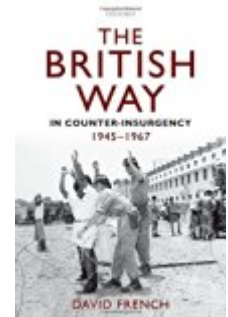


David French. *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. x + 283 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-958796-4.



Reviewed by Michael Silvestri

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Violence, and in particular its sometimes horrific deployment by agents of the colonial state, is an issue which has undoubtedly moved to the forefront of recent historical scholarship on the twentieth-century British Empire. Most prominently, historians such as David Anderson, Caroline Elkins, and others have reevaluated the history of late colonial Kenya, the site of perhaps the most well-known postwar British counterinsurgency campaign, and they have both documented and analyzed the scale and scope of the colonial state's brutal suppression of the Mau Mau uprising.[1] The hundreds of "migrated" files from the former colonial empire (whose existence was recently acknowledged by the Foreign Office) promises to reveal further instances of violence and coercion during the experience of decolonization in places such as Palestine, Cyprus, and Kenya.[2]

Yet as David French observes in his outstanding recent study, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency 1945-1967*, the conclusion of historians such as Anderson and Elkins "that wholesale repression could be an effective counter-insurgency

doctrine, still stands" (p. 7). The question of the nature and effectiveness of British policy against anticolonial rebels in the decades after World War II is of more than simply historical interest. In the past decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, policymakers and military commanders on both sides of the Atlantic have subjected the British experience of counterinsurgency in Africa and Asia to intensive scrutiny in search of lessons in fighting modern insurgents. "At the beginning of the twenty-first century," French observes, "the British army believed that it had a better understanding of counter-insurgency operations than any other western military," knowledge ostensibly derived to a great degree from decades of experience fighting anticolonial insurgencies (p. 251).

French's wide-ranging and richly detailed book examines ten counterinsurgency campaigns, from the outset of the 1945 Zionist insurgency in Palestine to the British withdrawal from Aden in 1967. He examines the question of to what extent those involved with the administration of Britain's overseas empire after the Second World

War, from soldiers and policemen on the ground to Colonial Office officials in London, “put into practice the ‘Ideal Type’ of British counter-insurgency” (p. 5). This “Ideal Type” is epitomized by the experience of Lt. General Sir Gerald Templer in Malaya, where as director of operations and high commissioner he established a highly effective system of “pyramidal committees and joint headquarters and operation rooms” which directed counterinsurgency operations at every level (p. 99). This “Malayan Model” depended both on civil-military coordination and (in theory) combined a judicious balance of winning the “hearts and minds” of insurgents with focused intelligence work and the application of state power.

French’s probingly analytical but highly readable monograph is divided into eight chapters, which explore the nature of the colonial state after the Second World War; the aims, ideologies, and tactics of the insurgents who challenged colonial authority; the strategies used to counter anti-colonial uprisings; and the question of how the “lessons” from successful counterinsurgency campaigns were analyzed, transmitted, and applied in other contexts. French’s conclusions give little support to those who would subscribe to the mythology of a largely peaceful and nonviolent British decolonization, or, indeed, to those who would argue for a coherent and sustained British approach to counterinsurgency in the decades following the Second World War. “Much contemporary British counter-insurgency doctrine,” he concludes, “is based upon historical arguments that are at best ill-informed, and at worst almost the opposite of what actually happened” (p. 7).

The colonial state was weak, rather than strong; local police forces were undermanned, underfunded, and poorly trained; and British Army units were typically rotated home at more or less precisely the time when they had often acquired requisite knowledge to successfully oppose insurgents. British colonial authorities and military commanders consistently misunderstood the aims

and ideologies of anticolonial insurgents, underestimating the force of nationalist sentiment, and consistently detecting “communist” insurgents where there were none. Martial law was not widely deployed because existing legal frameworks, skewed to uphold colonial power, allowed security forces almost the same scope of authority. “The British did not refrain from conducting counter-insurgency campaigns under martial law as a matter of principle,” French writes, “They did so as a matter of expediency” (p. 103).

Legal structures stopped colonial forces short of committing genocide against colonial populations, but nonetheless allowed considerable—and often lethal—use of force. Although French devotes a chapter to a careful analysis of the objective of “winning hearts and minds,” he argues that such doctrines had relatively little impact on counterinsurgency in the British Empire. Where the British won victories, he concludes, “on the balance ... they did so by being nasty, not nice, to the people” (p. 251). French’s tone is measured, but he does not shy away from explicating and analyzing the myriad brutalities of late-colonial counterinsurgency. Coercion in various forms was fundamental to officially sanctioned policies of counterinsurgency. In addition, when “unofficial acts of brutality” such as reprisals and torture occurred, colonial and military authorities were generally less than willing to prosecute those involved; fear of undermining the morale of security forces was at least as great a concern as maintaining the rule of law and the support of civilian populations (pp. 166-72). The author makes frequent and useful comparisons with the French experience of anticolonial insurgency in Algeria. The British did not, as did the French, transfer power from civil to military forces, but achieved the same results in terms of emergency regulations and the suspension of civil liberties (p. 104). The British, French concludes, did not “deliberately and systematically direct ‘dirty wars,’” but the factors mentioned above created an atmosphere

in which unofficial reprisals and human rights abuses could flourish (p. 173).

French's analysis is based upon wide-ranging research in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, and manuscript materials and sound recordings from the Imperial War Museum and other archival collections, supplemented by the judicious use of multimedia sources such as television documentaries, and Internet materials (such as memoirs of participants). In addition to the quality of its research, a great strength of French's book is its thematic structure, which skillfully and perceptively connects counterinsurgency across the late British Empire, from Kenya to Cyprus to Aden. This allows him to analyze one of the most important issues concerning late imperial counterinsurgency: the question of the extent to which the British developed a model of counterinsurgency which was developed and passed on. The answer is: not to any great extent. Thomas Mockaitis' pioneering study stressed not only the relative success of British counterinsurgency operations, but also the extent to which experience was passed on among military commanders, at least in informal terms.^[3] French demonstrates that not only were British counterinsurgency campaigns consistently coercive, there was also surprisingly little development of institutional knowledge of fighting colonial insurgencies. The British, he notes, had a "chequered history of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating the lessons of their campaigns" (p. 218). The much-lauded "Malayan model" of counterinsurgency was only applied in Malaya for three years, and utilized only "inconsistently and incompletely elsewhere" (p. 250). In Kenya and Cyprus, only "diluted versions" of the Malayan organizational structure were created, and local authorities resented the loss of authority which came with this attempt to replicate the successes of counterinsurgency operations elsewhere (pp. 100-101). This was not simply an omission on the part of military commanders and colonial authorities; the Colonial Office in London, far from developing an

institutional memory on this issue, practiced a consistent policy of forgetting rather than remembering colonial counterinsurgency doctrines.

French is sensitive to the ways in which "Orientalist" ideas shaped colonial stereotypes of insurgents. He provides a short but compelling discussion of the language used to describe and categorize rebels: "bandit" and "terrorist" were preferred to "insurgent" because such terms both denied the legitimacy of rebels' aims and degraded their status as "a genuinely popular movement" to that of common criminals (p. 61). There is, however, greater scope for these issues to be explored, and cultural historians of empire might have appreciated greater probing of the genealogy of terms such as "thugs," which had a long history intertwined with the development of imperial intelligence in colonial India. French notes the application of this term to insurgents, but nowhere discusses its history or significance. Nonetheless, the author makes an effort to place the colonial state's post-World War II campaigns against insurgency in the context of the wider history of the British suppression of anticolonial violence in the twentieth century, an area in which further research is needed. For example, French makes useful comparisons between the politics of reprisals in postwar counterinsurgency with the violence of crown forces during the Anglo-Irish War, and notes how India furnished not only a model Staff College exercise in counterinsurgency (pp. 94-95), but also personnel such as Sir Harold Briggs, a former Indian Army officer who came out of retirement to become director of operations in Malaya in 1950. Briggs's plan of operation, inspired by the suppression of the 1930-32 rebellion in Burma, combined an increased military and police presence in rebel areas with the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of civilians into military camps euphemistically called "new villages" (pp. 116-117).

French has an eye for the telling and colorful quotation, beginning with his book's opening,

where he relates the story of how Sir Gerald Templer, who came from an Ulster family background and held his first commission in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, discovered that a young district officer in Malaya was a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. Templer smiled approvingly and remarked, “Arraboy.... We’ll show these English bastards how to run a war” (p. 1). These anecdotes reveal not only the perspective of those who conducted counterinsurgency operations such as the Briggs Plan, which involved coercing the civilian population in “bigger and more effective ways,” but also their impact on colonial populations (p. 117). One former soldier drily recalled how the demonstration of the colonial state power involved “an element of embuggerance” for those caught in its way (p. 9).

French’s book will be essential reading not only for historians of the decolonization of the British Empire, but also for military and political leaders and policymakers who might seek to extract too-easy “lessons from the past” to apply to future counterinsurgency operations. Ultimately, “the British way in counterinsurgency” had far more to do with coercion and brutality than with “winning hearts and minds.”

Notes

[1]. David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005); and Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

[2]. Stephen Howe, “Flakking the Mau Mau Catchers,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 695-97.

[3]. Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919-1960* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

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