Learning the Lessons of ’57:
Reconstructing the Imperial Military after the Rebellion

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This paper explores aspects of imperial military administration in the aftermath of the rebellion. In focussing on the various ways in which 1857 was understood and interpreted, as well as on the ‘lessons’ the events were thought to convey, I also want to explore how reactions to the rebellion influenced military and colonial strategies in the latter nineteenth century. If it is widely accepted that 1857 had a profound impact on the ideologies of colonial rule in South Asia and beyond, we have less sense of the administrative mechanisms on which ideologies of rule devolved. By examining the transmissions between 1857 and the ‘martial race’ reforms of the 1880s and 1890s, I hope to illuminate certain aspects of military administration which I think have been rather marginalised in some of the existing literature.

In the aftermath of the rebellion, race and (especially) caste were key explanatory tropes for colonial administrators and historians alike and one of the principal ‘lessons’ of 1857, as we will see, emphasised the importance of surveying, monitoring and regulating the ethnography of the recruits who made up the Indian Army.¹ This reading of the rebellion, and the administrative measures which derived from it, had significant consequences in the late nineteenth century. In the immediate aftermath of 1857 ethnographic knowledge was harnessed in order to diversify recruiting so as to ensure that no single group predominated in the ranks of the imperial military while, under Roberts, ethnography legitimised the narrowing of recruitment to certain ‘martial races’. Often regarded as a distinct break with post-mutiny policy, I will suggest that Roberts’ martial race project is better understood as an effect of the post-1857 settlement. The apparent discontinuity reflects more the problems associated with organising and formatting knowledge in the aftermath of the rebellion (and the gradual resolution of these problems in the 1870s and 1880s) than it does a fundamental shift in nature of military administration.

¹ Here and throughout, I use the term Indian Army to refer to the ‘Presidency Armies’, along with the Punjab Frontier Force – the body of Indian troops typically referred to by colonials as the ‘Native Army’.

The processes by which military policy and strategy evolved during the latter nineteenth century may also help to us approach some wider historiographical questions. The debates around the notion of Indian ‘difference’, for example, have rarely engaged with the wealth of material relating to the history of the Indian Army, arguably the key imperial institution for the newly constituted Crown Raj. If the colonial sense of Indian alterity was hardened by the rebellion – as in some ways it clearly was – it is also important to recognise the way in which 1857 helped to give shape the colonialism’s sense of its own modernity. Readings of 1857, and formulations of military strategy after the rebellion, turned increasingly on an opposition which anticipated the impacts of scientific and technological developments whilst reflecting on the alterity (and backwardness) of the sepoys (and the Indian population more generally). This tautology had an important impact on military administration in the latter nineteenth century as discourses promising a ‘scientific’ treatment of imperial military strategy were mobilised to justify wide-ranging reforms. The martial race reforms, however, do not simply represent the hardening of a notion of Indian difference, for behind the shift to the martial army lay a series of administrative and economic factors which the ascendant martial race discourse rather obscured. Exploring these issues allows us to grasp much more fully how and why notions of race informed colonial rule in the period.

The Lessons of the Past

Assuredly the past contains valuable lessons which may well be remembered with profit when the day of action comes.

Government of India, The Revolt in Central India, 1857-9 (1908)

Contemporary responses to the rebellion were numerous and varied greatly in range, content and objective. Nevertheless, such enterprises shared a number of significant common features. From the initial, ‘on-the-spot’ accounts of officers and administrators, through the extensive regional ‘narratives’ prepared during the course of the counter-insurgency operations in 1857-8 to the exhaustive investigations

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convened at the behest of the metropolitan authorities, interpreting the rebellion was always, as Ranajit Guha argued, an exercise in counter-insurgency. However, the post-1857 proliferation of writing on and about the rebellion suggests, in important ways, the weakness of the colonial state rather than its strength: an example of what C.A. Bayly has called an ‘information panic’. Though the central problematic of post-mutiny reconstruction – the organisation of the imperial military – was frequently constituted in such a way as to negate the fundamental challenge to colonial authority implicit in the rebellion, the extensive investigations are testament to the profoundly destabilising effects of the rebellion.

The Royal Commission formed in July 1858, under the charge of the Secretary of State for War, Lord Peel, to consider the reconstruction of the imperial military took evidence from some fifty witnesses, each considered ‘expert’ in various aspects of imperial military practice. In March of the following year the Commissioners submitted their report to Parliament: a concise seven pages, accompanied by more than 600 pages of dense addenda, supplementary papers, and appendices. The Report was the culmination of an extensive investigation into the mutiny: both in London and in India, official enquiries into the causes of the uprising had begun shortly after the scale of the rebellion had become clear. Some months before the formation of the Royal Commission, Parliament had initiated its own enquiries into the causes of the rebellion, calling for information on the various castes from which the East India Company had latterly recruited its armies. At the instigation of the Viceroy, a similar survey was undertaken in India. The connection here between recruitment, caste and the rebellion is clearly significant and reflects the widely-held contemporary perception that the preponderance of Brahmins in the Bengal Army – described by

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5 Parliamentary Papers. (1857-58) XLIII, p. 123. ‘Return to an Order of the Honourable The House of Commons, dated 5 February 1858;- for, A Copy “of any Orders that may have been issued by the Court of Directors regarding the Castes of Hindoos from which the Native Army is to be recruited.”’

6 H.M. Durand’s survey collected the opinions of various officials in India, posing a series of questions regarding the ‘races, tribes [and] castes’ from which the military was recruited – and those that were excluded – as well as on the agency employed to facilitate recruiting and the measures necessary to ‘improve the future composition’ of the army. Durand’s survey was submitted to the authorities in India and in London, and was published as an appendix to the Report of the Royal Commission.
one officer as ‘a quasi masonic body’ – had precipitated the rebellion. Many of the ‘narratives’ and first-hand accounts produced by officers serving in India made this link and it was processed, much in the fashion described by Guha, into the rump of colonial historiography. Irrespective of the many problems which this rendering of the rebellion encodes – especially in overlooking the diverse regional characteristics of insurgency – the formulation was a commonplace.

Certainly, the bulk of the evidence gathered by the Peel Commission emphasised the connections between the ethnography of the Bengal recruits and the late uprising. In fact, while much of the labour of the Royal Commission was focussed on the European elements of the imperial garrison, the Commissioners’ report frequently emphasised the specificity of the native army, concluding that many of the questions referred for their consideration appeared beyond metropolitan resolution. The apparently intractable nature of the problems confronting the Commissioners was manifest in a number of ways but was most evident in their reluctance to return definite answers to the questions set in the terms of the enquiry. While content to set the broad parameters for imperial strategy the Commissioners reached few definite conclusions and frequently chose to defer the authority vested in them to the expertise of the authorities in India. Thus, while it was recommended that the proportion of British to Indian troops should not exceed 1:3 – and 1:2 in Bengal – the Commissioners declared themselves unable to reach a definite conclusion on the size or distribution of the imperial garrison. Though a number of questions were

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9 The Commissioners reported: ‘The second question, viz., the “permanent force necessary to be maintained in the Indian Provinces respectively, after the restoration of tranquility,” does not appear… to admit of a reply, in a definite numerical form, as the amount of force must depend on the probability of either internal disturbances or external aggression. The estimates of force given in the evidence are most conflicting, ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 Europeans… This amount and distribution, however, must always be affected by the political exigencies of the country; the introduction of railroads, and river steam navigation, the establishment of fortified posts, and other military considerations’. See ‘Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Organisation of the Indian Army, together
resolved by the Report, these were relatively discreet issues: it was widely agreed, for example, that native troops should be excluded from the artillery (and other ‘scientific arms’ of the service), and that it would be inexpedient to raise colonial troops from outside the subcontinent for service in India. More complex questions set in the terms of the enquiry – regarding regimental organisation, for example – were rather fudged.  

Having thus ‘disposed’ of the questions referred for their enquiry, the Commissioners appended to their report a series of further recommendations, including the widely cited suggestion that the Native Army be a mixed force, in which various ‘nationalities and castes’ were ‘mixed promiscuously through each regiment’. It was also suggested that the uniform of native troops be modified – for the purpose of ‘assimilating it more to the dress of the country, and making it more suitable to the climate’ – and that the powers of regimental commanding officers be increased.

These points aside, the Commissioners avoided specific recommendations and, in concluding their report, declared that they had ‘felt themselves precluded from entering into minute details, on many subjects referred to them for inquiry, from an apprehension of fettering the free action of the authorities in India, on points of a purely local nature, which, they conceive, must ultimately be decided in that country’.

In part, the rather tentative nature of the Commissioners’ recommendations clearly reflects the practical limits and pressures which confronted the British in the aftermath of the rebellion. Radical restructuring of the imperial military was constrained by the financial limits which the mutiny bequeathed and, more importantly, by the readiness of various Indian communities to enlist: the organisation and structure of the new army was shaped above all by the levies inherited from the counter-insurgency operations. Recalling Ripon’s description of the post-1857 settlement as ‘purely accidental’, David Omissi rightly emphasises the pragmatic and

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10 On the question of officering native regiments, the Commissioners endorsed various aspects of extant practice and, cautioning against any radical change, emphasised the importance of allowing a degree of autonomy to ‘Local Authorities’. See ‘Report of the Peel Commission’, pp. xii-xiv.


12 ‘Report of the Peel Commission’, p. xv. The limited range of the Commissioners’ recommendations met with some criticism. One officer complained that ‘after so long an incubation… surely something systematic could have been determined upon, and not merely the ventilation of a host of opinions extracted from the evidence of officers’. See Anon, ‘Sir Charles Wood and the Reorganization of the Indian Army’, Colborn’s United Service Magazine, Part II (1860) p. 325
reactive nature of the administration in this period. The Commissioners’ rather anodyne recommendations and the apparently limited impact of their report has thus left the Peel Commission rather peripheral to much of the historiography. Sandwiched between the bookends of the rebellion on the one hand, and the rise of Roberts and the martial races on the other, the mechanics of reconstruction and developments of the 1860s and 1870s are rather obscured in some of the current literature. Heather Streets’ recent history of the martial race theory, for example, notes the important roles played by the key ‘martial races’ – especially the Sikhs and the Gurkhas – during the rebellion, and establishes some connections between 1857 and the emergence of the martial army in the 1880s, but does so principally by focussing on metropolitan reportage. While popular accounts of the counter-insurgency operations (and especially of the role played by particular groups in such operations) undoubtedly shaped narratives of martial masculinity, it is hard to believe that the good service of such regiments during 1857-58 was central to the genesis of the martial race theory. In those few accounts where the evidence gathered by Peel is discussed at some length, as in K. Roy’s work, the very different strategic rationale invoked after 1857 is compared with that which catalysed Roberts’ reforms in the 1880s – a comparison

15 Though the sense that particular Indian communities had ‘proven’ their loyalty during the rebellion became a key trope of latter discourses of martiality, this was a retrospective rather than a contemporary interpretation. In the immediate aftermath of 1857, there was little support for an ethnically homogenous army – even one composed of those ethnic groups which had remained ‘loyal’. The Commander-in-Chief, for example, objected to a proposal to keep Gurkha regiments ethnically distinct, describing the proposals as ‘full of risk’. See Mayhew to the Government of India, 5 October 1861, BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241, p. 100. The Secretary of State agreed, noting that ‘we beat the Purbeahs by the Sikhs and we may have to reverse the operation’. Cited in A.H. Shibly ‘The Reorganisation of the Indian Armies, 1858-1879’, University of London: Ph.D. (1969). Even Roberts, who would become the most vocal advocate of the martial races, initially dismissed the idea of an army drawn from only a few communities, writing to his mother from the camp before Delhi that if ‘our army is composed of Sikhs and Punjabees, the opposite extreme, we shall have the same work again some day’. See F.S. Roberts, *Letters Written During the Indian Mutiny by Fred. Roberts* (London: MacMillan, 1924), p. 56. Additionally, even before 1857, some of the core tenets of what would become the martial race theory had been elaborated: the martial heritage of the Sikhs and the Gurkhas, for example, had been identified well before the rebellion. The genesis of the martial race discourse thus had both a longer and rather more complex genealogy than is reflected in an account which focuses exclusively on the legacies and memories of the counter-insurgency campaigns of 1857-58. See Hodgson, B.H., ‘Origin and Classification of the military tribes of Nepal’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 11, (1833), pp. 17-24; *Parliamentary Papers* (1857-58) XLIII, p. 138.
which tends to downplay the important administrative and epistemological continuities which bridge the two periods. 16

I want to suggest that there was a significant continuity between the post-mutiny reconstructions and the rise of the martial army under Roberts. In military praxis as in other elements of imperial policy, 1857 prompted a reconfiguring of the terms in which imperial policy was reckoned – emphasising the importance of national, India-wide metrics for administration – and this shift, in itself, was to exercise a significant influence on the Indian Army in the aftermath of the rebellion. 17

Although many of the prescriptions offered in the aftermath of the rebellion were contradictory, and though the Royal Commission undeniably offered a rather anodyne raft of recommendations, the injunction to study, record and monitor the ethnography of the native army was shared even amongst those who urged fundamentally dissimilar measures. Though the lessons of ’57 were very often contested, the injunction to learn those lessons was a powerful motor for long-term change and the settlement which emerged after 1857 had a profound impact on the ways in which these lessons were constituted in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The synoptic overview of India, the military and the sepoys which evolved during this period was effected in large part (and in particular terms) as a response to the rebellion. The ethnographic rendering of 1857 (and of the Indian army and population) was key not only to many of the (often very different) prescriptions for the Indian army offered after the rebellion, it also underwrote the martial reforms of Roberts in the 1880s. If we are to properly understand the shift to martial recruiting in the latter part of the century, we need first to understand the terms in which rebellion and reconstruction were made legible and intelligible.


Reconstruction

Manifestly, the question is far from being a mere technical matter; it is one involving grave political, financial, and even social considerations, and claims to be considered as a measure of Imperial moment.

Political and Military Committee of the Council of India, 1859

By foregrounding the role of the military in debates on imperial policy, the rebellion had a profound impact on metropolitan interest in the Indian Army. In part, as the Political and Military Committee made clear, such interest reflected the scale of the crisis precipitated by the mutiny. As one correspondent to Colborn’s United Service Magazine emphasised in 1859:

It is… essential to the successful development of our Indian future, that the native army shall be reorganised on a plan which shall eschew all errors of our former system… by keeping the Sepoys under a really effective discipline, while respecting their religious prejudices and so arranging the terms of service as to render it their interest to be faithful to their salt.

Our true policy is to treat the social organization of India as we do its famous river and accepting the general course it has marked out for itself, turn it to the very best advantage. As we embank and deepen the river, construct docks to be filled by its waters and preserving all its customary commercial marts connect them by our steamboats in substitution for their antiquated craft, so should we deal with the ancient institutions of the land which, however, vitiated in the course of ages, were originally suited to the genius of the people, and when reformed and impartially administered are much more the likely to afford the ground-work of future benefits than any wholesale substitution of English laws, excellent in themselves, but unsuited by circumstances to a people who move in one settled track.

The metaphoric opposition of (colonial) engineering and (Indian) nature which frames this narrative suggests the way in which 1857 was constituted as a marker of Indian ‘difference’. It is something of a commonplace in the literature on the aftermath of the revolt that, by cementing the widely held perception of India’s irrevocable difference, 1857 had a profound effect on the nature and range of colonialism in South Asia.

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18 Report from the Political and Military Committee of the Council of India, 30th June 1859’ BL, IOR L/MIL/17/5/1625.
19 Anon, ‘Our New Bengal Native Army’, Colborn’s United Service Magazine, Part I, (1859), p. 459. The interest in Indian issues represented something of a shift: as in metropolitan political circles, before 1857 imperial issues had long been marginalised within the metropolitan military journals. As the author complained, the ‘Indian Army… [has] so long been regarded as one of those tabooed subjects which no man unconnected directly with the late Company’s service could possibly master, that the recognized organs of the profession rarely contain any allusion to them’. For more, see T.R. Moreman, ‘The Army in India and the Military-Periodical Press, 1830-1898’ in D. Finkelstein and D. Peers, eds, Negotiating India in the Nineteenth-Century Media, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).
Victoria’s post-mutiny declaration is seen as an indication of the way in which the British attempted to consolidate their rule in a more ‘Oriental’ framework – seeking out the ‘natural leaders’ of the population, and curtailing the reformist impulses of the earlier ‘liberal’ imperialists. However, as the Ganges metaphor indicates, 1857 not only bolstered a sense of Indian alterity and tradition, it also helped to crystallise the opposite sense of colonialism’s modernity and to frame reconstruction in terms of this opposition.\(^{20}\) In the wider historiographical debates on the notion of Indian difference, the implicit, corollary hardening of a sense of British modernity has sometimes been rather overlooked. The intermingling of icons of engineering and nature, of the modern and the ancient, and of the west and the east was a key element in many readings of the rebellion.\(^{21}\)

Much of the evidence gathered by the Royal Commission, and many of the prescriptions offered for reconstruction, turned on similar notions. This was clear, for example, in a metaphor invoked to give substance to arguments in favour of the policy of ethnographic ‘divide and rule’. Elphinstone’s declaration that ‘the safety of the great iron steamers is greatly increased by building them in compartments [and] I would ensure the security of our Indian empire by constructing our native army upon the same principle’ hints at the way in which administration was to be engineered in the aftermath of the rebellion.\(^{22}\) ‘Surely’, another officer asked, ‘in refitting a ship saved from foundering by its watertight compartments, we should not think of removing them?’\(^{23}\)

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\(^{20}\) This is an important point but it should not be overstated. There is much evidence to show that, along with this sense of racial difference, there was also, always, a corollary recognition of similarity. Moreover, class often undercut simplistic racial binaries: it was widely feared, for example, that frequent contact between European and Indian troops would undermine the ‘prestige of the race’, by exposing the latter to the former’s drunkenness.

\(^{21}\) This was at least partly reflected, for example, in the circulation of the ‘greased cartridge’ explanation, which brought together several of these key tropes: the dangers of too radical a programme of reform, the religiosity and apparent irrationality of the natives, and at once the dangers and promises that technology made manifest for colonialism in India. For a useful discussion of the impacts of notions of science and technology on post-mutiny colonial rule, see G. Prakash, Another Reason: science and the imagination of modern India, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).


\(^{23}\) Suggestions for the Re-organisation of the Bengal Army, Drawn up at the time of the re-capture of Delhi by an officer who has passed 34 years in Military, Civil and Political Employ in India’, BL, IOR L/MIL/17/5/202; George MacMunn’s 1911 volume The Armies of India rearticulated the post-rebellion settlement in the context of the martial race theory, noting that the ‘watertight compartments’ were intended provide security against combination but also to develop the sepoys’ ‘feeling of clan emulation and martial characteristics to the full’. While the latter claim assumed more importance in retrospect than it had originally carried in 1857, MacMunn was certainly correct to note that the system established after 1857 had ‘gradually led to a very close study of the clans and races of India’. See The
This rationale drew, of course, on a particular reading of the rebellion which fixed the blame for the rebellion on the preponderance of the high castes in the Bengal army, as well as (in some cases) on India’s Muslim population. \(^{24}\) Whether the rebellion was thought to have originated in ‘Brahminical conspiracy’ or in ‘fanatical Mahommedanism’, it was widely agreed that ethnically homogenous corps had contributed to the rebellion and were therefore to be avoided in the future. As the Peel Commission discovered, however, there was little unanimity over the best means of achieving the balance anticipated in the metaphorical iron steamer. While some advocated a system of ‘general mixture’, in which recruits were mixed without regard to caste, race or religion, other officers – including the influential Punjab Committee – urged the importance of maintaining the ‘distinctiveness’ of the various groups from which the new army was to be recruited. \(^{25}\) Here again, however, various methods were suggested: some urged, for example, that recruiting and organising corps by district would militate against wider combination, as had occurred during 1857. Others advocated recruiting by ‘class’, a term vaguely synonymous with ethnicity, so that each regiment might be composed of four or five ethnic groups (each formed into their own company) but in which no single group dominated.

On this point, as on many others, the Royal Commission had failed to reach a definitive conclusion. Beyond, therefore, recommending a ‘promiscuous mixture’ of ‘different nationalities and castes’, the Peel Commission made no definite recommendation regarding the mechanisms by which mixture was to be effected. To talk of ‘reorganisation’ is, in this sense, something of a misnomer. In fact, the imperial authorities were content to allow the extant structure to persist, rationalising their ‘decision’ on the grounds that the local authorities were best placed to make arrangements.

\(^{24}\) Roberts, for example, in a letter to his Mother on 24 July 1857 suggested that ‘the Musalmans are at the bottom of it’. See F.S. Roberts, *Letters Written During the Indian Mutiny* (London: Macmillan, 1924), p. 30. According to John Fitchett, a drummer of the late 6\(^{th}\) Native Infantry at Cawnpore, ‘two Mohammedans… came into the lines of the regiment to incite the men to mutiny’, see ‘Depositions Taken at Cawnpore under the Direction of Lieut. Colonel G.W. Williams’, BL, IOR L/MIL/17/2/498. Rose fixed the blame for the rebellion on India’s Muslims: ‘It is quite useless, again to go over ground so thoroughly beaten as that of Mahommedanism being the great anti-British element in India; before the mutinies this was only an apprehension but the history of those events has proved it to be an axiom’. BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.

\(^{25}\) As H.M. Durand noted, the views of the Punjab Committee – Lawrence, Chamberlain and Edwardes – were deemed particularly valuable in the aftermath of the rebellion, as the ‘Punjab furnished a large part of the native army now existing’. See ‘Report of the Peel Commission: Appendix’, p. 179.
judgements on matters of detail.\textsuperscript{26} Even within the military establishment, however, there was little agreement on the detail of reconstruction. As Rose, the Commander-in-Chief, wrote to Wood, the Secretary of State, in 1862, ‘The authorities, and arguments, used by them, in support of their different systems or sorts of mixture are so good, that as long as the principle of non-unity of races or sects in Regiments is acted on, it would, perhaps be safer not to insist, too rigidly, on the assertion of any particular principles of mixture, but watch carefully, the progress and success of each of them’.\textsuperscript{27}

This process of enumeration and surveillance was enacted through the transmission of various forms, circulars and reports, which were gathered and compiled in the Military Department. It was, in effect, to this centre of expertise and administration that both the metropolitan and imperial authorities devolved much of their authority. While in some senses the Peel Commission offered a rather anodyne prescription for the Indian Army, the pragmatic bent of imperial policy in this period should not detract from the qualitative extension of surveillance directed towards the native army. After 1857, the strategic logic of divide and rule was premised on an administrative regime of monitor and control.\textsuperscript{28} It is the growth of this ‘ethnographic modality’ which is evident throughout the 1860s and 1870s.\textsuperscript{29} Though orientated towards a very different strategic end, the means by which post-1857 military policy was conceived and the mechanisms by which the strategy was realised bear much more in common with those which gave shape to the martial army under Roberts than has hitherto been widely recognised.

\textsuperscript{26} The Political and Military Committee of the India Council agreed: ‘In an army employing Afghans, Seikhs, Goorkhas, Hindoostanee Mussulmans, and Hindoos of every caste and province, none are likely to judge so well as the local authorities what precise composition may be expedient’. See BL, IOR L/MIL/17/5/1625.

\textsuperscript{27} BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.

\textsuperscript{28} Major Williams, Superintendent of Police in the North-Western Provinces, advocated an even more pervasive monitorial regime. Williams explained that the causes ‘which led to the mutiny were, under all circumstances, in silent operation in the huts of every native regiment. Emissaries were entertained, extensive correspondence was kept up, rumours were circulated, grievances magnified, and mutiny matured in the lines, without the slightest check or hindrance on the part of the native officers’. Drawing on Bentham’s panoptican, Williams designed a form of military lines, in which the native troops were to be housed in ‘open barracks… so that European officers could look after the men, and the men could not entertain propagators of sedition’. While Williams’ Benthamite barrack design is a rather extreme example, it does illustrate a more widely-held suspicion that synoptic surveillance was key to the disciplining of the native troops and to the security of the empire. See ‘Report of the Peel Commission: Supplementary Papers’, p. 308

\textsuperscript{29} As represented, for example, in the revision and extension of bureaucratic mechanisms for the compilation of annual caste returns. For this, and other similar measures, see BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.
Many of the administrative mechanisms which become familiar in the latter part of the century were first proposed in the immediate aftermath of 1857. Brigadier Steel, for example, advocated the establishment of regional recruiting centres for ‘distinct races of military character and taste’, suggesting (amongst others) ‘Allyghur for Jats, Umritsar for Seikhs and Goozerat for Punjabees’.  

Other officers recommended appointing European specialists – ‘good linguists… [with] a knowledge of the native character’ – to superintend recruiting. In time, of course, recruiting depots under ‘specially selected officers’ were formed for each of the principal ‘martial races’ and while, in 1857, ideas regarding ‘fighting spirit’ and ‘military character’ were rather more nebulous than they were to become, the sense of continuity is clear. Moreover, as suggested by the Punjab Committee’s recommendation that ‘a relative proportion of the respective castes… be fixed and adhered to’, the previous measures reflect the wider belief that ethnography was to be monitored, mobilised and marshalled. In keeping with this injunction, throughout the 1860s any deviation from the prescribed composition of the native regiments was permitted only with the sanction of the military authorities.

However, while ethnography was thus made central to the process of reconstruction, there remained a good deal of ambiguity regarding distinctions of race, caste and tribe. An investigation into the utility of various ‘low caste’ levies raised during 1857 was abandoned in 1861 when it emerged that while some officers had raised troops from sweepers and outcastes, others understood the term to refer simply to those regiments raised without Brahmins. This is simply one example of

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30 The rather ambiguous distinction between regional and ethnic identities in Steel’s proposals helps to explain why there was little agreement over whether region or ethnicity offered the better protection against combination. To further complicate matters, as Colonel Burn noted, those Sikhs attached to the corps in Delhi in 1857 had mutinied, whereas those regiments which were ‘distinct’ had not. See ‘Report of the Peel Commission: Appendix’, pp. 179-209; Anon., ‘Our Sepoy Army’, Colborn’s United Service Magazine, Part I (1870) p. 11.
32 ‘Report of the Peel Commission: Appendix’, p. 182
33 ‘The Secretary of State was of opinion that in such corps a discretion should be left to commanding officers to enlist the fittest men, but that they should be required to submit periodical castes returns, so that any deviation from the authorised proportion of classes might be checked’. Despite this injunction, subsequent orders indicate that these aspirations were never fully realised: by the end of the 1860s Government published confidential orders urging the importance of communicating accurate information to the centre and reminding Commanding Officers that they were obliged to seek sanction before modifying recruiting. Further, similar orders were issued again in 1871. See BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.
34 In the aftermath of the ‘Purbiya mutiny’, many British officers looked to the low castes as potential allies of the Raj and the levies raised during the counter-insurgency campaigns were thus regarded with some interest during the early 1860s. As K. Roy has noted, for some British officers such levies offered
the numerous, wider ambiguities which inflect colonial knowledge in this period and which (amongst other factors) militated against radical change in the aftermath of the rebellion. This ambiguity was reflected in much of the evidence gathered by the Royal Commission, where geographic and regional distinctions overlapped and complicated religious and ethnic identities. Nevertheless, the administrative impulse to know India after 1857 is evident throughout the process of reflection and reconstruction undertaken by the imperial military. However, as the diversity of opinion gathered by the Royal Commission makes clear, while there was general recognition that ethnographic knowledge was key to the business of administering the native army, there was much less agreement on the precise mechanisms by which such administration could be carried forth and, often, widespread confusion over the most salient aspects of Indian ethnography, culture and tradition.

In part, the injunction to ‘know’ India and its peoples is characteristic of the period.35 Certainly, the various interpretations of the uprising tended to connect to and draw strength from the widespread perception that the rebellion had arisen (in part at least) because of the Company’s failure to properly allow for the specificities of Oriental administration. It was widely suggested, for example, that the system of courts martial had, in the eyes of the native soldiers, demeaned the personal authority of European officers. The Punjab Committee submitted that ‘it is not to be doubted that the gradual weakening of commanding officers has hastened the gradual dissolution of the discipline of the native army. We are a free people, rejoicing in constitutional liberty, and we have loved to treat our native army in the same way, forgetting that they are not yet ready for it… What they respect is power in their

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a mechanism for social engineering –Lieutenant Colonel Bruce noted, for example, that while ‘the Brahmins or Mahomedans may hope that they may be restored as rulers, and be always ready to attempt usurpation… this can hardly be the case with the lower orders, whose ambition would not extend beyond a rise in the social scale which could only be achieved under our Government’. However, not only was such a strategy at odds with the drift of post-rebellion policy to reconcile colonial rule with the traditional contours of the Indian social but the confusion which attended debates on the ‘low caste levies’ frequently frustrated attempts to evaluate the utility of the new corps: the degree of confusion is suggested by a series of increasingly exasperated annotations scribbled over Bruce’s report on the low castes. See BL IOR, L/MIL/7/7236; K. Roy, ‘Recruitment doctrines of the colonial India Army: 1859-1913’, The Indian Economic and Social History Review 34, No.3 (1997) p. 334. 35 See, for example, the illustrated taxonomy of Indian ethnographic types prepared by Kaye, Watson and Meadows Taylor and published as The People of India. A series of photographic Illustrations with Descriptive Letterpress, of the races and tribes of Hindustan, originally prepared under the authority of the Government of India and reproduced by order the Secretary of State for India in Council (London: W.H. Allen, 1868). In style and content, the 1868 volume foreshadows MacMunn’s collection on India’s military races. For more, see N. Dirks, Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 149-228.
immediate superior; not power a thousand miles off, in some jealous constitutional check’. The calls to invest in European officers ‘magisterial powers’ befitting ‘Oriental depots’, of course, in many ways a reaction to the rebellion and the palpable loss of control it represented. However, as with the earlier metaphors rooted in engineering and technology, they also suggest the hardening of an idea of racial difference. This was also represented in various other measures anticipated in the period as, for example, in the calls to ‘Orientalise’ the sepoy’s uniforms – one of the few points on which the Royal Commission was able to agree in 1859. The ‘miserable spectacle [of sepoys] buttoned up’ in English accoutrements, like the diminution of powers of European officers, was read as symbolic of the way in which pre-mutiny policy had adopted a reformist bent, fundamentally unsuited to the Indian population and implicated, therefore, in the rebellion.

1857 not only catalysed the shift to the Crown Raj (and in doing so reconfigured Indian military issues within a pan-imperial context) it also centred ethnographic knowledge as the critical metric for the administration and organisation of the imperial military. On both these counts, the injunction to know, record and monitor the ethnography of the Indian military helped to prepare the ground for the reforms of the 1880s and 1890s. Additionally, the ceding of authority on questions of recruitment to the military establishment enabled Roberts to oversee the development of an administrative system that was able to effect and give coherence to the martial race reforms. While the post-1857 settlement was pragmatic and reactive, it nevertheless set the terms in which subsequent strategies were elaborated. If the information panic which followed the rebellion rather overwhelmed the military during the 1860s and 1870s it was, as I now hope to show, a necessary precondition of the shifts which took place under Roberts.

36 ‘Report of the Peel Commission: Appendix’, p. 182. Paradoxically, while some officers suggested that the system of courts martial ‘bewildered’ native soldiers, it was widely believed that the sepoys were able to manipulate the system to their own advantage. See, for example, Anon, ‘Review of the Rebellion in India, And its Causes’, Colborn’s United Service Magazine, Part I (1859), p. 567; Anon, ‘Our Sepoy Army’, Colborn’s United Service Magazine, Part I (1870), p. 5.


38 In his campaign for reform of recruiting during his command, Roberts dwelt heavily on the importance of ‘local’ knowledge, criticising the ‘erroneous’ belief that Southern Indians made equally good soldiers as recruits from the North. See BL, IOR L/MIL/17/5/1615, Vol. III, p. 51.
Reorganisation

From the time that I became Commander in Chief in Madras until I left India the question of how to render the army as perfect a fighting machine as it was possible to make it, was the one which caused me the most anxious thought, and to its solution my most earnest efforts had been at all times directed.

F.S. Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India* (1897) 39

The undeniably pragmatic and reactive nature of military administration after 1857 is often contrasted with the apparently more purposeful, reformist command of Roberts. The opposition is typically explained by the escalation of Anglo-Russian tension and the onset of the ‘great game’. However, as I have tried to suggest, many of Roberts’ reforms were rooted in the administrative strategies that evolved after the rebellion. The gradual evolution of an administrative mechanics apparently capable of organising and processing the range of knowledge collated after 1857 is apparent throughout the 1870s. In part, of course, the more confident tone of the late 1870s is a reflection of the temporal and psychic distancing of 1857. The narrowing of the recruiting grounds from which the Indian Army drew its recruits was concomitant with the streamlining of the forms of knowledge which structured colonial understandings of the military. It was in 1874, for example, that Napier (the Commander-in-Chief) ordered the preparation of short, ethnographic surveys of the principal ‘races’ from which the native army was recruited – documents which directly prefigure the familiar caste handbooks which emerged around the turn of the century.40 The confidence invested in the synoptic ethnographies and taxonomies of race which accrued after 1857 was central to the emergence of the martial army under Roberts: the transmissions between 1857 and the martial race theory on this account are at least as significant as the oft-invoked good service rendered by the Sikhs and Gurkhas. Indeed, while the martial army was constituted to a fundamentally different end – an anticipated conflict with Russia – it was organised along familiar lines, although class regiments gradually displaced class company regiments as the number of favoured ‘races’ was reduced to the familiar mantra of Sikhs, Gurkhas and Pathans.

40 BL, IOR MSS Eur F114.5.4. By 1875, H.W. Norman reported that ‘when officers advocate their corps being formed of one class, they almost invariably desire that this one class should be Sikhs or Gurkhas or Pathans, who are supposed to be the best soldiers; but we do not want an army only composed of these men’. BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241
The proliferation of knowledge about the native armies after the rebellion mirrors the wide-ranging attempts of the new Crown Raj to constitute itself in place of the East India Company.\textsuperscript{41} In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, this process involved devolving much of the detail of military administration to ‘experts’ in India, despite the fact that there was, in fact, no real consensus on the mechanics of reconstruction. Nevertheless, the surveillance and monitoring of the native army shifted into a fundamentally new register after 1857. Because of the way in which regimental organisation had been decided after the rebellion, routine enquiries into matters of efficiency, discipline and economy were viewed through an optic which stressed the ethnographic distinctiveness of the classes which composed the various regiments.\textsuperscript{42} After 1857, officers who wrote about their experience in command of Indian regiments wrote about their experience in command of certain ‘races’ or ‘castes’, rather than (as previous officers had) their experience in charge of composite regiments.\textsuperscript{43} The administrative settlement centred on ethnography thus developed a self-reinforcing momentum in which race and caste seemed evermore pertinent to military strategy and organisation. This momentum culminated in the martial race reforms of Roberts.

By rendering 1857 as a product of Indian backwardness, colonial interpretations of the rebellion helped to make the events of 1857 an exemplar of the colonial project in India: as the earlier Ganges metaphor made clear, this involved the binary of colonial science/technology with Indian nature/tradition. The mechanical metaphor offered by Roberts – ‘a fighting machine’ – plays on similar signifiers. More concretely, many of the measures anticipated in the fraught aftermath of the rebellion were ultimately realised under Roberts and alongside the changing strategic contexts which have rightly been seen as central in the shift to martial recruiting, we also need to recognise the gradual evolution of an administrative praxis which made the martial army both practicable and apparently desirable. The rhetoric of scientific and technological advance which underpins the ‘Report of the Eden Commission’ of

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  \item \textsuperscript{41}The gathering and centralisation of knowledge of this kind is evident in fields of economy and geography, as well as in those of population, society and culture. M. Goswami, \textit{Producing India: from Colonial Economy to National Space} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004);
  \item \textsuperscript{42}See, for example, the collected papers on reorganisation at BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.
\end{itemize}
1879, for example, refigures as fact many of the technical and techno-scientific projections and fantasies of the post-mutiny period. In place of the tentative recommendations of Peel, Eden declared confidently that ‘India can have a simpler, cheaper and more scientifically constructed military organization, with far greater security than the present system actually gives’. This confidence was fed in part by the forms of knowledge gathered and submitted to the Commission and in part by the faith then invested in the power of modern arms, communications and infrastructure. Nevertheless, while in some ways a break from 1857, Eden was also, in many ways, a clear continuum: the enumeration of population and the reckoning of strategy in terms of such knowledge was key to the Commission’s Report. Statistical returns from the Presidencies provided a means of calculating the relative strategic pressures across India and, where the previous Peel Commission had baulked at making concrete suggestions on the distribution of forces, the latter Commission declared that its recommendations were ‘based upon sound geographical, political and military reasons… the internal security of the country [will be] enhanced, and our military power increased by this readjustment’.

The apparent concentration of technical and scientific expertise (and power) in the hands of the British helped not only to restore imperial confidence but also served to cement the sense of difference which 1857 was taken as a marker of. The perceived military and strategic significance of the railways and telegraph in 1857, as much as the wider sense that the rebellion was a product of Indian ethnographic alterity, helped to feed this sense of difference and to invest in technology and science a particular coherence and authority.

This confidence depends in part on a tautology and on a particular vision of empire which premises the opposition of colonial modernity and Oriental tradition

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44 ‘Report of the Special Commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor General in Council to enquire into the Organization and Expenditure of the Army in India’, BL, IOR L/MIL/7/5445, p. 30 (my emphasis).

45 In fact, the findings of the Commission were heavily influenced by the views of the Viceroy, Lytton, who pressed for reductions in military expenditure – principally by effecting reductions in the less ‘efficient’ Madras army – as a way of easing the financial crisis of the 1870s and as part of his wider campaign to abolish the Presidency system. See B. Robson, ‘The Eden Commission and the Reform of the Indian Army – 1879-1895’. Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 60, Spring (1982), p. 5.

46 The Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab – described as ‘home of the most martial races of India, and the nursery of our best soldiers’ – reported that ‘the state of feeling towards the government is excellent… the people of the Punjab will remain well disposed and loyal’. See ‘Report of the Special Commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor General in Council to enquire into the Organization and Expenditure of the Army in India’, BL, IOR L/MIL/7/5445, p. 39.
(and which, in this context, as we have seen, drew some of its coherence from the rebellion). In fact, the increasingly hegemonic language of ‘science’ provided a means of justifying and rationalising measures aimed principally at attaining a new degree of economy in military organisation. Lytton, in particular, sought to manoeuvre the Commission to reduce military expenditure by effecting reductions in the less ‘efficient’ Madras Army. Though in time ‘efficient’ came to be synonymous with both ‘martial aptitude’ and ‘fighting spirit’, in its 1879 iteration, the term accurately signifies the economic forces which made southern recruits comparatively more expensive than those from the north. The labour market in the south was much more diverse than that in the newly-annexed north and hence the costs of employing and victualling Madras recruits far exceeded those which were accrued in recruiting from, for example, Punjab. The codification of notions of martiality – and the evolution of an administrative framework which legitimised and gave coherence to a recruiting praxis based on the ‘logic’ of martiality – thus overlapped economic and strategic imperatives. Just as ethnographic alterity provided a palatable framework in which to interpret the rebellion, so the apparent confidence of the Eden Report disguised the economic imperative which underwrote the reforms. What was claimed as a language of science and increasingly, of race, was in many ways a convenient means of realising and rationalising administrative economy.

In using ethnography to provide a synoptic rendering of the Indian population, and in framing questions of recruiting and organisation in ethnographic terms, the ‘reconstruction’ of the military after 1857 set the context within which Roberts’ reforms were elaborated. While new ideas about race and science provided the epistemological framework for the shift to martial recruiting, these were worked out and rationalised by officers whose experience was of working in regiments structured according to ethnography. In this sense, it is scarcely surprising that race became such a pervasive fixture of subsequent military strategies. Race, however, is only an element of this story: in the 1870s, a desire for economy was framed and rationalised by a language of science in which race and ethnography figured centrally. By the

47 It is no coincidence that the notion of the ‘scientific frontier’ was invoked in this period as way of justifying a revision of military strategy on the Northwest frontier.
48 The additional costs involved in recruiting and supplying the Madras Army were widely recognised but were seldom acknowledged to have a substantive bearing on imperial military strategy. Notions of declining martial aptitude provided a more nebulous, but in some ways more convenient means to explain the readiness, or otherwise, of various communities to enlist in military service. See testimonies on regimental recruiting in BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7241.
1880s, new strategic imperatives reconfigured this debate around an increasingly coherent, and apparently scientific, notion of martiality. The martial race reforms, then, are best understood not as a break with the praxis which emerged after 1857 but as a reconstitution of the impulse to know which was manifested after the rebellion. While the flood of ‘knowledge’ produced after the rebellion rather overwhelmed the imperial authorities, it was latterly organised and put to use to make possible, rationalise and justify a whole series of transformations which fundamentally reorganised the imperial military.

To properly understand this process, we need to better understand the precise mechanisms by which the martial army was recruited and recognise the extent to which such developments drew on, and grew out of, the post-rebellion settlement. Behind the shift in recruiting there evolved an administrative machinery which enabled the British to mobilise certain communities and to rationalise the restricted recruiting strategies which developed in this period. It was this praxis, and the ethnographic modalities on which they were based, that were the principal legacies of the rebellion. As they were rearticulated in the 1880s and 1890s, these mechanisms effectively enabled British officers to overlook the economic factors which helped explain why recruits were more easily sourced from Punjab than from Madras. Though Eden Vansittart is best known as the author of the first of the familiar recruiting handbooks, his work in the recruiting depot at Gorakhpur was significant also because he developed a series of administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms by which recruiting could be carried forward and through which the success of his operations be represented. He developed, for example, new methods of monitoring and recording the stature of the recruits processed by the depot under his charge, and established metrics to reward recruiters for enlisting ‘first-class specimens’. 49 Vansittart was able to persuade Roberts of the success of his operations at Gorakhpur in part by demonstrating the marked improvements in the physique of recruits enlisted at the depot.50 Ethnography and enumeration thus fell-in together in the service of the imperial military to lend a veneer of scientific and statistical coherence to martial race recruiting. Though the improvement in Gurkha recruiting was attributed to the

49 See BL, IOR P/3477, June 1889
50 In 1889, Vansittart reported that ‘as compared with the two former seasons... every regiment has this season gained in physique’. The 1889 cohort were, on average, younger (by around three months), taller (by more than an inch) and with a greater chest girth (by an inch and a quarter) than those enlisted just two years previously. See BL, IOR P/3477, June 1889.
inherent martiality of the Nepalese, the apparent success owed much to the readily quantifiable and calculable terms in which Gurkha recruiting operations were formatted, as well as to a series of political accommodations reached with the Nepalese authorities. In administrative and practical terms, the methods developed by Vansittart and the hardening of a notion of Nepalese martiality reflect the way in which the 1857 settlement evolved into the martial race theory.

There are similar, wider parallels which connect 1857 with the martial race period and which give further reason to view the latter nineteenth century reforms in the context of post-mutiny reorganisation. The social engineering which some officers anticipated might be possible with India’s low castes (but which was quickly deemed to be impossible because of the pervasiveness of caste and its social hierarchies) was effectively enacted in the mechanisms through which Sikhs and Gurkhas were rewarded for their service. As well as cultivating relations with local groups, recruiting officers were responsible for coordinating the distribution of pensions, for overseeing a series of labour exchanges for ‘loyal’ pensioners, and in the case of some Gurkha regiments, for facilitating the transit of Nepalese women to establish what were, in effect, government-subsidised Gurkha colonies. The establishment of institutions for the so-called ‘line boys’ of Gurkha regiments – at the same time that such institutions were being abolished in the other Presidency armies – is another example of the way in which the relationship between the colonial state and certain communities was deliberately engineered in a manner quite distinct from that projected by the martial race ideologues. As R. Mazumder has shown, the close relationship between the imperial military and the Sikh communities of Punjab was key to the economic growth and relative prosperity of certain of the region’s communities in the latter nineteenth century. While quite different to some of the alliances anticipated in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, the relationships which developed between the colonial state and the so-called martial races were also, in many ways, remarkably similar.

51 In 1875, C.H. Brownlow bemoaned the failure of government to maintain better relations with retired native soldiers, recounting a story of an elderly native officer who, having been retired some years before the rebellion, presented himself to the British on hearing of the rebellion. Wounded in the early stages of the siege of Delhi, he recovered to lead his men in the final assault in which he was killed ‘fighting among the foremost’. Such men, Brownlow complained, were ‘lost to us both as citizens and soldiers’. C.H. Brownlow, ‘Notes on the Native Army of Bengal; its Present Material and Organization, as compared with the Past’, reproduced in IOR L/MIL/7/7241, pp. 155-9. On Gurkha recruiting, see BL, IOR P/3172, July 1890; BL, IOR L/MIL/7/7054.

That the rebellion had a profound impact on the nature of colonial rule, and on the ways in which the imperial military was regarded, is widely agreed. However, much of the literature on the history of the Indian Army in the latter nineteenth century posits a clear delineation between post-mutiny strategies and those which developed in the context of the ‘great game’. While there clearly is an important shift in the strategic context in this period, there are significant continuities in the administrative means through which strategy was developed. To understand this process, we need to take these mechanisms seriously. The terms in which the mutiny was made legible and the mechanisms by which the military was reconstituted after 1857 shaped military administration for the rest of the century (and arguably until independence in 1947). 1857 not only transposed issues of military organisation into matters of pan-imperial importance, the rebellion also foregrounded a particular reading of Indian society (and colonial rule) in which ethnography was central to administration. If this was, in one sense, little more than a means of neutralising the political agency manifested by rebellion and a convenient way of rationalising the hotch-potch nature of the post-1857 native army, it was also to have profound effects on colonialism in India: taken up and developed by men like Roberts and Vansittart – men whose military experience was shaped by the system which developed after 1857 – this way of thinking about military strategy provided a means and a rationale for thoroughly reorganising the army (a process which had profound impacts not just on the military but on aspects of Indian society and politics throughout the subcontinent). The increasingly scientific and technical terms in which recruiting and organisation was rendered reflect the reconfiguration of colonial rule after 1857 and, in this sense, help to illuminate a number of wider historiographical issues.

The ongoing debate about the notion of Indian ‘difference’, and the apparent hardening of such concepts after the rebellion, has only infrequently engaged the literature and sources on the colonial military. This is a shame as the military records of the period provide many rich veins of archival material. For us to properly understand the history of post-mutiny military reconstruction and the emergence of the martial races, we need to understand the wider shifts in colonial rule which took place in the latter nineteenth century: the elaboration of new taxonomies of martiality in the 1880s needs to be understood in the context of the parallel and similar developments which codified the ethnographic basis of other forms of labour in India,
especially notable, for example, on the railways or in colonial understandings of indentured labour. However, if we need to understand the reorganisation of the imperial military in the context of the wider history of the period, we need also, conversely, to understand the wider history of the period in the light of the evidence of the imperial military. If the emergence of a notion of difference after 1857 was key to shaping aspects of colonialism in India (as well as of a new sense of empire and national identity in the metropole), the history of the military after 1857 also tells us something about the way in which this notion of difference was elaborated, the purposes it served, the issues that it seemed to illuminate and the ambiguities which it manifestly obscured. This, it seems to me, is another important lesson of ’57.