

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Clive Emsley.** *Exporting British Policing during the Second World War: Policing Soldiers and Civilians.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 272 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-350-02501-1.

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Between 1942 and 1945, Dickie Hearn served as a detective with the Special Investigations Bureau (SIB) in North Africa and Italy. Hearn had joined the Coldstream Guards before entering police service as a beat constable of the Surrey Police in 1938. During the war, Hearn investigated crimes by military personnel and civilians in the Mediterranean theater. Hearn's experience as a wartime police officer encapsulates the central themes of *Exporting British Policing*, including the link between military service and policing, beliefs in the superiority of British policing, and the unique conditions faced by officers in liberated territory during World War II.

Many police histories have traditionally focused on policing from an institutional perspective, leaving the officers on the beat invisible. More recently, scholars, such as Chris Agee in the American context and Joanne Klein in the British, have examined the role of police officers as workers. Using War and Home Office records and available memoirs, Clive Emsley pushes such historiography by focusing on "serving police officers who continued policing roles during the Second World War, but in khaki battledress rather than their blue civilian uniform" (p. xi).

*Exporting British Policing* focuses on the roughly one thousand police officers who joined military police units during World War II and carried out broadly defined policing activities ranging from traffic management to investigation of war crimes. Emsley describes the everyday experience of police officers in two police units, Civil Affairs and the SIB, active in the European and Mediterranean theaters, and, secondarily, he examines how officers understood police service at home and the police

institutions they encountered in liberated countries. The focus on officers, however, means that there is little discussion of the ways people in the European and Mediterranean theaters experienced the police, though Emsley acknowledges this omission.

British policing rested on the belief that the Bobby was unique. In contrast to continental Europe and the United States where police operated on a military model, the British police model emphasized the beat officer as "little more than a citizen in uniform who policed with the consent of his fellow citizens" (p. 4). British police were nonpolitical and nonmilitary, which, in the eyes of the British, made them an attractive model for export. While this belief often led to negative views of local peoples and police systems, such as Arab groups in North Africa, a more critical take from Emsley on the ways British police officers operated on assumptions of race and ethnicity would have provided a more complete picture of the complexity of British policing during the war.

Emsley is at his best in describing the development and activities of the SIB and Civil Affairs units. The SIB, for example, developed out of the local conditions faced by the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1939. Concerned with theft of material at military ports, the War Office contacted Scotland Yard for advice and assistance, which led to a proposal that came to be SIB. Recruits for the SIB were often drawn from the ranks of British police officers and given military rank. Prior police knowledge allowed officers to transfer their skills to new policing challenges and conditions during the war. Throughout the Mediterranean theater, for example, they

confronted black markets, honored societies, and drug trafficking that they had not encountered at home. SIB officers also investigated war crimes, helping with the interrogation of three thousand prisoners of war (POWs) in Italy and the Middle East at the war's end.

Civil Affairs officers, the subject of the second part of the book where the exporting British policing argument comes through most clearly, helped to reestablish governing structures and postwar European police forces along the model of British civilian policing, not "paramilitary, colonial-style police" (p. 119). Civil Affairs units faced a range of obstacles, most notably social, economic, and political conditions that made British policing incompatible. In Greece, for example, the police mission meant to establish a policing system independent of politics. However, they were unable to root out political policing due to the divide over communism and views of the British police as occupiers. Emsley suggests that such criticism was off the mark, but in doing so, he leaves British officers off the hook. Indeed, for officers who returned home after the war the perception of the superiority of British policing was "undimmed," suggesting a deeper story of the intersections between police power

and colonial rule (p. 199).

While Emsley effectively describes the experience of British police officers, his argument about the significance of wartime policing does not come through explicitly until the final chapter. Emsley notes that "seeking to impose one country's style of policing on others that have understood policing in a rather different fashion" reveals the limitations of the British operations during World War II (p. 212). This is an intriguing argument and one that remains muted in the larger narrative of wartime police officers. Emsley also suggests that there has been less attention to the exportation of police ideas and training around the world in the post-World War II era, but his discussion lacks an engagement with studies of transnational connections between police institutions, in particular the intersection of policing and empire.

Despite some questions about the lack of a critical eye toward the British police, Emsley's account provides an important foundation for historians of both policing and war to think about the role officers play during wartime and the ways in which that service translated in terms of limitations and opportunities for officers when they returned home.

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