

## Empire and epidemic

**Review Number:** 2408

**Publish date:** Friday, 24 July, 2020

**Editor:** Robert Peckham

**ISBN:** 97898888208449

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Price:** £44.00

**Pages:** 256pp.

**Publisher:** Hong Kong University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://hkupress.hku.hk/pro/25.php>

**Place of Publication:** Hong Kong

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**ISBN:** 9781784531300

**Date of Publication:** 2016

**Price:** £26.09

**Pages:** 272pp.

**Publisher:** Bloomsbury

**Publisher url:** <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/imperial-violence-and-the-path-to-independence-9781350153066/>

**Place of Publication:** London

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Covid-19 has fuelled widespread panic across the world. Every day there are new cases of infected people and deaths. We became accustomed to seeing crowds of people emptying stores from all necessary provisions. In most discussions, there are constant references to various forms of panic surrounding Covid-19. Headlines such as “Do not panic,” “Remain calm,” “Be smart but don’t panic” became ubiquitous. This intertwined relationship between panic and epidemics is well explored in Robert Peckham’s edited collection of essays, *Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties*. Although some of the contributors analyzed panic in relation to other crises such as fire, biowarfare, and indigenous resistance, there is a particular emphasis on the contagious nature of panic and its close association with disease.

*Empires of Panic* is organized around eight thematic chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The collection follows a chronological order from the early 19th century to the 21st century. It examines a series of case studies from East Asia, India, Southern Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States.

In a highly interesting introduction, “Panic: Reading the signs,” Robert Peckham refers to a noteworthy definition of panic “as a psychological state or an emotionally charged group response—invariably constructed as irrational—to some external menace, whether natural or manmade, actual or imagined (p. 5).” He rightly identifies the tension that continues to mark definitions of panic: panic is defined as a primitive and as a modern phenomenon. Here, Peckham presents the major themes covered by the volume, including the widespread occurrence of panic in settler colonies. In this respect, Alan Lester examines British settlers’ panicked responses to isolated tales of Xhosa raiding in the Eastern Cape colony in the 1830s and 1840s and

to rumours of black rape in Natal during the 1860s and 1870s.

Lester takes special interest in highlighting state and civil responses to these panics. In both the Eastern Cape and Natal, colonial panics fuelled the racialization of the indigenous people and called forth more stringent measures from colonial states and settlers. Interestingly, Lester emphasizes the “inherently trans-imperial” nature of these seemingly isolated panics (p. 27). Nevertheless, the chapter is short. I wish the author would have developed his analysis further by including, for example, more detail about the settlers’ panicked responses to Xhosa raiding, which can be found in the 1820 settlers’ personal writings. But the chapter ends with a pertinent commentary on the contagious nature of panic and how it spreads through gossip, newspapers, telegraph, and other means of communication. This is emphasized throughout the volume.

In chapter two, “Slow Burn in China: Factories, Fear, and Fire in Canton,” John Carroll considers Western—and more specifically British—anxieties about fire in pre-Opium Canton. Although Westerners’ anxieties about their personal security and the protection of their property were particularly intense after the great conflagration of 1822 and during the dry autumn and winter months, the author insists that fires produced “localized panics...hardly on the scale of panics induced, say, by epidemics or natural disasters” (p. 35). The chapter addresses also the effects of these long-standing anxieties which mounted merchants’ grievances against the Canton System.

In chapter three, “Epidemic Opportunities: Panic, Quarantines, and the 1851 International Sanitary Conference,” Joao Rangel de Almeida looks at the political opportunities presented by epidemics through focusing on the cholera epidemic which swept Europe in the 19th century and fuelled widespread panic. Despite the alarming mortality rates caused by the disease, the author insists that the cultural and political associations of cholera were, perhaps, an even greater focus of concern for many Europeans. He explains, “as a disease imported from the colonial world, cholera violated imperial expectations, countered enlightened ideals of progress, and challenged scientific rationality” (p. 60).

The cholera panic led to the organization of the 1851 International Sanitary Conference in Paris, which drew many European and medical diplomatic envoys from countries such as Lisbon, Paris, London, Moscow, and Vienna. Their major aim was to devise effective ways of coping with epidemic diseases. Yet the main challenge facing these delegates was how to devise shared methods for dealing with epidemics while, at the same time, upholding the sovereignty of the states they represented. The author rightly notes that the epidemic management programs adopted by the 1851 International Conference entailed different financial and sovereignty costs for each participatory state. More specifically, it provided European states with legitimate mechanisms that allowed them to intervene in Ottoman affairs.

In chapter four, “Health Panics: Migration and Ecological Exchange in the Aftermath of the 1857 Uprising, India, New Zealand, and Australia,” James Beattie focuses on how the Indian Uprising of 1857 triggered considerable panic about indigenous attacks. This panic heightened British anxieties about the harmful effects of India’s climate on the health of British soldiers and administrators. Such anxieties were so intense following the uprising that some British officers sought to immigrate to other colonies. Most importantly, Beattie convincingly demonstrates that the health panic spurred on connections between India, Australia, and New Zealand. Australian trees, which were assumed to have health benefits, were introduced into India. Moreover, hill stations were developed in Australasia in order to reduce Australia’s summer heat and improve the unhealthy swamps of Christchurch, New Zealand.

In chapter five, “Disease, Rumor, and Panic in India’s Plague and Influenza Epidemics, 1896-1919,” David Arnold compares the impact of two epidemic cases: the bubonic plague of 1896-97 and the influenza of 1918-19. Although both epidemics caused high mortality rates, the bubonic plague, unlike influenza, triggered full-scale panic. While the bubonic plague fuelled malicious rumors, prompted migration from cities, sparked off riots, and brought about a series of draconian state measures, influenza did not produce such panic. Arnold relates this to the different nature of the diseases and the cultural baggage associated with them, the distinct emotions they triggered, and the internal and international contexts surrounding them.

In chapter six, “Panic Encabled: Epidemics and the Telegraphic World,” Robert Peckham successfully fills a historical gap that pertains to the relationship between telegraphy and disease panics. Looking at the “Russian Influenza” in Britain and the 1894 bubonic plague in Hong Kong, Peckham argues that, although telegraphy played a key role in the global surveillance of infectious disease by disseminating information about its etiology, spread, mortality, and morbidity rates, it spread the panic it was intended to quell.

Chapter seven, “Don’t Panic! The excited and Terrified Public Mind from Yellow Fever to Bioterrorism,” shifts away from Asia. Amy L. Fairchild and David Merritt Johns shed light on the concerted efforts to manage disease panics in the United States from the 19th until the 20th century. Focusing on yellow fever, influenza, smallpox, swine flu, and biowarfare or bioterrorism, the authors present some of the immediate and anticipatory measures taken to combat epidemics and the panics associated with them. Fairchild and Johns conclude their chapter by rightly noting that

“panic will remain a term that is used haphazardly. There is no formula for determining when fear rises to the level of panic, no reliable or objective definition, and history only underscores panics multiple meanings and uses” (p. 179).

In chapter eight, “Mediating Panic: The Iconography of New Infectious Threats, 1936-2009,” Nicholas B. King focuses again on the link between modern technology and panic by exploring how visual culture produced infectious disease “panics” from the 1930s up to 2009. King reiterates the major argument of the whole volume; that panic is one of the consequences of technologies of communication. Finally, in the epilogue, Alison Bashford reminds the reader of the book’s major themes and persuasively remarks that the digital world, with its instantaneous means of communication such as the Internet and smartphones constitutes a “new world for panic, disease, communication and containment” (p. 206). Certainly, most of the arguments developed by the contributors perfectly apply to our present time especially after the outbreak of Covid-19.

The book makes an important contribution to the field of British imperial history by illuminating our understanding of how the everyday life of empire was interwoven with anxieties and panics. *Empires of Panic* explores how the particular contexts of empire can inflame anxiety and amplify the impact of crises. This challenges, although implicitly, the commonly-held view of an empire led by unflinching colonists.

Shereen Ilahi challenges another myth about the British Empire, which is commonly presented as a liberal one. In *Imperial Violence and the Path to Independence: India, Ireland, and the Crisis of Empire*, Ilahi compares British imperial violence in two seemingly disparate sites, India and Ireland, in the aftermath of the First World War. From the outset, the author notes that, despite some of the obvious cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between both countries, they share similarities and connections which make it useful to compare British violence in both of them after the First World War. The main argument put forward by the author is that violence was at the heart of the British imperial enterprise. This view has been extensively discussed in the works of scholars and historians including Caroline Elkins, Kim Wagner, Richard Price, and Marc Condos. But the comparative perspective adopted by the author makes the book an original contribution to the existent literature.

Throughout the book, ‘violence’ and ‘force’ are used interchangeably. Although the author notes that the

book deals with three categories of violence, she stresses that the main intent of British imperial violence is not to produce mass casualties but rather to have a salutary effect on colonial subjects, in order to uphold imperial power and supremacy.

The book consists of three main chapters. Chapter One, “Punjab Disturbances”, examines the state of unrest that characterized Punjab and how the British responded to it. Following the First World War, many Indians were influenced by Wilsonian rhetoric about the right of all peoples to self-determination. Moreover, after the great support they offered to the British during the war, Indians expected to gain self-government. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 were a great disappointment to Indian nationalists as they granted Indians only limited power to regulate their affairs in areas of education, agriculture, and public works. Other domains, such as revenue, finance, and law and order, which were identified as more vital, remained in the hands of British officials. At the same time, the British authorities were deeply concerned about the expiration of their wartime powers of surveillance and arrest and, in March 1919, passed the Anarchical Act and Revolutionary Crimes Act (commonly referred to as the Rowlatt Acts). The latter gave the government unrestrained power to arrest and imprison suspects without trial.

These repressive acts were passed at a time when Punjab, like the rest of India, was suffering the severe economic distress of the war. Ilahi highlights the fact that these circumstances triggered widespread riots in Amritsar. The British authorities responded harshly. For example, Ghandi was banned from entering Punjab and two other leading Indian nationalists were arrested. British troops fired upon Indians who were demanding the release of their leaders, killed ten, and wounded many other protestors. As a result, anti-British feeling was strong. The symbols of British power and authority, such as the Telegraph Exchange and the Station Master, were attacked. A British railway guard was killed. This troubled relationship between the British and Indians culminated in the Amritsar Massacre, also known as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

On April 13, 1919, the Anglo-Irish officer, General Reginald Dyer, ordered his troops to shoot a huge crowd of unarmed protesters without warning. In shooting that lasted for about ten minutes, at least 379 Indians were killed and a further 1,200 wounded. Further aggravating the atrocious nature of the event, Dyer left the spot without providing medical aid for the wounded. After the massacre, martial law was imposed, under which Indians were punished harshly for minor offences such as failure to *salaam* a commissioned officer or refusal to sell milk. Some recalcitrant Indians were sentenced to prison, others sentenced to transportation for life. General Dyer also imposed his “crawling order” and floggings became more common.

These violent imperial measures in Punjab triggered official government inquiry and gave birth to the Hunter Committee, which is the focus of Ilahi’s second chapter, “Inquiry, Reactions and the Principle of Minimum Force.” The committee investigated the administration of martial law in Punjab, and Dyer’s shooting at Amritsar. It consisted of British and Indian members. The author clearly identifies some of the disagreements between the reports of the majority (European) and the minority (Indian) members. Nevertheless, the overall report affirmed that Dyer violated the principle of minimum force and he was consequently forced to retire. Ilahi also analyzes the divided reactions to Dyer’s censure with a particular emphasis on his defenders. Many Irish Unionists and Anglo-Indians supported Dyer, raised funds for him, and defended him as the “Savior of Punjab.” Some of them, such as the lieutenant governor of Punjab, Micheal Dwyer; the Irishman and Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Henry Wilson; and many others were explicitly worried about the “serious implications” that Dyer’s censure would have for the future of Ireland.

Chapter three, “The Anglo-Irish War”, provides background to the Irish War of Independence and focuses on the deep British concern about how to deal with the Irish rebellion. It pays close attention to the use of reprisals against Irish civilians as an example of retaliatory violence, similar to that used in Punjab. Yet, unlike Punjab, the reprisals in Ireland targeted private property. For instance, barns, creameries, shops, and pubs belonging to suspected IRA families were burned down. Interestingly, the chapter points to the government’s great reluctance to introduce martial law to Ireland. For this, Ilahi offers two persuasive explanations. First, the government sought to avoid another scandal, like Dyer’s case, which would

undermine public support for the empire. The government was aware that the “the kinder face of empire had to be put forward, and the cabinet was painfully aware of the importance of maintaining positive British public opinion” (p. 116). Second, the British were unwilling to impose martial law for logistical reasons, mainly related to manpower and money. It was not until December 1920 that martial law was imposed, but it was not extended to the whole island. The author persuasively refutes Charles Townshend’s argument that British colonial authorities were hesitant to impose martial law because they were essentially opposed to the use of violence.

The conclusion focuses on the shooting at Croke Park, widely known as “Bloody Sunday.” On November 21, 1920, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) fired upon an unarmed crowd attending a Gaelic football match at Croke Park. 12 people were killed. Ilahi pays close attention to the similarities between the Amritsar massacre and Bloody Sunday. In both Ireland and India, the British resorted to atrocious violence in order to punish those who challenged colonial power and supremacy, and similar justifications were made for this violence. Moreover, Ilahi notes that both reprisals in Ireland and martial law in Punjab were intended to have a salutary effect on the indigenous population but failed to achieve their objective. The use of force failed to subdue Ireland and enflamed nationalist opinion in India. Moreover, the negative press over Dyer’s shooting affected the British government’s willingness to enforce martial law in Ireland.

The author identifies other interesting connections between India and Ireland. On 28 June 1920 some rangers, Irish infantrymen stationed in Punjab, refused to serve in protest at the use of reprisals against their fellow Irishmen at home, and because they believed that the Indian Army coerced Indians in similar ways. Their protest became known as the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers. Another major connection has to do with the fact that Irish and Indian nationalists attempted to connect with one another during the Anglo-Irish war. It might have been more effective had the author devoted a separate chapter to “Bloody Sunday” rather than combining this with the conclusion. Nevertheless, by illuminating the connections between two seemingly contained sites, Shereen Ilahi highlights the interconnected nature of the British Empire, and the common threads in official policy and colonial behavior across that empire. The book also contests the widely-held view of the empire as a liberal enterprise, which has been evoked especially during the Brexit campaign. The author’s hard work and extensive reading across diverse sources and historiographies has produced a thought-provoking comparison of two colonial sites and the empire that links them.

Professor Shereen Ilahi gratefully accepts this review.

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