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Introduction: British ways of counter-insurgency

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Introduction: British ways of counter-insurgency

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This essay introduces the special issue, drawing together the different studies around the central theme of the nature of the force used by Britain against colonial insurgents. It argues that the violence employed by British security forces in counter-insurgency to maintain imperial rule is best seen from a maximal perspective, contra traditional arguments that the British used minimum force to defeat colonial rebellions. It shows that the use of force became more difficult especially after the Amritsar massacre in 1919. The presence of white settlers in counter-insurgencies – such as in Kenya in the 1950s – accelerated abuse by security forces and complicated the measured use of force against insurgents by the colonial state. The article concludes by drawing lessons from the British experience of counter-insurgency to unconventional military operations today, suggesting that in some situations the use of maximal force is still an option in counter-insurgency.

Keywords: minimum force; violence; counter-insurgency; Amritsar; Hanslope Park; British Army; hearts and minds

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The British way in counter-insurgency

The product of an international conference held in London in September 2012 and sponsored by the Marine Corps University Foundation (MCUF), the articles presented in this collection are framed around the question of whether there was a British 'way' in counter-insurgency when it came to the use of force by soldiers, a 'hearts and minds' strategy of pacification using minimum force against insurgents and their local civilian supporters. British armed forces were 'generally more scrupulous than most', and worked within the rule of law, avoiding the human rights abuses that marked out other colonial or post-colonial powers, it is argued.[1] 'No country which relies on the law of the land to regulate the lives of its citizens can afford to see that law flouted by its own government, even in an insurgency situation. In other words everything done by a government and its agents in combating insurgency must be legal', was the conclusion of a leading British soldier that expressed the ideal of British counter-insurgency, and an issue discussed in depth in Sir Robert Thompson's influential *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966).[2] More recently, Caroline Elkins in her Pulitzer-winning

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book on the suppression of the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya in the 1950s wrote (ironically):

> Decades had been spent constructing Britain's imperial image, and that image contrasted sharply with the brutal behavior of other European empires in Africa. King Leopold's bloody rule in the Congo, the German directed genocide of the Herero in South-West Africa, and France's disgrace in Algeria – the British reputedly avoided all of these excesses because, simply, it was British to do so.[3]

The defence of the British is that where abuses occurred during counter-insurgency these were exceptional aberrations, rather than examples of systematic or systemic abuse, a point well articulated by Thomas Mockaitis, one of the contributors to this volume:

> ...relatively few cases of documented abuse occurred and these were usually the work of local forces lacking the traditional discipline of the army... Even if allowance is made for the possibility that excesses might have occurred, the sparsity of reported cases over a twenty-year period suggests that on the whole the British behaved with commendable restraint... The British generally did not tolerate anyone taking the law into their own hands. Isolated incidents of ill-treatment no doubt occurred, but these were never the result of official policy. Allegations of misconduct were usually investigated and abuses stopped.[4]

US authors have also seen the British riposte to colonial rebellions as exceptional. Former US army officer John Nagl's recent book on Britain's experiences in counter-insurgency – set reading for US Marine officers studying today on staff college courses – draws lessons from the British success against communist insurgents in Malaya in the 1950s, comparing it to the American failure against insurgent guerrillas in Vietnam a decade later.[5] The current official US military manual on counter-insurgency (published, significantly, by a major US university press) makes the same point: the police in the van of operations alongside 'well-disciplined' British soldiers were vital to the British success in Malaya.[6] The use of minimum force when confronting insurgencies minimised abuse against non-combatants during counter-insurgencies, something that is relevant to, say, US Marines trying to avoid needless deaths of civilians, such as happened at Haditha in Iraq in 2005.[7]

Counter-insurgency and history

As well as the discussion on the use of force, this collection contributes to the debate about whether historians and history can or should contribute to diplomacy, statecraft, and the waging of war.[8] MCUF exists to support professional military education (PME) for soldiers, the 'ammunition for the mind' that is a force multiplier for the country's armed forces; US Marines need to have not just physical but also 'mental fitness'.[9] Thus, university-level study at staff colleges now forms an integral part of officers' careers, and not just in the US; education for successful officers is taken almost as seriously as training in modern hi-tech armies. MCUF supports these programmes, many of which are based on an understanding of history and past experience. The focus of PME in

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the US today is on counter-insurgency, the operation that US forces are most likely to engage in the 'war on terror' after 9/11. Counter-insurgency has become the conventional military operation for Western armies. The unconventional is now the conventional. The counter-insurgency strategy of imperial Britain holds historical lessons for today's post-colonial superpowers such as the US and through PME soldiers can learn what to do and what not to do when fighting insurgents. Soldiers can ignore the past and blunder instead into wars that they were bound to lose: France and Britain in 1940, Germany and Japan in 1941 and, arguably, US forces in Iraq in 2003. It was for this reason that Thucydides wrote his famous history of the Peloponnesian War over 2000 years ago, to help 'those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past, and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.'[10] Many of history's best soldiers were students of military history (some even wrote the history, such as Julius Caesar), a subject covered in the volume edited by Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, to which readers are directed.[11]

The history of British counter-insurgency lingers in other ways, ones that are not only topical but also have troubling legal and moral implications. Three of the speakers at the conference – David Anderson, Huw Bennett, and Caroline Elkins – work on British counter-insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s and are expert witnesses in the ongoing court case in the UK launched by Kenyans alleging abuse by British forces during the suppression there of the insurgent Mau Mau revolt. A similar court case is mooted for relatives of Malays killed by British soldiers in the communist-led Emergency in that country in the late 1940s, the subject of work by Karl Hack, another of the contributors at the conference.[12] The moral and financial implications for the British government of these legal proceeding are obvious and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) civil servants attended the event, not typical attendees for such a forum. The release in April 2012 of the first tranche of a 'lost' colonial-era government archive that was held for many years at an FCO storage site at Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire has excited academics and the media, and is the subject of the article presented here by Anthony Badger, the scholar chosen in June 2012 by the FCO to manage the release to the public of the Hanslope Park archive. The suspicion is that the Hanslope archive was kept hidden as it contained damning evidence of abuses committed during British colonial counter-insurgency campaigns. The Hanslope material promises to be a rich source for historians of empire; its discovery is bound up with the destruction and preservation of archives decades ago by colonial officials, many of whom were keen to cover up abuses by security force personnel and so destroyed the historical record. The Hanslope archive hastened the legal cases by Kenyan and Malayan victims of abuses at the hands of security forces in the 1940s and 1950s; a similar case is being discussed by Cypriots who suffered at the hands of the army, again prompted by the Hanslope disclosure. The Cyprus Emergency is the subject of the essay here by Simon Robbins.[13]

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British counter-insurgency: maximal and minimum force

Returning to the main theme of this collection – the use of force – the debate on the British use of minimum force in counter-insurgency is sterile. The British never employed minimum force in their imperial policing and counter-insurgency campaigns, a point argued elsewhere and confirmed by the studies presented here.[14] The use of force in counter-insurgency by British security forces is best viewed from a maximal and not a minimal position, asking the question: what were the limits to the use of force? To answer this question, we need to go back to 1919, India, and the British-run 'Committee to Investigate the Recent Disturbances in Bombay, Delhi and the Punjab, their Causes and the Measures Taken to cope with Them'. Chaired by Lord Hunter (and so known as the Hunter Committee), the former Solicitor-General for Scotland, the Inquiry was convened to determine the events surrounding a massacre earlier in the year by British-led troops commanded by Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer of Indian demonstrators in the Punjabi town of Amritsar. During a period of popular unrest, Dyer had ordered his men to fire on unarmed protestors gathered in an open, walled space in the town, the Jallianwala Bagh. In a short, decisive exchange, soldiers shot dead some 400 Indians, wounding many more, after which the military withdrew without offering succour to the wounded.

When questioned by the Hunter Committee, Dyer was remarkably, usefully (stupidly) candid, both on the use of force and of the role of the legal system in colonial control. Dyer was bound as a soldier (and officer) by the *King's Regulations* and the *Manual of Military Law*, the latter regularly updated, the most recent version being one published in 1916. As the anonymous authors of the *Manual* informed Dyer, an armed insurrection justified the use of any degree of necessary force. Imperial military power depended on 'necessary', effectual and not minimum force. That said, the use of force was not absolute and evolving British and Indian norms mediated how society exercised and understood the idea of necessary force, which is why Dyer was in the witness box. The harsh, extreme suppression by British forces of the country following the 'Indian Mutiny' in 1857 was not acceptable decades later in 1919 at Amritsar. The successful colonial state had to manage force to make it practicable and palatable to a wider public, with colonial law justifying what was done. Dyer's admissions to the Hunter Commission betrayed both himself and the colonial state. Dyer's aim, he said, was not just to disperse the crowd in the Jallianwala Bagh but to produce a 'moral effect'. When asked by the Indian lawyer, Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, whether what he meant by this was 'to strike terror', Dyer replied: 'You can call it what you like. I was going to punish them.'[15] Dyer's candour and the Commission's findings meant that he was relieved of his command; he returned home to the UK and retirement. Popular subscription raised a £26,000 purse for the disgraced Dyer, a huge sum at the time, and not something that one would expect today in similar circumstances.[16]

Dyer's mistake was to tell the truth. Minimum force was necessary force, there, euphemistically, to have moral effect, to strike (or threaten) terror so as to

sustain imperial control. But necessary force was not always acceptable force. Here is the 'friction' that retarded the maximal tendency of the violence inherent in the colonial project. British officers learned the lesson from Amritsar and Dyer's fate, at courses at Sandhurst and at the Staff College, and in conversations in officers' messes wherever the army served. They faced a dilemma, damned if they used too much force and they ended up in the dock for killing civilians, damned if they used too little and an unlawful assembly escalated to a riot, which then became a full-scale insurrection and rebellion. The ambiguous wording of the *Manual of Military Law* did not provide soldiers with much help. Practically, soldiers used graded, incremental force, tempered by unit and regimental differences, the strength of the insurgent opposition, changing societal norms and the differing nature of the local colonial administrations. Minimum force was simply the degree to which maximal force was impracticable.

The presence of white settlers during a colonial rebellion accelerated the latent violence of counter-insurgency, pulling it to an extreme, as was the case in colonies such as Kenya where paramilitary white settler police and military units committed the worst atrocities against insurgents. The same point can be made about local non-white soldiers serving with the colonial government – collaborators, if you like, or loyalists – whose future was intimately wrapped up with the maintenance of the colonial government, like the black loyalist soldiers who fought with the British against Mau Mau ('home-guard thugs' to their militant opponents) or the *Harkis* who served with the French in Algeria ('traitors' to the cause, for most Algerians). Familiarity with local peoples bred contempt and fear, for white settlers, long-service police officers, and locally recruited non-white soldiers. While British soldiers serving on time-bounded rotations through a colony during an insurgency mechanistically wrecked villages and shot people, they eschewed the premeditated tortures of the locally based police, prison service, and settlers, as the anti-British Palestinian insurgent from the 1930s, Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah, recounted to this author in an interview in 2009.[17] The presence of settlers complicated the measured use of violence by security forces, as happened spectacularly in French-run Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s when the settlers attacked the French state that no longer supported the *colons*.

The state could formally regulate the use of force to effect colonial policy but this opened a Pandora's Box of brutality by 'ordinary' soldiers on the dealing and receiving end of the violence, men whose emotions, once aroused, were not easily switched off. Measured violence easily escalated; the psychology of abuse meant that 'ordinary men' could commit extraordinary outrages, a point famously made by the experiments of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo.[18] Minimum force was simply the degree to which the army and state retained control over the security forces. Recent media coverage has picked up on isolated outrages, highlighting the events at, for instance, Batang Kali village in Malaya in 1948 when British soldiers killed local villagers, claiming that the villagers were insurgent fighters.[19] The British press has likened the Malays killed at Batang Kali by Scots Guards soldiers to the Vietnamese civilians massacred by US troops at

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My Lai in Vietnam in 1968.[20] This makes for good copy but it ignores the difference between the restricted one-off violence of Batang Kali where British soldiers killed 24 Malays to the hundreds of Vietnamese civilians (up to 700, including children) killed and raped at the village of My Lai in 1968. (And My Lai was not an isolated incident.) While Britain's use of force was not exceptional, comparative analysis of how and why national armies and colonial governments do things differently is useful, providing texture to studies of counter-insurgency, as is the nature and form of different rebellions – the subject of the essay here by Peter Lieb. The tension is obvious. Soldiers and their supporters look to the training and ethos of different regiments, seeking to eliminate any tendency to commit abuses that will inevitable be brought to public attention by the media. Such an approach makes modern counter-insurgency practicable. Critics of military operations against insurgents – often on the political Left and uninterested in the detail of military service – do not make the distinction, seeing 'hearts and minds' training for soldiers as window dressing, emphasising instead the centrality of state violence to colonialism and neo-imperialism.

In the British case, military doctrine (such as existed in the British Army) and past military experience on countering colonial rebellion created a permissive institutional framework in which subordinate commanders had considerable power to do what they wanted in the field. Limits to the use of force and the practical reactions of the soldiers and colonial officials who exercised force are the subjects for study in this volume. The humanist tendencies of some colonial officers vied with the hawkishness of others; the same was true for insurgents and the terrorism that they employed. The essays here detail the brutality that was used by security forces in times of rebellion. This ethnography of nastiness is a valuable empirical exercise, hampered by the morally bankrupt policy that shredded and destroyed archival material on such things, the subject of the essay by Anthony Badger. Spectacular examples of atrocities should not detract from the more important study of the nature of the colonial state and how it used legal measures, propaganda and education, village resettlement, control of food and labour, identity passes and control of the movements of peoples to pacify indigenous populations that might support insurgents, as Hack argues in his essay in this volume. The studies here do more than just list abuses; they contextualise the torture, detention, and beatings within the apparatus of the colonial government and the legal systems employed to work with the state and the army. This has wider significance for studies of imperial, legal, and post-colonial history. It might be that the law was there to protect imperial subjects – it certainly did this at times – but in times of rebellion, quasi military or martial law was in force – the emergency state. This raises the question: what was the pre-existing legal system that military or martial law superseded? Critics of colonialism and the emergency state would argue that the establishment of military rule in the colonies is a moot point: military law in times of open rebellion was simply a more visible manifestation of the long-established draconian powers of the colonial state, a view well articulated by Nasser Hussain.[21] For instance, when the British took

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over Palestine after the Great War, they established within two years the basic structures of a collective punishment regime of detention, house destruction, fines, and corvée. This was standard practice across the empire and in Palestine it provided the legal basis for ruling the country, backed up by the extensive, practical use of brutal 'Turkish' police methods picked up from the Ottoman period and carried out by British police officers from the demobilised 'Black and Tans' counter-insurgency force that had been previously employed in Ireland against rebels there.[22] In the Arab revolt after 1936, the colonial authorities easily blended new draconian emergency laws to the pre-existing regime – the continuity of suppression that characterised the colonial state.

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Afterword: British counter-insurgency today

This collection brings together and consolidates new scholarship on the end of empire and foregrounds a dark and violent history of British imperial rule, one that stretched back to the nineteenth century and continued until the final collapse of the British Empire in the 1960s. Similar points could be made about the French experience in Algeria.[23] The troubled legacy of empire for post-colonial governments did not simply end with the withdrawal of troops from colonies and the handing over of power to local governments. The violence of counter-insurgency lived on in rebels – witness the current UK court case by Kenyans allegedly castrated by the security forces in the 1950s – and also in the hidden, personal histories of the soldiers who fought the insurgents and whose service is later judged harshly by those who were never there, as happened with Scottish soldiers who served in Aden in the 1960s and who allegedly abused local civilians, the subject of media revelations in the 1980s.[24] Newly uncovered colonial-era archives, such as those at Hanslope Park, refresh debates on the subject, kept alive by a post-colonial public and media sceptical of the official version of events and broadly sympathetic to the non-European victims of counter-insurgency.

The British experience of fighting insurgents across the empire over a great span of time raises uncomfortable long-term issues regarding the use of force, then and now, ones that confront policy-makers today. The British never had a tradition of 'hearts and minds' but, depending on the situation, combined savvy political concessions with considerable military force to rule the empire. The force employed came in the form of conventional military operations alongside coercion in the form of food control, passes to travel, employment restrictions, forced resettlement, and detention, as mentioned above. The 'softer' forms of power were as (or more) important for defeating the rebels than spectacular acts of violence by the security forces. This point can be lost in the media excitement directed at an isolated act of violence, such as at Batang Kali in Malaya. The counter-violence of articulate, mobilised insurgents mitigated the violence of counter-insurgency. For instance, in Palestine in the 1940s the British faced mobilised 'white' Jewish insurgents and they had no political cards to play; all that they could rely on was force, which did not work, and so the British lost.

The articulate Jewish resistance in Palestine, the subject of David Cesarani's article, was central to defeating the British, bringing to the fore in any debate on counter-insurgency the character of the opposition and the support that it had from foreign powers, in the case of the Jews from the US. In Malaya and Cyprus in the 1950s and 1960s, the British offered the political carrot of independence to help bring the conflict to a successful conclusion, but not before the British defeated or checked the rebels in the field. Without any political advantage, the only option was to use force and this had to be so maximal as to cow the insurgents and their civilian supporters into submission. This was the policy of the German armed forces during the Second World War in occupied Europe, one that worked in the violent context of the Nazis. Extreme, necessary force was once an option for colonial officials and soldiers faced with rebellions and in some situations it could and did work. Dyer's dismissal in 1919 after the Amritsar massacre signified a qualitative shift in the use of maximal force, at least for Britain.

Troops fighting rebels today cannot easily use maximal force to defeat the enemy, certainly not those deployed by liberal democracies with an informed public and free media. Mass media coverage of war from the 1960s, augmented today by blogs and instant filming, has disseminated the violence of counter-insurgency to a post-imperial world inflected by liberal doubt on such things, including the soldiers tasked with shooting people. Without a rapid workable political solution in the face of intractable insurgent opposition what can be done? The use of modern military technology – the surgical 'drone strike' – to avoid civilian casualties in some measure addresses this question, alongside careful management of the media and the development of economic, cultural, and government-building programmes in countries where insurgents threaten. In Afghanistan after 2001, the consequence has been the Sisyphean policy of nation building alongside 'hearts and minds' military operations by Coalition forces that are tough enough to alienate local peoples but not tough enough to terrorise the people into submission. Even today, maximal violence can defeat insurgents, in certain situations. For instance, government forces in Sri Lanka trapped rebel Tamil guerrillas (and civilians) in a coastal area on the island in 2009 and destroyed them with maximum firepower, crushing and decisively ending the decades-long Tamil rebellion. The studies presented here show that the management of violence is central to success or failure in counter-insurgency, whether it is Britain in the heyday of empire 'policing' its colonies or the Americans fighting Islamist insurgents today.

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military history is exemplary. The editor acknowledges the contribution of conference speakers such as Huw Bennett, Paul Dixon, Caroline Elkins, and Rod Thornton, whose work on counter-insurgency has been published elsewhere.[25] The topic of the conference is not new. Paul Dixon organised a similarly themed conference at the Royal United Services Institute in London in 2007, and the editor acknowledges his debt to the debates raised at that event, published in a different forum.[26]

Notes

1. Beckett, *The Roots of Counter-Insurgency*, 11.
2. Kitson, *Bunch of Five, 289*; Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 52ff.
3. Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*, 306.
4. Mockaitis, 'The British Experience in Counterinsurgency', 86–92.
5. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.
6. *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 235.
7. For the use of minimum force, see Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency*.
8. An issue usefully discussed in, Murray and Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue* and the subject of a conference held in Texas in June 2012: 'Reassessing Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practice', 7–9 June 2012, University of Texas, USA. See Gventer, 'Counterinsurgency'.
9. See http://www.mcuf.org/first_draft/index.html (accessed 4 July 2012).
10. Quoted in Murray and Sinnreich, *The Past as Prologue*, 2.
11. Ibid., *passim*.
12. 'Batang Kali Relatives Closer to the Truth about Britain's My Lai Massacre'. *The Guardian*, 25 January 2012.
13. Patrick Dewhurst, 'EOKA Fighters to Sue Brits over Torture', *Cyprus Mail*, 14 April 2011.
14. For more on this, see Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*; Bennett, 'The Mau Mau Emergency'; Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*; French, *British Way in Counter-insurgency*; Hughes, 'The Banality of Brutality'; Newsinger, 'Minimum Force'; Newsinger, *British Counter-Insurgency*; Shoul, 'Soldiers, Riots and Aid to the Civil Power' (2006), 'Soldiers, Riot Control and Aid to the Civil Power' (2008). For the latest word, see Reis, 'The Myth of British Minimum Force' and *Small Wars and Insurgencies, passim.*
15. Quoted in Swinson, *Six Minutes to Sunset*, 115.
16. Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar*, 405. See also Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment* and Lloyd, *The Amritsar Massacre*.
17. Author interview, Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah, Amman, Jordan, 21 June 2009. For a full account of Abu Gharbiyah, see Hughes, 'History of Violence'.
18. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*; Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*.
19. 'Revealed: How Britain tried to Legitimise Batang Kali Massacre'. *The Observer*, 6 May 2012.
20. 'Batang Kali Relatives Closer to the Truth about Britain's My Lai Massacre'. *The Guardian*, 25 January 2012.
21. Hussain, *The Jurisprudence of Emergency*.
22. Outlined in Hughes, 'The Banality of Brutality'.
23. Alexander and Keiger, *France and the Algerian War*; House and MacMaster, *Paris 1961*.
24. 'Castration and Conspiracy', *Daily Mail*, 6 April 2011; 'Argylls Dossier', *Sunday Mail*, 3 May 1981.
25. Bennett, 'Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency'; Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*; Thornton, 'The British Army and the Origins of its Minimum Force Philosophy'.
26. Dixon, 'Hearts and Minds?'

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