

The Banality of Brutality: British Armed Forces and the  
Repression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–39\*

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Embodied in the documentation by which Britain accepted the League of Nations mandate for Palestine in 1922 were clauses facilitating Jewish immigration to the country. The Palestinians were hostile to Jewish immigration and settlement, resulting in recurring bouts of violence in the 1920s and early 1930s as the Arabs attacked Jewish settlers and the British authorities. Jewish immigration peaked in 1936, the year in which the Palestinians began a full-scale, nation-wide revolt. The spark for the uprising was an attack on 15 April 1936 on a convoy of taxis on the Nablus to Tulkarm road in which the assailants murdered two Jewish passengers.<sup>1</sup> Portrayed in the press as an act of Arab banditry, the assault was possibly the result of specific targeting of Jews by Arab 'Islamic patriots', followers of the late Shaykh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, killed by British police in 1935.<sup>2</sup> At the funeral for one of the dead Jews in Tel Aviv, there was rioting; at the same time, gunmen shot two Arab workers sleeping in a hut in a revenge attack. An Arab general strike and revolt ensued that lasted till October 1936 when British diplomatic efforts channelled through the rulers of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Transjordan and Yemen led to a ceasefire during which a Commission headed by Lord Peel came to Palestine to determine the territory's future. The Arabs' rejection of Peel's conclusion in 1937 that Palestine should be partitioned led to a second phase of the revolt from September

1937 to late 1939: the violence finally petered out with the approaching war in Europe. For long stretches of the revolt, especially its second phase after 1937, the British lost control of swathes of Palestine, including most major towns and, for about five days in October 1938, the Old City of Jerusalem. The rebels attacked Jewish settlers in Palestine, but as the revolt was an attempt to divert British policy, they also targeted British soldiers, colonial officials, police officers and Palestinians working for the mandate government. To suppress the revolt, the British launched an intense and prolonged imperial policing operation in aid of the civil authority — or, as we would say today, a counter-insurgency campaign, a term that became fashionable after 1945— which involved at its height in 1938 an immense force built around two army divisions numbering some 25,000 servicemen.

How humane were the British authorities in their response to the revolt? Did the British operate within the rule of law, and did servicemen avoid what today would be called human rights abuses? Were the British comparatively enlightened in suppressing the revolt compared to, say, other European powers operating in similar conditions? These are topical questions, not least as the military history literature on counterinsurgency<sup>3</sup> emphasises British success in this sphere, the 'hearts and minds' aspect to British counter-insurgency and British 'exceptionalism' in which British armed forces — 'generally more scrupulous than most'<sup>4</sup> — worked within the rule of law, avoiding the abuses against non-combatants that supposedly characterised other colonial and post-colonial powers. '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 the British 'way' in counter-insurgency, and an issue discussed in Sir Robert Thompson's influential *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1965).<sup>5</sup> More recently, Caroline Elkins in her examination of Britain's suppression of the 'Mau Mau' revolt in Kenya in the 1950s wrote:<sup>6</sup>

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.

This was also the view of senior British military commanders in Palestine at the time, one of whom remarked to a colleague, 'If the Germans were in occupation in Haifa we'd not have any bloody trouble from the Arabs'.<sup>7</sup>

The literature — in Arabic,<sup>8</sup> English<sup>9</sup> and Hebrew<sup>10</sup> — on the revolt is exiguous and skates over the issue of the conduct of soldiers in the field, excepting some of the Arabic-language volumes, which record contemporaneous accounts of British brutality. While the Arabic material is the most extensive, it is dated, rarely uses British sources and is often printed primary material. The Hebrew literature focuses either on the internal

dynamics within the Palestinian community or on Zionist military training in this period, as opposed to any abuses committed by British troops, Yuval Arnon-Ohanna and Hillel Cohen's books being good examples of examinations of intra-Arab relations.<sup>11</sup> Simeon Shoul's recent English-language doctoral thesis on British imperial policing recognised this gap, arguing that 'there has been to date a general reliance .... that the British employed minimal force. Where this is gainsaid, and brutality alleged, there are only partial attempts to quantify the force employed .... There has been a persistent failure to dig into the experience of many people "on the ground," an accompanying over-reliance on official sources'.<sup>12</sup> Shoul is right; the methodological challenge when examining the conduct of British armed forces in Palestine is finding the evidence of abuse by soldiers and officials who were reluctant to leave a record of abuses against non-combatants. For both perpetrator and victim, so often, 'You don't want to remember the bad stuff', which is hidden away or forgotten.<sup>13</sup>

What was the legal system that bound and directed British servicemen in Palestine after 1936, underpinning and legitimising counter-rebel operations? Legally, British soldiers fighting internal insurgents conducted themselves as an aid to the civil power, an issue articulated at the time by Major-General Sir Charles Gwynn and Colonel H.J. Simson, building on the earlier work of Captain C.E. Callwell.<sup>14</sup> The *King's Regulations* and the 1929 *Manual of Military Law* bound soldiers of all rank, the latter a bulky hard-back volume updating the Army Discipline and Regulation Act (1879) and Army Act (1881), the key points of which appeared in abridged form in pocket-sized paper-back pamphlets such as *Notes on Imperial Policing, 1934* and the 1937 *Duties in*

*the Aid of the Civil Power* that officers could take with them on operations.<sup>15</sup> The 1929 manual was precise on how soldiers should conduct themselves, forbidding, for instance, stealing from and maltreatment of civilians. The 1929 regulations stated that a soldier was also a citizen and subject to civil as well as military law, and that an 'act which constitutes an offence if committed by a civilian is none the less an offence if committed by a soldier', but it also provided a legal framework for shooting rioters and allowed for 'collective punishments' and 'retribution', both loosely defined terms in the 1929 volume and both of which are relevant to what happened in Palestine.<sup>16</sup> Neither the 1929 volume nor the subsequent 1934 and 1937 pamphlets provided any concrete definition for what constituted collective punishment and reprisals, thereby giving field commanders considerable leeway when it came to interpreting the rules. The law for soldiers was clear: they should use collective punishment and retribution as a last resort and, if possible, that they should avoid needless civilian suffering and any offence towards religion, race or class, but the 1929 law clearly stated that where coercion was required or where terrorism needed to be checked, collective punishment and reprisals, which will 'inflict suffering upon innocent individuals', were 'indispensable as a last resource'.<sup>17</sup> As the law stated, 'The existence of an armed insurrection would justify the use of any degree of force necessary effectually to meet and cope with the insurrection'.<sup>18</sup>

In Palestine, in 1924–25, the British had formalised the principle of collective punishment in the Collective Responsibility and Punishment Ordinances, building on the idea that Palestinian village life was a collective 'social system based on mutual

protection rather than justice', a view in some measure endorsed by arrangements such as the collective rural *faz'a* (alarm) security system whereby certain villages would help one another in times of crisis.<sup>19</sup> The British updated these ordinances in 1936 with the Collective Fines Ordinance, these local regulations being compatible with the personal instructions for soldiers detailed above.

While civil proceedings against servicemen for individual offences during any military operations were theoretically possible, a strict reading of the military law in force with its broad acceptance of group punishment and reprisal action meant that tough action was within the law. Where theft, brutality and assault occurred, unlawful under the 'civil' element of the law governing conduct, soldiers had little to fear from disciplinary action as 'Complaints about military were frequent, lawsuits rarer, and successful lawsuits almost unheard of ... in the colonies the military had a freer hand than in Britain, and restraint of excessive violence was far lighter'.<sup>20</sup> Victims could take out civil proceedings but before 1947 and the Crown Proceedings Act the Crown was immune from prosecution, so these would have to be against individual soldiers, and the victim would have to prove that the soldiers involved were acting beyond their lawful operational orders. This was not practicable, especially when soldiers had no identifying personal number or sign. One Arab claimed that soldier 'number 65' had beaten him, unaware that all the men from that unit, the York and Lancaster Regiment, formerly the 65th Foot, carried this number on the left side of their helmets.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the establishment of military courts and regulations in Palestine after September 1936 which could

'not be challenged by the ordinary civil courts' made any such appeal almost impossible to succeed.<sup>22</sup> This author has found only one successful prosecution of servicemen in Palestine, that of four British police officers who blatantly executed an Arab prisoner in the street in October 1938, witnessed by a number of non-British European residents, not Arabs, whose complaints never led to a prosecution.<sup>23</sup>

International conventions laying out rules of war, notably those at Geneva (1864, 1906 and 1929; superseded by the Geneva conventions of 1949) and the Hague (1899 and 1907; also the Draft Rules on Air War of 1923) also constrained British forces in Palestine. While the fourth convention of the 1949 Geneva conventions dealt specifically with the protection of civilians, the international laws in place in 1936 dealt with the conduct of war and the treatment of prisoners-of-war (POWs) rather than the maltreatment of civilians. Britain classified the Arab revolt as an internal insurrection and not an international war and so denied POW status to Arab fighters. Thus it treated captured Arab guerrillas as civilian criminals subject to the ordinary civil law modified by any conditions of martial law, such as the death penalty for carrying ammunition or a firearm, and for whom international law did not apply. Anyone found with arms or ammunition, except for government-issued licensed shotguns rationed out to compliant village *mukhtars* (headmen), was liable for the death penalty, an anomalous position in a country where rural villagers had rifles for hunting and personal protection. One old man with no criminal record received a sentence of ten years for having three rounds in a coffee pot — which the police could easily have planted during their search — a sentence reduced on

appeal to four years.<sup>24</sup> The British during the revolt were careful to put captured suspects before the courts, before hanging, sentencing or acquitting them. Later on in the revolt, quickly convened military courts passed rapid judgement — and justice soon followed, the convicted went very quickly to the gallows — but there was always the veneer of legal respectability.

While British forces in Palestine during the revolt operated as an aid to the civil power, conditions in the country approached martial law, a situation that further eased civil limits on soldiers' behaviour as under a martial law regime 'acts might be carried out which would normally be illegal'.<sup>25</sup> The British never instituted full (or 'real' ) martial law in Palestine, but in a series of Orders in Council and Emergency Regulations, 1936–37, they issued 'statutory' martial law, a stage between semi-military rule under civil powers and full martial law under military powers, and one in which the army and not the civil High Commissioner had the upper hand.<sup>26</sup> The British by the 1930s had ruled out full martial law in situations of 'sub-wars', excepting in the most extreme cases, the reference here usually being to the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, but after the Arab capture of the Old City of Jerusalem in October 1938, the army effectively took over Jerusalem and then all of Palestine. In fact, since late 1937, the army had been in charge with the 'full power of search and arrest, independent of the police, and the right to shoot and kill any man attempting to escape search or ignoring challenges. Grenades may be used during searches of caves, wells, etc. Since November [1937] co-operating aircraft have been "bombed-up," and pilots instructed to machine gun or bomb "armed parties".'<sup>27</sup> There was *de facto* if not *de jure* martial law from late 1937 or early 1938.



To be fair, the British never removed civil authority in Palestine from the decision-making process, but by 1938 the High Commissioner tempered rather than directed the actions of British armed forces and when Sir Arthur Wauchop, the High Commissioner in place for the first phase of the revolt, looked for a political solution to the revolt and challenged army efforts to institute martial law, he antagonised the armed forces who thought him too lenient and referred to him as 'washout' and 'ga-ga'.<sup>28</sup> In March 1938, the Colonial Office replaced him with the more compliant Sir Harold MacMichael.

In the examination that follows, can we distinguish between, say, 'brutality', 'torture' and 'atrociousness', terms that are often used interchangeably? The language employed is significant. For instance, in 1991 one senior British officer objected to the BBC's use of 'brutality' when describing British army actions in Palestine, suggesting 'determination' as a substitute, the BBC countering with an offer of 'harshness'.<sup>29</sup> The (British) dictionary definition of 'atrociousness' raises the issue of 'moral reference': an act of 'savage enormity, horrible or heinous wickedness, an atrocious deed, an act of extreme cruelty and heinousness with no moral reference'.<sup>30</sup> For the Americans, such an act is 'outrageously wicked, criminal, vile or cruel, heinous, horrible'.<sup>31</sup> Such definitions could also apply to torture or extreme brutality.

International conventions such as article five of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>32</sup> and article three of the 1950 Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms<sup>33</sup> do not define torture as much as outlaw the practice: 'no one shall be subjected to torture

or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment',<sup>34</sup> the same wording as was used in the 1987 European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.<sup>35</sup> The 1984 United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defined (part one, article one) torture (but not brutality) in the following terms, the last sentence being significant in relation to what happened in Palestine after 1936:<sup>36</sup>

... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.

Similarly, the Council of Europe's 1950 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (article 2) also raised the issue of the legal use of force: 'Deprivation of life shall not be regarded as inflicted in contravention of this article [right to life] when it results from the use of force which is no more than absolutely necessary ... in action lawfully taken for the purpose of quelling a riot or insurrection'.<sup>37</sup>

The legal framework of reprisals and collective punishments

directed British troops when they went on operations after April 1936. Punishment in the form of the destruction of Arab property across urban and rural areas of Palestine was central to British military repression after 1936, the countryside being badly hit although there were some egregious house demolitions in urban areas. Destruction and vandalism became a systematic, systemic part of British counter-insurgency operations during the revolt, and justified by the legal measures in force at the time. Alongside the destruction, soldiers looted properties, something not officially sanctioned; indeed officers often tried to stop the men pilfering. Alongside the blowing up of houses — often the most impressive ones in the village — and the smashing up of Arab villagers' homes, there were 'reprisals' in the form of heavy collective fines, forced labour and punitive village occupations by government forces for which villagers bore the cost. One Arab rebel noted that the British army was unable to 'strike' the fighters, so it had to resort to 'revenge' and 'collective punishment'.<sup>38</sup> Using air support, radio communications, intelligence, collaborators and mobile columns, the British improved their tactics against the rebel bands, but as they never were able to defeat an elusive enemy in open battle in rough terrain, they adopted a two-pronged military approach, targeting enemy fighters and the civilians on whom they relied for support. The level of damage varied depending on time, place and the regiment involved, but it could be very severe. In 1940, after the revolt was over, John Briance, a police officer who became the head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Palestine, witnessed the 'burn scars' of the West Yorkshire Regiment at the village of Bayt Rima, north-west of Ramallah, 'A disgrace to the

British name', an incident also referred to by a British doctor in Palestine at the time.<sup>39</sup> Abuses went unreported as the British heavily censored the Palestinian Arabic-language newspapers, while commanders such as Major-General Bernard Montgomery in northern Palestine banished newspaper reporters so that his men could carry on their work untroubled by the media.<sup>40</sup>

During army searches, soldiers would surround a village — usually before dawn so that they could catch any suspects before they fled — the men and women then divided off, held apart from the houses, often in wired 'cages', while soldiers searched and often destroyed everything, burnt grain and poured olive oil over household food and effects.<sup>41</sup> The men meanwhile were 'screened' by passing hooded or hidden Arab informers who would nod when a 'suspect' was found, or by British officials checking their papers against lists of suspects. If the army was not on a reprisal operation but was following up an intelligence lead and looking for a suspect or hidden weapons, any destruction was incidental to the searching of properties — troops also used primitive metal detectors on such operations.<sup>42</sup> On such operations, however, brutality against villagers could occur as the army tried to extract from them intelligence on the whereabouts of hidden weapons caches or suspects, as happened at the village of Halhul in 1939. In some cases, the brutality would then extend to the vandalism of property as a means of gaining information. The level of destruction varied, the army using the excuse of weapons searches to justify any damage if there were complaints. Army engineers would also demolish houses or groups of houses.

The destruction of property was alien behaviour for soldiers but they did the job with gusto, once prompted. The officer entrusted

with checking on destruction in one village reprimanded a corporal who left intact a beautiful cabinet full of glasses; the officer then destroyed the cabinet and its contents.<sup>43</sup> The British designated some searches as 'punitive', as one private recalled, 'Oh yes, punitive. You smashed wardrobes with plates, glass mirrors in and furniture, anything you could see you smashed'.<sup>44</sup> The local District Officer told Colonel J.S.S. Gratton, then a subaltern with the Hampshire Regiment, that the unit's search of Safad (Zefat) was a punitive raid, and so they could

... knock the place about. And it's very alien to a chap like you or me to go in and break the chair and kick chatty in with all the oil in and mixed it in with the bedclothes and break all the windows and everything. You don't feel like doing it. And I remember the adjutant coming in and saying, "You are not doing your stuff. They're perfectly intact all those houses you've just searched. This is what you've got to do." And he picked up a pick helve and sort of burst everything. I said, "Right OK," so I got hold of the soldiers and said, "this is what you've got to do," you know. And I don't think they liked it much but once they'd started on it you couldn't stop them. And you'd never seen such devastation.<sup>45</sup>

In such operations, away from officers' view, looting or the taking of 'souvenirs' was inevitable, and periodic personal searches of men by NCOs under officers' orders failed to stop the problem of endemic petty thieving. Looting was not official policy, as a special order to the two battalions entrusted with re-taking the Old City of Jerusalem in October 1938 from the rebels reveals: 'Any attempts, even the most minor, at looting,

scrounging or souveniring by individual troops or police will be rigorously suppressed'.<sup>46</sup>

The largest single act of destruction came on 16 June 1936 in the Arab city of Jaffa when the British blew up between 220 and 240 buildings,<sup>47</sup> ostensibly to improve health and sanitation, cutting pathways through Jaffa's old city with 200–300 lbs gelignite charges<sup>48</sup> that allowed military access and control. By this act — headlined in *al-Difa'* as 'goodbye, goodbye, old Jaffa, the army has exploded you' — the British made homeless up to 6,000 Palestinians, most of whom were left destitute, having been told by air-dropped leaflet on the morning of 16 June to vacate their homes by 9 p.m. on the same day.<sup>49</sup> Some families were left with nothing, not even a change of clothes.<sup>50</sup> Such callous vandalism shocked the British Chief Justice in Palestine, Sir Michael McDonnell, who frankly condemned the action, for which he was dismissed; the Arabs with glee printed up 10,000 copies of the court's critical conclusions for public distribution.<sup>51</sup> Unable to express their opposition to the destruction of Jaffa, the Palestinian press resorted to sarcasm, reporting how the 'operation of making the city [Jaffa] more beautiful is carried out through boxes of dynamite'.<sup>52</sup> Particularly recalcitrant villages would be entirely demolished, reduced to 'mangled masonry', as happened to the village of Mi' ar north of Acre in October 1938.<sup>53</sup> On other occasions, the British used sea mines from the battleship HMS *Malaya* to destroy houses.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes the charges laid were so large that neighbouring houses came down or flying debris hit watching bystanders. British troops even made

Palestinians demolish their own houses, brick-by-brick.<sup>55</sup>

Following a search and cordon of the town of Safad by the Hampshire Regiment, the senior police officer, Sir Charles Tegart, noted simply and euphemistically that the soldiers 'did their work thoroughly', adding that local villagers had little sympathy, feeling that the townsfolk of Safad now 'know what has been happening to us'.<sup>56</sup> Hilda Wilson, a British school teacher in Palestine, concluded that the reason for soldiers' destructiveness was because they were 'bored stiff' and had no social amenities, compounded by the alienation that they felt serving far from home:<sup>57</sup>

Soldiers are traditionally careless of other people's property ... so what can be expected when they find themselves in a distant country among people who, they are told, are the "enemy." I remember one occasion when the troops were giving me a lift from Ramallah to Ain Sinia [properly ' Ayn Sinya], and while sitting in the foremost lorry of the procession, waiting in Ramallah's main street, I heard a sergeant further down the line instructing men on what they were to do when they reached their destination. They were to cordon the village, and then proceed to drive the people out of their houses on to the hillside. I shall never forget the ferocity he put into that word "drive."

Trapped between the hammer of rebel operations and the anvil of the British army, Arab peasants demanded army protection from the depredations of the rebels while also complaining about servicemen's behaviour.<sup>58</sup> In June 1936, Muslim religious leaders

wrote to the High Commissioner detailing how police officers on operations 'stamped' on things, destroyed everything, 'smashed doors, mirrors, tables, chairs wardrobes, glass, porcelain' and ripped women's clothing and bed linen. Soldiers mixed in margarine and oil with foodstuffs, they trampled on 'holy books', and they destroyed wooden kitchen utensils, as well as glasses, clocks, smoking pipes and basins.<sup>59</sup> In the same month, another protest complained about police and soldiers hitting innocent people, insulting their dignity, stealing items and destroying furniture, goods and provisions.<sup>60</sup> As one rebel recounted, servicemen,<sup>61</sup>

Searched houses, each one by itself, in a way that was sabotaging on purpose, and they looted some of the assets of the houses, and burnt some other houses, and destroyed provisions/goods. After putting flour, wheat, rice, sugar and others together, they added all the olive oil or petrol they could find. And in every search operation they destroyed a number of houses of the village and damaged others. They also put signs on other houses to destroy them in the future if there are any incidents near the village, even if that incident is only cutting telephone wires.

Britain's heavy-handed military methods combined with rebel demands to weaken, perhaps to shatter, Palestinian rural village society, creating in the process lawlessness, hunger and social dislocation. This was unjust collective punishment. The collective fines imposed were a heavy burden for poor Palestinian villagers, especially when the army also took away all the livestock,



smashed up properties, imposed long curfews and police posts, blew up houses and detained some or all of the men folk in distant detention camps. Rebels also fined (or robbed) villages for non-compliance with the revolt, £P1000 in one case, £P10–100 per household in another.<sup>62</sup> If villagers were unable to pay collective fines, they paid them in produce: 'As usual police were called to do the dirty work, collecting chickens, eggs and grain from each family and taking them to Haifa for sale'.<sup>63</sup>

Police activity went beyond the forced requisitioning of produce, as when the police went to a village after rebels had killed some 'wogs', at which point they indulged in indiscriminate violence against villagers, not rebels. 'By the time we arrived of course they had vanished into the blue but we had orders to decimate the whole place which we did, all animals and grain and food were destroyed and the sheikh and all his hangers on beaten up with rifle butts. There will be quite a number of funerals their [sic] I should imagine'.<sup>64</sup> When the police received a report that rebels had blocked the road with trenches and roadblocks near the village of Shafa ' Amr, they went to investigate. 'The local inhabitants protested that they had been compelled to do this sabotage by rebel gangs, but this excuse did not relieve them from a fine of £[P]700', and they had to repair the road.<sup>65</sup> For villagers, £P700 was a considerable sum of money to find. By comparison, in the late 1930s a British police officer of constable rank earned a basic pay of £P11 rising to £P18 for an Assistant Inspector a month 'all found', an attractive wage that drew police recruits to Palestine. Fines varied but could be as high as £P5,000 and they had to be paid promptly in cash or in the form of produce such as animals, eggs and cereals; in the village of

a-Tira (or Taybe/Tayyiba, the transliteration from Arabic to Hebrew to English is not clear), peasants responded to a fine of £P2,000 by picking up what they could carry and leaving.<sup>66</sup> Villagers were in permanent debt as village *mukhtars* attempted to gather fines from their villagers who often had no livestock, no men folk and no food. The rationale for fines was at times bizarre, with the authorities fining villages for forest fires in the summer months, the assumption being that local peasants must have started these maliciously.<sup>67</sup> Certain villagers were also required to produce bonds of up to £P100 and additional sureties to ensure their good behaviour. Failure to pay could result in imprisonment.<sup>68</sup>

While the British improved their methods of tracking rebels, the impact of military operations on villages changed little during the revolt. When rebels killed an RAF officer in an ambush twelve miles south of Haifa on 18 February 1938, badly wounding a British woman passenger, the British brought up a tracker dog, specially imported from South Africa, and the dog picked up the scent:<sup>69</sup>

The trail was expected to lead up the Wadi Mughar to the bad village of Igzim [in literary Arabic Ijzim], and B Company, less one platoon, under Major Clay was detailed as dog escort. The fourth platoon was given the task of rounding up 2,300 goats and 200 sheep for confiscation as a punishment on the inhabitants of the area in which the crime was committed. The dog quickly took up the trail and moved up the Wadi Mughar to Igzim, where it "marked" a house on the northern end of the village. It was then taken back to the coast road and put onto

another clue, again tracking back to the same village, but to a house opposite the first one. When searched, however, the owners of both houses were absent. The whole village was then cordoned and searched, while reports were sent to Brigade Headquarters in Haifa on the result of the dog's tracking. Later in the morning orders were received to demolish the two houses marked by the dogs ....

A policeman present at Ijzim, Sydney Burr, recalled the brutality of the 'search', one that was so tough as to prompt a complaint about army behaviour from the Anglican mission in Palestine.<sup>70</sup> The use of Doberman tracker dogs specially brought in from South Africa gave a spurious exactitude to an operational method that relied on villagers doing the work of the British army, suppressing the rebels on pain of the collective punishment and reprisals that would inevitably ensue if there were any rebel actions in the local area. Critics alleged that tracker dogs always picked out some suspect on parade; on another occasion, the dog followed a scent after a robbery to a distant village, leading the police to an old blind man, and then barked at him proving that he was the robber.<sup>71</sup> Once the tracker dog had marked a Palestinian or a dwelling, the police invariably 'found' some bullets to confirm guilt, and the courts then took over with hanging the ultimate penalty for the possession of even one round.

The authorities punished villages because they were the nearest to an incident or because they thought that a particular village was pro-rebel — a 'bad' as opposed to a 'good' village, terms that appear with regularity in the British files. In one

operation, police dogs led troops to a house in the village of Naim (possibly al-Na ' ima, Nain or Bani Na ' im) in which police officers found two Arabs 'of known bad character'.<sup>72</sup> They told the owner of the house that unless he gave the police the information that they required, they would destroy his house. After imposing a collective fine of £P50 on the village *mukhtars*, the British withdrew to return several days later, whereupon they loaded up grain on lorries to the value of £P50 and made the villagers and the owner of the house carry 200 lbs of explosives up to the village to blow the house. The authorities then collected the inhabitants on the edge of the village to watch the explosion.<sup>73</sup> The British triaged villages, destroying Muslim Arab villages while leaving intact neighbouring Druze villages that they viewed as anti-revolt. As one police officer recalled, 'The Druze are always friendly and pleased to see the police and hate the Arabs like poison. They are a much cleaner and better looking race and are supposed to be descendants from the English and French crusaders'.<sup>74</sup> Soldiers reported that they had little trouble from the Druze and Christian Arabs of Palestine, especially around the predominantly Christian town of Nazareth.<sup>75</sup> As the *Hampshire Regimental Journal* described it: 'We might mention Mughar is a Christian Arab village and not in such bad odour with the authorities as some villages, and consequently this time was not searched .... The Druze are a friendly people and our relations with them have been most cordial'.<sup>76</sup> Yet the authorities fined the Christians of Nazareth and destroyed houses in 1939 after a rebel raid, despite the local Christian clergy protesting their loyalty to the government. 'The terrorists will be glad that the fine has been imposed. Notices were said to have been left in the streets

calling the people of Nazareth traitors' noted the Anglican clergy.<sup>77</sup> The sorting of villages was based on weak intelligence, as police officers' letters home show: 'It is very difficult to catch the culprits as there is absolutely no information to work on and you can receive no support from the population in the villages. You may follow the police dogs into one village and upon this vague clue you may smash the village and burn it down but the next night the wires are cut in another part of the road — and so it goes on'.<sup>78</sup>

A British doctor in Hebron during the revolt, Elliot Forster, recalled the effect of living under sustained British military occupation. Accustomed to local life, Forster worked in Hebron's St Luke's Hospital and held surgeries in outlying villages. He lived through periods of intense military operations as the army and police fought local guerrillas. The rule of law collapsed as troops ran amok, shooting Arabs at random simply because they were in what was, in effect, a 'free-fire' combat zone. While some officers tried to restrain the men, local Arabs moved about Hebron and the surrounding countryside in fear of their lives, not from rebel actions but because of the violence meted out by marauding troops and police. 'Anyone who sees the army nowadays runs like a hare — I do myself!' wrote Forster.<sup>79</sup> In engagements with rebels, the army would shoot Arabs near the battle zone, even when these were old men and boys tending their flocks. Forster daily treated local people brought in to his hospital with gunshot wounds. Candid as to when he was treating a real rebel, most of the time he was tending gunshot wounds inflicted by trigger-happy British troops. He included a well-documented account of policemen executing in broad daylight in October 1938

an Arab suspect travelling in a police vehicle through the Manshiya district of Jaffa, an outrage witnessed by non-British European residents, and repeated examples of troops robbing Arabs of money, including young children who were relieved of their pocket money.<sup>80</sup> The execution witnessed by non-British Europeans did lead to an investigation and charging of four police officers — who received minimal sentences reduced on appeal — but this was a unique case of servicemen being brought to justice.<sup>81</sup> In October 1938 troops even robbed the Anglican Archdeacon of Jerusalem, maltreating in the process the Arab boy whom the cleric had left to look after his affairs.<sup>82</sup>

For the soldiers, their activities in Palestine were unremarkable, their job being 'to bash anybody on the head who broke the law, and if he didn't want to be bashed on the head then he had to be shot. It may sound brutal but in fact it was a reasonably nice, simple objective and the soldiers understood it'.<sup>83</sup> Regimental histories and contemporary regimental journals did little to hide the reprisals, destruction and collective fines, recording how villages were 'beaten up', homes burnt and men detained in cages 'on orders from above' because of rebel activity nearby.<sup>84</sup> While euphemisms would be used — 'the search was drastic enough to shake the villagers'<sup>85</sup> — regimental journals would cheerily and sportily describe the trashing of a village, as with the Essex Regiment at the 'sack' (obvious pun intended) of Sakhnin, 25–26 December 1937, with physical force that stopped short of outright torture or blatant wanton destruction — or these were not reported.<sup>86</sup> The repeated complaints about the reprisals made to the mandate authorities by Arab petitioners and the Anglican

clergy in Palestine, supported by first-hand evidence, met with denials and promises to investigate.<sup>87</sup>

Beyond the official policies designed to break the resolve of the Palestinian peasantry, there were also unofficial acts of brutality committed by rank-and-file servicemen. While these do not form part of the story of official reprisal and collective punishment, they contributed to the terrorising of ordinary Palestinian civilians, and officers operating in the field with the men sometimes sanctioned or simply accepted a level of casual brutality by their men. While the ad hoc outrages committed by servicemen were in some measure the soldiers' revenge against attacks and a means of defeating the rebels, a willingness to inflict suffering on others played its part in what happened. As the commanding officer of the Essex Regiment noted at the end of 1937, punitive search operations against Arab villages were 'enjoyed by all ranks'.<sup>88</sup>

For instance, it was common British army practice to make local Arabs ride with military convoys to prevent mine attacks. Often, soldiers carried them or tied them to the bonnets of lorries, or put the hostages on small flatbeds on the front of trains, all to prevent mining or sniping attacks. 'The naughty boys who we had in the cages in these camps' were put in vehicles in front of the convoy for the 'deterrent effect', as one British officer put it.<sup>89</sup> The army told the Arabs that they would shoot any of them who tried to run away.<sup>90</sup> On the lorries, some soldiers would brake hard at the end of a journey and then casually drive over the Arab who had tumbled from the bonnet, killing or maiming him, as Arthur Lane, a Manchester Regiment private candidly recalled:<sup>91</sup>

... when you'd finished your duty you would come away nothing had happened no bombs or anything and the driver would switch his wheel back and to make the truck waver and the poor wog on the front would roll off into the deck. Well if he was lucky he'd get away with a broken leg but if he was unlucky the truck behind coming up behind would hit him. But nobody bothered to pick up the bits they were left. You know we were there we were the masters we were the bosses and whatever we did was right .... Well you know you don't want him anymore. He's fulfilled his job. And that's when Bill Usher [the commanding officer] said that it had to stop because before long they'd be running out of bloody rebels to sit on the bonnet.

British troops also left Arab wounded on the battlefield to die<sup>92</sup> and maltreated Arab fighters taken in battle, so much so that the rebels tried to remove their wounded or dead from the field of battle.<sup>93</sup> Lane, the soldier with the Manchester Regiment, was in a clash with guerrillas in which several British soldiers had died and he provides a graphic, disturbing account detailing what happened to the Arab prisoners captured after the fire-fight and who were taken back to the military camp and tied to a post,

... they were in a state and they were really knocked about .... whoever had done it when they got them on the wagons to bring them back to camp the lads had beat them up, set about them ... [the interviewer asks him with what] .... Anything. Anything they could find. Rifle butts, bayonets, scabbard bayonets, fists, boots, whatever. There was one poor sod there he was I would imagine my age actually and I'd heard people



say in the past that you could take your eye out and have it cleaned and put it back and I always believed it but it's not so because this lad's eye was hanging down on his lip, on his cheek. The whole eye had been knocked out and it was hanging down and there was blood dripping on his face.

When asked why the soldiers had done this, Lane replied simply, 'Same as any soldier. I don't care whether he's English, German, Japanese or what. He's the victor he's the boss and you accept the treatment that he gives you. I don't care what you say. That was repeated to me later [the Japanese took Lane prisoner in 1942]. But it's even today. There's a beast in every man I don't care who he is. You can say the biggest queen or queer that you come across but there's a beast in him somewhere and in a situation like that it comes out'.<sup>94</sup> Lane then described how the men destroyed their own tents, an act that the commanding officer allowed so that his men could let off steam, but in this trashing of their own camp the soldiers left untouched the Arab detainees. One sergeant — described by Lane as deranged — led the Arab captives to the armoury to show them all the weapons there and spoke to them in English, which the Arabs did not seem to understand. He was on the point of letting the Arabs go free through the gates of the camp when an officer stopped him. Then before the army sent the Arabs to Acre jail, the soldiers took them<sup>95</sup>

... around the back and any lads who were doing nothing at the time we all gathered round and stood and formed two lines of men with pick axes, pick axe helms, some with bayonets,

scabbards you know with a bayonet inside, some with rifles, whatever was there, tent mallets, tent pegs. And the rebels were sent one at a time through this what do you call it? Gauntlet and they were belted and bashed until they got to the other end. Now any that could run when they got to the other end went straight into the police meat wagon and they were sent down to Acre. Any that died they went into the other meat wagon and they were dumped at one of the villages on the outside.

These excesses were soldiers' response to rebels wounding or killing comrades in battles, with any prisoners, local village or villagers becoming the target for a revenge attack, something that Arabic sources also note.<sup>96</sup> But British accounts also detail soldiers bayoneting innocent Arabs<sup>97</sup> and Arab fighters in battle being machine gunned en masse by men from the Royal Ulster and West Kent regiments as they came out to surrender near Jenin. 'At one time the Ulsters and West Kents caught about 60 of them [Arab guerrillas] in a valley and as they walked out with their arms up mowed them down with machine guns. I inspected them afterwards and most of them were boys between 16 and 20 from Syria .... No news of course is given to the newspapers, so what you read in the papers is just enough to allay public uneasiness in England'.<sup>98</sup> There is also the question of the methods used by Orde Wingate's 'Special Night Squads' that mixed British servicemen with Zionist fighters and pitted them against the Arabs in Galilee — 'extreme and cruel' noted one colonial official, Sir Hugh Foot, a force that tortured, whipped, executed and abused Arabs according to another source — but is

a subject beyond the scope of this article.<sup>99</sup>

The brutality of the Palestine police and prison service had some official sanction. Sir Charles Tegart, a senior police officer 'headhunted' from India, authorised the establishment of torture centres, known euphemistically as 'Arab Investigation Centres', where suspects got the 'third degree' until they 'spilled the beans', a major one in a Jewish quarter of West Jerusalem was only closed after colonial officials such as Edward Keith-Roach complained to the High Commissioner.<sup>100</sup> Interrogators used what we now know as the 'waterboarding' torture at these centres.<sup>101</sup> Keith-Roach, to his credit, raised the issue that the 'questionable practises' carried out by CID officers on suspects were counter-productive both in terms of the information gathered and the effect on local people's confidence in the police.<sup>102</sup> For the Anglican Archdeacon in Palestine, police abuses were the cause of the violence rather than a response to it.<sup>103</sup> He wrote to the Mandate Chief Secretary in June 1936 detailing the daily complaints from Arabs of beatings at the hands of rampaging police officers, concluding with an account of a constable who was reprimanded for bringing in a suspect unharmed — 'definitely ordered to duff them up' was the police order.<sup>104</sup>

The letters home of Palestine policeman Sydney Burr provide an explicit personal account of police brutality — 'it is the only way with these people'.<sup>105</sup> Extra-judicial executions, torture, beatings and general violence were commonplace for the British Palestine police officers with whom Burr worked during the Arab revolt. Burr discusses the 'third degree' dished out to Arab suspect along with general beatings and trashing of Arab shops

and houses in almost every letter home. Much of the brutality was casual and wantonly destructive, described by the police and soldiers in terms akin to a good, fair fight — rebel ‘hunting is still the great sport’ — enjoyed by all concerned.<sup>106</sup> Most came in the form of beatings in the street rather than in sinister torture centres, but the effects could be severe, something that can be overlooked in the sporting-style descriptions given in many memoirs: ‘it was a good fair fight with plenty of bottles and knives flying about. They are greatly helped by their womenfolk who specialise in dropping family utensils such as mangles and bedsteads out of the window on our unfortunate heads’.<sup>107</sup> Thus, another British police officer, Douglas Duff, recalled the effects of a rifle-butt beating delivered by a colleague to an Arab in the 1920s:<sup>108</sup>

... our attitude was that of Britons of the Diamond Jubilee era, to us all non-Europeans were “ wogs, ” and Western non-Britons only slightly more worthy. When one of the Nablus detachment produced an old cigarette tin containing the brains of a man whose skull he had splintered with his rifle butt .... I felt physically sick ... the sight of that grog-blossomed face of the gendarme with his can half-full of human brains proudly brandishing his smashed rifle-butt as proof of his prowess, altered something inside of me; people who owned skins other than pink Western ones became human beings.

Duff put it simply when talking about a Muslim Palestinian crowd disturbance in 1922: ‘Had our Arabic been better we might have sympathised with them; though I doubt it, for most of us

were so infected by the sense of our own superiority over “lesser breeds” that we scarcely regarded these people as human’.<sup>109</sup> Police officers in vehicles would try to knock down Arabs, ‘as running over an Arab is the same as a dog in England except we do not report it’.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, in the early life of the Palestine police, many recruits were ex- ‘Black and Tans’ and ‘Auxiliaries’ from the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) and so came with experience of that brutal conflict, imbuing the force with a tough ethos when it came to policing the country. ‘For a time I was seriously troubled at the “ Black and Tan ” methods of the police, of which I had overwhelming evidence’, wrote the Anglican Archdeacon in Jerusalem to his secretary.<sup>111</sup> The toughness was, at times, amusing, as when Burr received a handkerchief from home, forcing him to write back, ‘I am afraid I will not be able to use it here, the old Black and Tans who were the beginning of this force do not look upon such effeminate apparel in a kindly light. They think the force is going to the dogs as it is. It is because of the soft ways that are creeping into the police that the Arabs are so defiant’.<sup>112</sup> There was also some fascist influence within the police force, the authorities having to issue orders forbidding the practice of men giving each other the Nazi salute in public. On another occasion, Jews complained when a riot squad in Tel Aviv appeared with swastikas painted on their short riot shields.<sup>113</sup> British police officers saw their service as akin to serving in the French Foreign Legion, many making explicit reference to this — ‘a British Foreign Legion. With the faults as well’ — and some seem to have acted accordingly.<sup>114</sup>

The insouciance of the police was such that they 'smartened-up' in jail a prisoner with rubber truncheons, not caring that a British clergyman who was waiting in the police station to report his car stolen witnessed this action.<sup>115</sup> This 'smartening-up' might be the same instance recorded in the Anglican Jerusalem Mission files in which a clergyman witnessed the savage beating of a suspect whose teeth were already knocked out before he was brought in for a sustained assault by policemen and a man in civilian clothes who might have been a military intelligence officer working with the police:<sup>116</sup>

A second man came in who was in plain clothes, but whom I took to be one of the British Police, and I saw him put a severe double arm lock on the man from behind, and then beat him about the head and body in what I can only describe as a brutal and callous way. Once or twice he stopped and turned to the other people in the station, and in an irresponsible and gloating manner said "I'm so sorry" — "I'm awfully sorry." And then proceeded to punch the prisoner round the station again. A third man came in. He was in plain clothes, and was wearing a soft felt hat. He was, I think, British, and may have been a member of the Police Force, but I thought at the time that he was a soldier in civilian clothes .... But this man also made a vicious and violent attack on the prisoner, and punched him about the head and body .... I am gravely disturbed at the possibility that one of the men who was in the station, and who beat up the first person who was brought in was not a member of the police force, but a soldier — this was the man who was wearing a soft felt trilby hat .... I was for two years Chaplain to

a prison in England, and in the course of my duties not infrequently witnessed the methods which police and prison warders were compelled to use with men detained or serving long terms of imprisonment, and can only say what I saw on this occasion sickened me and filled me with the gravest misgivings.

The presence of authority did little to blunt police violence, the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem having to remonstrate with one police sergeant — ‘under the influence of drink or mentally disturbed’ — who was threatening a school boy travelling in the bishop’s car.<sup>117</sup> Another police officer remarked to the Bishop that he had orders from the High Commissioner to assault Arabs.<sup>118</sup> When clergymen discussed these issues on the telephone, the line went dead: ‘With regard to our telephone conversation this morning I feel certain that someone was listening in and cut us off just when you were discussing with me the serious aspects of the situation in Palestine’.<sup>119</sup>

On the receiving end, Palestinians made repeated complaints to the authorities. One young man wrote to the British detailing the treatment his father, ‘Abd al-Hamid Shuman, a bank director, had received at the hands of the police. Arrested on 20 February 1938 in Jerusalem, the British moved the father to Acre jail and then al-Mazra ‘a detention camp (near Acre) before he ended up back in Acre prison hospital after what he claimed were severe beatings by prison guards that left him unable to walk.’<sup>120</sup> There are other accounts in Arabic of suspects being tortured, of Arabs being blown to bits in vehicles after being forced along roads in which the British had placed mines, of British operatives placing

huge terrorist bombs in Haifa, of detainees being left in open cages in the sun without sustenance, of men being beaten with wet ropes, 'boxed' and having their teeth smashed, and men having their feet burnt with oil.<sup>121</sup> Those who were 'boxed' were beaten until they were knocked out, 'needles' were used on suspects, dogs were set upon Arab detainees, and British and Jewish auxiliary forces maltreated Arabs by having them hold heavy stones and then beating them when they dropped them. Guards also used bayonets on sleep-deprived men and made them wear bells around their necks and then dance.<sup>122</sup>

In petitions made through the Anglican mission, Arab detainees in Palestine's prisons protested at the extreme treatment meted out by guards. Prisoners jumped to their deaths from high windows to escape their captors, had their testicles tied with cord, were tortured with strips of wood with nails in, had wire tightened around their big toes, hair was torn from their faces and heads, special instruments were used to pull out fingernails, red hot skewers were used on detainees, prisoners were sodomised, boiling oil was used on prisoners as were intoxicants, there were electric shocks, water was funnelled into suspects' stomachs and there were mock executions.<sup>123</sup> As one British resident in Palestine concluded, 'after the murder [on 26 September 1937 by Arab gunmen] of Mr [Lewis] Andrews [Assistant District Commissioner in Galilee] the police asked permission to use torture to the prisoners to extract information and that permission was granted from the Colonial Office. Several of the leading police officers in Jerusalem refused to countenance it. One of them has since left the country'.<sup>124</sup> The Arabs claimed that CID officers subjected suspects to such severe beatings that



they made false confessions. Thus, 'in order to extract from him a fabricated admission, and as a result of this method [severe inquisitorial proceedings and beating] he was compelled under stress and force and in order to overcome such an atrocious method against his body and spirit to admit that he gave to other terrorists one time — bomb, two bombs and a revolver'.<sup>125</sup>

Two single incidents during the Arab revolt arguably meet the definition of an atrocity. Neither has been widely discussed, even in the Arabic-language literature, but they have appeared in printed primary records and in television programmes.<sup>126</sup> The British army was responsible for both incidents. They occurred at the villages of al-Bassa, in the Acre district by the Lebanon border, in September 1938, and at Halhul near Hebron in May 1939. Contemporaneous Palestinian papers such as *Filastin* made passing mention of an outrage that seems to be the one at al-Bassa, but there was nothing in *Filastin* on Halhul.<sup>127</sup> As already mentioned, strict British censorship during the uprising ensured that Palestinian (Arabic-language) papers were closed for long periods of time and the Palestinian Arabic press was unable to make critical comment on British military activities in the country after 1936.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, the Zionist press — such as the *Palestine Post*, *Haaretz* or *Davar*— had more comment on Britain's repression of the revolt than the heavily censored Arabic-language press.

The British killed some twenty villagers at al-Bassa, most if not all in cold-blood, during an operation in which villagers were also tortured according to Arabic sources. Up to fifteen men died in Halhul, mostly elderly Palestinians (the youngest victim was thirty-five, the oldest seventy-five) who died after being left out

in the sun for several days in a caged enclosure with insufficient water. Halhul villagers also claim that soldiers shot a local man at a well during the same operation — in fact, it seems that soldiers beat the victim and then left him to drown in the well.<sup>129</sup>

At al-Bassa, British troops claimed that they had been the victims of roadside bomb and mine attacks — what today we would call 'IEDs'. On the evening of 6 September 1938, an RUR armoured fifteen-cwt lorry car hit a mine near the village of al-Bassa, killing four RUR soldiers — Lieutenant John Anthony Law, Lance-Corporals J. Andrews and C. Kennedy, and Rifleman A. Coalter — two of whom (Andrews and Coalter) died on the 6th, with two dying from their wounds on the 7th (Kennedy) and the 9th (Law).<sup>130</sup> The blast also seriously wounded two men. An RUR officer present at the time, Desmond Woods, recalled what happened next in an oral history interview given many years later:<sup>131</sup>

Now I will never forget this incident .... We were at al-Malikiyya, the other frontier base and word came through about 6 o'clock in the morning that one of our patrols had been blown up and Millie Law [the dead officer] had been killed. Now Gerald Whitfeld [Lieutenant-Colonel G.H.P. Whitfeld, the battalion commander] had told these *mukhtars* that if any of this sort of thing happened he would take punitive measures against the nearest village to the scene of the mine. Well the nearest village to the scene of the mine was a place called al-Bassa and our Company C were ordered to take part in punitive measures. And I will never forget arriving at al-Bassa and seeing the Rolls Royce armoured cars of the 11th Hussars

peppering Bassa with machine gun fire and this went on for about 20 minutes and then we went in and I remembered we had lighted braziers and we set the houses on fire and we burnt the village to the ground. Now Monty was our divisional commander at the time, with his headquarters at Haifa, and he happened to be out on his balcony of his headquarters, and he saw a lot of smoke rising in the hills and he called one of his staff officers and he said "wonder what this smoke is in the hills there" and one of them said "I think that must be the Royal Ulster Rifles taking punitive measures against Bassa." Well we all thought that this was going to be the end of our commanding officer Gerald Whitfeld, because you know certainly if it happened these days it would've been. Well anyway Monty had him up and he asked him all about it and Gerald Whitfeld explained to him. He said "Sir, I have warned the *mukhtars* in these villages that if this happened to any of my officers or men, I would take punitive measures against them and I did this and I would've lost control of the frontier if I hadn't." Monty said "All right but just go a wee bit easier in the future."

This is not the full story. Before or after destroying the village, almost certainly the latter, RUR soldiers with some attached Royal Engineers collected approximately fifty men from al-Bassa and blew some of them up in a contrived explosion under a bus. Harry Arrigonie, a British Palestine policeman at al-Bassa at the time, recalled what happened in his memoirs, with the British 'herding' about twenty men from al-Bassa 'onto a bus. Villagers who panicked and tried to escape were shot. The driver of the bus was forced to drive along the road, over a land mine buried

by the soldiers. This second mine was much more powerful than the first [i.e., the rebels' mine] and it completely destroyed the bus, scattering the maimed and mutilated bodies of the men on board everywhere. The villagers were then forced to dig a pit, collect the bodies, and throw them unceremoniously into it'.<sup>132</sup> Arrigoni provides grisly photographs of the maimed bodies, taken by British Constable Ricke, present at the incident, and he claimed that the officer involved had been 'severely reprimanded'.<sup>133</sup> Recalling the same incident, a senior British Palestine police officer, Raymond Cafferata, wrote to his wife, 'You remember reading of an Arab bus blown up on the frontier road just after Paddy [a slang term for the Irish] was killed. Well the Ulsters did it — a 42 seater full of Arabs and an RE [Royal Engineers] Sgt [Sergeant] blew the mine. Since that day not a single mine has been laid on that road'.<sup>134</sup>

The atrocity at al-Bassa prompted the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, the Rt. Rev. G.F. Graham Brown, himself a former military man who had been battalion adjutant of the King's Own Scottish Borderers in the First World War, to visit al-Bassa and then call upon Montgomery, the divisional commander for northern Palestine. Keith-Roach, the senior colonial official, recounted the encounter between the bishop and the general: 'He had a long interview with Montgomery and came back absolutely bewildered. To every question, he said, Monty had but one reply: "I shall shoot them." "The man is blood mad," the bishop moaned across my office table'.<sup>135</sup>

A letter in Arabic of 8 September 1938 giving the Palestinian side of events extends the atrocity to include premeditated torture. The letter dates the rebel mine explosion to 10.30 p.m.

hours on 6 September, following which, on the morning of 7 September, soldiers came to al-Bassa. They shot four people in the streets, in cafes and in the homes of the village, after which the soldiers searched and looted the village, before gathering and beating inhabitants with sticks and rifle butts. The British then took one hundred villagers to a nearby military base — Camp Number One — where the British commander selected four men (the letter lists their names) who were tortured in front of the rest of the group. The four men were undressed and made to kneel barefoot on cacti and thorns, specially prepared for the occasion. Eight soldiers then told off the four men and two per Arab detainee set about beating them ‘without pity’ in front of the group. Pieces of flesh ‘flew from their bodies’ and the victims fainted, after which an army doctor came and checked their pulses. The army then took the group of villagers to another base — Camp Number Two — while soldiers destroyed the village of al-Bassa. All of this happened on the morning of 7 September, with the army withdrawing at 1 p.m. on the same day.<sup>136</sup> While this letter does not mention the villagers blown up on the bus, another letter of 20 September 1938 refers to the British and Jewish police blowing up arrested suspects in this fashion along the Lebanese border, the British sending back to the villages the mangled bits of bodies or quickly burying them.<sup>137</sup> Thus, it seems that the army destroyed the village on the 7 September, returning some days later with engineers and some police officers to kill more villagers in one or more mine explosions under vehicles filled with local Arabs.

An 11th Hussar NCO present at al-Bassa remembered how he and his men had ‘flattened’ the village — ‘blew the lot’ —

before referring to a similar incident near Nablus where the 11th Hussars after suffering casualties destroyed another village.<sup>138</sup> In the archives there are other cryptic comments from British officers to their destroying and burning villages but the vague references to what happened and the reticence of British officers fully to record what they were doing hampers further research. The Rt. Rev. W.H. Stewart, the Anglican Archdeacon of Jerusalem and, from 1938, Hon. Chaplain to the Palestine Police and so no enemy of the force, wrote of dark deeds in rural areas of Palestine, concluding, however, that while his evidence was 'absolutely trustworthy, is second hand and not such that I can produce'.<sup>139</sup> After al-Bassa, the press in Beirut noted that British troops 'ont fait plusieurs expéditions punitives dans les villages de la région', suggesting that it was not an isolated reprisal but one of a set of punishments inflicted on the Palestinians.<sup>140</sup>

The second major incident was at Halhul in May 1939. Located on the road between Hebron and Bethlehem, Halhul was, the British believed, sympathetic to the rebels. The Black Watch Regiment surrounded and took over the village in May 1939. What followed was an attempt to get villagers to hand over rifles, a recurring British demand during village searches, by setting up two wired cages. One was a 'good' cage in which there was plenty of water, food and shelter from the sun, and one was a 'bad' cage in which men were left in the open in the intense heat with between half and one pint of water per day. In an interview with a BBC 'Timewatch' team working on a 1991 programme on the Arab revolt — what it called 'the first intifada' — the commanding officer of the Black Watch emphasised the voluntary nature of the action; villagers could escape the heat simply by

handing over a rifle, after which they would be moved to the 'good' cage. What he did not make clear is what the villagers were to do if they did not have a rifle.<sup>141</sup>

Again, a closer examination of the sources paints a less rosy picture of the events at Halhul. Keith-Roach, in a private letter, wrote that only a half pint of water was distributed, and he does not refer to a 'good' cage. Instead, after the military high command had given the commander of the Black Watch the green light, soldiers rounded up all the men of the village,<sup>142</sup>

... instructed that they be kept there [in an open cage] and he gave them half a pint of water per diem. I saw the original order. The weather was very hot for it was summer. According to Indian Army Medical standards, four pints of water a day is the minimum that a man can live upon exposed to hot weather. After 48 hours treatment most of the men were very ill and eleven old and enfeebled ones died. I was instructed that no civil inquest should be held. Finally, the High Commissioner, MacMichael, decided compensation should be paid, and my Assistant and I assessed the damage at the highest rate allowed by the law, and paid out over three thousand pounds to the bereft families.

The British doctor, Forster, talks of two cages, one for the men and one for the women, and makes no mention of an option to escape the cages. They were there just for punishment. 'We may yet teach Hitler something new about the conduct of concentration camps' was Forster's acerbic conclusion.<sup>143</sup> An Arab whose father died at Halhul claimed that between eleven and

fourteen men died after two weeks in the sun with no food and water, one at a village well where 'soldiers kept pushing him and he was killed'.<sup>144</sup> The same man recalled electric generators/ floodlights/heaters running all night to increase the detainees' privations, some being so hungry that they ate dirt. A woman from Halhul noted that ten men died, two at the well incident, the British only releasing the men after the villagers produced forty old Turkish rifles, and that this was after eight days' captivity. The same woman also recalled the night-time lights, and how the soldiers beat them and threw away food that the women brought for their captive menfolk. 'Without guns those men will never be released', one British official (local British ruler) told her.<sup>145</sup> Other Arab accounts talk of the use of 'cages' for three days 'at least' in military operations in other villages.<sup>146</sup>

In correspondence surrounding a Thames Television programme on Palestine,<sup>147</sup> both Geoffrey Morton (formerly of the Palestine police) and Sir Thomas Scrivener (a former Assistant District Commissioner in Palestine) challenged the idea that villagers were denied water in village searches, with Morton questioning the 'senile old' peasant that Thames TV had 'dragged in' to recount his tale. It is not clear if these relate to Halhul or are more general comment but Thames Television's reply is interesting:<sup>148</sup>

The problems of the oral tradition (confusing hearsay with personal experience) made us doubt it, too, and the sequence was cut when our Zionist adviser told us that these stories originated as black propaganda in Nazi Germany. One of my colleagues, however, undertook a personal search in the Public



Record Office and found the original papers. As soon as this incident took place, Government House informed the Secretary of State that people had died during an arms search. The Secretary of State asked for full details because of the danger of Nazi propaganda, and payments of £2,000 were made to the bereaved families.

The mention of compensation suggests that this could be a reference to the Halhul incident of May 1939. One of the survivors of the cages at Halhul recounted to Forster, the Hebron doctor, the events of May 1939:<sup>149</sup>

On my return this morning I found man had been admitted suffering from the effects of his internment at Halhul. He is a Hebron man who had the misfortune to be caught in the round up. He has not suffered permanently and is not seriously ill. The point is that he strikes me as being a quiet and reliable witness. He denies the lurid stories that were set forth in the two [Arab] petitions you showed me this morning, and says that apart from one man who was drowned in a well only the ten men we know of died from exposure. The death of this man in the well was bad enough, but again he says the horrible story told in the petition is not true. The man was suffering badly from thirst and in order to get a drink he told a false story of a rifle hidden in a well. He was let down into the well and drank his fill, but on being hauled up empty handed he was struck with the butts of rifles. He had a knife and managed to cut the cord on which he depended, fell back into the well and was drowned. My patient said the first few days were terrible,

and the allowance of water was pitifully small. He says that he and others did in fact drink their own urine. During the latter part of his internment — he was there twelve days in all — things were somewhat better. As is usual with the oriental petitioner, these folk seem to spoil their case with exaggeration and falsehood. In this present case surely the unvarnished truth was terrible enough.

There are other references to similar excesses in the primary sources. Forster mentioned a 'worse' atrocity at the village of Bayt Rima, another example of the tangential comments to other incidents for which there is some corroborating evidence: 'Apparently the military authorities declared that they had issued strict instructions against "frightfulness". I don't know if this makes things better or worse. Ballard [a military officer in Hebron] says a man at Beit [Bayt] Rima died after a beating by an officer. "He's a known sadist" is the explanation'.<sup>150</sup> The Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem wrote of 'serious charges' against soldiers in operations at Bayt Rima and Michmash, following which the Bishop protested to senior officers.<sup>151</sup> The Anglican Mission in Jerusalem listed twenty-two villages and towns in which troops inflicted single or multiple outrages, sometimes over a period of many months.<sup>152</sup> In 1977, a local man, Qasim al-Rimawi (likely a rebel and, later, ' Abd al Qadir al-Husayni's secretary and a Jordanian cabinet minister), claimed that three villagers were tortured to death by troops at Bayt Rima during a thirteen-day search involving 2,000 troops.<sup>153</sup> In November 1938, the army also set up fake executions for villagers in Halhul in the hope of getting them to hand over weapons, as a major recalled

with 'enormous pride' in a conversation with Forster.<sup>154</sup> There is a reference in the regimental journal of the RUR to 'severe reprisals' following the death of soldier in a landmine attack on the 'Yirka track' (usually Yarka, a Druze village about six miles south-east of Acre) in February 1939.<sup>155</sup> 'The Royal Ulster Rifles treated the Arabs very firmly indeed but by Jove it paid dividends but of course you can't do those sorts of things today', was how one RUR officer put it.<sup>156</sup>

After a soldier was blown up by a mine near the village of Kafr Yasif in February 1939, soldiers burnt down seventy houses, blew up forty more and, reportedly, then told nine villagers from the neighbouring village of Kuwaykat to run after which the soldiers gunned them down.<sup>157</sup> 'I do not think the circumstances differ from those with which we are familiar', noted a local Anglican Chaplain.<sup>158</sup> Under pressure from the Anglican clergy, the army provided some relief to the homeless villagers, the Anglican Chaplain in Haifa concluding:<sup>159</sup>

On the whole I cannot help wondering at the way the Arabs trust us and believe us and believe that in the end we will try and do what is right. Some of the villages which have recently been hardly [*sic*] hit seem to go as far as possible in making allowances. Sometimes they appear to accept the severest treatment as the inevitable result of acts of violence by the gangs, even though they themselves are not responsible. And they do not hold the government responsible for actions taken by the military authorities, though we know that the government can't disclaim responsibility. The people at Kafr

Yasif were very eager to point out that the troops who destroyed their houses were not English but Irish.

Following the reprisal attack on Kafr Yasif, local Arabs gathered outside the German Consulate shouting 'We want Hitler — We want Mussolini'.<sup>160</sup>

Arab sources make claims of police assassination squads abducting and killing villagers,<sup>161</sup> the RAF's use of 'incendiary bombs' on villages near Bad al-Wad west of Jerusalem resulting in 'burnt' bodies, artillery firing on villages at night 'sowing fear among the hearts of women and children', women being attacked by soldiers, bias in favour of the Jews, and desecration of mosques and Korans.<sup>162</sup> Arab leaders complained to Wauchope, the High Commissioner, that police and soldiers were 'desecrating mosques, stealing personal property, destroying Korans and beating people up'.<sup>163</sup> In retaliation, Palestinians targeted officials, often those who were especially brutal or pro-Zionist, one early victim being the British police inspector, Alan Sigris, 'sentenced to death' by local Jerusalemites, and shot along with his guard by two assassins in his car on 12 June 1936 outside St Stephen's Gate by the Old City in Jerusalem.<sup>164</sup> Notorious for his savage truncheon-wielding attacks on Arabs, including beating up the staff of the *al-Difa'* newspaper office in May 1936, Sigris launched indiscriminate assaults on Arab passers-by, including a well-dressed District Officer who refused to pick up nails left by rebels hoping to puncture tyres.<sup>165</sup> After Sigris's shooting, British soldiers captured and, allegedly, maltreated one of his wounded attackers, kicking and beating him with rifle butts in the back of a

truck, after which he died.<sup>166</sup> Another high-profile victim was Lewis Andrews, Assistant District Commissioner in Galilee, shot leaving church on 26 September 1937, accused of supporting Zionism; on 24 August 1938, a gunman shot dead British acting Assistant District Commissioner W.S.S. Moffat, 'known for his bad behaviour'.<sup>167</sup>

There were some complaints of soldiers molesting women, usually the claim that they touched women's breasts: 'the wife of Asfur Shihadeh [ ' Asfur Shihadeh] of Bir Zeit [Bir Zayt] while on her way to the village spring for water was stopped by a soldier who proceeded to search her and feel her breasts .... On the same day, July 6th, 5 women of Bir Zeit [Bir Zayt] were fetching water from the spring to the north of the village. The troops rushed, searched them and shamelessly handled their breasts and bodies in spite of their cries and protests'.<sup>168</sup> Similarly, there was an account of an attempted assault by troops who 'attempted to attack the honour of the wife of Issa Rabah [ ' Isa Rabah] but she refused and yelled for help and consequently was rescued from the claws of the civilised troops by her village women neighbours'.<sup>169</sup> Again, 'In another case the soldiers went in and found an unmarried girl in bed they forcibly took off her vest played with her breasts and tried to assault her but her shrieks attracted the neighbours and this was prevented'.<sup>170</sup> At a search at Tulkarm, soldiers made women line up in front of them and bare their breasts to prove that they were not men.<sup>171</sup> There was also an accusation of an assault against a girl, directed at British troops: 'Sophiye Ibrahim Hamoud [Hamud] aged 12, raped by the army. She received a dangerous wound on her head which

broke the skull'.<sup>172</sup> Finally, there was a serious sexual assault allegation but this was against three Arab policemen, not British soldiers: 'They beat me with their rifle butts — laid me on the ground. One sat on my chest and kept my mouth shut, etc., while another assaulted me — then the men changed places; all three had me in turn'.<sup>173</sup>

The issue of sexual violence is opaque; but, in general, the Arabs complained about British physical force, not sexual assault against women. It seems that sexual violence was not common and some of the allegations might have resulted from soldiers' clumsy attempts to search frightened women. Servicemen shot dead stone-throwing women, but they were careful to avoid sexual offence — as were the Israelis after 1948 who, again, used inherited British repressive methods against the Palestinians.<sup>174</sup> When it came to searching local women, female 'wardresses' attached to British units were deployed to search women villagers down to their 'private parts'.<sup>175</sup> On another occasion, an army officer complained of police 'mismanagement' in failing to bring along a female 'searcher' on an operation, suggesting that female searchers were used in the field.<sup>176</sup> There were, however, very few female police searchers, some Arab/Armenian, some Jewish, for the whole of Palestine, so outside the major towns women should not have been searched unless a woman searcher was present, impracticable in fast-moving operations. The British used Jewish and Armenian women as searchers — 'no British woman would lower herself to do it' — but, for example, in October 1938 in Jerusalem they had just two Arab women for this task, one at the Jaffa Gate and one at the Damascus Gate.<sup>177</sup> In June 1936,

when the British wanted to search women escaping the destruction of old Jaffa, they sent seven women from the prison service in Jerusalem down to Jaffa for the job, commandeering a local building especially for the purpose.<sup>178</sup> The British police claimed that the Arab rebels hid their 'stuff' with Palestinian women, the Arabs countering that hidden goods were simply valuables or money that they did not want stolen by servicemen.<sup>179</sup>

Nor did the British army act as one, regiments behaving differently on operations. Arab propaganda played on the fact that Scottish regiments were especially unpleasant. One Arab leaflet, written into (clumsy) English for distribution to soldiers, made clear the link between abuses and Scottish troops deployed to Palestine:<sup>180</sup>

One can never imagine inhuman deeds than bombing up the houses over their inhabitants of innocent ladies and children, of robbing passengers, then shooting them, of ruining whole villages and scattering their inhabitants to die of cold and thirst; and of obliterating the ladies of those killed persons in order that they might terrify the peaceful citizens. These savage actions are mostly committed by "ROYAL SCOTCH REGIMENTS," in so many places of Palestine; and hundreds of photographs are kept for future generations to behold these actions of "ROYAL SCOTCH REGIMENTS."

This is corroborated by police officer Burr who noted that Scottish regiments were the 'worst offenders' when it came to causing trouble, and 'if an Arab sees anybody in a kilt they run a

mile. In the trouble last year they used the bayonet on the slightest excuse'.<sup>181</sup> The Arabs were aware of regimental differences, with Arab students in London in May 1939 protesting specifically against Black Watch soldiers following the Halhul outrage.<sup>182</sup> Following the death of two Black Watch soldiers by the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem on 5 November 1937, General Archibald Wavell remarked on the restraint shown by the Black Watch on a subsequent operation against Silwan, the village south of the city blamed for the attack, although he admitted that a suspect died 'falling over a cliff'.<sup>183</sup> Officially, after tracker dogs led the authorities to the village, one villager ended up hospital after falling off a cliff, while soldiers shot dead one man and wounded another. Then the authorities sealed the village forbidding villagers to leave without a permit, made all males report every evening to the police and made the village pay for a twenty-man police post.<sup>184</sup> Yet, the private diary of a North Staffordshire Regiment officer tells a different tale, recording how Black Watch men beat to death twelve Arabs in Silwan with rifle butts after the death of their comrades.<sup>185</sup> Why would this officer lie to his private diary? Palestine policemen recalled that Scottish regiments were especially tough when it came to dealing with the Arabs, and several later counterinsurgency excesses after 1945— at Batang Kali village in Malaya in 1948 (Scots Guards), the Aden 'Crater' in 1967 (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders) and the Falls Road in 1970 (Black Watch) — involved Scottish regiments.<sup>186</sup>

While Black Watch (Scottish) troops were involved in actions at Halhul and Silwan, other Scottish regiments behaved properly, as Forster noted concerning the change in the Hebron garrison from



the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders to the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), 'a far less aristocratic affair [and disbanded in the 1960s] but worth about six times their predecessors. Soon after their arrival a village patrol was ambushed and a truck blown up by a land mine .... The Cameronians bore no malice and for the rest of their stay became very popular with the people. Gilmour [Captain G.H. Gilmour, the officer at the ambush] encouraged his men to go, in properly conducted parties, to look at the suq and the mosque'.<sup>187</sup> Moreover English county regiments could also act very robustly.<sup>188</sup> While certain regiments recruited heavily from certain regions, these differences were fundamentally regimental and not regional, and were a function of the internal dynamics and leadership within different regiments. All of the servicemen in Palestine were regular volunteers, so there was continuity at the grass-roots level, especially as the different regiments drew recruits from broadly similar socio-economic backgrounds who then experienced a shared training and soldiering regimen. But regiments were not the same, some had weaker or tougher leadership cadres and command structures, and different traditions of soldiering, and so brutality was more or less likely to occur when men went on operations against guerrillas.<sup>189</sup>

On occasion, servicemen took the law into their own hands, not least as they did not appreciate that the judicial system supported their work in the field against the rebels as, while military courts with no jury did sentence to death Arabs brought before them, they also acquitted suspects or handed out lesser sentences. For instance, of eighty-two persons tried in the period from 20 May to 31 July 1938, the courts acquitted thirty-six,

found one not guilty due to insanity and the average length of sentence was three and a half years. The British handed out nineteen death sentences, of which they commuted seven.<sup>190</sup> One British military prosecutor recalled how a judge acquitted a sniper caught with a rifle and ammunition on a legal technicality, and that Jewish evidence would never be sufficient to convict an Arab: 'The Arab Bar appreciate the impartiality of the military prosecutors'.<sup>191</sup> On the other hand, a policeman relating the trial of a Jewish rebel in the 1940s, described military justice as akin to 'kangaroo courts'.<sup>192</sup>

The perceived leniency of the courts might help to explain the numbers of Arab suspects shot while 'trying to escape', a recurring phrase in police files and which policeman Burr admits were assassinations by colleagues who were tired of the legal system and so 'shot out of hand' suspects.<sup>193</sup> Briance confessed to his mother that colleagues shot on the spot an arrested rebel.<sup>194</sup> Troops also shot captives, including the Palestinian suspected of assassinating acting Assistant District Commissioner Moffat in August 1938 in his office in Jenin. The British quickly apprehended the assassin after the murder — he was, apparently, a blond hunchback and so rather visible — after which he was shot trying to escape, despite his disability and being surrounded by fit, young British soldiers.<sup>195</sup> Then again, the Arabs nicknamed Moffat's assassin, 'Muhammad', 'gazelle' because he was so swift.<sup>196</sup>

Arabic sources paint a harrowing picture of the judicial system. Abu Gharbiyah secured a press post that allowed him access to the workings of the military tribunals set up in 1937 and presided

over by three military judges. His accounts of the workings of these military as opposed to civil courts highlight a judicial system in which proceedings and the passing of the death sentence could take less than an hour. The commanding officer of the Essex Regiment noted how the courts worked at 'high pressure. The Arab is slow to learn'.<sup>197</sup> The supreme British commander — at this time General Archibald Wavell — confirmed one sentence the same evening and the British hanged the convicted man the next day. The whole sequence from the start of the trial to execution took forty-eight hours. Abu Gharbiyah noted with irony how he and his comrades, 'cheered for British justice!'<sup>198</sup> On another occasion, a family of nine from Gaza came before the court charged with possession of one gun. The judgement took fewer than two hours, with the family of nine standing throughout with British guards pointing weapons at them. The judges found six children guilty and sentenced them to life imprisonment, sent two children who were minors to jail for seven years, while they condemned the chief accused (presumably the father) to death.<sup>199</sup> Abu Gharbiyah claimed that in 1938 military tribunals passed 2,000 'long' sentences and 148 death sentences, the latter not borne out by the official figures of those hanged. Finally, the British detained tens of thousands of Arabs, many of whom had no connection with the rebellion but were just unfortunate enough to be villagers in areas of rebel activity, or were sent into detention after 'screening' procedures whereby hooded Arab informers working with the British checked over villagers, a widespread practice in later counterinsurgency campaigns.

According to official British figures, the army and police killed

more than 2,000 Arabs in combat, while 100–112 were hanged, and 961 died because of 'gang and terrorist activities'.<sup>200</sup> Building on the British statistics, Walid Khalidi cites figures of 19,792 casualties for the Arabs, with 5,032 dead, broken down further into 3,832 killed by the British and 1,200 dead because of 'terrorism', and 14,760 wounded.<sup>201</sup> The accounts of the fighting in Palestine in which 'unofficial' deaths were high bear out Khalidi's statistical examination. If we accept an overall figure of 5–6,000 Arabs killed during the revolt, how many died because of non-British actions? Yuval Arnon-Ohanna produced figures of between 3,000 and 4,500 Arabs killed due to intra-Arab fighting, often against suspected collaborators or because of fighting between the Nashashibi and Husayni families, a point he emphasised in his critical examinations of Palestinian Arab unity and social cohesion during the revolt.<sup>202</sup> More recent Hebrew work by Hillel Cohen questions Arnon-Ohanna's scholarship, claiming that he misread Arabic sources, lowering the figure of Arabs killed by Arabs to 900–1,000, providing a total that is more sympathetic to the Arab cause as it puts less emphasis on intra-Arab clashes.<sup>203</sup>

What are we to make of these figures? The non-Jewish population of Palestine in 1939 comprised 927,133 Muslim, plus 116,958 Christian and 12,150 'other' non-Jewish, giving a grand total of non-Jews of 1,056,241.<sup>204</sup> If we accept a total of 3,832 Arabs killed by the British, this results in percentages of 0.36% non-Jewish killed. Khalidi shows that the comparable percentages for Britain and the US, taking the higher total figure of dead of 5,032, would have resulted in 200,000 British and 1,000,000

Americans killed.<sup>205</sup> Put this way, the figures do look more dramatic than they do when seen as absolute totals, and it is for this reason that the same statistical method was applied by pro-Zionist historians when detailing Israeli casualties during the 1948–49 Arab-Israeli War, showing that they suffered more casualties than Britain did in the Second World War.<sup>206</sup>

By late 1938, once the Munich crisis had passed, the British had deployed two full-strength divisions to Palestine. The British government was keen to resolve the Palestine revolt before war broke out with Germany and so allowed these forces to increase the tempo of their operations. 'The military command in Palestine and the High Commissioner were able to do more or less as they liked' because of the threat from Germany, recalled one officer in Palestine at the time.<sup>207</sup> With such a large deployment, some level of human rights abuse was inevitable, especially as successful counter-insurgency demanded some degree of brutality. Did the reprisals and collective punishment allowed by the 1929 Military Law that the British used in Palestine in the 1930s constitute the 'severe pain or suffering' demanded by, say, the UN definition of torture? This article has uncovered evidence of blatant torture — and recognised as such at the time — but most of what it describes is premeditated, systematic, officially sanctioned brutality in the form of collective punishments and reprisals directed primarily at property not people. There are fewer instances of unpremeditated and extreme 'wild' reactive rank-and-file brutality. These could reflect soldiers' anger at a guerrilla attack — notably if rebels killed or wounded a comrade in an attack — and a subsequent desire for revenge. Unofficial torture and brutality were illegal then and now — *pace* the

arguments of those such as Alan Dershowitz legitimising the use of torture against terrorist suspects.<sup>208</sup> The officially directed brutality was legal at the time, leaving aside the moral outrage that such action would now provoke. Britain's concern to follow the law — modified as necessary — meant that her actions were usually within the law.

While some incidents such as al-Bassa meet the dictionary definition of an atrocity, these outrages were not the systematic excesses that one would expect to see in a police state in which service personnel could act without 'moral reference'. In her charged attack on British imperialism, Elkins described Kenya in the 1950s as 'Britain's Gulag', not a phrase that is readily applicable to Palestine in the 1930s, at least not with the records currently available.<sup>209</sup> Army actions at Halhul and al-Bassa saw the deaths of around thirty-five people, tragic, wrong and illegal, but in a three-year insurgency evidence that restraint and 'moral reference' rather than unalloyed wickedness guided military operations. That recognised, other outrages similar to those at al-Bassa and Halhul undoubtedly occurred — this article has touched on some of them — although the numbers of dead in each incident were small. Cumulatively, however, these boost the figure of thirty-five dead to something much greater, especially if one considers the recurring incidence of single or several Arabs shot dead while running from troops, although troops were legally empowered to shoot 'suspects' who were running away following a verbal challenge.

The question is partly how one measures the severity of excesses, partly what one looks for in the archival material. Wilson, the British teacher in the village of Bir Zayt, noted that

the British soldiers whom she met daily behaved very correctly towards both herself and the local Palestinian community.<sup>210</sup> Of course, that Bir Zayt was a Christian Arab village in which there were female British teachers could also explain the troops' gentler behaviour, but when soldiers detained some local Arabs and took them into captivity in Ramallah prison, they did little to them beyond making them mend some buildings. The Arabs' main complaint to Wilson was that the better-educated ones resented their gaolers leaving them in a cell with ordinary peasants. The extent of British military violence towards the suspects was to manhandle them through the door into the basement cell in which the soldiers detained them. Once released, their soldier gaolers gave the local men cigarettes and then a lift home.<sup>211</sup> The villagers were 'not specially indignant, taking it rather as part of life's general unpleasantness. "Turkish soldiers before 1918," they said, "English soldiers now. All soldiers are alike".'<sup>212</sup> Forster, typically very critical of the British army, also commented on positive changes in British behaviour in Hebron — 'military thieving has stopped' — showing that there was no consistent pattern of abuse.<sup>213</sup>

Local Arab women came to see Miss Hulbert, one of Wilson's Bir Zayt's teaching colleagues, crying and complaining about the British detaining their menfolk for road repairs: "They are beating them! The soldiers are beating our men!" "Beating!" exclaimed Miss Hulbert. "How do you mean — like this?" giving an energetic pantomime of two-handed whacking with a stick. "Oh no no!" replied the women. "Only like this" — demonstrating the mildest of pats and pushes; obviously no more than would be necessary to show the men where to go or what to do — not

surprising when soldiers and villagers cannot speak each other's language'.<sup>214</sup> Whom are we to believe? Both Forster and Wilson are credible witnesses, both spoke some Arabic and both were sympathetic to the Palestinians amongst whom they lived. Similarly, the account above from ' Abd al-Hamid Shuman's son regarding his father's maltreatment at al-Mazra ' a detention camp is not supported by one of Shuman's fellow detainees, ' Abd al-Hamid al-Sa ' ih, who remembered calling in take-away food, jogging, sun-beds, educational classes, and a prison governor's 'humane gesture ... worthy of praise and I thank him for this'.<sup>215</sup>

British troops acted correctly and with humanity, contradicting the negative accounts detailed above. 'If we wounded a terrorist or anything like that well I mean he was usually looked after as well as one of our own chaps. I don't think there was any great sort of animosity', or, 'British soldiery were very bad at brutality; we used it half-heartedly or even not at all'.<sup>216</sup> The Arab revolt raises methodological issues when faced with masses of primary evidence pointing in opposite directions. Soldiers' memories of the conflict vary greatly, acts of great kindness sitting oddly alongside brutality towards vulnerable people, sometimes in the same soldier's record, all evidence of the peculiar experience of soldiering and the later process of memory and historical record. Similarly, Arabic accounts are not consistent and do seem, at times, exaggerated. Perhaps the issue is whether one is looking to support or to deprecate the British army, its counter-insurgency methods, and imperial rule generally.

Casual racism certainly influenced servicemen's conduct towards the 'wogs' — 'There is apparently only one method of



handling the Arabs with the exception of the Bedouin, that is by ruthless white domination', or 'the Arab was a slightly half-witted younger brother'<sup>217</sup> — but there was none of the racial hatred that, say, white settlers directed at the black Africans involved in the 'Mau Mau' revolt in Kenya. Moreover, soldiers disliked Jew and Arab in equal measure. One police officer remarked on the 'real' Arabs of the desert, like 'chalk and cheese' compared to the 'craven, cowardly' Palestinians, before going on to describe Jews as 'poor soldiers' lacking initiative and 'guts' who were also 'ill-mannered, arrogant' and 'subversive'.<sup>218</sup> For the British troops, 'by and large the Arab was a clean fighter' and they respected him accordingly.<sup>219</sup> While servicemen commented on the dirt in Arab areas, they rated the rebels as worthy opponents, they saw the Arabs as a once-powerful culture and service in the Holy Land impressed them. 'I think we British rather admire the Arabs', was one officer's far from isolated comment.<sup>220</sup> Servicemen were disinterested when it came to the Arab-Zionist conflict in Palestine, excepting that the Arabs in the 1930s were the rebels and so were the enemy. Towards the Arabs, there was little of the prejudice shown after 1945, when anti-Semitism among servicemen was rife, perhaps because while the Arabs failed in their revolt, the Zionists were successful in their struggle against the British.

As for the Palestinian villagers, they were so desperate to escape the rebels who came by night for sustenance and the troops who came by day to punish them that many fled their homes, creating an internal refugee crisis requiring official relief and soup kitchens, the latter organised by the Muslim *waqfs*.<sup>221</sup> By the end of the revolt, Palestinian villagers were referring to

the guerrillas not as *mujahidin* in a holy war but as rebels (*thuwwar*).<sup>222</sup> While grossly unfair, the targeting of non-combatants worked, the British suppressing the revolt by 1939, leaving them free to deploy their troops for the coming war in Europe. Britain directed operations against the Palestinian Muslim population along with the rebel bands that the army hunted down, when it could find them and bring them to battle. As with later successful counterinsurgency campaigns such as Malaya in the 1950s, British forces discriminated in Palestine, targeting the Muslim community while working with or treating leniently friendly groups in Palestine such as the *Yishuv* — the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine — and, arguably, the Druzes and the Christian Palestinians, the latter a sensitive subject that deserves more examination. Support for the *Yishuv* during the revolt is beyond the remit of this article, but Britain's recruitment of thousands of extra Jewish supernumerary police — 14,411 according to one source — was one sign of her recognition of the relative value of the different communities in Palestine.<sup>223</sup> When inflicting reprisals and instituting collective fines, the British treated the Jews softly, avoiding, for instance, house demolition of Jewish homes in Tiberias following the death of an Arab in a land mine attack.<sup>224</sup>

After 1936 in Palestine, the British established a systematic, systemic, officially sanctioned policy of destruction, punishment, reprisal and brutality that fractured and impoverished the Palestinian population. Most of this repression was legal to the letter of the military law and the emergency regulations in force in Palestine after 1936. The army maintained that destruction was not its primary aim during operations even when this was its

operational method, suggesting that soldiers knew that such actions were questionable morally if not legally — servicemen also had orders banning photographing of demolitions.<sup>225</sup> The authorities (re)constructed the law to give soldiers' actions legality. The British had to balance what was lawful, what was morally right, and what worked, and these were not compatible. The regulations in force after 1936 made, as a pro-Arab British resident of Haifa wrote, 'lawful things which otherwise would be unlawful'.<sup>226</sup> Lawlessness *was* the law. Servicemen were guided by a legal system that meant that they could accept the premisses of their government that allowed for brutal actions, and they could do so with all the energy of good bureaucrats obeying orders — hence the phrase 'banality of brutality' in the title to this article, a tilt to Hannah Arendt's study of Adolf Eichmann.<sup>227</sup>

Where the British army tortured and illegally executed Palestinians, these were the casual, uncontrolled actions of servicemen operating outside of the law and without explicit orders. That noted, while there was no discernible army chain of command guiding a system of extreme brutality directed at persons, and which broke civil law, police officers and prison staff might have directed torture that was systematic or even systemic. Looking at the Arab revolt as a whole, extreme acts of personal abuse were probably not systematic, and almost certainly not systemic. Admittedly, the British high command tolerated the less blatant abuses committed by its men in the field, but senior officers based in Haifa and Jerusalem were sensitive to charges of abuse, politically if not morally, and so it was junior officers in the field who were intimately involved in

any excesses. The Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem put it succinctly, writing how outrages 'are not officially sanctioned although they have not been officially regretted'.<sup>228</sup> Whether there was an unwritten code from on high sanctioning grass-roots level gross abuse is unproven, and probably impossible to prove, precisely because those involved were unwilling to leave a written record of such orders. For the Anglican Bishop, those in the 'highest positions of authority' deplored the deaths of innocent civilians, suggesting that civil and military forces acted as a brake on counter-rebel operations.<sup>229</sup> Britain's forces of repression were not united, with the army, for instance, working with the *Shai*, the Zionist intelligence branch, handing it Arab material to translate, sidelining the colonial administration that opposed army 'methods' that were outside 'usual police activities'.<sup>230</sup>

Britain lost control of Palestine in the late 1930s during the Arab revolt. Faced with similar disturbances, other imperial powers responded much more harshly than the British did in Palestine, as even a cursory glance at other twentieth-century counter-insurgency campaigns shows, whether it is the Spanish in the Rif mountains, the Germans in Africa before the Great War and during the Second World War, the Japanese in China, the Italians in Libya, the French in Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, the Portuguese in Africa or the Soviets in Afghanistan. These actions included systemic, boundless violence, large-scale massacres of civilians and POWs, forced starvation, overt racism, gross torture, sexual violence and rape, the removal of legal process, the use of chemical and biological weapons against civilians, ethnic cleansing, extermination camps and genocide. This does not excuse British abuses in Palestine but it provides

some comparative context. Put simply, in Palestine the British were often brutal but they rarely committed atrocities. Indeed, by moderating its violence, Britain was probably more effective as an imperial power. Perhaps this is the best that can be said for the British 'way' in repressing the Arab insurgency in Palestine: it was, relatively speaking, humane and restrained — the awfulness was less awful — when compared to the methods used by other colonial and neo-colonial powers operating in similar circumstances, an achievement, of sorts.

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1. *al-Jami' a al-Islamiyya* [The Islamic Community] (Jaffa), 16 Apr. 1936 records three killed.
2. A. Schleifer, 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam: Preacher and Mujahid', in E. Burke et al., eds., *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley, 2006), 139.
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  77. Bishop's Visit to Nazareth, 4 May 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC.
  78. Letter, Briance to Mother, 8 Jan. 1937, Briance papers, in possession of Mrs

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91. A. Lane, 10295, 18, IWMSA.
92. F. Howbrook, 4619, 35–6, IWMSA.
93. Letter, Percy Cleaver [Palestine police] to Aunt, 10 Feb. 1937, Cleaver papers, GB 165-0358, MEC.
94. Lane, 10295, 23ff, IWMSA.
95. *Ibid.*, 26–7.
96. A Notice of the Office of the Arab Revolt about the Tragedy of ' Atil [ ' Ateel], 11 Dec. 1938 in Zu ' aytir, *Watha'iq al-Haraka*, 529 (see also 545).
97. Binsley, *Palestine Police Service*, 104–5.
98. Letter, Burr to Parents, Mar. 1938 [date pencilled in], Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
99. H. Foot, *A Start in Freedom* (London, 1964), 51–2.; T. Segev, *One Palestine, Complete* (New York, 2000), 430–1; R. Catling, 10392, 16–17, IWMSA; files in S25/10685, 3156, 8768 C[entral] Z[ionist] A[rchive], Jerusalem.
100. Keith-Roach, *Pasha of Jerusalem*, 191; E.H. Tinker, 4492, 34–5, IWMSA; Smith, 'Two Revolts in Palestine', 114–19; (Judge) Anwar Nusseibeh, 28 Mar. 1977, Thames TV Material (not on open access), Lever Arch file: Nigel Maslin, I[mperial] W[ar] M[useum] F[ilm] A[rchive].
101. Segev, *One Palestine*, 416–17.
102. Typed two-page document by Edward Keith-Roach, untitled or dated, at the

end of which is added pencilled comment, Keith-Roach papers, in possession of Mrs Christabel Ames-Lewis.

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104. Letter, Archdeacon to Chief Secretary, 2 June 1936, J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 61, File 1, MEC.
105. Letter, Burr to parents, n.d., Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
106. 'A Gunner's Impression of the Frontier', *Quis Separabit*, x/1 (May 1939), 45.
107. Letter, Burr to Parents, 22 April 1938, Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
108. D.V. Duff, *Bailing with a Teaspoon* (London, 1953), 46.
109. *Ibid.*, 36.
110. Letter, Burr to Alex, n.d. [Dec. 1937], Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
111. Letter, Stewart to J.G. Matthew, 9 June 1936, J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 61, File 1, MEC.
112. Letter, Burr to Parents, n.d. [April 1937], Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
113. Letter, Burr to Jill, n.d., Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD.
114. Alexander Ternent, 10720, 18, IWMSA.
115. Letter, Burr to Father, n.d. [Dec. 1937], Burr papers, 88/8/1, IWMD. See also the correspondence on police abuses in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 61, File 3, MEC.
116. David Irving (Anglican Chaplain, Haifa) to the Lord Bishop in Jerusalem (Graham Brown), 29 Dec. 1937 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, 21–3, 29ff, MEC.
117. Note by George Francis Graham Brown, Bishop in Jerusalem, 19 April 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC.
118. Bishop in Jerusalem to Major Wainwright (Palestine Police), 18 Apr. 1938 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, 95, MEC.
119. Margaret Dixon, Government Welfare Inspector, to Lord Bishop [Graham Brown], 3 Feb. 1938 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, MEC.
120. Letters of Protest to the British Government about the Torture of Abd al-Hamid Shuman and the Detainees in Acre Prison, 29 April and 23 June 1938 in *Zu ' aytir, Watha'iq al-Haraka*, 478.
121. A Letter from the Fighter Arrested, Subhi al-Khadra, 20 Sept. 1938 in *Zu ' aytir, Watha'iq al-Haraka*, 505–6. See also, *ibid.*, 548.
122. Statement about the Torture of Arabs Arrested in Military Camps and Prisons, 1938–39 in *Zu ' aytir, Watha'iq al-Haraka*, p. 548. See also the accounts in *ibid.*, 579, 594, 601 and Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya*, 47.

123. See, Palestine Prisons for Howard League for Penal Reform, 6 Apr. 1938 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, 76ff, MEC and Allegations of Ill-treatment of Arabs by British Crown Forces in Palestine (translated from the Arabic by Frances Newton, 19 June 1939) in *ibid.*, 141–3.
124. The Alleged Ill-treatment of Prisoners by Frances Newton (sent to the Howard League for Penal Reform), 15 Apr. 1938 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, 94, MEC.
125. Statement of Mutah Said Lababidi of Hama, Syria, Resident of Jerusalem in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 66, File 4, 1, MEC.
126. 'Palestine: The First Intifada' (BBC: Timewatch, 27 Mar. 1991); Segev, *One Palestine*, 421–2; 'Palestine: Promises and Rebellion' (London: Thames TV, three parts, 1977–78).
127. *Filastin*, 15 Sept. 1938, 1–2 was closed during the al-Bassa incident. *al-Difa'* was closed 13 Aug. to 13 Sept. 1938, after which it said nothing about al-Bassa. The press outside of Palestine briefly discussed al-Bassa: *al-Nahal* [The Day] (Beirut), 9 Sept. 1938, 5 *L'Orient* (Beirut), 9 Sept. 1938, 2.
128. See Kabha, *The Palestinian Press as Shaper of Public Opinion*, 227ff.
129. 'Palestine: The First Intifada' (BBC: Timewatch, 27 Mar. 1991); Allegations of Ill-treatment of Arabs by British Crown Forces in Palestine (translated from the Arabic by Frances Newton, 19 June 1939) in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 65, File 5, 145, MEC; 'Palestine: Promises and Rebellion' (London: Thames TV, three parts, 1977–78).
130. Dates confirmed by the men's headstones in the Ramle British war cemetery. *Palestine Post*, 11 Sept. 1938, 1; *Filastin*, 15 Sept. 1938; H. Arrigonie, *British Colonialism: 30 Years Serving Democracy or Hypocrisy* (Bideford, 1998), 35–6.
131. Woods, 23846, IWMSA.
132. Arrigonie, *British Colonialism*, 35–6.
133. *Ibid.*, 36.
134. Letter, Cafferata to Wife, 22 Oct. 1938, Cafferata papers, in possession of Mr John Robertson.
135. Keith-Roach, *Pasha of Jerusalem*, 194–5.
136. Letter from Acre about the English Soldiers' Atrocities in the Village of al-Bassa, 8 Sept. 1938 in Zu 'aytir, *Watha'iq al-Haraka*, 503–4.
137. A Letter from the Fighter Arrested, Subhi al-Khadra, 20 Sept. 1938 in *ibid.*, 505–6.
138. Charles Tinson, 15255, IWMSA.
139. Letter, Stewart to J.G. Matthew, 9 June 1936, J & E Mission papers, GB

- 165-0161, Box 61, File 1, MEC.
140. *L'Orient* (Beirut), 9 Sept. 1938, 2.
141. 'Palestine: The First Intifada' (BBC: Timewatch, 27 Mar. 1991).
142. Typed two-page document by Edward Keith-Roach, untitled or dated, at the end of which is added pencilled comment, Keith-Roach papers, in possession of Mrs Christabel Ames-Lewis.
143. Diary, 13 May 1939, Forster papers, GB 165-0109, 119, MEC.
144. Account Translated from Arabic of Hassan el-Quader, Thames TV Papers, GB 165-0282, Box II, File 5, MEC. This is a jumbled file and there is ambiguity about whether this witness is from Halhul.
145. Account Translated from Arabic of Woman Resident of Halhul, Thames TV Papers, GB 165-0282, Box II: File 5, 16–18, MEC.
146. Account Translated from Arabic of Unnamed Arab Villager, Thames TV Papers, GB 1650282, Box II: File 4, 12, MEC.
147. 'Palestine: Promises and Rebellion', (London: Thames TV, three parts, 1977–78).
148. Letter, Nigel Maslin to Sir Thomas Scrivener, 29 Aug. 1978, Thames TV Material (not on open access), Lever Arch File: British Letters S-T, IWMFA.
149. Forster [unsigned] to Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem [Graham Brown], Confidential, Not to be Quoted or Referred to in Public, 25 May 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC.
150. Diary, 14 May 1939, Forster papers, GB 165-0109, 119–20, MEC.
151. Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem to Miss Trevelyan, 29 May 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC.
152. J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 66, Files 1-2, MEC.
153. Dr Qassam al-Rimawi, Amman, 19 Sept. 1977, Thames TV Material (not on open access), Lever Arch file: Nigel Maslin, IWMFA.
154. Diary, 5 Nov. 1938, Forster papers, GB 165-0109, 93, MEC.
155. *Quis Separabit: The Regimental Journal of the Royal Ulster Rifles*, x/1 (May 1939), 28.
156. Woods, 23846, IWMSA.
157. Anglican Chaplain [signature illegible], Haifa, to Bishop [Graham Brown], 28 Feb. 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC. See also Swedenborg, *Memories of Revolt*, 108.
158. Anglican Chaplain [signature illegible], Haifa, to Bishop [Graham Brown], 28 Feb. 1939 in J & E Mission papers, GB 165-0161, Box 62, File 1, MEC.
159. Ibid.

160. Ibid.
161. British sources claim that the executions were false — shots fired wide to give villagers the impression that they had executed someone and so force them to divulge information: G. Morton, *Just the Job: Some Experiences of a Colonial Policeman* (London, 1957), 104; Frank Proctor, 16801, IWMSA.
162. Atallah Bey to Dr Tannous, 1 Mar. 1939, P361/5, ISA; Letter from the Amman Ladies' Committee, 28 July 1936, RG65 P3221/18, ISA; 1 Aug. 1936 entry, RG65 P3221/18, ISA; 8 Aug. 1936 entry, RG65 P3221/18, ISA; 19 Aug. 1936 entry, RG65 P3221/18, ISA; 5 Sept. 1936 entry, RG65 P3221/18, ISA; T. Mayer, 'Egypt and the 1936 Arab Revolt in Palestine', *Journal of Contemporary History*, xix (1984), 275–87, 277; Rahman, 'British Policy Towards the Arab Revolt in Palestine', 148.
163. Smith, 'Two Revolts in Palestine', 26.
164. *Haaretz*, 14 June 1936.
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