It*, chap. 17.

²⁴ As they dryly put it, ‘we cannot avoid the impression that the Punjab Government rather easily persuaded themselves that the introduction of martial law was necessary’: *Hunter Committee Report*, p. 106.

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inquiry conducted by the Indian National Congress (INC) was even more damning in its criticism, claiming that the entire British response to the disturbances had been an overreaction from the start, caused by anxious and ‘panicky’ leaders who had needlessly escalated events through their own heavy-handedness.²⁵ Shortly after the publication of the Congress report, Pearay Mohan, the assistant editor of the Lahore-based newspaper, *The Tribune*, published a sensational and incendiary book, provocatively entitled *An Imaginary Rebellion and How it was Suppressed*.²⁶ In it, he excoriated the British colonial state for its tendency to ‘invent’ enemies and crises as a pretence for the expansion of draconian state powers, like the Rowlatt Act. The danger of these types of laws, he pointed out, is that they could be used to inflict ‘widespread injustice and terror . . . when the Local Government is in a state of panic or excitement’.²⁷ Far from being a measured and resolute response to a legitimate threat, then, Indian critics saw this as the hasty and excessive overreaction of an alarmist colonial administration.

The Punjab disturbances of 1919 offer a striking picture of how the British colonial state in India responded to challenges to its authority. In times of crisis, British authorities frequently resorted to coercion, violence, and ‘terror’ tactics in order to maintain control over their wayward colonial subjects. As Raj Chandavarkar has pointed out, Britons in India were vastly outnumbered and surrounded by a potentially hostile population, making them particularly aware of their own vulnerability in the face of mass discontent. Overwhelming displays of violence and coercive power were therefore just as much about discouraging future resistance and bolstering their own prestige as they were about suppressing actual rebellion and disorder.²⁸ But rather than being expressions of British strength and invincibility, these types of violent and oppressive practices do, indeed, seem more like the fitful and panicked behaviour of a colonial administration that was desperate to maintain its authority at any

²⁵ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress* (Lahore: K. Santanam, 1920), pp. 75–6 [hereafter *Congress Report*].

²⁶ Pearay Mohan, *An Imaginary Rebellion and How it was Suppressed: An Account of the Punjab Disorders and the Working of Martial Law* (Lahore: Khosla Bros., 1920). In addition to its fiery tone, this book also included a forward by the notable Punjabi revolutionary, Lala Lajpat Rai.

²⁷ In the case of the Rowlatt Act, Mohan argued, officials could provide ‘no definite proofs’ to substantiate the necessity for the law, ‘but the whole affair was given a romantic touch by reference to the mysterious anarchist who is everywhere and nowhere, who lurks in the background, does all his work in secret, and is not to be found’: *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁸ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 216–18.

cost – as contemporary Indian observers suggest.²⁹ Using this event as a starting point, this book examines various other instances that challenged the illusion of colonial superiority and invincibility; moments that threatened colonial power and control; and the ways British colonisers used these recurring and persistent threats to justify the creation of a deeply oppressive and authoritarian system of rule. In so doing, it seeks not just to understand these ‘exceptional’ moments of crisis, but also how the everyday anxieties and concerns that preoccupied colonial administrators in India fed into the violent and coercive tendencies of the colonial state more generally. As its title suggests, this book argues that British colonial state-building in India was intimately tied up with and predicated on a deep-seated, pervasive, and permanent sense of insecurity.

This book approaches these issues through an examination of colonial practices in one of the most strategically important provinces in the whole of British India: Punjab. At first glance, Punjab may seem an odd choice for a study of this nature. With its reputation as one of the most stable, loyal, and economically prosperous provinces in all of British India, Punjab has often been seen as a colonial success story. Governed by a vigorous, forceful, and authoritarian system of rule known as the ‘Punjab School’, the province’s administration was widely admired throughout India and seen as a ‘model’ of colonial rule. During the catastrophic Rebellion of 1857, for example, Punjab remained loyal to the British cause and furnished the soldiers necessary to retake Delhi and other territories that had been lost to rebel forces. Following the Rebellion, Punjab was gradually transformed into the primary recruiting ground for the Indian armed forces, providing recruits that were not only essential to the defence of British India, but to the wider British Empire as well. When we delve deeper below the surface of these apparent colonial

²⁹ The Congress report’s commentary on a lesser-known incident during the disturbances that occurred in the Sheikhpura district just north-west of Lahore is particularly illuminating in this regard. In the early hours of 16 April 1919, the Extra Assistant Commissioner of Sheikhpura ordered an armoured train to open fire indiscriminately with its machine guns against anyone it encountered along the line between Sheikhpura and the small village of Chuharkana after mobs had looted the railway station and damaged telegraph and railway lines earlier that day. While the officer admitted that they could barely see whom they were shooting, he claimed that it was his intention to strike ‘terror’ into hearts of the district’s inhabitants in order to reassert control. The Congress committee concluded that this action was: ‘hasty, premature, indiscriminate and due to panic or over-zeal. To strike terror was no part of the officers’ business. It is a sign not of strength but of weakness, not a vindication of justice, but a perpetration of injustice’: *Congress Report*, p. 136. A more detailed version of the officers’ deposition appears in the Hunter Committee’s investigation: *Evidence Taken Before the Disorders Inquiry Committee: Vol. V: Gujranwala, Gujrat, Lyallpur and Punjab Provincial* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1920), p. 105.

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successes, however, a somewhat different picture emerges. Instead of a powerful and confident state, the archive reveals an anxious colonial administration that was fundamentally preoccupied with its own safety and security. Punjab officials not only remained deeply concerned about the supposed threat posed by the province's 'warlike' inhabitants, who were ironically meant to be the stalwarts of imperial defence, but they also frequently resorted to brutal forms of violence and coercion when anti-colonial resistance imperilled colonial authority and prestige. This book traces how these systemic anxieties and concerns about the security and stability of the colonial regime were inscribed into the very foundations of colonial power in Punjab and beyond.

0.2 An Empire of Anxiety

One of the most familiar and enduring myths about the British Empire in India is that it was a powerful, confident, and nearly indomitable force. The influences of this myth can be seen in historical accounts emphasising the Empire's role as a vehicle for the export of the essentially irresistible institutions, ideas, and technologies that helped to 'make the modern world'.³⁰ There are also certain quarters of public opinion that continue to insist on defending Britain's imperial record by extolling its enlightened virtues of civilisational uplift and all the good it did for its colonies.³¹ Aside from their somewhat triumphal tone, these accounts largely gloss over the extent to which the British imperial project was often an anxious, uncertain, and occasionally tenuous endeavour. Over the last two decades, however, scholars have shown an increasing interest in unsettling and challenging the notion that the British Empire, and indeed European imperialism more generally, were always strong, confident, and rational projects. Instead of focussing on the 'successes' of imperialism, these studies examine the less well-known moments when imperial failures or setbacks elicited doubt, uncertainty, fear, and sometimes even panic from Europe's supposedly unflinching imperialists.³²

³⁰ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: the West and the Rest* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); John Darwin, *The Empire Project: the Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

³¹ The arguments marshalled against a motion suggesting that Britain owes reparations to its former colonies in a 2015 debate at the Oxford Union is just one recent example of this.

³² See, for example, Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London: Pimlico, 2003); Ricardo Roque, 'The Razor's Edge: Portuguese Imperial Vulnerability in Colonial Moxico, Angola,' *The International Journal of African Historical*