CHAPTER TWELVE

THE INDIAN ARMY AND INTERNAL SECURITY: 1919–1946

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Military Aid to the Civil Power (hereafter MACP) was the least popular duty amongst British troops in India but also one of the most important in maintaining colonial rule. Whilst a great deal of attention has focused on the events at Amritsar and British approaches to internal security in 1919, there has been relatively little work on the deployment of British or Indian troops in MACP duties in the inter-war years or during the period from Quit India campaign in 1942 till 1944. A study of the 1930s and 1940s allows us to identify certain principles and methods at work in this regard in the history of the Indian Army, including the influence of techniques drawn from the North-West Frontier. The British approach in the inter-war years tended to start from the assumption that the grievances of the Indian people were a security problem, and political concessions were offered in order to maintain colonial rule. This chapter seeks to illustrate how British and Indian troops were used in ‘Aid of the Civil Power’ and how British concerns about maintaining internal security paved the way for the abrupt ending of the Raj.

The Imperative of Colonial Internal Security

Wherever colonial forces found themselves confronted by widespread civil violence, they were compelled to implement measures that, in the first instance, focussed on the restitution of order. Soldiers were rarely involved in the political questions of local grievances in internal security matters as these were the preserve of the civilian authorities. Nevertheless, the Indian Army could not operate in isolation of political issues, not least because of the concern that Indian troops might be affected by nationalist sentiments. The increasingly politicized nature of unrest in the subcontinent in the inter-war years, and the deep resentment of Brigadier-General Dyer’s actions in Amritsar in 1919, caused the army and the colonial authorities to embark on a review of
their techniques. The consequent methods, which were also shaped by political violence in Ireland, Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq, reveal something of the transition in colonial thinking between 1919 and 1947.\(^1\) The Indian Army acting in support of the civil authorities in the subcontinent, developed its approach through the ‘lessons’ it had derived from the Indian ‘Mutiny’ of 1857, its operations on the North-West Frontier and through direct experience of internal security duties.\(^2\)

The imperative of the colonial period was to maintain order, and significantly, to preserve prestige through a fear of the force at the British Empire’s disposal. The British believed that a failure to act swiftly had been the chief cause of the most serious rebellions against colonial rule, and that particular emphasis should be placed on identifying and neutralizing the ring leaders. The lesson of the Indian Mutiny appeared to be that indecisive British leadership, insufficient force and too much delay had been the cause of an avoidable disaster. It was generally held that swift and decisive action, even with small numbers, could prevent a recurrence. These ideas were engrained in British thinking. Much of the unrest in the 1930s and 1940s stemmed from a challenge to the British colonial dispensation, but it was also the result of communal violence, food riots and on the North-West Frontier, fighting for the preservation of traditional ways of life.\(^3\) For the Indian Army, the way to deal with these problems was much the same, namely a rapid and bold strike, but in the inter-war years, it also had to adhere to a far stronger emphasis on the principle of minimum force.

