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‘Blown from a gun’: situating the British practice of execution by cannon in the context of southern and western Asia

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Abstract

In parts of southern and western Asia, as elsewhere, the cannon once served as one of the most dramatic tools in the inventories of state executioners. The practice of ‘blowing from a gun’, by which the condemned was bound to the front of a cannon and quite literally blown to pieces, was most infamously employed in British India and the Princely States, and the vast majority of English-language scholarship focuses on these regions. However, blowing from guns was commonplace in several other contemporary states, and the British use of the practice has rarely been situated in this context. The tactic was considered especially useful in Persia and Afghanistan, where weak governance, rebellion, and rampant banditry all threatened the legitimacy of the nascent state in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article presents a history of the practice of execution by cannon in southern and western Asia, positioning it within the existing literature on public executions in the context of military and civilian justice. In doing so, the article seeks to situate the British use of the tactic within a broader regional practice, arguing that, whilst the British—following the Mughal tradition—used execution by cannon primarily in maintaining military discipline, states such as Persia and Afghanistan instead employed the practice largely in the civilian context. This article also provides a brief technical review of the practice, drawing upon numerous primary sources to examine execution by cannon within the Mughal empire, British India, Persia, and Afghanistan.

Keywords: cannon; British India; Mughal empire; Persia; Afghanistan

Introduction

In parts of southern and western Asia, as elsewhere, the cannon once served as perhaps the most dramatic tool in the inventories of state executioners. The condemned was tied to the front of a cannon—typically with each of his arms bound to the wheels or another part of the gun carriage, and often with his feet bound to a stake or other fixture anchored to the ground, or to the barrel of the gun itself (see [Figure 1](#))—that had previously been loaded with a blank charge (i.e. gunpowder without any projectile). Upon firing, the prisoner would be, quite literally, blown apart by the blast wave that propagated out from the barrel of the gun.¹

¹ In some cases, cannon were used to execute prisoners by way of projectiles fired from the gun (typically grapeshot). In 1857, for example, 237 of 282 mutinous sepoys of the 26th Native Infantry were executed by



Figure 1. A full-page illustration that appeared on the back page of the illustrated supplement to *Le Petit Journal* of 23 November 1913. The caption reads: 'Comment on execute les condamnés politiques en Afghanistan' ('How political convicts are executed in Afghanistan'); 'Les auteurs d'un complot contre l'émir sont tués à coups de canon' ('The perpetrators of a plot against the Emir are killed by cannon fire'). Emir Ḥabībullah Khān is visible in the front row of the crowd, over the condemned man's left shoulder. Note how the prisoner is bound in several places: to each wheel of the gun carriage, to a post in the ground, and around his body to the muzzle of the cannon itself. Source: *Le Petit Journal*, 'Comment on execute les condamnés politiques en Afghanistan', Supplément Illustré, 23 November 1913, p. 380. Please note that this image has been lightly edited for clarity.

The practice, referred to in English as ‘blowing from a gun’,² was most infamously employed in British India and the Princely States. Contemporary English-language sources (especially newspapers) tended to understand the practice almost entirely through the lens of British use in India. Execution by cannon was well documented during the 1857 Sepoy (or Indian) Mutiny in particular, with some newspapers that supported British imperial policy being forced to actively defend the practice.³ Even today, the British use of the tactic has cast a long shadow over understandings of the British response to the rebellion, sometimes being seen as emblematic of brutality. The British use of cannon execution was even depicted in Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin’s painting, ‘Suppression of the Indian Revolt by the English’, which was received with great controversy when Vereshchagin brought it to the UK.⁴ Modern academic literature from the English-speaking world—whether originating in the West or the Indian subcontinent—focuses almost exclusively on the British use of execution by cannon. This is, in part, because almost no work has been done to look closely at the history of the practice itself. K. A. Wagner provides what is likely the most exhaustive overview of execution by cannon within contemporary academic scholarship, but only in the context of explaining British understandings of the efficacy of execution methods on local populations.⁵ Most academic references to the practice are rife with inaccuracies, perpetuating misconceptions and maintaining a singular focus on the British. Many works suggest or leave open the possible interpretation that the practice was introduced to the region by the British themselves;⁶ others fail to place the British use of cannon execution into its regional context;⁷ still others make reference to it as a Mughal practice⁸ later adopted by the British, but fail to delve into its earlier use.⁹ Thus, what is absent from the English-language scholarship to date is a historical overview of the method of

cannon fire (S. Malik, ‘1857 Gogira Rebellion in southeastern Panjab: a forgotten chapter of Muslim response to British rule in India’, *Islamic Studies* 16.2 (1977), pp. 65–95). They were buried ‘into one common pit, by the hands of village sweepers’ (F. H. Cooper, *Crisis in the Punjab: From the 10th of May Until the Fall of Delhi* (London, 1858), p. 162).

² Other common variations include ‘being blown away from a gun’ and ‘being blown from the mouth of a gun’.

³ K. A. Wagner, ‘“Calculated to strike terror”: the Amritsar massacre and the spectacle of colonial violence’, *Past and Present* 223.1 (2016), p. 200. Wagner cites *The Daily News*, 5 November 1857.

⁴ J. O. Baylen and J. G. Weyant, ‘Vasili Vereshchagin in the United States’, *The Russian Review* 30.3 (1971), pp. 250–259.

⁵ Wagner, ‘Calculated to strike terror’. Also see K. A. Wagner, *Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre* (New Haven, 2019), p. 4.

⁶ Malik writes, for example, that ‘it should be added here that the novel but rather barbaric punishment of cannon-blowing the rebels was initiated in the Panjab by the administration of Sir John Lawrence’ (S. Malik, ‘1857 Gogira Rebellion’, p. 67).

⁷ See M. Condos, ‘License to kill: the murderous outrages act and the rule of law in colonial India, 1867–1925’, *Modern Asian Studies* 50.2 (2016), p. 506; S. Ashraf, *Finding the Enemy Within: Blasphemy Accusations and Subsequent Violence in Pakistan* (Canberra, 2021); J. Mangamma, ‘Mutiny at Arni and Arcot in the Madras presidency 1784’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 60 (1999); A. M. Matin, ‘“The Hun is at the gate!”: historicizing Kipling’s militaristic rhetoric, from the imperial periphery to the national center. Part One: The Russian threat to British India’, *Studies in the Novel* 31.3 (1999). A lack of regional context is often the by-product of the scholarly focus of these works, which is usually British India and concerns itself only peripherally with the history of methods of execution.

⁸ As far as the authors are aware, no work exists that comprehensively examines the Mughal use of the practice.

⁹ See S. David, *The Indian Mutiny* (London, 2002), chapter 10; C. Anderson, ‘Execution and its aftermath in nineteenth-century British empire’, in *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse*, (ed.) R. Ward (London, 2015); L. James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London, 1997), Part 2, chapter 4; Wagner, ‘Calculated to strike terror’; Wagner, *Amritsar 1919*, p. 4. Even some works in the latter category, which provide some necessary historical context, can fall into inaccuracies; for example, Anderson writes that

execution—and indeed, one rooted primarily in English-language source material—that is necessary for situating the British use of it in reference to local powers.

Despite this almost singular focus on the British use of execution by cannon in English-language literature—with the occasional brief reference to its supposed Mughal origin—the practice was not pioneered or used most commonly by the British, nor even their Indian predecessors. In fact, as is shown below, the first reference to the use of the practice comes from *Portuguese* colonists, and it was popular with native rulers in countries beyond India. Moreover, the tactic was considered especially useful in Persia and Afghanistan, where weak governance, rebellion, and rampant banditry all threatened the legitimacy of the nascent state in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the geographic nexus and eventually the centre of the macabre punishment, Afghanistan enthusiastically wielded execution by cannon as the ultimate deterrent. Indeed, Afghanistan was reluctant to abandon the practice, continuing to execute prisoners in this fashion well into the twentieth century. Importantly, this local use of blowing from a gun differed from colonial uses of the practice. The British Indian administrations typically reserved execution by cannon for mutineers, rebels, and traitors—that is, they used it almost exclusively as a form of military punishment—whereas Persian and Afghan leaders made widespread use of the punishment in the civilian context, often seeking to disincentivise banditry and to punish other more commonplace crimes. This provides important nuance to discussions of the practice that have almost exclusively focused on British military use during the Sepoy Mutiny. Regardless of the crime that was seen to merit its use, execution by cannon was intended to strike terror into the hearts of those who watched, instilling obedience and deterring crime.

This article presents a history of the practice of execution by cannon in southern and western Asia, with the particular focus of situating the British Indian use of the tactic in its regional and historical context. It argues that, even when looking primarily at English-language sources, British-ordered execution by cannon should not be regarded as somehow unique, but rather as part of a long history of ‘blowing from a gun’ in southern and western Asia—even where it differs in meaningful ways from earlier and later uses by local powers. This argument is intended to correct English-language scholarship on the issue and, as such, is shaped by an analysis of mostly English and European writings of the time to show that—even if one relies on what contemporary Europeans wrote about the practice—the British use of cannon executions must be reframed in the context of its use by other past, present, and future regional powers.

To this end, the article also seeks to position the wider southern and western Asian use of the practice within the existing literature on public executions in the context of military and civilian justice. An assessment of the practice through the lens of military discipline, in particular, provides an important perspective from which to consider its use in the region.¹⁰ Military law—‘that branch of criminal law which is especially prescribed for the government of the persons in the military establishment ... [for] what are known as “military offenses”’¹¹—has existed generally to promote self-sufficiency and the unique goals of the military vis-à-vis the law, such as maintaining complete discipline

the first instance of the British blowing sepoys from guns occurred in 1825 (Anderson, ‘Execution’, p. 175), when in fact there were British Indian executions by cannon in the 1760s.

¹⁰ Despite this important heuristic, much of the existing literature on military justice is focused on the American and British militaries. See, for example, G. Oram, *Military Executions during World War I* (London, 2003); K. S. Bernard, ‘Structures of American military justice’, *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 125.2 (1976), pp. 307–336.

¹¹ C. E. Brand, *Roman Military Law* (Austin, 1968), p. vii. Such offences include, among others, ‘desertion, misbehavior of a sentinel, insubordination’ and ‘cowardice’.

and fighting organisation, which are not usually concerns for civilian governments.¹² Execution has served an important and well-documented function within this context since at least the Roman period, acting especially as a deterrent for would-be traitors and deserters.¹³ This function continued into the twentieth century, remaining common even in Western liberal democracies.¹⁴

Whilst executions by cannon were not always practised in the context of military justice, it is this use that receives by far the lion's share of attention in modern English-language academic literature. The use of the practice by the British, particularly during the Sepoy Mutiny, was almost always an act of military punishment. In almost all cases, blowing from the gun was employed primarily for its perceived deterrent effect, making its better-documented use in the context of military justice a useful heuristic by which to understand the practice more generally, and particularly to compare how execution by cannon was used in British India versus Persia and Afghanistan—the latter states employing the practice primarily in a civilian justice context, and often as a tool of state-building. Specifically, this article argues that the British (and Mughals) tended to use cannon executions as a form of military punishment, whereas nascent local powers used them to punish civilian crimes as well. The use of cannon in executing those condemned under civilian judicial systems in southern and western Asia has heretofore received little attention.

The purpose and procedure of execution by cannon

Many detailed first-hand English-language accounts of how and why individuals were executed by cannon are available, which are reviewed herein to provide a comprehensive account of the common procedure.¹⁵ The process appears to have been conducted in essentially the same manner throughout its geographic and chronological distribution, although some sources identify interesting deviations. Little technical information is available as to the particular weapons used in executions—the pieces are generally referred to simply as 'guns', 'cannon', or 'horse artillery guns'.¹⁶ One primary source claims that the cannon used by British forces to execute prisoners were 'usually six or nine-pounders', although another account describes a British execution that used an 18-pounder piece.¹⁷ Mortars also appear to have been used, including in Persia,

¹² *Ibid.*; E. J. Gannon, 'Military justice', *Current History* 61.360 (1971), p. 76. Military crimes may also overlap with political crimes, such as in cases of treason or espionage.

¹³ Brand, *Roman Military Law*, pp. 101–105. Of course, it is likely that the practice of executions within armed forces dates to the dawn of such organisations.

¹⁴ See, for example, J. R. Lilly, 'Military executions', in *Handbook of Death & Dying*, vol. 1, (ed.) C. D. Bryant (Thousand Oaks, 2003), pp. 378–385, for an overview of the US practice of military executions into the twentieth century.

¹⁵ It should be noted that a great many of these accounts were recorded by British colonists or travellers who passed through India, Persia, or Afghanistan. As such, many of the extant descriptions of the practice are presented through a specific Western European lens and do not provide as much geographic or cultural diversity as a researcher might like. For more on the symbolism and rationale motivating execution by cannon in the context of British colonialism, see Wagner, 'Calculated to strike terror', pp. 185–225.

¹⁶ A. Rahman Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, vol. 1 (London, 1900), p. 34; F. M. Kātib Hazārah, *The History of Afghanistan (Sirāj al-tawārikh)*, vol. 1 (Boston, 2013), p. 54; J. Atkinson, *The Expedition into Afghanistan: Notes and Sketches Descriptive of the Country* (London, 1842), p. 188.

¹⁷ C. Doveton, 'The Bangalore conspiracy in 1832', *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* 2 (1844), pp. 620–624; J. Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs: Selected and Abridged from a Series of Familiar Letters Written During Seventeen Years Residence in India*, vol. 4 (London, 1813), p. 123.

Afghanistan, and by Portuguese colonists in East Africa.¹⁸ In any event, the cannon used were almost invariably those that performed other regular functions. For example, under Afghan Emir ‘Abd al-Rahmān Khān (Abdur Rahman Khan; r. 1880–1901) and his son Ḥabībullāh, so-called ‘noon guns’ were employed to execute prisoners: ‘When a person is ordered to be blown from a gun, he is taken to the one which is fired daily to announce the hour of midday, and is fixed on a small hill close to Sherpur Cantonment.’¹⁹

Whatever the weapon used for execution, it was generally ‘loaded only with blank cartridge’—no projectile was necessary to produce a dramatically lethal effect.²⁰ The condemned were placed against a cannon so that their back pressed against the mouth of the weapon.²¹ To hold them in place, the victims were tied down with ropes that were lashed either to the wheels of the gun carriage or, as in several accounts, to ‘stakes driven into the ground’.²² The executioners would then ignite the powder charge and the resultant explosion would violently dismember the condemned. One spectator recounted:

When the gun is fired, his head is seen to go straight up into the air some forty or fifty feet; the arms fly off right and left, high up in the air, and fall at, perhaps, a hundred yards distance; the legs drop to the ground beneath the muzzle of the gun; and the body is literally blown away altogether, not a vestige being seen.²³

Several accounts describe animals quickly consuming the remains of the victims. One British officer recalled that birds of prey ‘caught in their talons many pieces of the quivering flesh before they could reach the ground’.²⁴ Another witness to a different execution, this time in Afghanistan, described how a victim’s entrails were ‘in an instant devoured by the dogs that were loitering about the spot’.²⁵ Indeed, it seems that consumption by animals was, in many cases, an intended component of the execution. Rahman Khan wrote that he sentenced a group of men to be executed by cannon ‘on market day, so that their flesh should be eaten by the dogs of the camp, and their bones remain lying about till the festival was over’.²⁶ Compounding the brutality of the practice, execution by cannon was sometimes botched. A British captain wrote of a cannon execution that was commuted to a pardon after the weapon failed to fire three times.²⁷ However, victims of botched executions were rarely this fortunate. During one particularly gruesome occasion:

One wretched fellow slipped from the rope by which he was tied to the guns just before the explosion, and his arm was nearly set on fire. Whilst hanging in his

¹⁸ C. J. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and Sun, or Modern Persia* (London, 1883), p. 203; M. D. D. Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement on the Zambesi: Exploration, Land Tenure and Colonial Rule in East Africa* (New York, 1973), p. 41; Hazārah, *History*, vol. 1, p. 111.

¹⁹ F. Martin, *Under the Absolute Amir* (London, 1907), p. 168.

²⁰ Doveton, ‘Bangalore’, p. 624. One late report of the practice in Persia claims that ‘scraps of metal’ were loaded into the cannon (H. F. Weston, ‘Persian caravan sketches: the land of the lion and the Sun seen on a summer caravan trip’, *National Geographic* XXXIX.4 (1921), pp. 417–468). Such a modification to the method would have been unnecessary and, as described elsewhere in this article, greatly increased the risk of unintended harms.

²¹ G. C. Stent, *Scraps from My Sabretasche* (London, 1882), p. 170.

²² See, for example, Atkinson, *Expedition*, p. 189; Doveton, ‘Bangalore’, p. 624.

²³ Stent, *Scraps*, p. 172.

²⁴ T. Blakiston, *Twelve Years’ Military Adventure in Three Quarters of the Globe*, vol. 1 (London, 1829), p. 309.

²⁵ J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan*, (trans.) W. Jesse (London, 1856), p. 189.

²⁶ Rahman Khan, *The Life*, p. 34.

²⁷ I. Munro, *A Narrative of the Military Operations of the Coromandel Coast* (London, 1789), p. 358.

agony under the gun, a sergeant applied a pistol to his head, and three times the cap snapped, the man each time wincing from the expected shot. At last a rifle was fired into the bottom of his head, and the blood poured out of the nose and mouth like water from a briskly handled pump.²⁸

Accidents could also prove extremely dangerous to spectators, and even to the executioners themselves. Charles Ball's *The History of the Indian Mutiny* recounts an incident in which the gun crews remained in their 'proper station' near the cannon during the execution, causing some to be wounded by fragments of the executed prisoners' corpses.²⁹ In another incident, executioners accidentally loaded grapeshot instead of blank cartridges. The grapeshot struck a crowd of spectators, some of whom required amputations.³⁰

Despite these risks, execution by cannon remained a popular form of punishment for several centuries, with most of the (albeit limited) English-language academic scholarship on the topic focusing on British India. The majority of cannon executions performed by the British were punishment for mutiny, desertion, and insurrection;³¹ indeed, the British deemed the practice to be at 'the utmost extent of military severity'.³² In such cases, the punishment was typically reserved for those responsible for soldiers instigating serious insubordination. Contemporary texts recall that 'ringleaders' and 'the most forward of those concerned with the mutiny' were selected to be blown from guns in British India.³³ However, in Persia and Afghanistan, nascent states ruled by indigenous leaders, the threshold for applying the punishment was evidently lower and the practice was regularly employed in both the military and civilian contexts. In addition to deserters and spies, highwaymen and other thieves could expect to be blown from guns. The distinction between these two contexts, and its relevance for understanding the British use of execution by cannon, is discussed below. In either case, the primary purpose of such a graphic execution was the same: to terrify the audience and encourage adherence to the law, whether that be military (in the case of the British) or civilian (in the case of the Persians or Afghans). The British especially seem to have thought that execution by cannon would 'quell mutanies [sic]'³⁴—the end goal of British military executions more generally (even of non-native troops).³⁵ To this end, British use of the punishment was 'invariably carried out in the presence of other native soldiers to overawe and frighten them'.³⁶ Civilian executions in Persia and Afghanistan similarly took place in public areas so as to maximise the visibility of the punishment amongst the intended civilian audience.³⁷

²⁸ *The Preston Chronicle and Lancashire Advertiser*, 'India—blowing from a gun', 7 November 1857, p. 2, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3207448411/ (accessed 10 June 2021).

²⁹ C. Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, vol. 1 (London, 1858), p. 411.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ There were exceptions to this general rule and, in general, the practice was employed by British military courts after 1760 whenever capital punishment was deemed necessary (J. Long, *Selections from Unpublished Records of Government for the Years 1748 to 1767 Inclusive Relating Mainly to the Social Condition of Bengal*, vol. 1 (London, 1869), p. li).

³² J. Adolphus, *The History of England, from the Accession to the Decease of King George the Third*, vol. 1 (London, 1840), pp. 267–268.

³³ *Ibid.*; *The Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons*, vol. XXIX (London, 1791), p. 637.

³⁴ R. C. Butalia, *The Evolution of The Artillery in India: From the Battle of Plassey (1757) to the Revolt of 1857* (New Delhi, 1998), p. 273.

³⁵ G. Oram, "'The administration of discipline by the English is very rigid": British military law and the death penalty (1868–1918)', *Crime, History & Societies* 5.1 (2001), p. 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Wills, *In the Land*, p. 203; Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys*, p. 189.

In addition to the physical brutality of this method of execution, the prospect of having one's body parts scattered—and frequently eaten by wild animals or buried in graves shared with other prisoners—held religious and cultural significance that made the prospect of being blown from a gun yet more terrifying. This spiritual condemnation was particularly chilling for Muslims and Hindus. Wagner (2016) describes execution by cannon as a form of 'spiritual warfare', specifically intended to turn native peoples' cultures against them.³⁸ A contemporary British newspaper echoed this sentiment:

You must know that this is nearly the only form in which death has any terrors for a native. If he is hung, or shot by musketry, he knows that his friends or relatives will be allowed to claim his body, and will give him the funeral rites required by his religious; if a Hindoo, that his body will be burned with all due ceremonies and if a Mussulman, that his remains will be decently interred, as directed in the Koran. But if sentenced to death in this form, he knows that his body will be blown into a thousand pieces, and that it will be altogether impossible for his relatives, however devoted to him, to be sure of picking up all the fragments of his own particular body; and the thought that perhaps a limb of some one of a different religion to himself might possibly be burned or buried with the remainder of his own body, is agony to him.³⁹

It was not universally agreed that blowing from a gun was the most feared form of execution amongst the native populations of India, however, and even some modern sources have claimed that such a death was 'honourable'.⁴⁰ In June 1857, British forces under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel George Malcolm captured the fort of Nargund, taking prisoner Raja Bhaskararao Bhave II (Bhāskaraṛāv bhāve; r. 1842–1858).⁴¹ Bhave was sentenced to hang but he apparently expressed great horror at the proposition⁴² and 'repeatedly petitioned to be blown away from a gun'.⁴³ Nonetheless, it seems likely that the spiritual and psychological aspects of execution by cannon made the method more attractive to many leaders, colonial and native alike. Execution by cannon was a brutal display of state power. It sent a clear message to those who witnessed it and punished the condemned 'beyond death' in a way that other execution methods could not.⁴⁴ For the British, whose ethos of military punishment was shaped by the desire to deter proscribed actions amongst what they considered to be an unruly and unreliable soldiery,⁴⁵ execution by cannon provided numerous perceived benefits that may be considered in reference to the longer history of the practice in the region.

Early execution by cannon in western and southern Asia

Contemporary English-language accounts indicate that, by the time the British had begun their colonisation of India, neither execution by cannon nor its use by the British in India was particularly unique. Throughout western and southern Asia, public execution has

³⁸ Wagner, 'Calculated to strike terror', p. 200.

³⁹ *The Preston Chronicle and Lancashire Advertiser*, 'India—blowing from a gun'.

⁴⁰ David, *The Indian Mutiny*, chapter 10. This is not corroborated by other works known to the authors.

⁴¹ G. T. Paget, *Camp and Cantonment: A Journal of Life in India in 1857–1859* (London, 1865), pp. 194–197; K. N. Chitnis, *Glimpses of Maratha Socio-economic History* (New Delhi, 1994), pp. 27–28.

⁴² Hanging was said to occasion a loss of caste (Paget, *Camp*, p. 210) and indeed the native population Nargund apparently declared that a 'rope was not made that could hang a Brahmin' (*ibid.*, p. 204).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 210. Nonetheless, many British officials considered hanging an ineffective deterrent for Indian colonial subjects (Anderson, 'Execution', p. 182).

⁴⁴ Wagner, 'Calculated to strike terror', p. 197.

⁴⁵ Oram, 'The administration', p. 99.

long been a common form of punishment for the most heinous crimes, regardless of who ruled at any given time.⁴⁶ Famously, Jesus of Nazareth is generally understood to have been crucified publicly under Roman rule, executed alongside convicted thieves. As the Umayyad Caliphate displaced both the Roman/Byzantine and Persian presence in the region, similar practices were used under Islam. There are many examples of public execution in the Umayyad period, often involving the crucifixion of rebels.⁴⁷ Later, the Seljuk empire, which spanned much of the modern-day Middle East as well as Iran, would also make widespread use of public execution to punish those they deemed heretics and those whom Seljuk rulers saw as the greatest threat to their empire's authority.⁴⁸ Lange writes that the 'chronicles from early Islam up to Ottoman times provide many cases in which the authorities made an example of offenders against the public order by publicly shaming, torturing and executing them'.⁴⁹ Whilst 'historians of crime and punishment in medieval Islam often opt to more or less ignore legal doctrines, considering them largely irrelevant to historical practice',⁵⁰ Muslim rulers could nonetheless (often selectively) draw on Islamic law that allowed—or, in some cases, outright demanded—for offenders to be put to death for crimes such as banditry, terrorism, and rebellion.⁵¹ A range of brutal punishments were variously employed throughout the region, including mutilation, dismemberment, lapidation, scaphism, *poena cullei*,⁵² immolation,⁵³ impalement—even toppling a wall upon the condemned⁵⁴ or boiling them alive in a huge cauldron.⁵⁵ Thus, execution by cannon was simply one of the many forms that public executions

⁴⁶ Lilly, 'Military executions', p. 378.

⁴⁷ See, for example, A. Marsham, 'Public execution in the Umayyad period: early Islamic punitive practice and its late antique context', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 11 (2011), p. 104.

⁴⁸ C. Lange, 'Torture and public executions in the Islamic middle period (eleventh–fifteenth centuries)', in *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, vol. II: 500–1500 C.E., (eds.) M. S. Gordon, R. W. Kaeuper, and H. Zurndorfer (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 172–173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵¹ M. H. Kamali, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law: A Fresh Interpretation* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 111–118. The Arabic term used for 'banditry' and 'terrorism' is the same, *hirabah*, and the Qu'ran prescribed 'a fourfold punishment that culminates in death and crucifixion', after which 'the executed body ... is placed on public display for a period of three days' (*ibid.*, p. 178). As discussed, banditry (sometimes described as 'highway robbery' or 'brigandage') is a crime for which a significant number of people were blown from a gun—almost entirely in native-ruled Islamic states.

⁵² Literally 'penalty of the sack'—a death penalty believed to originate in Roman law (for those found guilty of patricide) that entailed sewing the condemned into a leather or rawhide sack (sometimes along with a variety of animals) and throwing the sack into a body of water (R. A. Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome* (London, 1996), pp. 30–31).

⁵³ Despite the 'largely negative tone of the [Islamic] legal literature', immolation has been used as a method of execution by several Islamic states at different points in history (A. Marsham, 'Attitudes to the use of fire in executions in Late Antiquity and early Islam: the burning of heretics and rebels in late Umayyad Iraq', in *Violence in Islamic Thought: From the Qur'an to the Mongols*, (eds.) R. Gleave and I. T. Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 106–127).

⁵⁴ A method of public execution also practised by the Taliban in the late twentieth century, and one that they have indicated may be reintroduced (*Associated Press*, 'Man crushed by brick wall survives', 16 January 1999, <https://apnews.com/article/bcd7ec37ef191ac200d253f32d28ff5> (accessed 12 May 2021); P. Ronzheimer, 'Dieser Taliban-Richter lässt steinigen, hängen, Hände abhacken', *BILD*, 12 July 2021, <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/nach-bundeswehr-einsatz-taliban-wollen-wieder-frauen-und-schwule-steinigen-77052966.bild.html> (accessed 19 January 2022)).

⁵⁵ R. Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travel in Persia, Ceylon Etc.*, vol. I (London, 1857a), pp. 274, 340; Marsham, 'Public execution'; Marsham, 'Attitudes'; Lange, 'Torture and public executions'; J. N. Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (New York, 1979), pp. 30–31; A. Gallonio, *Tortures and Torments of the Christian Martyrs*, (trans.) A. R. Allinson (Paris, 1903), pp. 17–20; J. J. Reid, *Crisis of the Ottoman Empire: Prelude to Collapse, 1839–1878* (Stuttgart, 2000), pp. 440–442.

took in western and southern Asia. Such graphic methods of execution were never unique to Islamic or Eastern states, of course, but, as these countries continued the arduous process of state-building in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they became relatively more common in comparison with the West.

Executions by cannon first took place in Asia in no later than 1509, when Portuguese explorer and soldier Francisco de Almeida ordered for ‘many’ prisoners to be blown from the mouths of cannon in Cananore (Kannur), India.⁵⁶ The Portuguese continued to use this method of execution in their colonial holdings in Mozambique and Brazil—possibly up until the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ As noted, several British sources of the period, as well as contemporary historians, attribute the origins of the practice to the Mughal empire, often referring to ‘the old Mughal punishment for mutiny’.⁵⁸ This appears to be inaccurate—the Mughal empire did not exist before 1526. In all likelihood, execution by cannon has existed for as long as cannon have. Nonetheless, there remains significant scope for further research into the early history of this most graphic method of capital punishment. What is clear is that the practice was common in parts of western and southern Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, before the eighteenth century, with well-documented use of cannon executions by the Portuguese, Mughals, British, Afghans, and Persians.

Although the Mughals did not devise the practice, they executed a great many prisoners with cannon and influenced later British adoption of the practice. Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, was an early proponent of the use of gunpowder weapons in executions, having used firing squads to put Afghan prisoners to death as early as 1526.⁵⁹ Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) is said to have executed a rebellious regional leader by cannon after besieging his fortress for months.⁶⁰ In *The History of Afghanistan* (the *Sirāj al-tawārīkh*), court historian Fayz Muḥammad Kātib Hazārah recounts that, under the Mughal Emperor Farrukh Siyar (r. 1713–1719), the son of a Sikh rebel was ‘blown to bits by a cannon’.⁶¹ Captain Markham Kittoe of the 6th Bengal Native Infantry, writing in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1847, recounts that an unnamed Mughal emperor had Purbeel Singh—the last of the chiefs of the town of Oomga (Umga), near Gaya in Bihar—put to death by cannon in the nearby town of Aurungabad.⁶² Mutiny and other political crimes appear to account for the majority of recorded Mughal executions by cannon—a trend that would be followed by the British—but the method was also employed to punish other crimes. William Irvine writes, for example, that, during a military expedition, Mughal leaders used cannon to execute thieves who had stolen from the army.⁶³

Other native states of India also employed the practice. Political enemies were favoured targets. In 1766, Hyder Ali Khan (Haidarālī, Sultan of the Kingdom of Mysore 1761–1782) conquered the Kingdom of Calicut (Kozhikode), on India’s Malabar Coast, and had the

⁵⁶ J. E. Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon* (London, 1850), p. 395.

⁵⁷ D. Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, Its Empire, and Beyond: 1540–1750* (Stanford, 1996), pp. 54–55; R. Southey, *History of Brazil*, vol. I, 2nd edn (London, 1822), p. 469; H. Salt, *A Voyage to Abyssinia, and Travels into the Interior of that Country: Executed under the Orders of the British Government, in the Years 1809 and 1810* (London, 1814), pp. 38–40.

⁵⁸ See, for example, T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester, 1995), p. 105; G. Fremont-Barnes, *The Indian Mutiny 1857–58* (Oxford, 2007), p. 79.

⁵⁹ I. A. Khan, *Gunpowder & Firearms Warfare in Medieval India* (Oxford, 2004), p. 148.

⁶⁰ S. A. Afsos, *The Araish-i-mahfil, or the Ornament of the Assembly*, 1st English edn, (trans.) Major Henry Court (Allahabad, 1871), p. 64.

⁶¹ Hazārah, *History*, vol. 1, p. 54.

⁶² M. Kittoe, ‘On the temples and ruins of Oomga’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 14.2 (1847), pp. 656–661.

⁶³ W. Irvine, *Later Mughals*, vol. 1: 1707–1720 (Calcutta, 1922), pp. 286–287.

Zamorin's⁶⁴ finance minister tortured.⁶⁵ Fearing that he would be 'hanged, or blown from a gun', the Zamorin set fire to his own palace, killing himself.⁶⁶ In 1800, the brother of Brahmin Sardar Baloba Tatyā Pagnis was blown from a cannon. Nurayun Rao Bukhshee, of the same caste, was reportedly 'killed by rockets'.⁶⁷ This related method of execution, apparently practised in both the Kingdom of Mysore and the Maratha empire, saw numerous artillery rockets affixed to the condemned and then lit, launching the unfortunate individual into the air or carrying him along, 'mangling his body dreadfully'.⁶⁸ J. G. Duff describes this method as 'the invention and sport of the execrable Ghatgay [Sarjērao Ghatge]',⁶⁹ although it appears to predate the Marathi usage. Mysorean Sultan Hyder Ali is also recorded as having employed the method, which must have been sometime in the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ Several native states also used execution by cannon to deter banditry. In August 1802, for example, the forces of Anand Rao Gaekwad (Ānandarāva Gāyakavāḍa), Maharajah of Baroda, succeeded in a skirmish against the Pindaris (Pēṅḍhāri) near Surat. The Maharajah's men captured 15 prisoners, two of whom were 'immediately blown from a gun'.⁷¹

Blowing from a gun in British India

Despite early Mughal adoption of the practice and its continued and widespread use by other native rulers—a fact that was well documented at the time, but has received less attention in recent decades—it was colonial British forces that were responsible for those executions by cannon in India that are best known today.⁷² While the use of the practice during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 is well known, the British appear to have adopted the tactic as a capital punishment meted out by courts martial in 1760, considering the technique 'more deterrent, more public and more humane' than the method of capital punishment that preceded it: flogging to death.⁷³ Execution was not an altogether uncommon punishment for British soldiers convicted of desertion, treason, or even lesser crimes.⁷⁴ However, in the context of colonial India, British perceptions of the local cultures appear to have directly influenced the choice of method.⁷⁵ Hanging was seen as an insufficient deterrent for native troops as it 'did not result in the severing of the

⁶⁴ Also Samoothry, Samoothiri, etc. (Malayalam: Sāmūtiri).

⁶⁵ L. B. Bowring, *Haidar Alī and Tipū Sultān: And the Struggle with the Musalmān Powers of the South* (Oxford, 1899), p. 45.

⁶⁶ J. Duncan, 'Historical remarks on the coast of Malabar', *Asiatic Researches* V (1799), p. 31.

⁶⁷ J. G. Duff, *History of the Mahrattas*, vol. III (London, 1826), p. 190; B. Lal, *Memoirs of the Puthan Soldier of Fortune* (Calcutta, 1832), p. 127.

⁶⁸ W. Campbell, *British India in Its Relation to the Decline of Hindooism and the Progress of Christianity* (London, 1839), p. 421; Duff, *History*, p. 190.

⁶⁹ Ghatge is said by Duff to have had a 'disposition to violence' that he 'fully gratified in acts of wanton and barbarous cruelty' (Duff, *History*, p. 201).

⁷⁰ Campbell, *British India*, p. 421. Indeed, the Kingdom of Mysore pioneered the effective military use of metal-cased rockets. For more on this fascinating topic, see N. Olikara, 'Tipu's Mysore rockets', presentation to the Arms and Armour Society, London, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nx62o6YRa0> (accessed 2 February 2022); N. Olikara, 'An 18th century sword-bladed metal cased Maratha war rocket and the evolution of the use of the war rocket in India', *Journal of the Arms and Armour Society* XXIV (2022).

⁷¹ J. H. Gense and D. R. Banaji (eds.), *The Gaikwads of Baroda: English Documents*, vol. V: *Anandrao Gaikwad (1802-1803)* (Bombay, 1803), p. 279.

⁷² This is due in no small part, of course, to the nature of the extant source material available to English-language researchers today, much of which comprises contemporary British accounts.

⁷³ Long, *Selections*, p. li.

⁷⁴ Oram, 'The administration', p. 104.

⁷⁵ S. Den Otter, 'Law, authority, and colonial rule', in *India and the British Empire*, (eds.) D. M. Peers and N. Gooptu (Oxford, 2012), pp. 186–187.

head from the body'⁷⁶ and, as such, execution by cannon was favoured by the British Indian Army for particularly egregious crimes committed by native Indian soldiers, or 'sepoys'.⁷⁷

Whilst execution by cannon was to become infamous for its use in punishing mutineers, the first prisoner to be executed by the British administration—condemned by a court martial that comprised native Indian officers—was the leader of a gang of thieves, a carpenter named Nayn.⁷⁸ However, this was a highly atypical case; the British administration's military courts saw sepoys blown from guns for over a century, usually in response to military crimes with a political dimension, such as desertion or mutiny.⁷⁹ In 1764, British forces in Oudh executed 24 sepoys by cannon after an entire battalion deserted.⁸⁰ In 1780, a 'Maratha spy' was blown from a gun to 'deter others' by using such an 'exemplary' and 'spectacular' punishment.⁸¹ On 30 April 1784, native cavalry and light infantry mutinied at the fort in Arni, in the Madras presidency.⁸² After military personnel under Lieutenant-General Ross Lang surrounded the fort and forced their surrender, a dozen ringleaders ('some of whom happened to be black officers') were executed by cannon.⁸³ Six of the 19⁸⁴ sepoy ringleaders condemned to die for their roles in the Vellore Mutiny (1806)⁸⁵ were blown from guns on the western glacis of Vellore Fort on 23 September. The commanding officer Colonel George Harcourt described the executions as a 'painful duty', performed 'without a single failure or accident'.⁸⁶

Most infamously in both contemporary English-language accounts and modern academic scholarship, the British were notorious for their use of cannon executions during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, relying upon the physical, psychological, and spiritual terror of this practice to both punish and suppress rebellious impulses. Indeed, one report of four mutineers executed by cannon in 1857 suggests that British forces felt 'this is nearly the only form in which death has any terrors for a native'.⁸⁷ Desertion had long been a problem within British Indian Army units that comprised native troops—and, as shown, in egregious cases had been met with execution by cannon—but the 1857 mutiny saw the dramatic escalation of the practice, 'as "no quarter" became the general cry' of the British.⁸⁸ Summaries of the condemned abound in British newspapers and magazines of

⁷⁶ Anderson, 'Execution', p. 182.

⁷⁷ The term 'sepoy', originally derived from Persian, was used in British India and elsewhere to describe native soldiers.

⁷⁸ Long, *Selections*, p. 224.

⁷⁹ One European mutineer, referred to only as 'Foster', was executed by cannon in 1798; see C. Grey, *European Adventurers of Northern India, 1785-1849* (New Delhi, 1993), pp. 273–274.

⁸⁰ Adolphus, *History*, p. 268; Butalia, *Evolution*, p. 273. Thus, Wagner's assertion that the first mass execution of Sepoys by cannon was in 1857 is not correct.

⁸¹ R. Mukherjee, 'The Kanpur massacres in India in the revolt of 1857: reply', *Past & Present* 142 (1994), p. 184, citing India Office Library Records, 30 April 1780, *Extract of the General Letters from Bombay*, Home Miscellaneous Series 149.5, pp. 111–112.

⁸² Mangamma, 'Mutiny at Arni and Arcot', pp. 495–500.

⁸³ Munro, *Narrative*, pp. 357–358; see also Mangamma, 'Mutiny at Arni and Arcot', p. 497.

⁸⁴ Five others were killed by musket fire and eight were hanged. Two further sepoys were acquitted and others were held for transportation (Colonel G. Harcourt to Adjutant-General P.A. Agnew (*in litt.*), 8 April 1872, in W. J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, vol. 3 (London, 1883)).

⁸⁵ The events of the Vellore Mutiny are today overshadowed by the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, but the impact in Britain was profound at the time. Both the governor of Madras, Lord William Bentinck, and the commander-in-chief of the Madras Army, Lieutenant-General Sir John Cradock, were recalled in disgrace following the latter's introduction of dress regulations that offended native troops' sensibilities. See Martin, *Absolute Amir*, p. 17; P. Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698-1858* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 71.

⁸⁶ Harcourt to Agnew (*in litt.*).

⁸⁷ Mukherjee, 'Kanpur massacres', p. 184; Ball, *History*, p. 413.

⁸⁸ S. Parlbly, *The British Indian Military Repository* (Calcutta, 1822), vol. I, pp. 187–188; Heathcote, *The Military*, p. 105.

the time, with those blown from guns being punished for crimes such as communicating orders to rebellious troops, leading mutinies, or assassinating British officers.⁸⁹ In late 1857, the British used cannon to execute an Indian who had ‘instigat[ed] an attack upon the Europeans and their property’ and, due to suspected involvement, ‘his son suffer[ed] with him’.⁹⁰ Following British forces’ success in capturing rebels in Ajnala, Sir Robert Montgomery, head of the Justice Department in Punjab, directed F. H. Cooper to send captured mutineers to Lahore for public execution, writing ‘we want some for the troops here and also for evidence’. Forty-one former sepoys were thus blown from guns in the provincial capital.⁹¹ In cases of mutiny and rebellion, it was common for the British to execute only a relatively small proportion of the conspirators, particularly their leaders.⁹² Often an even smaller proportion of those to be executed were blown from guns—serving primarily as an example to others. This was not always the case, however. In perhaps the largest single officially sanctioned execution of this type, the British executed 68 Kuka Sikhs by cannon in 1872.⁹³ It has been suggested that the British, fearing a repeat of the 1857 mutiny, responded with disproportionate brutality, despite the absence of a coherent political motivation for the Kuka crimes.⁹⁴

Whilst not seeking to downplay these atrocities, it is worth noting that, at least on the scale of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny itself, execution by cannon was not commonplace. This is demonstrated even in Indian writings about the mutiny that seek to cover perceived British atrocities in depth. Estimates of the number of Indian deaths resulting from the mutiny range widely, from 100,000 to 10 million (depending on how the count is made and who is counted).⁹⁵ Even taking the most conservative estimate, execution by cannon during the entire period of British rule account for only some 150 individuals killed in total—reflecting a very small percentage of deaths attributed to British actions during the mutiny. Of those officially sanctioned executions carried out by British forces,⁹⁶ the practice is dwarfed by other modes of execution such as hanging or shooting.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Jackson’s *Oxford Journal*, 6 March 1858, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BA3200102982/ (accessed 5 June 2021); Lloyd’s *Illustrated Newspaper*, ‘The Bombay mail’, 13 February 1859, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BC3206204813/ (accessed 31 May 2021).

⁹⁰ *The Era*, ‘The Indian rebellion’, 1 November 1857, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BA3202424723/ (accessed 31 May 2021).

⁹¹ Malik, ‘1857 Gogira Rebellion’.

⁹² See, for example, A. Broome, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Army*, vol. 1 (London, 1850); W. Thomson, *Memoirs of the Late War in Asia*, vol. 1 (London, 1788); Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*; The Editor of the Royal Military Calendar (ed.), *The East India Military Calendar; Containing the Services of General and Field Officers of the Indian Army*, vol. II (London, 1824), pp. 496–497; J. Deerrett, *The Remembrancer; or, Impartial Repository of Public Events for the Year 1783 Part 2*, vol. 16 (London, 1783), p. 83. According to James (Raj, Part 4, chapter 2), some sepoy ‘counter-intelligence service’ members were also executed in this manner, perhaps emphasising how serious their transgressions were considered to be.

⁹³ Forsyth to Griffin (*in litt.*), 8 April 1872, in *Extracts from Correspondence Relating to the Kooka Outbreak* (London, 1872).

⁹⁴ Wagner, ‘Calculated to strike terror’, pp. 206–207.

⁹⁵ A. Misra, *War of Civilisations: India AD 1857* (New Delhi, 2007); R. Ramesh, ‘India’s secret history: “A holocaust, one where millions disappeared...”’, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/24/india.randeepamesh> (accessed 29 October 2023).

⁹⁶ See R. C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857* (Calcutta, 1957), Book II, chapter IV; T. M. Hashmi, Z. H. Wattoo, and S. Ishaq, ‘Colonial demolition of Bahadur Shah Zafar’s government: some bitter facts and literary reactions’, *Palarch’s Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 19.2 (2022), p. 800; R. Mukherjee, ‘“Satan let loose upon Earth”: the Kanpur massacres in India in the revolt of 1857’, *Past & Present* 128 (August 1990), p. 94.

⁹⁷ M. Hashmi, Z. H. Wattoo, and S. Ishaq, ‘Colonial demolition of Bahadur Shah Zafar’s government: some bitter facts and literary reactions’, *PalArch’s Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 19.2 (2022), pp. 794–801, at p. 800. While no number is given for how many Indians were blown from a gun following the recapture of Delhi, the authors claim that ‘[h]undreds were hanged’ and ‘[t]housands of people were shot’.

According to one account, after Delhi was recaptured from the rebels, five or six people would be hanged *daily* at one gallows set up in the city.⁹⁸ Despite its rarity, the British use of the practice has received significant attention in the English-language literature. There are several possible reasons for this: the focus of these works on British India specifically; English-speaking sources are often skewed towards British practices; and the profound psychological impact of the practice is remembered even today. However, the British use of execution by cannon should more accurately be seen as a punishment reserved for spies and mutiny ringleaders, only rarely being extended to lesser crimes.⁹⁹

It is likewise important to note that Indian rebel forces also executed captives by cannon during the mutiny. Several British officers were blown from guns by rebels in a ‘massacre’ that one British newspaper ascribed to the mutineers’ ‘thirst for blood’.¹⁰⁰ In several recorded instances, it is clear that the practice was not applied through the lens of military justice used by the British. One contemporary British source recounts in detail how two British women were blown from a gun by mutineers—one woman falling victim to a gruesome misfire.¹⁰¹ In another case, a woman was supposedly going to be blown from a gun but managed to escape before her execution.¹⁰² By contrast, British forces are not known to have executed any female prisoners by cannon during the mutiny.

Execution by cannon as a tool of state-building in Persia and Afghanistan

Following the Sepoy Mutiny, the practice of blowing from a gun seems to have largely died out in British India. By 1868, the British had formally abandoned the spectacle of public execution in the UK following the passage of the Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868,¹⁰³ although legally the act did not apply to British India.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, social pressures from the motherland and relative political and military stability in British India in the decades following the mutiny mean that public executions of all types sharply declined. However, execution by cannon did not cease with the British abandonment of the practice. Indeed, European observers in southern and western Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries noted the continued practice of blowing from a gun as employed by indigenous powers in the region. Used by the British primarily as a military punishment, the practice was now an enduring tool of

⁹⁸ Majumdar, *Sepoy Mutiny*, p. 108.

⁹⁹ Giving an example of one such instance, David writes: ‘At first, as a warning to others, all one hundred and twenty sepoys captured by Nicholson were sentenced to be blown away from guns. But petitions for partial clemency were submitted by both Nicholson and Sir John Lawrence. “The officers [of the 55th] all concur in stating that the Sikhs were on their side to the last,’ wrote Nicholson to Edwardes. ‘I would, therefore, temper stern justice with mercy, and spare the Sikhs and young recruits. Blow away all the rest by all means, but spare boys scarcely out of their childhood, and men who were really loyal and respectful up to the moment when they allowed themselves to be carried away in a panic by the mass’” (David, *The Indian Mutiny*, chapter 10).

¹⁰⁰ *Caledonian Mercury*, ‘Foreign intelligence’, *British Library Newspapers*, 2 March 1858, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BB3205491225/ (accessed 30 May 2021).

¹⁰¹ B. W. Noel, *England and India: An Essay on the Duty of Englishmen Towards the Hindoos* (London, 1859), pp. 461–462). W. H. Russell (*My Diary in India, in the Year 1858–9*, vol. II (London, 1860)) documents a very similar event in his diary. Also see *Morning Chronicle*, ‘Latest from India, 5 July 1858’, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BC3207395531/ (accessed 30 May 2021) for a contemporary news source documenting the execution by cannon of a British collaborator by an Indian rebel leader.

¹⁰² *Pall Mall Gazette*, ‘A romance of the Indian Mutiny’, 29 August 1872, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BA3207697669/ (accessed 2 June 2021).

¹⁰³ Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868, 31 & 32 Vict. c. 24; see R. McGowen, ‘Civilizing punishment: the end of the public execution in England’, *The Journal of British Studies* 33.3 (1994), pp. 257–282 for further details.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, ‘Execution’, pp. 189–190.

statecraft for native powers in parts of Asia, in part due to the political instability in many countries at the time. Blowing from the gun was referred to in one 1857 British account as ‘a common punishment in all Moslem countries’.¹⁰⁵ The practice was seen as an effective tool in controlling crime in several states, and was broadly applied in the contexts of both military and civilian justice. English physician C. J. Wills, who travelled, lived, and worked in Persia during the mid- to late nineteenth century observed that the severe punishments meted out in that country served to effectively deter violent crime—in contrast to the near-exclusive military use of the practice by the British.¹⁰⁶

In Persia, when a condemned prisoner was executed by cannon, the executioner was said to be ‘making him the breath of a cannon’.¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, several accounts of Persian cannon executions describe how the condemned was forced to stand atop a pile of bricks, such that the centre of their back was in line with the muzzle of the gun.¹⁰⁸ In punishing political crimes, Persia was not so different from other states in the region in the nineteenth century. Following the Kurdish uprising under Sheikh Ubeydullah (Kurdish: *Şêx Ubeydelayê Nehrî*) in 1880–1881, several executions took place. Jalil Khan¹⁰⁹—a commander of Persian troops at Miandoab, who had betrayed the city to Kurdish forces and took part in the subsequent massacre and pillaging—was taken to Tabriz and ‘shot from a cannon’s mouth’.¹¹⁰ One such execution (perhaps of Jalil Khan) was depicted in the Parisian weekly *Journal des Voyages* (see Figure 2).¹¹¹ Another contemporary account recalls that a rebellious Khan was blown from a gun in Isfahan, having exhausted his finances in delaying his execution.¹¹²

One contemporary correspondent in Persia referred to blowing from a gun or mortar as an ‘exceptional punishment’, on a par with crucifixion, walling-up, burning, and burying alive.¹¹³ Such punishments—which also included being impaled or being hung by the heels and cut to pieces—were administered, according to one European observer, ‘lors-qu’il y a dans le crime quelque circonstance aggravante’ (‘when there is some aggravating circumstance in the crime’).¹¹⁴ Despite its use as a tool of political control, a great many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century accounts record executions by cannon being meted out in response to non-political crimes. These were mostly economic crimes, and the practice of blowing from the gun appears to have served as a deterrent against an increase in criminality during periods when the state’s capacity to respond to a

¹⁰⁵ Binning, *A Journal*, p. 274. The author reluctantly admits that it ‘has sometimes been resorted to in British India, in serious cases of mutiny and conspiracy’.

¹⁰⁶ Wills, *In the Land*, pp. 202–205.

¹⁰⁷ Binning, *A Journal*, p. 274.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, *ibid.*; Weston, *National Geographic*, XXXIX, pp. 417–468; Wills, *In the Land*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁹ Weston (*National Geographic*, XXXIX, pp. 417–468) writes of the execution of a ‘Jalil Khan’, *The Daily News* (‘General Foreign News: Turkey and Persia’, 6 June 1881, p. 6, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3203113998/ (accessed 1 June 2021)) reports on a ‘Jellil Agha Mukri’, and B. H. Révoil (‘Une Exécution à Téhéran’, *Journal des Voyages et des Aventures de Terre et de Mer*, 225 (30 October 1881), pp. 225, 228–229) describes the death of a ‘Djahl Agha’. The three sources may be describing the same incident, although Révoil describes the execution as taking place in Tehran whilst the other sources say Tabriz was the site of the punishment.

¹¹⁰ S. G. Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs* (New York, 1895), p. 119; *The Daily News*, ‘General Foreign News’, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Révoil, ‘Une Exécution’, pp. 225, 228–229.

¹¹² Wills, *In the Land*, pp. 202–203. Wills also describes a man ‘blown into the air from a mortar’ in the square at Shiraz.

¹¹³ *The Star (Guernsey)*, ‘Judicial punishment in Persia’, 11 August 1885, link.gale.com/apps/doc/R3210880252/ (accessed 4 June 2022); Wilson, *Persian Life*, pp. 185–186. Many other arcane and brutal punishments were in use in Persia during this time, including mutilation, dismemberment (including the *shekkeh* method of bisection), and boiling the condemned alive in a huge cauldron (Binning, *A Journal*, pp. 274, 340).

¹¹⁴ *Le Petit Journal*, ‘Comment on Exécute les Condamnés Politiques en Afghanistan’, Supplément illustré, 23 November 1913, ‘Comment’, p. 374.

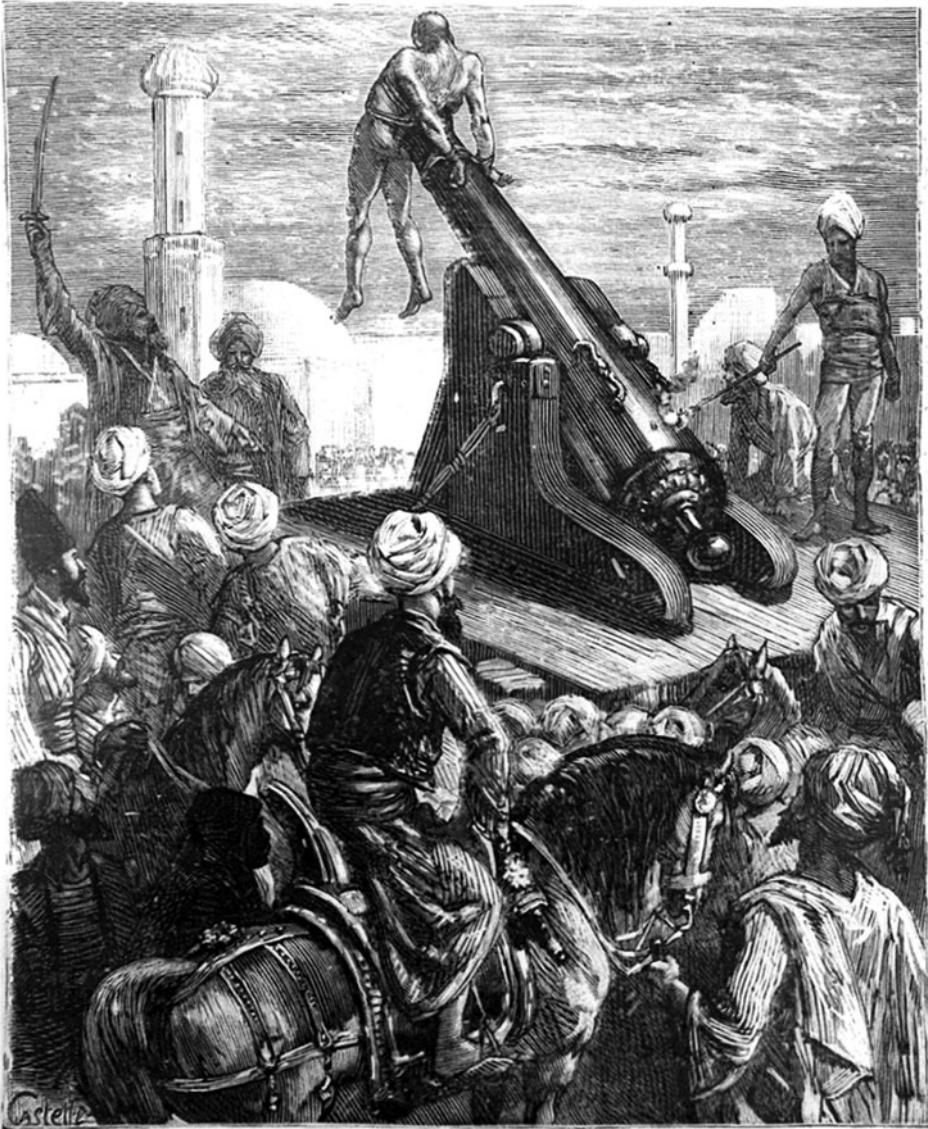


Figure 2. A full-page illustration that appeared on the cover of the 30 October 1881 issue of *Journal des Voyages*. The caption reads: 'Une exécution a Téhéran.—Le bourreau attacha le condamné à la gueule d'un canon' ('An execution in Tehran.—The executioner tied the condemned man to the mouth of a cannon'). Source: B. H. Révoil, 'Une Exécution a Téhéran', *Journal des Voyages et des Aventures de Terre et de Mer* 225 (30 October 1881), pp. 225, 228–229. Please note that this image has been lightly edited for clarity.

crime wave was low, such as during political crises. Such executions could be justified—though not necessarily motivated—by Qur'anic law, which demanded execution for those convicted of banditry, highway robbery, and similar crimes (such as extortion).¹¹⁵ In 1848, for example, Persian Prince Feeroz Mirza, governor of Fars, ordered that a thief who had taken advantage of the recent death of the Shah to loot shops and extort civilians be

¹¹⁵ Kamali, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 111, 178.

blown from a gun.¹¹⁶ In 1887, a persistent bandit leader who had been fined many times previously was captured and blow from a gun at Tabriz. His ‘scattered fragments could be seen in the court-yard of the governor’s palace’.¹¹⁷ According to Weston, the governor of Isfahan threatened to have the 14-year-old son of a leading brigand fired from the mouth of a cannon.¹¹⁸ These uses make the Persian practice distinct from the Mughal and especially British use of executions by cannon, and closer to that of Afghanistan, where the practice was employed as a form of capital punishment in the broader civilian context. Persia was late to abandon the practice, too, with a 1921 issue of *National Geographic* containing an image of a ‘Persian robber’ moments before being blown from a gun.¹¹⁹ Afghanistan was perhaps the one country to persist in employing execution by cannon for longer than Persia. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century, Afghanistan had already become the geographic nexus of the practice.

The government of Afghanistan was enthusiastic in their use of cannon in executions. Afghanistan in the nineteenth century was perhaps uniquely positioned to embrace the practice; not only had the country once formed part of the Mughal empire, but it was also situated between Persia and British India. It existed in a tumultuous political landscape—the Afghan government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries held little power outside of the country’s major cities, and rival political factions and bandits repeatedly threatened the legitimacy of the ruling Durrānī and Bārakzay Dynasties. In this atmosphere of political precarity, political rivals and rebels were frequently blown from guns in order to deter unrest. In 1802, for example, a Ghilzai rebel and his two sons were blown from guns.¹²⁰ As one of the first acts of Shah Shuja’s first reign (1803–1809), he blew a man named Ashik ‘to bits by a mortar’ as retribution for crimes committed against a previous Shāh.¹²¹ In 1839, two Afghans were executed by cannon for wounding or killing *sarwans*¹²² and for stealing camels.¹²³ In November 1841, an Anglo–Durrānī expedition under the command of General William Knott captured Akram Khān of Dihrawāt.¹²⁴ Upon his return to Kandahar, Akram Khān was blown from a gun on the orders of Shah Shuja’s son, Muḥammad Tīmūr.¹²⁵ That same year, an Afghan man was blown from a gun for murdering, apparently without cause, a European writer who had accompanied a British officer to Herat.¹²⁶ In 1845, a French observer noted that Yar Mohammed, the Vizier of Herat, had executed a Taymoni chief by cannon for disloyalty and then thrice escaping the city while imprisoned.¹²⁷ It should be noted that use of the practice oscillated over time in Afghanistan, likely due to the preferences of individual leaders. For example, during his first reign, Dōst Moḥammad Khān deported a military official for having ‘blown [a deserter’s] head off by cannon’ in 1835, seeming to indicate

¹¹⁶ Binning, *A Journal*, pp. 273–275.

¹¹⁷ Wilson, *Persian Life*, p. 185.

¹¹⁸ Weston, *National Geographic*, XXXIX, p. 447. The boy allegedly replied: ‘I kill others every way. Watch them die fast, slow. Myself not yet killed. Like best to be blown from cannon. See quick what comes after.’

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

¹²⁰ C. Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan the Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826–1863)* (London, 1997), p. 211.

¹²¹ F. M. Kātib Hazārah, *The History of Afghanistan (Sirāj al-tawārikh)*, vol. 2 (Boston, 2013), p. 111; G. P. Tate, *The Kingdom of Afghanistan: A Historical Sketch* (Bombay, 1911), p. 121.

¹²² A term referring to those who tend camels.

¹²³ Atkinson, *Expedition*, p. 188.

¹²⁴ M. E. Yapp, ‘Disturbances in western Afghanistan, 1839–41’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26.2 (1963), pp. 306–307.

¹²⁵ Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, p. 58.

¹²⁶ *Evening Standard*, ‘Multiple News Items: From the Delhi Gazette of Aug. 25’, *British Library Newspapers*, 5 November 1841, link.gale.com/apps/doc/R3212170365/ (accessed 31 May 2021).

¹²⁷ Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys*, p. 189.

that he did not approve of the practice.¹²⁸ Indeed, there appear to be no records of Dōst Moḥammad Khān himself ordering execution by cannon, and all of the documented examples of the practice during his reign either took place in independent Herat or were ordered by his military officers (including by Sardar—later Emir—Abdur Rahman Khan).¹²⁹

Upon his accession to the throne in 1880, blowing from the gun became an important tool in Emir Abdur Rahman Khan's efforts to establish a stable Afghan state. This is emphasised in many contemporary English-language accounts and has even been noted in passing in some modern academic works. Lee (1996) writes, for example, that Abdur Rahman Khan's 'Reign of Terror' occasioned some 5,000 executions each year, with some of the condemned blown from guns.¹³⁰ During the Iron Emir's 21-year reign, he claimed to have executed some 120,000 people.¹³¹ While Rahman reigned, everyone from petty criminals to anti-government insurgents could expect to be executed upon capture: 'Those who were most likely to incur the Amir's wrath were, of course, those who rebelled against his authority, but even the most ordinary of criminal acts was viewed as treasonous and liable to exemplary, if not summary, justice.'¹³²

These death sentences were intended to terrorise spectators and instil obedience in the Afghan populace. Executions of rebels were said to have 'struck fear and grief into [the people of] those regions' and brought 'terror and dread to the ears of the enemy'.¹³³ Likewise, the brutal treatment of criminals was used as a deterrent. In line with these tactics, blowing from guns was recognised by European observers and Afghan writers alike as a 'common form of execution' under Rahman.¹³⁴ A contemporary newspaper notes that Rahman ordered 300 rebels to be transported to Kabul in 1889 for execution, 100 of whom were blown from guns. Those sentenced to death by cannon were dressed in black.¹³⁵ Another account reports that, after putting down a revolt in Afghan Turkestan in 1887–1888, Rahman marched into formerly rebel-controlled territory. Immediately upon having prisoners delivered to him, he ordered the use of cannon to execute two rebels.¹³⁶ In 1887, a rebel leader named Sharbat Khān—who served as a general for the revolutionary forces of Muḥammad Ishāq Khān, a rebellious nobleman and governor of Turkestan who led an uprising against his cousin, the emir—was blown from a gun in Herat.¹³⁷ In Afghanistan, as in Persia and the Mughal empire, this method of execution was not restricted to crimes of a political or military nature. An 1880 news article describes the execution of a Muslim man who was blown from a gun—on orders from the emir himself—for murdering a Hindu goldsmith.¹³⁸ Frank Martin, who wrote extensively about his time with Rahman and his son, wrote that the punishment was typically reserved for '[m]en who rob or

¹²⁸ Hazārah, *History*, vol. 1, p. 208.

¹²⁹ Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys*, p. 189; Hazārah, *History*, vol. 2, p. 106.

¹³⁰ J. L. Lee, *The 'Ancient Supremacy': Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 543–562. Other methods employed under the emir included hanging, crucifixion, sawing, strangulation, bayoneting, and being dragged by horses.

¹³¹ D. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 111.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Hazārah, *History*, vol. 2, pp. 322–486.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Those sentenced to death by sword were dressed in red and those sentenced to be hanged were dressed in yellow or green (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 'A hundred days' vengeance', 11 September 1889, p. 7, gale.com/apps/doc/Y3200419237/ (accessed 3 June 2021)).

¹³⁶ Lee, 'Ancient Supremacy', pp. 530–531.

¹³⁷ *Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*, 'The rising in Afghanistan', *British Library Newspapers*, 1 November 1887, link.gale.com/apps/doc/R3212958556/ (accessed 1 June 2021); Hazārah, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 424–428.

¹³⁸ *The Ipswich Journal*, 'Foreign intelligence—Afghanistan', 5 October 1880, p. 4, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3202582082/ (accessed 2 June 2021).

swindle Government funds ... also highway robbers and spies'.¹³⁹ An 1890 newspaper article reports that an Afghan governor was blown from a gun outside Sherepore following his conviction for the murder of another official, the latter having planned to report the governor for the misappropriation of government funds.¹⁴⁰

Rahman's successful military campaigns and brutal domestic crackdowns—including the widespread use of cannon in executing prisoners—helped him achieve his broader political aims. Under Rahman, 'the structures of the state began to take a more consolidated form' and criminality decreased.¹⁴¹ Pleased with his own success, the emir wrote: 'The same nation that was always engaged in rebellions and fighting against me in the early part of my reign ... has become the most peaceful, obedient, law-abiding, and civilised nation.'¹⁴² Today, Rahman is widely credited with establishing the modern Afghan state. In part due to his achievements, Rahman's successors continued in his brutal footsteps, prolonging the global lifespan of executions by cannon. His son, Ḥabībullah Khān (Habibullah Khan; r. 1901–1919), took keenly to the practice. In 1905, a spy was blown from the noon-day gun at Sherepur Cantonment—a moment depicted in the *Illustrated London News* (see Figure 3).

Habibullah also ordered several constitutionalist agitators, including the governor of Qal'ah-i Fath, to be blown from a gun in Jalalabad in 1909, following a suspected plot on the emir's life.¹⁴³ This method was also used to execute Jahandad Khan—a pretender to the Afghan throne and leader of the Khost Rebellion—in 1912.¹⁴⁴ As shown in Figure 1, Habibullah had nine additional conspirators blown from guns in 1913. European observers took note of this; for example, *Le Petit Journal* wrote:

Récemment on découvrit à Caboul un complot contre l'émir. Neuf des chefs des conjurés furent pris, jugés et condamnés à mort. On amena neuf canons, on les chargea, après quoi on attachait un conjuré à chaque gueule de canon et les neuf coups partirent en même temps, mettant en pièces les corps des neuf condamnés.¹⁴⁵

Recently, a plot against the Emir was uncovered in Kabul. Nine of the leaders of the conspirators were caught, tried, and sentenced to death. Nine cannon were brought in and loaded, after which a conspirator was tied to each cannon mouth and the nine shots were fired at the same time, destroying the bodies of the nine condemned men.

Thus, in contrast to the British and Mughal use of cannon execution to punish mostly military crimes, the practice in this context was seen as essential to the consolidation of the Afghan state under its ruling Barakzai Dynasty, in the face of rival claimants and reformers. Indeed, the practice appears to have endured in Afghanistan for longer than in any other country. In 1930, a mass execution by cannon—perhaps the last time this method was used in Afghanistan—was reported by *The New York Times*, which wrote that 11 'followers of the dead usurper, Bacha Sakao, have been blown from guns at Kabul'.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁹ Martin, *Absolute Amir*, pp. 168–169. Again, the use of the term 'highway robbery' here is notable, as such a crime was punishable by death according to Islamic law (Kamali, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 111).

¹⁴⁰ *The Hampshire Advertiser*, 'An Afghan crime and its punishment', 15 November 1890, p. 2, gale.com/apps/doc/R3208889781/ (accessed 3 June 2021).

¹⁴¹ W. Maley, 'Human rights in Afghanistan', in *Islam and Human Rights in Practice: Perspectives Across the Ummah*, (eds.) S. Akbarzadeh and B. MacQueen (London, 2008), p. 93; Edwards, *Heroes*, p. 111.

¹⁴² Rahman Khan, *The Life*, p. 230.

¹⁴³ F. M. Kātib Hazārah, *The History of Afghanistan (Sirāj al-tawārikh)*, vol. 4 (Boston, 2016), pp. 2165–2166.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2269.

¹⁴⁵ *Le Petit Journal*, 'Comment', p. 374.

¹⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, 'Eleven Afghans blown from guns', 5 April 1930.



Figure 3. A spy being blown from the noon-day gun at Sherpur Cantonment, outside Kabul, in 1905. Source: *The Illustrated London News*, CXXVI, 3431, supplement.

Conclusion

Despite the focus of the majority of English-language contemporary accounts and modern academic literature on British Indian executions by cannon, it is clear that the practice should instead be understood in the wider context of the employment of the tactic in southern and western Asia over several centuries. Whilst the British (and their Mughal forerunners) in India tended to use blowing from a gun to punish military crimes, especially mutiny, indigenous leaders in Persia and Afghanistan instead expanded the practice to encompass the civilian judicial context, seeking to consolidate their nascent state structures. This article demonstrates that, even by examining predominantly sources that were and are available to English speakers, the practice has been insufficiently contextualised in the literature and regularly mischaracterised as uniquely or particularly associated with British rule in India. Although the role of executions by cannon has been widely discussed both popularly and academically within the context of the 1857 mutiny in particular, the broader understanding of the practice both in the military context and in its use as a tool of state-building in punishing civilian crimes has heretofore been limited. This context is important not just for understanding the British use of the punishment, which originates with Mughal practices of military justice and was comparatively limited in scope and scale of application, but also for understanding how British use fits into the broader history of executions by cannon.

Execution by cannon proved to be a useful, albeit barbaric, method for punishing disobedience and deterring rebellion. Not only did it promise a humiliating and gruesome death to those who wronged the state, but it was also thought to torment the souls of



Figure 4. A 60-paise commemorative postage stamp depicting the execution of Veer Narayan Singh, issued by India in 1987. Source: *India Post*.

the condemned and terrorised onlookers into submission. For these reasons, the method was adopted by many regimes: in Persia, it served largely as a heavy-handed punishment to deter crime; in India, execution by cannon was a fearsome implement of both native and colonial control; and, in Afghanistan, the practice became a barbaric tool for state-building. Although almost all contemporary English-language scholarship focuses exclusively or primarily on British practice, this article has demonstrated that this limited view overlooks important historical uses in other states and by other rulers.

The symbolic display of power in executing either civilian or military prisoners via excessive force has remained appealing to regimes eager to wield terror, even in more recent years. Both North Korea and the so-called Islamic State are known to have performed executions with anti-aircraft artillery guns.¹⁴⁷ The brutality of cannon execution has remained in the public imagination as well, though, as with scholarship, attention has been focused almost singularly on the British application of the punishment. A 60-paise commemorative postage stamp issued by India in 1987 depicts Veer Narayan Singh, one of the leaders of the Indian rebellion in Chhattisgarh, who was executed by cannon on 10 December 1857 (see [Figure 4](#)).¹⁴⁸ There exist several works of art depicting British forces blowing prisoners from guns, the most famous of which is ‘Suppression of the Indian revolt by the English’ (circa 1884), by Russian war artist Vasily Vereshchagin (1842–1904).¹⁴⁹ As noted, a full-page colour illustration that appeared on the back page of the illustrated supplement to *Le Petit Journal* of 23 November 1913 shows the macabre fascination with the practice that endured in Europe (see [Figure 1](#)). There is even a modern craft beer from Nightmare Brewing Company called ‘Blowing from a Gun’, which depicts the aftermath of one such execution on its label in a very gruesome fashion.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ J. Park and J. Pearson, ‘North Korea executes defence chief with an anti-aircraft gun: South Korea agency’, *Reuters*, 12 May 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-purge/north-korea-executes-defence-chief-with-an-anti-aircraft-gun-south-korea-agency-idUSKBN0NY01J20150513> (accessed 20 January 2022); Armament Research Services (ARES), *Conflict Materiel (CONMAT) Database* (confidential, Perth, n.d.). While similar to blowing from a gun, this is a distinct practice. Rather than being tied to the front of an artillery piece to be killed by the escaping pressure and gas, prisoners are shot by projectiles from medium-calibre cannon (typically 23 millimetres). This would likely have a no less dramatic terminal effect.

¹⁴⁸ A. R. N. Srivastava, *Tribal Freedom Fighters of India* (New Delhi, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ The current whereabouts of this painting are unknown.

¹⁵⁰ In fact, the ‘Blowing from a Gun’ beer was directly influenced by Vereshchagin’s painting. Nightmare Brewing Company has depicted various different forms of execution on the labels of its other brews, including crucifixion, scaphism, and drawing and quartering. The brewery’s stated goal is to ‘[bring] together ingredients, death metal, and our horrific history into a cohesive liquid experience’; see Nightmare Brewing Company, n.d., ‘Blowing from a gun’, <https://www.nightmarebrewingco.com/> (accessed 12 January 2022).

This, of course, is not the whole story. Executioners outside of Asia also made use of cannon, especially in the Ottoman empire and its tributary and vassal states. In 1596, a janissary was executed in Constantinople for ‘shameful behaviour’, being ‘wrapped in rags in Tophane and put into the mouth of a cannon, which was then fired’.¹⁵¹ In 1683, following the bombardment of Algiers as part of France’s ongoing campaign against the Barbary Corsairs, Algerian commander Mezzo Morto Hüseyin Pasha executed a number of French prisoners, including consul Jean Le Vacher, by cannon.¹⁵² Portuguese colonial administrators also employed the technique beyond the borders of their Indian possessions. In 1571, the forces of Portuguese explorer and soldier Francisco Barreto rounded up 50 Muslims in the Kingdom of Mutapa (Tawara: *Mwene we Mutapa*). These unfortunate individuals were ‘impaled, blown from mortars, torn apart on tree-trunks, axed or shot’.¹⁵³ Africans enslaved by Portuguese colonists in Mozambique were sometimes blown from guns when a ‘spectacular’ execution was required, such as when punishing those slaves who incited others to mutiny.¹⁵⁴ Henry Salt, who visited the Portuguese settlements on the east coast of Africa in 1809–1810 on the orders of the British government, described how the Portuguese executed the Sheikh of Quintangone (Ilha Quitangonha) by cannon in order to ‘strike the neighbouring chieftains with awe’.¹⁵⁵ The Portuguese also made use of the practice in their South American colonies. In 1618, for example, an indigenous rebel leader named Amaro was captured in Portuguese colonial Brazil and blown from a gun.¹⁵⁶ Future research might seek to establish a complete timeline of the practice and to examine its role in other regions¹⁵⁷ and contexts—which, as this article highlights, have ranged from state-building to simple criminal deterrence, and have occurred within both the military and civilian judicial systems. This would go a long way towards correcting the mistaken assumptions about the practice—especially as regards British usage—in both popular and academic understandings.

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¹⁵¹ E. Boyar and K. Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 112.

¹⁵² A. Martin, ‘Un voyage de rédemption dans la Régence d’Alger’, in *Autour de la géographie Orientale, et au-delà: en l’honneur de J. Thiry, Lettres Orientales* 11, (eds.) L. Denooz and X. Luffin (Leuven, 2006), p. 150. Le Vacher was killed using the cannon called ‘Baba Merzoug’, which had been cast in 1542 by a Venetian engineer. ‘Baba Merzoug’ was supposed to be used to kill another French consul, Andre Piollé, in 1688 but the unfortunate Frenchman was beaten to death before his appointed hour of execution. Several other prisoners were killed by the Venetian gun instead (Préaux, ‘La Consulaire’, in *France Maritime: Fondée et Dirigée*, vol. 2, (ed.) A. Gréhan (Paris, 1855), pp. 92–93).

¹⁵³ Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement*, pp. 40–41.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190; M. Thoman, *Jesuitens und Missionärs in Asien und Afrika: Reise- und Lebensbeschreibung* (Lindau, 1869), p. 111.

¹⁵⁵ Salt, *A Voyage*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁵⁶ Southey, *History of Brazil*, p. 469.

¹⁵⁷ A detailed examination of the Portuguese use of the practice, expanding beyond the English-language literature (e.g. Alden, *Making of an Enterprise*; Southey, *History of Brazil*; Salt, *A Voyage*, etc.) would be valuable, for example.

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