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### Book review:

*Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt 1936–1939*, Matthew Hughes

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*Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt 1936–1939*, Matthew Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-107-10320-7, pp. 478, £34.99.

This work by the military historian Matthew Hughes describes in great detail the multifaceted approach taken by the British army “to grind out the rebellion” (blurb), the suppression of the uprising of the Palestinian Arabs between 1936 and 1939. The uprising commenced with the killing of Zvi Danenburg and Israel Hazan on the road from Nablus to Tulkarm by members of the Black Hand group in April 1936. The masked gunmen also stole money, purportedly to purchase arms to avenge the killing of Iz al-din al-Qassam, an Islamist insurgent, in late 1935. This sparked off yet another killing of two Arab workers on the road from Petah Tikva to Yarkona, which the Arab press attributed to the Irgun. At the funeral of Danenburg and Hazan, local Arabs were attacked and police had to intervene. Within a few days, the insurrection, known to history as the Arab Revolt, had begun.

The newly formed Arab Higher Committee attempted to coordinate the revolt and stage a general strike. A central aim was to limit Jewish immigration from Europe in the wake of Hitler's rise to power. The British responded, on the one hand, by flooding Palestine with troops and, on the other, by authorizing Lord Peel to proceed to the Middle East at the end of the year to investigate the causes of the unrest. The consequence of the Peel Commission was to advocate in 1937 the partition of the country into two states, one Jewish, the other Palestinian Arab.

The Islamist followers of al-Qassam strongly opposed partition, took up arms, and in the summer of 1937 killed the District Commissioner, Lewis Andrews, and his bodyguard, Peter McEwan, on their way to church in Nazareth. This intensification of the conflict put the Islamists at odds with the nationalist urban elite – a gulf epitomized today by the differences between the nationalist Fatah and the Islamist Hamas. Al-Qassam is still lauded as a hero in Palestinian folklore – Hughes notes that Che Guevara has a similar status in the international Left – as a martyr for the cause. Regardless of the historical context, both serve as recruiting sergeants to this day.

Hughes comments that the colonial mindset understood pacification as “a raft of military and social, political, psychological, and economic punishment of recalcitrant peoples” (p. 13). He lists eight categories of

suppression – from the legal machinery to “the terror of dirty wars” (p. 155), the use of indefinite detention and the fining of neighbourhoods, to diplomatic initiatives. From mid-1938 onwards, the demolition of homes, destruction of property, and smashing of all belongings emerged as an alternative to executing villagers. As one photograph in this book illustrates, the British military routinely blew trumpets after each successive demolition – to announce that they had completed their work and as a clear warning to the culprits’ neighbours.

Orde Wingate, a follower of the Plymouth Brethren, instructed the Jewish members of his Special Night Squads in such practices. Hughes assumes that Wingate’s reprisals resulted in the killing of three to four Arabs in every raid on an Arab village. The Palestinian academic Walid Khalidi has estimated that 3,832 Palestinian Arabs were killed by the British, a further 1,200 as a result of intercommunal strife, and that nearly 15,000 were wounded.

Hughes seeks to measure British conduct in Palestine against other episodes of rebellion in the British Empire. He compares the estimated 108 to 122 Palestinian Arabs hanged in the 1930s to the 1,090 Kenyans hanged during the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s. Following the Amritsar massacre in 1919, the British military became more cautious in handling their colonial subjects. As Hughes remarks, pacification became a question of “how to coerce civilians without being too coercive” (p. 165). He notes that “sexual violence by Servicemen was limited or non-existent” (p. 160). Hughes further cross-references other revolts outside the empire and thus draws comparisons between British conduct and that of other colonial rulers. He draws comparisons to the Sétif massacre in French Algeria (1945) and the My Lai atrocity committed by the Americans in Vietnam (1969). In these cases, hundreds were killed. Hughes measures conduct and discrimination in terms of the ratio of dead civilians to dead soldiers. In Palestine, that ratio was relatively low: between five and six civilians to each dead soldier.

Hughes also documents extra-judicial killings, including that of Muhammed Haddad by four policemen in October 1938 who were later put on trial. Hughes writes about the Assistant District Commissioner, Aubrey Lees, who emerged as a severe critic of British police tactics in Mandatory Palestine. Lees feared police reprisals and was eventually sent back to Blighty by the High Commissioner in an attempt to extract the fly from the imperial ointment. His home in Jaffa was broken into by police after his departure. However, the author misses accusations of antisemitism directed at Lees. He was later involved with the pro-Nazi Right Club of

the Conservative MP Archibald Ramsey and, in June 1940, detained at His Majesty's pleasure under Defence Regulation 18B.

The Islamists catalysed a slide into anarchy and misrule in Palestine, combining idealism for the cause with banditry and financial greed. Corruption, criminality, and a settling of scores between rivals became de rigueur. Hughes remarks that "British violence was political and targeted, while Palestinian violence was personal and politically indiscriminate . . . the culture of violence was superior to its political value" (p. 130). Amidst actual and attempted assassinations the *fassad* (feuding, p. 137) reached new levels within the urban elites, between the Husaynis and the Nashashibis. Ransoms, thefts, and the payment of protection money to Islamist gangs spawned an embryonic Druze-Jewish alliance, turned Arab villagers towards accepting the welcome presence of the British, and left Christian Arabs looking to the West and the rule of law. Some 40,000 moved to Syria and Lebanon to escape the violence.

Unlike, say, Castro's march from the Sierra Maestra to Havana (1958–59) or the Vietcong's Tet offensive (1968), the Arab Revolt did not lead to a decisive breakthrough. The ensuing disarray reflected the insurgents' lack of military structure and the weakness of their deeply riven, invisible political leadership. As has frequently been noted, the British did, to be sure, go to some lengths to suppress the revolt, but its failure was also self-inflicted and the consequences of this weakness for the Palestinian Arabs were only too apparent in 1948.

Although hundreds of Jews died in this episode of the conflict, they were, in one sense, secondary players in the conflict between the imperial rulers and their colonized subjects. While only two Jews were hanged, the absence of any mention of the execution of Shlomo Ben-Yosef in June 1938 is an oversight. Ben-Yosef was revered as a martyr for the cause by the Zionist Right and promoted by figures such as Vladimir Jabotinsky in London and the young Menahem Begin in Poland. Ben-Yosef's sacrifice on the gallows was transformed into a powerful symbol in subsequent decades and featured prominently in the Irgun's struggle against the British after the Second World War.

Meticulously researched, this book will serve as an important source of detailed information about the Arab Revolt.

Colin Shindler