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'Paying the Butcher's Bill': Policing British Colonial Protest after 1918

Martin Thomas¹

This article reconsiders the forms and functions of colonial police actions in the repression of organized dissent. In part, it is a study of changing patterns of repressive behaviour in worsening economic conditions, an approach which explains the concentration on the inter-war period, cleaved as it was by the acute economic disruptions of the Depression years. In part, it is an investigation of the connections between perception and action. Focusing on Colonial Office instructions regarding protest policing, it examines the ways in which police and military security forces in the British Empire constructed enemies of colonial state 'order'. This, it is argued, shaped the resultant strategies of repressive restriction, riot control, and labour containment adopted.

Cet article réexamine les formes et les fonctions de l'intervention des polices coloniales dans la répression de l'opposition organisée. C'est, d'une part, une analyse de l'évolution de la répression sous l'effet de la dégradation des conditions économiques. Ceci explique la focalisation sur la période de l'entre-deux-guerres, marquée par les bouleversements intenses des années de la Dépression. C'est d'autre part une étude des relations entre la perception et l'action. En se concentrant sur les instructions du Colonial Office concernant le maintien de l'ordre, l'article examine de quelle manière la police et l'armée se représentaient les ennemis de l'«ordre» étatique colonial dans l'Empire britannique; son argument est que ces représentations informaient les stratégies répressives de contrôle, de maintien de l'ordre et d'encadrement du monde du travail.

Inside the Colonial Office, its colonnaded facade soaked by London's murky drizzle on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, Secretary of State for the Colonies Walter Long put his signature to a letter circulated to the governors and high commissioners in the generally warmer climes of the British Empire. Long's

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despatch was about civil disorder, and how colonial police forces might cope with it. It addressed the worst-case scenarios of colonial policing that were, it seemed, becoming alarmingly commonplace². The Minister's principal concern was not that colonial administrations would respond with too much violence but, rather, that they would dither, and apply too little, too late:

It is, I am sure, unnecessary that I should urge caution in having recourse to the use of military force for the maintenance of civil order or urge forbearance in dealing with riotous crowds by those in command of the forces so employed. The natural reluctance of responsible persons to employ weapons of precision against civilians may be relied upon to delay the adoption of military methods of repression until the need is urgent. I believe it is rather in the opposite direction that a Governor may be inclined on occasion to err. I therefore think it desirable to remind you that hesitation in invoking military aid when the need for it is apparent, or in making due use of it when obtained, may in the end lead to greater loss of life than would otherwise have occurred³.

Why was the Minister so concerned? As the guns fell silent in Europe, the scope for arbitrary arrest, collective fines, detention without trial, or state-sanctioned violence against even small gatherings of people in Europe's empires was very wide indeed. For its Colonial and War Office draughtsmen, however, two pre-requisites – deterrence and economy – underpinned the architecture of repressive legal powers that emerged over the winter of 1918-1919. The two certainties facing colonial governments confronted with disorder were that there would be neither enough locally available police or troops to go round, nor the money to pay for more⁴. In the British Empire especially, suppression of civil protest reflected a prevailing 'make do' administrative culture steeped in a Victorian ethos of self-reliant, self-financing colonial government, and reinforced by the swingeing expenditure cuts of the immediate post-war years⁵.

Set against this prevailing concern for economy, two other points bears emphasis. First was the broad agreement among security force officers about the merits of coercion as pre-emption, a variant of the minimum force ideal. Few questioned the calculation that coercive capacity, rapidly deployed, sustained colonial authority cheaply and efficiently. Policemen, soldiers and, increasingly, military aircraft were inevitably the key instruments in this strategy⁶. This 'repressive consensus' rarely broke down in the British Empire between the wars. Spectacular instances of such breakdown – as, for example, over the Amritsar massacre in 1919 or quarrels over the recruitment of Jewish police auxiliaries during the Arab rebellion in Palestine after 1936 – were

² NA, CO 323/771/B, Walter Long, Secretary of State for Colonies, letter to Colonial Governors, 11 November 1918. Enclosure 1 to secret circular dispatch of 11th November 1918: extract from Report of Commission appointed to inquire into the Featherstone Riots. The most comprehensive accounts of British colonial policing in this period remain Clayton, Killingray (1989); Anderson, Killingray (1991). Sinclair (2006) also contains valuable insights into the inter-war period.

³ NA, CO 323/771/B, *ibid*.

⁴ Plans for the reorganization of the internal security forces in the newly acquired Iraq Mandate illustrated the post-war pressure for economies in action, see: NA, WO 32/5234, 'Report of Macdonogh Committee on Mesopotamia for raising a police force and special military force from Indian or African units, 1921'.

⁵ Jeffery (1984, pp. 12-13, & 17-24).

⁶ NA, AIR 75/27, Official papers of MRAF Sir John Slessor, 'Air Control – The other point of view,' May 1931 and Air Staff memo, 'What Air Control means in war and peace; what it has achieved,' 20 June 1930; Omissi (1990); Satia (2006, pp. 26-32); Cox (1985); (1989); Townshend (1986).

exceptions rather than the rule. The second point is that the expansion of colonial police powers should not be mistaken for a consolidation of imperial rule. Protracted rebellions may have remained rare, but numerous colonies in the early twentieth century remained tense societies in which European hegemony was strongly contested. Put simply, repressive policing was usually born of weakness, not strength, and greater use of violence pointed to a crisis of authority rather than its ultimate incontestability.

A NEW REPRESSIVE CONSENSUS AFTER WORLD WAR I?

During the war just ending, Britain's empire, like its French counterpart, had been convulsed by numerous rural uprisings, urban riots, workplace protests, and other forms of civil disobedience. Often, these culminated in violent clashes with police and troops, what, in Charles Tilly's terms, would be described as 'contentious action'⁷. Among French colonies badly affected, Algeria and much of French West Africa stood out. Reactions there were sharpest to the coercive recruitment drives of 1915 to 1917. At the height of the disturbances in West Africa from December 1915 to July 1916 French soldiers and police destroyed over 200 villages along the Niger River valley in punishment for dissent⁸. With the obvious exception of Ireland's Easter rising, the worst disorder in the British Empire occurred on the island of Ceylon. During May and June 1915 the colonial government in Colombo was forced to declare martial law having lost political control in several provinces during a spate of inter-communal violence that originated in processional clashes during Buddhist religious festivals between the Sinhalese majority and recent Indian Muslim immigrant traders, known as coastal Moors⁹. Additional troops were called out in the central highlands and in the island's south-western quadrant. Loyalist irregulars were also recruited to help put down widespread unrest, the socio-economic, religious, and communal origins of which the authorities found impossible to disentangle¹⁰. Viewed paradoxically both at the time and by historians as a spontaneous anti-Muslim pogrom and a sign of emergent anti-colonial sentiment, more recent interpretations point to the prominent role played in the disturbances by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists, who harnessed the backing of sympathetic local agitators to orchestrate the violence¹¹. Whatever the case, the bald statistics made grim reading. At least forty Moors were killed and the numbers arrested ran close to 9,000¹². The clampdown's severity and its lack of selectivity compounded the humiliation felt by British administrators in Ceylon, India, and Whitehall¹³.

⁷ Hanagan (2010, pp. 283-285).

⁸ Service Historique de la Défense-Département de l'Armée de Terre (SHD-DAT), 5H6/D2, Philippe Pétain report, 'Troubles et soulèvements intérieurs en Afrique Occidentale Française pendant la guerre 1914-1918', 26 March 1925.

⁹ The sequence of events and subsequent inquiry are laid out in two files: NA, CO 537/677 and 678.

¹⁰ Kannangara (1984, pp.131-147); Jayawardena (1970).

¹¹ The differing interpretations are critiqued in Rowell (2009), and Rogers (1987, pp. 591-594).

¹² Blackton (1970).

¹³ NA, CO 537/677, CO Ceylon riots file, 1915; Fernando (1969); for administrative reforms in Ceylon from the 1880s onwards, see Mills (2005, pp. 251-271).

The subsequent Colonial Office inquiry recognized this as a case where the use of troops 'in aid of the civil power' had gone badly wrong. Reference was made to the so-called Featherstone 'massacre' of September 1893 in which two striking miners in the West Yorkshire town of Featherstone were shot dead after the army was called in to assist the policing of a protracted pithead lock-out¹⁴. The Featherstone shootings made British governments more reluctant to deploy troops alongside policemen to police industrial disputes and major public disturbances even during the huge resurgence of industrial unrest in Britain between 1909 and 1912¹⁵. In this, they were only partially successful. Not only was the army called in to help contain protracted disorders in the Rhondda Valley coalfield in November 1910, but legal authority over the use of police and troops in and around Tonypandy passed inexorably from the police chief constable to the military commander¹⁶. Neither was able to prevent protests over pithead lock-outs escalating into riotous confrontations between striking miners, police and troops. Official indecision, and recrimination between the authorities involved, added to the sense of breakdown, although no one was killed¹⁷. Fatalities were also avoided during the mineworkers' and dockyard strikes in South Wales and London during 1911. But soldiers called in to escort police vans carrying rioters arrested during Liverpool's bitter transport strike shot men dead during the largest mass demonstration in the city on 13 August 1911¹⁸.

As Barbara Weinberger notes, in the wake of this 'great unrest' the British government was compelled to adopt much clearer standards and legal regulations regarding the containment of violent civil protest¹⁹. The question confronting Colonial Office officials a few years later was whether the Ceylon riots should do the same in the British Empire. The answer was yes. Sandwiched between increasingly violent worker protest in British India before the war and the reappearance of urban food riots immediately after it, the Ceylon disturbances left a lasting administrative legacy in changes made at Walter Long's behest to the policing of colonial demonstrations²⁰.

It fell to the Government of India and the India Office in London to resolve the dilemmas of internal security in the British Raj. But Ceylon was a Colonial Office responsibility. Taking its cue from British India's longer and more varied experience of mass protest, the Colonial Office was, in some degree, simply 'catching up' with the imperial bureaucracy of the Raj²¹. The 1915 Defence of India Act, justified at the time as a wartime expedient, arrogated emergency powers to imperial security forces, including its armed policemen. Sweeping legislative powers to suppress Indian political violence, especially prevalent in Bengal and the Punjab, would be further entrenched by the Anarchical and Military Crimes Act of 1919. This legislation was itself the product of a judicial review of extended peacetime emergency

¹⁴ Neville (1976).

¹⁵ NA, CO 323/771/B, enclosure 1: extract from 'Report of Commission appointed to inquire into the Featherstone Riots,' n.d.; Fletcher (1996, pp. 252-260).

¹⁶ Morgan (1987, pp. 44-48 & 154-164); Vogler (1991, pp. 74-78).

¹⁷ Vogler (1991, pp. 78-80).

¹⁸ Weinberger (1990, pp. 83-85, 92-93, & 108-110).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (pp. 116-117).

²⁰ Basu (1998); Arnold (1979).

²¹ For details of continuing changes in security policing of India's more restive northern regions, see Kudaisya (2004).

powers conducted on behalf of the Government of India by a committee headed by British judge, S. A. T. Rowlatt²². If India spurred some empire-wide changes, others were prompted by the frictions in government arising from the breakdown of British rule in Ireland, whose political violence reverberated throughout metropolitan society²³.

Charles Townshend brings out the fundamental clash of civil-military cultures between politicians and generals in Britain and the empire by focusing on the arguments and anomalies of martial law legislation as imposed in Ireland following the Easter Rising of April 1916²⁴. Where army officers had always favoured clarity regarding their right to use force during a civil emergency, the coalition government preferred ambiguity²⁵. Both positions were understandable. Soldiers feared courts martial or worse if they were found to have transgressed the perilously imprecise line between legitimate use of lethal force against sedition and the murder of civilians. Decisions to fire on violent crowds, strikers or gunmen might well be pardoned by a retrospective Act of Indemnity but, then again, they might not. Army commanders faced cross-examination, damage to reputation, or even dismissal and imprisonment if suspected of having used excessive violence. For their part, Westminster politicians across the political spectrum valued the threat implicit in martial law over its actual application. Enacting martial law signified the failure of politics. To impose it was to acknowledge the incapacity of the state, the police, and the judiciary to function as before²⁶. Speaking in relation to Ireland, Townshend puts it thus, 'Insofar as it had a positive intention, the government wished to keep the army in its traditional, low-profile role of supplying aid to the civil power. British political leaders were naturally concerned to maintain the impression that the disruption resulting from the republican campaign had not exhausted the normal resources of the civil administration'²⁷.

It was a forlorn hope. Governmental determination to conserve the appearance of normality became untenable as Ireland's political violence intensified²⁸. To make matters worse, senior politicians, army officers and trained civil servants were soon wrestling with the more basic problem of how to police Ireland in the short term while preparing for partition and withdrawal²⁹. In these fast-moving and increasingly chaotic circumstances, rare were the officials who fully grasped the theoretical and practical differences between the key legislative instruments designed to prevent sedition or violent protest. Few, for instance, were crystal clear about the lines separating martial law as applied in war-torn Ireland from the Defence of the Realm Act passed on the outbreak of war in August 1914. Most continued to make reference to another precedent entirely – the procedures of the long-established Riot

²² Boyce (1999, pp. 651-655); Arnold (1977, pp. 102-104); Silvestri (2000). This legislation was known by its catch-all appellation, the Rowlatt Acts.

²³ For the wartime background, see Hennessey (1998). For an overview of the war's conduct, see Showalter, Kautt (1999, chapters 2 & 5-7). For a unique insider's perspective on its imperial ramifications, see Jeffery (2006, chapters 12-13).

²⁴ Townshend (1989, pp. 278-292).

²⁵ Townshend (1993, pp. 39-52).

²⁶ Townshend (1982, pp. 171-175 & 182-187).

²⁷ Townshend, (1989, p. 287).

²⁸ Townshend (1983, pp. 277-321 *passim*); Gardiner (2009, pp. 31-60 *passim*); Costello (1988). For the unofficial perspective, see Augusteijn (1996).

²⁹ Walter Long stands out as an exception here, see Murphy (1986).

Act with its more limited recourse to troop call-outs in time of civil or industrial strife³⁰. Only in January 1934 did the Army Council issue regular army officers stationed in imperial territory with a digestible fifty-page booklet containing definitive guidance on the distinctions between their responsibilities to assist police in 'normal circumstance', under martial law and 'in aid to the civil power'³¹. In the same year, the Colonial Office commissioned a similar, pocket-sized instruction book, 'The Powers, Training and Handling of Civil Police in Times of Internal Disorder', designed to be carried by colonial police officers on duty. But when the booklet was finally completed two years later in July 1936, it lived up to its cumbersome title and was immediately rejected on the grounds that it was too big, too complicated, and substantially irrelevant³². A specially-appointed inter-departmental committee was sent back to the drawing board in an effort to translate complex legal procedure into simple, sequential instructions in case of public disorder³³.

As if these abstract considerations were not taxing enough, immediately after the First World War anxiety in Whitehall about the behaviour of the large numbers of ex-servicemen recruited to colonial police forces was intensified by the prominent part played by former soldiers in race riots, rowdy demonstrations, and street violence in mainland Britain in the first two years after the Armistice³⁴. The brutality of British paramilitary auxiliaries in Ireland offered further proof of the political damage that could be done locally and internationally by such groups³⁵. At the opposing end of the political spectrum, thousands of demobilized service personnel joined the fast expanding ranks of Britain's trade unions, whose membership peaked at 8,348,000 in 1920, double the 1914 figure. The potential for political violence and industrial strife in the new decade ahead to eclipse their pre-war antecedents in scale, breadth and revolutionary potential was impossible to ignore³⁶.

It did not seem far-fetched to suggest that a brutalized generation of young men inured to lethal violence and alienated from civilian life by their dreadful war experiences might destabilize imperial Britain³⁷. For some commentators, it was only a matter of time³⁸. In these circumstances, sharp divergences between the views of soldiers, politicians, and bureaucrats were readily comprehensible. But the gulf between them caused lasting confusion and, in the short term, helped account for the erosion of civil liberties during the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21³⁹.

As Townshend concludes:

³⁰ For the Riot Act's eighteenth-century origins under the Hanoverian regime, see Vogler (1991, pp. 1-2).

³¹ NA, WO 279/796, 'Notes on imperial policing, 1934,' Army Council booklet issued on 30 January 1934.

³² NA, CO 323/1519/1, Home Office letter to F.J. Howard, Colonial Office, 12 January 1937.

³³ NA, CO 323/1519/1, Colonial Office draft letter 'For Mr Williams,' 12 February 1937.

³⁴ Rowe (2000); Jenkinson (1996, pp. 92-111, 2008).

³⁵ Fitzpatrick (1996). The role of IRA reprisals in Ireland's conflict escalation is examined in Eichenberg (2010, *passim*).

³⁶ Weinberger (1990, pp. 148-149 & 160-161).

³⁷ Lawrence (2003); For parallels with counter-revolutionary ex-servicemen in the defeated states of Central Europe, see Gerwarth (2008).

³⁸ Overly (2009, pp. 10-15).

³⁹ Townshend (1989, pp. 288-292).

What became clear in the end was that a modern liberal-democratic state required an emergency mechanism more sophisticated than martial law to cope with domestic crises. A workable system required formal codification of emergency powers; to go from the ordinary law to the arbitrary “will of the general,” shielded retrospectively by an Act of Indemnity, was a move too jarring to be feasible. In practice, a civil-military power struggle developed, reducing the soldiers to bafflement and anger and preventing the pursuit of any coherent “governing” policy...To the last, the civil authorities showed no sign of being able to find a *modus operandi* or *modus vivendi* with the military⁴⁰.

EXEMPLARY FORCE AND DANGEROUS PRECEDENTS

The Indian and Irish experiences clearly impressed Britain’s imperial rulers with the need for sharper legislative instruments and muscular police powers to uphold colonial control in the more volatile circumstances of the immediate post-war period⁴¹. But the conviction that prompt, decisive intervention was necessary to crush rebellion was neither new, nor especially British. In Australia, for example, outspoken support for Sinn Fein among a highly vocal minority, when combined with official fears of Bolshevik-style worker dissent, were enough to provoke fundamental changes in police and security service organization between 1917 and 1919⁴². And use of targeted, exemplary force against crowds to demonstrate the physical power and moral authority of the state was supposedly axiomatic to French policing of industrial protest⁴³. Long after the use of selective lethal violence became a rarity in British public order policing, the administrators, police and military officers responsible for the British Empire’s security remained attached to this notion of exemplary force⁴⁴. But what was it? What, indeed, was a crowd, and how did one know when such a gathering assumed dangerous proportions?

These were questions to which Walter Long wanted answers – and answers of the empirical, pragmatic sort preferred within Whitehall over the abstract thoughts of crowd theorists like Gustave Le Bon⁴⁵. Yet one should not take the image of doughty British pragmatism, informed by precedent rather than theoretical insight, too far. The associations made by Le Bon and others, such as Scipio Sighele, Henry Fournial, and Gabriel Tarde, between criminality and crowd behaviour, between collective psychology and urban disorder, would influence lawmakers and law-enforcers for decades to come⁴⁶. Refracting the work of these crowd theorists, Louis Lépine, Prefect of Police in turn-of-the-century Paris, paid especially close attention to collective assembly – whether spontaneous or pre-planned – as the foremost internal threat to state security and law-abiding bourgeois society. Lépine returned to this theme in his memoirs, published on the eve of the Great Depression in 1929.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (p. 291).

⁴¹ The best treatment of British imperial security concerns in the immediate post-war period remains Jeffery (1984); see also Gallagher (1981).

⁴² Finnane (2008, pp. 11-12).

⁴³ Townshend (1982, p. 171); Johansen (2005).

⁴⁴ Townshend (1982, p. 168).

⁴⁵ Barrows (1981, pp. 3-5).

⁴⁶ Barrows (1981, pp. 141-144).

Again reflecting the crowd theory first popularized in the feverish political atmosphere of the 1890s, he dwelt on the terrifying spectre of the enraged proletarian mass hell-bent on social revolution⁴⁷.

It is impossible to say how many colonial police officers, French or British, had heard of Scipio Sighele or Gabriel Tarde, still less how many had read their work. But it seems a reasonable supposition that most politicians with security responsibilities in Paris and London had some acquaintance with Gustave Le Bon's ideas, as well as more than a passing interest in Louis Lépine. Even those who had never encountered their writings directly were bound to do so indirectly when reading the police manuals and individual colonial government instructions that dealt with police responses to public protest and crowd violence. British experts in colonial policing may never have read up on crowd theory in the manner that, almost forty years later, French psychological warfare officers in the Algerian War consumed Sergei Chakhotine's ideas on mass persuasion and propaganda⁴⁸. What is certain is that British officials between the wars were increasingly preoccupied by violent industrial protest and by the potential for sudden explosions of crowd violence at home and in the empire⁴⁹.

Thus we return to Walter Long. Using the dry, bureaucratic phraseology of his senior legal adviser, the Colonial Secretary explained the problem:

Experience in many parts of the Empire has proved that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the responsible authorities at a time of crisis to draw up, on the spur of the moment, instructions to those engaged in repressing disorder which shall be precise, adequate, and clear enough to guide persons without legal training and perhaps without practice in the exercise of public authority. The questions involved are difficult, and there is no time to study them, or to consider and provide against all the possibilities of misunderstanding inherent in conveying legal principles to those who must necessarily, in the majority of cases, be unprepared by previous training to grasp them. Uncertainty as to their powers and duties may lead such persons either to take refuge in inaction or, from excess of zeal, to adopt measures which cannot be justified. Either course may have deplorable results⁵⁰.

Simply put, neither colonial governments nor their policemen knew what to do when confronted with mass protest. Some reacted too slowly, others too quickly; some with insufficient shows of strength, others with excessive brutality. But what was 'proportionate' state violence and when should it be used? Here again, answers turned on what constituted a crowd or, more exactly, a threatening one. It was this that Long wanted his subordinate governors to clarify.

The Minister's invitation to individual colonial governments to explain precisely the circumstances in which police or military units were authorized to fire on groups of unarmed protesters masked the fact that Colonial Office officials, along with

⁴⁷ Lépine (1929, pp. 128-138), cited in Barrows (1981, p. 190).

⁴⁸ Paret (1964, p. 58); Ambler (1966, p. 318); Kelly (1965, p. 135). All cited in MacMaster (unpublished); Sergei Chakhotin, *Le Viol des Foules* and the development of European propaganda, 1914 to 1960,' unpublished article, note 3. I am very grateful to Neil for letting me read this piece of work.

⁴⁹ Waddington, Jones, Critcher (1989, pp. 3-4).

⁵⁰ NA, CO 323/771/B, Walter Long, Secretary of State for Colonies, letter to Colonial Governors, 11 November 1918.

colleagues from the War Office, had already drawn up revised guidelines on the use of lethal force against demonstrators as part of the official inquiry into the Ceylon disorders⁵¹. These were now to be rolled out across the Empire, ostensibly as part of a consultation process, a stock-taking of colonial policing in the immediate post-war months. The exercise was certainly timely. Many of the Empire's key political spaces were especially unruly: Ireland, India, Egypt, and Iraq, to name only the most obvious examples manifested everything across the spectrum of internal disorder from outright civil war to army massacre, urban revolution, and ethno-religious uprising⁵². In other places, police struggled to cope with outbursts of inter-communal violence. Blood-letting between Arabs and Jews began with two days of rioting in Jerusalem's old city in April 1920 before Britain's mandate over Palestine was even confirmed⁵³. More protracted clashes in Jaffa and Ramleh in early May 1921 left forty-eight Arabs and forty-seven Jews dead⁵⁴. Perhaps most shocking of all, South Africa would see state suppression of industrial unrest transformed into government-endorsed race killing by settler vigilantes during the Rand miners' strikes of 1922⁵⁵.

But, in November 1918, and for the next twenty years, the Colonial Office's principal concern in matters of empire policing was with more a mundane, but nonetheless vital issue: how to maintain the apparatus of colonial authority without calling upon military power to uphold it. As this problem implied, the answer hinged on colonial police forces, their training and composition, their deployment and their actions. Behind this challenge lurked deeper questions of state legitimacy, or the 'right to rule' of imperial nations that would soon be tested in new ways by the League of Nations and its mandate system. If, as the European imperial powers insisted, their colonial authority conferred the right to monopolize the use of violence to guarantee internal order, then the forms and scale of such violence required tighter regulation in an era when both internal threats to Empire and international scrutiny of imperial responses to such threats seemed bound to increase⁵⁶. Colonial authorities had to act consistently if, as was possible, those that demonstrated against them might be killed in the name of good government.

⁵¹ NA, CO 323/771/B, Enclosure I, 'Report of commission appointed to inquire into the Featherstone Riots,' and enclosure III, 'Orders for officers and others in command of troops acting for the assistance of the civil authorities'. Both 11 November 1918.

⁵² The following reports give a sense of the empire-wide crisis felt at the time: NA, WO 35/214, 'Report on the Intelligence Branch of the Chief of Police, Dublin Castle from May 1920 to July 1921'; IOR, Mss EUR D1194: Cyril George Grassby typescript: notes on Bengal police, terrorism and policing in Darjeeling district, 1921-40; NA, FO 407/184, doc. 152, 'Memorandum by Sir Ronald Graham on the unrest in Egypt,' 9 April 1919, doc. 373, 'Expressions of opinion on political conditions in [Egyptian] provinces extracted mainly from the reports of British political officers,' 24 May 1919; KV1/17: "D" Branch Report: The Organization of the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau, 1921; WO 32/5628, Governor of the Straits Settlements to Secretary of State for Colonies, 'Proposals for the establishment of a political intelligence bureau in Malaya,' 18 October 1921.

⁵³ Muhammad Haj Amin al-Hussaini, the future Mufti of Jerusalem, and 'Arif al'Arif, editor of the newspaper *Suriyyah al-Janubiyah* (Southern Syria) fled to Transjordan after being charged with incitement over the Jerusalem riots. See Jbara (1985, pp. 32-35); Elpeleg (1993, p. 6).

⁵⁴ Kolinsky (1994, p. 32); Wasserstein (1991, pp. 100-105). Palestine High commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel suspended Jewish immigration in response to the 1921 unrest.

⁵⁵ Krikler (2005, 1996, 1999).

⁵⁶ For discussion of this scrutiny and its effectiveness, see Callahan (1999); Pedersen (2006).

Viewed in a certain light, writing new rules for the containment of political violence (actual or potential) by the use of lethal fire power (itself, state-sanctioned political violence) was even a progressive step. So was engaging on-the-spot officials, if not colonial peoples, in the process. The Colonial Office certainly thought so. Regulations about police riot control, about troop call-outs 'in aid of the civil' authorities, and about the circumstances in which martial law could be declared had been similarly codified in Britain over the course of the nineteenth century⁵⁷. It was time the colonies followed suit. Moreover, the replies received to Walter Long's circular highlighted alarming disparities in practice between individual territories. Several colonial governments made reference to dubious past precedents – the Duke of Wellington's reflections on sabre charges by mounted troops in Britain's industrial cities or the bloody suppression of Jamaica's Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 for instance – to justify the harshest crowd control measures⁵⁸. And Long himself consulted the 1866 inquiry report into the Morant Bay uprising, which lambasted the government in Kingston for having 'thrown away the advantage of the terror which the very name of martial law is calculated to create in a population such as that which exists in this Island'⁵⁹.

Talk of terror, of cutting down protesters with bullets and bayonets, jarred with the emergent post-war mantra of 'minimum force' policing. Ever since a 1907 official inquiry into the use of buckshot to break up prison riots in Trinidad, the Governors of the West Indies remained divided over the permissible extent of police 'free firing' without prior authorization⁶⁰. Where volleys were clearly ordered by superior officers and carefully targeted at identified 'ringleaders' the use of lethal firearms was commended. Such was the case, for example, during rioting in Jamaica's port of Montego Bay on 5 April 1902 in which the city Court House came under attack. Inspector H.T. Thomas, the police officer in charge, deployed a party of constables who fired twenty-five shots at the protest leaders. He was later praised for his decisive action in the official inquiry into the day's events⁶¹. Elsewhere, the Governors conceded, more random police shootings remained a recurrent feature of civil disorder in the British-ruled Caribbean, something they ascribed to the natural excitability of 'Negro policemen' and the excessive generosity of white officers in supplying their subordinates with ammunition⁶². The crass dismissal of random killing as a form of local exuberance, albeit dating from ten years earlier, showed that Long's vision of orderly protest policing would necessitate profound change in the psychology of certain colonial officials and in the policing practiced in parts of the empire's city streets, prison yards and cane-fields.

⁵⁷ Townshend (1993, pp. 37-41).

⁵⁸ NA, CO 323/771/B, enclosure II.

⁵⁹ NA, CO 323/771/B, enclosure VI: Extract from report of Jamaica Royal Commission, 1866: 'The duration of martial law.'

⁶⁰ NA, CO 323/771/B, enclosure II: West Indies, 'The Use of Buckshot Ammunition in the Suppression of Riots,' memorandum by the John R. Chancellor, Secretary of the Colonial Defence Committee, 15 August 1907.

⁶¹ Rhodes House Library, Mss. W. Ind. r. 9: Colonel Clive A. Crosbie-Smith, 'The Jamaica Constabulary Force, 1867-1938,' pp. 14-15.

⁶² NA, CO 323/771/B, Enclosure II: West Indies, 'The Use of Buckshot Ammunition in the Suppression of Riots,' 15 August 1907.

None of this should surprise. In the absence of basic freedoms of association or of assembly, let alone of democratic representation, Africans, Asians and West Indians living under the British flag were liable to be treated as seditious whenever they gathered in even small groups (smaller than a football team or a wedding party, for example). They were considered threatening if they reacted too slowly to official instructions to disperse. If they ignored those instructions entirely, the consequences might be commensurately worse. Take, for instance, the so-called 'Hosein riots' of 1884, the worst single incident of police violence against Indian indentured labourers in British-ruled Trinidad before the First World War. In this case, the labourers' fateful decision to defy an official ban on public processions led to clashes with police during the Shiite religious festival of Muhurram, or Hosein. The outcome was the killing of twenty-two labourers and the wounding of hundreds more⁶³.

Trinidad's Hosein riots remind us of another factor: the role of employers. Their claims that the actions of 'rioters', strikers or, as in this case, festival celebrants, were prejudicial to productivity or a menace to crops, livestock or commercial property, could increase the likelihood of harsher protest policing. Local authorities often responded by instructing police to treat such demonstrations as the equivalent of political disorder, particularly if those employers happened to be European. For instance, the Indian Tea Association, which lobbied on behalf of British planters, worked in conjunction with police representatives in the Assam and Bengal Legislative Assemblies to ensure a common approach to any labour unrest on their garden estates⁶⁴. French rubber producers in Indochina, Dutch planters in Sumatra, and Belgian timber producers in the Congo worked in similar fashion, although not always with success.

Not surprisingly, British India, in the early twentieth century still the largest colonial agglomeration of them all, shone particularly harsh light on the hollowness of minimum force policing. As Prashant Kidambi notes in his study of the policing of Bombay before the First World War, studies of the colonial police in British India have stressed its relative weakness as an instrument of social control, highlighting funding shortages, limited social reach, and de facto reliance on both local elites and compliant auxiliaries to make feasible any regular policing of the rural poor and the emerging urban working class⁶⁵. Ranajit Guha's 1998 study of the colonial state in India, for instance, suggests that British reliance on coercive force to subjugate a population denied political opportunity to express its demands necessarily undermined Britain's claims to hegemonic control. Ruling through coercion and not consent paradoxically set narrow limits to Britain's capacity to embed colonial rule among India's population⁶⁶. Drawing on Guha's finding, Purnima Bose takes this absence of hegemonic control one step further. In her analysis of British parliamentary censure of General Reginald Dyer for ordering Gurkha and Baluchi troops to gun down hundreds of civilian protesters at Amritsar on 13 April 1919, Bose argues that the very absence of hegemonic security force control produced the inclination

⁶³ Lai (1993, p. 145). The riots led to a commission of inquiry into their causes and consequences, the only such official investigation in the history of indenture in Trinidad.

⁶⁴ IOR, India Tea Association papers, Mss EUR F174/628a: ITA General Committee 1937 report, pp. 7, 37-38.

⁶⁵ Kidambi (2004, pp. 27-34).

⁶⁶ Guha (1998, pp. 271-283).

among 'rogue' officers to extreme acts of exemplary state violence of which the Amritsar massacre was only the most egregious inter-war example⁶⁷. Framed differently, heightened colonial coercion derived from the absence of real authority, not from the capacity of a powerful state to act without restraint⁶⁸. General Dyer regarded his mission in Amritsar not as the restoration of civil authority but as a wartime operation against a hostile population. For Dyer, 'Amritsar was enemy territory'⁶⁹. After the massacre his supporters maintained that Dyer's actions had literally turned back a rising tide of aggressive Indian humanity. The image of a near unstoppable torrent of undifferentiated, innately violent colonial subjects only dissuaded from rebellion by exemplary punishment – by death or the fear of it – recurred time and again in the turbulent years immediately after 1918⁷⁰.

Coercive policing, then, was a powerful indicator of the colonial state's limited reach. Kidambi rightly acknowledges that this interpretive trend towards equating state violence with state weakness has enhanced our understanding of the colonial police in India, not as a powerful monolith, but as a complex and dynamic social organization whose local networks of influence, recruitment, and co-option enabled it to function in increasingly testing circumstances. By extension, the absence or collapse of these networks could lead to a rapid loss of control, often with appalling consequences. Kidambi's conclusion is damning: 'if earlier studies of the colonial police perceived it as emblematic of an omnipotent colonial state, the revisionist view emphasises the 'fragility of its control'. Yet, as he concedes, some of these revisionist accounts go too far, overstating the weaknesses of the colonial police and the extent to which it became 'imprisoned' within the confines of local networks of power in particular urban contexts⁷¹.

Perhaps the most salient point to emerge in Kidambi's study relates to the intimate working relationships between the major employers in Bombay's textile industry and local police commanders. Strikes and other workplace disputes over pay and conditions in the textile sector, as well as police efforts to regulate the casual 'economy of the street' in which numerous poor economic migrants scratched out a living, triggered more sustained working class protest in the city's poorest quarters than the better known outbreaks of plague and inter-communal clashes between Hindu and Muslim. These last events occasioned greater collective violence and notorious instances of lethal police intervention to curb urban rioting. But they were not the stuff of everyday policing. Put differently, while historians have been drawn to major outbreaks of urban disorder in Bombay that required most high-profile police intervention, notably in 1893 and 1898, the more workaday activity of Bombay's police centred on the workplace, whether it concerned the informal economy of street-trading or, more especially, the expanding numbers of rural labourers that had migrated to work in the city's textile mills. It was here that the circuits of cooperation between police, employers, and local auxiliaries functioned most clearly of all. Heightened police interventionism, typified by the greater police

⁶⁷ Bose (2003, pp. 31-37). For more details of the inquiry into Dyer's actions, see Fein (1986); Collett (2005); Sayer (1991).

⁶⁸ Sherman (2009, pp. 16-37).

⁶⁹ Kingsley Kent (2009, p. 67).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* (2009, pp. 68-74).

⁷¹ Kidambi (2004, p. 27).

patrolling enshrined in the 1902 City Police Act, was meant to ensure public order through closer surveillance of Bombay's highly mobile, densely packed labour force, whether at the factory gates or on the streets⁷².

POLICING PUBLIC SPACE: 'PAYING THE BUTCHER'S BILL'

Returning to Walter Long's 1919 inquiry, what did the Colonial Office recommend police officers should do when confronted with dangerous protest? First, that, once due warnings were given, it was preferable to make early, accurate use of lethal force to disperse a crowd. Delaying the order to fire or shooting ineffectually either over protesters heads or at their legs (as occurred in the 1915 Ceylon disturbances) antagonized demonstrators without terrorizing them. This risked a greater loss of life at a later stage. Second, that this shoot to kill instruction was to target 'ringleaders' wherever feasible⁷³. Finally, that shooting as execution (presumably, after capture), as opposed to shooting to prevent the escalation of unrest, remained illegal and, therefore, impermissible⁷⁴. Whatever the practical difficulties of discerning and maintaining such distinctions, colonial administrators generally presumed that this could be done.

With the professionalization of colonial forces tied to more effective protest policing, we should not be surprised at the apparent ease with which some colonial forces served the needs of colonial employers between the wars. Colonies' Legislative Councils usually contained a strong business and settler representation. And workplaces, industrial or agricultural, were the commonest locations for collective protests, whether spontaneous stoppages, longer-term strikes or other demonstrations. As we saw in the case of Assam's influential tea planters, some police forces had worked hand-in-glove with their local business community for years. International settlements in colonial, or quasi-colonial, port cities were another discrete location where the demands of commerce and policing intersected. As in the case of British India, Colonial Office staff took an interest in the peculiarities of local policing even though, as an international settlement run by a municipal council, Shanghai did not fall under Colonial Office jurisdiction. From its inception in 1854 the Shanghai Municipal Police Force (SMP) defended the privileges of the Treaty Port's British residents, upholding the barriers – political, commercial, racial, and social – between British 'Shanghaianders' and their 'foreign' neighbours, whether European or Chinese. So vociferous and, on occasion, so violent was their policing of these exclusions and the protests they provoked that, as Robert Bickers has shown, the ramifications could be global⁷⁵. The SMP's suppression of riots in Shanghai on

⁷² *Ibid.* (2004, pp. 28–41).

⁷³ Defending security force killings of Jamaicans after the Morant Bay uprising in October 1865, the Island's Governor stressed that 'ringleaders' were quickly identified and appropriately targeted, see: Kostal (2005, pp. 24–28).

⁷⁴ NA, CO 323/771/B, copy of Ceylon Orders for Troops' and 1915 Martial Law declaration. For an interesting, albeit more institutionally extreme, parallel in the punishment of 'ringleaders' of colonial insurrection, in this case, the Herero of German South West Africa, see Hull (2005, pp. 17–19).

⁷⁵ Bickers (1991, pp. 185–198).

13 May 1925, which left eleven Chinese dead, even marked a watershed in the development of the Chinese nationalist movement⁷⁶.

Yet, despite the scale of these adverse consequences, few lessons were learned. Ambassador Sir Miles Lampson in Peking pressed for a reconsideration of policing in Shanghai's International Settlements but the city's colonial police culture survived⁷⁷. Indeed, the SMP's continued treatment of anti-imperialist demonstrations, not just as an illegal gathering, but as a form of urban crime would be replicated by other British colonial police units deployed to contain civil unrest⁷⁸. Take, for instance, the most violent clashes of the 1920s between the Straits Settlements police and Chinese demonstrators in Singapore. These occurred on 12 March 1927 during a march commemorating the second anniversary of the death of Kuomintang-founder and nationalist patriot, Sun Yat Sen. The previous year's commemorations had passed off peacefully and so the police scaled back the number of officers deployed twelve months later. Yet the authorities' intolerance of open support for the Kuomintang (KMT) had hardened in between times. This was largely because of the Chinese nationalist party's adoption of a strident pro-leftist position in the wake of the earlier Shanghai riots in May 1925 in which the municipal police played so pivotal a role⁷⁹. The tenor of relations between the Straits Settlements police and Singapore's Chinese community also changed decisively once news of the events in Shanghai became more widely known⁸⁰. Police raids on KMT offices, Chinese night schools and meeting houses increased in frequency, and young members of the Chinese Hailam community (with ties to Hainan Island, China's southern-most province) were targeted as a troublesome source of seditious, anti-western propaganda⁸¹.

Singapore's 1927 march turned ugly after marchers surrounded a police station at South Bridge Road in Kreta Ayer. This was a predominantly Chinese district of the city and was known for relatively high levels of Triad-related crime. Kreta Ayer's local constables, like those of the entire Straits Settlements force, comprised a mixture of Malays, Sikhs, and Punjabi Pashtuns. As Singapore's Attorney-General noted with studied under-statement during the inquest into what followed, 'unlike the police at home, the local police are not the friends of the people, from the Chinese point of view'⁸². Architecture played almost as much of a role as ethnicity.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* (1991, pp. 162, 179-182); Bickers (1999, pp. 3-4 & 69-70). British-officered, the SMP relied on an Indian, predominantly Sikh, rank and file, in this respect akin to the Straits Settlements Police in Singapore and Penang.

⁷⁷ NA, WO 32/2829, F7633/25/10, Report on formation of a special police force for Shanghai, enclosure 1: Sir Miles Lampson to Shanghai Consul-General Sir S. Barton, 27 July 1927.

⁷⁸ Wakeman Jnr (1997, pp. 8 & 59-64).

⁷⁹ NA, WO 32/5350, C.P. 306(25), Joint memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 'Kuo Min Tang,' June 1925; extract from Malaya Bulletin of Political intelligence no. 33, October/November 1925.

⁸⁰ NA, CO 273/534/16, Malayan bulletin of political intelligence no. 38, April 1926, compiled by the Political Intelligence Bureau, Singapore, 10 May 1926.

⁸¹ NA, CO 273/538/2, H. Fairburn, Inspector-General of Police, Straits Settlements, 'Report on the Kreta Ayer shooting incident, March 12th, 1927', pp. 25-26; WO 32/5350, Governor Clementi, Government House Singapore, to Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Passfield, 8 March 1930.

⁸² NA, CO 273/538/2, G. Seth, acting attorney-general, Straits Settlements, 'Report on the Kreta Ayer Inquest', 7 July 1927, pp. 2-3. Seth was Solicitor general at time of Inquest proceedings.

The Kreta Ayer police building had multiple entrances, making it susceptible to being 'rushed' by a hostile crowd. Fearing this eventuality, the station's British police commander, Chief Officer Dale, went outside in a bid to mollify those gathering outside. Moments later he was kicked to the ground and left with concussion, leaving his men without instruction once they managed to drag him back inside. Soon afterwards four Malay constables were also badly beaten. Shooting began when protestors tried to storm the station⁸³. The police fired twenty-nine rounds, killing five Hailam demonstrators and two passers-by, one Indian, the other Chinese⁸⁴.

Was this a replay of the events in Shanghai two years earlier? Singapore's senior police officers and legal officials thought not. Their view was simple. Violence of the sort witnessed at Kreta Ayer was a foreign import, uncharacteristic of the city's well-established and law-abiding Chinese commercial community. Those responsible were more recent immigrants, mainly casual labourers and Hailam students. The Hailam especially were singled out as irredeemably alien; young hotheads who brought the contagion of China's anarchy and communist anti-colonialism with them. Armed by the city's criminal gangs, these revolutionary agitators, though small in number and peripheral to 'true' Malayan politics, were a menace to colonial security. Vulnerable and exposed, Kreta Ayer's policemen were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time⁸⁵. Singapore's newly-arrived Governor Sir Hugh Clifford praised the besieged constables for their restraint, not least as their commander and several colleagues already lay wounded before shots were fired⁸⁶. There was less certainty about the Singapore clashes back in London where Labour Party calls for a full inquiry compelled the Colonial Office to conduct yet another review of police crowd control measures. Unlike Sir Hugh, some dissentient voices did criticize the police, not, though, for firing too much; rather, for not using volley fire immediately. The shooting had clearly compelled the marchers to pull back from the station, so the policemen's only error was to fire ineffective initial warning shots⁸⁷. The argument was bluntly summarized by one unnamed official thus: 'firing in the air is mistaken leniency. In the end it increases the "butcher's bill"'⁸⁸.

NEW DECADE, SAME PRIORITIES? PROTEST POLICING IN THE 1930S

As the scope of public order policing widened to include everything from suppression of dissent and workplace protest to tax collection and the enforcement

⁸³ NA, CO 273/535/11, Malayan bulletin of political intelligence, February-April 1927, p. 4.

⁸⁴ NA, CO 273/538/2, despatch 493, H. Fairburn, Inspector-General of Police, Straits Settlements, 'Report on the Kreta Ayer shooting incident, March 12th, 1927'.

⁸⁵ NA, CO 273/538/2, G. Seth, acting Attorney-General, Straits Settlements, 'Report on the Kreta Ayer Inquest,' 7 July 1927, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁶ NA, CO 273/538/2, Governor, Straits Settlements, to Secretary of State for Colonies, Leo Amery, 27 August 1927.

⁸⁷ NA, CO 273/538/2, P.A. Clutterbuck, CO minute, 21 June 1927. Labour MP George Lansbury, a long-standing critic of colonial policing methods, led back-bench calls for a full investigation of the shootings.

⁸⁸ NA, CO 273/538/2, Minute by G.G., 30 September 1927.

of public health codes, the potential for collective antagonism to police intervention grew accordingly.

Results were sometimes spectacular. In October 1931 police in Nicosia were overwhelmed by Cypriot protesters demanding union with Greece. Once the police lines were broken, the crowd vented its anger against British rule by burning down the Governor's residence⁸⁹. Rioting continued in Cypriot towns for several more days until troops flown in from Egypt, their heavy equipment brought by sea, restored order. Security force difficulties were compounded by Cypriot outrage at the arrest of five 'ringleaders', including two former members of the Island's Legislative Council and the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Kitium⁹⁰. Targeting ringleaders was entirely consistent with evolving police practice, but there were red faces in the Colonial Office when the five were deported for inciting violence under the terms of a 'Defence Order in Council' hastily invoked by Governor Sir Ronald Storrs. This was of a piece with other arbitrary actions by the now homeless Governor, including his decision to abolish the island's troublesome Legislative Council, some of whose Greek members persisted in making the case for Enosis⁹¹. Police inability to contain a riot had turned into a full-blown political emergency.

The rapid escalation of the Cyprus crisis after the police first lost control had repercussions for British colonial policing far beyond the Eastern Mediterranean. The Nicosia disorders in October 1931 made plain that colonial governments needed better legislative instruments to hand to assist their police commanders. Simple things mattered. It was vital that police have authority to requisition vehicles to help them deploy more quickly. Officers also needed to know that a blanket ban on public protest could be imposed without delay⁹². The resultant 'Peace and Good Order Bill' promulgated in Cyprus might have become a model for colonies elsewhere had its provisions not been superseded by the more Draconian legislation introduced at much the same time in Palestine to contend with the developing Arab revolt⁹³.

Meanwhile, on 7 February 1936, the very day that the Cyprus legislation proposals reached the Colonial Office, an assistant district officer (ADI) and an Indian police inspector died in confrontations with Manga Arabs in the Malindi quarter of Zanzibar. Trouble started at the offices of the city's agricultural department where a small group of merchants accused food inspectors of discrimination in their random checks for sub-standard copra, a staple crop traded by Zanzibar's Manga community. The inspection regime had been introduced two years earlier. It was enforced with police assistance, partly because it adversely affected those copra sellers, like

⁸⁹ NA, CO 67/240/10, Governor of Cyprus to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 22 October 1931. As Robert Holland has shown, the 1931 riot quickly entered Cypriot collective memory as a decisive step in the struggle for *Enosis*, or union with Greece, see Holland (1998, pp. 1-5).

⁹⁰ NA, CO 67/240/10, GS81/22/10: Cipher telegram from HQ RAF Middle East to Air Ministry, 22 October 1931; secret telegram 74, Governor of Cyprus to Colonial Office, 23 October 1931.

⁹¹ NA, CO 67/240/10, RAF HQ Middle East to Air Ministry, telegram, 26 October 1931; telegram 87, Governor of Cyprus to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 October 1931. The story of the 1931 Cyprus crisis is copiously analyzed in Georghallidis (1986).

⁹² NA, CO 67/269/20 Memorandum of instructions in event of rioting, Cyprus, 1936, extract from secret despatch (4), from Governor of Cyprus to Secretary of State for Colonies, 7 February 1936.

⁹³ NA, CO 67/269/20, CO Minute by H. Duncan, 27 March 1936. For other British colonial legislation in the Cyprus model, see CO 167/893/7: Riots Order Ordinance, enclosure to Mauritius despatch of 29 February 1936, 'A Bill for the prevention of riots and unlawful assemblies'.

the Manga, who relied on newly-purchased local produce to sell at market. Richer plantation owners and copra shippers could afford to leave their produce to ripen in commercial drying sheds and so escaped the inspectors' gaze. To the Manga, whose relations with beat policemen were already strained by accusations of unlicensed trading, the agricultural department and the police had a hidden agenda: to drive them out of business and out of Malindi. These were the arguments rehearsed during an angry confrontation in a produce inspector's office as sellers began gathering on the morning of the 7th. Punches were thrown and distinctive curved Arabian daggers appeared from beneath traders' robes. The scuffling spilled outside where the ADI's fatal stabbing took place. His assailants then made their way to the nearby police station at Darajani, which also came under attack. It was here that the police inspector died, mobbed by furious traders and knifed. Only then did the remaining policemen fire into the crowd, killing four. An exemplary police riposte, no warning shots, and instant dispersal of the crowd: the subsequent inquiry report praised Zanzibar's police for learning the lessons of efficient riot control by selective use of lethal force⁹⁴. The fact remained that two colonial officials had lost their lives trying to pacify demonstrators. Why? Because of a specific economic grievance against the administration and the police.

It was a long way from communism to copra. Shanghai, 1925; Singapore, 1927; Cyprus, 1931; and Zanzibar, 1936: each incident had specific local catalysts and distinct patterns of escalation. But their obvious common feature was the targeting of policemen by protesters⁹⁵. Faced with such diverse threats, colonial police forces found some unlikely champions in imperial government. One such occasion was in early December 1935, at the height of Italy's war in Ethiopia, when the newly appointed Colonial Secretary, Jimmy Thomas, pleaded on behalf of Britain's colonial policemen to his Cabinet colleagues. Once a leader of the National Union of Railwaymen, Thomas was, at first glance, no friend of police interests, but, by 1935, as a National Labourite and former Dominions Secretary, he was a strong proponent of Britain's imperial connections. Colonial police forces, he insisted, needed supplies of tear gas. Taking his cue from the Palestine High Commission, which, two years earlier, successfully persuaded Ramsay MacDonald's government to allow the use of tear gas to disperse illegal assemblies, Thomas pointed to other colonies where tear gas canisters rapidly deployed might have saved lives⁹⁶. He cited civil disturbances in Ceylon, Northern Rhodesia and, above all, Jamaica, as instances in which colonial police were compelled to fire on rioters for want of any other means to scatter a crowd. Tear gas was, he assured them, successfully used in Palestine to deal with 'banditry' (quite how was left to ministers' imagination) and to make arrests when individuals were hiding in buildings. Since November 1934, moreover, French gendarmes had been authorized to use tear gas as well as converted fire engines that sprayed high-pressure water jets to break up demonstrations in France

⁹⁴ NA, CO 323/1543/3, 'Report of the Commission of Enquiry concerning the riot in Zanzibar on the 7th of February 1936'.

⁹⁵ The same held true in the Colombo riots of February 1929, during which striking transport workers attacked the city's police. They fired back in retaliation and were reinforced by soldiers of the Royal Artillery, see NA, CO 54/896/1, Governor of Ceylon to Colonial Office, 6 February 1929.

⁹⁶ NA, CAB 24/Secretary of State for Colonies memoranda CP 301(33) and 301A(33).

and North Africa. Tear gas, in short, offered a humanitarian alternative to policemen's bullets and Britain's colonial police needed to keep up with the times⁹⁷.

Thomas's concerns brought other problems to light. For one thing, it was clear that Cabinet had little sense of the frequency with which colonial police forces resorted to lethal violence during riots, strikes, and prison disturbances. For another, while tear gas might lessen the requirement to fire live rounds at protesters, there was no question of curbing the powers of colonial police forces to use rifle fire when necessary. The ministerial discussion also threw into sharper relief something of which only Whitehall officials and colonial administrators were previously aware: the question of how colonial police should respond to public disorder. The issue had recurred time and again in the inter-war years and was the main Colonial Office concern in relation to police affairs after World War I. The beginning of a Palestinian general strike in April 1936, followed by the outbreak of rebellion over the summer, would add urgency to familiar arguments about police militarization, the reliability of locally-raised cadres, insufficient police intelligence, and the imposition of martial law⁹⁸. The availability of tear gas, already used by British security forces in Palestine, but uncommon elsewhere, pointed to the exceptional difficulties of policing the Mandate⁹⁹. The departure from 'minimum force' solutions that resulted was evident in the scale of political violence, the extent of reprisal killings, and the high levels of security force brutality¹⁰⁰.

CONCLUSION

The life of a colonial policeman did not fit a neat job description with roles and responsibilities neatly demarcated. Colonial policing may be hard to pigeon-hole, but official pre-occupation with protest policing and the practical problems and legal difficulties it presented is more easily identified as a long-standing pre-occupation. How to respond to public disorder and, more basically still, how to define it provoked anxious discussion from the Whitehall corridors of the Colonial Office to the backrooms of colonial government and outlying police stations. The British experience suggests that these fundamental questions were, at best only partially resolved in the twenty years after Walter Long first aired them with his colonial subordinates at the end of the First World War. Why was this so? So wide-ranging were the definitions of public disorder embedded in colonial legislation that individual police forces inevitably confronted a herculean task. They were expected to react vigorously to gatherings that, in a non-colonial context, would not have been judged a menace to social peace. Yet, enforcing stability through repression of protest was

⁹⁷ NA, CO 323/1341/19, CP226 (35), J.H. Thomas memorandum, 'Use of tear gas in the colonial empire,' 3 December 1935. Thomas was compelled to resign from his post in May 1936 after leaking budget secrets to City financiers.

⁹⁸ Lesch (1979, pp. 114-118); Swedenburg (1988); Arnon-Ohanna (1981); Kolinsky (1992, pp. 148-156); Cohen (2008); Townshend (1988).

⁹⁹ NA, CO 323/1113, Palestine and Transjordan Defense Scheme, n. d. January 1930, chapter 4: 'Army measures to be taken in peace during the precautionary stage and at the outset of the action stage'; WO 191/170, GHQ Palestine and Transjordan, 'Military Lessons of the Arab Rebellion,' compiled in February 1938.

¹⁰⁰ Hughes (2009); Swedenburg (2003, pp. 108-109 & 179-186).

self-defeating because the stability in question was purchased in the short term through actions sure to antagonize the indigenous majority in the longer term. At its root, protest policing was a matter of resisting change, suppressing opposition, and enforcing labour discipline. It was cyclical, with demonstrations and their suppression bound to repeat themselves so long as the politics that first brought people onto the streets remained unaddressed. Until that point was reached policemen were, in a very real sense, caught in the middle. And it fell to them to ensure that the butcher's bill was paid.

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