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## **Camp follower or counterinsurgent? Lady Templer and the forgotten wives.**

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## **Camp follower or counterinsurgent? Lady Templer and the forgotten wives.**

British counterinsurgency thinking today remains strongly influenced by the Malaya Emergency (1948-1960) but little-known is the extensive women's outreach program, pioneered by Lady Templer, involving the Women's Institute and British Red Cross. Through discourse analysis of archival records, this article identifies four discourses characterizing British women's participation, used, at the time, to make acceptable their presence whilst distancing them from the counterinsurgency campaign. By exploring how women's presence has been negotiated and marginalized, I will reveal the blurred boundaries of counterinsurgency, questioning how the role of the counterinsurgent is constructed and sustained over time and for what purpose.

Keywords: Malaya, counterinsurgency, women, Critical Military Studies

### **Introduction**

My wife flies madly all over the place on Women's Institute work. They are now going in all the States and Settlements [...]. If we really can get at the women of this country, and particularly the Malay women, we shall have done quite a big thing.<sup>1</sup>

These words of General Templer, High Commissioner in Malaya from 1952 to 1954 draw a connection between the work of his wife, Lady Templer<sup>2</sup>, and the counterinsurgency efforts<sup>3</sup>. The Malaya Emergency is remembered for violent jungle warfare - a male domain - undermined by the war labour of such women whose stories go unheard in the historical record, their contribution to the counterinsurgency campaign forgotten. It is perhaps not surprising that the narrative of British participation in the Malayan counterinsurgency was gendered, with uniformed men 'doing the soldiering'. Women's exclusion is both subtle and convenient. They were framed as voluntary community welfare workers, their feminine qualities emphasising their non-combatant status. What is surprising is the extent to which women were actively involved, country-wide, in initiatives intent on influencing the direction of the campaign and how this has been marginalized. This tension between a visible male fighting force and women's invisible

war labour undermines current understandings of counterinsurgency. The, notionally non-combatant, women in this paper worked in roles which in recent campaigns have been the remit of serving personnel. By exploring women's war labour and its relationship with the campaign this paper exposes the blurred boundaries of counterinsurgency. What does it mean to be a counterinsurgent? How is the idea of the counterinsurgent constructed? How is this discourse sustained over time, and for what purpose?

The Malaya Emergency may have taken place seventy years ago, but it remains a strong influence on both counterinsurgency scholarship and British Army thinking today. On deploying to Afghanistan as a junior officer in 2009 I was struck by the extent to which the enduring narrative of Malaya still loomed large in the thinking (and pre-deployment reading<sup>4</sup>) of my peers and commanders. The Malaya Emergency (1948-1960) was an 'End of Empire' campaign between the British government and their Commonwealth Armed Forces and the Malayan Communist Party and their Malayan National Liberation Army<sup>5</sup>. Tasked with enacting the Briggs Plan<sup>6</sup>, General Templer is credited with coining the phrase 'hearts and minds' which came to represent this classic campaign. Undoubtedly, this story is increasingly contested, not least whether 'hearts and minds' or 'coercion and repression' were the reality of the tactical campaign<sup>7</sup> but also unravelling how the legacy of British colonialism pervades this history. Britain controlled the administration of Malaya as a colony throughout the campaign, reinforcing racialized power dynamics<sup>8</sup> between the civilizing and civilized<sup>9</sup> whilst employing the prize of independence as a tool to encourage disparate groups towards this goal<sup>10</sup> and away from the communists<sup>11</sup>. But, the legacy of the Malaya Emergency has endured through its framing by the British Army as 'a classic campaign'<sup>12</sup> from which the classical principles emerged<sup>13</sup> and today's counterinsurgency theory was derived.

This study employs discourse analysis, grounded in Foucauldian genealogy, dismissing the idea of ‘history proper’ as linear, progressive<sup>14</sup> and seeks out ‘rupture’ and ‘discontinuity’<sup>15</sup> motivated by this moment of largely forgotten women’s labour. Up to now, any sustained coverage of women’s labour during the conflict has been held in the archives and histories of organisations like the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) and the Women’s Institute (WI)<sup>16</sup>. This study extends to government archives, through which I have explored the construction of women in discourses from the time which support, overlap, connect, diverge and contradict to reveal the ‘systemic exclusion’ of women from the construction of these master narratives<sup>17</sup>. Amassing these sources, the material was coded to identify the scale and role of women’s labour but most particularly to determine connections with the counterinsurgency operation. From this analysis emerged four discourses which offered a framework for revisiting the experiences of these women<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, measurement of effect – as we would think of it today – was limited to tracking the number of Communist Terrorists<sup>19</sup> and there remains insufficient data to support an assessment of the effectiveness of different methods of counterinsurgency.

This study adds to the ‘ongoing critical interpretation’ of the archive as a ‘tool of hegemony’ to ‘control what the future will know of the past’<sup>20</sup>, recognising its role in ‘ordering knowledge’, and maintaining power<sup>21</sup> over ‘the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and [...] over how we know ourselves’<sup>22</sup>. As a feminist ex-servicewoman and ‘insider-outsider’<sup>23</sup>, I am conscious of how my positionality shapes this study, its implications for how I select and interpret the archive. Post-colonialism exposes the connection between Britain’s colonial history and contemporary politics of

liberal intervention in ways that have reinforced the links I can see between my own military service and individual women involved in campaigns spanning the last seventy years<sup>24</sup>. I have been prompted by the literature of coloniality to question how I might be implicated through my white privilege<sup>25</sup> and to ask what I am trying to say by reclaiming the ‘new herstories’ of women counterinsurgents and whether my acknowledged admiration for them is releasing them from their responsibilities as part of an intervening or colonial force<sup>26</sup>. I have come to see this as a productive tension, one which I work with, accepting the inconsistencies and uncertainties this brings.

The article will be structured around four discourses capturing how women’s identities were negotiated at the time and what this reveals about how women were allowed to be present in this war zone and yet framed as not participating in counterinsurgency. They are not mutually exclusive discourses, each presenting a distinct characterisation of different groups of women but overlapping and evolving through the campaign. This paper will expose the scale of women’s participation and examine the evidence supporting their reframing as counterinsurgents. It will concentrate on the forgotten wives and although I acknowledge female British soldiers deployed (largely to Singapore but occasionally into Malaya itself) reporting is limited to their social and sporting lives. Similarly, other agencies were present, including the Australian Red Cross, Women’s Service League, St Johns Ambulance, Welfare Council, Girl Guide Movement and Women’s Voluntary Services but without evidence of links to the military campaign. This paper opens by observing women’s absence from mainstream counterinsurgency scholarship and the missing connections in gendered critiques of counterinsurgency. It continues with the discourse of the ‘volunteering wife’ providing community welfare through her informal endeavours. This is followed by the ‘proselytiser’ bringing a new

European way of life to Malayan women. The third discourse is the 'female pioneer' or overseas adventuress whose femininity is constantly emphasized. The final discourse is that of the 'woman bandit' in 'enemy' propaganda, demonstrating the 'enemy' assessment of these initiatives.

### **Mainstream counterinsurgency scholarship and gendered critiques**

This paper contributes to the mainstream counterinsurgency literature in two important ways. Firstly, women are absent<sup>27</sup> from the mainstream, influential and critical literature<sup>28</sup> on the Malayan Emergency, their invisibility, whether as 'colonised, colonizer, radical and conservative', reflecting the 'politics of voice'<sup>29</sup>. The women's outreach programs feature briefly in some histories but framed solely as colonial welfare<sup>30</sup> and distant from the military operation<sup>31</sup>. This is unsurprising given the seeming irrelevancy of non-combatant women for inclusion in campaign records (and subsequent doctrine) written by and for men. This paper addresses the specific absence of women's voices in the Malaya scholarship.

Beyond the Malaya Emergency, broader counterinsurgency scholarship has perpetuated women's invisibility by failing to consider a non-uniformed counterinsurgent, even in a type of warfare defined by its sociological dimension. Growing scholarship acknowledges women as victims or participants in non-state armed groups and terrorist organisations<sup>32</sup> in contemporary conflicts but not as counterinsurgents. Where women's presence in historical counterinsurgencies is being revisited<sup>33</sup>, it has been confined to their parallel contribution in the humanitarian and development domain<sup>34</sup>. The 'sexual contract' at the heart of colonization<sup>35</sup> has been ignored and with it the gendered power relations that define agency and powerlessness<sup>36</sup> and police women's bodies as 'targets' and 'practitioners'<sup>37</sup>. Secondly, then, this article questions what we mean by

counterinsurgency: exposing the tension between discursive constructions sustained to keep women out and the messy realities of blurred boundaries in practice.

Turning to the smaller subset of feminist critiques of counterinsurgency literature, these contrast counterinsurgency with conventional warfare in being ‘kinder and gentler’<sup>38</sup>, ‘more humane’<sup>39</sup> and using ‘minimum force’<sup>40</sup>, and yet simultaneously – as population-centric - characterized as ‘soft, weak, indecisive’ and ‘associated with a socially-constructed femininity’<sup>41</sup>. Arguably, counterinsurgency, or ‘armed social work’<sup>42</sup>, has been feminised to placate a domestic public unwilling to reconcile themselves with the realities of war<sup>43</sup> and - through the gendering of spaces, encounters and policy-making - sustain a hierarchy of power in counterinsurgency, based on intersections of gender, class and race<sup>44</sup>. But, warfare and not women tend to be the subject of these feminist critiques of counterinsurgency, failing to make connections between hegemonic conceptions of counterinsurgency and framings of women as counterinsurgents, especially the debates about the military as a gendered institution or women and combat. This paper contributes to the feminist literature by redressing this failing, demonstrating that discursive constructions used to distance women from counterinsurgency reveal the blurred boundaries of counterinsurgency in practice.

### **The volunteering wife**

[The speed of forming the new WIs] is entirely due to the energies of Lady Templer, [...], who, before my arrival, had made a tour of the nine States and two Settlements [forming] temporary Organising Committees in each.<sup>45</sup>

Lady Templer is easily dismissed as a camp follower by invoking this idea that she was merely keeping herself busy and doing what would have been expected of her, as the General’s wife, whether overseas or not. Having sustained the voluntary service



movement of the Second World War, leisured middle and upper-class women were faced with the 'professionalisation of social work in the welfare state'<sup>46</sup>. Consequently, 1950s British women may have sought solace in working overseas on their own merits or as the wife of a soldier, diplomat or businessman. And yet, senior officer's wives would have been expected to continue this social leadership by committing their leisure time to a worthy cause.

On Lady Templer's request<sup>47</sup>, the National Federation of the Women's Institute (NFWI) deployed Miss Herbertson<sup>48</sup> in late 1952, forming the first Women's Institute in Malaya in the November<sup>49</sup>. By mid 1953, 160 WIs had been established, rising to 270 by 1955<sup>50</sup>. Lady Templer's commitment was mirrored by 'government servants' and planters' wives<sup>51</sup> who [gave] a great deal of time and trouble to help with the Institutes'<sup>52</sup>. There was the 'enterprising District Officer's wife' teaching 'a class in Health and Beauty in Negri Sembilan'; the wife of a Brigadier who was renamed 'Mrs Patchwork Quilt' for her teaching to the WIs<sup>53</sup>; the 'Police Officer's wife in the wilds of Trengganu [...] teaching English and sewing (she cannot sew on a button herself) simultaneously in three languages with the aid of whistles', and the 'wife of the Sultan' as 'chief organiser in the state of Perlis'<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, in late 1949, the then High Commissioner and his wife, Sir Henry and Lady Gurney instigated the preliminary BRCS visit to scope establishing a presence in Malaya<sup>55</sup>, noting that wives of prominent British men would be approached to become branch President<sup>56</sup>. By 1952, 50 Red Cross personnel (25 trained nurses and 25 welfare officers)<sup>57</sup> had been deployed to New Villages<sup>58</sup> country-wide. This was matched by an extensive local membership<sup>59</sup> such that by late 1952, the BRCS teams were caring for some 200,000-250,000 people<sup>60</sup> supporting the assertion that 'Red Cross workers were by then a familiar sight'<sup>61</sup>.

There is a long history of women as camp followers to the military providing essential 'unpaid' labour - cooking, laundry and nursing<sup>62</sup> - which set the foundations for the 'two-person career'<sup>63</sup> - mirrored in the diplomatic service of the time<sup>64</sup> - whereby a man's service is incomplete without his wife's contribution. The military or 'incorporate' wife<sup>65</sup> is an 'appendage of the state's soldiers', a 'resource' to be 'used' by the military<sup>66</sup>, with ceremonial, entertaining, mentoring and public relations duties<sup>67</sup> all being 'part of [their] life as a soldier's wife'<sup>68</sup>, and yet they were arguably subjects of oppression, analogous with the 'colonised'<sup>69</sup>. These senior officer's wives, with their coffee mornings and cocktail parties, were useful to the British Army, embodying civilisation as 'culture carriers'<sup>70</sup> and marking the stark contrast between the imperial British governorship and their subjects, sustaining colonial power relations<sup>71</sup>. But, wives would not have deployed with lower ranked troops out in the jungle (many of whom would have been unmarried). And even middle ranking wives were contained within the closed enclave of the garrison<sup>72</sup>, 'never really belonging'<sup>73</sup>: there to support their husbands by sustaining social and domestic lives<sup>74</sup> and running the regimental welfare system. The 'cotton wool effect' of 'wrapping wives in a comfort blanket of national and institutional familiarity to protect them from and compensate them for the strangeness of life in a "foreign country"'<sup>75</sup> perpetuated their distance from the business of the military mission. Only at the more senior ranks was there an expectation on wives to reach beyond the garrison.

Not only did the contribution of these elite volunteering wives have utility to the British Army, it was a convenient framing for marginalising women's voices as 'passive companions or victims of white men's actions'<sup>76</sup>, contained within the civilian and domestic sphere. Their involvement is a footnote to the work of their husband as exactly

has been the case with Lady Templer who is given brief mention in Templer's biographies. And yet the appeal of such a discourse to a public audience through its association with the welfare of women and children enabled these women to negotiate their presence overseas. A 1953 media story covering Lady Templer in the prominent English-speaking *Tiger Standard* emphasised how she 'has used every spare moment for the welfare of women and children'<sup>77</sup>. Women's participation was presented as a continuation of women's wartime roles, making their presence 'acceptable' as dutiful subordinates to their husband and to be employed 'nowhere near the fighting'.

This discourse of the volunteering wife as contained, acceptable and distant from the military campaign is challenged by the archival records which reveal labour that was integral to the counterinsurgency plan. Civil and government agencies had been thrust into interdependent relationships during the Second World War, a dynamic which endured into the 1950s, such that numerous humanitarian organisations in Malaya worked in a coordinated fashion with the military mission. Indeed, it was a conversation between General Templer and his wife in which he asked 'What are you doing about the Malay women in the Kampongs?'<sup>78</sup> that catalysed this work, giving a sense of Lady Templer as an ally to her husband. The influential Briggs Plan, attributed with setting a course for success in winning the support of the population, has as a central tenet, increasing community confidence to resist the insurgents through, among other things, the provision of social services<sup>79</sup> with the raising of living standards described as 'one of our most important weapons in the combating of Communism'<sup>80</sup>. Not only was this women's outreach program part of the plan, and supported financially by the Malay government<sup>81</sup>, it was regarded as contributing to the success of the campaign with questions asked about why it had not been thought of before<sup>82</sup>. Praise for the initiatives referenced building

community confidence (something I clearly recall being oft cited in Helmand) to set the conditions for peace<sup>83</sup>. Not only does Oliver Lyttelton describe the effect as ‘great’<sup>84</sup> and ‘quite electric’<sup>85</sup>, the BRCS Vice Chairman reported that ‘a Senior British Officer told me that there were conditions in which a couple of Red Cross girls living and working in one of the Resettlement villages could do as much good as a battalion’<sup>86</sup>. Although many of these individuals had a vested interest in their success, nonetheless the discourses they were shaping were still omitted from the enduring mainstream campaign narrative.

So, whilst critics might attempt to dismiss this women’s labour as development or humanitarian in nature, behind the conservative discourse of the volunteering wife, there is strong evidence that this work with women was part of the strategic plan, part of Templer’s vision and made a significant and direct contribution to building community resilience. General Templer and Oliver Lyttelton clearly see Lady Templer as an ally in their vision for Malaya and a broader sense of the relative organisational autonomy of the WI and BRCS attests to the agency of the volunteering wife. Lady Templer’s touring with her husband to remote outposts of Malaya, engaging with the local women, was very similar to the work of Female Engagement Teams<sup>87</sup> in Afghanistan. And similarly, the women’s outreach programs have strong parallels to those delivered by the Provincial Reconstruction Team. Surely both make a strong case for Lady Templer having been a counterinsurgent too. And yet, the idea that her identity has any relationship to the military campaign has been so far from the minds of the military strategists and historians who have sustained the mainstream campaign narrative as to be unthinkable.

## **The proselytiser**

[The work of the Red Cross women] in the New Villages and Kampongs has made all the difference to the lives, and the outlook, of so many people - who otherwise, of course, would have no opportunity of ever seeing a European woman.<sup>88</sup>

The 'proselytiser' is a European woman coming to Malaya to bring a new modern way of life to their women, sustaining the colonial order<sup>89</sup>. Emanating from the British agencies deploying women for this work, it permeated the records of these institutions thus shaping the discourse amongst the audience of their wider membership. But it too was convenient for the British Army as it made the moral case for women's participation by reinforcing their association with 'womenandchildren'<sup>90</sup>, nursing and homecraft and distancing them from the military effort. The WI magazine, Home and Country, captures the nature of this 'acceptable' work, describing sewing, embroidery, knitting, crochet, patchwork, cookery demonstrations, poultry raising, health and hygiene talks, and child welfare<sup>91</sup>. Similarly, archival records of the Red Cross teams reveal how they ran daily clinics and travelling dispensaries, gave courses of instruction in first aid and nursing and established Red Cross detachments including for cadets<sup>92</sup>.

In exploring the use of the proselytising mission to distance women from counterinsurgency, it is important to note that whilst today's humanitarian actors may be fiercely protective of their independence (often as a source of their personal protection), colonial administrations became interdependent<sup>93</sup> with secular and religious actors<sup>94</sup> as tools to 'improve' the colonies and relieve suffering<sup>95</sup>. At a time when violent and revolutionary insurgencies blurred distinctions between combatants and non-combatants, 'development' aid became politicised in the wars of decolonisation and a 'second colonial occupation' ensued. 'An army of welfare specialists, health professionals and agricultural experts was despatched' - to curry favour with their colonial subjects by improving their

day to day lives<sup>96</sup>. In the midst of this ‘sociological warfare’ or ‘armed social work’<sup>97</sup> were the ‘white’ ‘imperial ladies’ who delivered aid as the ‘saviours’ of the ‘other’ women for whom they campaign, whilst simultaneously quashing their agency<sup>98</sup>, reflecting racialised hierarchies of empire<sup>99</sup>. The National Societies of the Red Cross and the WI embraced this ‘embedded humanitarianism’<sup>100</sup> with the former ‘spread[ing] the Red Cross way of life amongst the people with whom they live’<sup>101</sup> and the latter ‘leading colonial people to become decent members of self-governing civil society and preparing them for future independence’<sup>102</sup>.

This dynamic was gradually undermined by an emerging tension with the apolitical humanitarian principles (and the perception by some humanitarians that the military presence was the source of suffering)<sup>103</sup>. For example, the British Red Cross reasserted their fundamental principles<sup>104</sup> whilst describing their activities as ‘directly connected with the Emergency’<sup>105</sup> and integral to the new villages<sup>106</sup> and the WI stated that they must ‘not be used for political ends’<sup>107</sup>. So, there was clearly a concern about how this work was being framed and what proximity to the military effort was permissible. This resonates with my personal experience of the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan which have been criticised for their unclear mandate with confusion over their employment, at one extreme, for intelligence gathering, perceived as a traditional (masculine) military activity, and, at the other, for longer term development (feminine) activity<sup>108</sup>.

But at home, the narrative of colonial welfare delivered by the established apolitical and secular Women’s Institute and British Red Cross overseas<sup>109</sup>, was helpful in justifying women’s participation as conventional and conservative drawing on the idea

of housewives as guardians of a homely English 'national identity'<sup>110</sup>. And yet, this civilising mission of social advancement was simultaneously considered 'revolutionary' for the Malay women at the time<sup>111</sup>. This might seem incongruous to the modern ear when one thinks of the traditional and conservative WI and its 'Jam and Jerusalem' image<sup>112</sup>, but it was the bringing together of women through social welfare initiatives, in what was a patriarchal society in Malaya, and encouraging the establishment of Western organisations and ways of operating which led to the idea that it was 'revolutionary'<sup>113</sup>.

The 'proselytiser' discourse enabled British women to deploy to a far-flung country, like Malaya, negotiating their participation as missionaries to these 'distant and uneducated' communities. It was a small leap from the historical tradition of women's presence near, and even on, the battlefield for the tending of the wounded<sup>114</sup> to the provision of welfare services to impoverished communities. By drawing on the essentialised framing of women as the custodians of familial and community culture, Western gender norms were reinforced, making such initiatives acceptable to men and containing women's participation to the 'domestic', non-combatant margins of the campaign. Whilst they could take their place in the histories of women as British Red Cross nurses or an 'exotic' footnote in the annals of the Women's Institute they could not be considered actors or 'counterinsurgents' in the mainstream narratives of the Malayan counterinsurgency. So, whilst what they were offering to the women of the local community might have been revolutionary, their participation was maintained as conservative.

### **The female pioneer**

Lady Templer is a friendly woman, anxious to help, eager to please and determined to work as hard as her husband for the improvement of the Federation. [...] Wherever she

goes, she leaves behind women glowing with encouragement [...] Lady Templer manages in the few minutes she is allowed, to do the job she has set herself.<sup>115</sup>

Lady Templer was framed as ‘female pioneer’ or exciting overseas adventuress in media coverage at the time with one such article describing her as ‘pretty, but practical’<sup>116</sup> but also as a tireless champion - ‘us[ing] every spare moment’<sup>117</sup> and her ‘energies’<sup>118</sup> - for the welfare of women and children, albeit subordinate to her husband’s work. Underpinning this discourse was the sense that it was a rarity - a few bold, adventurous women getting involved overseas, but not for everyone. And this ‘thrilling’, ‘pioneer work’ was still associated with the ‘women and children’ agenda to sustain a safe and acceptable narrative<sup>119</sup>.

Nonetheless, there was something of a fascination with these ‘exceptional’ women, ‘transcend[ing] their condition’ and breaking out from societal expectations<sup>120</sup>. From travellers to sportswomen and scientists, their spirit of adventure was portrayed with an accompanying sense of reassurance that these ‘acceptable mavericks’ remained captivatingly feminine. Women’s bodies were being ‘polic[ed]’ through these discursive constructions<sup>121</sup>, the articulation of their femininity used as a jarring articulation of the absurdity of their being fit for the ‘front-line’. Typical of this media coverage at the time, is this description of Jerrie Cobb - ‘America’s first lady astronaut’ in the early 1960s - as ‘equally at ease in a fashionable dress and hat or bulky space suit and helmet’. She ‘maintains her femininity with deliberate aplomb’<sup>122</sup>. And, in case that was too subtle: ‘There’s nothing masculine about her 121 pounds attractively arranged over 5 feet, 7 inches’<sup>123</sup>. Similarly, as if to remind readers of her female form, Lady Templer’s maternal position is emphasised by media reports referring to her as ‘first lady of the land’<sup>124</sup> reflecting a ‘maternal imperialism’ whereby colonised women were portrayed as ‘little sisters’ or ‘surrogate daughters’<sup>125</sup>.



The maverick nature of Lady Templer is captured in private correspondence from Miss Herbertson to Lady Brunner, NFWI Chairman, which reveals how:

Lady Templer, [...] has little idea of how the English WI is organised [and] has gone ahead and started Committees in all the states and settlements. She confesses that she has not read the rules (and has now lost them) and does not intend to take much notice of them.<sup>126</sup>

But Lady Templer was not alone, Miss Herbertson is similarly reported in media coverage as a ‘pioneer’ taking on a ‘mission which sounds just about the toughest proposition a woman could undertake’<sup>127</sup>, shortly followed by this physical description emphasising how she nonetheless maintains her femininity:

No-one better equipped to overcome opposition and prejudice could have been found than this tall, slim woman with the grey eyes and the disarming smile that is never far from the corners of her mouth. She has none of the grim earnestness of the ‘woman with a mission’.<sup>128</sup>

This reference to women’s bodies persists in private correspondence with General Templer commenting to Oliver Lyttelton, Secretary of State for the Colonies, about Miss Herbertson that ‘we have got an absolutely first class paid organiser out here from England – incidentally a very good looking and delightful young woman – not at all the sort you’d expect to be a paid organiser in Women’s Institutes’<sup>129</sup>. This had not gone away by the time I deployed to Helmand with photo-journalism of female soldiers exploring their femininity<sup>130</sup>. So, as with ‘the volunteering wife’ and ‘the proselytiser’,

these public discourses helped to negotiate women's participation going as far as presenting it as romantic, glamorous and 'exotic' whilst simultaneously containing their involvement, maintaining it as conservative, acceptable and above all peripheral to the campaign. So, women are allowed to be exciting pioneers in 'exotic' lands so long as they limit their roles to the domestic realm and do their utmost to maintain their femininity.

### **The woman bandit**

One thing we must be careful about - we must be on guard against the wife of Templer with her so called women's movements which aims at bluffing the women folk into joining the Women's Institute. This woman bandit is cunning. She is pretending that the movement is not connected with politics but solely aims at ameliorating the welfare services of women with so-called lectures on mothercraft, cooking, etc. This is trickery pure and simple. The chief bandit (Templer) has found it rather awkward to force women folk to joining the M.C.A. and the armed forces. So, his wife takes over and tries this trick to dissuade the women folk from working for the revolution and later to ruin it, in order to better drag them into the sea of certain death.

Women compatriots, unite closer round the Revolution and boycott the activities of this woman bandit.<sup>131</sup>

This representation of Lady Templer as a 'woman bandit' appears in True News, the Malayan Communist newspaper, giving us an insight into the enemy discourse. Although only a single piece of evidence, it was brought to Lady Templer's attention in a letter which makes reference to her 'popularity rating with the Communist Terrorist Organisation' as 'still very low' implying this was not the only time they had seen such reports<sup>132</sup>. Lady Templer acknowledges the significance of this report in letters back to Lady Brunner, NFWI Chairman, where she calls it 'the most encouraging thing said about the [Women's Institute] here yet. We really must be doing well if they bother to be unpleasant about us'<sup>133</sup>.

Unlike the attempts of other discourses to distance women from the military effort, this time Lady Templer is intentionally framed as a counterinsurgent, placing her right at the heart of the military campaign. Gaining the attention and concern of the enemy indicates the numbers and geographical reach these women's outreach programs were achieving. Having explored the conceptual distancing of women from military operations, reflecting on their physical proximity is another means of understanding the position of women as counterinsurgents. The WI were by no means limited to more affluent or benign locations being established across the country including in remote and inaccessible locations. Miss Williams<sup>134</sup>, Miss Herbertson's successor as in-country organiser, is noted as 'never spar[ing] herself, travelling all over the Federation in her van, along 'Red' roads (those which are not considered safe because there are known to be Communist terrorists in the area) and going to the Institutes wherever they might be'<sup>135</sup>. Similarly, Miss Herbertson describes having driven 40 miles from the main road in Kelantan along a track which would be impassable in the wet season to meet a newly formed WI at Batu Melintang to find four members there representing an even more remote village who had travelled three hours by boat<sup>136</sup>! The dedication both of organisers and participants in travelling such lengthy and dangerous routes makes clear the belief and will to pursue these programs. Similarly, the Red Cross teams document visitors to the outstations travelling 'into the jungle to Bukit Besi' and noting how the branch's 'voluntary help will be somewhat restricted in nature as they are so cut off from the rest of the State and the bandits are rather active on their railway'<sup>137</sup>. And the Malayan National Liberal Army requested that their vehicles be painted with a large Red Cross to deter sniper fire enabling the Red Cross to 'travel unarmed and unescorted throughout the whole area of military operations in Malaya'<sup>138</sup>. There can be no question that these

women were operating in remote and dangerous locations – active ‘bandit country’ – and yet they remain conceptually distanced from the campaign.

The specific framing of Lady Templer as a ‘bandit’, the term used by the British to describe the Communist Terrorists, thus (unlike any of the Western public narratives above) draws her into the military narrative. The distance between Lady and General Templer is closed with both of them being bandits (albeit he is the “chief”) and she is given greater agency in recognising her contribution to the conflict as direct and significant<sup>139</sup>. Whilst presumably intended for their home audience, it would have been known that such propaganda would also be likely to come into the hands of the British and could have been another attempt to constrain her by attempting to provoke a backlash at home in Britain or amongst General Templer’s male colleagues to the idea of women’s involvement as well as fear of targeted retaliation by the enemy, although I have uncovered no evidence of this. Interestingly, the British Army reaction seems to have been to view this incident as more of an amusing footnote to the campaign. There is no suggestion that this enemy discourse was going to trigger any re-evaluation of women’s participation by the British Army that would lead to an enduring position in the mainstream campaign narrative.

## **Conclusion**

British women were present<sup>140</sup> in Malaya during the Emergency and enabled activities on a large scale in support of the counterinsurgency campaign. They participated as WI organisers, as nurses and as welfare officers. Their outreach programs would have been visible in country at the time and their presence known across the country. And yet, they remain absent in the enduring mainstream campaign narrative. The women delivering the outreach programs of the WI and BRCS were characterised by three discourses – ‘the

volunteering wife', 'the proselytiser' and 'the pioneer' – all of which provided an acceptable means of negotiating women's presence in Malaya with the British public audience presenting them as 'exotic' and exciting, even radical and revolutionary, but simultaneously limiting their remit to the acceptable traditional employment. They could be both overtly and physically present but distanced from being counterinsurgents by the nature of their work. Only enemy propaganda attempted to frame Lady Templer as a 'woman bandit' drawing her into the military effort.

And whilst Templer's 'hearts and minds' rhetoric has a stronghold in British counterinsurgency doctrine, Lady Templer and the women's outreach programs have been forgotten. The marginalization of women from the history of the Malaya Emergency is subtle and convenient. It is subtle because there was simply no logic in including women in the narrative of a military conflict. British women were, in the most part, civilians and not in uniform. They were voluntary community welfare workers. According to traditional conceptions of war, these were not combatants and they were not involved in operations. It is a convenient framing because being 'volunteers', 'proselytisers' and 'pioneers' reinforced their feminine qualities and strengthened the divide between them and the counterinsurgency. And yet, this paper has revealed that British women were present during the Malaya Emergency and established women's outreach programs on an extensive scale. They were working right across the country, including in remote villages in 'bandit country', and putting themselves at considerable risk travelling on dangerous routes, to engage with communities. The correspondence between General Templer and Oliver Lyttelton, demonstrates that the women's outreach programs were part of Templer's vision for Malaya and aligned with the intent of the Briggs Plan. Not only this but they considered them to be making a significant and direct

contribution to building community resilience. But the exclusion of women's stories from the campaign archive represents an act of distancing women from counterinsurgency, reinforcing their place as wives and custodians of the concerns of women and children only.

And yet, drawing on my own experience, I remain conscious that there was very little difference from the women's outreach, both medical and social, and the training of policewomen that was being delivered in Malaya in 1952 and that I saw in Afghanistan in 2009. The Women's Institute were delivering a program including embroidery and patchwork in Malaya in 1952 and the Provincial Reconstruction Team ran a sewing project for Helmandi women in the Department of Women's Affairs in 2009. BRCS were delivering nursing training to their local membership in Malaya in 1952 and the Provincial Reconstruction Team were funding a midwifery training course in Lashkargah in 2009. I have no doubt that had Lady Templer been relocated to Helmand in 2009 and given some combats and a pistol she would have been easily identifiable as part of a Female Engagement Team.

It has perhaps satisfied convention, up to now, to find that the history of the Malaya Emergency is gendered, dominated by stories of uniformed male soldiers. But, what is surprising is the extent to which women were actively involved in initiatives with the strategic intent of influencing the direction of the campaign and how this has been marginalized. This tension between a visible male fighting force and the invisible women's war labour challenges what we mean by counterinsurgency. Discursive constructions of these women made their presence in the campaign acceptable whilst attempting to distance them from counterinsurgency. It was convenient to the British

Army in sustaining the narrative that women were absent from the military campaign. What I find almost more alarming is that, despite the sustained focus on this classic campaign, which has become famous for its sociological dimension captured by the famous phrase ‘hearts and minds’<sup>141</sup>, and the ample opportunities of several decades to revisit this history in the light of current thinking, the question of women has been sidelined and little challenge has been made to the mainstream campaign narratives in this regard. But unpicking their involvement reveals the messiness and blurred boundaries of counterinsurgency and the significance of bearing arms, wearing uniform, what you are doing and where you are doing it. It demonstrates a need to explore other historical campaigns, such as Northern Ireland, to examine the way in which women’s presence has been negotiated and marginalized, to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a counterinsurgent, how it is being constructed and sustained and for what purpose.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Templer, G. Letter to Lyttelton 1952.
- <sup>2</sup> Lady Ethel ‘Peggie’ Templer was the daughter of Beatrice and Charles Davie, the latter a Devonian lawyer, and married Gerald Templer in 1926. She became a Lieutenant Colonel in the St John’s Ambulance during the Second World War. She had two children, Jane and Miles. During their time in Malaya she set up a hospital outside Kuala Lumpur which is named after her. (*The Times*, 7 April, 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Templer, G. Letter to Lyttelton 1953.
- <sup>4</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgencies*; Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup*.
- <sup>5</sup> Komer, *Malayan Emergency in Retrospect*, v-vii.
- <sup>6</sup> The Briggs Plan was written in 1950 by Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, then Director of Operations in Malaya, recognising the political dimension to the campaign and emphasising the need to protect the population from the Communists and win their support, Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup*, p.71-72.
- <sup>7</sup> Dixon, *British approach to counterinsurgency*, 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Parashar, ‘Feminism and Postcolonialism’ and Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes’.
- <sup>9</sup> Syed and Ali, ‘The White Woman’s Burden’.
- <sup>10</sup> Harper, *The End of Empire*, 324 and Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup*.
- <sup>11</sup> Stubbs, ‘Evolution of British Strategy’, 116.
- <sup>12</sup> LWC, *Field Manual Countering Insurgency*.
- <sup>13</sup> Marston and Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Robinson, *Force to reckon with*, 183.
- <sup>17</sup> Schwartz and Cook, ‘Archives, records and power’, 7; Voss-Hubbard, ‘No Documents No History’; Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*; Spry ‘Performing Autoethnography’, 720; Muncey, *Creating autoethnographies*, 31.
- <sup>18</sup> Noakes, ‘Gender, War and Memory’, 666.
- <sup>19</sup> Henniker, *Red Shadow Over Malaya*.
- <sup>20</sup> Schwartz and Cook, ‘Archives, records and power’, 12-13.
- <sup>21</sup> Pell, ‘Radicalising politics of archive’, 35 and Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
- <sup>22</sup> Schwartz and Cook, ‘Archives, records and power’, 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Merton, ‘Insiders and Outsiders’; Greenwood, ‘Chameleon masculinity’; Henry, Higate, and Sanghera, ‘Positionality and Power’; Yuval-Davies, ‘Intersectionality, Politics, Belonging’.
- <sup>24</sup> Parashar, ‘Feminism and Postcolonialism’, Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
- <sup>25</sup> Icaza, ‘Social struggles and coloniality’; Syed and Ali, ‘The White Woman’s Burden’.
- <sup>26</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
- <sup>27</sup> Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 7, explores Iran/Contra Affair asking ‘where are the women?’ and Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters*, 4 describes how the patriarchal nationalist movement removed women’s participation as combatants from the historical narrative.



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- <sup>28</sup> Hack, 'Everyone lived in fear'; Hack, *Using and abusing past*; Ucko, 'The Malayan Emergency'; Marston and Malkasian, *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*; Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*; Jones and Smith, 'Myth and small wars'; Ramakrishna, "'Transmogrifying" Malaya'; Strachan, 'British COIN Malaya-Iraq'; Smith, 'General Templer and COIN'.
- <sup>29</sup> Levine, 'Gendering Decolonisation'.
- <sup>30</sup> Mizokami-Okamoto, 'Colonial Welfare'.
- <sup>31</sup> Cloake, Templer, Tiger of Malaya; Harper, *The End of Empire*; Strobel, *European Women and Empire*; Robinson, *Force to reckon with*; Sunderland, *Winning Hearts and Minds*.
- <sup>32</sup> Bhattacharya, 'Gender, insurgency and, terrorism'.
- <sup>33</sup> Bruce-Lockhart, 'Unsound minds, broken bodies'; Muzenda, *Invisible trauma of women*.
- <sup>34</sup> With the exception of the French in Algeria where mobile social and medical teams (Equipes Medicales Sociales Itinerant) were employed directly by the Army to reach out to women in the community, encouraging reforms (Seferdjeli, 'French Army, Muslim Women').
- <sup>35</sup> Mama, 'Colonialism'.
- <sup>36</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
- <sup>37</sup> Dyvik, 'Women "Practitioners" and "Targets"'.
- <sup>38</sup> Dixon, *British approach to counterinsurgency*, 79.
- <sup>39</sup> Dyvik, 'Women "Practitioners" and "Targets"', 411.
- <sup>40</sup> Kilcullen, 'State of controversial art'.
- <sup>41</sup> Duncanson and Cornish, 'Feminist approach to counterinsurgency', 147; Goldstein, *War and gender*.
- <sup>42</sup> Owens, *Economy of Force*.
- <sup>43</sup> McBride and Wibben, 'Gendering of counterinsurgency'.
- <sup>44</sup> Khalili, 'Gendered practices of counterinsurgency'.
- <sup>45</sup> Herbertson, Letter from Malaya.
- <sup>46</sup> Hinton, *Women and social leadership*, 157, 177.
- <sup>47</sup> NFWI, Annual Report 1952, 18-19.
- <sup>48</sup> Margaret Herbertson had been in the employment of the NFWI as General and Public Questions Organiser for 6 months when she successfully applied for the post as WI organiser in Malaya (NFWI, Annual Report 1952, 19). Daughter of a retired Foreign Office Official, she worked as a code and cipher operator with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry during the Second World War in Egypt and Italy before working as a house mistress and in the probation service (*Woman's Week*, 2 October, 1952).
- <sup>49</sup> NFWI, Annual Report 1952, 18-19.
- <sup>50</sup> Diemer, 'Setting Up National Body', 11; Barton, *Instructor's for Malayan WIs*, para 2.
- <sup>51</sup> European planter's wives similarly challenged gendered expectations by engaging in public political debate despite their isolation and demanding living conditions (Datta, 'Wives of European Planters'). Their agency is portrayed in the 1952 film, 'The Planter's Wife', where Claudette Colbert plays the tough wife called upon to defend the plantation from attack (See Rich, *Cinema and Unconventional Warfare*).
- <sup>52</sup> Barton, *Instructor's for Malayan WIs*, para 3.
- <sup>53</sup> Herbertson, Letter from Malaya.
- <sup>54</sup> Home and Country, *More News From Malaya*, 116.
- <sup>55</sup> Gurney, Letter to Countess Limerick, 1; Spens, Preliminary visits to Malaya, para3.

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- <sup>56</sup> BRCS, Notes of conversations, 2.
- <sup>57</sup> BRCS, Broadcast by Charles Mathew, 1, para 3.
- <sup>58</sup> New Villages were 'settlements for the Chinese squatters, estate workers, and villagers that protected them behind chain link and barbed wire fences lit with floodlights and patrolled by Chinese Auxiliary Police Forces' and included 'schools, medical aid stations, community centers, village cooperatives' and their own Home Guard (Nagl, *Learning to eat soup*, 75).
- <sup>59</sup> Malacca Branch recorded 19 life members, 77 first aid detachment members, 84 serving associates, 329 subscribing associates and 370 junior cadets (BRCS, *Malacca Branch Report 1953*); and Perak Branch recorded 87 life members, 490 first aid detachment members, 739 serving associates, 105 subscribing associates and 1213 junior cadets. (BRCS, *Perak Branch Report 1953*)
- <sup>60</sup> British Journal of Nursing, *Work in New Villages*, 90.
- <sup>61</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 60-61.
- <sup>62</sup> Enloe, *Does khaki become you?*, 73; Goldstein, *War and gender*, 381; Hyde, *Inhibiting No-Man's-Land*.
- <sup>63</sup> Papenek, *Two-person career*, 852.
- <sup>64</sup> McCarthy, *Women of the World*, 323-326.
- <sup>65</sup> McCarthy, *Women of the World*, 323-326.
- <sup>66</sup> Enloe, *Does khaki become you?*, 50, 49, 73.
- <sup>67</sup> Harrell, 'Army Officer's Spouses', 55.
- <sup>68</sup> Diemer, 'Setting Up National Body', 11.
- <sup>69</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
- <sup>70</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*, 30.
- <sup>71</sup> Parashar, 'Feminism and Postcolonialism'.
- <sup>72</sup> Hyde, 'Civilian Wives of Military', 202.
- <sup>73</sup> Bamfield, *The British Army Wife*, 9-10.
- <sup>74</sup> Legg, *Military wives*, 50-52, 88-92.
- <sup>75</sup> Hyde, 'Civilian Wives of Military', 202.
- <sup>76</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*, 27.
- <sup>77</sup> Diemer, 'Setting Up National Body', 11.
- <sup>78</sup> Cloake, Templer, *Tiger of Malaya*, 216.
- <sup>79</sup> Briggs, *Federation Plan for Malaya*, 2.
- <sup>80</sup> Griffiths, *Raising Social Standards*, 1.
- <sup>81</sup> BRCS, Central Council Meeting 1952, 17; Spens, Preliminary visits to Malaya, para 3; NFWI, Annual Report 1952, 18-19.
- <sup>82</sup> Home and Country, *Thanks from Malaya*, para 7; Lyttelton, General Templer February 1953, 4.
- <sup>83</sup> Lees, Letter Assistant District Officer, 1; Mathew, Letter to Editor.
- <sup>84</sup> Lyttelton, General Templer September 1952, 2.
- <sup>85</sup> Lyttelton, General Templer May 1952, 6.
- <sup>86</sup> Mathew, Letter to Editor.
- <sup>87</sup> Female Engagement Teams (FETs) were groups of female soldiers deployed by the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan to work with the local population by reaching out to women (and some men) in the local communities. The British policy ran from 2010 to 2014.

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- <sup>88</sup> MacGillivray, Letter to Lady Limerick, 1.
- <sup>89</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*.
- <sup>90</sup> Enloe, *The Morning After*, 166.
- <sup>91</sup> Home and Country, *More News From Malaya*, 115.
- <sup>92</sup> BRCS, Report of Travelling Dispensary, 1; BRCS, Federation Annual Report 1951, 1; BRCS, Work Red Cross Branches, 1.; Templer, E. Letter to Lady Brunner, 1.
- <sup>93</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test'; Davey, Borton, and Foley, *History of humanitarian system*, 26; Rist, *The History of Development*.
- <sup>94</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 54.
- <sup>95</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test'; Davey, Borton, and Foley, *History of humanitarian system*.
- <sup>96</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 51.
- <sup>97</sup> Owens, Economy of Force.
- <sup>98</sup> Syed and Ali, 'The White Woman's Burden', p.352
- <sup>99</sup> Sabaratnam, Decolonising Intervention - International Statebuilding, Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes'.
- <sup>100</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 58, 64.
- <sup>101</sup> BRCS, Broadcast by Charles Mathew, 1.
- <sup>102</sup> Mizokami-Okamoto, 'Colonial Welfare', 28, 43; Robinson, Force to reckon with; NFWI, International Sub-Committee May 1951; NFWI, International Sub-Committee November 1951, 1.
- <sup>103</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 52-53
- <sup>104</sup> Brown, Suggested Teams for Malaya, 1.
- <sup>105</sup> BRCS, Broadcast by Charles Mathew, 1.
- <sup>106</sup> Pery, *Diary of Lady Limerick*, 8; Junior Red Cross Journal, *Federation of Malaya*, 18-19.
- <sup>107</sup> NFWI, International Sub-Committee October 1953, 4.
- <sup>108</sup> Azarbajjani-Moghaddam, *Seeking out afghan sisters*.
- <sup>109</sup> NFWI, Executive Committee May 1953, 6.
- <sup>110</sup> Mizokami-Okamoto, 'Colonial Welfare', 37.
- <sup>111</sup> Home and Country, *WI Outing in Malaya*, 223.
- <sup>112</sup> Robinson, Force to reckon with.
- <sup>113</sup> Home and Country, *WI Outing in Malaya*, 223.
- <sup>114</sup> Goldstein, *War and gender*, 312.
- <sup>115</sup> Unknown, Winning hearts of people, para 7-9.
- <sup>116</sup> Diemer, 'Setting Up National Body', 11
- <sup>117</sup> Diemer, 'Setting Up National Body', 11
- <sup>118</sup> Herbertson, Letter from Malaya.
- <sup>119</sup> Home and Country, *More News From Malaya*, 115.
- <sup>120</sup> Russell, Blessing of Good Skirt, 14.
- <sup>121</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*, 25.
- <sup>122</sup> Nelson, *Race for Space*, 67.
- <sup>123</sup> Nelson, *Race for Space*, 67.
- <sup>124</sup> Unknown, Winning hearts of people, para 4.
- <sup>125</sup> Pettman, *Worlding Women*, 29.

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- <sup>126</sup> Herbertson, Letter to Lady Brunner.
- <sup>127</sup> Smith, Takes WI into jungle, 1.
- <sup>128</sup> Smith, Takes WI into jungle, 8.
- <sup>129</sup> Templer, Letter to Oliver Lyttelton, 8-9.
- <sup>130</sup> Baskerville, *The White Picture*.
- <sup>131</sup> Peterson, D.G.I.S. to Lady Templer, 1.
- <sup>132</sup> Peterson, D.G.I.S. to Lady Templer, 1.
- <sup>133</sup> Templer, E., Letter to Lady Brunner, 1.
- <sup>134</sup> Viola Williams had been the NFWI Agricultural Organiser before being appointed to follow on as WI organiser in Malaya after Margaret Herbertson. Growing up in Wiltshire to a family embedded in the WI, she had experience of Malaya from her service there in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry Welfare Unit during the Second World War. (Home and Country, *To and From Malaya*, para2).
- <sup>135</sup> Home and Country, *Thanks from Malaya*, para5.
- <sup>136</sup> Barton, Instructor's for Malayan WIs.
- <sup>137</sup> Patterson, Trengganu Branch of BRCS, 3.
- <sup>138</sup> Thompson, 'Humanitarian principles to test', 57-58.
- <sup>139</sup> Peterson, D.G.I.S. to Lady Templer, 1.
- <sup>140</sup> Funded by the Malay government the NFWI sustained a rolling appointment of a WI organiser for four iterations before training a Malay replacement (NFWI, International Sub-Committee October, 1954, 5). The British Red Cross deployed 25 Nurses accompanied by 25 Welfare Officers (BRCS, Broadcast by Charles Mathew, 1, para 3). British women were also present in country as planter's wives and the wives of colonial administrators, some of whom supported these outreach programs, although numbers are unclear (Barton, *Instructor's for Malayan WIs*, para 3). Servicewomen also deployed with 4 Independent Company, Women's Royal Army Corps although being stationed in Singapore only limited numbers visited Malaya (*The Telegraph*, 26 July, 2011).
- <sup>141</sup> Owens, Economy of Force.

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