

**Concealing Colonial Comparability:
British Exceptionalism, Imperial Violence,
and The Dynamiting of Cave Refuges in
Southern Africa, 1879-1897**

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24.5.2021

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Word count: 14,387

Concealing Colonial Comparability: British Exceptionalism, Imperial Violence, and The Dynamiting of Cave Refuges in Southern Africa, 1879-1897

Abstract: The 1845 Dahra Massacre, in which French troops killed hundreds of Algerians by ‘smoking out’ their cave refuges, instantly became (and remains) an emblematic case of colonial violence. In Britain, this atrocity came to stand for everything British colonialism supposedly was not, and thus buttressed the claim to British exceptionalism as having a supposedly ‘better’, less violent colonialism. And yet, such attacks on caves had featured regularly in nineteenth-century British warfare in southern Africa, smoke being supplemented by dynamite from the 1870s onwards, cumulating in the little-known but extensive cave dynamitings in MaShonaland 1896-1897. This article reconstructs that long history, describing not only how practitioners accepted the dynamitings largely unquestioned, but also asking how at the time the British claim to exceptionalism was sustained despite the more than apparent resemblances to foreign cases. Apologists of empire did not cover up the violence but rather defended it; what they chose to remain silent on were the foreign analogies – concealed comparability was key to successfully sustaining British exceptionalism. Given the continued influence of exceptionalist arguments in public debate and historiography, this article finally makes a case to more forcefully place histories of British colonial violence next to those of other empires in an explicitly transimperial framework.

Keywords: British Empire, colonial war, colonial violence, transimperial, Rhodesia, Mashonaland, French Algeria, Transvaal, caves, dynamite.

When the French were at war in Algeria they incurred great odium because they smoked and suffocated the brave Arabs who fought under Abd-el-Kader. Sometimes they took refuge in caves, and on one occasion Marshal Bugeaud and Marshal Pelissier sealed up the mouths, and thus suffocated the poor inmates. We remember, too, how all this was denounced in England. Lord Palmerston specially went down to Tiverton to make a speech

about it, and all England thanked God that we were not as other men, not even as those Frenchmen. Well, now in Zululand we are doing something very like what Bugeaud and Pelissier did, and it is not pleasant reading which comes to us (...).

- "THE RAIDS IN ZULULAND." *REYNOLD'S NEWSPAPER*, JUNE 22, 1879.

It is one of the most emblematic instances of French colonial violence. During the French conquest of Algeria of 1830-1847, French troops 'smoked out' and killed hundreds of Algerian men, women and children who had taken refuge in caves. Although the method was apparently first used in 1832, it gained notoriety only in 1845, when news reached Europe of the actions of Colonel Pélissier at the caves of Ouled Riah in the Dahra.¹ The consequent scandal caused the French *enfumades* to be well anchored in European memory, including in Britain. While Britain itself embarked on decades of imperial expansion and colonial warfare, the French *enfumades* always proved a contrast against which the British defined themselves.

However, as this article shows, this stance covers up a long history of British extreme violence against indigenous groups seeking refuge in caves on the frontiers of southern Africa. As it was, 'smoking out' caves had been a regular practice of Boers and Britons at the Cape since the end of the eighteenth century. It was even the British who – to put it cynically – innovated on the method, by substituting smoke for dynamite in the late 1870s, leading one newspaper to comment sarcastically that 'So promptly are the new discoveries of science pressed into the aid of an advancing civilisation'.² Used already a number of times in the decades before, it was in the 1896-1897 MaShonaland War in Rhodesia that the method was employed on the largest and most devastating scale, with dozens of cave refuges, occupied by Shona men, women and children, being dynamited by British imperial and settler forces.

Contrary to the Algerian *enfumades*, however, the British dynamiting of caves has never become established as part of collective memory. It is thus just one example of the manifold colonial histories 'made unavailable, unusable, safely removed from the domain of

current conceivable human relations', to use Ann Laura Stoler's words.³ Stoler has explored these silences and apparent forgetting under the term 'colonial aphasia'.⁴ Paul Bijl has developed this concept for colonial atrocities specifically, showing of the Dutch colonial massacres in Gayo- and Alasland (Sumatra, 1904) how these were widely reported and scandalised in the metropole at the time, but nevertheless always appeared 'absent' in memory afterwards, as they were not 'meaningful' within the established societal frameworks, i.e. the Dutch self-perception as a liberal, benevolent empire.⁵ Instead, as memories that could not be made sense of, they repeatedly came to haunt Dutch society in the decades since.⁶

Stoler and Bijl focus primarily on memory. The question of how the benevolent imperial self-image was squared *at the time* with evidence to the contrary (as represented in our case in the MaShonaland events and their precursors) will be more central to this article. Bijl, drawing on Stanley Cohen, suggests 'interpretive' or 'implicatory denial' were key at the time: the raw facts that appeared to contradict and destabilise the imperial self-image were not denied, but their apparent meanings adapted. In the first type of denial, roles of victim and perpetrator were switched, with the latter now appearing defensive, and actually suffering the most for having had to inflict such violence. In the second type, the violence was reframed as simply the inevitable, and universal, 'misery of war', and any significance or implications denied.⁷ Such adapted meanings are also prominent in the considerations of Esme Cleall and Richard N. Price, who have asked similar questions for the British Empire. Cleall has done so in relation to the indenturing of Bechuana 'rebels' in the Cape Colony in 1897, a case which equally appeared to grossly violate the ideals of 'freedom', 'protection', 'civilisation' and 'justice' that were at the heart of the British views of their empire. She concludes that these values were configured and understood differently 'in ways that spoke to the specificities of different colonial sites', which allowed for their persistence even if scandals of colonial violence could occasionally expose the discrepancies and contradictions.⁸ Cleall's argument

about situational difference connects to a point made more generally by Richard Price: that '[e]mpire in Britain was not the same as empire in the empire. And silence was one way of ensuring that the two were not confused'.⁹ As Price notes, by the late nineteenth century settler culture was prepared to admit violence as part of empire, while imperial culture denied it; this 'huge gulf' could only be sustained by silence and denial. While thus more strongly emphasising the element of plain silence, Price however also notes the importance of 'narratives of displacement' that acknowledged the violence but sought to shift the blame for it onto the victims.¹⁰

As will be seen, all these strategies recur in the story of the British dynamitings as well. While these might explain how the ideal of the 'liberal empire' was safeguarded, they say little on how this worked with regard to the exceptionalist aspects of this ideal, that is, the claim that one had a different, better type of colonialism than other nations – a self-image that both the Dutch and the British claimed for themselves.¹¹ This is where the article intervenes. In a case where the British colonisers used and built so evidently on the same practices of spectacular colonial violence as other empires, it seems especially pertinent to ask how at the time they still managed to sustain the fiction of exceptionality and continue to demarcate themselves from others who were considered worse. It appears to me that this is so far a somewhat underestimated aspect to the question of British exceptionalism, which might also provide another clue to the better understanding of how the exceptionality myth worked.

In other words, I look at the historical origins of that one oft-recited popular argument in the debate about the violence of the British Empire, that the British were better than others, or, in its negative form, that 'the others were worse'. This is a shade different from outright denial; it acknowledges that violence was indeed there, but diminishes its significance, while retaining a notion of British exceptionalism. The argument remains firmly anchored in many sections of British society as a staple apologetic thrust in public discussion.

Apart from public discourse, the idea has however also left its mark on historiography. In the discussion on 19th- and 20th-century British colonial warfare, and especially for those who have treated this as an early instance of counter-insurgency, the conviction that the British conduct of these wars was somehow more restrained (which supposedly found expression in the so-called ‘minimum force doctrine’ of the 1930s) continues to exert a powerful influence and has sparked recurring debates.¹² Frequently, the claim that the ‘others were worse’ is only implicit in these arguments, but in others it is clearly expressed. Ian Beckett, for instance, has claimed that the British Army has ‘generally acted with more humanity than most others in the twentieth century’.¹³ Or, closer to the 19th-century frame of this article, consider Daniel Whittingham’s take on the foremost British theorist of colonial warfare, Charles Callwell. While acknowledging that Callwell advocated brutal tactics, Whittingham holds that ‘the question of how the British approach measured up in comparison with the methods employed by other European countries must also be considered’. The conclusion, though not stated there explicitly, is obvious, especially when the author suggests briefly thereafter that ‘the idea of British brutality can be exaggerated’.¹⁴

There are of course a considerable number of studies that debunk the myth of a more restrained British colonial warfare, many of these related to the wars of decolonisation, especially the suppression of the Mau Mau Rising in Kenya.¹⁵ Regional studies of colonial conflict, for instance for the settler colonies in Australia and South Africa, have long been aware of the brutal violence inherent in such wars.¹⁶ Studies on the broader phenomenon of British imperial warfare have equally painted a picture that discards any notions of British ‘restraint’.¹⁷ In a peculiar way, however, these have failed to strike at the heart of the ‘British particularity’ argument. As it is, all refute the myth from within a *national-imperial* framework; they are only about the British Empire. Remarks on the fundamental similarities to the colonial brutality of other empires are mostly limited to the conclusion, and then generally remain superficial. Thus, while convincing in their rebuttal of the claims of British

‘restraint’, they simultaneously remain curiously detached from the wider transimperial context. Involuntarily, there are some strange parallels to the way some nineteenth-century observers wrote on the cave dynamitings in southern Africa, as detailed below: these actually could acknowledge brutal violence at times, but avoided putting it in explicit relation to the violence of fellow imperial powers.

Therefore, I propose here to put cases of British extreme colonial violence next to those of others, and to do so explicitly, transimperially, and on a strong empirical base, as a possibly more effective way to take on the myth of British exceptionalism. This is why I take the barely known case of the British cave dynamitings, with its unmistakable similarity to the signal case of the French *enfumades* (and to comparable, but lesser known, cases by Boer, German and Dutch colonisers, among others), to pursue two objectives with this article. At the middle of this piece is a reconstruction of the violence inflicted on the Shona cave refuges in 1896-1897 in MaShonaland, in part based on previously unseen source material. It shows the extent and brutality of the practice, in which it is not only difficult to detect any amount of British ‘restraint’ but also any qualitative difference to the violence of the French at Dahra and elsewhere. Curiously, it even shows Robert Baden-Powell, supposedly the embodiment of what was considered to be a particularly British way of ‘gentlemanly’ war, involved in the practice.

Wrapped around this reconstruction is a survey of how the British reacted to information about the dynamitings from their emergence to their high point, with special consideration of the connections drawn or not drawn to comparable foreign events. Here, it becomes clear that the *practitioners* of the violence did not need any special legitimisation for their actions; rather it is the perceived normalcy of the practice which stands out. The question of British comparability to other empires was of little account to them.¹⁸ This was different for observers in the metropole. As long as it was not the British attacking cave refuges in the colonies, observers had rarely missed a chance to paint such practices as un-British.

Metropolitan critics of British colonial violence therefore saw parallels to the French and Boer cases as a potent weapon to draw attention to their case. To this, the proponents of empire did not only react with silence, but more often with ‘interpretive denial’. They had soon established certain racialised strategies of legitimation that could again and again be employed to defend the occurrences and to put the matter to rest soon. When it came to foreign analogies, however, the reaction was not one of denial (of any sort). As Stanley Cohen noted, there is a paradox in denial, as what is denied first has to be somehow acknowledged.¹⁹ Instead, the defenders generally remained completely silent about possible foreign comparisons. Not denied, but *concealed comparability* was here the key to sustaining British exceptionalism.

Precedents: French and Boers

It is impossible to repress the strongest expression of horror and disgust at the atrocity of an act committed by Colonel Pelissier, commanding a French detachment in Algeria (...). Eight hundred human beings, of both sexes and of every age, having been driven to take refuge in a vast cave from the incursion of the French troops into their mountain fastnesses (...) were attacked by fire applied to the mouth of their retreat. For two whole days an immense mass of combustibles was kept in constant ignition. The rocks were cleft with the scorching heat. The suffocating columns of smoke penetrated the innermost recesses of the cavern, and so horrible were the sounds of wo[e] which rose from that furnace of torture, that even the French soldiers engaged in heaping green faggots upon the flames recoiled from the use of such unwonted weapons of attack upon defenceless prisoners. When the heat had abated and the cave was opened, 500 corpses, in every varied form of human

suffering, were strewn among the rocks; and, of the few survivors, 70 more expired as they reached the face of day.

- "TUESDAY, JULY 15, 1845." *EVENING MAIL*, JULY 16, 1845.

It was with dramatic and outraged pieces such as the one quoted above that the British press generally reported on the massacre of Dahra. The events had first been reported in Algiers on July 5, and the news had created outrage in France and even more so abroad.²⁰ One of the earliest reports on the event in the British press, published on 14 July 1845, was already typical of the way the *enfumades* would come to be generally framed in the British public sphere: as evidence of the inhumanity of French imperialism, but also something against which to immediately demarcate oneself as being British. Admitting that the whole truth was not yet known, and that foreigners ought to be 'impartial judges', the article in the *London Evening Standard* nevertheless went on to state that 'it is not out of place to congratulate ourselves upon the peculiar – we believe singular – constitution of the British army, which generally protects us from the necessity of apologising for events at all like that of Dahra'. Other newspapers followed suit, with one declaring that 'there is not an Englishman to be found in the world capable of an act so diabolical' (*Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 17 July 1845) and another that 'There are honourable hearts in France; but they do not beat high enough for us with sentiments of independence and universal philanthropy' (*Bradford Observer*, *ibid.*). The invocation of French conduct in Algeria to contrast this with alleged British impeccability had a history; it had already been used by Lord Palmerston during his election campaign in 1841, when he spoke of the French army as 'tarnished by the character of their operations' in comparison to the British Army in Afghanistan.²¹

The press scandal obviously caused 'Dahra' to be firmly established in British collective memory, as can be seen from later newspaper articles quoted in the next section. To a smaller degree, such attacks on caves also became associated with the Boers in the years

thereafter. Boer *commandos* had apparently already been ‘smoking out’ cave refuges of San communities in the northern Cape Colony since the 1780s.²² As is suggested by some of the incidents below, such procedures also continued to be part of the practice of Cape forces after the British takeover of the colony in 1806, though these appear to have occurred largely outside of public scrutiny. It was however in the Boer republic of Transvaal to the north-east of the Cape Colony that explosives (not yet dynamite) were apparently first employed against cave refuges, by a Boer commando besieging Kekana Ndebele in Makapans Valley in 1854, though the attempt to blast the rocks above the caverns and thus crush and bury its occupants alive failed due to the unfavourable stone.²³

The blasting and subsequent starving of the cave called forth furious condemnations in Great Britain, such as in William C. Holden’s *History of The Colony of Natal* (1855). The message, again, was clear: such brutal cave warfare was the work of others, not of the British. However, as a portent of things to come, Holden also referred, though somewhat disapprovingly, to a comment which had appeared in the *Times* at the time. While the commentator had repeated the standard theme that ‘Every one will rejoice that so horrible a massacre was not perpetrated by British soldiers’ he had gone on to state that ‘[t]he whole expedition was contrived with a rude simplicity, which, though barbarous enough in its result, was successfully adapted to the purpose in view’ and that he was convinced that ‘if the colonisation of South Africa is to be continued, the savage tribes of our frontier can only be successfully encountered, like the savages of all other regions, by acts resembling their own’.²⁴

Here, one part of the legitimisation strategy for the later British adoption of the practice did already make its appearance. By framing the opponent as ‘savage’ and ‘bloodthirsty’ by nature, it was somehow implied the Europeans had no choice but to also adopt ‘savage’ measures, though it remained unclear wherein this downward pull consisted exactly.²⁵ This was similar to the ‘implicatory denial’ identified by Bijl that recurred on the motif of the

inevitability of misery in war, but here the supposed inevitability was already explicitly grounded on the racial otherness of the enemy.

The British Take Up Dynamiting: 1879

In 1881, Holden's work was still referred to in an official manual on the Transvaal intended to inform British soldiers about the area. This manual reiterated the episode as evidence of the Boers' brutality, chiding them for their non-observance of the 'principles of humanity' in their 'miserable petty wars with the native tribes'.²⁶ However, British Cape forces themselves had already started employing dynamite against caves two years earlier. The very first evidence²⁷ I found of the practice was in southern Basutoland (then a part of the Cape Colony) in 1879 in the war against Morosi, a Phuthi chief.²⁸ On 15 May 1879, Cape Mounted Yeomanry attacked a stronghold occupied by what was believed to be one of Morosi's chief counsellors, who, with all his people, including women and children, had retired into caves. A newspaper correspondent describes what happened next:

During the evening some dynamite that had been sent for arrived, and the Colonel decided to try its effect next day. Next day, accordingly, we marched down to the river as usual, and commenced shelling. Meanwhile Sergeant Jones, who thoroughly understands the use of the dynamite, had been sent with a small party to (...) come round to the great cave. Presently the shelling ceased, and we saw Jones, at great risk to himself, lean over the top of the rock and throw in a charge of dynamite with a lighted fuse attached. We heard a great commotion in the cave, then an explosion, and then an awful yell. (...) Several other charges were thrown in, doing more or less damage, and the Colonel then shouted to Jones

to bring the rest of the dynamite down. Subsequently the cave was smoked. A fire was lit at the entrance, and fed by dripping fuel down on to it from the first step.²⁹

The 'smoking out' was only interrupted after the cave's occupants indicated their willingness to surrender, but after shots were apparently fired at soldiers who went in to bring the people out, the fire was piled up again and kept going till sundown, killing a total of ten men and boys, if the report is to be believed.³⁰

As the newspaper report indicates, the employment of dynamite for such purposes was apparently new. The legitimacy of its use, however, was apparently uncontested by the practitioners; there is no indication of any moral scruples. The use of smoke against cave refuges does appear as a matter of course; the Cape men seemed to know the method all too well. It is unclear whether the fuel had deliberately been brought for this purpose, but the men certainly knew how to make use of it.

Dynamite was used against cave refuges several more times over the course of the Morosi campaign,³¹ and at the end of the same year explosives also came to be applied by the British Army itself when it attacked the stronghold of King Sekhukhune of the BaPedi in the Leolu Mountains in British-annexed Transvaal. After the survivors of the ferocious onslaught on the mountain had sought refuge in caves, charges of gun cotton (an explosive similar to dynamite) were placed at some cave entrances and dropped down into recesses by army engineers, though, as it seems, killing few inside. Fires were also lit at the mouth of Sekhukhune's hiding cave.³²

In British public reactions to these instances of cave atrocities, the specific strategies of response were now worked out for the first time. One pattern was for the critics to refer to the foreign precedent (in this case the French-Algerian one) and earlier British reactions to it in order to provoke anxieties about British hypocrisy. This strategy was evident in the article

which figured at the opening of this article, when it stated that ‘Well, now in Zululand [sic] we are doing something very like what Bugeaud and Pelissier did (...)’.³³

Wielding the French precedent was a strategy also employed by Joseph Chamberlain, then still a first-time M.P., who referred in Parliament to ‘devices such as had cast a lasting and well-deserved disgrace upon one of the most distinguished of French Marshals’. However, he also already reproduced an older pattern by depicting the cave dynamitings as something ultimately not British, claiming from ‘reliable information he had received privately’ that the culprits in such cases in South Africa were almost all of Dutch descent.³⁴

Contrary to British reactions to Dahra, however, not all was criticism in 1879. Some newspaper articles defended the practice, and they already followed the same argumentation which was also to be used in 1896-1897. A piece in the *Newry Reporter* of 5 July 1879 on the abovementioned Basutoland dynamiting and ‘smoking out’ of 15 May was typical in this respect. First, the ‘smoking out’ was basically blamed upon the occupants of the caves themselves, who supposedly had given incitement ‘of a most exasperating nature’ by pretending to surrender and then fire again – the article here ignored the fact that by the point of the alleged feigned surrender the cave had already been dynamited and smoked once (see above). Now, the blame-shifting had also become more direct. It was not only on account of their ‘savage’ nature anymore that the Africans had supposedly brought such violence upon themselves; concrete actions had now also been found to legitimise the colonisers’ violence. Nevertheless, as in 1855, the ‘savagery’ of the enemy continued to be blamed as well, when the article argued that such atrocities were an unavoidable part of warfare against ‘savages’, who themselves always committed atrocities as well: ‘(...) experience tell [sic] us that in wars with savages, and bloodthirsty tribes, atrocities on both sides must always be part of the programme’. These were the typical ‘narratives of displacement’ (Price). What was studiously avoided, however, was to refer to any foreign examples. This was the pattern that would also be visible in 1896-1897.

Blaming the Boers

After 1879, the dynamiting of cave refuges continued to be used in the region from time to time. More particularly, the practice is recorded during the so-called Mapoch (1882-1883) and the Boer-Bagananwa War (1894).³⁵ At this point, however, it took place under the authority of the Transvaal Afrikaners, who had regained their independence under formal British suzerainty in 1881.

Many British politicians and the press now seemed content to decry the practice as evidence of the Boers' brutality vis-à-vis the native population and forget or deliberately omit that the British had once also engaged in this atrocity. Cave warfare of the Boers now came to stand next to the French in Algeria as symbolising all that the British were not. For instance, when news reached Britain of Boer cave dynamiting during the Mapoch War, one English daily self-righteously declared that 'Many in this country were unwilling to believe that such cold-blooded warfare as this was practiced by the Boers' and in Parliament Lord Randolph Churchill confidently proclaimed that dynamite had never been used against human beings by British troops, although Prime Minister Gladstone, who apparently knew better, challenged him twice to assert whether he was really sure on this issue.³⁶ Remarkably however, Gladstone did not make explicit the episode he was probably hinting at, even after this lack of exemplification was criticised by another MP, who equally doubted that dynamite had ever been used by English troops in the way it had been by the Boers.³⁷

Criticism of the Boer atrocities was often connected with explicit or implicit calls for British intervention in the Transvaal.³⁸ In 1883, therefore, the British Government, obviously unwilling to interfere in the Transvaal so shortly after losing the first Anglo-Boer War (1881), felt obliged to ward off public pressure to react. The Colonial Secretary clumsily came to

declare that the use of dynamite was ‘not necessarily culpable’ and that when operations of war were going on it seemed to him to make little difference whether gun powder or dynamite was used.³⁹ The Colonial Office thereupon asked the British Resident in Transvaal for a report, but was happy to let the matter be after the resident reported he had been told by the Transvaal Government (!) that no women and children had been killed and that both had been given every opportunity to evacuate before the dynamitings.⁴⁰

There were two publics in the United Kingdom in which the memory of *British* cave dynamiting remained very much alive during these years: the socialist and the Irish-nationalist publics. Here, British cave dynamiting was recounted as evidence of the hypocrisy of British rule, and, in the latter case, could even serve to justify Irish dynamite attacks in Britain. In July 1896, just some two months before news would arrive in the British metropole of British forces employing dynamite in MaShonaland, a notorious Irish-American dynamiter, Patrick J. Tynan, was reported to have told a meeting of the Irish-American Military Union that ‘England did not hesitate to blow men and women to pieces in Africa with dynamite, and why, therefore, should Irishmen hesitate to use dynamite against her?’⁴¹

The Ndebele-Shona War, 1896-1897

Since 1890, MaShonaland (in the east of current-day Zimbabwe) had been in the hands of the British South Africa Company (BSAC), the enterprise of Cecil Rhodes which had received a crown charter to annex large territories in East Central Africa and thus pre-empt the Germans, Afrikaners and Portuguese. Most of the territory’s inhabitants were Shona, who were organised in principalities under Shona paramounts. To protect themselves from hostile raids, many Shona villages were built on *kopjes* (the typical small hills rising from the plains in

southern Africa) and offered the possibility to find shelter in caves in the rear when danger threatened.⁴²

Partly as a propaganda ploy to justify annexation of neighbouring Matabeleland, the Shona had long been presented by the BSAC as defenceless victims of the preying Ndebele.⁴³ Despite this ascribed role as victims, racial stereotyping of the Shona had been especially derogatory from the beginning, the Shona being seen as a downtrodden race in a 'condition of abject pusillanimity', without real history, religion or political institutions; other characterisations applied to them were 'intense stupidity' and a 'dirty, cowardly lot'.⁴⁴

In March 1896, the neighbouring Ndebele had risen against BSAC rule and its characteristics of cattle and land expropriation, labour coercion and widespread abuse and impunity of settlers and native police. Many Shona paramounts, who had similar grievances as the Ndebele, followed in June.⁴⁵ In both cases, the rising caught the whites completely off-guard; settlers and their families were killed and the survivors reduced to a precarious defence in laagers at several of the settler towns. That the supposedly 'cowardly' Shona were able to organise and rebel came as a shock to virtually all settlers and must have contributed to feelings of fear and hate. That the Shona in their fighting mainly stuck to the cover of the kopjes and hills and retreated into caves when their villages were stormed could then, however, be attributed to the old stereotype of Shona 'cowardice', while the settlers' complete ignorance of the incoming rising could be explained by 'true Kaffir deceit'.⁴⁶

Reinforcements for the beleaguered settlers started to arrive in Matabeleland by the end of May. In early June, Major-General Sir Frederick Carrington arrived in Rhodesia from South Africa and took command of all settler, colonial and imperial forces in Rhodesia. When the Shona rose, four companies of Mounted Infantry from England were directed to MaShonaland as reinforcements. Together with several settler outfits and other relief forces they formed the Mashonaland Field Force (M.F.F.) under Lieutenant-Colonel Alderson. It was this force which was to play the leading role in the MaShonaland dynamitings.

MaShonaland: Cave Dynamiting and Its Systematisation

When colonial forces in Rhodesia were first confronted with an opponent retiring into caves, the initial reaction was to use smoke against these – a method that was obviously still well-known at the south African frontier.⁴⁷ This was visible both in Matabele- and MaShonaland.⁴⁸ The first use of dynamite against such caves apparently occurred in June in the Belingwe district of Matabeleland,⁴⁹ but it was in MaShonaland, under the auspices of the M.F.F., that the practice was systematised. In the first encounters with the Shona caves, dynamite had not yet been used, but this was to change when the M.F.F. marched to Gatzi's kraal on August 10. Apparently, negotiations first took place with the people who had fled into the cave there, but after these were unsuccessful tins filled with charges of dynamite were dropped down, and when this could not force the Shona to come out, the old 'smoking out' was tried by burning sulphur in bags at the entrances of the cave. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Alderson's later account of the events, these actions were prompted by Shona 'treachery', with one officer of his force being shot from a cave while parleying was still going on.⁵⁰ The diaries of two Mounted Infantry privates present at the event cast doubt on this however, as both report the shooting only after speaking of the use of dynamite.⁵¹ If these diaries are right, it should not surprise us; as will also be shown below, the resort to extremely violent measures such as cave dynamiting seems generally to have been a quite natural and unquestioned choice rather than something which needed great provocation. Alderson's memoir is also demonstrably distorting by omitting the use of dynamite (only speaking of the sulphur burning), even though Alderson himself reported the dynamite use in an official letter to the Chief Staff Officer.⁵²

At Gatzi's kraal, dynamiting was still improvised, as shown by its placement in empty tins of bully beef. However, its employment became more deadly over time, with troops applying ever bigger amounts of dynamite. This was already evident at the second assault on the stronghold of the Shona paramount Makoni at Gwindingwi at the end of August. As soon as the position of the caves there had been ascertained with more certainty, heavier dynamite charges of up to 50 pounds were employed.⁵³ A letter by Major Watts, who was in command, makes clear the dynamite was not only meant to frighten but to specifically target the Shona in the caves, with Watts using a term from oil drilling ('struck ile') to describe the moment one finally hit the right spot:

On Tuesday [Lieutenant] Fishat discovered a mere crack right down below from wh[ich] the nigs were trying to slink out – he rushed at it and commenced firing his revolver down – then he and H[arding] and 6 men placed a case of dynamite [and it] exploded – Then we knew that we had “struck ile” as a hideous uproar came from the bowels of the earth, followed by voices of women saying they w.^d [would] come out – and they did (...).⁵⁴

More than hundred 'dust begrimed' women and children, suffering hunger and thirst, consequently left the caves.⁵⁵ As Makoni and his men still refused to surrender however, the blasting continued. At the night of 2 September, so much dynamite had already been used that new supply had to be sent for. By that time, many Shona must have been killed down in the caves: a pervasive stench of dead bodies hung around Gwindingwi, as a news correspondent reported. The inferno only ended when Makoni, apparently attempting to surrender, was 'captured', tried by court martial and shot on the afternoon of 4 September.⁵⁶ Gwindingwi however was far from the high point of the practice; when the M.F.F. returned to Gatzi's kraal on 24 October, it set off an even more staggering 2000 pounds of dynamite at the final blast.⁵⁷

Already by mid-September, the dynamiting of caves was increasingly becoming the standard.⁵⁸ Though soldiers' diaries and letters show that it was certainly not used on all caves they encountered, their remarks show that the method nevertheless soon came to be perceived as a standard part of assaulting cave refuges rather than a last resort. '(...) [W]e are going to nother [sic] kraal today to drive them all into their stronghold so as we can dynamite them up', Private Rose of the Mounted Infantry noted in his diary for 29 September – already presenting the dynamiting as the ultimate objective of such an attack on a kraal.⁵⁹ The settler soldier Edward Dormer was equally blunt: 'What caves we can, we blow up with dynamite', he wrote home to England.⁶⁰ This purpose was confirmed in an official report written after the end of the MaShonaland War, in which the author explicitly stated that the attacks on Shona settlements would first drive the inhabitants from their kraals, after which they would always flee to the caves, 'and this movement was not interfered with, *being in fact exactly what the assailants hoped for.*'⁶¹

The total number of such cave dynamitings in MaShonaland is unknown. As the practice however became part of the routine of the patrols sent out all over the country to attack 'rebellious' chiefs in 1896-1897, it must have occurred dozens of times. Alderson records 33 patrols sent out up till the moment the imperial troops left MaShonaland in December 1896. After the turn of the year, operations were continued by the British South Africa Police (BSAP) and detachments of local volunteers, with dynamite again making a regular appearance.⁶²

Unsurprisingly, the Shona developed strategies of response. As one British volunteer noted: 'The natives got to know what our dynamite cartridges meant, and would throw them back amongst us if they could pick them up in time. Then we jolly well had to skip (...)'.⁶³ Also, from the caves, Shona with their guns continued to inflict casualties on the colonisers' troops. Nevertheless, it was an uneven and cruel contest. According to the Zimbabwean historian Lawrence Vambe, it was the characteristic of the dynamite to split and blow rock

into thousands of pieces that made it particularly lethal, killing and wounding and maiming thousands of Shona. Many of the wounded were doomed to die a slow death due to the lack of medical facilities.⁶⁴ The horrible effects on those who survived the subterranean blasts were described by one eyewitness at Manyepera's kraal in October, who noted the 'awful sights' of women and children being sent out after an enormous explosion: '(...) they had been thrown against the rocks and were all covered with blood and the dynamite [sic] had skinned them or burned the skin off their bodies'.⁶⁵ Worse even was to come for those (now presumably only men) still remaining in Manyepera's cave. Three cases of dynamite were detonated, the results being described by the historian Richard Hodder-Williams in the following terms: '(...) the whole complex was utterly destroyed, the rocks disintegrating or subsiding and the bodies being hurled, mutilated and lifeless, in all directions'. It is unknown how many were killed in the final explosion; according to one witness, only two Shona escaped.⁶⁶

It is true that in most cases, the employment of dynamite against cave refuges was preceded by a warning to send out all women and children, who would then receive free passage.⁶⁷ Yet, this was not always the case. For instance, none of the accounts we have of the first use of dynamite at Gatzi's kraal mentions the offer of free passage.⁶⁸ At other instances, women and children had left the caves at some point, but had still been inside while the first explosive charges had been fired.⁶⁹ Robert Poore also evinced an anything but protective attitude towards women and children when he and an Afrikaner inspected some caves in Matabeleland in September 1896: We came across one [cave] where we heard a child cry, this meant that there were women and that meant men, so we commenced to smoke them out (...).⁷⁰ The diary of another Hussar, W. Simm, even tells of one instance in 1897 where a Shona chief sought to send out all women, but these (except for the wounded ones) were then actually *sent back* by Major Ridley, who would only accept the surrender of all the cave's occupants. The next day, with all unwounded women thus still inside, a BSAP officer threw in a few tins of dynamite, though, if we are to believe Private Simm, they had 'no effect'.⁷¹

The Practitioners: Unquestioned Acceptance and Codification

The cave dynamitings speak to the generalised acceptance in the settler and imperial troops of the employment of extreme violence in wars against non-European enemies. Virtually none of the personal documents I found of those present at the time do evince any sign of moral doubts. Even though for most it would have been the first time they witnessed this practice, one cannot find a trace of surprise, let alone outrage. Even accounting for the abrupt style of the soldiers' diaries, the terse and blithe way the diarists wrote about the first cave dynamiting at Gatzi's kraal is striking. Private Reeder is representative here: 'Capt. Jenner had an indaba with the chief the result of which ended in the natives retiring to the caves which we tried to blow up with dynamite but were not successful'.⁷² Dynamiting might have been a new method, but it was apparently accepted just as naturally as the 'smoking out'. The same seems to have been true of the men in command. Apart from Alderson's claim that dynamiting was initially repugnant to him,⁷³ no disapproval from any of the commanding officers in Rhodesia is recorded. Though it appears that General Carrington did never recommend the method (at least not in any official document), neither did he utter any criticism as to its use – which is possibly unsurprising as Carrington himself must already have witnessed the method as far back as 1879, being present at Sekhukhune's stronghold.⁷⁴

Curiously, the dynamitings even came to involve a man who was soon to become a symbol of a supposed Victorian 'gentlemanly warfare': Robert Baden-Powell. As described in his own war memoir, Baden-Powell, serving as a staff officer in Rhodesia at the time, commanded a mounted column that blew up a cave near Inyati on 28 September 1896:

We called down into the caves, for anybody who might be there to come out, as we were going to use dynamite, and after getting out a large supply of grain and Kaffir food, and sending it off to the waggons by gangs of prisoners, we blew up the cave with three charges of dynamite.⁷⁵

A news correspondent who accompanied the column noted that the explosion ‘caused havoc in the cave’, though most of the occupants had apparently already fled through a back entrance.⁷⁶

Questions on the legitimacy of such violence had a clearly gendered nature. The only issue which at times seemed to give rise to scruples was the presence of women and children in the cave refuges. In several memoirs, some of the actors involved deplored that the dynamitings also hit women and children, though none of the authors seemed to question the necessity of the practice.⁷⁷ However, it should be remembered here that these memoirs were written much later, and that the authors were aware of a metropolitan, civilian audience, and were clearly trying to justify themselves in front of this audience or even to themselves.

The twisted morality of those implicated in the dynamiting of Shona women and children can also be seen in Colin Harding’s much later attempts to justify the practice in his memoir *Far Bugles* (1933). Harding’s defence ran as follows: ‘Let me say now definitely that the use of dynamite was introduced under great provocation, and those whose duty it was to insert it in the caves did so at great risk to their own lives’ – as if the practice was justified by the fact that its perpetrators put their life at risk doing it. The ‘great provocation’ that Harding saw consisted in the fact that the Shona, ‘when attacked, retreated at once to these caves (refusing to come out and surrender, even when their lives were guaranteed), and shot down our officers and men at all times without the slightest risk to themselves’.⁷⁸ This was the typical line of argumentation whereby the victims themselves could be blamed.

Harding, however, was not quite sure whether that was enough justification. He thus added that dynamite had only been inserted into the strongholds when he had been convinced that none other than men remained in the stronghold, only to prove himself wrong somewhat later in the book, when he described how in Chesumba's caves 'women and children remained until shaken nigh to death by the explosion of dynamite'.⁷⁹ Anyway, even 35 years later, Harding himself did not seem the least bothered by the practice, as he also claimed, with something verging on pride, that 'as much or more than any other officer who took part in the Mashona campaign, I had used and been responsible for the use of dynamite, and I make this admission without the vestige of a blush'.⁸⁰

With such attitudes paramount even decades later, it was unsurprising that there was no hand-wringing in the military in the aftermath of the events. Rather than an embarrassing episode best forgotten, the lessons of the cave dynamiting were considered useful enough to be codified in writing. Therefore, a quite detailed instruction on how to take Shona cave strongholds was included in a so-called *Précis of information concerning Southern Rhodesia* published in 1899 by the War Office and meant to prepare officers for service there. These instructions were extracted from a report written by the BSAP commander Frederick de Moleyns. In it, De Moleyns explained that experience had taught him that it was not enough to attack kraals, capture and 'kill a few natives' and then leave the rest in possession of the caves; rather, 'It was necessary to keep them in the caves until they could be killed or captured (...)'.⁸¹ The proceedings to do so were then set out in considerable detail, ranging from the night approach, the (apparently indiscriminate) first volley fired into the huts of the unsuspecting kraal inhabitants, the charge and capture of the kraal, the rest and breakfast in between (!), the closing in on the cave mouths by a picket line, the determination of the exact location of the cave mouths and finally the placement and firing of the dynamite charges.⁸² It was recommended to first place and explode a small charge of dynamite, and then, 'before the natives can recover', rush up a second, heavy one. Recommendations were also given

concerning the number and weight of the different charges (the amount ranging up to eight cases of dynamite!), as well as on the timing of the fuses.⁸³

Yet, for all the details given, the army also made strategic use of silence. Like some of the memoirists mentioned above, it was aware of the delicate issue of the presence of women and children in the caves. The *Précis* therefore did not speak of these until the very last sentence, when the quoted report stated that three such operations had led to the capture of 1400 men, women and children, while killing some 300 men – which suggested not a single woman or child had been killed by them.⁸⁴ The silence also meant that the otherwise detailed instructions completely failed to mention the possibility of offering the cave's occupants a chance to surrender or free passage for women and children. This was a striking omission, especially since the instructions were meant to guide officers during future operations.

With the use of extreme violence clearly self-evident to most of its British practitioners, they generally also appeared insouciant about foreign analogies. Most did not directly mention such analogies, but Callwell, who equally codified the Mashonaland dynamitings by citing another report by De Moleyns in the second edition of his manual *Small Wars*, betrayed his awareness of the Algerian *enfumades* at one point. He did however not utter any condemnation of these, rather noting somewhat cryptically that 'Algerian warfare and experiences in Zululand and Mashonaland' had shown that 'caves and clefts of rock form strongholds not easily wrested from a savage foe'.⁸⁵ More generally, his admiration for the war waged by Bugeaud in Algeria is more than evident and contrasts sharply with the general tendency in British public discourse to censure the French colonisation there as brutal and militaristic in comparison with a supposedly 'better' British approach.⁸⁶

The Metropole: The Use and Non-use of Comparison

As earlier, the dynamitings of 1896-1897 would be publicised in the metropole. Nevertheless, overall the events appear to have found less coverage in the British press this time. Contrary to earlier instances, when discussions had reached up to parliament, a more pronounced silence now seemed to reign, though this must in part have been induced by the host of other news occupying the media at the time, for instance the aftermath of the Jameson Raid and the massive anti-Armenian violence in the Ottoman Empire. News of the occurrences in MaShonaland nevertheless found their way into newspapers from mid-September 1896 onwards, nearly exclusively in the reprint of brief despatches from the theatre of war, which were generally left uncommented.⁸⁷

Yet, some critics still emerged, several of which again resorted to pointing out how the British were copying methods of the French and Boers.⁸⁸ Others foregrounded the charge of hypocrisy more generally, with the *Portobello Advertiser* writing ‘All the time that we are (...) proclaiming humanitarian principles (...) we have been extending our power in Africa, (...) and we have been burning the kraals of native chiefs in Rhodesia and slaughtering miserable fugitives with dynamite in their caves’ (October, 30). The well-known missionary Harriette Colenso put this charge more subtly at the end of a letter to the editor in which she quoted several reports of the dynamitings, ending by stating that ‘these evil things have been done recently in South Africa in our name and at our cost, till a *Russian* newspaper points out that “it is impossible to talk about humanity in Europe with the destruction (going on) of the native races of South Africa by dynamite.”’ (*Glasgow Herald*, January 6, 1897, my italics). Unsurprisingly, socialist and Irish-nationalist papers were even more vocal in drawing on these strategies of denunciation, as visible for instance in a commentary by Robert Cunninghame Graham in the socialist weekly *Justice*: ‘In Crete, Armenia, Cuba, and in all those lands where British capital is not laid out, rebels are patriots, and we wish them all success against their tyrant; but to rebel against our rule is monstrous and quite unnatural, and if the miscreants kill our soldiers, spoil our trade, and cant of liberty to us, ’tis time to make

them feel our power, and let them see the glories of our Empire through smoke of dynamite and sulphur' (September, 26, 1896).⁸⁹

Those who instead chose to defend the method in the press remained curiously silent about any foreign precedents. One comment in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (November, 18) admitted that such events must be 'shocking to the English reader' but then typically chose to blame them on the Shona themselves, exhorting the readers to think of the 300 cruelly murdered settlers when hearing of 'the relentless arm of vengeance striking the rebels'. A book reviewer in 1898 put this argument in a particularly nasty and dehumanising phrase when he remarked of the Shona that '(...) creatures that run into holes and bite cannot complain if they come to be treated as venomous animals'.⁹⁰ Again, when blamed on Shona themselves and when irritating comparisons to other empires' violence were conveniently left out, treating other people like 'venomous animals' was apparently perfectly defensible.

Over the year 1897, a number of letters from British participants themselves appeared in the local press, which were often of graphic nature and concealed little of the brutality of the dynamitings.⁹¹ Again, these accounts remained uncommented, with one newspaper simply thanking the letter writer for his 'interesting narrative' (*Gloucestershire Echo*, December 1). In the national press, by the end of the year cave atrocities had however once more become a foreign thing, with the *Daily Telegraph* (December, 27) carrying an article on 'Boer barbarities' in which the 'smoking out' of a cave was referred to as one example. In an ironic instance of forgetfulness, the article even presented the 1879 British subdual of Sekhukhune and his Pedi people, during which the British had been blowing up caves, as saving the Pedi from the Boers.

The Colonial Office opted for a combination of defence and cover-up when in October 1896 it received two outraged letters by a certain W. Evans, who had read about the dynamitings in the summary newspaper despatches. Evans protested vociferously against such

a ‘wicked method of exterminating those wretched people’ and these ‘barbarities of using that “infernal” dynamite against fugitive women and children’. He also highlighted British hypocrisy by including in his correspondence a newspaper cutting which spoke about British public agitation against the Armenian Massacres occurring at the same time in the Ottoman Empire.⁹²

Although the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, had himself criticised the dynamitings as an MP back in 1879,⁹³ the Colonial Office now showed little interest in critical introspection. The internal minutes by its chief clerks are quite revealing in this aspect. They show that some at the Colonial Office had already been aware of the practice in Rhodesia (‘I expected a shriek about this’) but had apparently not acted on it before.⁹⁴ In a first minute, one official had proposed to reply that dynamite had only been used to blow up empty caves, but this was then soon crossed out, as the Colonial Office seemed to know better.⁹⁵ The department came up with the 1882 Boer precedent of the Mapoch War (no other precedents were mentioned) to convince itself that women and children were not harmed in such operations, although the officials’ minutes make clear they were unsure about the exact manner in which dynamite was being used.⁹⁶ The precedent is interesting; again, cave dynamiting appeared here as something non-British, whether deliberately or not, even in internal departmental discussion. Curiously, where it suited the Government well, the Boers could be held up not for barbarity but to soothe one’s own apprehensions.

The records of the Colonial Office, however, also show how avoiding foreign analogies could be a conscious political strategy. Some months earlier, just after the outbreak of war in Matabeleland, the department had been contacted by a man who offered to testify as a witness on the ‘Woodbush atrocities’, the Boer mistreatment of African prisoners in the aftermath of the Boer-Bagananwa War of 1894. While the Colonial Office had earlier been intent on pursuing this case as a cudgel against the Transvaal,⁹⁷ it now suddenly realised that bringing these Boer atrocities to public attention might produce unfavourable similarities with

British conduct in Rhodesia at the time. The Assistant Undersecretary Edward Fairfield, noting indications of murderous retribution being meted out at the time by the Rhodesian settlers, stated: ‘We shall probably have a hard struggle with our own people, and but indifferent success, in attempting to restrain acts of vengeance and murder[?] and violence; and the time seems therefore inopportune for cavilling at the past conduct of our neighbours. Probably in an effort to restrain unreasoning vengeance, our fervent critics will be the very men who have been loudest in their denunciations of “Boer atrocities.”’⁹⁸ To this his fellow officials as well as Chamberlain agreed.⁹⁹ This was clearly a case of what Bomholt Nielsen has called the ‘managing’ of colonial violence in official circles.¹⁰⁰ Unfavourable comparisons with the colonial violence of others were to be avoided, while those criticising the Transvaal for its atrocities were not to turn against the British Government.

While a letter was sent to the High Commissioner for South Africa in which it read that ‘I presume that in all cases where caves are blown up ample opportunity is afforded for the surrender of the occupants and for the escape of the women and children’, the matter was apparently not pursued further when no answer was received.¹⁰¹ Already before, a highly sanitised response had been sent to W. Evans, in which even the word dynamite had been omitted and it only said that ‘(...) the use of mines [sic!] is a necessary incident of warfare’ and that Chamberlain had no reason to suppose the proceedings were ‘inconsistent with the ordinary usages of civilised nations’.¹⁰² Here, another sort of interpretive denial was employed: a modification of factual details that was supposed to make the practice appear innocuous.¹⁰³

Only rarely thus did officials resort to overt denial. This was however the case when someone wrote about the matter to Lord Wolseley, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, who reportedly wrote back that the accusations were ‘absurd statements’.¹⁰⁴

The most elaborate attempt by a civilian to defend the practice to the British public was undertaken by the newspaper correspondent H.C. Thomson, who had the reputation of

being a humanitarian, an 'Exeter Hall man'.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the correspondent had initially been highly critical of the dynamitings, but it seems he let himself be converted while accompanying the troops in MaShonaland.¹⁰⁶ In a book on his Rhodesian travels published in 1898, Thomson explained that he had held a 'preconceived opinion' about the method but that he had now become convinced that 'the use of dynamite under proper supervision is legitimate' and that it was perhaps even more humane than starving out the caves.¹⁰⁷ Thomson also focused on modifying details in order to 'normalise' the occurrences. He stressed that the caves in MaShonaland were no real caves, but more nearly resembled burrows, and that therefore the idea of people collected in extensive underground chambers which were being blown to pieces with the people in them was 'essentially erroneous'.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, he tried to prove that the method could be employed 'humanely' (a word he repeated several times in this context) if it was used as a last resort, women and children were given ample time to come out, and if it occurred under strictest supervision. This was 'interpretive denial' in action: what on the face of it appeared as terrible inhumanity was now turned into its opposite. Thomson referred to the moral authority Victorians generally invested in missionaries and imperial officers to prove his point:

That, on the whole, it has been used humanely during the Mashona rising is proven by the fact that most, though not all, of the missionaries approved of its use. The fact, too, that it was employed by Sir Richard Martin and Captain de Moleyns, who are known for their punctilious regard for humanity, is a sufficient guarantee that it was made use of when they were present in a proper way (...).¹⁰⁹

At this point, Thomson already admitted he had also heard rumours that dynamite had not always been used 'with an equal sense of responsibility', but in the face of such supposedly

responsible officers as Richard Martin and De Moleyns, such ‘regrettable excesses’ could be attributed to ‘harsh or indiscreet’ men.¹¹⁰

Thomson was one of the very few apologists of the method who actually came to mention the French *enfumades*. Here, Thomson did something other defenders of the practice avoided, and he must have been aware this was dangerous ground. He was however anxious to demarcate the British dynamitings from the events in French Algeria, upon which, he wrote, censure could ‘deservably’ be bestowed. Quoting some particularly heinous comments of a French officer warmly approving of his own actions in the Dahra, Thomson assured his readers that ‘There has been nothing of this kind in Mashonaland’. Thus, by contrasting a French unapologetic revelling in the brute violence with the supposed ‘punctilious regard for humanity’ of the British actors involved in Rhodesia, the latter still appeared somehow ‘better’. Denying rather than concealing comparability nevertheless carried its dangers. Thomson’s next sentence betrayed the irrepressible ambivalence of his own defence of the practice: ‘Whether the use of dynamite is legitimate, in cases where women and children are assembled, is a point about which there will always be a difference of opinion; but supposing it to be so, it seems to have been used, on the whole, with due precautions and in a proper way’.¹¹¹

Conclusion

‘Smoking out’ cave refuges, despite being intimately connected to French colonial violence in the public mind up to this day, was part of the standard repertoire of colonial warfare of every colonial power around 1900 – instances of it can be found of it in places as wide apart as German East Africa and the Netherlands East Indies.¹¹² In this the British were no different from the French, Dutch or the Germans, even though Britons also especially liked to

demarcate themselves from the latter. In 1891, at the beginning of the colonisation of MaShonaland, Lord Grey had urged Cecil Rhodes to avoid ‘objectionable German methods’ in Central Africa.¹¹³ In a way, he got what he asked: the method of cave *dynamiting*, instead of ‘smoking out’, did not seem to have any foreign precedents. Nevertheless, the resemblance to (particularly) the French *enfumades* was plain for all to see, and potentially threatened the British self-image as a better and more benevolent coloniser. This was not so much an issue for the practitioners of colonial violence on the ground, to whom the extreme violence appeared almost invariably legitimate, and who did not even hesitate to codify the practice for future use. It was however in the metropole. ‘Empire in Britain was not the same as empire in the empire’ (Richard Price) and domestic critics were aware that the best way to denounce the dynamiting of cave refuges was to place such deeds exactly among the ranks of the colonial atrocities of the French and Boers, thus questioning British exceptionalism. Those defending the empire sometimes reacted with silence and outright denial; more often, however, they reacted not by being silent on the cave dynamitings themselves; rather they chose to stay silent on the foreign analogies, concealing comparability. Obviously, they felt they had more to fear from such analogies than from revealing the brutal violence itself. That violence, in fact, could be legitimised by ‘interpretive’ or ‘implicatory denial’ (Stanley Cohen) whereby the racial otherness of the African opponent and a strategy of blame-shifting were always central. As such, the narrative of British exceptionalism remained untouched and this apparently allowed to put the matter to rest soon; the British dynamitings, unlike the French *enfumades*, vanished rapidly from public consciousness each time. British exceptionalism was not shattered for most sections of society; so strong and hard to break were the British senses of self¹⁴ that the events did not even come to haunt public consciousness later on, contrary to the Dutch colonial massacres of 1904 studied by Paul Bijl. Only in the Irish-nationalist and socialist publics did the dynamitings continue to be revisited to an extent.

Consequently, while Dahra has become emblematic, MaShonaland never has. This has even affected historiography: the Shona cave refuges do not feature in the conventional narratives of the British Empire, and neither are they prominent in the narratives of the Empire's wars and violence. Rarely mentioned in broader textbooks on British colonial warfare, where they are mentioned it is only in a cursory and vague way. For instance, Lawrence James, though he calls the war in Rhodesia 'arduous and brutal', speaks somewhat obscurely of 'resisters' being 'cornered and overwhelmed (...) in remote caves'.¹¹⁵ Victor Kiernan gives us a rather disingenuous reading, stating that explosives were set off at the entrance of caves 'to frighten the occupants, men and women, into giving themselves up'.¹¹⁶

It is such long-standing omissions which have certainly contributed to the stubborn persistence of the idea that 'the others were worse' and the myth of a supposedly more 'restrained' British colonial warfare. It is, however, also the frequent omission to explicitly and more elaborately place the brutal instances of British colonial violence next to those of other empires that accounts for the fact that the myth of British exceptionalism refuses to go. Therefore, we would do good not only to continue to expose the many instances of extreme violence in the British colonial world in all their brutal details, but also to do so in an explicitly transimperial framework.

Acknowledgements

This article was born of my larger doctoral project 'The Colonial Way of War: Extreme violence in knowledge and practice of colonial warfare in the British, German and Dutch colonial empires, c. 1890-1914' which I pursued in the *EUmanities* programme at the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne. This project has received funding from the

European Union Horizon's 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 713600.

Declaration of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest reported by the author.

1 Gallois, "Dahra and the History of Violence"; Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, exterminer*, 138-45; Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 83; Sullivan, *Thomas-Robert Bugeaud*. See also: Kitouni, "Naming the Suffering."

2 "The situation in South Africa." *London Daily News*, June 24, 1879.

3 Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia," 121.

4 Ibid.

5 Bijl, *Emerging Memory*, 12-13.

6 Ibid., 12-13, 86-89, 185, 228.

7 Ibid., 88-103.

8 Cleall, "In Defiance of the Highest Principles." Quote from page 601.

9 Price, *Making Empire*, 298.

10 Ibid., 9-10, 298, 355; ---, "Psychology of Colonial Violence," 38-43.

11 Cleall mentions exceptionalism but does not elaborate: Cleall, "In Defiance of the Highest Principles," 606-07. Bijl in his conclusion notes that exceptionalist beliefs were central to Dutch colonial culture, but in his previous chapters only briefly hints at it: Bijl, *Emerging Memory*, 65-66, 69, 225. Richard Price does not touch on the British sense of particularity, even though he believes Bijl's considerations more broadly to be applicable to the British Empire as well: Price, "Psychology of Colonial Violence," 38.

12 Basically, the debate saw an early wave in the early 1990s and a much larger one in the late 2000s, mostly played out in the pages of the *Small Wars & Insurgencies* journal, see: Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency*; Newsinger, "Minimum Force, British Counter-Insurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion"; Mockaitis, "Minimum Force, British Counterinsurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion: A Reply"; Thornton, "The British Army and the Origins"; Bennett, "The Other Side of the Coin"; Thornton, "'Minimum Force': A Reply to Huw Bennett"; Bennett, "Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency"; ---, *Fighting the Mau Mau*.

13 Beckett, "British Counter-Insurgency," 789.

14 Whittingham, "Savage Warfare," 604. It must be noted that Whittingham appears to have revised his view in his recent biography of Callwell; where the centrality of brutality in Callwell's approach is more frankly admitted, see: ---, *Charles E. Callwell*, especially 8-11. For other examples: Thornton, "British Army and the Origins," 86; Hughes, "The Banality of Brutality," 354.

15 Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*; Elkins, *Britain's Gulag*; Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau*; Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame*.

16 As noted for instance by Price, "Psychology of Colonial Violence," 25-27. For examples, see: Adhikari ed., *Genocide on Settler Frontiers*; Ryan, "Settler Massacres." For colonial Zimbabwe specifically see for example: Ranger, *Revolt*; Samkange, *Origins of Rhodesia*; Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People*.

17 For example: Gordon, *Extreme Violence and the 'British Way'*; Wagner, "Savage Warfare"; Burton, *Trouble with Empire*; Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried*; Gott, *Britain's Empire*. See also: Drayton, "Where Does the World Historian Write From?"

18 See also Bijl, *Emerging Memory*, 69, for a similar observation as to the Dutch East Indies Army.

19 As cited in: *Ibid.*, 134.

20 "The Massacre of Dahra." *Bristol Mercury*, July 19, 1845; Gallois, "Dahra and the History of Violence," 3-4, 9-13; Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 163.

21 Seton-Watson, *Britain in Europe*, 221-22.

22 Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide*, 45.

23 William C. Holden, *History of the Colony of Natal, South Africa* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1855), 447-48; Naidoo, "The Siege of Makapansgat."

24 Holden, *History of the Colony of Natal*, 448-49.

25 On this topos, see: Price, "Psychology of Colonial Violence," 41; Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 159-60. See equally: Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 122-26.

26 War Office, *Précis of Information Concerning the Transvaal Territory. Corrected to November, 1880* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1881), 77-78.

27 I have researched these earlier instances of cave dynamitings mainly through a newspaper database search using the British Newspaper Archive.

28 Atmore, "The Moorosi Rebellion"; "The war in Basutoland." *Illustrated London News*, June 28, 1879.

29 "The war in Basutoland. Use of dynamite by the British forces. Natives burned or suffocated." *Northern Whig*, July 4, 1879.

30 *Ibid.* Other reports give higher casualty numbers, but it is unclear whether these include the earlier fighting.

31 See, among others: "Attack on Moirosi's stores." *The Standard*, September 27, 1879; "The siege of Moirosi's stronghold." *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, November 7, 1879; "Storming of Moirosi's Mountain." *Morning Post*, December 19, 1879.

32 Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us*, 244-45; Henry Brackenbury and War Office Intelligence Division, *Chief of Staff's Journal of the Military Operations in the Transvaal, 1879* (London 1880), 39-42; Emery, *Marching over Africa*, 91-95; "South Africa.", *The Graphic*, January 3, 1880. I thank Heidi Russenberger for providing me with photos of the War Office publication.

33 See above, first page. The author, obviously confused by the much-publicised Zulu War going on at the same time, mistakenly locates the practice in Zululand; furthermore, the Tiverton speech was not actually about cave massacres in Algeria but about other atrocities of the French Army in Algeria. For another newspaper reference to foreign precedents: "News of the day." *Bristol Mercury*, January 28, 1880.

34 "House of Commons – Friday, August 1, 1879." *The Scotsman*, 2 August 1879.

35 Makhura, "Another Road to the Raid," 262-63.

36 "The old and the new." *Essex Standard*, December 30, 1882; House of Commons Hansard: Debate 5 March 1883, vol. 276, cc. 1524-1525.

37 House of Commons Hansard: Debate 5 March 1883, vol. 276, c. 1528.

38 For such calls for British interference, see for instance: "The old and the new." *Essex Standard*, December 30, 1882, and F. Petrie. 1894. "Boer Rule in South Africa. To the Editor of The Globe." *The Globe*, August 8.

39 "Imperial Parliament." *Morning Post*, March 6, 1883.

40 Letter British Resident Transvaal to High Commissioner for South Africa 15/3/1883, in: 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, Command Papers, *Further correspondence respecting the affairs of the Transvaal and the adjacent territories 1883*, C. 3686; Cover page with minutes 16/3/1883 to Despatch N° 4633, The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CO 291/22, Colonial Office: Transvaal Original Correspondence. Despatches 01 January 1883 – 30 June 1883, f. 188; H.C. Thomson, *Rhodesia and Its Government* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1898), 155.

41 "Extraordinary speech by an Irishman." *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, July 10, 1896.

42 On the history of early colonial MaShonaland see: Ranger, *Revolt*; Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*.

43 Ranger, *Revolt*, 26-32, 95.

44 *Ibid.*, 2-4; Tsomondo, "Shona Reaction & Resistance," 12-13.

45 For accounts of the rising: Ranger, *Revolt*; Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*; Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People*.

46 Ranger, *Revolt*, 191-95, 269; Tsomondo, "Shona Reaction & Resistance," 14. The new, post-rising characterisation of the Shona is evident in: C.T. Dawkins, *Précis of Information Concerning Southern Rhodesia. Compiled in the Intelligence Division, War Office* (London: H.M.S.O., 1899), 27-28, 51.

47 For more on knowledge transfers and cave warfare, see: PhD thesis 2021...

48 In Matabeleland, it can be observed for instance at the end of the larger battle at Intaba zikaMambo. While omitted in most contemporary accounts and reports of the battle, it is described with some detail in Frank W. Sykes, *With Plumer in Matabeleland: An Account of the Operations of the Matabeleland Relief Force During the Rebellion of 1896* (Westminster: Constable & Co., 1897), 147-48. For another case, see the diary of the Hussar Robert Poore: Journal of Captain R.M. Poore 7th Hussars in Rhodesia, entry 8/9/1896, National Army Museum, London (NAM) 1974-04-44-1. For 'smoking out' in MaShonaland, see for instance the actions of some settler units and their discussion in a settler newspaper: "Monday's fight." *Rhodesia Herald*, August 26, 1896; "Arrival of Alderson's Scouts." *Ibid.*; "The campaign." *Ibid.*, August 19, 1896. These issues of the *Rhodesia Herald* can be found in GB 0099, KCLMA Archer, King's College London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, box 3.

49 D. Tyrie Laing, *The Matabele Rebellion 1896: With the Belingwe Field Force* (London: Dean & Son, n.d. [1897]), 234.

50 E.A.H. Alderson, *With the Mounted Infantry and the Mashonaland Field Force, 1896* (London: Methuen & Co., 1898), 108-12; Ranger, *Revolt*, 276; Letter Alderson to Chief Staff Officer 18/8/1896, TNA, CO 879/47/3, Confidential print No. 520. South Africa. Correspondence relative to the native rising in Matabeleland and Mashonaland in 1896, 616.

51 Private Reeder, Transcript diary Rhodesia: Mashonaland Rising 1896-97, entry 10/8/1896, NAM 1974-05-68; H. Green, Diary P^{te} H Green, Rifle Company, Mounted Infantry, Mashonaland Field Force, South Africa, 1896-1897, entry 10/8/1896, Hampshire Archive and Local Studies, Winchester (HALS) 170A12W/D/4119.

52 Letter Alderson to Chief Staff Officer 18/8/1896, TNA, CO 879/47/3, 616.

53 Ranger, *Revolt*, 277.

54 Letter by C.N. Watts, probably to his wife, 8/9/1896, NAM 1986-04-70: C.N. Watts, Photocopies of two manuscript letters, 1896, f. 1.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., f. 2; Ranger, *Revolt*, 277-80.

57 Hodder-Williams, "Marandellas and the Mashona Rebellion," 48-49.

58 Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*, 491.

59 J.C. Rose, The Diary of James Cook Rose During His Trip to South Africa, NAM 1972-01-9. [Note that Rose's diary is not subdivided into dated entries and the dates he mentions in his text do not always seem accurate].

60 Letter E.H. Dormer, addressee and date unknown (probably around the end of October 1896), NAM 1973-10-59, Edward Henry Dormer, Extracts from E.H.D.'s letters from East Africa. 1896.

61 My italics. The report is quoted in: C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice*, second edition (London: Printed for H.M. Stationery Office, by Harrison and Sons, 1899), 164. On the report by De Moleyns see also the passage on codification below.

62 Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers*, 34; Alderson, *With the Mounted Infantry*, 286-95.

63 "Troubles in Rhodesia. A Swansea Volunteer officer's experiences." *South Wales Echo*, January 21, 1897.

64 Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People*, ProQuest edition, 59.

65 Ranger, *Revolt*; Hodder-Williams, "Marandellas," 48. This reconstruction is mainly based on the diaries of Native Commissioner 'Wiri' Edwards and H. Adams-Acton, which are quoted by Ranger and Hodder-Williams, respectively (the quote is from Adams-Acton). Their versions differ slightly in some points; Ranger for instance does not mention the first smaller dynamiting.

66 Hodder-Williams, "Marandellas," 48; Ranger, *Revolt*, 276-77. There are again some smaller differences between the two accounts.

67 For example: Alderson, *With the Mounted Infantry*, 182. Captain McMahon of the Mounted Infantry, who wrote this particular chapter of Alderson's book, called this a 'customary warning'.

68 See note 49 above, and Alderson, *With the Mounted Infantry*, 112. As said above, Alderson's account is even silent about the use of dynamite itself, though not about the burning of sulphur.

69 For instance at the second assault at Gwindingwi, see: letter Watts to his wife (?) 8/9/1896, NAM 1986-04-70, f. 1-2; Ranger, *Revolt*, 277-78. Also during the October attack on Gatzzi's caves, mentioned above.

70 Poore, diary entry 8/9/1896, NAM 1974-04-44-1.

71 Diary of W. Simm, Mashonaland War 1896-1897, NAM 1996-08-207, 14-15.

72 Reeder, diary entry 10/8/1896, NAM 1974-05-68. Compare also the entries for the same date in Green, Diary, HALS 170A12W/D/4119, and Rose, Diary, 14 August, NAM 1972-01-9. The latter, however, seems again to confound the date and also the chief's name.

73 Alderson, *With the Mounted Infantry*, 94.

74 On Carrington's presence in 1879: Brackenbury and War Office Intelligence Division, *Chief of Staff's Journal*, 37-38.

75 Robert Baden-Powell, *The Matabele Campaign, 1896. Being a Narrative of the Campaign in Suppressing the Native Rising in Matabeleland and Mashonaland* (London: Methuen & C., 1897), 341-42. Baden-Powell was also commanding when dynamite was used to blow up the kraal and caves of Wedza on 16 October, however both seem to have been evacuated beforehand by its occupants. See entry 15/10/1896, Staff Diary 16th to 22nd October, 1896, TNA, CO 879/47/3, 690-691.

76 "Patrolling in Rhodesia." *The Globe*, November 10, 1896.

77 Colin Harding, *Frontier Patrols. A History of the British South Africa Police and Other Rhodesian Forces* (London: C. Bell & Sons, 1937), 97; and the unpublished memoir by another Rhodesian: *Reminiscences of John Meikle* [1945], Bodleian Library, Micr. Afr. 639, Southern Rhodesia Government Archives, Reel 31, 281.

78 Colin Harding, *Far Bugles* ([London]: Simpkin Marshal, 1933), 54.

79 *Ibid.*, 54, 72. See also Hodder-Williams, "Marandellas," 44.

80 Harding, *Far Bugles*, 70.

81 Dawkins, *Précis of Information Concerning Southern Rhodesia*, 51.

82 *Ibid.*, 52-53.

83 *Ibid.*, 53.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Callwell, *Small Wars*, 444.

86 For Callwell's admiration of Bugeaud's mode of war, see particularly: Callwell, *Small Wars*, 106-110. See also Whittingham, "Warrior-Scholarship," 29. On British public discourse on French Algeria: Middleton, "French Algeria in British Imperial Thought."

87 For instance: "Rhodesia. Sharp fighting." *Daily Telegraph*, September 16, 1896.

88 "The "pacification" of Rhodesia. Natives to be blown up in their caves." *Lancashire Daily Post*, October 21, 1896; "A topic for Sir E. Bartlett to-night." *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, November 26, 1896.

89 For other examples: "Friday, October 9, 1896." *The Derry Journal*, October 9, 1896; as well as the meeting of the Social Democratic Federation described in "'The social revolution." Mr. G. Lansbury at Camberwell." *South London Press*, March 13, 1897.

90 "Reviews. The Mashona Rebellion." *Pall Mall Gazette*, May 17, 1898.

91 "Troubles in Rhodesia." *South Wales Echo*, January 21, 1897; "A Watlington man in South Africa." *Henley and South Oxford Standard*, November 26, 1897; "Stroud man's experiences in South Africa. Graphic description of the fighting in Rhodesia." *Gloucestershire Echo*, December 1, 1897.

92 Letters W. Evans to Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain 12/10 and 27/10/1896, and newspaper cuttings "Still fighting in Rhodesia" and "Sultan's massacres", TNA, CO 417/200, Colonial Office: High Commission for South Africa, Original Correspondence, Individuals 1896: E-G, f. 69, 79, and 71. The correspondence is also mentioned in Bomholt Nielsen, '*as Bad as the Congo?*', 84-85.

93 See the section on 1879 above.

94 Minute by F.B.(?) 13/10/1896 to Despatch N° 21259, TNA, CO 417/200, f. 68.

95 Minute by J.F.P. 13/10/1896, *ibid.*, f. 67.

96 Minutes by J.F.P. and F.B.(?) 13/10/1896, *ibid.*, f. 67-68.

97 Despatch N° 9414, TNA, CO 417/204, Colonial Office: High Commission for South Africa, Original Correspondence, Individuals: S & T, f. 120. In a dispatch addressed to the South African Republic, Chamberlain had declared his intention to appoint a mixed commission to inquire into the incident; after the Jameson Raid however the dispatch was held back. See Bower, *Sir Graham Bower's Secret History*, 58.

98 Minute by E.F. 9 May 1896 to Despatch N° 9414, TNA, CO 417/204, f. 120-121.

99 Other minutes to Despatch N° 9414, TNA, CO 417/204, f. 122.

100 Bomholt Nielsen, "Delegitimizing Empire," 837, 41.

101 Draft letter Colonial Office to Lord Rosmead 23/10/1896, TNA, CO 417/200, f. 72; Bomholt Nielsen, '*as Bad as the Congo?*', 84.

102 Draft letter Edward Fairfield to W. Evans 22/10/1896, TNA, CO 417/200, f. 73.

103 This had already surfaced in 1879, see for example: "Topics in town." *Northampton Mercury*, July 12, 1879.

104 See the letter to the editor by one T.F. Harris: "Mr Caldwell, M.P., on the Matabele War." *The Glasgow Herald*, January 6, 1897.

105 As Colin Harding noted: Harding, *Far Bugles*, 69. 'Exeter Hall' referred to the venue in London where many philanthropic societies held their meetings, see: Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*, 545-46.

106 Thomson, *Rhodesia*, 154-55. See also Colin Harding's description of his encounter with Thomson in MaShonaland in 1897: Harding, *Far Bugles*, 70-71.

107 Thomson, *Rhodesia*, 154-55.

108 *Ibid.*, 151, 57.

109 *Ibid.*, 155-56. Sir Richard Martin, a retired colonel of the Dragoons, had been appointed as 'Deputy Commissioner' in Rhodesia by the imperial authorities, in an attempt to gain some control on the BSAC's administration of the country, see: Keppel-Jones, *Rhodes and Rhodesia*, 431-32.

110 Thomson, *Rhodesia*, 155-56.

111 Ibid., 157.

112 For the Netherlands East Indies, see for example the incident described in the 1909 printed annexes to the proceedings of the Second Chamber of Parliament: *Handelingen der Staten-Generaal, Tweede Kamer, 1909-1910, Aangangsel tot het verslag van de handelingen der Tweede Kamer. Schriftelijk beantwoorde vragen, 3-5*. For German East Africa, see for instance: Carl Peters, *Gefechtweise und Expeditionsführung in Afrika* (Berlin: Hermann Walther, 1892), 10-11; Paul Gröschel, *Zehn Jahre christlicher Kulturarbeit in Deutsch-Ostafrika: dargestellt in Briefen aus den Jahren 1898 - 1908* (Berlin: Buchhandlung der Berliner ev. Missionsgesellschaft, 1911), 172-74.

113 Ranger, *Revolt*, 49.

114 I am inspired here by Gallois' observation that 'French senses of self' in the nineteenth century were 'stronger and harder to break' compared with the traumatic experience of colonial violence during the Algerian War of Independence: Gallois, *History of Violence*, 8.

115 James, *The Savage Wars*, 183.

116 Kiernan, *Colonial Empires and Armies*, 99. Bomholt Nielsen has recently included the cave dynamitings in his comparison of British and German colonial violence in Rhodesia and German South West Africa, but he unfortunately positions the dynamitings in the wrong place and context by locating them in the Matobo Hills stand-off in Matabeleland: Bomholt Nielsen, '*as Bad as the Congo?*', 82-85.

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