

The primitive bombs sometimes did not explode, and tribal children developed a passion for playing with the duds. When the air force proposed using bombs with delayed action fuses, one senior officer protested that the result would be "blowing a lot of children to pieces". Nevertheless, the RAF went ahead - without the knowledge of the civilian High Commissioner for Iraq, Sir Henry Dobbs - because delayed-action bombs prevented tribesmen from tending their crops under cover of darkness.

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Churchill was sometimes troubled by the realities of the methods he had supported. During one raid in Iraq, British pilots machine-gunned women and children as they fled from their homes. "To fire wilfully on women and children taking refuge in a lake is a disgraceful act," Churchill protested to the Chief of the Air Staff. "I am surprised you do not order the officers responsible for it to be tried by court martial." No action was taken, and this incident was quietly forgotten.

This "police bombing" was too much for some air force officers to stomach.



In 1924, a distinguished Air Commodore, Lionel Charlton, resigned his post as a staff officer in Iraq after he visited a hospital and saw the victims of British bombing recovering from their injuries. The air force recalled him to England, promising not to otherwise damage his career provided he took his protests no further; but they went back on their word and placed him on the retired list in 1928.

Other officers seemed to enjoy the work. One who did was Arthur Harris, who would later achieve fame directing the bomber offensive against Germany in the second world war. Known to his friends as Bomber and to his enemies as Butcher, he first practised his trade against Kurdish villages in Iraq.

"Where the Arab and Kurd had begun to realise that if they could stand a little noise, they could stand bombing, and still argue," he reported after one raid in 1924, "they now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape."

The British employed "police bombing" elsewhere in the empire - in Transjordan; against the Pathan tribesmen on the north-west frontier of India; in the Aden Protectorate (now the southern part of Yemen); and against the Nuer people of the southern Sudan.

The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Hugh Trenchard, had great ambitions for his bombers. In a paper written early in 1920, when some politicians feared a revolution in Britain, he suggested that the RAF could even suppress "industrial disturbances or risings" in England itself. Churchill was horrified, and demanded that Trenchard never refer to the proposal again - at least not in writing.

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Baghdad and British bombers

(Guardian, UK 19 January, 1991)

Iraq is no stranger to British aerial bombardment. David Omissi recalls the 1920s when gas shells and explosives were used to keep dissident tribesmen under control.

SADDAM HUSSEIN was not the first to use chemical weapons against the Iraqi population. General Sir Aymer Haldane commanded the British forces which effectively ruled Iraq after its conquest by the Allies during the first world war. When the tribesmen of the Euphrates rose in rebellion against British military rule in the summer of 1920, the British army used gas shells - "with excellent moral effect" - in the fighting which followed.

Unsurprisingly, the rebellion was crushed - with the loss of nearly 9,000 Arab lives. Freed to impose their political will in Iraq, the British then created a client kingdom, under Faisal ibn Hussain, the son of the Sharif of Mecca. The British did not want Faisal to appear a puppet, so held a referendum in 1921 and almost certainly fixed its result - to give some legitimacy to his appointment.

The British armed forces underpinned this indirect imperialism. Winston Churchill, Colonial Secretary from 1921, believed that British bombers could control the dissident Iraqi tribesmen. Some army officers feared such methods might be too brutal, but despite this they were adopted because they promised to be very cheap. In 1922, the Air Ministry took over the defence of the new kingdom.

Like Saddam's bombers, the squadrons of the Royal Air Force flew most of their missions against the Kurds who resented rule from Baghdad. For 10 years the British waged an almost continuous bombing campaign in the oil-rich and mountainous north-east against the Kurdish rebels, to whom they had earlier promised autonomy.

The Iraqi air force - which the British had built up, trained and equipped - carried on the work after Iraq became nominally independent in 1932.

Churchill consistently urged that the RAF should use mustard gas during these raids, despite the warning by one of his advisers that "it may ... kill children and sickly persons, more especially as the people against whom we intend to use it have no medical knowledge with which to supply antidotes". In the event the air force did not use gas bombs - for technical rather than humanitarian reasons.

Even without gas the campaign was brutal enough. Some Iraqi villages were destroyed merely because their inhabitants had not paid their taxes. The British authorities always maintained in public, however, that people were not bombed for refusing to pay - merely for refusing to appear when summoned to explain non-payment.