

Artist Connects Revolutionaries on the Anniversaries of Jallawallian Bagh Massacre and Ireland's Partition

Pritika Chowdhry highlights the alliance between Ireland and India through a text she discovered while researching the installation "An Archive of 1919."

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-- In 2008, I visited the Jallawallian Bagh Massacre memorial in Amritsar in India. Walking through the narrow entrance, I thought about the British-led massacre's consequences on the global community. Instead of only instilling fear in Indians, or as they were thought of by the British - subjects, it provoked Indian and Irish freedom fighters to engage further. It rallied India and Ireland against their common enemy and colonizer - the British Empire. Perhaps this is why American architect Benjamin Polk who built the monument in 1951, made it claustrophobic to enter so that we would be surprised by the open expanse with space to convene and build community past its entry point.



Installation view of "An Archive of 1919: The Year of the Crack-Up," at the Whittier Storefront gallery, in Minneapolis, MN.

It is widely reported that the Jallawallian Bagh Massacre catalyzed India's freedom movement. However, less publicized are the warm relations and mutual support between Indian and Irish revolutionaries that, in many ways, were solidified after the bloody event. On April 13, 1919, General Reginald Dyer led ninety British army soldiers into a small town called Amritsar in Punjab, India. There, he opened fire on a peaceful gathering of men, women, and children in a public park called the Jallianwallian Bagh. The troops blocked the park's only passageway and fired until they ran out of ammunition. One year later, in 1920, Eamon de Valera, the president of the Sinn Fein party of Ireland, published "India & Ireland," a pamphlet where he condemned the British for their violence in Amritsar. In it, de Valera compares India and Ireland to George Washington's plight to free the United States. He also presented the text as a speech during the

Friends of freedom dinner in New York for India. In the pamphlet, he details the two countries' mutual goal to become free from the British.

One of the most important parts of decolonization, or counteracting eurocentric ideals, is connecting revolutionary events globally. Taking as its starting point the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre my installation "An Archive of 1919" functions as a visual and experiential archive of the year 1919 - weaving together global events of resilience. The project covers—the May Fourth Revolution in Tiananmen Square, China; the Turkish War of Independence in Istanbul, Turkey; the Russian Civil War in Kyiv; the creation of the Weimar Republic in Germany; the Race Riots of Chicago in America; the Great Iraqi Revolution in Baghdad; the Third Anglo-Afghan War in Peshawar; the Red Flag Riots in Brisbane, Australia; the Egyptian Revolution in Cairo; the Third Battle of Juarez in El Paso; the Irish Declaration of Independence in Dublin—all of which took place in 1919. Drawing on F. Scott Fitzgerald's description of a crack-up—"the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function"—I ask viewers to hold together various historical moments and conflicts to look for connections across space and time.



Close-up of the spittoon engraved with "Jallianwallan Bagh" and a map of Amritsar showing where the event took place, on the brick well.

The work is comprised of fourteen brass spittoons etched with the name of a historical event and a map that locates the city and building where the event occurred. As I conducted research for "Archive of 1919" I scoured archives of letters and newspapers to find connections between the events of 1919. As April and May mark the important intertwining anniversaries of the Jallanwallian Bagh Massacre and, two years later in May 1921, Ireland's Partition it seems important to revisit "India & Ireland" which was one of the most prominent historical texts that connect the two countries.

Although maps unite the installation "Archive of 1919." "The Martyrs' Well" is its center point. It is a well-like structure in the center of the gallery space using old, locally sourced bricks that reference the Martyrs' Well. After the Jallanwallian Bagh Massacre, hundreds of bodies were found in the well; presumably, they had jumped into it to protect themselves. Although they are oceans apart, this violence in Amritsar moved de Valera to the point that he called out to the world to view Ireland and India's causes as unified.

Counteracting British supremacism, de Valera proclaims Irish and Indian peoples as equals as he addressed a global community of supporters in New York in 1920. To honor the anniversary of the Jallanwallian Bagh Massacre and Irish Independence and by weaving together these interrelated events we can both understand the magnitude of human lives lost due to colonialism. But also, importantly and less historicized, diverse colonized peoples formed alliances in order to better fight for freedom.

More about "An Archive of 1919."

About the Artist

Socio-political, feminist artist Pritika Chowdhry's large-scale sculptures and site-sensitive installations reference the body to memorialize unbearable and difficult memories. Within the frameworks of counter-memory, postmemory, and post-colonial theory, her work seeks to connect seemingly disparate geopolitical contexts. Since 2007, she has built on her oeuvre through the Partition Memorial Project which has research components published on her blog and YouTube channel. In her art, Chowdhry migrates between fibers, latex, paper, clay, glass, metal, wood, poetry, and drawing pursuing cultural references that the materials provoke. Transnational in scope, her sculptural art installations and anti-memorials bear witness to partitions of countries, civil and military wars, riots, border violence, genocides, and terrorist attacks holding space for mourning, remembrance, and repair. Chowdhry's work has been featured in The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, CBS, Fox News, TNS, and ABC, and exhibited widely in museums and galleries in North America, Pakistan, and India.

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