High Noon of the Sikhs in the Armed Establishments of British Malaya

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SYNOPSIS

The history of the British colonisation of Malaya could not be separated from the roles which the Sikhs had played as instruments of pacification. Sikhs were much sought after as soldiers, policemen, watchmen and other caretaker duties during colonial times. The Punjab Province provided most of the manpower for all the armed establishments of Malaya since the beginning of British intervention in the Malay States until the outbreak of the First World War. Sikhs were then highly regarded as the most faithful and loyal servants of the Crown in Malaya. However, after the events of 1914 and 1915 Sikhs were less preferred in the local forces of British Malaya. By 1930, the colonial authorities did not wish to see any more armed Sikhs in Malaya. This article seeks to highlight the high noon of the Sikhs and the causes for their wane.

THE SIKHS

Sikhism is a religion adopted by about forty per cent of the inhabitants of Punjab. It is a religion, not a race, although often politically expressed as a race. Captain R.W.

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1 Pritchard to War Office, 25.11.1930, CRMC No. 25778, CO 717/51543.

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Falcon in his *Handbook on Sikhs*, gives a brief history of the Sikhs, laying emphasis on the purely religious character of early Sikhism in the sixteenth century. According to Sikh traditions the first of the Ten Gurus, Baba Nanak, was a holy man teaching a reformed and purified form of Hinduism in the sixteenth century. Sikhism under the first five gurus was tolerated by the Moghuls. The Fifth Guru, Arjan, tried to blend the disciples into something of a race and a palatinate, and this first brought them into disfavour with the Moslem government. Arjan was probably put to death by the Moslems, and his son Har Govindh succeeded him. In Govindh’s hands the sect, hitherto a simple brotherhood began to take on a military guise, and think about defending themselves. It was in the time of the Ninth Guru, Teg Bahadur, 1664-75, that trouble really rose with authority. Bahadur was also tortured to death. His son Guru Govind Singh, the tenth and last of the Ten Sikh Gurus, brooded on that tragedy. It was with Govindh Singh that Sikhism became a military order as well as a religion. He introduced a special initiation and baptism into an austerer form of the brotherhood. All Sikhs were to adopt the Rajput cognomen of Singh or ‘lion’ and the Singhs were to be distinguished by the wearing of what is usually known as the five Kakkas: the kesh, the uncut hair rolled in a knot on the head; the kachhera, shorts with a special cut; the kirpan, a steel dagger; the kara, a steel bangle; and the kangha, a small iron toothcomb, always worn in the hair. Falcon emphasizes the fact that a Sikh in the full sense is not born but becomes a Sikh only when he is initiated in the ceremony known as pahul or ‘gate’. The Tenth Guru had made their dress as distinctive as possible from Hindu or Moslem ones, and had then proclaimed measures to separate them finally from any communion with them. Caste was abolished as the repudiation of caste was the basic doctrine, and the ranks of the brotherhood were thrown open to all comers, though unfortunately the caste instinct so deeply ingrained does still linger.

Although all Sikhs are, in a sense, brothers, there are important distinctions to be understood and these Falcon carefully records. First, there are those whose ancestors were once Jats and those whose ancestors belonged to the Hindu divisions. There are also those whose ancestors belonged to the menial groups. After the Ninth Guru was killed by the Moslems, three scavengers carried his body away and Guru Govind Singh welcomed them and their descendents into Sikhism and named them Sikhs by religion-Mazhabi Sikhs. Initially the name, according to Falcon, could also be used by the

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3 The sixteenth century was a very active period in religious thought and searchings in the world. It was about the time of Martin Luther that Baba Nanak began to teach. Baba Nanak was a member of the Khatri caste, a high Hindu caste.

4 Before his murder by a Pathan the Guru is reported to have said that no further gurus were needed, and that he made over his brotherhood, the khalsa or ‘pure society’ to God, and that henceforth the *Ad Granth* was to be the guide of his people. Therein he said would the Guru be found. It was thus three centuries after Baba Nanak taught, that Sikhism came into combined political and religious stability.

5 Jats, like the Rajputs, were formerly Hindus. When Islam came to India a large number of Rajput and Jat tribes adopted that faith. When the teaching of Sikhism was introduced a large number of Hindu Jats accepted this new sect and later identified themselves as Jat Sikhs. George MacMunn, *The Martial Races* p. 13.
descendants of those three scavengers; however it was later appropriated by all converted scavengers.

The great mass of the Sikh people were the muscular and hardworking farmers, the Jats, Sainis and Kumbhos. Other Sikhs were the Khatris, who claimed to be of Kshattriya origin, and the Labanas, the traders; both were of the upper class. Most Sikhs, particularly in the Indian Army, descended from Hindus who were Jats by caste before their conversion. During the time of Govind Singh the Jats of half a district at a time would go through the pahul and join the order. There were many more respectable Hindu castes who converted to Sikhism. Among the Hindus the Jats were not reckoned among the higher castes such as Brahman and Rajput; their widows could remarry and they did not wear the sacred thread. They were landowners, patient and enduring cultivators; stubborn, courageous, assertive of personal and individual freedom. Such qualities were highly preferred in the colonial army and police.

The three districts from which the bulk of the Sikh soldier came, and where most of the Sikhs resided, were known as: the Manjha country in the Barri Doab; the Doaba, the country between the Beas and the Sutlej; and the Malwa, the country east of Sutlej.

THE SIKH AS A MARTIAL CLASS

As we have seen, the birth of Sikhism saw the beginning of a more than a hundred years' struggle between Sikhs and Moslems. This new enemy contributed greatly to the downfall on the Moghul Empire. Trouble began during the reign of Emperor Aurungzebe. It was at this time the Sikhs began to take on military guise, and think about defending themselves. Towards the end of the Moghul Empire, the Sikhs under one filibustering young baron, Runjhit Singh, managed to establish their military dominance in Punjab. The whole of Punjab and the frontier provinces were in the masterful hands of Runjhit Singh by 1830. Runjhit Singh built his mighty Sikh Army on the European model which became one of the most modern native armies of India at that time. They had once ruled Punjab where the population was about fifty per cent Moslems. Their rule was not remembered with affection by the Moslems, and it was with the expressed purpose of fighting Moslem intolerance that the Sikhs had become a military order. However, after the death of Runjhit Singh in 1839 his successors could not maintain order in Punjab and all met their deaths at the hands of their unruly soldiery and nobles.

The military qualities of the Sikhs were discovered by the British during the Sikh Wars. In December 1845 a Sikh army crossed the Sultej into British territory and attacked British troops. The British suffered heavy casualties in the fighting. The ability of the Sikhs to withstand British assault for three years was a proof that Sikhs were fine fighting men. The fighting qualities of the Sikhs impressed the British so much that immediately after the First Sikh War in 1846, two Sikh infantry regiments, the Ferozepore and Loodianah Regiments, were raised. A Punjab Irregular Force was also raised in 1846 to occupy and police the newly annexed Doaba territory. The Infantry regiments of this Force was known as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Sikh Infantry. After the

6 Ibid., p. 137.
Second Sikh War this force was incorporated with a larger one, the new Punjab Irregular Force, which was to garrison and police the Afghan and tribal borders. During that same year [1846] a corps whose task was to procure intelligence and act as guides to troops in the field was formed with one troop of cavalry and two companies of infantry. Some nine years later a Sikh Military Police Battalion was raised for service in the Sonthal country on the lower Ganges, after the Sonthal rebellion.\(^7\) When Punjab was annexed, every Bengal Infantry Regiment was ordered by the Commander-in-Chief to recruit at least a hundred Sikhs.

The Mutiny of the Bengal Army in 1857 saw the beginning of the mass recruitment of Sikhs for the Indian Army. Other than the Gurkhas, Sikhs had rendered the most vital service and they played an important role in besieging the mutineers. During the reorganization of the Bengal Army most of the surviving units were disbanded and replaced by Sikh regiments. As the years rolled on and the old Madras regiments were growing unfit, more and more of them were converted to Punjabi regiments and this meant more and more demand for Sikhs. Sikhs of other classes, even of the sweeper class, the Mazbhi, were also recruited as infantry battalions for the Bengal Pioneers.\(^8\)

To the British, the Sikhs who had been beaten had taken their defeat in the true sporting spirit of a side defeated at cricket. In less than ten years the Sikhs had become so grateful for the benefits of British rule that they were happy to fight for it. They were simple, manly and upright fellows. The army was considered as their natural profession. They were hardy, brave and intelligent, obedient to discipline; attached to their officers; and careless of caste prohibitions. They were considered to be thoroughly reliable and useful soldiers.

Falcon emphasised the role of heredity qualities such as hardiness, boldness and independence of spirit. Such qualities were said to be hereditary and would be weakened through intermarriage with non-Sikh women. To guard against deterioration of quality, recruitment colonies were established. The earliest to note was in the Punjab province in 1887. The Punjab Government invested over Rs30,000,000 for the irrigation of the barren wasteland of the central Punjab. More than 2,000,00 acres of cultivable land were distributed to carefully selected Sikh, Moslem and Hindu zemindars on the basis of their ability as agriculturalists and less tangible qualifications such as family and proven loyalty to the British.\(^9\) These settlers were divided on the basis of district, caste, and religion. Water rates in the colonies were much lower than in the non-colonies because the government hoped a policy of leniency in such matters would ensure the loyalty of the settlers who supplied recruits to the Indian Army.\(^10\)

It was men from these colonies whom the British recruited for the military and police forces of their colonial territories in East Africa, the Middle East, Hong Kong and Malaya. In Malaya, the earliest to note was the Sikh force raised by Captain Speedy. In July 1873, Ngah Ibrahim, the Menteri of Larut, commissioned Captain


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Tristram Speedy, then superintendent of police, Penang, to raise force of fighting men in order to save his tin mines from the depredations of the Chinese insurgents. Speedy who once served with the 10th Punjab Regiment went to the Punjab Province and recruited two hundred Sikhs and Pathans. The first batch of one hundred and ten Sikhs landed together with Speedy at Penang. When the Treaty of Pangkor was signed the following year [1874], Speedy was appointed as the Acting British Resident, and then as Assistant Resident of Larut. The Sikh force raised by Speedy then became the nucleus of the Perak Armed Police.

Towards the later part of the 1870s, when Malay resistance to colonial rule broke out in the various states British regulars of the 10th Regiment and other units of the Indian Army saw service in the Malay States. About 2,000 troops of the North Indian ethnics, the Sikhs and Punjabi Mussalmans were brought from India and Hong Kong to suppress Malay uprisings in Perak and Selangor. Once the Malay States were brought under British control. More Sikhs were recruited for the manpower in the para-military police forces for the maintenance of law and order: effectively they were military formations in support of imperial conquest and rule. Most of these were men with military experience who had formerly served in the Indian Army. In order to facilitate recruitment of these ex-sepoys Act IV of 1874 was passed by the Viceroy in Council known as 'An Act to Control Recruiting in British India for the Service of Foreign States'. Of the establishments the earliest to note was the First Battalion Perak Sikhs or its precursor Perak Armed Police.

In order to meet the manpower for the maintenance of law and order as well as for the suppression of local uprisings the Perak Armed Police was reorganised into a military formation in 1884 and named as the 1st Battalion Perak Sikhs. Frowd Walker, a British officer of the 28th Regiment of Foot, was sent by the governor of the Straits Settlements to Punjab in 1883 to select men of the 14th, 15th and the 45th Sikh Regiments. A total of about 1500 Sikhs and Pathans with military experience were brought to the Malay States as men of the First Battalion Perak Sikhs. This force was officered by former non-commissioned officers (NCOs) of the British Army who had been stationed in the Straits Settlements and most commandants were also former British regulars or officers of the Indian Army. The NCOs on the other hand were largely made up of Sikhs and Punjabis.

11 Kimberly to Governor Ord, 9.7.1873, CO 273/67. See also the Agreement between Speedy and Ngah Ibrahim, 11.8.1873, CO 273/69. For a detail report on the uncontrolable situation see Kimberly to Governor Ord, 10.7.1873, CO 273/67, and 24.7.1873, CO 273/68.
12 Foreign Department, Government of India to Lord Duke, SS for India, 16.10.1873, SS Original Correspondence, CO 273/72. See also Abstracts of the Contents of a Despatch to HM's SS for India, No. 189, 16.10.1873, CO 273/72.
14 This information appeared in the reports and memoranda enclosed with despatches written by Sir William Jervois, Governor of the Straits Settlements dated 17 and the 30 December of 1875, CO 273/82.
British penetration into the rest of Malaya also saw the increasing demand of Sikhs for policing the new territories. British early admiration of the Sikhs was best described by Governor Sir Frederick Weld who wrote after inspecting the Perak Force in August 1880:

I was especially pleased with the Sikh military police, their skirmishing was magnificent, and the wrestling after parade gave me an opportunity of observing their fine physique and remarkable litness and activity.\(^{17}\)

Later in 1888 Colonel F. Cardew, the comandant of the forces in the Straits Settlements also expressed satisfaction of the performance of the First Battalion Perak Sikhs as a military and police body. He considered the Battalion as a unit of the garrison for the defence of Malaya.\(^{18}\) In comparison to the Malays enlisted into the police force, Colonel Walker, then commandant of the First Battalion Perak Sikhs of 1886, said that Malays lived too easily to bind themselves to regular work and discipline.\(^{19}\) During 1892 and 1894 the Perak Sikhs, reinforced by Sikh contingents from Selangor, Sungei Ujong and Pahang, fought two campaigns against Malay uprisings in Pahang.\(^{20}\)

Later in 1896, as investment poured into the Malay States and as the number of British civilians increased, a new systems of protection was arranged with the Malay Rulers. Under a treaty dictated by the British, the four Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were forced to accept and maintain a battalion of Indian troops to be stationed at the chief tin mining district of Taiping.\(^{21}\) The treaty further stipulated that, ‘the above named Rulers also agreed to give such assistance in men, money, or other respects and further undertake, should war break out between Her Majesty’s government and that of any other power, to send, on the requisition of the Governor, a body of armed and equipped Indian troops for service in the Straits Settlements.’\(^{22}\)

Colonel Frowd Walker was again asked to organise a regular military unit from the existing police forces. This first mercenary battalion maintained by the Federated Malay States under the 1895 treaty was known as the Malay States Guides (MSG). The regiment originated from the First Battalion Perak Sikhs. The Malay States Guides was wholly Indian in composition. It had four companies of Sikhs and two of Punjabi Mussulmans and a springkling of Pathans. Additional Sikhs and Pathans of military and non-military experience were recruited in India from time to time to maintain the strength of the battalion. The establishment of this battalion in most respects was similar to that of the Guides or the Frontier Regiment of the Indian Army. The Guides

\(^{19}\) Perak Annual Report for 1886.
\(^{20}\) Lt. Col. Walker’s Despatches, 12 August to 7 November 1892.
\(^{21}\) The need to establish a garrison at Taiping was not only derived from the economic importance of that tin belt, but also because of its military strategy during that time. A battalion was required for the defence of British interests bordering with Siam and its vassal states. Taiping with its railway link to Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and even to Singapore would enable the battalion to be deployed wherever required.
of the Indian Army had infantry, cavalry and artillery companies. The MSG had infantry and artillery companies only, as cavalry was not suitable for the Malayan environment. The British officers were regulars of the British and Indian armies, holding Queen’s commissions and maintaining British army ranks. They wore colonial dress uniform of red and blue and a spiked white helmet. The Indian officers were officially styled ‘native officers’, using the Indian ranks of ‘Jemadar, Subedar and Subedar Major’, and were commissioned by the High Commissioner. The NCOs also maintained the Indian ranks of ‘Lance-Naik, Naik, Havildar and Havildar-Major’. Uniforms of the native rank holders were the same as that worn by the rank and file with red coats, blue breeches, white gaiters, white belts and green turbans. The Indian Officers wore khaki turbans and the Havildars wore red sashes. Thus in reality the MSG was a regiment of the Indian Army except that it was constituted in Malaya. Its organization was based on the unit of the Indian Army and its strength of about 900 men was organised on the following lines:

**Infantry**
- One double company Manjha Sikhs
- One double company Malwa Sikhs
- One double company Pathans and Punjabi Mohamedans.

**Artillery**
- One section Sikhs and one section Mohamedans.

Other than the employment of Sikhs in the military and police forces of the Federated Malay States, Sikhs were also recruited for the police forces of the Straits Settlements. In 1878, a police Commission of Inquiry appointed to study and suggest remedies to the bad state of affairs in the Straits Settlements recommended the enlistment of more Sikhs as policemen. A new contingent of policemen was constituted in the Straits Settlements Police Force known as the Sikh Contingent.

In 1909, in accordance with the Treaty of Bangkok the north and eastern Malay States came under British protection. Sikhs were also recruited for the police forces established in these Unfederated Malay States. In the state of Kelantan two separate and distinct police forces were constituted, the Kelantan Police Force composed of entirely Sikhs, and the Malay Police Force recruited amongst Malays. Thus Sikhs were highly regarded as the most effective instruments of control in colonial Malaya.

The Sikhs passed their high noon throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when their fine military qualities were highly required for the armed establishments of colonial Malaya. The British were favourably impressed by the physique and military bearing of the Sikhs. The efficiency and smartness of the Malay States Guides and the police forces had been attributed to regular supply of Sikh recruits both locally and from the Punjab. As incentives, Sikhs enjoyed better terms of service compared to men of other Asiatic races. However, the late 1914 and the years that followed saw the beginning of the decreasing demand for Sikhs. This had been caused by the unexpected insubordination and breach of faith by the men of the Malay

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23 The first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant-Colonel Walker, then succeeded by Lieutenant-Colonel Murray of the 89th Punjabeer Regiment in 1900. Two years later Lieutenant-Colonel Lees of the 53rd Sikh took over as Commanding Officer until the disbandment of the regiment in 1919.
States Guides, the Singapore Mutiny of 1915, and the nationalist activities of the Sikhs after the 1920s.

At the outbreak of the First World War, the only British battalion of the Singapore Garrison, the King’s Own Light Infantry, was called back to Europe.\(^2\) The remaining troops consisting of the Indian 5th Native Light Infantry,\(^3\) known as the ‘Loyal Fifth’ in recognition of its service during the Indian Mutiny, took over the responsibility for the defence of the colony. Withdrawal of the European battalion reduced the number of regular troops in Singapore from the normal establishment of 2,480 to 1,060 of all ranks.\(^4\) The Guides were transferred to Singapore for garrison duties with the 5th Light Infantry. During that time members of the Gadr Party\(^2\) frequently passed through Singapore on their way to India and had established contact with some personnel of the 5th Light Infantry and the Guides. The government felt that in the event of clashes between the authorities and Indian rioters it would be unwise to use Indian troops as their loyalty was questionable. For such reason the Governor urged the military authorities to release the Indian battalion for service elsewhere. The existing police and the Volunteer Forces were considered sufficient to deal with any likely internal disorder.\(^5\)

Meanwhile, toward the end of August 1914, Subedar-Major Fateh Singh, then the most senior native officer of the Guides told Colonel Lees, the commanding officer that the Indian soldiers volunteered to serve overseas. He claimed that he had consulted the views of all the Indian officers and men and they were both willing and eager to proceed on service to Europe. He was also sent to the mainland to ask for the views of the detachments at Taiping and Penang. The British officers who were asked to advise the commandant on the matter made a gratifying report confirming that the soldiers and their native officers were keen and eager to go to the war front. This was accordingly reported to the General Officer Commanding (GOC) and a cable was sent to the War Office. When there was no reply for four weeks Fateh Singh went to see the commandant again urging him to consider the possibility of sending another telegram.\(^6\) The offer was favourably considered by the Army Council and that the Malay States Guides would be most useful and fully employed for service in East

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\(^2\) Telegram No. 170, GOC to War Office
\(^3\) The 5th Light Infantry had been raised in 1803 and had been awarded the distinction of being Light Infantry in 1842. The regiment had survived the Indian Mutiny, after which it was numbered the 5th. It was unusual being entirely Moslem, mostly Ranghars from Delhi and the Eastern Punjab, Delhi Pathans and some Baluchis. See Nadjzal Enron, ‘The Classic Ingredients of Mutiny in the Indian Army: The Case of the 5th Light Infantry’ JEBAT Journal of the Department of History 17 (1989): 3-26.
\(^5\) The Party was based in California and was said to be partly financed by German Agents. The objective was the subversion of British rule in India. According to the plan, agents were to formulate troubles in the colonies. If disturbances occurred the energies of the British would be engaged in that direction. Simultaneously, a revolt in India was to be raised. Report of Inquiry presided over by Sir Evelyn Ellis, 26.8.1915; and Testimony of Sukumbar Chatterji on his role in the Gadr Party movement after his arrest in 1914, CO 273/435.
\(^6\) Young to Harcourt, 22.11.1914 CO 273/408; and 19.1.1915, CO273/420.
\(^7\) Lees to Staff Officer to Local Forces, Straits Settlements, 6.12.1914, CO 273/435.
have monetary interests which they loath to leave unattended; these interests were not specified but it was likely that money-lending was prominent among the Sikhs as they were notorious in this respect in Malaya. Discipline in the regiment was of low standard and it seemed that there were widespread fears of casualties and defeat in battle. 38

A mutiny led by members of the 5th Light Infantry broke out on 15th February 1915. 39 The Mountain Battery of the MSG consisting of fifty-four Sikhs and forty-one Punjabi Moslems was involved in the mutiny, and this adversely affected the future of the MSG and the Sikh race as a whole. The events of 1914 and the Mutiny of 1915 gave doubt as to the reliability of the MSG. The Military authorities were compelled to question whether the Guides could be thoroughly trusted for local defence. The Guides were confined to Taiping, they were not called to Singapore to suppress the rebellion; instead, volunteers were mobilised. 40 When another rebellion against British authority occurred in Kelantan, British troops of the Shropshire Light Infantry were sent to the state instead of the Guides. Two hundred Sikhs of the Guides were sent only after the GOC decided to call the British infantry back to Singapore a week later. 41

Disbandment of the Guides, or of at least the adoption of a policy which would implement selective changes in the regiment’s personnel with the object of removing the more obvious malcontents was in the mind of the military authorities. India Office, however, adamantly opposed such a policy, considering that disbandment was inopportune as it would result in the return of a large number of discontented and seditious elements to the recruiting centres of India. 42 The problems of the Guides were thus left to the Malayan authorities, who still questioned whether the disgruntled soldiers would be reliable in the event of internal disorder. Finally, it was decided to send the Guides to the war front. Their terms of enlistment did not provide for liability to serve outside Malaya, and they consequently had to be offered greatly increased financial inducement before they would go overseas. The Guides were required to sign a new service agreement and were ordered to leave for Aden. The Guides had been trained mainly for ceremonial duties and for quelling hostilities. It had neither battle experience nor desert warfare training. For these reasons the Guides suffered heavily in the hands of the Turks in the Aden campaign. Despite constant replacement of the dead and wounded there were only about 400 men left at the end of the war. Out of this strength many were unfit for duty. Due to its poor performance the regiment was finally disbanded under the authority of Lord Milner’s secret telegram dated 16th January 1919 while it was still in Aden.

When considering the replacement of the unit, priority was given to a regiment which could be relieved periodically so as to avoid any possibility of the officers and men getting into the same unsatisfactory state of inefficiency as appeared to have been

39 For a detailed report see the series of GOC's telegrams and report to War Office, February and March, and 9.4.1915, CO 273/435.
41 Report by GOC Ridout to War Office, 27.5.1915, CO 273/435.
the case with those of the Guides. Both the GOC and the Governor strongly urged that no Indian regiment be allotted for the Taiping Garrison. Both stated that after the events of 1915, the civil population viewed with great distrust the presence of Indian regiments containing Sikhs or Punjabi Mohamedans. The GOC and Governor Arthur Young both preferred a British or a Gurkha battalion as an alternative; but none of the battalions could be spared for the Malaya garrison. The Overseas Defence Council (ODC) recommended replacement either by a battalion of the Indian Army of a class constitution or by a Burmese battalion. After a long deliberation the War Office announced by telegram dated 12.7.1919 to the GOC the decision to send a battalion of the Burma Rifles.

This regiment originated from the paramilitary force and later enlisted as a unit of the Indian Army administered by the Army Headquarters at Simla. Burmese hill tribes known as the Kachins and Chins were trained and officered by British regulars in the early period of British intervention in Burma. These ethnic groups were organised as paramilitary forces to support the British war effort in the Anglo Burmese War of 1824-26. Its effectiveness as a fighting unit led to the formation of a regiment known as the Burma Rifles. The fighting value of this regiment was claimed to be similar to that of the Gurkhas, as demonstrated in the Mediterranean theatre. In the post-War constitution of the Indian Army, an infantry regiment consisted of a number of active battalions and one training battalion. The first battalion of Burmese sent to the Malay States was the 70th Burma Rifles. This battalion was still in the Middle East when it was ordered to take over the Taiping garrison at the end of 1919. Every three years a new battalion of the Burma Rifles would relieve the earlier battalion. The 70th Burma Rifles was relieved at the end of 1922 by the 1st Battalion of the 20th Burmese. The 2nd Battalion of the same regiment took mercenary duties in 1926. The last battalion consisting of nineteen British officers, twenty native officers and 617 other ranks was also from the 20th Burmese. No Punjabi regiment ever set foot on Malayan soil until the outbreak of the Second World War.

After the mutiny Sikhs were almost unwelcome in any of the colonial armed establishments. In early 1916, the Sikh community of Singapore through its Advisory Board offered their services under the Volunteer Ordinance of 1888. The GOC recommended the formation of a Sikh Company as a political move to conciliate the Sikh population to draw the Sikh community into closer and more friendly relations with the European population. He also urged Governor Young who questioned the Sikhs’ loyalty to reconsider the idea as it was common knowledge that the Sikhs in Malaya were a money-lender race and thought that the Sikhs would rather sacrifice their feelings than their money. They Army Council did not share the views of the

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43 GOC to War Office, 20.2.1919; 24.3.1919; and Young to Colonial Office, 18.2.1919, CO 273/486.
44 This battalion was supposedly to return to India after completing its tour of duty in 1937 but was requested by the GOC Lieutenant-General Dobbie to remain to a later date.
45 Ridout to War Office, 23. 6. 1916, CO 273/450.
46 Ridout to Young, 21. 6. 1916, CO 273/450. Such concern was expressed by the authorities as early as 1889. See Perak Government Gazette, 1889, p. 175.
GOC and the volunteer forces of Malaya saw no company or detachment of Sikhs in their strengths throughout British rule in Malaya.

The distrust held against Sikhs in Malaya remained at least until the end of the Second World War. Opinions that Sikhs were untrustworthy were always expressed by the highest level of decision makers. By 1930 the political administration of Burma was about to be separated from India. The separation would involve the removal of all the Burma battalions from the control of Army Headquarters, India. It was communicated to the High Commissioner that the Burma Rifles was to be withdrawn from Malaya and as a replacement the War Office proposed a Punjab regiment. Clementi, the High Commissioner, expressed the opinion in favour of a British or Gurkha unit and not a regiment of Indians to be stationed in Malaya. 48 The GOC, Major-General Pritchard, also shared the opinion of the High Commissioner. In his memo to the War Office he preferred the Burma Rifles to other units of the Indian Army to be under his command. He expressed the highest opinion on the qualities of the Chins and Kachins of which the Burma Rifles battalion was composed. If the Burma Rifles were for any reason to be removed from Malaya, Pritchard requested the War Office to replace them only by a British regular battalion in order to guarantee the security of the country against internal disturbance and invasion. 49 He therefore endorsed the High Commissioner's protest at the decision of the War Office to replace the Burma Rifles with Sikh troops. Pritchard stressed the shortcomings of Sikh troops as it definitely decreased the security of the country against internal disturbance. 50 In a letter dated 21st February 1931 enclosed in Colonial Office despatch dated 16th March 1931, the Army Council agreed that it was undesirable that any unit containing a large proportion of Sikhs should be stationed in the Malay States; and in a confidential letter dated 16th July 1931 the Government of India undertook that units including Sikhs in their class composition would not be selected for service in Malaya.

Similar opinion was expressed by Governor Shenton Thomas in 1934 and 1935 when the question on the replacement of the Burma Rifles was again discussed. 51 The strong objection to the presence of Sikh troops in Malaya was further enhanced by a report that the local authorities were even prepared to pay more (some Rs 70,000) to keep the Burma Rifles or to raise a new battalion of Burmans than to have even a class composition of Punjabis of the Indian Army for service in the Malay States. 52 In addition to suspicion of the Sikhs' loyalty the Malayan authorities held that Sikhs had given much trouble by money-lending at extortionate rates up to one hundred and twenty per cent per annum! It was reported that Sikhs were disliked by the native population on account of this. 53 A writer according to the 1934 Report of the Agent of 47 War Office to Colonial Office, 10. 8. 1916, CO 273/450.
48 FMS Secret Telegram, no. 84 of 12. 5. 1931; and Sir Clementi's FMS Secret, 26. 6. 1931, CO 717/8237.
50 Pritchard to War Office, 25. 11. 1930, CRMC No. 25778, CO 717/3334.
52 Thomas to John Maffey, 23. 1. 1935, CO 717/110/51543.
53 Thomas to John Maffey, 23. 3. 1935, CO 717/110/51543.
HIGH NOON OF THE SIKHS

the Government of India in Malaya gave the statistic of Sikh money-lending in Malaya of about 10,000 persons. The authorities therefore strongly opposed the presence of any battalion with a class composition of Sikhs. The question about the Sikhs’ loyalty therefore forced the colonial authorities to conclude that they were not at all anxious to see any more armed Sikhs in Malaya.

The British were also very cautious in recruiting Sikhs for the local police forces of Malaya after the First World War. It was reported that Sikh policemen were passively disloyal in discharging of their duties during the Singapore disturbance. After 1915 there were shifts to local resources for the various police establishments. The practice of recruiting Sikhs from India ceased. Local Sikhs were properly screened before they could be accepted. Malays had been substituted for Sikhs especially in the Malay States. The ratio which used to be 50:50 in 1915, was by 1934 about 2:1. The ratio was much less in the Straits Settlements. The composition of Sikh policemen by 1925 was only fifteen per cent. In the state of Johore, of the total strength of 964 policemen there were only sixty Sikhs. Whilst in the state of Kelantan the strength of the Malay Police Force was by 1925, 315, and that of the Kelantan Police Force (Sikhs) was only seventy.

Several considerations probably influenced the British image of the Sikhs in post World War I Malaya. Of all the peoples of India, the Sikhs were after the First World War perhaps the most inflammable. They were prosperous by Indian standards; their lands were fertile and they did not subdivide them indefinitely but sent their younger brothers to the army or to the police in Malaya, Hong Kong, Africa and other British colonies, drive taxis in Calcutta, and to work as electricians or carpenters in Kenya. They were better educated than most peasant communities of India. Such people cannot be insulated; it is among the thriving, the go-ahead, the intelligent, not among the destitute, the lacklusture and the hopeless, that radical doctrines take hold. The Sikhs were conscious of politics to a higher degree than any other element of the Indian Army.

A series of anti-British agitations took place in the years that followed. There was the vigorous sect of Akali Sikhs, who in the 1920s were militantly anti-British. In 1919 the Government of India passed the Rowlatt Acts, giving them very wide powers to act against persons judged guilty of sedition. The Acts were passed against the votes of every non-official in the Legislative Council. They were never used but they were felt as a slap in the face for a people who had supposed their services in the war would be acclaimed with superlatives and rewarded by trust. But worse was to follow. At Amritsar, the heart of the Sikh religion, a massacre of Sikh men, women and children took place on April 13th, 1919. General Dyer ordered a party of Gurkhas to open fire

56 Thomas to John Maffey, 23. 3. 1935, CO 717/110/51543.
58 Ibid., p. 56
59 Ibid., p. 58
on a crowd of Sikhs who had gathered to hold a meeting in defiance of orders. The meeting was in an open space surrounded by buildings to which the only entrance was held by the troops; the crowd could not disperse. Dyer continued to fire until he had killed 379 persons and wounded over 1,200; what made even this slaughter more appalling was that he said afterwards that he had determined to administer a lesson that would have an effect throughout India. Instead of ending opposition against the Government, he intensified hostility; he dealt a wound to relations between British and Sikhs that has never been healed.

There was the mutiny of the Sikh squadron of the Central Indian Horse at Bombay in 1940. Men of this regiment had been in touch with an organization known as the Kirti Lehar the 'Peasant Movement' preaching an incendiary peasant communism. When the Central India Horse was ordered overseas, the men entrained without any unusual signs, but at Bombay there was an unexpected delay; they were shunted into a siding and kept there for a day and a night, during which the Sikhs who had been really infected by the Kirti Lehar propaganda had their chance. Two-thirds of the Sikh squadron refused to go overseas. The mutinous Sikhs went before a court martial and the leaders were transported to the Andamans.60

British distrust of the Sikhs was further enhanced by the fact that immediately after the fall of Singapore in 1942, a large number of Sikhs of the disbanded Indian Army enlisted in the Indian National Army under its leader Mohan Singh. The conduct of Sikh guards toward European prisoners of war at the Changi camp in particular made them more unpopular with the post War colonial authorities. Punjab, however, remained as the chief recruiting centre for the Indian Army until the end of British rule. But, in Malaya, the Sikhs passed their high noon during the decades before the outbreak of the First World War. The unexpected insubordination and breach of faith by the men of the Guides in 1914, and the involvement of the Mountain Battery in the Singapore Mutiny in the following year marked the beginning of their waning roles in the local forces of Malaya. Until the outbreak of the Second World War any Indian unit with a class composition of Sikhs was not accepted for garrison duties by the Malayan authorities.