# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 381

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**Michelle Gordon.** ***Extreme Violence and the 'British Way': Colonial Warfare in Perak, Sierra Leone, and Sudan.*** London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 9781350156883 (hardcover, $115.00); 9781350202603 (paperback, $39.95).

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## Review by Roel Frakking, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

In this book, Michelle Gordon sets out to "write violence back into the history of the British Empire to come to better understandings of 'the empire'," its impact on British history and the plight of the colonized (1). To expedite more profound readings of empire, Gordon has looked to genocide studies; its tenets urge historians to place colonial violence in wider contexts that include mass killing and, naturally, linkages to twentieth-century, intrastate European war and genocide (7).[1] According to Gordon, particularly the notion of genocidal potential seems pertinent to analysing the violence of empire (208-209).

*Extreme Violence and the 'British Way'* is built upon three case studies, the 'Perak War' in Malaysia (1875-1876), the 'Hut Tax War' in Sierra Leone (1898-1899), and the 'War of Reconquest' in Sudan (1896-1899). Taken together, they serve to explore what occasioned "outbreaks of extreme violence" (2). These often "forgotten and ignored" and "lesser-known cases," states Gordon, lay bare patterns "regarding the ways in which communication between the periphery and the metropole and the actions of men on the spot affected conditions on the ground." Violent policies precipitated resistance by "indigenous peoples" which, in British eyes, legitimized "escalation" in return (3, 179). Perak, Sierra Leone, and Sudan are linked by "extreme violence," which Gordon, after Susanne Kuss, terms as violent activity beyond the limits of military necessity (21).[2]

By way of Perak, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, Gordon deftly untangles the web of events and modes of thinking that fed into unleashing extreme violence. Based on honed practices that ranged from racialised 'othering' and divide-and-rule to the refusal to apply international laws of war, no method was beyond the pale in changing realities on the ground to the British liking. Looting, executions, weaponizing access to food (starvation), or shooting prisoners were the tools of empire deployed to decide the 'little wars' that Gordon has described.

[1] Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds, *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Cathie Carmichael, *Genocide Before the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, 'The Study of Mass Murder and Genocide', in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36:4 (2002): 7-36.

[2] Susanne Kuss, *German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence*, transl. Andrew Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University, University Press, 2017), 6.

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*Extreme Violence and the 'British Way'* shows that well beyond its infamous and widely-discussed colonial and neo-colonial wars—Malaysia again (1948-1960), Kenya (1952-1960), Iraq, and Afghanistan (post-2001)—British Empire was violent across the board. The book's conclusions therefore fall within a current, dominant strand of research. Gordon joins other scholars who have illuminated that empire, British or otherwise, was animated by racism, dehumanization, and victim blaming, and that local administrators took matters into their own hands.[3] Violence and its threat were integral to empire.



The narrative would have been more forceful, however, had the open wars analysed here been nestled firmly into the context of empire as a hyper-violent system. From this empire-as-a-system-centric vantage-point, the colonial wars under purview were not necessarily "episodes" (176) that escalated (18; 28) or that radicalized (96) into violence, but in fact were part and parcel of empire's very nature. In this way, the analysis could have been critical beyond the idea that "demands of the 'natives'" were unimportant (181), or foregrounding "the immense suffering of the [British] rank and file" as a partial explanation for brutalities (136-137). Then, too, the views of "men on the spot" (179) would divert less analytical attention away from the very structure wherein these men operated, and with what objectives. With this in mind, more attention could have been devoted to what actually constitutes "overreaction" (40, 189) and/or "extreme" violence when in mass violence *was* military necessity.

Additional contextualization would also have strengthened the findings from genocide studies even further. This mainly involves the conclusion, where Gordon again takes up the issue of genocidal potential. Based on power asymmetries, war's totalization and, in more practical terms, the massacres of wounded soldiers or the targeting of specific leaders, the book concludes that the wars in Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Perak had genocidal potential (3, 168-169, 171, 209). They never transitioned into actual genocide, however: wiping out local communities, Gordon concludes, would have negated empire's revenue model (209-210). This latter point basically shines through in the chapters as well. The end-goal of the wars under review comes across as 'pacification,' which is a ways removed from extermination. How does this relate to genocidal potential?

Gordon solves this tension by stating that the case studies possessed "'moments' of genocidal potential" (210). However, as the notion of genocidal moments seems associated with settler colonialism, the narrative could have elucidated more clearly how the case studies in *Extreme Violence* stack up against that particular form of empire.[4] In that sense, Robbie Mcveigh's zero-sum games between colonizer and colonized could have been applied as well. He, too, addresses colonialism's connection to genocide, but by adding a layer to "physical genocide" in the form of "cultural assimilation."[5] The book would thus have benefitted from the inclusion of more exposition in order to clarify Gordon's analysis and its conclusion on genocidal moments.

What stands out, however, is that *Extreme Violence and the 'British Way'* is a welcome reminder of the violent nature of empire by way of lesser-known examples. The book therefore constitutes a worthwhile addition to the growing body of

[3] There is a rich scholarship on the topic: Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck, eds., *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Kim A. Wagner, "Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency," *History Workshop Journal* 85 (2018): 217-237; Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*; Andrew Mumford, *The Counter-Insurgency Myth: The British Experience of Irregular Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2012); for the views of a man on the spot, see Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York, Random House, 1979), 16.

[4] A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36:4 (2002), 7-36; Moses, "An Antipodean Genocide? The Origins of the Genocidal Moment in the Colonization of Australia," *Journal of Genocide Research* 2:1 (2000): 89-106.

[5] Robbie Mcveigh, "'The Balance of Cruelty": Ireland, Britain and the Logic of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 10:4 (2008): 555-556.

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literature that has finally dispensed with all too charitable readings of (British) empire, including its false but persistent myth of restraint.

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