

Sir Charles Tegart: The "Counterterrorism Expert" in Palestine

Part 1

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In the summer of 1937, as the Arab revolt in Palestine entered into its second year, the British government became increasingly desperate to crush it. The Colonial Office in London, reluctant to see the revolt as a politically-motivated national movement, viewed the rebels as “thugs” and “bandits.” The best way to deal with these “bandits,” they believed, was better policing. They therefore turned to an almost thirty-year veteran of colonial policing, and commissioned him to go to Palestine. This was Sir Charles Tegart and he carried out what is seen by many as one of the most influential missions to reshape “security” policy in Palestine. And, as Laleh Khalili has argued, security and counterinsurgency practices in British Mandate Palestine both drew from previous, and contributed to future, imperial domination around the globe down to the present time.¹

This essay is a brief biographical sketch of Tegart’s life until the end of his first tour of duty in Palestine in June 1938.² Tegart was an extremely private person. He never spoke to the press and rarely allowed his photo to be taken. His surviving diary entries read largely like appointment calendars (for example, “10 am – Saunders”) with no mention of a meeting’s purpose, let alone Tegart’s thoughts or feelings on a subject. Tegart also seemed to prefer face-to-face meetings rather than communicating via memos or letters. Notes from his time in Palestine often read something like: “B.– dropped by to see you but you were out. I’ll come by tomorrow. CT.” This biographical sketch thus relies heavily on the notes, letters, and diaries of others who knew or met Tegart.

Editor’s Note:

This article is the first of two about Charles Tegart. The second article will appear in issue 75 of *JQ* and focuses on Tegart’s role in creating the police fortresses that he established across Palestine.



Figure 1. Lady Tegart (left), carrying her fur, with Mrs. Saunders, followed by Inspector-General Alan Saunders (in uniform), walking with Sir Charles; in the back (right), David Petrie, carrying his overcoat.

Early Years

Charles Tegart was born in 1881, in Londonderry, in the north of Ireland. He was the second son of Joseph and Georgina Tegart. His father was an Anglican priest, originally from the south of Ireland. After receiving a parish near Dublin, his father moved the family to Dunboyne, in County Meath, and young Charles spent his childhood in the countryside there, just outside of Dublin. As a child, Tegart would occasionally accompany his father to church services or lectures in Dublin; after he and his father rode home, his father would quiz young Charles on the content of sermon. Tegart's father died when Charles was just 14 years old, and his mother died a year later. At this point he and his brother came under the custody of their uncle, supported by his father's estate, assessed at £2,443.³

Charles first attended a preparatory school at Rathmines, just south of Dublin. His uncle then sent Charles and his brother to the Portora Royal School, a boys' boarding school in the countryside near Enniskillen, in County Fermanagh, northern Ireland. His brother later recalled the austere environment and strict teachers. Charles excelled in his studies and in sports. Perhaps Charles's upbringing in a clergyman's home gave him an aptitude for theology: he did well on his exit exams, and received the "First Class Prize in Greek [New] Testament in the Senior Church of Ireland examination" as well as a School of Divinity prize.⁴

Charles studied theology at Trinity College, Dublin, and, again, excelled in his studies.

But when he saw an announcement for recruits to the Colonial Police in India toward the end of his first year at Trinity, he signed up. He was one of 17 applicants (of some 150) to pass the recruitment and horsemanship exams and be offered a position. He passed the medical examination and enlisted in June 1901.

India Years

Tegart and the other new recruits took the long boat journey to Bengal, India. There, he attended the Police Training College in Bhagalpur, where he studied local languages, as well as criminal law. In his free time, he enjoyed horseback riding and polo. At the polo field, Tegart met Sir John Cumming, the British District Magistrate. When Tegart finished his training, Cumming appointed him in charge of the police in Patna City, which had a population of 200,000. Tegart was twenty-one years old at the time, but could already speak two of the local languages.⁵ He was in charge of the police in Patna City for two years (1903–04), then in Birbhum for a year, and Manbhum for six months. In April 1906, he was transferred to Calcutta and appointed acting deputy commissioner.

In Calcutta, Tegart lived with other bachelors and later recalled how they would pass time shooting at bats. During a fistfight, Tegart broke the jaw of one of his housemates. The male colonial camaraderie also led him, the night before a good friend's wedding, to attempt to ride a bicycle down the stairs of their bachelor pad, breaking his ankle in the process.⁶

From 1906 until the outbreak of World War I, Tegart was a rising star in the Calcutta police force. Tegart was developing into an officer who would be part of a hierarchical network of abuse and segregation in these years. At the start of the war, he helped foil a plot by Germans to supply arms to revolutionaries in Bengal. He then returned to England and joined the Royal Field Artillery in France, where he saw active duty until the end of the war. He served in the army of occupation in the Rhineland until 1919, when he was transferred to a special intelligence branch. He worked in intelligence in England and Ireland from 1919 until he was recalled to India in 1923. Tegart married Kathleen Frances Herbert in 1922. Like Charles, she was the child of a clergyman.⁷ Shortly after their marriage, Charles was appointed commissioner of police of Calcutta. The thirty-year-old Irishman was now in charge of a police force that numbered approximately 2,500 men.

As the Indian movement for independence from British colonial rule spread and strengthened in the early twentieth century, unrest and acts of resistance grew in Bengal. To Tegart and the British, the leaders of the movement were “revolutionaries” and their methods were “terrorism.” Tegart was keen on suppressing such acts of violence and gained a reputation for effectively combating “terrorism” and “revolutionaries.” Several attempts were made to assassinate him, none successful. On an early January morning in 1924, a businessman who resembled Tegart was looking in a shop window with his back to the street. A young Bengali, assuming it was Tegart, shot the man

in the back several times and fled on foot. The man died of his wounds, and when the perpetrator was caught, he was shocked when Tegart walked into the jail to question him.⁸

Tegart's widow later described her husband's ability to "convert" young revolutionaries away from their use of violence, and even his ability to recruit these "converts" into informants for the police.⁹



Figure 2. Tegart's car with holes from bombs, August 1930 (Cambridge, Tegart Photos)

Her naive and sympathetic account must be contrasted with reports of police brutality and coercion during this time period in India; if anything, it shows an astonishing British imperialist self-perception. It is clear from Tegart's own papers that he viewed himself and his tactics as enlightened (however self-delusional we find this to be). A fascinating private meeting in 1925 between Tegart and Mahatma Ghandi will be discussed elsewhere.¹⁰ That same year, Tegart received his knighthood.

In 1930, a serious rebellion broke out in Chittagong, Eastern Bengal, which Tegart and his men tried to put down. On 25 August 1930, as Tegart was being driven to work in the morning, two bombs were hurled at his open convertible car (figure 2). Tegart jumped out to pursue one of the suspects and, according to newspaper accounts, he shot and killed one assailant and captured another. His driver and others were wounded, but Tegart was unharmed.¹¹ Tegart received dozens of notes of congratulations from the British Empire Association to the Muslim Student Association and the Calcutta Stock Exchange.¹²

In early September 1930, Tegart received permission from the French to carry out an attack to pursue some Chittagong rebellion leaders who had fled into neighboring French-controlled territory. Tegart and nine of his men set out after midnight to raid their hideout in Chandernagore. Tegart and his men wore tennis shoes to keep quiet and masks over their faces. They encircled the remote house where the rebellion's leaders were hiding, and successfully captured three of the leaders.¹³ In this we see Tegart willing to use innovative tactics, transforming part of his police force into what today we would call a small SWAT team. Through his years as the head of the police in Calcutta, Tegart's reputation grew due to his successes in putting down "disturbances" and also due to press coverage of the many attempts on his life.

In the photographs that Tegart collected during his years in India and later brought home with him to England, there are many of dead Indian men. He wrote their names on the back of the photos, often noting the crime for which they were hunted down.

London Years

In March 1931, Tegart's brother was diagnosed with a terminal illness and Tegart returned to spend time with him during his last weeks of life. When his brother passed away the following month, Tegart remained to spend time helping his brother's widow and child, and also with his wife's family. After, they drove to France, meandering through the countryside until they reached Cannes on the Riviera, where they vacationed with Lady Yule, widow of Sir David Yule, one of the most important businessmen in India and one of the wealthiest men in Britain. Lady Yule invited them to sail back to Calcutta on her yacht, the largest in the world at the time. Here we see the privilege and prestige that a British Colonial official from a fairly modest background could enjoy. The Tegarts were unable to avail themselves of this offer, however, as Charles fell ill and underwent an emergency appendectomy.

As Tegart recovered, the Secretary of State's office offered him membership in the Council of India. This was a high honor and one that no former police officer had been offered. Tegart hated to give up his post as police commissioner in Calcutta, but ultimately accepted the offer, resigned his police duties, and joined the council before Christmas 1931 to begin his five-year appointment.¹⁴ Early in 1932, Tegart was invited to give a lecture or speech at the Royal Empire Society. Although he generally shied away from anything public, he accepted. His topic was "Terrorism in India" and not surprisingly he advocated for using harsh tactics for fighting terrorism.¹⁵

During his years on the Council of India, Tegart and his wife spent their summers touring Europe by car. In 1934 they went to Austria and Hungary, returning to London via Germany and Belgium and in 1935 they visited Freudenstadt, in Germany's Black Forest. They were troubled by the anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany, seeing signs that read *Juden sind hier nicht erwünscht* (Jews not welcome here) and children giving the Nazi salute as they passed in the British-plated car. By the summer of 1936, Hitler had occupied the Rhineland, and the Tegarts did not travel to Europe.¹⁶ Prior to his time in Palestine, Tegart had developed sympathy for European Jews.

Palestine Years

In July 1937, the Royal Commission, headed by Lord William Peel and which had toured Palestine after the first phase of the Arab revolt, published its report.¹⁷ The Arab reaction to the report was predictably negative. As violence in Palestine continued, and even heightened, the Colonial Office approached Tegart to offer him the position of inspector-general of police in Palestine. Tegart was eager to help, but noted that he was unfamiliar with the country and the language and thus declined the position. Instead, he suggested that he go to Palestine as a counterterrorism expert to inspect the police apparatus and make recommendations for reforms. He also insisted that the Colonial

Office not publicize his mission. The Colonial Office appointed him for a six-month period based on Tegart's suggestion, but failed to keep his mission a secret. Within days, news of his appointment was in the press. In Palestine, the chief secretary heard rumors that "Tegart will be attacked upon his arrival."¹⁸ Tegart thus negotiated a larger salary (£300 per month) and also requested that his former colleague in India, David Petrie, be appointed his assistant.¹⁹ Tegart reasoned, "I'm impulsive and inclined to rush to get things done and impatient if I don't see immediate action. Petrie's hard-headed and arrives at his judgment by slow, logical reasoning."²⁰ The Colonial Office concurred and offered Petrie a commission.

Meanwhile in Palestine, the situation was deteriorating. The high commissioner, Sir Arthur Wauchope, had gone on leave in early September 1937, leaving the chief secretary, William Battershill, as acting high commissioner. On 26 September, the acting district commissioner for the Galilee, Lewis Andrews, and British constable Peter R. McEwan were gunned down outside a church in Nazareth. Andrews was the first senior British official killed in the revolt and his death sent shockwaves through the British administration and community. Battershill ordered the arrest of the Arab Higher Committee the following week; only Hajj Amin al-Husayni and Jamal al-Husayni managed to avoid arrest.²¹

Tegart, still in London and not yet officially employed in his new appointment, met with Wauchope (still in London on leave), Sir Cosmo Parkinson (undersecretary of state for the colonies), and Alan Saunders (the newly appointed inspector-general of the Palestine Police) in preparation. Saunders had served in the colonial police in India (1908–14), and had been in Palestine since World War I, rising to deputy inspector-general from 1926 to 1935, and then served as inspector-general of the Nigeria Police from 1936 to 1937. Wauchope, meeting Tegart for the first time, noted afterward, "I hope he is as good as his reputation credits him. What we need more than any thing is someone who can catch a criminal."²²

The Tegarts and David Petrie sailed for Port Said in late November 1937. From Egypt they travelled by train to Lydda, where they were met by Saunders and his wife (figure 1). By all accounts, Tegart was an intense man and worked hard. Almost immediately upon arriving in Palestine, he held talks with Wauchope, Battershill, and Saunders. He also wasted no time in inspecting police stations and posts all over Palestine. The Criminal Investigation Department provided Tegart with descriptions of various Arab leaders and each district police headquarters sent a detailed list of known or suspected rebels.²³

Within four weeks of his arrival, Tegart had come up with fourteen suggestions for immediate action. On New Year's Eve, 1937, he and Petrie met with Battershill, Saunders, and Assistant Inspector-General A. J. Kingsley-Heath to discuss these suggestions. They were not the recommendations for the reorganization of the Palestine Police for which Tegart had been commissioned; rather they were immediate measures for the government and police to get a handle on the rebellion. At the top of the list was

immediate “enlistment of irregulars” (evidently, Jewish supernumeraries) to patrol the northern and north eastern border. He also recommended to “stop enlistment of regular [Arab] Palestinian Police” and “[e]xtra jail accommodation for terrorist prisoners.” He wanted more dogs, more armored vehicles, and quick and generous cash payments to informants for “results,” a border fence and village registers.²⁴ This was a virtual “short list” of colonial methods of coercion. Within a few days, the high commissioner approved all of his recommendations.²⁵

On 24 January 1938, Tegart and Petrie submitted their report: a list of twenty-eight recommendations, to the chief secretary and inspector-general.²⁶ Among these recommendations, some of which were already being implemented, were reorganizing and strengthening the Criminal Investigation Department and creating a rural mounted police section to strike in the hill country where rebels were active. For this he suggested that the British recruit ex-servicemen, “the tough type of man, not necessarily literate.”²⁷ Several recommendations dealt with infrastructure: constructing roads, border posts, and a border fence.²⁸ Perhaps the most enduring recommendation was for the construction of new police stations or fortresses.²⁹

Petrie returned to England, while Tegart remained in Palestine, actively advising the government and the military. He met frequently with an informal “security committee” of himself, the general officer commanding, the chief secretary, and the inspector-general of police. It was clear to Tegart and others that the rebel movement’s leadership was now based in Damascus, with some elements in Beirut. In February 1938, Tegart and his wife traveled by car to Beirut, where he visited the French intelligence offices. He was given free access to files, which he described as highly disorganized,³⁰ and obtained some commitments of better collaboration between the French intelligence officers in Beirut and their British counterparts in Palestine. Tegart and his wife departed Beirut for Damascus, where they were hosted by the British consul, Colonel Gilbert MacKereth, and his wife. Tegart met several high level officials there, including the head of intelligence, Commandant Bonnet, and the high commissioner, Damien de Martel.³¹ In Beirut and Damascus, Tegart relentlessly pursued commitments for the French authorities to collaborate more with the British in Palestine to stop the flow of rebels across the border.

On the drive from Damascus back to Palestine, the Tegarts’ car slid off the road into a ditch near al-Qunaytra, which Tegart recorded in his diary in his typically understated and impersonal style – “A very wet day and greasy roads” – but they were eventually returned safely to Nazareth by a car sent by the police unit at Safad. That evening and the following morning, Tegart met with Alec Kirkbride, district commissioner of the Galilee, sharing with him what he had learned in Damascus and Beirut. He then met with police officials in Nablus, before returning to Jerusalem. By this time, Tegart had realized that he lost his cigarette lighter in Damascus. He sent word to MacKereth, who replied that police there hardly ever find missing objects. This cannot have inspired much confidence in his counterparts across the border, and Tegart removed the lighter from his list of personal belongings.³²



Figure 3: Farewell table set with replica of “Tegart’s Wall” at King David Hotel, Jerusalem, 11 June 1938.

Tegart’s Wall

Tegart was completely convinced of the need for a secure border with Syria and Lebanon. In his view, the one-time expense of constructing a barrier would save money in the long run. He pointed to a recent attack on Christmas Day 1937, when perpetrators had fled across the frontier to Syria. He believed that if a proper barrier with patrols had been in place, they would have been trapped.

By March 1938, Tegart convinced the new high commissioner, the general officer commanding, and the Executive Council of the need for his plan. The high commissioner then pressed the Colonial Office in London to support this effort. Petrie, Tegart’s former assistant who had returned to London, also met with officials in the Colonial Office in mid-March and “took the occasion to press strongly for the early erection of the proposed fencing.”³³ In early April, news was out that an electric fence was being considered for the frontier. The press rumored that the wall would be thirty feet tall and that trespassers would be electrocuted. Among service members and also in the press, the border barrier was referred to as “Tegart’s Wall.”³⁴

Tegart estimated the cost of the border fence at £80,000. Military authorities adjusted the figure to £300,000, while the high commissioner requested £150,000 for its construction. On 6 April 1938, a telegram sent by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the high commissioner for Palestine “approve[d] expenditure not to exceed £150,000 for frontier fence and re-siting and redesigning of Police Posts.”³⁵ Within weeks of Tegart’s

proposal to build the fence, the Colonial Office had given approval, despite its falling outside of the budget and the absence of a concrete final cost estimate.

Tegart received permission to hire an outside firm (rather than the Public Works Department or other Mandate services) to construct the fence. He contracted with Solel Boneh, the contracting company of the Federation of Jewish Labor. While the high commissioner and the Colonial Officer were still corresponding about the cost, the fence was already being built. The Reuters new agency reported that the Palestine government was using Egyptian labor,³⁶ but the fence was being built by Jewish labor protected by Jewish supernumerary police – paid by the British.³⁷ The Jewish Telegraphic Agency wrote:

The barbed-wire “fence” under construction today along the northern frontier of Palestine will be a barricade such as exists on no other border in the world, not even the most troubled. The “fence” is actually an entanglement of the most substantial and permanent wartime type, over six feet high and six feet deep, strung on stakes set in concrete. There are 200 yards of wire coiled in an impenetrable tangle in every yard of length of the barricade.³⁸

The Federation of British Industries cited rumors that the barbed wire was being purchased from Belgium or, yet worse, from Mussolini’s Italy, while Chief Secretary Battershill claimed it came from Czechoslovakia.³⁹

During and after the fence’s construction, rebels cut the wires, sometimes removing large portions of it. Still, some authorities regarded “Tegart’s Wall” a success. As Sir Charles and Lady Tegart prepared to depart from Palestine in June 1938, a farewell cocktail party and several dinner parties were hosted in their honor.⁴⁰ The most elaborate was a farewell dinner at the King David Hotel, where for a centerpiece, a miniature “Tegart’s Wall,” made from real barbed wire, complete with pillbox guard towers, ran down the center of the table. Tegart’s chair, at the place of honor, was also adorned with barbed wire (figure 3).

At the end of the summer of 1938, Tegart was re-commissioned to continue his work in Palestine. He returned in September and remained in Palestine until May 1939.

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Endnotes

- 1 Laleh Khalili, “The Location of Palestine in Global Insurgencies,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42, no. 3 (August 2010): 413–33; especially 415.
- 2 The author’s description of Tegart’s second stint in Palestine, and subsequent construction of fortified police stations across Palestine, will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* focusing on police, prisons, and criminal justice in Palestine.
- 3 National Archive, Ireland, Will Calendars, 1895, 00501490900435_005014909/.

- 4 Cambridge, Centre for Asian Studies Archive (hereafter Cambridge CASA), K1, folio 10.
- 5 Cambridge CASA, K1, folio 36.
- 6 Cambridge CASA, K1, folio 64.
- 7 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, vol. 54, 24; J. C. Curry, *Tegart of the Indian Police*, National Army Museum, 1960, 15 and 22.
- 8 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 3, file 1.
- 9 Cambridge CASA, K1, folio 57.
- 10 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 2, file 8. The author is working on a separate article that focuses on Tegart and Ghandi's meeting.
- 11 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 1, file 2a.
- 12 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 1, file 4.
- 13 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 1, file 2a.
- 14 Curry, *Tegart of the Indian Police*, 29.
- 15 Cambridge CASA, Tegart Papers, box 2, file 5.
- 16 Cambridge CASA, K1, folia 45–46.
- 17 Lord Peel served as the Secretary of State for India in the 1920s.
- 18 Oxford, Rhodes House, Bodleian Archive, British, Empire, s. 467, Battershill, box 10, file 3 (a twenty-page letter from Battershill to Sir John E. Shuckburgh, 21 November 1937).
- 19 Oxford, St. Anthony's College, Middle East Centre Archive (MECA), Tegart Papers, box 4, file 2b, folia 3–4.
- 20 Cambridge CASA, K1, folio 249.
- 21 Battershill, box 10, file 4, folio 21.
- 22 Battershill, box 10, file 4, folio 32b.
- 23 See, for example, MECA, Tegart Papers, box 2, file 3, folio 16.
- 24 MECA, Tegart Papers, box 2, file 3, folio 25.
- 25 MECA, Tegart Papers, box 2, file 3, folios 26–28.
- 26 National Archive, London, Colonial Office, 7331/383/, folio 66ff; MECA, Tegart Papers, box 4, item 7.
- 27 Colonial Office, 7331/383/.
- 28 For an analysis of Tegart's proposed reforms in comparison with those of Dowbiggin (1930), see Gad Kroizer, "From Dowbiggin to Tegart: Revolutionary Change in the Colonial Police in Palestine during the 1930s," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32, no.2 (May 2004): 115–133.
- 29 See my article on the "Tegart Forts" in issue no. 75 of *Jerusalem Quarterly*.
- 30 MECA, Tegart Papers, box 3, file 5, folios 25ff.
- 31 MECA, Tegart Papers, box 4, item 7.
- 32 MECA, Tegart Papers, box 3, file 5, folios 26–29.
- 33 Colonial Office, 7333/382/, folio 53b.
- 34 "Fencing-Off an Ancient Land: Trespassers in Palestine to Be Electrocuted," *Cork Examiner*, Cork Ireland, 2 April 1938.
- 35 Colonial Office, 7333/382/, folio 50.
- 36 *Yorkshire Post*, 28 June 1938.
- 37 Colonial Office, 7333/382/, folio 48.
- 38 *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Bulletin*, 10 May 1938.
- 39 Colonial Office, 7333/382/, folios 30–46.
- 40 MECA, GB1650193-, MacGillivray's diary, 8–11 June 1938.