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978-1-107-51954-1 - Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940

Martin Thomas

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Introduction: Police, labour and colonial violence

In early March 1937 workers at several iron ore and phosphate mines in southern Tunisia downed tools. The minerals they excavated were the most lucrative exports from France's Tunisian protectorate at the time. The value of these 'strategic' raw materials increased as war clouds gathered over Europe, making Tunisia's miners, supplemented by labourers from neighbouring Italian-ruled Libya, integral to France's rearmament effort. But there was little sign of imperial unity or colonial differences forgotten at Metlaoui, the worst affected mine-works. Strikers there occupied the company offices, copying the sit-in strikes that briefly paralysed French industry in the first weeks of the left-wing Popular Front government the year before. Informed of the sit-ins, local garrison troops tried, but failed to secure the compound. Meanwhile, the strike's alleged 'ringleaders'¹ – a term whose loaded connotations will become familiar to us over the course of this book – broke into and then blockaded another company building nearby. There they found 300 rifles and ammunition kept for civil defence purposes, as well as the mine company's stock of industrial dynamite. The strikers had stumbled on a veritable revolutionary arsenal.

It proved to be a fatal discovery. Reinforcements of gendarmes and more heavily armed colonial soldiers surrounded the affected depot once it became clear that the miners had access to weapons and explosives. A gendarmerie officer was assaulted while trying to clear the area. The dynamite was never used, but some rifle shots were fired from behind the strikers' improvised barricades. This was pretext enough to send in the colonial assault troops. Within twenty-four hours, sixteen mineworkers lay dead.² Previously unheard of, 'Metlaoui' became a milestone in the onward march of Tunisian nationalism and a byword for the severity of labour control in the French colonial empire before the Second World War.

This book contains a number of detailed, local accounts like these from various locations within the French, British and Belgian empires. The reason for their inclusion is simple. A detailed reconstruction of

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local protest or, to use specialist parlance, a micro-historical approach to the study of colonial protest policing reveals broader trends and deeper meanings about the direction and intent of colonial state repression – who it served and why.

Subsequent chapters will illustrate how typical the events at Metlaoui were of colonial protest policing between the wars. Typical in three ways: first, in showing that industrial strikes and other forms of economic protest were issues of mounting concern to colonial governments and police commands in the inter-war years; second, in indicating the central importance of workplace regulation to changes in the working practices of colonial police; and, third, in revealing the connections between police practice and the economic configuration of individual colonies. Cumulatively, the argument is this: political economy offers the best guide to understanding what colonial police were called upon to do.

Connections between colonial economic activity and labour coercion help explain ‘why political economy?’ We need also to remind ourselves that the study of popular dissent and of the repressive strategies adopted to contain it has been embedded in broader narratives of the expansion and contraction of empires, from conquest to decolonization and post-colonial state formation. Put simply, colonial policing has figured largest in histories of existential threats to colonial regimes.³ Using political economy allows us to dig deeper, offering another perspective on police activities and the colonial priorities implicit in them. As the Metlaoui example suggests, between the 1910s and the 1940s the most common call on colonial security forces was not to defend the state against imminent overthrow. It was more prosaic: to police internal industrial disputes, whether organized strike actions by industrial workers or spontaneous work stoppages by plantation labourers. This begs another question. Beginning from this observation, the next step is to consider what was the relationship, if any, between the politics of imperial repression and the economic structures of colonies?

To answer this question we need to dwell on certain features of colonial states. A combination of three factors was common to numerous dependent territories, particularly the larger ones. First were their sheer geographical extent and the consequent unevenness with which thin police resources were spread. French Algeria, the Sudan Condominium and the Belgian Congo: these were, by some margin, the three biggest administrative units on the African continent. Each dwarfed the European nation states that governed them. British-ruled Nigeria and French Indochina, both federated territories investigated in later chapters, were also geographically large and, next to the earlier

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trio, more densely populated. They each became sites of quintessential experiments in styles of colonial governance – ‘indirect rule’ in Nigeria; ‘associationism’ in Indochina with the promise of ‘assimilation’ for a naturalized Vietnamese elite.⁴ In practice, their status as laboratories of colonial rule reflected two things above all: their ethnic heterogeneity and the practical difficulties of governing such complex, resistant places on a tight budget.

Linked to problems of geographical scale and resilient, impenetrable cultures was a second factor evident in each of the territories to be examined here. This was the patchy administrative presence and limited infrastructural development characteristic of colonial rule. Imperial governance, including police regulation, was, in consequence, absent much of the time. Being ruled or repressed were phenomena that colonial peoples experienced fitfully, often when economic expropriations, labour exactions, or fiscal demands were made, rather than constantly as part of their daily lives. That is not to suggest that colonialism as an abstract social condition mattered less to subject communities than we might assume. Occasional they may have been, but colonial demands could be highly disruptive: forcible relocation, military recruitment, labour service, or, less visibly, incorporation into an expanding wage economy. As Samuel Popkin demonstrated long ago, fundamental changes in authority relations ruptured the moral economies of peasant societies, provoking ‘defensive reactions’ that were often violent and which typically required police intervention.⁵ The nature of colonial demands, their local variations and the responses they triggered raises the third distinctive factor: the ties between a colony’s economic organization and the form and scale of repressive policing within it.

The widespread colonial turn away from subsistence agriculture and towards waged labour in the early twentieth century was not matched by industrial diversification. Imperial bureaucrats on both sides of the English Channel remained deeply ambivalent about the consequences of colonial industrialization. Most were hostile. They warned of sprawling city slums, juvenile ‘delinquents’ and an uncontrollable proletariat.⁶ Uprooted from their conservative rural milieus, colonial industrial workers would lose the moral compass of traditional cultures.⁷ Less alarm was expressed about attracting further investment into existing colonial export industries. That is not to say that administrators regarded big colonial business as unproblematic or benign. Working alongside a fast-developing banking sector, numerous European-controlled enterprises in colonial Africa and Asia remained extremely powerful. The Bank of Indochina, for instance, was not only France’s largest finance house in the Indochina federation but the biggest French investor in China

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and Southeast Asia. It also issued Indochina's colonial currency, the piastre.⁸ The Bank's accounts, its board membership and their annual general meetings were, not surprisingly, subjects of formal discussion and informal gossip inside the French Ministries of Finance and Colonies.⁹ North of the French border, the *Société Générale de Belgique*, a conglomerate with strong links to Belgium's monarchy, developed interests in mining, banking and other trading consortia throughout the Belgian Congo.¹⁰

While the major colonial banks drew on their capacity to invest or withdraw capital, the influence of the largest corporate exporters was often enhanced by monopoly rights over the extraction, distribution and sale of particular commodities.¹¹ Planting consortia, mining companies and other businesses seeking exclusive commercial concessions were sometimes resented by colonial treasuries, whose resources could look poor by comparison.¹² Governments typically collected taxes to meet their own administrative costs and, if surpluses were achieved, to provide revenue for additional spending on infrastructure. Even in good economic times surpluses were small.¹³ As Martin Klein notes, fiscal constraint meant that 'colonial administrators could exert nearly absolute power, but only in very limited spaces'.¹⁴

Funds for longer-term investment evaporated with the onset of the depression.¹⁵ Demands for free labour did not. There were widespread requirements to work a set number of days each year at the behest of local officials. Most colonial administrations in black Africa and Southeast Asia maintained *corvée* systems tied to discriminatory legal codes to ensure that public works were completed. Some massive projects started in more propitious economic circumstances also continued – the *Office du Niger* in French West Africa; an equally ambitious scheme for cotton cultivation in Portuguese Mozambique; the completion of coastal rail links in the Belgian Congo; and the construction of an arterial road system in Vietnamese Indochina for instance. Often, the stringency of labour recruitment increased as state funding dried up.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the ties between European-run businesses and district officers (or, their French and Belgian equivalents: *commandants de cercle* and *Territoriale* agents) grew stronger. Closer co-operation made sense. It minimized clashes between them in their quest for workers. And it allowed government and larger industrial concerns to pool resources in securing migrant labour to work large-scale agricultural, industrial or mining enterprises. These ties were also part of a longer-term regulatory trend. New quotas, passport controls, travel permits and other legislative instruments restricted internal economic migration and large-scale movements of workers within and between colonial territories.¹⁷ In

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more remote areas especially, working relationships between officialdom and commerce became social and informal.

White police officers also moved in these circles. All colonial governments assigned police to help maintain order on plantations, in processing plants, factories, mines and other European-controlled workplaces. Police worked alongside government labour inspectors in monitoring the inflow of workers, their assignment to employers, and, in some cases, their eventual return home. Policemen got to know estate managers, business owners and other senior commercial staff in their area; indeed, it was their job to do so. Locally, these relationships were mediated through the networks of association between administrators, traders, managers and police officers. At the personal level as much as the structural one, the political priorities and security practices of colonial rule were thereby attuned to its economic organization.¹⁸

It follows that received wisdom about contrasting styles of European colonial policing may be misguided. This is not to deny that analysis of colonial policing has expanded thanks to its immersion in wider questions of social control and the nature of the late colonial state. Historians of the new imperial history have contested whether repressive practices were primarily cultural or political phenomena. In other words, there is lively debate about whether the legislative restrictions, economic discriminations and varying forms of social segregation common in numerous colonies were the product of discrete ways of constructing dependent populations. The case studies in this book indicate that, rather than distinctive national traditions of colonial police practice, the most salient factor in state repression was local economic structure, specifically the coercive practices inherent to the operation of colonial wage economies and the extent to which corporate and settler interests controlled them. As a result, there were distinct political economies of empire protest and police repression.

Each was shaped by the economic relationships between the late colonial state, European producers and indigenous labourers, whether in predominantly rural colonies or in those adjusting to rapid urbanization and industrialization from the 1920s to the 1950s. These relationships, some exclusively local, others more transnational, underpinned workplace politics. And their flashpoints often culminated in police intervention. A colony's political economy helps us to map changing police priorities and practices between the wars, but it does not offer a comprehensive explanation for all police actions. Government and, in some cases, corporate use of security forces to police colonial economies suggests that repressive policing was critical, first to the configuration of colonial rule, then to its eventual collapse. Unravelling this paradox

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requires us to consider the dilemma involved. On the one hand, imperial governments relied on police services in all their major economic choices, from tax collection and land appropriation to the suppression of worker dissent. On the other, such police deployments marked an attempt to compensate for the state's inability to satisfy its economic requirements through co-operation. Police power and legal sanction upheld coercive labour practices in the short term. But, the denial of popular inclusion in key economic decisions ranging from working conditions and wage rates to land use and resource extraction rendered colonial states vulnerable to mass opposition in the longer term. The book's principal finding is that this paradox in colonial police actions – repression as inherently self-defeating – makes more sense when factors of political economy are given due weight.

This finding is compatible with the idea that the discrete national traditions and intra-imperial borrowings of colonial police forces influenced their character and development. British, French, Belgian and other European colonial policemen acted as they did, at least in part, because of their attitudinal formation, their past career experience and the inculcation of distinctive national policing methods within their own empires. The point, though, is that ethnicity and cultural background are insufficient explanatory tools for the directions taken by colonial protest policing between the wars. Crucial to this viewpoint is the fact that colonial police officers, much like the forces they commanded, became hybrids. Each blended metropolitan influences with more exotic flavours derived from the multi-ethnic composition of local security forces as well as the peculiar legal frameworks – part European, part colonial, part customary – in which police work took place.

The same argument could be made about the subjects of police attention – colonial populations. To use the example of Malaya's Chinese communities, as Lynn Hollen Lees has argued, the scale of transnational, regional and internal migration around Southeast Asia helped foster multiple identities among individuals who regarded themselves as, for example, simultaneously Anglo-Chinese, British subjects, Chinese subjects and residents of British Malaya.¹⁹ Tim Harper agrees, noting that 'multilingual individuals learned to "switch codes and styles" rather than to assimilate to one standard identity'.²⁰ As Lees concludes, in Malaya, 'Britishness was a capacious identity'.²¹ Police work required equal versatility. It was less hidebound by a particular national tradition than might be assumed. Officers' identities were refashioned by encounters at the frontier. So were police practices, aspects of which were locally derived. And 'lessons' of protest policing built on supra-national influences. Transmission of police ideas was,

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in this sense, redolent of the ‘material life of knowledge’ discussed by Richard Drayton in relation to maritime imperial networks.²²

Ann Stoler takes us further down this road of ideas in flux. She suggests that using empire as both a descriptor and an analytical field imposes needless constraints on the way we think about processes of colonial change. Stoler offers the alternative ‘imperial formation’ as a way to introduce more flexibility into our thinking about colonial rule, the policing of empire included:

In working with the concept of imperial formation rather than empire, the emphasis shifts from fixed forms of sovereignty and its denials, to graduated forms of sovereignty and what has long marked the technologies of imperial rule – sliding and contested scales of differential rights. Imperial formations are defined by racialized relations of allocations and appropriations. Unlike empires, they are processes of becoming, not fixed things. Not least they are states of deferral that mete out promissory notes that are not exceptions to their operation but constitutive of them: imperial guardianship, trusteeships, delayed autonomy, temporary intervention, conditional tutelage, military take-over in the name of humanitarian works, violent intervention in the name of human rights and security measures in the name of peace.²³

There is much to be said for this approach when considering the involvement of colonial police in the political economy of empires – or imperial formations – between the wars.

Staying with the theoretical for a moment, there is also something to be derived from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about forms of capital and symbolic violence in analysing colonial police behaviour. Bourdieu, after all, cemented his reputation with fieldwork among Algeria’s Kabyle Berbers before taking up a post at the University of Algiers in the dying days of colonial rule.²⁴ His suggestion is that social actors who share a similar position within any particular society – colonial police officers for instance – are likely to develop similar pre-dispositions, practices and norms. Bourdieu’s analysis bears directly on the way that the colonies studied in this book were policed.²⁵ Defence of colonial hierarchy was almost automatic for the police officers involved – a reflex reaction based on their presumptions about what was socially correct in the colonial society or, in Bourdieu’s terms, the ‘field’ in which they found themselves. The outcome was the recourse to ‘symbolic violence’, that is, the attempt to impose their own normative standards and social meanings on other sections of society. In other words, dominant social actors – colonial police officers acting in the name of colonial government in this context – legitimized their own prevailing standards and expectations about individuals’ behaviour and deference to colonial authority as the normal way of things, as the way the world should be.²⁶

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Putting these elements together, the argument plays out thus. Police applied symbolic violence to uphold the rules and hierarchies inherent to the imperial formation in which they operated. The point is important because it demonstrates that cultural presumptions and police actions were subject to the political order and economic organization – the political economy – prevailing in their colony.

The picture of European colonial rule presented in the chapters to come is unflattering. Collective violence and security force repression were more or less constant features in the political landscape. But what perspective should we adopt towards them? Should disorder and the stresses of colonial policing be in the foreground or confined to background detail? Were they indicative of incipient imperial collapse, the precursor to decolonization? Or were dissent and protest policing merely innate features of life in tense societies, not so much indicators of governmental dysfunction as affirmation that, for all its iniquities, colonialism had put down roots deep enough to withstand internal upheaval?

To investigate these questions the book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters consider colonial policing generically. The approach is less transnational than comparative, meaning that, although the roles of sub-state actors – frontline police and their opponents – are investigated, the colonial state remains central to the analysis. Changing norms and practices of protest policing are examined between forces, colonies and empires. The connections between them are also explored. These links were evident in several, overlapping ways: in methods copied, ideas shared, or, more basically, in the movements of police personnel and their political opponents between territories. Before unpicking these threads, Chapter 1 analyses discrete approaches to the study of security policing, strategies of repression and colonial violence. The second chapter focuses on the colonial police themselves. It discusses the structure of local forces, their professional roles and priorities, their involvement in such things as labour control and the running of prisons; in short, the material life or ‘stuff’ of policing. The third and final chapter in the book’s first section concentrates on the phenomenon of protest policing. It has two major concerns. One is the changing inter-war conceptualization of how public demonstrations in general, and workplace protests in particular, were to be policed. The chapter scrutinizes official thinking about how such actions were to be either prevented, contained, or ended; by what methods and at what human cost. The second concern arises from the first. The discussion indicates that the policing of waged labourers and their places of work – colonial labour control broadly defined – was

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both a perennial feature and an increasingly prominent facet of police work in the colonies between the wars.

The inter-war years lend themselves to such investigation because numerous export staples – rubber, coal and tin in Southeast Asia, precious minerals in British West Africa, Trinidadian crude oil – were only then being extracted on an industrial scale. In each case, rapid growth was adversely affected by the impact of the global depression which hit most colonies very hard in the early 1930s. Elsewhere, long-established export industries – viticulture in French Algeria or sugar in British Jamaica – suffered equivalent shocks. In all these cases, colonial police confronted problems bound up with the economic fortunes of the major exporters in their locality. The connection between colonial policing, industrial concentration and economic conditions may seem an obvious one. Even more so if we remind ourselves that theoretical interpretations of policing as an inherently repressive phenomenon have sometimes come with pronounced flavours of Marxist analysis or Weberian sociology. Such readings attach primary significance to abstract processes of state development and class formation, but remain useful in explaining critical changes in police activity over time. Put simply, the argument goes that police forces were tightly harnessed to state efforts to impose social control once the society in question became demarcated between dominant and subordinate groups welded together under a single administrative authority. Whether social divisions were governed by ethnicity, economic and political power, or membership of customary elites, the result was broadly the same: the police were used by the privileged in society to safeguard their access to limited resources, wealth and property. Police forces were thereby caught in a cleft stick, notionally obligated to serve the public but called upon to uphold elite interests and the hierarchies of difference on which they rested.²⁷ Usually, it was public order policing that predominated.

These linear, theorized interpretations have limits. For one thing, the evidence suggests that policing empires was more improvised and inconsistent than they allow. For another, these theories leave little room for consideration of distinct policing cultures, whether national, colonial or institutional. More important, they overlook the fact that the concept of colonial public order and of its opposite, public protest, was fluid and subjective. Most colonial authorities and their indigenous clients defined public order narrowly, enacting restrictions to match. Protest, by extension, could mean virtually any expression of dissent that came to official attention. Increasingly, it encompassed the actions of waged workers whose numbers expanded hugely in the colonial world from the 1920s onwards. Stripped of theory, it is in this sense of a

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coercive workplace in which opportunities to press demands were limited that the connections between order and industry, between policing and political economy become easier to discern. Responding to a June 1926 request from Britain's service chiefs to reflect on 'problems of internal security in the Colonies', the Colonial Office began its assessment thus: 'It may be stated in general that in any Dependency where there is a mixed population there is under post-war conditions more risk than at home that industrial disturbances will be so influenced by colour questions as to lead to riots.'²⁸ It is this relationship between colonial governments, police forces and disorder in racially ordered colonial workplaces that this book explores.

The themes that inform the opening three chapters recur in the nine that follow. These are the colonial case studies that, together, comprise the book's second part. They investigate the place of labour control in French, British and Belgian colonial policing between the two world wars. Each examines the situation in a specific colony or region. And all approach the depression years as a pivot point, not just in local economic conditions but in colonial policing as well. From the mining industries in French North Africa and British West Africa, through Southeast Asia's rubber plantations, to the sugar estates of Jamaica, the oilfields of southern Trinidad and Katanga's copper-belt, the book allows readers to see how government priorities and the needs of key industries affected colonial police work over the course of the inter-war period. The various roles assigned to paramilitary forces, military reinforcements and settler vigilante groups in assisting – sometimes, in dominating – such policing also figures large in the narrative.

French territories feature first, followed by British and, finally, Belgian. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate policing in the three French-administered states of North West Africa: Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. They approach issues of internal order from the perspective of a particular security force: the gendarmerie. The reason for doing so is simple. Although a part of the French army, gendarmerie forces played a leading role in rural police work. They were also in the vanguard of protest policing, dedicated crowd-control units being drawn from their ranks.

Chapter 6 remains with the French Empire, but throws the spotlight onto the Indochina federation, the rubber-producing regions in the southern Vietnamese colony of Cochinchina in particular. The chapter explores the triangular relationship between colonial business, imperial bureaucracy and colonial security forces in French-ruled Vietnam in a key export industry – rubber production. The importance of rubber revenues to the French colonial authorities in Indochina