The 1919 Egyptian revolution sits alongside the simultaneous Irish war of independence and disturbances in the Punjab as a key event in what John Gallagher labelled as Britain’s «crisis of empire». 1919–1922 was a hiatus moment for British imperial rule in a number of territories all of which had contributed to the exertions of the imperial war effort over the preceding four years. As a result of mobilising these societies for a «total war» the often tenuous bonds of legitimacy that underwrote British imperial rule were stretched to breaking point. Egypt in particular raises a series of interesting and significant questions about the nature of Britain's post-war imperial crisis and, more importantly, the means by which the British imperial state sought to crack down on anti-colonial nationalist challenges. ¹

The Egyptian nationalist movement posed a substantial challenge to British authority in 1919, not just in Egypt, but also in terms of the example it could set for other groups across Britain’s nascent Middle Eastern empire. The revolution’s impact derived from its nationwide scale, with urban and rural activists playing prominent roles and causing disruption in cities, provincial towns and isolated hamlets, as well as across much of the cultivated areas of northern Egypt and the Nile Valley. Given the depth of feeling articulated by the Egyptian population in spring 1919 it is surprising that the revolution was contained so quickly; by the end of April widespread violence had fizzled out and some degree of law and order, from a British perspective, was restored. The path towards independence, albeit with significant British caveats over the nature of that independence, remained a tortuous one, with begrudging concessions made in February 1922 after much political wrangling. ²

The imperial response to Egyptian unrest in 1919 was analysed by the interwar military theorist Major-General Sir Charles Gwynn, a former commandant of the

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² J. Darwin, Britain, Egypt and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918–1922, London 1981, 80–137.
British Army Staff College at Camberley. In his 1934 work, *Imperial Policing*, he described the military campaign to tackle the Egyptian revolution in glowing terms. Gwynn noted that in little over a month from the beginning of the unrest order had been completely restored throughout the country with the government able to function as before. Furthermore, he suggested that in many respects the British military response had been a model imperial policing operation:

> With the exception of those cases in which a definite attack which had to be repelled was made, there was little loss of life. No steps in the nature of vindictive or oppressive punitive measures were taken, and the troops showed admirable restraint. Their conduct furthered the clear-cut policy which was adopted of avoiding anything likely to leave a permanent feeling of bitterness among the people. Firm rapid action and the presence of an adequate number of troops had made these results possible.³

Gwynn’s assertions about the limited number of casualties and the nature of colonial repression places the counter-revolutionary campaign within the rubric of a benign policing operation. In this sense Egypt was a model of how the British Army should deal with the problems of Empire; a model which could be easily juxtaposed to the failings of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer in Amritsar. Egypt could thus be portrayed as an early example of the British Army’s much fabled «minimum necessary force» approach to operations in aid of the civil power. Gwynn’s discussion of imperial policing touches on one of the most neglected elements of the Egyptian rising, and of studies of the «crisis of empire» more generally. The British military response is often treated in a perfunctory fashion in accounts of the revolution, dismissing it either as a small part of a wider political dialogue or the representation simply of the ruthless brutality that the British imperial state was, at times, prepared to use to preserve its control.⁴ This leaves unanswered questions of how the British tackled unrest, both at an operational and tactical level, and whether there is any validity in Gwynn’s claim that the campaign was conducted with restraint as the guiding principle.

Historigraphical discussion of the British Army’s «minimum necessary force» approach to imperial policing and aid to the civil power operations during the twentieth century has boomed over the past decade.⁵ Much of this debate, as Bruno Reis

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has argued, creates an artificial divide between doctrine and practice; whereas the
former saw the British setting strict requirements over how force should be de-
ployed, in reality soldiers on the ground often ignored such constraints, soon adopt-
ing excessively coercive measures. The response to the 1919 Egyptian revolution
suggests much greater complexity in the manner in which military force met na-
tionalist challenges. Doctrine, the little of it that there was, and institutional mem-
ory did not act to restrict military action but to create a permissive framework in
which a multiplicity of responses could be adopted at the tactical level to deal
with unrest. The very nature of the British Army’s approach to imperial policing
operations involved promoting the autonomy of subordinate commanders, not re-
stricting it. In such circumstances the debates of myriad military historians over
the intricacies of doctrine provide relatively little insight into the reality of cam-
paigns to preserve the imperial edifice. The 1919–1922 «crisis of empire» period is
of particular importance, as it was the conflicts of these years, not least the spectre
of Amritsar, which did much to shape the codification of doctrine on imperial
policing in the inter-war period.

The violence of the counter-revolutionary response in Egypt and the reasoning
behind it have received little attention in comparison to the bloodshed that oc-
curred in Ireland and the Punjab in 1919–1922; the focus of this article attempts to
address this lacuna. It briefly outlines the origins and course of the revolutionary
upheaval in spring 1919 and the powerful threat posed to British rule as the result
of urban and rural Egypt rising in unison. The response of the colonial state is then
examined, particularly the role of the British Army in the region, known as the
Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), which spearheaded the campaign to restore
law and order. The article then addresses in greater detail instances of violent re-
pression carried out by two British infantry battalions, examining the extent to
which small, often isolated military units were left to develop their own responses
to unrest in urban and rural Egypt. These two case studies and the wider counter-
revolutionary campaign demonstrate the flexible, context specific and often doc-
trine free nature of British imperial policing in the wake of the First World War, and
more generally across the twentieth century.

6 B. C. Reis, «The Myth of British Minimum Force in Counterinsurgency Campaigns During De-
7 S. Shoul, «Soldiers, Riots, and Aid to the Civil Power, in India, Egypt and Palestine, 1919–1939»,
University of London Ph.D. thesis 2006, 84–160; N. Lloyd, «The Indian Army and Civil Disorder:
1. The EEF and the Egyptian Revolution

The immediate trigger of the nationwide unrest in spring 1919 was the arrest and deportation of Sa’ad Zaghlul, leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement, and three of his associates on 8 March. This was the nadir of a struggle over Egypt’s post-war status as a sovereign nation that had begun with the visit of a delegation to the British High Commissioner, Reginald Wingate, on 13 November 1918. At the start of the First World War martial law was imposed on Egypt, shortly followed by the creation of a protectorate, in many respects merely formalising the system of occupation created after 1882. The delegation demanded an end to the protectorate and the right to represent Egypt at the Versailles peace conference, both of which were refused by the Foreign Office. As Erez Manela has forcefully argued, the nationalists’ challenge to the British authorities, which developed rapidly over the course of late 1918 and early 1919, tapped into the rhetoric of Wilsonianism, principally the idea of the right to national self-determination. Moreover, the Anglo-French pronouncement in November 1918 on the future of former Ottoman territories liberated during the course of the war sent mixed messages to Middle Eastern nationalists. It seemed bizarre to Zaghlul and his associates that the Arabs were being promised autonomy and representation in Paris, but that the Egyptians would be ignored.

A day after the arrest of Zaghlul, Cairo erupted in a series of protests. These predominantly involved students and, according to the British authorities, were orchestrated by the sheikhs of the al-Azhar university and mosque. As the protests escalated over subsequent days it became clear that the rhetoric of Wilsonianism and Egyptian nationalism had an appeal beyond the country’s intellectual elite. By 10 March the city’s police were on the verge of being overwhelmed and British military forces were called upon to provide assistance. The situation rapidly deteriorated, with strikes in numerous government ministries effectively grinding the central administration of Egypt to a halt. It was soon evident that unrest was not confined to Cairo and had spread to the provinces; on 16 March troops clashed with rioters in the Delta town of Damanhur, leaving twelve Egyptians dead. The next day trouble erupted in the Fayoum district to the south-west of the capital, with the local Bedouin taking up arms against the British. Violence in rural areas focused on the communications network, principally the railway system. Across the country

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numerous stations were burned down, rails torn up and telegraph wires cut. As a result, by mid-March communications between the main urban centres of Egypt had been severed. Attacks on European residents and British troops, the destruction of property and widespread rioting lasted for over a month, with remote areas in Upper Egypt experiencing unrest into late April.

The action of the Egyptian peasantry (the fellahin) in attacking the communications network and challenging government authority reveals the deeper causes of the revolution. It is quite striking how rapidly a national protest movement developed in March 1919, rather than one simply made up of urban radicals and students, raising questions over why the fellahin allied themselves to the nationalist cause. As Ellis Goldberg has suggested, the very nature of the rural unrest illustrates the peasantry’s relationship to nationalist agitation.10 Rising inflation and food shortages posed the danger that the fellahin might go hungry in 1919. The First World War had witnessed a dramatic fall in the area under wheat cultivation, a fact worsened by the large-scale export of Egypt’s food output overseas. The acreage given over to food production was further threatened by considerable incentives for landowners to switch to growing cotton, for which prices were booming on the world market. In addition, the British military, via the Supplies Control Board, began to requisition increasing amounts of food during 1918 in order to keep their forces in the Middle East fully fed.11 These problems exacerbated longer-term trends that had created the potential to provoke a rural crisis. Egypt’s population had been rapidly growing and urbanising since the late nineteenth century, placing further strain on agricultural resources.12 More importantly, the control of these resources was located within a narrow band of large and medium landowners; the vast bulk of the population had little power or influence within the agricultural economy. It was logical that in March 1919 the fellahin’s revolutionary protests focused on attacking the railway system, symbolic of the unbalanced and exploitative economy, and intended to prevent the further extraction of food supplies.

The First World War, as well as adding to the burdens on Egypt’s population, significantly shifted the relationship between the people and the British occupation. The labour needs of the EEF during 1916–1918 were considerable, given the

11 P. G. Elgood, Egypt and the Army, Oxford 1924, 326.
nature of the terrain to be crossed in Sinai and Palestine and the requirement to sustain a large modern army in inhospitable surroundings. In order to meet these needs an extensive support infrastructure was constructed, based around the Egyptian Labour Corps (ELC), a formation which grew to be 72,162 strong by June 1918. The ELC drew its manpower from volunteers recruited among Egypt’s rural population, but by summer 1917 it faced severe manpower shortages. Conscription was rejected as a method by which to bring in more recruits and instead increased pressure was placed on provincial officials to meet higher enlistment targets. As Lieutenant-Colonel P.G. Elgood, commander of the Port Said base area, argued, this approach produced a «barbarous and arbitrary» system of recruitment. Village sheikhs often used the calls for labour as a chance to settle old scores with their local enemies. This created a bitter atmosphere across much of rural Egypt, where families denounced each other and corruption became commonplace, with those least able to bribe officials being the first to be taken for service in the ELC.\textsuperscript{13}

The EEF also required large numbers of draught animals to be requisitioned across Egypt to feed its logistical needs. Camels were vital to the daily existence of the fellahin as they were used to move produce to market. Again the system of requisitioning appeared to be skewed against the peasantry, allowing wealthy land holders and village elders to avoid losing their animals, while the poorest suffered the most. As Kristian Ulrichsen has suggested, the British fashioned an intrusive military extractive state in Egypt during the First World War, a shift away from the remote occupation system prior to 1914. This new extractive state exploited the country’s resources to the maximum degree possible in order to sustain the war effort against the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{14}

The impact of this process by March 1919 meant that large swathes of the Egyptian peasantry were willing to ally their local grievances to the higher political rhetoric of Zaghlul’s nationalist movement.

Given the mass nationwide unrest in 1919, many British observers cast the revolution in apocalyptic terms. Joseph McPherson, head of the political branch of the Criminal Investigation Department within the Cairo police, likened it to the 1857 Indian Mutiny, one of the most notorious examples for the British of an imperial world turned upside down.\textsuperscript{15} The official account of the unrest produced by the EEF’s general staff in late 1919 went even further. It too drew on the Mutiny comparison, but embellished it with a further parallel to the Boxer Rebellion.\textsuperscript{16} This placed the nationalist unrest alongside an example of fanatical and anarchic violence against a besieged European community. More importantly, the unrest in Egypt in 1919 appeared to tie into a wider discourse of nationalist challenges to

\textsuperscript{13} Elgood, Army, 315–318.
\textsuperscript{16} The National Archives (TNA), London, FO848/10, EEF Historical Summary, 31.
British imperial authority in the wake of the First World War. In Ireland and India nationalist movements were gaining considerable momentum, and in the former case had already demonstrated a clear desire to achieve their ends through violent means with the 1916 Easter Rising. Egypt in 1919 did not, therefore, appear as an aberration borne of wartime suffering; instead it represented one of the most significant anti-colonial events in Britain’s post-war «crisis of empire».

Given the widespread disorder across Egypt in 1919 and the perception of British observers that the days of the Mutiny had returned, it is striking that very few European civilians were harmed during the month and a half of unrest. Only 31 were killed, of whom four were British, and 35 wounded. These figures were skewed to a certain extent by instances of inter-communal violence, which principally targeted Egypt’s Armenian and Greek communities: nineteen of those killed were Armenian and seven were Greek. Military casualties were also surprisingly low given the intensity of many of the operations that had to be undertaken to restore order. In total three British officers, seventeen British other ranks and nine Indian sepoys were killed, with 78 British and 36 Indian troops wounded. In contrast, the casualties among the Egyptian population were significant. Simeon Shoul’s meticulous study suggests that 748 Egyptians were killed and 1015 wounded during the revolution, a figure that dwarfed European civilian and British military losses. British official estimates produced in summer 1919 came to a similar conclusion, suggesting that 800 Egyptians had been killed and 1500 wounded. This disparity in casualties is even more striking when Egypt is placed alongside attempts to quell nationalist unrest in India during spring 1919. The suppression of the Punjab disturbances, often seen as the archetype of British imperial brutality, resulted in 463 Indians killed and 1489 wounded, figures undoubtedly skewed by the blood bath at Amritsar. In a comparative sense it is clear that the suppression of the Egyptian revolution represented one of Britain’s bloodier post-war imperial campaigns.

2. A Repressive Pacification Campaign

Suppressing the Egyptian revolution ultimately rested on an extensive, sustained and significant British military response. Initial protests and rioting were dealt with by the Egyptian police force in Cairo, although within a few days control was handed over to Major-General H. D. Watson, commander of troops in the city. By the middle of March it was clear that the breakdown in communications across Egypt was producing a dilatory response. In addition, the rural Egyptian police along with small detachments of troops were having little impact on quelling riot-

19 Shoul, «Soldiers», 71.
20 TNA, FO141/583/1, Telegram from EEF GHQ to the High Commissioner, 21 July 1919.
ing across much of the country. Lieutenant-General Edward Bulfin, commander of the EEF’s XX Corps and temporarily in charge of the EEF in the absence of General Edmund Allenby at the peace conference, therefore decided to travel to Egypt on 16 March to coordinate the military response. The Residency, denuded of the High Commissioner, then on leave in Britain, was being run by Sir Milne Cheetham, a career diplomat with nearly a decade of experience of Egyptian affairs. His telegrams to the Foreign Office were adamant that anything less than a full-scale military operation would fail to re-establish order. He cabled that a policy of «repression» would have to be followed for a considerable period of time to achieve any success, arguing that a large number of troops would be required and that it would result in «considerable bloodshed» and «great sacrifice of human life». The response from the Foreign Office made it clear that all efforts should be concentrated on restoring law and order. Rioting was to be «sternly suppressed» and any insubordinate Egyptian officials should be punished. London made it clear that a policy of repression was acceptable, providing the only means that appeared likely to put an end to the unrest.

Over the course of a month and a half from 16 March the EEF deployed four divisions to Egypt, alongside the Cairo Brigade and assorted Australian Light Horse units. In total, however, only 19,430 soldiers were involved in policing operations, a force below the strength of two fully-equipped divisions. This was largely due to the fact that the EEF was in the midst of demobilisation, and as a result many units were under strength. For example, 1/10th London Regiment, sent to police the turbulent Delta town of Tanta on 10 March, could put into the field barely 400 men, less than half its normal complement. A day into its deployment the battalion was facing riotous crowds estimated to be at least 8000 strong. In comparison to the meagre overall forces used in Egypt, General Aylmer Haldane required an army of over 60,000 in 1920 to quell the tribal rising in Iraq, and took six months to achieve success. Given the relatively small size of Bulfin’s force and the rapidity with which he contained unrest it is necessary to examine in greater detail his operational approach in 1919.

The operational scheme devised by Bulfin and the EEF’s staff to deal with unrest was remarkable for its clarity and simplicity. The immediate focus was on repairing rail communications, principally between Cairo and Alexandria. Bulfin
feared that the intention of the nationalists was to isolate the capital from food supplies and thus produce ever-intensifying rioting as the population began to go hungry. He argued that «one can appeal to the reason of a well fed man but a starving one does not listen to reason». Once the line to Alexandria was restored and secured, forces could then be deployed to re-establish rail communications with Port Said and subsequently with the south of the country. Following this, eighteen flying columns would be deployed along the reinstated railways to spread out across the countryside and begin the process of restoring order and civil government. These columns would initially head for the large towns in each region, from where they could send out smaller formations for periods of three to four days to patrol the local villages. Commanders of these columns were instructed to display their forces to as large an area as possible, to make a particular point of visiting villages that had engaged in hostile acts, to interview the *omdahs*, and to hold summary courts. Each column would be accompanied by a political officer and a detachment of police, so that arrests could be made in the name of the civil, rather than military, authorities. The intention was to demonstrate that a concerted and unified political-military effort to restore order was being made by the colonial state alongside trustworthy elements of the Egyptian administration.

Allenby, who returned to Egypt on 25 March, having been appointed as Special High Commissioner with a remit to tackle the nationalist unrest, endorsed Bulfin’s approach, bringing the Residency fully behind the military policy of repression. To facilitate the process of pacification Egypt was divided into seven administrative areas, each of which was placed under the command of a general. The major urban centres of Cairo and Alexandria formed two of these commands, one area covered the Canal Zone, the Western and Eastern Delta regions provided another two, and the remainder were formed of the areas south of Cairo with a break at the town of Wasta. The four rural commands, in the Delta and Upper Egypt, were given to major-generals who had commanded divisions during the EEF’s 1917–1918 Palestine campaign: Steuart Hare, John Longley, P. C. Palin, and John Shea. These area commanders, alongside those officers leading pacification columns, were given considerable autonomy to act as they saw fit to restore order in their region. Crucially, they were allocated full powers to enforce martial law and confirm punishments, except for death sentences which had to be approved by the Commander-in-Chief.
Martial law provided the context that permitted the smooth functioning of this repressive pacification campaign. Crucially, it gave clarity to the British military and imperial authorities in Egypt. This stands in direct contrast to the confused command and control picture that existed in Ireland over the course of the 1919–1921 struggle, where political concerns about the introduction of military rule only served to hamper an effective response to Irish insurgency. Martial law was proclaimed in Egypt on 2 November 1914 by General John Maxwell, then commanding the British garrison and who would later become notorious for his actions in suppressing the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Concerns over the ties, both formal and cultural, between Egypt and its former imperial suzerain, the Ottoman Empire, motivated the introduction of martial law. At the time it was made clear that the powers to be exercised would only complement, rather than supersede the civil administration. Martial law was introduced before the protectorate was declared and survived its abrogation in February 1922, only being ended in July 1923; it was an expedient means of waging «total war» from an imperial territory that proved of greatest value to the colonial state once the war had ended. In a detailed analysis of its legal operation M. S. Amos, writing in 1925, offered considerable praise for the way in which the martial law system coped with the 1919 unrest. He declared that the military courts in particular «set an unfamiliar standard of care and deliberation». Martial law’s key contribution in 1919 was to facilitate Bulfin’s assumption of overall control. With a clear legal framework in place it was possible for the temporary head of the EEF to direct both military and civilian forces along a unified plan in order to restore order and civil authority as quickly as possible. Few British military commanders working in aid to the civil or colonial power during the course of the twentieth century would have the luxury of such clarity. It was much more common for a gradual slide away from civil rule to be made, passing through a series of emergency measures before some form of curtailed martial law was introduced. In Palestine in the late 1930s just such a process produced chaos and confusion, severely undermines attempts to tackle the Arab revolt.

Under this permissive martial law context Bulfin was able to issue a series of increasingly draconian orders in an attempt to restore order. On 13 March a clear warning was given that anyone tampering with or attempting to damage railway,

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telegraph, or telephone lines would be liable to be shot. It was therefore made explicit from an early stage that deadly force would be used to deal with the disturbances. Four days later a further order was made, introducing the notion of collective punishment: villages located close to damaged parts of the railway line would become liable for the full cost of the repairs. This was then modified so that the *omdahs* and *sheikhs* of any villages within ten miles of damaged railways, telegraph lines, or government property would be subject to military trials. Bulfin was rapidly raising the stakes for Egyptians, particularly in rural areas, who wished to encourage or partake in attacks on the country’s communications network. In part this reflected the vital importance of railways, telegraphs and telephones to a twentieth-century army such as the EEF. Over the course of its campaign against the Ottoman Army in 1916–1918, the EEF had developed a sophisticated communications system upon which it relied to deploy its military resources rapidly and effectively. For officers and soldiers schooled in this form of warfare the problem of interrupted communications would have been the most pressing issue in March 1919, and therefore all steps possible would be authorised in order to preserve reliable communication links.\(^{33}\) The apogee of this policy of escalating threats under martial law came on 18 March with the distribution of a general warning that «any further damage or destruction of railway stations or railway property will be punished by the burning of the village nearest to the scene of the destruction».\(^{34}\) These orders under martial law were not only intended to produce a degree of acquiescence from the Egyptian population, but also set out the framework within which subordinate formations of the EEF could operate as they attempted to bring order to their respective areas. There could be little doubt in the minds of junior officers and other ranks that by mid-March their military superiors were firmly behind a repressive policy of pacification.

3. The Suppression of the Egyptian Revolution by the EEF: Case Studies

The context for military repression, as framed by martial law and the operational edicts of the EEF’s staff, may have been clear, but on the ground British soldiers often found themselves facing a confused situation. An examination of the activities of EEF units gives an insight into the multiplicity of responses to nationalist unrest adopted by the British Army and the colonial state. It is evident from the following examples that no uniform system of pacification existed in Egypt. Instead, commanders in different localities were provided with a loose operational

\(^{33}\) Modern communication systems could also help to disseminate panic rapidly around imperial territories; see D. K. Lahiri Choudhury, «Sinews of Panic and the Nerves of Empire: The Imagined State’s Entanglement with Information Panic, In-

\(^{34}\) TNA, FO848/10, EEF Historical Summary, 39, 50, 65, and 68.
framework within which they could shape their own tactical approaches, which included both desperate attempts to maintain order in the face of rioting crowds through to more brutal cordon and search operations, where inflicting collective punishment on a locality was the aim.

The actions of 1/6th Essex Regiment provide a good example of an understrength battalion struggling to cope with the fast changing nature of urban rioting in March and April 1919. Having to learn riot control as the battalion went along contributed to the manner in which it deployed force to meet revolutionary unrest. The unit was sent to Cairo on 14 March and the next day a small section of 25 soldiers ran into a crowd who began stoning them; in response the section opened fire on the rioters. By 18 March the battalion had been reinforced with a light armoured car and men from the Royal West Kents. This additional firepower did not prevent crowds in Sharia Boulac from stoning sections of 1/6th Essex and the armoured car while on patrol. The troops and armoured car fired on the crowd, resulting in at least six Egyptian casualties. By the end of the month the battalion had adapted its tactics, moving men around in lorries, allowing it to rapidly deploy sufficient forces to meet any disturbance. The most significant problem faced by the unit was the need to distribute its men around the city on fixed guards of important sites; 1/6th Essex alone was responsible for finding guards at 62 different locations. This left only a handful of men to provide a reserve to cope with rioting crowds.35

During April the battalion’s riot control techniques began to show signs of improvement. Junior officers were becoming better able to judge the appropriate levels of force to deploy against nationalist agitation on the streets of Cairo. Although clashes with rioting crowds remained a frequent occurrence, firing by soldiers resulted in fewer Egyptian casualties. The unit’s war diary recorded with pride that following a major riot in Abdin Square on 3 April the battalion managed to restore order after a few hours and to arrest 48 of the rioters. Not all British officials believed in the restrained use of military firepower, with some arguing that firing on crowds was often the only truly effective means of rapidly clearing an area, producing a salutary effect for those wavering on the fringes of a mob.36 1/6th Essex still suffered incidents, however, where isolated picquets facing large and aggravated gatherings had no alternative but to use deadly force in order to protect themselves. At Saida-Zenab station on 9 April the Essex Regiment’s guards fired on a mob that rushed the building, resulting in ten Egyptians killed and twenty wounded. Despite these incidents the battalion did not just confine itself to a reactive policy of dealing with unrest as and where it occurred. Beginning on 29 March sections of the unit were used to carry out raids and arrests targeting leading nationalists believed to be

36 TNA, WO95/4650, War Diary of 1/6th Essex Regiment, 3 April 1919; Carman / McPherson, Man Who Loved Egypt, 214.
inciting unrest, as well as confiscating weapons and seditious literature. By the end of April, a lieutenant was leading a section of seven soldiers in carrying out plain clothes operations. These dealt with attempts to intimidate government officials who were breaking the nationalists’ strike.\textsuperscript{37}

1/6th Essex provides an interesting example of how tackling unrest in Egypt played out at a local level in March–April 1919. It is evident that in the confused early stages troops were deployed in small units that could easily be overwhelmed. The necessity of showing that British forces were still in control of the streets of Cairo, however, militated against waiting until larger forces could be concentrated for deployment. Isolated sections often found themselves facing threatening situations with few options but to use deadly force to try to restore order. This needs to be seen in the context of wartime recruits, both junior officers and men, adapting to a new and challenging situation; the EEF was not trained in riot control and aid to the civil power, but was a warfighting organisation bloodied in battles from Romani in 1916 to Megiddo in 1918. Within a few weeks of being deployed in Cairo the 1/6th Essex had adopted a more proactive stance and was beginning to develop its own techniques to deal with riotous formations. In addition, soldiers soon slipped into police work on the fringes of the military role they were primarily tasked with. The boundaries between policing, military aid to the civil power and imperial operations were thus relatively indistinct for the officers and men of EEF units in spring 1919.

A second example, this time from rural Egypt, demonstrates the extremes of violence that the British Army was capable of using when suppressing nationalist unrest. On the afternoon of 30 March 1919 a construction train and its military escort arrived at a break in the railway line close to the village of Shobak in Upper Egypt.\textsuperscript{38} The escort was comprised of two companies of 1/5th Somerset Light Infantry, under the command of Major Urwick. Once the train had come to a halt a small party of soldiers made their way to the village, supposedly to purchase food, and were attacked by armed villagers who feared that their property was about to be looted. In the ensuing struggle nine soldiers were wounded. Urwick ordered a platoon of 35 men to clear the village, shepherding the villagers into nearby fields and preventing them returning during the night. The platoon spent around an hour in the village engaging in a search operation that descended into looting and arson, with a number of buildings burning down. With the assistance of a local police officer the village sheikh and four other notables were identified as having led the earlier attack on the troops and were arrested. Urwick decided that in retaliation these five would be shot, a sentence that was carried out early on the morning

\textsuperscript{37} TNA, WO95/4650, War Diary of 1/6th Essex Regiment, 22–29 April 1919.  
\textsuperscript{38} TNA, FO141/825/2, Report by Major G.W. Courtney, 4 July 1919.
of 31 March. By the end of this small-scale, and impromptu, pacification operation 57 Egyptians had been killed and the village burnt to the ground.39

The clearing of Shobak soon became the subject of numerous accusations made by the local population. Witnesses testified that they had not fired on British forces and that they had actually welcomed them into the village. It was claimed that at least seven women were raped by groups of British soldiers as they made their way from building to building attempting to find anything of value to steal; in cases where women resisted they were shot. In addition, a number of the villagers stated that the five notables arrested on 30 March had been found the next day buried to their waists having been shot and the bodies mutilated with bayonets. Many of the details of this brutality found their way into the propaganda publications of the Egyptian delegation at the Paris peace conference and its lobbying campaign in the USA.40 More importantly, by mid-April questions were being raised in the House of Commons referring to rumours that EEF personnel had committed atrocities, with accusations of assaults on Egyptian women causing particular concern. The government was, however, able to deflect attention from these accusations, aided by the fact that many Members of Parliament saw the claims as merely the work of malicious nationalist propaganda.41

In response to these atrocity claims the EEF instituted one of its most thorough investigations of any single incident involving British forces during the Egyptian revolution. From 10 June to 19 July a court of enquiry sat at Kasr-el-Nil barracks, headed by Brigadier-General H. A. D. Simpson Baikie. The enquiry took evidence from 39 witnesses, 27 of whom were Egyptians, and amassed 240 pages of information. The court found little evidence for the claims of rape and supported Urwick’s decision to clear the village with troops. Criticism was reserved for the manner in which the five village notables were executed. It argued that there had been plenty of time between the men’s arrest and their execution to hold a military court, for which there were more than enough officers available on the train. Crucially, this would have allowed the Egyptians a chance to put forward a defence of their actions. The five men had apparently received no warning that they were to be shot save for a vague threat during their interrogation. Furthermore, the executions were carried out without a medical officer present who could check the men were dead before they were buried. The offence was further compounded by a failure to observe Islamic burial rites. In concluding, the court was appalled by the fact that Urwick had passed off all his responsibilities onto a subaltern, who was described

40 Egyptian Delegation to the Peace Conference: Collection of Official Correspondence from November 11, 1918 to July 14, 1919, Paris 1919, 105–183; TNA, FO141/434/2, Extract from the Congressional Record, 18 August 1919.
41 Hansard, 5th series 115 (15 May 1919), 1856–1861; Hansard, 5th series 116 (19 May 1919), 44.
as the only officer to emerge from the affair with any credit. Major-General Gorringe, reviewing the court’s conclusions, offered his opinion that Urwick was «unfit to hold a responsible command».42 Urwick, however, did not leave Egypt in total disgrace; Allenby prevented the attempt to strip him of his command due to his «fine record of service» during the war.43

The criticisms of the court focused on the procedures used in the carrying out of military justice. Its findings were generally supportive of the collective punishment of the villagers for attacking British troops, revealing the extent to which repressive violence was seen as the norm during rural pacification in 1919. The permissive martial law framework within Egypt gave officers like Urwick the freedom to carry out acts of retributive violence; they just had to take care to make sure that their men did not cross an ill-defined line towards excess. In this instance the excessive nature of the Somerset Light Infantry’s actions was made clear by the public backlash the incident produced within Egypt and the role it then played in aiding nationalist propaganda.

4. British Army Doctrine and the Imperial Policing of Egypt in 1919
The 1919 counter-revolutionary campaign in Egypt and the actions of units such as those discussed above need to be placed within a deeper trend of thinking on, and the practising of, small imperial wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For much of the century after 1815, with the exception of the Crimean campaign, the British Army’s principal military activity was expanding, protecting and policing disparate imperial territories. Although the British Army had a wealth of experience in imperial warfare it had failed to develop a detailed and substantial body of doctrine on the subject, to which Bulfin and his subordinates could turn for intellectual guidance and practical advice in 1919. Charles Callwell’s Small Wars, originally published in 1896 and continually updated in the following decades, was the standard compendium on how to deal with non-European opponents in battle. It offered relatively little guidance, however, on how to deal with a nationalist uprising that enjoyed mass popular support in a territory that had been subject to a British occupation for over three decades.44

Some sections of Britain’s imperial forces did show a willingness in the early twentieth century to engage intellectually with aspects of aid to the civil power operations. The Indian Army’s staff college, for example, set an essay in 1913–1914 examining the tactics to be used in street fighting in Eastern cities. Two of the prize

42 TNA, FO371/3722, Letter from Major-General G. F. Gorringe to the Deputy Adjutant General Egypt, 15 July 1919.
43 TNA, FO371/3722, Minute by Lieutenant-Colonel R. H. Andrew, 25 August 1919.
winning entries were published in the *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* in 1915, both of which paid much greater attention to urban combat after a city had been stormed in time of war. The brief comments they did make on riot control illustrated that a few basic concepts had been imbibed by most officers. In order to tackle a mob it was thus necessary to deploy forces rapidly to gain the initiative. Lieutenant-Colonel Bainbridge’s essay emphasised that such operations would see isolated units operating under junior commanders, who would need to be well trained. This reflected the situation the officers and men of the EEF faced in 1919, where confusing and rapidly changing circumstances often forced soldiers into speedily constructed – and usually violent – solutions to the problems of imperial policing.

In general, the EEF was operating in an almost doctrine-free bubble in March–April 1919. Many of the techniques of imperial policing had to be learnt as units went along, or were derived from the collective experiences of senior officers. The majority of the EEF’s commanders at brigade level and above were regular soldiers who brought with them a wealth of experience of colonial warfare from the late 1880s onwards. For example, Major-General Hare, commanding 54th Division and the western Delta region, had served in a diverse range of campaigns including the Hazara expedition of 1891, the Miranzai campaign a year later, and operations in Chitral in 1895. Bulfin’s imperial background was by contrast much more limited. He had served in Burma in 1893 and took part in operations in the Kachin Hills, but otherwise his military career had been that of a staff officer. Crucially, much of the experience senior officers had gained on imperial campaigns had been in the early stages of their military careers. They had therefore seen such conflicts from the regimental level of lieutenants or captains. This would have given them a sound grasp of the difficulties faced by the junior officers upon whom much of the riot control and pacification campaign would devolve in 1919, many of whom had enlisted for the duration of the First World War or were pre-war Territorials and thus lacked imperial policing experience. Nevertheless, the imperial pasts of many middle-ranking and senior EEF officers would have formed a pool of experience which could be tapped for ideas and approaches to deal with the challenges of Egyptian nationalism. In many respects the British Army represented one of the foremost examples of what Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski have termed the European «colonial archive», a wide conceptual body of knowledge and practice, both national and transnational, that would be remobilised in a variety of settings across

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the twentieth century. In the case of the British Army, this institutional memory frequently substituted for formal doctrine when it came to dealing with anti-colonial nationalist unrest.

The flexible, doctrine-free and contextually specific nature of imperial policing campaigns allowed violent methods to flourish. As was evident in Egypt in 1919, a full martial law framework allowed commanders to indulge in demonstrative acts of violence, such as the collective punishment and destruction of villages associated with unrest, which they deemed appropriate to the restoration of local law and order. In such circumstances martial law permitted Bulfin to run a short, intensive and frequently violent campaign of pacification, designed to restore order rapidly. The British Army’s Manual of Military Law (1914 edition) offered little legal guidance on how force should be used in such circumstances. It made it plain that if troops were called on to aid the civil authority in tackling unlawful assemblies or riots then there were a series of caveats on how force should be used, most of which gave primacy to civil officials. When it came to suppressing insurrections these legal restrictions became much looser. As the Manual made clear, as soon as the insurrectionary nature of a mob was evident then the use of arms could be resorted to. Indeed, it went even further in stating that «the existence of an armed insurrection would justify the use of any degree of force necessary effectually to meet and cope with the insurrection». This fluid interpretation of how to deal with imperial unrest left the way open for a range of repressive measures to be deployed in Egypt in 1919. In this sense, the rubric of «minimum necessary force» that supposedly underwrote the British Army’s imperial policing methods in the twentieth century was followed by the EEF, just that the level of force deemed necessary by Bulfin and other commanders to restore British rule to Egypt in the face of revolutionary upheaval was considerable.

This reflected one of the principal British conceptions of imperial policing, its ever-changing and context specific nature. A one-size-fits-all doctrinal or legal approach was perceived as of little value; policing Egypt was not like policing India, Iraq or Ireland. The British military response would have to be tailored to suit the circumstances of each challenge to imperial authority. This interpretation went

49 This is an argument often applied to technology and tactics in the imperial setting, but is equally applicable to doctrine; see I. F. W. Becket, The Victorians at War, London 2003, 185. David French has argued for a peculiarly British military tradition, developing since the eighteenth century, which emphasised the «character» of officers over their ability at abstract reasoning; European-style doctrine was thus far too restrictive. D. French, «Doctrine and Organization in the British Army, 1919–1932», in: The Historical Journal 44 (2001), 497–515; D. French, «Big Wars and Small Wars between the Wars, 1919–39», in: H. Strachan (ed.), Big Wars and Small Wars: The British Army and the Lessons of War in the Twentieth Century, Abingdon 2006, 36–53.
even further as it allowed for a variety of methodologies of pacification to be deployed within one particular imperial campaign, where they could be made to fit the tactical specifics of individual operations. The flexibility of the British approach to imperial policing in 1919 Egypt and the legally permissive framework offered by martial law meant it could encompass extremes of practice. In many respects this malleable approach was not a uniquely British phenomenon, but merely reflected the often confused nature of imperial campaigns conducted far from the eyes of the metropole. In such a context the "coloniale" or "man on the spot" had to be flexible to survive and achieve operational and strategic goals; this was not a place for doctrinal rigidity.50

Given the focus of his Imperial Policing on trying to drive home the lessons of a "minimum necessary force" doctrine for junior officers, it is less surprising that Major – General Gwynn offered up such praise of the Egyptian campaign, particularly if the "necessary force" aspect is emphasised over the need to keep violence to a minimum.51 Even in comparison to the events in the Punjab, Egypt witnessed a particularly bloody period of imperial rule in March-April 1919. In the short-term the EEF’s actions did restore British control of the country allowing a slower and more controlled process of decolonisation to be negotiated, resulting in the February 1922 decision to end the protectorate and recognise Egypt as an independent state, subject to imperial security caveats. This was a tortuous political process, but from Gwynn’s perspective in 1934 the spectre of bloody revolutionary upheaval that destabilised Egypt and threatened the principal arterial communications link of the empire – the Suez Canal – had been dealt with effectively.

Despite its specificities, the suppression of the Egyptian revolution also needs to be seen in a comparative context within the various struggles against national movements that dominated the immediate post-war military challenges of Britain. Egypt fitted into a pattern of how the British Army dealt with anti-colonial nationalist unrest, from Ireland through the Middle East and on to India, which, as Peter Lieb has argued from his comparison of the post-war campaign in Mesopotamia with that of the Germans in the Ukraine, cannot be described in terms of its moderate approach to the use of violence.52 In each case the British Army’s default position was to resort to a repressive pacification campaign. Although this reflected a tendency to draw on a deeper "colonial archive", this also demonstrated the extent

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51 Gwynn, Imperial, 1–33 and 79.

to which the «crisis of empire» was perceived as a real and pressing problem in 1919–1922. As Keith Jeffery has illustrated it was more than the neurotic musing of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Henry Wilson.\(^53\) The seriousness of the threat necessitated a drastic military response to safeguard the integrity of the empire. Campaigns as varied as the suppression of the 1921 Moplah rising, crushing of the Iraqi tribal rebellion in 1920 and attempted destruction of IRA insurgency would thus all bear the hallmarks of the repressive and violent approach seen in Egypt, although with varying degrees of success from the perspective of the colonial state.\(^54\)


**Violence in Defence of Empire:**

*The British Army and the 1919 Egyptian Revolution*

The Egyptian revolution of spring 1919 posed a serious challenge to British imperial rule in the wake of the First World War, and has traditionally been examined solely through political, diplomatic and economic lenses. Within these approaches the counter-revolutionary response of the British colonial state, principally involving the use of military force, has been ignored. The British military campaign to suppress the 1919 Egyptian revolution was one of the most significant and violent operations launched to contain anti-colonial nationalist unrest during the 1919–1922 «crisis of empire» period. This article addresses the general development of the campaign to end the revolutionary upheaval and focuses in on two case studies to examine how British army units, often isolated from assistance, dealt with unrest. The violent nature of the campaign to suppress the revolution highlights the flexible and context specific nature of British imperial policing as it developed after 1918, and challenges assumptions on the «minimum necessary force» approach that has come to characterise Britain’s small colonial wars of the twentieth century.

James E. Kitchen
Department of War Studies
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
UK–Camberley, GU15 4PQ
e-mail: james.kitchen101@mod.uk

**ABSTRACT**