



BCMh Summer Conference 2012 – *Indian Armies*

THE INDIAN ARMY AND THE MALABAR REBELLION, 1921-22

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In August 1921, Muslim peasants (known as *Mappillas* or *Moplahs*) from Malabar in the Madras Presidency rose up in revolt against their imperial rulers, resulting in one of the bloodiest and most horrific risings in India between the Punjab Disturbances of 1919 and the ‘communal war of succession’ that would take place in the final days of British rule in 1946-47. Over the course of the next four months, the Indian Army was faced with a determined and fanatical guerrilla resistance movement that was spread over a wide area across a landscape that was extremely difficult to operate in. During the course of the campaign, 2,339 rebels would be killed, over 1,500 wounded and almost 6,000 captured. 43 Indian Army soldiers would die, including five British officers, while 132 others would be wounded. The fighting was also accompanied by extensive communal unrest, including the killing and mass rape of Hindus and the destruction of temples.¹ According to the historian Charles Townshend, the Malabar Rebellion was ‘the most serious insurrection since 1857’ when ‘governmental hesitancy allowed a small resistance movement to grow into a full-scale insurgency whose extent was limited by ethnic boundaries rather than by state power’.²

The rebellion remains little known. Apart from a confidential history by a colonial official (R.H. Hitchcock) and an article by the historian Robert Hardgrave (published over 30 years ago), the events in Malabar have remained unstudied and lacking in critical appreciation. Some writers on the Indian police and British counterinsurgency have briefly mentioned the revolt, but little detail is provided.³ As is perhaps understandable, most histories of the colonial Indian Army and its approach to irregular warfare have focused on the campaigns and tribal policy on the North-West Frontier and have seen little to write about from Southern India. Indeed, the British had faced much more serious civil disorders in northern and central India since 1857 and had relatively little trouble from the southern half of the country. They had also increasingly come to regard the races of the south as being less worthy fighters than those from the north, particularly the Punjab, which was in line with ‘martial race’ theory.⁴ Yet the Malabar Rebellion is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the Indian Army was forced to mount a counterinsurgency campaign that was very different to the kinds of

¹ India Office Collections, British Library, London (IOC): L/MIL/17/12/33, ‘Report by His Excellency General Lord Rawlinson of Trent, Commander-in-Chief in India on the Operations in Malabar for the period 20th August 1921 to 25th February 1922’, [hereafter ‘Rawlinson Report’], p. 10.

² C. Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars. Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), pp. 140-1.

³ IOC: L/PS/20/F207, R.H. Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion, 1921* (Madras: Government Press, 1925) and R.L. Hardgrave, Jr, ‘The Mappilla Rebellion, 1921: Peasant Revolt in Malabar’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1977), pp. 57-99. A collection of official correspondence can be found in *The Mappilla Rebellion 1921-22* (Madras: Government Press, 1922). For a recent discussion see N. Lloyd, ‘The Indian Army and Civil Disorder, 1919-22’, in K. Roy (ed.), *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2011), pp. 335-58.

⁴ By 1914, 66% of cavalry, 87% of artillery and 45% of infantry were Punjabis. T. Tai Yong, *The Garrison State. The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947* (New Delhi & London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 18, 71.



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operations it was used to conducting on the frontier. Second, the terrain was very unfavourable to operate in, across thickly forested hills that offered the rebels perfect sanctuary. Third, it was notorious for the vicious communal violence that took place, with forcible conversions of Hindus, looting, arson and other outrages, as well as anti-government violence. Fourth, the Indian Army had to fight this campaign with far fewer troops than it would have liked and when it was simultaneously facing considerable civil disorder across the subcontinent as part of Mohandas Gandhi's programme of non-cooperation. Rebellion in Malabar was the last thing the Government of India wanted, particularly after the disorders that had taken place in the Punjab only two years before, which had become infamous after the shooting at Amritsar on 13 April 1919.⁵

The roots of the outbreak in Malabar were related to the wave of unrest that swept India as the First World War came to an end. Economic pressures, combined with the growth of nationalist feeling and the rise of discontent, helped foster an atmosphere of disorder and unease that was only given greater fillip by the reforms championed by Edwin Montagu (Secretary of State for India), which resulted in the Government of India Act of 1919. This legislation significantly decreased British control of the provinces and introduced a more representative form of government, with Indian politicians being invited in to run selected provincial portfolios. Although it had been intended that this would harness political dissent in ways more amenable to the government, in many cases it only encouraged nationalists to demand further concessions from the British. Moreover, the authority of the Government of India had been shaken by the unrest in the Punjab and the bungled response to it, most notably the disastrous Hunter Committee hearings in the winter of 1919-20 that revealed great confusion about how to handle disorder and a reluctance to support officials. After considering its verdict, Lord Hunter criticised the chief protagonist, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, for making an 'error of judgment' in Amritsar. On 13 April 1919 troops under his command had fired into an illegal political gathering in a patch of waste ground known as the Jallianwala Bagh. 379 people had been killed and over 1,000 wounded. Whatever the controversy over Dyer's actions, it sent a clear message that in future support for officials trying to restore order could not be taken for granted.⁶

The situation in Malabar had been difficult for some time. As a result of Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign against the Rowlatt Bills in the spring of 1919, which was followed by sustained agitation against the 'Punjab wrongs' over the next two years, subversive propaganda had been flooding into the area for some time. It came at a time when a considerable number of India's Muslims were protesting about the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, and two well-known agitators (the Ali brothers), had been active in spreading their message of dissatisfaction. By the spring of 1921 the political temperature was rising. In March the provincial Fortnightly Report warned of the 'strained' feelings between, on the one hand, Christians and the lower-caste Hindus, who did not support the non-cooperation movement, and on the other, the Muslims and higher-caste Hindus, in Cochin. At the beginning of the

⁵ For the Amritsar Massacre see N. Lloyd, *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011) and 'The Amritsar Massacre and the Minimum Force Debate', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 382-403.

⁶ Command 681, Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc. (London: HMSO, 1920).



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month one Christian was killed in clashes with Mappillas and a detachment of police had to be sent to restore order. ‘The incident proves – if proof were needed – how easily the population of the Malabar Coast can be roused into violence and how readily the well-known fanaticism of the Mappillas can be played upon by the political agitator’, the report noted. Furthermore, there were growing indications ‘of incitement to a fanatical outbreak’ from the local Khalifat Committee.⁷ By July, Captain P. McEnroy (commanding a detachment of 1/Leinster Regiment) complained that ‘the lot of the civil authorities was anything but happy. They were flouted at every turn, and it became conclusive that the Mappillas believed the British Raj about to close’.⁸

The storm broke in August. A large meeting of Mappillas was held on 4 August at Ponnani to discuss the religious aspect of the Khalifat movement, but it was not until 17 August that matters came to a head. When local police tried to make some arrests for burglary in the village of Pukkottur, ‘a large and hostile crowd of Mappillas armed with swords and knives and including a number of their women folk, collected to prevent the arrests being carried out’. Although the Police Inspector and his men were not attacked, they were in serious danger until local leaders managed to get the crowd to disperse. Unfortunately, this was ‘regarded as a defeat for the Police and therefore the Government’ and only seemed to embolden the Mappillas. The District Magistrate, Mr E.F. Thomas, immediately applied for extra troops, and proposed to make a number of arrests in order to disarm several suspects.⁹ Unfortunately, when this was attempted, full-scale rebellion broke out. On 20 August, Thomas went to Tirurangadi to arrest a number of identified Mappilla leaders (including one Ali Mussaliar) accompanied by the District Superintendent of Police, Mr Hitchcock, 100 police officers, and a detachment of soldiers under Captain McEnroy. Thomas did manage to apprehend a number of suspects and carry out some searches, but the situation rapidly got out of hand, and a large mob – perhaps several thousand strong – attacked a small detachment of troops left behind in Tirurangadi, killing Second Lieutenant W.R.M. Johnson and the Assistant Superintendent of Police, Mr Rowley. Within days widespread revolt spread across Malabar, particularly the *taluks* (a sub-district administrative division) of Ernad and Walluvanad in South Malabar, which were at the centre of the disturbances. Railway lines and roads were torn up and public offices were burnt and looted. Over the next week most of the Hindu shops in the affected *taluks* were attacked and many houses belonging to Hindus were also torched by bands of rebels. Crowds of Mappillas then went through the *taluks* shouting that ‘there was no longer any Government; they must obey the Khalifat Government’. Within days, all civil authority had collapsed in the affected area. Parts had been parcelled out into ‘rebel kingdoms’, bands of dacoits and thieves patrolled the roads, which had been blocked, and all telegraph wires had been cut.¹⁰

Events moved quickly. On 26 August Major-General John Burnett-Stuart (GOC Madras District) was appointed Military Commander of the troubled areas. That day a large band of rebels ambushed a column of Leinsters and police (170 strong) at Pukkottur, on the road to Malappuram. Although they were able to muster large numbers – up to 3,000 rebels in some

⁷ ‘Fortnightly Report’, 17 March 1921, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, p. 10.

⁸ IOC: L/PS/20/F207, Hitchcock, *A History of the Malabar Rebellion, 1921*, Appendix II, p. 201.

⁹ ‘Fortnightly Report’, 4 and 17 August 1921, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, p. 12.

¹⁰ ‘Note on the Rebellion by Mr F.B. Evans’, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, pp. 46-9.



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estimates – the Mappillas lost heavily in the ensuing engagement, sustaining 300 dead after making wild charges into machine-gun fire. After this stunning defeat, the rebels split up into different groups and adopted classic insurgent tactics, melting away into the jungle and using their superior mobility to conduct ‘hit and run’ attacks, as well as terrorising the local Hindu population. When British columns eventually reached Tirurangadi on 30 August, they found it largely deserted, apart from a group of Mappillas, led by Ali Mussaliar, who were determined not to surrender. After blockading themselves in the mosque and firing on the columns, a firefight broke out. In the ensuing engagement, 24 Mappillas were killed and 38 were taken prisoner including Ali Mussaliar. Over the following month, Burnett-Stuart split his forces into two moveable columns and sent small detachments to garrison selected villages in the affected areas. Although they did provide support for local police, they were unable to force a major engagement – another Pukkottur in other words – and found it increasingly difficult to find their quarry in terrain that Lord Rawlinson, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, described as ‘eminently suited’ to the guerrilla tactics the Moplahs employed. Rawlinson noted that ‘The jungle clad slopes of the Nilgiris afforded a sure refuge for any hard pressed rebel bands, from which only starvation could feasibly dislodge them’.¹¹ Evidently, dealing with this outbreak of disorder would be far more difficult than had been initially presumed.

As operations in Malabar got underway in earnest in September, the authorities had to decide how to administer the areas that came under military control; what to do with the prisoners they had captured, and how they should be punished and dealt with. The Madras Government had telegraphed the Government of India on 22 August asking for permission to promulgate martial law in three *taluks* (Ernad, Walluvanad and Ponnani), receiving a draft order two days later. Simla confirmed that martial law administered by a military commander could be enforced in specified areas, but ordinary courts would continue to function, and the powers of military officers would be carefully controlled. Government regulations stated that ‘special tribunal and summary general court-martial are unnecessary and that summary courts, to which civil magistrate only would be appointed should suffice’. Military commanders were empowered to make regulations for public safety and the maintenance of order, but punishments were only those ‘authorized by ordinary law’. Furthermore, ‘regulations shall interfere as little as possible with ordinary avocations of life, and before making any regulation unconditional, Commander shall consult senior civil service officer in direct charge of administration of areas’. Simla made it clear that the military must ‘keep in closest touch with civil authorities’ and that ‘trial and punishment should be left as little as possible in the hands of the military officers and that, as suggested above, civil officers alone should be vested with these powers’.¹²

The issue of martial law was a point of very great sensitivity for the Government of India in 1921. Chiefly, Simla was loathe to repeat what it regarded as the mistakes of the past, most notably the much-maligned employment of martial law in the Punjab two years earlier, which had caused a scandal of grave proportions across the empire. Martial law had come into force across selected districts in the Punjab on 15 April 1919, five days after violence had broken out across northern India, including in the city of Amritsar where mobs murdered Europeans

¹¹ ‘Rawlinson Report’, p. 1.

¹² Government of India to District Magistrate, Malabar, 24 August 1921, in *The Mappilla Rebellion 1921-22*, pp. 293-5.



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and burnt banks. The then Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, had initially requested that martial law be introduced, but wanted the civil power to remain supreme and only employ the military to *enforce* this authority. But in what would become a fateful and unfortunate mistake, the Government of India took a more simplistic and traditional interpretation of martial law and assumed that when it came into force, civil officers would become subservient to the military. In line with this, it overruled O'Dwyer's requests and informed him that there could be 'no half measures' and that the civilian power was 'entirely to cease' with all authority now being invested in the military commander.¹³ Yet within days of its introduction, awful revelations of racial humiliation, of so-called 'fancy punishments' and 'erratic acts' (such as the infamous 'crawling order' in Amritsar) began to leak out, providing a propaganda gift to the burgeoning nationalist movement.¹⁴ Although the incidents of abuse and unrestrained violence were much exaggerated – both then and ever since – the perception that the military had got out of control persisted for many years. In truth, at this point in time, the last thing any provincial government wanted was to declare martial law; they would, on the contrary, do almost anything to avoid it.

What this meant was that although the government agreed to sanction martial law, it was to be kept firmly under control and only used sparingly. The reluctance to approve a version of martial law with teeth was not lost on Burnett-Stuart and his officers. They argued for stronger measures, principally military court-martials with powers to punish offenders, but the Government of India was having none of it, and again stressed that punished should be done primarily by civilians. Burnett-Stuart found these restrictions to be deeply troubling and, frankly, unworkable. He would later claim that 'one of the greatest handicaps' he had to deal with was 'the inadequacy of the Martial Law Ordinance'. It was, he wrote, 'a mere shadow of Martial Law, and under it [Colonel H.T.] Humphreys, whom I had nominated as the commander to administer Martial Law in Malabar had practically no powers except to make regulations'. Furthermore:

All powers of punishment were in the hands of the special Civil Courts. [The o]nly way of dealing with the rebels were open to the troops; they could either kill them if they encountered them in armed opposition, or they could hand them over when arrested or captured to the Civil authorities. This meant endless delay in every case; it also meant that notorious leaders lingered on in confinement, unpunished, almost indefinitely as they had successive rights of appeal. It is essential in a situation such as that with which we were confront that punishment should be prompt, and the death sentence on prominent rebels, if imposed, should be carried out at once.¹⁵

¹³ Sir M. O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew it 1885-1925* (London: Constable, 1925), pp. 298-9; Evidence Taken Before the Disorders Inquiry Committee (7 vols., Calcutta: Government of India, 1920), VI, p. 39, 50.

¹⁴ Congress called martial law in the Punjab 'unnecessary, cruel, oppressive' and 'an abortion of justice'. See 'Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress', in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Online*, XX, p. 176, 180. [<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL020.PDF>, accessed 25 March 2010]. For a defence of O'Dwyer and an alternative look at martial law see N. Lloyd, 'Sir Michael O'Dwyer and "Imperial Terrorism" in the Punjab, 1919', *South Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (December 2010), pp. 363-80.

¹⁵ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London (LHCMA): Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), 'Moplah Rebellion Memoir', p. 101.



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Burnett-Stuart knew what was going on. He realised that he was now suffering from the fallout from 1919; a reaction to way in which martial law had been employed in the Punjab and which was now the cause of great unease and nervousness in both Simla and Madras.

Throughout September, Burnett-Stuart's Malabar Force conducted a number of operations designed to capture rebel leaders and restore order, but was unable to score any great successes. Typical of the difficulties of restoring order was an incident at Kaipakkancheri in the middle of September. A detachment of Indian troops and police stayed there for two or three days, making a handful of arrests, but were unable to secure most of the men they wanted. A few days later, Mr F.B. Evans, Special Civil Officer, received an urgent wire from an informant saying that he had been taken by the Mappillas and was about to be murdered. The man did manage to escape, but such incidents were by no means uncommon. Evans complained that 'a further clearing up will be necessary... and the restoration of confidence and of "law and order" will be a very tedious job'.¹⁶ By the end of the month, government authority was being re-established in places, but large areas of Ernad and Walluvanad *taluks* remained in the hands of the rebels. As a later report noted, although they occupied posts at all the important places, 'no roads were safe and all supplies had to be escorted; rebel spies were everywhere and our scouts were frequently murdered; the few Hindus who remained in the area were given the choice of Islam or death, and those suspected of helping the troops were freely murdered'. It was estimated that during September there were around 5,000 rebels still active, split into a number of armed gangs, with up to 3,000 firearms, including Martini-Henry rifles, shotguns, and even muzzle-loading smoothbore guns. Almost all Moplahs carried swords and they tended to rely on setting ambushes along roads – the only routes that the Indian Army could use in the difficult terrain.¹⁷

By late September Burnett-Stuart was becoming increasingly concerned with the spread of the revolt and the lack of support he was getting. Realising that more reinforcements were needed, he requested two further battalions, one of Gurkhas and one of Burmese troops (used to jungle warfare). He also asked the Madras Government for further guidance on how to proceed. 'I respectfully beg to point out', he wrote on 24 September, 'that since the outbreak of the rebellion I have received no information or instructions from Government, either as regards their own appreciation of the situation or as regards their policy and plans, and that the conduct of operations in Malabar has been left entirely in my hands'. He felt that this was improper as he was 'particularly anxious not to exceed the minimum application of force necessary to bring the rebels to reason'.¹⁸ Three days later he wrote to Southern Command and the Chief of the General Staff in Simla and again warned them that the situation was now 'developing on different and unforeseen lines'. 'The rebel leaders now avoid open conflict with the troops and have adopted guerrilla warfare, ambushing and sniping columns, re-occupying places which the troops have passed, looting, terrorising and forcible converting all inhabitants of other persuasions, commandeering crops and food supplies, and destroying property and communications'. Although Burnett-Stuart felt that the military operations had

¹⁶ 'Malabar Disturbances – Note on Operations From 26th August 1921 to 6th September 1921', by Mr. F.B. Evans, Special Civil Officer, Malabar in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, p. 240.

¹⁷ 'Note on the Rebellion by Mr F.B. Evans', in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, p. 49.

¹⁸ LHCMA: Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), Burnett-Stuart to Government of Madras, 24 September 1921, in 'Moplah Rebellion Memoir', p. 109.



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been carried out ‘with energy and thoroughness’, it was difficult to move rapidly in such difficult terrain and they were not able to gather a great deal of intelligence on the movements of the rebels. Finally, he made it clear that he was unhappy with the modified form of martial law that had been introduced. The ‘present limited application of military force’, he claimed,

has been exploited to the full and a continuance of action on the same lines can only result in prolonging the disturbance, in the loss of valuable lives, and in filling the gaols with prisoners. The most that can be hoped for under present conditions is to continue the collection of prisoners and to keep the rebellion localised; but meanwhile the devastation of the area will continue.¹⁹

He, therefore, requested ‘the fullest powers of punishment’ to put down the rebellion quickly.

Sooner or later Burnett-Stuart’s concerns would have to be addressed. At a military conference three days later, it was decided to agree to his request for an additional two battalions and also begin to introduce swifter means of punishments for rebels. Sir William Vincent of the Home Department, Government of India, visited the disturbed areas and issued new guidelines that enabled Burnett-Stuart (and Humphreys) to try ‘urgent cases’ by military courts with the powers to impose death sentences. While this was an extremely welcome development, the progress of the campaign remained slow. 2/8th Gurkha Rifles only arrived on 16 October, with two further battalions (2/9th Gurkhas and 1/39th Garhwals) being unable to get into position before 10 November. Even so the two battalions Southern Command initially received were between 130 and 200 men below establishment (with no provision for wastage) and their wireless sets were almost useless (being ‘worn out, and of a pattern long out of date’). They had no lorries and their armoured cars were so heavy as to necessitate the strengthening of every bridge before they could cross, significantly adding to the difficulties of mobility in Malabar.²⁰

During October the rising continued to spread, now pushing westward into the Calicut *taluk*, which alarmed many of the planters in the area. Burnett-Stuart could do little other than marshal as many forces as he could and send them off on ‘search and destroy’ missions through the affected zones, while pushing for more special police to be raised. On 20 October, the Gurkhas and Dorsets, accompanied by a handful of armoured cars, took part in a ‘drive’ around Pukkottur, which resulted in a fierce action, with 46 rebels being killed, ‘mostly with the kukri’. A week later, around Melmuri, the Dorsets were also able to defeat a group of almost 250 rebels.²¹ Yet there remained a sense that the campaign was drifting. On 24 October, Burnett-Stuart wrote to Southern Command updating them on what was happening. It made for sober reading. ‘Many factors have been at work in the disturbed area during this period’, he noted. ‘The change in rebel tactics from open to guerrilla warfare has steadily developed and has shown increasing signs of more intelligent and efficient leading. There are no signs of weakening or repentance’. Had his requests for reinforcements and the

¹⁹ LHCMA: Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), Burnett-Stuart to HQ Southern Command and Army HQ, Simla, 27 September 1921, in ‘Moplah Rebellion Memoir’, pp. 105-7.

²⁰ Burnett-Stuart to HQ Southern Command and Army HQ, Simla, 24 October 1921, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, pp. 156-8.

²¹ ‘Summary of the Important Events of the Rebellion by Under Secretary’, in *The Mapilla Rebellion*, p. 39.



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deployment of special police been made with ‘greater dispatch’ than ‘the situation could have been dealt with in time’. He made no pronouncements about when the rebellion would come to an end, warning that in some districts it might go on ‘until every Moplah is either exterminated or arrested’. ‘On the other hand a period will probably be reached, in some Districts, at any rate, when the Moplah will throw in his hand. In either event, there will come a time when the military control can be replaced by police control, and I hope that the Madras Government will hasten the arrival of that moment by providing larger forces of armed special police in anticipation.’²²

Burnett-Stuart had been promised reinforcements at the end of September, but it was only by the beginning of November that four battalions (2/8th Gurkhas, 2/9th Gurkhas, 1/39th Garhwals and 3/70th Kachins) were in place and ready to really take on the insurgency and gain the initiative. Burnett-Stuart’s ‘big drive’ commenced on 11 November. He directed Colonel Humphreys to conduct an operation through Malabar territory up to the Beypore River. The plan was to deploy four battalions in line and move through the countryside, with a flotilla of motor launches (armed with machine-guns), thus preventing the Mapillas from crossing the river (which, in any case was wide and infested with crocodiles). Over the next 17 days, other large-scale sweeps took place through the affected *taluks*. During this period, battalions would often deploy with an advance guard of one platoon, divided into a main guard with two ‘horns’ ahead to the left and right in extended order. The main body would follow on closely. Although these drives were not always successful, they did help to break up large bands of rebels, allow intelligence to be gathered, and experience gained of how to operate over such forested hills. It was tiring work. Lieutenant-Colonel F.S. Poynder, historian of 9th Gurkha Rifles, remembered that after crossing the Beypore River, the daily advance was limited to about five miles ‘in order to allow each battalion thoroughly to search an allotted area’. Most of the time visual communication between battalions was impossible owing to the thick jungle and the progress of companies had to be signalled by the firing of flares every hour.²³

By the end of November most of Burnett-Stuart’s ‘big drives’ had been completed. As he later commented, the ‘results had not been spectacular, but it was significant that surrenders began to increase rapidly, and intelligence became much easier to get. I made the terms of surrender as easy as I could’. Over the following month, the Indian Army engaged rebel forces several more times, and on 19 December Chembrasserri Tangal, one of the chief Moplah leaders, surrendered.²⁴ Burnett-Stuart was now confident that the rebellion had been suppressed. ‘I think the Moplah Rebellion, as such, is now over’, he wrote to Rawlinson,

Practically every *amsom* (Parish) has surrendered, and as far as I can see they have done so whole-heartedly. Houses are being re-occupied and traffic on the roads resumed. Mop[lah]s and Hindus are seen together again. The surrendered Mop[lah]s are outwardly cheerful and respectful, and I could detect few signs of resentment or sulkiness. The Mop[lah] is a simple minded stout-hearted ruffian, and embarked on

²² Burnett-Stuart to HQ Southern Command and Army HQ, Simla, 24 October 1921, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, pp. 156-8.

²³ F.S. Poynder, *The 9th Gurkha Rifles 1817-1936* (London: Royal United Services Institution, 1937), p. 228.

²⁴ ‘Summary of the Important Events of the Rebellion by Under Secretary’, in *The Mapilla Rebellion 1921-22*, p. 40; LHCMA: Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), ‘Moplah Rebellion Memoir’, pp. 120-1.



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rebellion in the genuine belief that the British Empire was retiring from business, having now discovered that he has been misinformed I think that he is quite prepared to admit his error and accept things are they are.²⁵

Martial law was withdrawn on 25 February 1922 thus bringing military operations to an end.

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 and 1922 remains little known. Few historians have studied it; even fewer have trekked the jungle-clad slopes of the Nilgiri Hills to appreciate the difficulty of the terrain. Nevertheless, the campaign in 1921 offers a number of important insights into the way the Government of India handled serious disorders of this nature and, in some respects, completed the circle that began with the Punjab disturbances of 1919. It was only in Malabar in 1921 that the impact of what had happened in Amritsar really came home to roost. It was here that the confusion over martial law and the understandable wish to prevent the military from ‘getting out of hand’ resulted in a botched handling of a serious revolt – initially at least – and a reluctance to deal firmly with the disorder. There is little doubt that the initial response of the authorities was conditioned by the unease and concern created by the ongoing fallout from the events in the Punjab in April 1919. The spectre of the Jallianwala Bagh, the findings of Lord Hunter’s committee of inquiry, and the continual agitation over the ‘Punjab wrongs’, haunted the officials responsible for dealing with the unrest in Malabar and influenced their actions.

For the Viceroy the lesson of 1919 was that the government must proceed slowly and surely. There must be no military ‘outrages’, the army must be kept on a tight leash and martial law had to be tightly controlled by civilians. This was all well and good, but it paid scant attention to the reality of what was happening in the Malabar, the reasons why disorder had broken out, and the urgent need to use military forces to put a stop to it. The Government of India was, therefore, guilty of fighting the last war – of treating Malabar as if it was a repetition of what had happened in the Punjab. This may have been understandable, but it was simply not true and as Sir Michael O’Dwyer, Burnett-Stuart and others argued, the spread of insurgency in Malabar had to be dealt with firmly. It was only when the insurgency showed no signs of stopping and that ‘outrages’ increased even further, that the Government of India finally summoned the courage to give Burnett-Stuart the reinforcements – and crucially the powers – that he had requested at the beginning of the campaign.

For the Indian Army, Malabar offered a number of points to consider. Despite lacking sufficient numbers of trained soldiers and police, and operating across very difficult terrain, Burnett-Stuart was able to husband his resources and strike back effectively. Although there were occasions when soldiers went beyond the application of minimum force, these were rare and largely untypical of how the Indian Army operated in these circumstances. Writing in his memoirs, Burnett-Stuart waxed lyrical about his time in Southern India and the lessons that could be drawn from his experience. To him it was clear that had greater powers of martial law been given to the military commander at a much earlier stage then the rebellion could have been dealt with much quicker. Nevertheless, it was not simply about unrestricted violence and brutality. ‘Fighting in aid of the civil power must be controlled and selective’ he

²⁵ LHCMA: Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), Burnett-Stuart to Rawlinson, 29 December 1921, in ‘Moplah Rebellion Memoir’, p. 125.



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wrote, ‘the object is to punish, and only if unavoidable, to kill; methods of widespread destruction such as bombing from the air, are inappropriate. It is a personal business between the troops, as representing the arm of the law, and the rebels’.²⁶ It was unfortunate that it would be the Hindus of Malabar that would suffer so much in 1921 because of the nationalist outrage – much of it misdirected – that came from the events in the Punjab two years earlier.

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²⁶ LHCMA: Burnett-Stuart Papers (2/3/1 – 2/3/3), ‘Moplah Rebellion Memoir’, p. 132.