

Fig. 1. British officers with trophy-skulls and other souvenirs during the ninth Xhosa War in South Africa, 1878. F. N. Streatfeild, *Kafirland: a Ten Months' Campaign*, London, 1879.

## Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency by *Kim A. Wagner*

The nickel plate bullet hitherto used with the Lee-Metford rifle went clean through the body, and unless a vital part was struck the person did not feel the inconvenience for some little time. The Dum Dum bullet, on the other hand, stops the man instantly, and causes such a wound that the percentage of deaths and lifelong injuries is very largely increased. That is the way to spread civilising influences and impress the hillmen with a respect and admiration for their British foes.

*Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 1897.<sup>1</sup>

Within the last few years the subject of colonial violence has come to the fore in debates on the legacies of the British Empire, with a range of lawsuits and calls for formal apologies and reparation, as well as demands for the

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repatriation of imperial loot or the removal of statues of avowed imperialists. At the same time a growing body of scholarship has explored the role of colonial violence, both epistemic and physical, as an intrinsic aspect of British and European imperialism.<sup>2</sup> The insights provided by such studies, however, have yet to make much of an inroad in conventional historiography of the Empire – certain quarters of what was once described as ‘new imperial history’ now seem positively dated. In a recent roundtable discussion of John Darwin’s *The Empire Project*, Duncan Bell, for instance, takes the author to task for not adequately including ‘the brutal violence and insidious racism at the core of the Victorian empire’ in his analysis.<sup>3</sup> Darwin’s response is telling:

Exactly how to discuss violence in relation to the British Empire is an interesting question. Plainly there were many brutal episodes in its history. Plainly, its authority depended ultimately (and sometimes immediately) upon the use of violence. But then so has that of almost every state in history, precolonial, colonial and postcolonial (and things are not getting better). To say that violence played a central part in Britain’s imperial history is not to add much to the sum of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Since violence was not unique to imperialism, Darwin seems to suggest, no further examination is warranted beyond a token gesture towards those ‘episodes’ about which it is difficult to equivocate. The inevitable invocation of the ‘Mutiny’ of 1857, the Amritsar Massacre or Mau Mau as unfortunate yet singular excesses, ultimately serves to marginalize the role of violence as a key aspect of British colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Add to this the similarly inevitable comparison to German or Belgian colonial atrocities, or in Darwin’s case, to the mass murders of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, which relativizes British colonial violence to the point of whitewash. The result is an implicitly sanitized account of the British Empire.

Rather than looking at the ‘usual suspect’ that is settler violence, this article examines the violence at the heart of British colonial counterinsurgency during the high-point of Empire. The racialized aspects of colonial military doctrine and practice would be an obvious place to look if one were to examine the role of violence in the context of British imperialism, yet the subject has somehow managed to hide in plain sight. Largely eschewed by most imperial and global historians, colonial military history has till recently been the prerogative of parochial military histories. While the pervasive nature of colonial violence is commonly accepted, or at the very least acknowledged, within British and imperial history, the same cannot be said for the way in which military historians have dealt with the subject. Quite the opposite in fact; concurrent with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan after 2001, military historians and practitioners have increasingly invoked a narrative concerning British expertise and proficiency in



Fig. 2. 'A Zulu Scout': nineteenth-century depiction of the archetypal enemy, and environment, in 'savage warfare'. *Illustrated London News*, 26 July 1879.

counterinsurgency, with particular reference to the colonial experience of its armed forces.<sup>6</sup>

Amongst military historians it is accordingly not uncommon to speak of the classic work on colonial military doctrine, Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1896), as a timeless 'masterpiece' containing much 'wisdom'.<sup>7</sup> The assessment by David Betz is characteristic of the way that the more unsavoury aspects of Callwell's writing are simply dismissed as inconsequential to the real substance: 'There is also the matter of Callwell's flagrant racism. Yet, however discomfiting his language and attitudes (which were typical of his time), they should not blind us to the continuing relevance of what he says on war'.<sup>8</sup> The assumption appears to be that if the politically incorrect rhetoric is disregarded, the valuable lessons of colonial warfare can be salvaged. Key among these lessons was presumably a

principle of restraint and according to Daniel Whittingham, who has produced the most extensive study of Callwell: 'nineteenth century commentators such as Callwell recognised that, if the ultimate objective of a campaign was successfully to assimilate a people into the British Empire, then excessive use of force . . . was ill adapted to that end'.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than being seen as a historical source to be analyzed and historicized, *Small Wars* is, with a few caveats, being read today much as it was a century ago – as a manual for counterinsurgency.<sup>10</sup> British colonial campaigns, we are given to understand, can generally be considered to have been successful and thus provide a source of inspiration applicable to the conflicts of the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup> This narrative of a British 'soft approach' rests in part on the belief that colonial officers possessed a deep cultural understanding of the people and societies they dealt with, which allowed them to skilfully manoeuvre throughout the Empire without having to resort to violence.<sup>12</sup> This article critically examines those assumptions, focusing in particular on the cultural knowledge that was weaponized during colonial conflicts in the decades before the First World War. The forms and functions of what came to be known as savage warfare were not simply shaped by the tactical necessities of asymmetric fighting in the peripheries of Empire. Colonial military violence and the development of new technologies, such as the expanding Dum-Dum bullet, were based on deeply encoded assumptions concerning the inherent difference of local opponents and were as such underwritten by both imperial ideologies and a specific body of colonial expertise.

### CALLWELL AND SAVAGE WARFARE

In putting together *Small Wars* Callwell drew upon an extensive body of literature; in many ways he merely reiterated pre-existing ideas among colonial officers who had served in various campaigns throughout the British Empire. In 1873 two lectures given at Royal United Service Institution both used the concept of savage warfare to deduce some general principles based on personal experience in Africa. The famous British explorer Sir Samuel Baker described his time in Ottoman service during a lecture entitled 'Experience in Savage Warfare', while Colonel Gawler talked about 'British Troops and Savage Warfare, with Special Reference to the Kafir Wars'.<sup>13</sup> The two speakers did not present as comprehensive a set of principles as Callwell later did, but the basic distinction between British regular troops and savages was no less explicit. Both presented a highly racialized account of African 'savages' and even when Baker praised the quality of his native auxiliaries, the compliment was not unequivocal: 'I think that even among savages, although at first, you may be disappointed by their obtuseness, and in fact by the extremely low level of their intelligence, after a little time you may improve their *morale* by setting them a high example'.<sup>14</sup> The assessment of hostile natives was hardly better, as Gawler made clear when

describing the indigenous people whom the British brought close to extinction during the so-called frontier wars in South Africa:

Kafirs are individually brave, and devoted to their chiefs, but like most wild animals, a few will often make a much better fight in proportion than larger numbers. You may chase a herd of buffalo with impunity, as long as your horse will last, but put up two or three old bulls, and they will provide you with occupation.<sup>15</sup>

The ideas of racial and cultural hierarchies prevalent in the West during the second part of the nineteenth century thus permeated military thinking and practice.<sup>16</sup> Stereotypes of ‘uncivilized’ people, which buttressed the imperial project more generally, were at times further framed within an evangelical context, allowing British officers to present their conquest of ‘savages’ as divinely ordained. In his 1874 account of the Ashanti War, Henry Brackenbury wrote that: ‘... Providence has implanted in the heart of every native of Africa a superstitious awe and dread of the white man that prevents the negro from daring to meet us face to face in combat’.<sup>17</sup> From its very inception, the conceptualization of a colonial military doctrine was accordingly predicated on the ‘othering’ of the enemies of Empire, who were furthermore assumed to possess essential characteristics that could be easily categorized.<sup>18</sup>

This fundamental difference between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ people, what Partha Chatterjee describes as the rule of colonial difference, was in fact one of the guiding principles of Callwell’s book.<sup>19</sup> ‘The conduct of small wars’, he explained, is ‘an art by itself, diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare’.<sup>20</sup> One of the main challenges of savage warfare, according to Callwell, was the difficulty in striking a decisive blow against ‘uncivilized’ people who refused to give battle. ‘Hill-men and savages of parts of Africa dwelling in the bush are very difficult to meet in open ground, they stick to their cover obstinately and never give the troops a chance unless, in hope of loot or excited to it by seeing the troops fall back, they rush out, carried away by an uncontrollable impulse’.<sup>21</sup> ‘Savages’, clearly, were not accorded the same rationality as ‘civilized’ people but since they were enslaved to their emotions and instincts they could be lured out of the jungle. Callwell’s instruction for colonial officers to study the habits and customs of their enemies was accordingly not a call for an ethnographically sound inquiry, but rather a crude imposition of racial determinants in order to secure victory. The primary differentiation between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ was never in question, and when the enemy was classified simply as ‘lower types of savages’ or ‘cut-throats of the hills’, any attempt to understand their ‘habits and customs’ was invariably overdetermined by this typology. In the context of savage warfare, ‘knowing’ the enemy in reality meant ‘constructing’ the enemy.<sup>22</sup>



When fighting ‘savages’, Callwell argued, ‘regular forces are compelled, whether they like it or not, to conform to the savage method of battle’.<sup>23</sup> Small wars thus required the regular troops of ‘civilized’ nations to act like ‘savages’, which really makes savage warfare a far more appropriate description of colonial counterinsurgency. In savage warfare, the basic strategic aims of military operations differed from conflicts between ‘civilized’ nations, as did the means by which victory could be achieved. When fighting ‘uncivilized’ people, who did not possess formal government institutions, regular troops were, according to Callwell, ‘forced to resort to cattle lifting and village burning and . . . the war assumes an aspect which may shock the humanitarian’.<sup>24</sup> Absence of the restraints of conventional rules of war was explicitly invoked by Callwell as an element of savage warfare since ‘operations are sometimes limited to committing havoc which the laws of regular warfare do not sanction’.<sup>25</sup> One of the key tenets of savage warfare, as defined by Callwell, was in fact the great principle of ‘overawing the enemy’.<sup>26</sup> ‘Uncivilized’ people were, as we have seen, not considered as rational political actors and could accordingly not be negotiated with; the only language ‘savages’ understood was violence:

The lower races are impressionable. They are greatly influenced by a resolute bearing and by a determined course of action. ‘A la guerre’, wrote Napoleon, ‘le moral et l’opinion sont la moitié de la réalité’ – a maxim which is especially applicable to small wars. ‘Do not forget that in Asia he is the master who seizes the people pitilessly by the throat and imposes upon their imagination’ was Skobelev’s view.<sup>27</sup>

In the suppression of a rebellion, Callwell argued, ‘refractory subjects of the ruling power must all be chastised and subdued’, as ‘part and parcel of the system of overawing and terrifying the enemy, which is the great object always to be kept in view’.<sup>28</sup> The historical exemplar cited by Callwell was the Plains campaigns conducted against Native American tribes by the US army, which included the indiscriminate massacring of men, women and children at places like Sand Creek (1864), Washita (1868), and later Wounded Knee (1890).<sup>29</sup> A ‘bold and resolute procedure’ was accordingly not incompatible with the kind of genocidal violence that characterized conflicts in many nineteenth-century settler colonies.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout *Small Wars*, the repetitive insistence on not merely defeating but destroying the enemy assumes a cumulative force. ‘What is wanted is a big casualty list in the hostile ranks’, and victory, Callwell insisted, was ‘not merely the defeat of the hostile forces but their destruction’.<sup>31</sup> The lasting impression of Callwell’s instructions is of a logic surprisingly close to the central strategic principle which supposedly informed German military culture at the turn of the century – namely total war and the complete annihilation of the enemy.<sup>32</sup> Callwell notably referred to the German defeat of the Hereros in modern-day Namibia in 1904, seen by many historians as a

precedent to the policies of genocide that reached their climax in the Third Reich.<sup>33</sup> Callwell considered the German tactic, which saw the survivors of the Battle of Waterberg subsequently die by the thousands in the desert, an example of lack of rigour: complete encirclement and 'a sudden attack', rather than letting the Hereros escape, would have produced 'a greater moral effect'.<sup>34</sup> British colonialism is often compared favourably to the indisputable violence and brutality of, for instance, German East and South-West Africa, or Belgian Congo, and yet it is difficult to recognize in Callwell's book a particularly 'soft approach', let alone a principle of restraint.<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that in 1906, year of the third edition of *Small Wars*, the British left no survivors as they brutally suppressed the Bambatha Rebellion in South Africa at the Battle of Mome Gorge.<sup>36</sup>

Callwell's influential book occupies an interesting position in the history of savage warfare in that he reflected contemporary military practice and experience as much as he shaped it. More than simply a theory of warfare, *Small Wars* constitutes a unique record of how the British themselves at the turn of the century interpreted their military campaigns throughout the Empire. Warfare, however, rarely proceeds simply according to doctrine and to examine the actual practice of savage warfare, we need to observe the rule of colonial difference 'in action'. The following section focuses on what might otherwise be presumed to be a purely technical issue, namely the curious convergence of racist discourse, ballistic technology and medical knowledge in savage warfare.

#### DISCOURSE OF THE DUM-DUM

Only a year before *Small Wars* was first published, troubling reports emerged from the Chitral Campaign then under way on the North West Frontier of India. The relief-force sent in 1895 to lift the siege of Chitral, where a small British garrison was surrounded by tribesmen, was armed with the new Lee-Metford rifle, which was for the first time seeing extensive service.<sup>37</sup> In 1888, the British Army had adopted the Lee-Metford rifle, which fired a .303 bullet, or Mark II as it was also known; this was considerably lighter and had a longer range than the bullets employed in the rifles formerly used, most notably the Martini-Henry and the Snider.<sup>38</sup> The increased speed and smaller calibre of the Mark II, however, had a significant flaw: unless bone or central organs were hit, the bullet seemed to pass right through the body of the enemy without incapacitating him.<sup>39</sup> One case in particular attracted attention at the time, namely that of a local tribesman who survived being hit no less than six times by bullets from the Lee-Metford.<sup>40</sup> As a result of the experience gathered during the Chitral Campaign, the Adjutant-General in India concluded that '...the nature of the wounds inflicted and the absence of the shock do not justify the expectation that the present service bullet used with the Lee-Metford rifle would stop a cavalry charge, or a charge of fanatics, such as the British Army is liable to meet on the North-West Frontier of India, or in the Soudan'.<sup>41</sup>

The suggestion was that the medical reports should be submitted for the consideration of the Ordnance Select Committee.

As had been the case in Callwell's *Small Wars*, the notions of 'savages' and 'fanatics' were commonly used, in military circles and in the public sphere, and their connotations were apparently self-explanatory. The conceptualization of non-white enemies within the Empire moreover combined different discourses relating not only to racial and cultural difference, but also to medicine, anatomy and ballistics. Central to this line of reasoning was the constant comparison between 'savages' and wild animals. In an article in the *British Medical Journal*, in which he described the use of expanding bullets on wild game, Surgeon-Major J. B. Hamilton thus referred to the Mark II:

This bullet was complained of as not having stopping power – that is, it passed through the limbs or body without causing immediate collapse unless some vital part or important bone was struck. In European warfare this was of comparatively little consequence, as civilised man is much more susceptible than savages. As a rule when a 'white man' is wounded he has had enough, and is quite ready to drop out of the ranks and go to the rear; but the savage, like the tiger, is not so impressionable, and will go on fighting even when desperately wounded.<sup>42</sup>

The same journal had previously pointed out the potential implications if British troops were not sufficiently armed when facing 'enemies whose nervous development is apparently less exalted than that of Europeans'.<sup>43</sup> The logic underwriting the rule of colonial difference was in other words somewhat indeterminate as notions of Muslim fanaticism meshed seamlessly with Spencerian ideas about racial hierarchies and what may more vaguely be described as Orientalist discourses about the inferiority of non-western people.

One military surgeon in the Chitral relief force had early on reported that the locals had been 'free in their criticism of the weapon, and express contempt for it, saying it is not even good enough to steal, that though it has a long range, the bullet does not come with any force, and a man can walk quite well when hit by it'.<sup>44</sup> Such accounts of the enemy's disregard for the British armament was potentially extremely damaging to both British prestige and confidence in their own technological superiority – one of the central pillars of Western Imperialism. The notion of the embattled 'thin red line' – the last stand of brave British soldiers surrounded and outnumbered by the savage hordes of Zulus, Dervishes or Afghan tribesmen – indeed loomed large in the debates concerning the armament of colonial troops.<sup>45</sup> While providing iconic moments of colonial glory, exotic names such as Isandlwana or Maiwand simultaneously conjured up images of broken British lines being hacked to death by enemies with inferior weapons. At the Battle of Abu Klea during the failed Gordon Relief Expedition of 1885, the Gardner machine-guns infamously jammed and the British force



sustained large casualties when their defensive formation collapsed, as was immortalized in Henry Newbolt's poem, 'Vitaï Lampada':

The sand of the desert is sodden red –  
 Red with the wreck of a square that broke  
 The gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,  
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.<sup>46</sup>

The complete annihilation of the Italian colonial force at Adwa in Ethiopia in 1896 provided a recent example of the same nightmare scenario, of Western technological superiority being inadequate in the face of 'savages'.<sup>47</sup> Much of Callwell's assertive language, it may be noted, was in fact intended to conceal the reality that decisive victories proved elusive and the possibility of failure was never too distant. The debates regarding the performance of the Lee-Metford thus revealed a real concern about British military dominance, while at the same time giving further expression to a discourse portraying the enemies of the Empire as inherently 'savage'.<sup>48</sup>

Many of the British officers in India and elsewhere were avid hunters and when it came to the development of a replacement for the Mark II on the front-line of Empire, the most obvious source of inspiration was the types of ammunition used to shoot dangerous game such as tigers and rhinos. Reporting on the wounds caused by the Lee-Metford during the Chitral Campaign, Surgeon-Lieutenant Jay-Gould noted how 'Very marked indeed is the action of the service bullet compared with Tweedie's, which is used for sporting purposes. In the latter the apex of the thimble is filed off, and its destructive effect on bone is enormous'.<sup>49</sup> Somewhat ironically, a medical officer was here making suggestions of how to make the British armament more deadly. The bullet that was eventually adopted by the British army in 1896, known as the Mark III or the Dum-Dum bullet after the Indian garrison where it was manufactured, was in fact so closely modelled on expanding bullets used for hunting that Tweedie complained about patent infringement.<sup>50</sup> The Dum-Dum bullet was immediately adopted by the British Army in India and was first deployed during the Tirah Campaign in 1897 – providing the perfect case for comparison with the recent experiences in Chitral. By this time, the public gaze was fully focused on the performance of the new ammunition and Winston Churchill, who covered the campaign as a correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, provided a gleeful account of effect of its effect:

The power of the new Lee-Metford rifle with the new Dum-Dum bullet – it is now called, though not officially, the '*ek-dum*'\* bullet – is tremendous. . . . Of the bullet it may be said, that its stopping power is all that could be desired. The Dum-Dum bullet, though not explosive, is expansive. The original Lee-Metford bullet was a pellet of lead covered by a nickel case with an opening at the base. In the improved bullet this outer

case has been drawn backward, making the hole in the base a little smaller and leaving the lead at the tip exposed. The result is a wonderful and from the technical point of view a beautiful machine. On striking a bone this causes the bullet to 'set up' or spread out, and it then tears and splinters everything before it, causing wounds which in the body must be generally mortal and in any limb necessitate amputation.

\* Hindustani for 'at once'.<sup>51</sup>

The most memorable event of the Tirah Campaign, which was till then the biggest operation on the Frontier, was inarguably the charge of the Gordon Highlanders at Dargai Heights, on 20 October 1897.<sup>52</sup> During the assault on the enemy's heavily entrenched positions, Piper Findlater was wounded in both legs but continued playing his bagpipe as his comrades carried on the assault – a deed which earned him the Victoria Cross and instant fame throughout the British Empire. It was thus something of a shock when details of the wounds he had sustained were later reported in the press: British ammunition had fallen into the hands of the tribesmen who had been using the Dum-Dum bullet against its own inventors:

The Piper hero, Findlater, was wounded in the ankle with a Dum Dum bullet. His bones were knocked to pulp, and it was found imperative to amputate the foot some distance above the wound.<sup>53</sup>

The fact that Piper Findlater might have been hit by a Dum-Dum bullet, specifically designed to be used against 'fanatics' rather than heroic Scotsmen, complicated this otherwise perfect moment of late-Victorian colonial heroism. Just a few weeks before the Battle of Dargai Heights, newspapers had described the 'gratification expressed by the officers engaged in the present Indian frontier fights with the damaging injuries inflicted by the Dum Dum bullets...'<sup>54</sup> Being suddenly at the receiving end of their own armoury, as it were, and under such spectacularly sensationalized circumstances, the British were now forced to view in a different light the nature of the wounds they had been only too happy to inflict on their 'un-civilized' enemies.<sup>55</sup> Members of the opposition soon seized upon the issue and in February 1898 Lord Stanley, a Muslim convert and a historian, questioned the use and legality of the Dum-Dum bullets in the House of Lords. This querying of the British armament was not, however, motivated by a general humanitarian consideration of the effects of the ammunition as Stanley himself made quite clear: 'I am not now so much concerned with the Afridis as I am with our own soldiers'.<sup>56</sup> Expanding bullets had never been intended for use against 'civilized' people, but now the concern was that British troops themselves might suffer the consequences of their development.

Although the public debate about the expanding bullets provided ample ammunition for criticism of the incumbent Government, there was never any real question of its perceived efficacy in savage warfare. When the

Dum-Dum was discovered to be faulty, in that it did not always cause as much damage as intended, a new expanding projectile, the Mark IV, was developed – just in time for its baptism of fire in the Sudan Campaign in 1898. The campaign reached its bloody climax at the Battle of Omdurman on 2 September 1898, when the forces of the Mahdi launched a mass assault over open ground towards the well-positioned ranks of British and Egyptian troops. Considering the manner in which Churchill had previously described the effects of the Dum-Dum bullets during the Tirah Campaign, his evocative account of the Dervish charge at Omdurman revealed a growing sense of discomfort about the imperial war machine being unleashed:

Battalion by battalion . . . the British division began to fire . . . until by 6.45 more than 12,000 infantry were engaged in that mechanical scattering of death which the polite nations of the earth have brought to such monstrous perfection.

They fired steadily and stolidly, without hurry or excitement, for the enemy were far away and the officers careful. Besides, the soldiers were interested in the work and took great pains. But presently the mere physical act became tedious. The tiny figures seen over the slide of the back-sight seemed a little larger, but also fewer at each successive volley. The rifles grew hot – so hot that they had to be changed for those of the reserve companies. The Maxim guns exhausted all the water in their jackets, and several had to be refreshed from the water-bottles of the Cameron Highlanders before they could go on with their deadly work. The empty cartridge-cases, tinkling to the ground, formed small but growing heaps beside each man. And all the time out on the plain on the other side bullets were shearing through flesh, smashing and splintering bone; blood spouted from terrible wounds; valiant men were struggling on through a hell of whistling metal, exploding shells, and spurting dust – suffering, despairing, dying.<sup>57</sup>

The Dervishes never came closer than 1,000 yards to the main British lines and, according to the *Daily Mail's* correspondent, G. W. Steevens, 'It was not a battle, but an execution'.<sup>58</sup> The British casualties amounted to twenty-eight killed and 148 wounded, which may be compared to the estimated 11,000 killed and 16,000 wounded Dervishes.<sup>59</sup> Days later, Churchill and fellow officers surveyed the battlefield, still strewn with the corpses of the dead and the dying and giving voice to a rare sense of compassion for the enemies of the empire he noted how 'The terrible machinery of scientific war had done its work'.<sup>60</sup> It may be noted that, according to Churchill, the British troops at Omdurman spent more than 200,000 Mark IV rounds in their rifles and Maxims.<sup>61</sup> Back home in the imperial metropole the Battle of Omdurman was celebrated as a great victory avenging the death of General Gordon years earlier.<sup>62</sup>

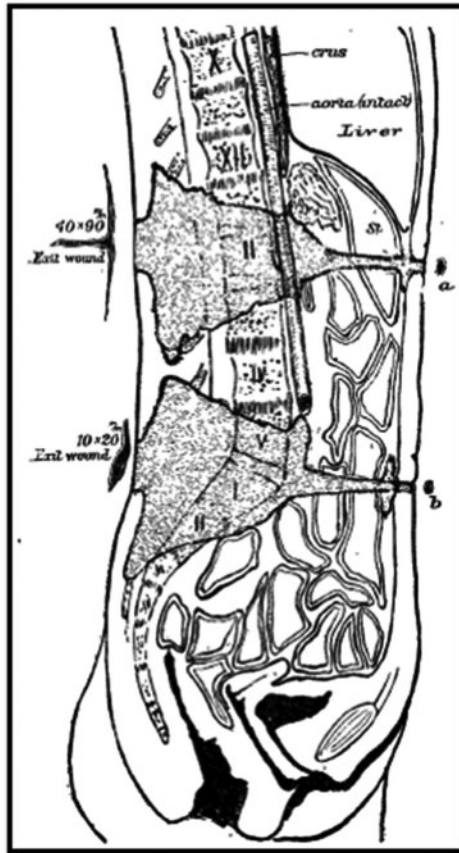


Fig. 3. Cross-section of female corpse used to test the effects of expanding bullets at the time of the 1899 Hague Convention. The points marked 'a' and 'b' show the entry-wound of the Dum Dum bullet, the size of which was about 7x7 mm. The bullet expanded inside the body and left an exit-wound 10x20 mm. Stippled areas show destroyed tissue. Dr A Keith and Mr H. M. Rigby, 'Modern Military Bullets', *Lancet*, 2 Dec. 1899, p. 1,505.

What neither the journalists nor the British public knew, and what is even today rarely acknowledged, was the fact that the Maxim machine-guns at Omdurman were loaded with expanding rounds, making them surely the most lethal weapon ever to be deployed in colonial warfare. The Mark IV, Major Broadfoot of the Royal Engineers stated: 'was used at Omdurman, both in ordinary rifles and in the Maxims, and found to be trustworthy – indeed its effects surpassed expectation; but its efficiency at long range prevented its power being tested at short range, for the dervishes were dispersed or destroyed before they could engage us at close quarters...'<sup>63</sup> After the battle, British medical officers went over the ground to inspect in person the destruction caused by the Mark IV on the bodies of the slain enemy. Without going into too many details, Broadfoot concluded: 'it is fair to

say that the bullet came well out of the trials both official at targets and in actual war'.<sup>64</sup> Much like the animals and cadavers that had during the preceding years been subjected to various tests in the pursuit of the perfect expanding bullet, the Dervishes at Omdurman unknowingly played the unenviable role of guinea-pigs for the development of the new armament of the British Empire. It might be pertinent here to note Callwell's assessment of the performance of the Lee-Metford at Omdurman, which to him proved 'that the new weapon settles for good and all any little chance of victory that the enemy may have had before its introduction'.<sup>65</sup> The lesson that Callwell took away from the defeat of the Dervishes was accordingly that regular troops should not hold their fire till the enemy was close: 'it is rather a case of pouring in fire from the moment that it can tell, so as to destroy a foe roused up to fanatical frenzy'.<sup>66</sup> One would search in vain for an ethic of 'minimum force' in the use of expanding bullets at Omdurman, let alone for evidence to support any assertion that the British did not make much use of the machinegun during this period.<sup>67</sup>

The British deployment of expanding bullets was, however, coming under increasing international scrutiny and France and Germany, in particular, condemned their use.<sup>68</sup> British claims that expanding bullets were 'indispensable' in colonial campaigns did little to assuage the vigorous criticism – this was after all the high-point of the 'scramble for Africa' and imperial rivalry: The Anglo-German armament race was well under way, and the relationship with France further strained by the Fashoda incident. At the Hague Convention in 1899, Britain was thus the only nation, apart from Luxemburg, that declined to sign the prohibition against the use of such bullets.<sup>69</sup> At a time when rules of war were being codified for conflict between 'civilized' nations, the British thus refused to commit themselves to any such limitations on the levels of violence that could be utilized in savage warfare. On the eve of the twentieth century, the British Government found itself in the peculiar situation of suggesting that two different types of bullets should in the future be used by its colonial forces: the old non-expanding Mark II for use against 'civilized' enemies, and the expanding Mark IV, or its successor the Mark V, against 'savages'.<sup>70</sup> The impracticalities of such an arrangement were nevertheless considerable, since British troops could be deployed to various theatres of conflict, facing different 'types' of enemies, at very little notice. Should British troops by accident use expanding ammunition against a 'civilized' power, or simply white people, the international outcry would be catastrophic – as would the threat of retaliation. Veering on the side of caution, British colonial troops were as a result armed with conventional non-expanding bullets during both the South African War and the Boxer Expedition.<sup>71</sup> When Britain finally abandoned the use of expanding bullets in 1902, it was accordingly for practical reasons, and from fear that similar bullets might be used against its own troops, rather than because of the moral force of international criticism.<sup>72</sup>



It is often assumed that the experience of four years of brutal warfare during the First World War, as well as the transformation of the political landscape after 1918, led to the abandonment of exemplary violence in colonial warfare. The Amritsar Massacre of 1919, during which colonial troops shot and killed hundreds of Indian civilians, is thus regarded as an anomaly and the last colonial atrocity, following which a doctrine of ‘minimum force’ came to characterize British colonial counterinsurgency.<sup>73</sup> The truth is that while tolerance of colonial violence by the British public decreased with the passing of time, the abiding belief in both the efficacy and necessity of exemplary force against anti-colonial movements and rebellions persisted.<sup>74</sup> The use of airpower within the British Empire reveals the continuing distinction between the military technologies that could be deployed against ‘civilized’ and ‘un-civilized’ populations later in the twentieth century.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the scale and level of brutality in the counterinsurgency campaigns in places such as Palestine, Kenya or Malaya would have been inconceivable in, for instance, Northern Ireland or Cyprus.<sup>76</sup> The language changed over time, as Callwell’s ‘small wars’ became Gwynn’s ‘imperial policing’, followed after the Second World War by ‘counterinsurgency’.<sup>77</sup> The principle, however, remained largely the same and the rule of colonial difference never lost its purchase.

### CONCLUSION

It has been suggested by military historians that Callwell, and by extension British military practice in colonial counterinsurgency, constituted an early version of ‘hearts and minds’: a strategy that seeks to win over the local population rather than alienating it by the use of excessive force. In his assessment of *Small Wars*, Whittingham thus concludes that:

Callwell argued that the ‘hearts and minds of the people’ were to be won by ‘butcher and bolt’ style methods. Such ideas were based on the perceived importance of ‘moral factors’ and the need to deal the rebels a heavy blow. However, the controversies caused by this approach and awareness of the need to win over but not exasperate the people suggests that the idea of British brutality can be exaggerated.<sup>78</sup>

Callwell did indeed warn against indiscriminate retribution and highlighted the suppression of the Vendée rising in eighteenth-century France as ‘a happy combination of clemency with firmness...’.<sup>79</sup> A hundred pages later, however, he also reminded the reader of the distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘un-civilized’ people, suggesting that: ‘Uncivilized races attribute leniency to timidity. A system adapted to La Vendée is out of place among fanatics and savages who must be thoroughly brought to book and cowed or they will rise again’.<sup>80</sup> Callwell’s warning not to ‘exasperate’ the enemy was accordingly not a call for restraint – quite the opposite, as he made clear: ‘the overawing and not the exasperation of the enemy is the end to keep in

view'.<sup>81</sup> Considering what Callwell implied by 'overawing', and the historical precedents upon which he drew, it is somewhat difficult to reconcile his argument with the high-sounding rhetoric, if not reality, of 'population-centric' counterinsurgency doctrines of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. 'Hearts and minds' is a twentieth-century euphemism and has no place in an analysis of savage warfare, not least because those who opposed Western imperialism a century ago were generally not considered to be in possession of 'hearts and minds' in any meaningful way.

Then, as now, military doctrine and practice did not develop within a discursive vacuum. The insistence that ideas concerning race and the bodily alterity of non-white people can be neatly separated from military culture, as expressed in the work of Isabel V. Hull for instance, is thus ultimately unsustainable.<sup>82</sup> British knowledge and understanding of the people they fought throughout the Empire was invariably shaped by the colonial ideologies and racial hierarchies implicit in the 'civilizing mission' and central to the imperial experience. Construction of the enemy as 'un-civilized', 'savage', or 'fanatic' had severe implications for the conduct of what became known as savage warfare; it dictated and justified techniques of violence that were by the same token considered unacceptable in conflicts between so-called 'civilized' nations.<sup>83</sup> Cultural knowledge was not simply a facet of imperialism; it was an organizing principle underwriting the rule of colonial difference according to which 'un-civilized' people had to be treated by different standards. Considering how the rule of colonial difference informed savage warfare at every level during the high-point of Empire, the conclusion surely must be that British brutality cannot be underestimated – in many instances, slaughter *was* the 'British Way', in theory and in practice.<sup>84</sup>

The point is not that scholars must denounce British imperialism as a brutal and morally corrupt endeavour. Indeed, one does not have to 'insist that violence was *the* distinguishing feature of British imperialism' in order to recognize that it was systemic and always about more than just 'a few striking examples'.<sup>85</sup> From the sordid everyday beatings or rape of labourers and servants, to the exemplary execution and spectacular massacres of rebels – whether routine or exceptional – colonial violence relied on the same logic of difference, insisting that brute force was the only language 'natives' understood.<sup>86</sup> It may be that John Darwin is correct when he claims that 'to say that violence played a central part in Britain's imperial history is not to add much to the sum of knowledge'.<sup>87</sup> However, merely to pay lip-service to the significance of racialized violence in Britain's imperial history, by downplaying its ubiquity or simply relegating the subject to the margins of analysis, is implicitly to perpetuate a narrative of British exceptionalism. This exceptionalism is further established in contrast to German imperialism and, by extension, to twentieth century totalitarian regimes.<sup>88</sup> Yet racialized violence was as much a distinguishing feature of British imperialism as it was of German, French or Belgian imperialism, and the important distinctions are a matter of



Fig. 4. The aftermath of the charge of the Dervishes at Omdurman, 2 Sept. 1898. From A. Hilliard Atteridge, *The Wars of the 'Nineties*, London, 1899, p. 165.

degree rather than of kind.<sup>89</sup> Even as Joseph Conrad's narrator in *Heart of Darkness* took ironic succour in the red blotches on the world-map, 'good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there', it is worth remembering that, ultimately, 'all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'.<sup>90</sup>

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subject of ‘Thuggee’, the Uprising of 1857, and resistance and colonial violence more generally in nineteenth and twentieth-century global history. His most recent publications include ‘“Treading Upon Fires”: the “Mutiny”-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India’, *Past & Present*, 2013, “‘Calculated to Strike Terror’: the Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence’, *Past & Present*, 2016; and *The Skull of Alum Bhag: the Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857*, 2017.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3 Duncan Bell, ‘A Roundtable on John Darwin’s *The Empire Project*: Comment: Desolation Goes before Us’, *Journal of British Studies* 54: 4, October 2015, pp. 987–93, 989.

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