

Introduction: case studies in colonial counter-insurgency

COLLINS, Bruce <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4521-6302>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/10742/>

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

COLLINS, Bruce (2015). Introduction: case studies in colonial counter-insurgency. *British Journal of Military History*, 1 (2), 2-7. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Introduction: Case Studies in Colonial Counter-Insurgency

BRUCE COLLINS

Sheffield Hallam University

Email: b.collins@shu.ac.uk

This issue of the journal is dedicated to articles on the history of colonial counter-insurgency. The whole subject has become increasingly controversial, with interest in part sparked by the Western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The re-emergence of interest in counter-insurgency doctrine has been well-documented in recent work by, for example, Keith L. Shimko for the United States and Michael Finch for France and in a thorough historiographical review by Ian Beckett for the United Kingdom. A simplified summary might run on the lines that nineteenth-century interest in counter-insurgency operations was limited essentially to the application of light infantry tactics to such campaigns, with the addition of political efforts to win over selected tribal leaders. The French developed arguments that their colonial order also advanced a civilising mission, while the British claimed that their rule would promote economic progress and good governance. A more systematic study of counter-insurgency did not emerge until the decolonisation campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Interest then receded during the 1980s, partly under the pressure of the challenges of the intensified Cold War and partly because Western colonies had largely disappeared. The Americans in particular wanted no more Vietnams and the British had the very special 'urban guerrilla' campaign of Northern Ireland to manage. Such indifference, however, turned into occasionally frenetic interest from 2004 in reaction to the insurgencies against Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and the proliferation of non-state militias and armies particularly in the Muslim world. Given this revived interest in counter-insurgency, Geraint Hughes's paper on the wider question of military interventionism provides an incisive analysis of the context in which the case-studies of colonial counter-insurgency may be placed and an assessment of the many forms which interventions can take. Another purpose of this issue is to stress how widespread colonial counter-insurgency was. We have deliberately sought a range of national

¹Keith L. Shimko, *The Iraq wars and the American Military Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Michael P.M. Finch, *A Progressive Occupation? The Gallieni-Lyautey Method and Colonial Pacification on Tonkin and Madagascar, 1885-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ian F.W. Beckett, 'British counter-insurgency: a historiographical reflection', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 23 (2012), pp.781-798. See also: David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-67* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Daniel Whittingham, "'Savage warfare': C.E. Caldwell, the roots of counter-insurgency, and the nineteenth century context", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 23, Iss. 4-5 (2012), pp.591-607.

CASE STUDIES IN COIN

case-studies.² In this regard, Thijs Brocades Zaalberg's paper is particularly valuable in providing a re-assessment of the typically overlooked effort by the Netherlands to crush the independence movement and restore its authority in the Dutch East Indies after 1945.

An initial definitional question is how far counter-insurgency doctrine is shaped by non-military factors. In the model offered by Beckett, for example, the main principles of counter-insurgency warfare include the need to understand insurgencies' political nature, to establish military-civil co-ordination, especially over intelligence, to isolate insurgents from the population, and to offer improvements to head off popular discontent. The military stick would be applied only when insurgents were isolated, either physically or ideologically, from the population.³ In this issue, Marie-Cecile Thorat examines the difficulties of isolating insurgents and developing a broader appeal to the local population in the contentious case of Marshal Bugeaud's subjugation of inland Algeria in the 1840s. For the Americans, the celebrated or notorious *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* of 2007 devoted much attention to promoting good governance and social improvement, with counter-insurgency operations almost becoming 'armed social work'.⁴ To press the point home, David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla* stressed the negative multiplier effects of attacking insurgents and inflicting heavy casualties upon them. Such lethal encounters simply bred more guerrillas among those whose family members, neighbours, and friends had been killed or wounded.⁵ The military component of much counter-insurgency doctrine has therefore been largely confined to policing and patrolling in a manner which builds confidence in the civilian population and denies space to the insurgents, and to working with civil authorities to amass intelligence about insurgents' organisation and to help break insurgents' cells.

A direct challenge to this approach has been mounted by Mark Moyar. He argues that an undue emphasis on network-centric and population-centric warfare has obscured the fact that insurgencies are initiated, expanded and led by talented elites. It is they who galvanise resistance and attract support; economic deprivation, he argues, has not been the determining factor in explaining the emergence or success of an insurgency. It follows that 'counter-insurgency is "leader-centric" warfare, a contest between elites in which the elite with superiority in certain leadership

² Four of the papers were first given at a workshop at Sheffield Hallam University on 27 June 2013; the financial assistance of the university's Humanities Research Centre and other participants' contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

³ Beckett, 'British counter-insurgency', pp.782-783.

⁴ Although published online by the US Army in 2006, the manual also appeared as a book in 2007. US Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field-Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁵ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (London: Hurst, 2009), pp.34-38.

attributes usually wins'.⁶ The priority is therefore to develop those who have the attributes and talents to lead and to empower them to take command in counter-insurgency campaigning while ensuring that they have the resources and political support to exercise their judgement and take decisive action: 'The United States must develop its most talented counter-insurgency leaders and those of its allies and place them into positions where they can wage war without fetters, their unshakable initiative and creative brilliance streaming across the plains and mountains'.⁷ Such actions are clearly directed at overseas interventions which in many analysts' eyes are generically linked to 'colonial' campaigning.

The suggestion that war might be waged 'without fetters' creates an obvious challenge for modern assessments of counter-insurgency. Culturally and intellectually, Western societies increasingly not only reject but also deplore their imperial past and find warfare, other than to defend one's homeland, an increasingly problematic phenomenon. At the same time, long-standing Western ideas of individualism have expanded in the last two decades into a legal and legislative preoccupation with enshrining and protecting human rights as a distinctive goal of public discourse and political action. Such cultural, ethical, legal and political concerns are very difficult to square with what happens when the norms of civil society are suspended in conditions of war.

In fact, one of the most significant developments in modern historiography has been the exploration of what in the past tended to be treated as the underbelly of counter-insurgency operations, the brutality which such operations involved. For example, the best-selling study of Delhi during the Indian Mutiny-Rebellion by William Dalrymple is less concerned with the technical military problems faced and overcome by the British in besieging, storming and taking Delhi than with the brutality of their treatment of both mutineers and the wider civilian population.⁸ The army assembled at Delhi is examined less as a complex organisation struggling to master immense challenges than as an instrument of vengeance, with attention given to individual officers' psychological journeys as they became increasingly indifferent to the slaughter they inflicted.⁹

Recent historical revisionism, developing criticisms made in the 1950s and 1960s of French, British and American military excesses in counter-insurgency conflicts, is in part a reaction against claims made for the political effectiveness of counter-

⁶ Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command. Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp.3-4.

⁷ Moyar, *A Question of Command*, pp.2-3 & pp.285-286.

⁸ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal. The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp.348-339, pp.362-366, pp.372-374, pp.385-391, pp.401-409 & pp.411-416.

⁹ Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, pp.197-201, pp.313-316 & p.405.

CASE STUDIES IN COIN

insurgency policies. In this respect, Sir Robert Thompson offered a classic statement of the ideal. Although he noted that governments might enact tough restrictions during an emergency, he insisted in 1966 that such impositions would only work if they were fair and applied to all:

There is a very strong temptation in dealing both with terrorism and with guerilla [sic] actions for government forces to act outside the law, the excuses being that the processes of law are too cumbersome, that the normal safeguards in the law for the individual are not designed for an insurgency and that a terrorist deserves to be treated as an outlaw anyway. Not only is this morally wrong, but, over a period, it will create more practical difficulties for a government than it solves.¹⁰

If this was the ideal, historians are bound to investigate the reality. For example, Huw Bennett has challenged the notion that the British applied minimum force and upheld high standards of legality in suppressing the Mau Mau rising among Kenya's Kikuyu people in 1952-56. In Kenya, patrols extensively ignored the restrictions on military force which the commander-in-chief, Sir George Erskine, sought to impose on operations. About 11,500 of the 24,000 violent deaths resulting from the emergency occurred from the non-combat or militarily unauthorised, if implicitly condoned, use of force. While this level of killing, directed essentially against the 1.4 million Kikuyu, was scarcely genocidal, it was part of an oppressive campaign involving the extensive re-settlement of the population into government- controlled villages.¹¹

The impact of such mounting revisionism is demonstrated in Douglas Porch's blistering re-assessment of counter-insurgency doctrine. His targets are myths about successful insurgency operations in the past, the sloppy or inaccurate deployment of them to support current doctrine, and the entire thrust of population-centric counter-insurgency as described by the US field manual. His immediate argument is that American military performance in Iraq was distorted by the claim that a new approach to COIN operations transformed the conflict from 2006. According to Porch, 'COIN offers a doctrine of escapism... - a flight from democratic civilian control, even from modernity, into an anachronistic, romanticized, orientalist vision that projects quintessentially western values, and Western prejudices, onto non-Western societies'.¹² Acknowledging George Decker's insistence that 'any good

¹⁰ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency. Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp.52-53.

¹¹ Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau. The British Army and Counter-insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.8, pp.192-196, pp.219-228, p.231; see also Michael Burleigh, *Small Wars, Faraway Places. The Genesis of the Modern World 1945-65* (London: Macmillan, 2013).

¹² Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency. Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.330.

soldier can handle guerrillas', by adapting military practice to particular conditions, Porch dissects the assertion, beginning from the 1840s with French officers in Algeria, that 'small wars' are an especially challenging branch of warfare requiring distinctive and hard-won skills. Instead, he argues that much French and British colonial campaigning was essentially insensitive to local social and political realities and depended instead on severe, often savage, and sometimes indiscriminate force.¹³

One response is to argue that such defects would be avoided by restricting the presence of foreign counterinsurgents. Kilcullen argues for the importance of recruiting manpower from within indigenous populations rather than relying on foreign forces. The costs are lower and the potential military gains are higher, for local forces do not require elaborate bases, are familiar with the indigenous languages and culture, and not rotated out after short tours. Mobilisation should therefore be based upon 'local partnerships and local security forces that protect communities and guard against extremist presence'.¹⁴ But indigenous troops and police can be equally if not more brutal than foreign colonial or interventionist forces. Ethnic hostilities played a major role in the killing which occurred during the Mau Mau rising. Iraq's highest number of monthly 'insurgent' or 'terrorist' attacks – some 3,500 of them – to that date occurred in May 2006, when there was a change of government between Iraqi parties and at a time when 263,000 Iraqi soldiers and police had been trained by the US.¹⁵

The focus on indigenous forces opens up two important subjects for further analysis. First, how far did governments engaged in counter-insurgency have police forces capable of providing intelligence for military operations against insurgents? This is a topic upon which Martin Thomas has worked extensively for the twentieth-century French empire.¹⁶ In this issue, David French provides a fascinating case-study of the operational demands which the insurgency in Cyprus in the 1950s placed upon the security service's resources. Second, how far was the recruitment of indigenous forces itself part of a counter-insurgency strategy? My paper argues for the dual importance of mobilising local forces against the threat of disturbance in the Bombay presidency of British India in 1857; the process secured necessary manpower but also reinforced support among the indigenous population. The management of local and regional ethnic rivalries, which is in part the subject of Nir Arielli's case-study of the Italians in Libya, raised questions about colonial authorities' and intervening powers' categorisation of and appeals to ethnic and tribal groups. The idea of martial 'races' was potent and self-reinforcing among many men within tribes or larger

¹³ Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, p.250, p.266, p.289.

¹⁴ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, p.271.

¹⁵ Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p.434, pp.472-473, p.480.

¹⁶ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence. Security Services and Colonial Disorder after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

CASE STUDIES IN COIN

groups so designated. The composition of indigenous forces, including their place within their societies, is a topic which recurs in a number of papers here and merits wider re-assessment.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Heather Streets, *Martial Races. The military, race and masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004). An interesting extension to seafaring races is Daniel O. Spence, *Colonial Naval Culture and British Imperialism, 1922-67* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).