

## Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers, c.1700-1964

**Review Number:**

167

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 1 February, 2001

**Editor:**

David Killingray

David Omissi

**ISBN:**

9780719057345

**Date of Publication:**

1999

**Pages:**

269pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Ian Beckett

It is to be expected that many edited collections of essays will be somewhat disparate in content and approach whatever the overall framework. This volume, however, is even more disparate than most. David Killingray's introduction certainly strives mightily to encompass most of the major issues respecting colonial armed forces, though largely with respect to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, most of the eleven essays in the volume, which include the introduction, are concerned with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and only one does not have a colonial army as its focus. There are contributions on the American, Dutch, French, and German empires, but the majority of essays are concerned with the British empire.

Killingray's introductory chapter clearly attempts to integrate some of the following ten essays within a general framework, but in a curiously low key way, relegating eight of them to brief references in the footnotes and mentioning two not at all. The situation is not perhaps improved by the additional introduction by John MacKenzie, general editor of the Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series, in which this volume appears, emphasising 'the myths of the military' as 'central to the justification and bluffs of imperial rule'.

Killingray's introduction does raise the particular issue of the theory of 'martial races' as well as other paradoxes of colonial military arrangements. Jaap de Moor is concerned with recruitment in his essay on the Dutch colonial army between 1700 and 1950 and addresses the 'imagined history' of some supposed martially inclined races in the East Indies. Yet, it cannot really be said that many of the contributors specifically address 'myth'. An exception is Frank Furedi's essay on the authorities' perception of the political threat from demobilised African soldiers after the Second World War, though this does link with aspects of

the loyalty of colonial forces raised by both Killingray and de Moor. There are correctives on the perceived 'masculine' image of colonial armies in Timothy Parsons's essay on family life in the King's African Rifles between 1902 and 1964, and Killingray's own separate essay on gender issues in African colonial armies though the masculinity of colonial armies is hardly what might be termed a major myth of empire. In some respects, as there is also an essay by Douglas Peers on sex and drink in British cantonments in India between 1800 and 1858, it might be argued that venereal disease is one of the stronger themes to emerge from the volume. To be fair, however, gender issues in respect of African soldiers do come back again to the question of loyalty, by suggesting reasons for stability within military communities.

Aspects of military influence over colonial policy are addressed by Kirsten Zirkel with respect to German East Africa and German South-West Africa between 1888 and 1918, and by Martin Thomas in his essay on the French army in Algeria between 1954 and 1958. Jane Samson examines the Royal Navy's attitudes to the labour trade in the Pacific in the mid-nineteenth century.

The remaining essays are those by Tim Moreman on 'watch and ward' on the North West Frontier between 1920 and 1939, and by Brian McAllister Linn on the United States army's dilemma in confronting the potential threat of both internal insurrection and Japanese intervention in its Pacific possessions between 1902 and 1940. In some respects, Moreman's essay reflects arguments developed in his full-length monograph, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (1998). Linn's contribution is effectively a summary of his monograph, *Guardians of Empire: The US Army and the Pacific, 1902-40* (1997), but does touch upon the issue of martial races. Killingray's fellow editor, David Omissi, does not contribute an essay.

Viewed individually rather than collectively, most of the essays have points of interest and Killingray is certainly correct to draw attention to the significance of military power within colonial empires and the degree of collaboration implied upon the part of indigenous recruits, who were cheaper (and healthier) than white troops. He also calls attention to the increasing role of colonial manpower in the world wars of the twentieth century, and to the relative immunity of colonial army rank and file from the political pressures faced by police forces consequent upon the growth of nationalism. In passing, it should be noted that Killingray confuses the British defeat at the hands of the Boers at Spion Kop in January 1900 with that at Majuba in the First Boer War in February 1881.

As indicated earlier, the question of loyalty is taken up in varying ways by de Moor and Furedi. The Dutch did not subscribe to a theory of martial races to the same extent as the British, yet clearly identified certain Indonesian peoples as more reliable than others, though the identification changed over time. Thus, there was a largely negative military image of the Javanese in the mid-nineteenth century until the success of the *Korps Marechaussee* in the Aceh War in the 1890s. By contrast to the Javanese, who had always come forward in relatively large numbers, the Ambonese, who were regarded much more favourably as soldiers, could not be induced to enlist until the 1890s. Ironically, they became the most steadfast of the allies of the Dutch, fighting on unsuccessfully to secure independence for the South Moluccas and becoming the nucleus of the exiled Moluccan community in the Netherlands. Furedi examines the widespread acceptance after 1945 by colonial authorities (and historians) of the idea that demobilised colonial soldiers represented a threat to imperial order and, as a result of their wartime experience, agents of nationalism. A sociologist rather than an historian, Furedi is much given to discussion of 'discourse', interpreting the acceptance of the threat in the absence of any effective evidence of unrest amongst the demobilised, as revealing 'deeply rooted fears about Britain's ability to retain control over the Empire'.

As suggested earlier, issues of loyalty also arise from the discussion of gender issues. This is most evident in Killingray's concluding essay to the collection, where he argues that the wives, children and assorted camp followers associated with African colonial armies, and even more marginalised in the 'new' African history of the 1960s and 1970s than the men themselves, encouraged monogamy. As suggested by Parsons, it also meant a high degree of social stability among self-perpetuating military communities. The two world wars

undoubtedly created significant difficulties in terms of the regulation of sexual relationships, especially given the perennial stereotypical fears on the part of the authorities that sexuality might release a dangerous volatility subversive of discipline and, conceivably, a threat to white female sanctity and the 'racial codes fundamental to the colonial order'.

While the focus of Killingray and Parsons is upon African soldiers, including, in the case of Parsons, the question of sanctioned brothels, Peers examines the question of British troops in cantonments and the particular challenges to the authorities represented by venereal disease and drink. Providing *inter alia* a useful survey of the differing kinds of cantonments and a discussion of the changing policy towards lock hospitals, Peers suggests the authorities were more concerned to target supply than demand. This rested on the belief that Indian society itself represented an extraordinary threat to moral health in a situation in which it seemed all but impossible to reform the character of the British soldier. Greater regulation of cantonments as represented by Act XXII of 1864 was a product of the Indian Mutiny. Peers also alludes to the greater efforts to encourage temperance in the late Victorian army. It would perhaps have been useful, therefore, if either Peers, or Killingray in his introduction, had drawn greater parallels with the regulation of prostitution and drink in the Victorian army at home with particular reference to the Contagious Diseases Acts.

In terms of the influence of colonial armed forces over colonial policy, Zirkel shows how a very small colonial military establishment, which was never part of the regular army and which relied largely upon reserve officers, came to exercise influence far in excess of its numerical strength in the German African colonies. At the same time, Kirsten has interesting comments on the evolution of *schrecklichkeit* under von Trotha in German South-West Africa, pursued, but deliberately so, only once a clear-cut military victory no longer appeared possible. By contrast, there was a more haphazard emergence of the same policy of extermination against the Maji-Maji rising in German East Africa. As in so many other areas of colonial policy, the actions of those on the spot determined events. Similarly, Thomas's study of the French army's military operations in Algeria in the closing years of the Fourth Republic demonstrates how assumptions on the part of the French military about the nature of the FLN and its military wing, the ALN, drove the government's response to the war. In the process, the war widened, necessitating the use of more and more conscripts. This had particular consequences for the French metropolitan population's commitment to the conflict. Widening the war also had consequences for the Muslim population's ability to avoid taking sides. In taking a critical view of the French army's military results, Thomas notes that the army effectively 'co-opted' the reform process in Algeria, the concept of order before reform having become one of order as a means of imposing reform.

If the French army failed to comprehend the nature of its enemy, in the only essay concerning naval as opposed to military policy, Samson demonstrates the way in which the humanitarian sympathies of officers on the Royal Navy's Australia Station led them to seek to suppress an all but imaginary Pacific 'slave labour' trade. The lack of success in catching slavers supposedly supplying the sugar and copra plantations of Queensland and Fiji was invariably attributed to the paucity of naval resources rather than the absence of the trade itself.

In a way, Linn, too, points up policy failures though, in this case, those of government rather than the military. The hapless American army commander on Hawaii was sacked after Pearl Harbor for concentrating his aircraft 'wing-tip to wing-tip' in a way which made them sitting targets for the Japanese. This unfortunate decision had been made, however, to facilitate guarding the planes because Washington had insisted that internal sabotage was as great a threat as external attack. As in his monograph, Linn charts the army's dilemma in seeking to meet both possibilities. At the same time, he usefully reminds us of the US army's failure to learn the lessons of its pacification campaigns in the Philippines, of the martial usefulness of the Macabebes, and of the superiority of the Philippine Scouts over the Philippine Constabulary for pacification duties.

In part, therefore, Zirkel, Thomas and Linn all address military operations. This, too, is the principal theme of Moreman's study of the 'modified forward policy' adopted for the North West Frontier in 1923 and re-affirmed in 1939-40. The lessons of the frontier did not perhaps guide post-war British counter-insurgency

practice as much as Moreman suggests, but the experience was clearly significant. Moreover, as Moreman makes clear, keeping 'watch and ward' required an extraordinary effort, which underlines Killingray's introductory remarks on the necessity of military power as the basis for empire. Indeed, in 1944, with a major war being fought against the Japanese in Burma, no less than 48 battalions were stationed on the Frontier. This represented 38 per cent of the Indian army's peace-time establishment and, according to the Frontier Committee report of 1945 quoted by Moreman, 'the cheapest concentration camp for allied servicemen the Axis ever possessed'. At least, these were largely Indian servicemen and, in that sense, the cost was still cheaper than if they had all been British soldiers, which also reinforces Killingray's point about the relative cheapness of locally raised indigenous armed forces.

It is suggested in the brief editors' note that publication has been somewhat delayed, presumably by the 'extensive reworkings of a number of the draft chapters' also mentioned. The editor's lot is not always a happy one, and it is to the credit of Killingray and Omissi that, despite its disparate nature, the volume is of value. Some of the individual parts, however, are arguably more interesting than the sum of the whole.

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/167#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1127>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>