

## BREAKING THE SPIRIT OF THE KUKIS

Launching the ‘largest series of military operations’ in the northeastern frontier of India

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During the winters of 1917–1918 and 1918–1919, the Assam Rifles and Burma Military Police launched operations at the imperial margin against the ‘rapidly spreading rising amongst the Kuki clans’, which ‘was disconcerting and most difficult to deal with’ for the Assam Military Police initially (Shakespeare 1980: 224). With a combined force of Assam and Burma it was the ‘largest series of military operations conducted on this side of India’ (Shakespeare 1980: 235). The Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Assam Military Police (now known as Assam Rifles) also lamented about the non-recognition of the military operations to which he was a part in the public which cost a whopping Rs. 28 lakhs during that time. He wrote: ‘Very little was known to the public of these operations; one or two Calcutta papers only publish short and erroneous accounts of what they wrote of as ‘outings of Political Officers and their escorts’, and generally belittling a long, hard ‘show’ carried through eventually to a successful issue by the combined Military police forces of Assam and Burma’. The DIG of Assam Rifles with dismay cited the much publicised and comparatively less expensive expedition in Upper Assam: ‘while of General Bower’s force in the Abor Expedition, 1911–1912, which was greatly written up in the newspapers, 4 were killed, 7 wounded, and 54 died of disease’ (Shakespeare 1980: 237). The tribes of the Northeast frontier were constant trouble makers, and to keep them self-contained, different policies were framed specifically for these people.

One thing that is glaring than anything else about the tribes in the Northeastern frontier of British India was that subjugation, and particularly ‘control’, was fiercely resisted. As such ‘indirect rule’ and minimal interference on the custom and culture of the natives was largely followed by the British in their colonised territories since the Indian rebellion of 1857. Before the commencement of these operations against the Kukis,

the general policy pursued (sic) by the British was to refrain from any direct control over the tribe in the management of their internal affairs. . . . The hill areas and the hill people continued to enjoy independence and the villages were administered by the respective chiefs without any direct interference of the British authority.

(Ray 1990: 63, 64)

The official colonial policy towards the tribes was explicitly mentioned by Woodthrope (1980: 6):

The Government does not wish to exterminate these frontier tribes, but by converting them into our allies to raise a barrier between our frontier districts and other more distant races. Suppose a tribe to be utterly crushed or exterminated, we should find ourselves no better than before – probably much worse, having merely removed obstacles to the assaults of a fiercer and more formidable foe, whose very remoteness would render it for us to conciliate or punish him.

Until the second decade of the twentieth century the Kuki Hills ‘surrounding the Manipur valley’ and Somra Tract, as Shakespear (1980: xxx) and other colonial officers would call it, were largely unadministered territories as they were, so far, friendly to the British government (Reid 1942: 79). In such territories, ‘Cases where hillmen are concerned and cases arising in the British reserve are excluded from the Darbar’s civil and criminal jurisdiction’ (Reid 1942: 78). Different neighbouring groups were also used against any who rose into revolt against the Raj. Thus, the policy of using one against another was followed to keep the frontier under their loose grip of control.

### A resurgent ‘Kuki Hills’

The Kukis were one of the dominant communities among the hill tribes of the British Northeast frontier. They were, to use Mackenzie’s

(1884: 146) word, 'a hardworking', 'self-reliant race', and the only hillmen in their neighbourhood who can hold their own against the other powerful hill tribes. In 1917 labour corps was raised by the British Government for France amongst various clans of Nagas, Lushais, Meiteis and others, as Colonel L. W. Shakespear (1980: 209) mentioned, 'who willingly came in, having in many cases done this short of work for (British) Government before in border expeditions, and knew the work and good pay'. In 1917 more Labour Corps were needed, and to supply it the British Government felt that it was necessary to draw from other sources, 'viz the various Kuki clans inhabiting the hill regions of the native state of Manipur', who were described by Shakespear (1980: 210) as 'a people who had never left their hills and knew but little of us and our ways'. Due to this exigency the British, despite their well established principle of rule, had to interfere into the hitherto freedom enjoyed by the Kukis. Despite the Maharaja of Manipur obligation to prepare 2,000 labourers, he 'had no direct control over the hill mass which he had over his own Manipuri subjects in the matter of labour recruitment' (Ray 1990: 65). The sleepy Kuki hills woke up to this undue interference to their freedom and in their ways of life and self-rule, which they think was also against their traditional religious belief. Webster reported that: 'a good deal of unrest has been created among the Kuki tribes in the hills of the Manipur State by recruiting for the Labour Corps for France'.<sup>1</sup>

The meetings in March 1917 at Jampi among the various Kuki chiefs, 'have taken an oath after killing a mythan that none of them would go to France or send any of their people there'.<sup>2</sup> With the refusal by principal chiefs to send coolies Webster viewed that: 'It is essential to the administration of a country peopled with uncivilised tribes that they shall be made to understand that legitimate orders cannot be disobeyed with impunity and that defiance brings certain punishment'.<sup>3</sup> With the rising tide of rebellion in the Kuki hills the main policy of the British administration in Assam was that the 'recalcitrant Kukis' should be called to account and their guns surrendered, and those who refused to submit will have their villages burnt. Yet, the Kukis still kept room for negotiation and responded to the call of the Political Agent (P.A.) of Manipur for peaceful negotiation. The Kuki chiefs of the western hills invited the PA to meet them at Oktan. The P.A. met 'the chiefs and representatives of between 30 and 40 of the leading Kuki villages' on 10 October 1917. Sensing the general hostile attitude the P.A. reported:

But two hours of argument failed to move them and they proved obdurate against threats of punishment. They persisted

that they feared to go so far from their homes and that if they had to die they preferred to die in their own country and would be prepared to meet force with force.<sup>4</sup>

The meetings ended with an informal agreement that another round-table conference will be convened by the PA in the near future. In spite of their informal agreement at Oktan to meet again for peaceful negotiation, the Political Agent, J.C. Higgins, took 50 riflemen to Mombi (Lonpi) after two days of the Oktan meeting and reached that village on 15 October. On 17 October 1917, he burnt down the village. This violent action did not only surprise the Kukis but also broke the trust on the part of the Political Agent. Since then passive resistance to the 'supply of labour' and 'surrender of guns' ended. Ngulkhup, chief of Mombi, closed down his country to the British and sent information to Pache that he had declared war against the Sahibs and if any officer came up he would have shot at them, and he requested Pache to do the same. Higgins reported that Ngulkhup 'has sent a message to Pachei chief of Chassad saying that if an officer visit Mombi again, he will be shot and begging Pachei to adopt the same attitude'.<sup>5</sup> Reporting on 24 November 1917, J.C. Higgins wrote about Khotinthang: 'He has recently been in communication with the chiefs of Mombi and Chassad with a view to concerted resistance to any attempt at coercion or arrest, and the latest information to hand indicates that Pachei chief of Chassad had called him to a council'.<sup>6</sup> Several meetings of the Kuki people in different parts of Kuki hills immediately followed the burning of Mombi, after which the main resolution taken was to fight if the British attempt to arrest them or burn their villages. Despite the decision by the Kuki chiefs to resist labour recruitment, the major resistance war began after the Chassad conclave, in which more than 150 Kuki chiefs gathered and unanimously decided to wage a war against the British Raj.

About the end of November or beginning of December in 1917, Pache, Chief of Chassad, summoned a 'big meeting' – a war conclave in which 150 Kuki chiefs of Assam and Burma participated including, Ngulkhup, chief of Mombi and Khotinthang, chief of Jampi. The Chassad meeting resolved 'not to obey any orders or summons from Government and to fight if Government tried to enforce orders'.<sup>7</sup> Higgins also reported about this meeting: 'Subsequently I learn from a good authority that he sent a bullet to the chiefs of Jampi, Ukha, Songphu, Henglep and Loibol with instruction to resist forcibly any attempt to impress coolies or to burn villages'.<sup>8</sup> However, despite being largely coordinated through the war communication system of

*thingkho-le-malcha*,<sup>9</sup> threats by principal chiefs of dire consequences for not joining them in the fight with them, 'The Southwest of Manipur which had sent men to France remained loyal and the villages mostly belonged to non-Thado tribes' (Reid 1997: 80). There are also some chiefs among the so-called Thadou tribe who remained friendly and loyal to the Raj.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the British administration also decided that by 1 December 'the recalcitrant Kukis should be called to account without delay and that those who refused to submit should have their villages burnt'.<sup>11</sup> The British policy thereof is clearly evident during this time when J.C. Higgins said:

if the chiefs surrendered themselves and their guns submitted to the punishment imposed on them, they would still save their villages from being burnt, & that if they used force and kill any one, they would certainly lose men, both in the fighting and by execution after they had been suppressed.<sup>12</sup>

In this compelling circumstance, the Political Agent of Manipur was authorised to summon the Kuki chiefs to Imphal in which the President of the Durbar was to 'decide what punishment shall be inflicted on them and their villages for their organised resistance to the demands of the State' so as 'to restore the authority of the Manipur State over the tribes under its control'.<sup>13</sup> The summons were accompanied by a promise to the chiefs that, apart from not requiring to provide coolies,

if they submit to the Durbar's jurisdiction and if the orders for the punishment of the villages are carried out promptly and completely, no villages will be burnt. At the same time they will be warned that further contumacy and defiance assuredly will result in their villages being burnt and in more severe punishment being inflicted eventually.

Webster was also doubtful of the positive response from the Kukis when he said: 'No other form of punishment is practicable, as the offending chiefs are almost certain to abscond on the approach of the punitive force and cannot be arrested in such a vast area of wild, mountainous and sparsely populated country'.<sup>14</sup> Living in trepidation between the two dominant forces, there were also many who were neutral to both the sides to escape their wrath.

The Kuki 'rebellion', according to the British, started in December 1917 and lasted for one and a half years (Shakespeare 1980: 136). Two decades after the end of the war Robert Reid (1942: 82) made a

succinct observation: ‘if there had been no recruiting for the Labour Corps there would have been no rebellion’. Freedom is central to the existence of the Kukis. For the Kuki men, fighting the superior British military force would be hard, but having the thought of losing their ‘freedom’ was harder. The passive resistance against recruitment for labour corps turned into an active armed resistance after the burning of Lonpi on 17 October 1917 by an intemperate British officer. The Kuki rebellion, as the official colonial version so regarded and recorded the uprising as in the words of Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam 1937–1941: ‘The most serious incident in the history of Manipur and its relations with its Hill subjects’; ‘commencing in the closing days of 1917, it cost 28 lakhs of rupees to quell, and in the course of it many lives were lost’ (Reid 1997: 79). As the largest series of military operations conducted in the Northeast frontier, different colonial strategies were adopted in two stages at a stretch of three years to suppress the uprising. This chapter will show that the uprising was brutally suppressed after a well-thought-out scheme to break the spirit of the Kukis.

### **The small war: British counter-guerrilla strategy**

During imperial expansion of western powers, small wars were closely associated with such colonial expansion. In small wars, which are basically ‘operations of regular armies against irregular, or comparatively speaking irregular, forces’ (Callwell 1906: 21), ‘unconventional tactics are the soul of this war’ (quoted in Porch 2013: 20). The operations of the regular armies against irregular forces were often laden with brazen categorisation and delegitimisation of indigenous resisters as ‘thugs, bandits, criminal tribes, bitter-enders, or fanatics’ (Porch 2013: 2). The so-called ‘civilising ministration’ was conducted with inherent brutality by western imperial powers that were ‘functioning democracies’, that concerns were often raised about the brutality of the tactics and operations of the regular armies.

To counter a guerilla warfare, ‘which is a war of the masses, a war of the people’ (Guevara 1961: 15), and largely carried out by a ‘relative diminutive groups of fighters utilised surprise as a force multiplier to carry out ambushes, sabotage and raids to harass and forage on the margins of large clashes of armies’ (Porch 2013: 4), Lazare Hoche laid down tactical principles during the late sixteenth century for a successful counter-guerilla operation. He ‘divided the theatre into sections, each with its network of posts linked by mobile patrols, informed by an active intelligence service. The fittest soldiers were organized

into fast-moving mobile columns that hunted down and surprised hardcore bands of insurgents' (Porch 2013: 5). Depriving peasants of their food and livelihood while seizing the hostages, combined with scorched-earth campaign, 'smashed and demoralized the insurgent base' (Porch 2013: 8). Marshall de Castellane explains the rationale of the scorched-earth campaign:

how do you act against a population whose only link with the land is the pegs of their tents? . . . The only way is to take the grain which feeds them, the flocks which clothe them. For this reason, we make war on silos, war on cattle, the *razzia*.  
(quoted in Porch 2013: 21–22)

In such operations,

Civilized standards of warfare, even basic human rights and judicial procedures, were considered superfluous by Europeans in non-Western settings against an enemy viewed as culturally, racially and morally inferior, and whose subjugation was approached in the spirit of total war.  
(Porch 2013: 76)

In order to deprive the rebels of foods and new recruits, populations were moved to concentration camps run by the military.

### The first 'Punitive Measures' 1917–1918

After it was clear following the 'big meeting' at Chassad that the Kukis decided to wage war against the British Raj, the war cry spread so fast and so wide in the whole Kuki hills. During the first operations, military columns were sent to identified rebel areas and the Political Agents toured the hills and were actively engaged in suppressing the uprising by using coercive diplomacy or forceful persuasion in which 'recalcitrant Kukis' were 'called to account' through the threat to burn their villages.

The colonial administration immediately dispatched columns of the 3rd Assam Rifles station at Kohima and the 4th Assam Rifles station at Imphal against the rebels. These two columns were 'aided by operations directed from Burma, acted vigorously and continuously against the rebels with varying measures of success' (Reid 1997: 80). The initial policy of the British was a prompt action against the rebel chiefs by isolating and eliminating them from the hills, thinking that the war

was instigated by few chiefs and leaders and people are not with them. As it was, disarmament was the chief object of the first operations.<sup>15</sup> Before the close of the first operations against Kukis Cosgrave wrote on 23 March 1918:

I think that disarmament should be the first aim of our policy and before the rains set in I want to make a start disarming as well as to detach rebel villages from adherence to such leaders as the chiefs of Ukha and Mombi who should be isolated and proceeded against with exemplary severity.<sup>16</sup>

For instance, on 23 January 1918 Cosgrave sent a message to the chief of Saibom Machet saying: 'if he came and surrendered to me today with his licenced gun I would not punish him as severely as other villages'.<sup>17</sup> However, such initial policy of selective elimination did not work out, not only because the Kukis did not confront the British in a battleground but choose guerilla warfare to prolong the rising but also because the Kuki masses were behind their leaders, hiding them, supply them with food and other materials. Webster, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, reported:

The general impression founded on experience on other part of the Frontier was that when the Kukis realised their inability to withstand the column sent against them and found their villages and property destroyed and themselves harried from pillar to post, opposition would collapse and their submission would be only a question of days.<sup>18</sup>

So the tactics of the British colonial state, despite claiming to be the most civilised and advanced society of the time, was to indulge the most 'barbaric' and inhuman forms of warfare, which today are prohibited by the Protocols of the 1977 Geneva Conventions. Such warfare included indiscriminate burning of recalcitrant villages, their properties, foodstuffs, livestock and driving the hapless women, children and aged into the jungle under chilling winter and hunting them down from pillar to post to capture them, and to use those captured, particularly the women and children, to break the spirit of the Kuki fighters.

As several military columns of the British moved from one place to another in the Kuki hills to punish the rebel villages, the policy of 'scorched earth' was becoming more evident. For instance, the P.A. of Manipur Mr. Cosgrave toured the Southwestern hills during the months of February and March and every rebel village was punished



in similar fashion. Here is his report about Henglep: 'We halted at Hinglep and punished the village severely by shooting more than 20 metnas and collecting a large quantity of paddy . . . and destroyed about 100 maunds of paddy'. When inadequate amount of paddy and other livestock were found the military column will not rest until 'hidden stores' in the jungle are found and destroyed. Cosgrave also reported about Songphu village:

As the search parties which we sent out could not find any metnas and very little paddy while I had information that this is a well off village we decided to halt here for another day so as to search for and destroy the enemies' property.<sup>19</sup>

In the first operations the military 'greatly underestimated' the Kukis, of the number of firearms and other warfare techniques. In the words of Shakespear (1980: 216): 'The Civil authorities were inclined to treat the idea of the Kukis having many fire arms as absurd, giving as their view that perhaps 100 or so were at most scattered about the hills'. While underestimating the rebel forces Webster stated:

In proceeding to the disaffected villages the Political Agent proposes to take escort of 150 rifles, which will be more than sufficient to overcome any possible opposition, and the Chief Commissioner is satisfied that the force on the spot will be amply sufficient to punish the tribes without incurring the very slightest risk of military aid having to be requisitioned.<sup>20</sup>

However, the total number of guns obtained by the end of the war stood at 1,158. This initial failure leads the British to shift their policy from selective elimination of 'rebel' leaders to 'a definite plan of campaign against the Kuki rebels'. The Kukis adopted jungle or guerilla warfare, one of the unique warfare during those times, to fight the stronger conventional military columns. Under such circumstances, it was impossible to capture the 'rebels'; voluntary submission was even more difficult. The mobility of the Kukis was one of the factors that worked to their advantage in jungle warfare. Shakespear (1980: 215) commented: 'The Kukis, being a people of nomadic habits, constantly change their village sites, consequently their homes'. Robert Reid (1997: 80) claimed that

large number of villages had been destroyed but, owing to the nomadic habits of the tribe and the flimsy nature of their

house, the loss sustained was small. . . . But owing to their methods of fighting, in ambushes and stockades, which they quickly abandoned, as soon as outflanked, the Kukis had sustained very few casualties, fewer in fact, than they inflicted.

The first operation was called off towards the end of May 1918 as 'further operations in the hills became impossible, owing to the climate' and 'the state of the rivers'. As Robert Reid (1997: 80) reported:

They (the Kukis) were still far from being subdued. . . . They were able to supplement their supplies from their Naga neighbours who, though friendly to the forces of law and order, were afraid to refuse the demands of the more ruthless Kukis, better armed than themselves and living in their midst.

Another report also stated: 'the Kukis of the Manipur Hills themselves show no signs of intending to submit' (Ibid., p. 623). According to the colonial military officer Macquoid, these operations were 'incomplete and unsatisfactory owing to lack of co-ordination'. The failure in this operation was largely attributed to the absence of 'previous experience' by the British officers and recruits 'of jungle warfare'.

### Plan of operations against the Kukis

Having largely failed in their previous operations against the Kuki rebels with a huge loss of men due to their underestimation of the firepower and effective jungle warfare techniques, 'the local officers had realised the seriousness of the situation', and even during the peak of the first operations, the idea of having a well thought-out scheme of operation was envisaged by the first week of March 1918. H.D.U. Keary, the Commanding Officer of the second phase of Kuki operations, reported:

The sudden blaze of rebellion, which spread simultaneously throughout the length and breadth of the hills from Kohima in the north to the Pakokku Hill tracts of Burma in the south, made it impossible last year to formulate put into force any complete and thought out plan before operations started.<sup>21</sup>

The General Officer Commanding the Burma Division of the first Kuki Punitive Measures wrote on 5 September 1918:

One thing remains clear, viz., that the operations should in any event proceed and the entire rebel country be overrun and effectively occupied, roads made and our troops should penetrate to every corner of every area. Only in this way, i.e., by actual demonstration will we prove to the Kukis our mastery and that resistance is futile.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the operations evidently intended to overcome ‘the difficulties of transportation, the state of military technology, and, above all, demographic realities [that] placed sharp limits on the reach of even the most ambitious states’ (Scott 2009: 4).

### *Objectives of the operations*

The main objectives of this ‘Plan of Operations’ was ‘the subjugation of the rebel Kukis of Assam and of N.E. Thaungdut and Somra in Upper Burma’, and as in the case of the first operations, the ‘complete disarmament of the tribes inhabiting them’. It specifically intended ‘To break the spirit of the Kukis to such an extent that they will become completely weary and demoralised and be ready to surrender themselves, their guns and property’, and to inflict pains and penalties as may decided.<sup>23</sup> In order to achieve this, 15 rebel principal chiefs were identified and they were placed under a ‘Special List’, and they were declared ‘guilty of notorious crimes, whose capture and punishment was especially desired by the Government’.<sup>24</sup>

After these principal chiefs were caught or surrendered’ penalties in the form of fines and other punishments would be imposed and enforced upon them and their people. The rebel Kukis would be forced to construct bridle paths fit for transport throughout the rebel Kuki areas so as to open the whole Kuki hills for administration. With these necessary outposts would have to be established in the whole Kuki country after the troops withdraw. With all these openings, it also aimed to establish necessary posts to hold the Kuki country. Construction of roads as a pacific agent, disarmament of the country and finally imposition of a new administration were also the objectives of the operations.

*Scheme of operations*

In July 1918, Colonel C.E.K. Macquoid, the General Officer Commanding of the Kuki Punitive Measures, and General H.D.U. Keary, the Commanding Officer of Burma Division of the Kuki Punitive Measures, along with the D.I.G. of Assam Rifles Colonel L.W. Shakespear met at Shillong, in which they 'decided that military operations would be necessary in the cold weather of 1918/19' (Reid 1997: 81), and they 'examined the scheme of operations, generally approving and only altering certain minor details' (Shakespear 1980: 231). The new scheme for the second phase of counter-guerrilla warfare operations, which originated from Major A. Vickers of the 3rd Assam Rifles and largely carried through with slight alterations,

was to divide the rebel hills into areas, appointing detachments for each, in which lines of posts were to be established sufficiently strong to enable them to combine in a number of small handy Columns with which to harry the rebels till they gave in; movable Columns also in each area were to drive the Kukis on the line of posts.

(Shakespear 1980: 230)

Even in the middle of the first operations, the D.I.G. of Burma Military Police sought information on the 'policy of the Assam Administration in putting down the present rebellion', in which Cosgrave reported about the suggestion by Captain Patrick for the deployment of 'half a dozen aeroplane' to put down the rebellion in a very short time.<sup>25</sup> It was pointed out that 'in the absence of landing places probably they could not be used in the hills',<sup>26</sup> the suggestion to use aeroplanes was disapproved. However, better modern weapons were sanctioned for use by the military forces in the second operations to overcome the difficulties of geography and jungle warfare techniques. In the first phase of operations, the dominant weapons used by the British military were Martini Henry rifles and a few 7 lb. mountain guns. In the second phase, the military forces were to be better equipped with .303 rifles, Lewis guns, stokes mortar and rifle grenades. These cutting edge weapons to be inducted newly in the second operations were largely as a result of the experience of the previous operations and mitigate the loss on the part of the military.

Cutting the food supply short of the Kuki fighters was one of the main objectives of the British, so that they surrender due to shortage

of food supply. During the first operations, the Kuki fighters were also able to acquire necessary food items from their Naga neighbours. The British learnt that:

They (Kukis) were able to supplement their supplies from their Naga neighbours who, though friendly to the forces of law and order, were afraid to refuse the demands of the more ruthless Kukis, better armed than themselves and living in their midst.

(Reid 1997: 80)

Different strategies were put forward to achieve this objective. Cosgrave suggested:

Another point which I think deserves consideration is the inducement of the friendly Anal Langang and cognate people of Sibong to settle in the plains so that the Kukis who with the present military operations will probably find it difficult to cultivate their own Jhums may not have a supply store ready at hand.<sup>27</sup>

Having lost heavily in the first operation due to unfavourable jungles and the techniques of guerilla warfare adopted by the Kukis, the 'plan of action' was to neutralise the Kukis through superior modern weapons and 'to put an end to the Kuki revolt by force of arms, break the Kuki spirit, disarm the Kukis, exact reparation and pave the way for effective administration of their country'.<sup>28</sup> To possibly do that a special training was needed for the troops and the 'experience gained in the last season's operations' were a good resource to better prepare and train soldiers for the next operations, and every possible profit has to be made from the experience gained in the previous operations. Henry Keary suggested: 'Up to that time the troops detailed for the operations will be under special training under their officers and all preparations as to equipment, supplies, transport and medical arrangements will be made'.<sup>29</sup> Brigadier General C.E.K. Macquoid also revealed that: 'The operation of the previous year had disclosed the tactics of the enemy. From this experience officers and men had benefited in that they had been thoroughly trained and practised to overcome them'.<sup>30</sup> As Robert Raid succinctly described:

The scheme of operations consisted in dividing the hostile territory into areas, each with one or more well-equipped bases

and chains of outposts, from which small and mobile detachments could operate against the rebels and keep them on the run. In the southeastern hills, friendly Chins, and in the southwest Lushai and friendly Kukis, were armed and employed as scouts and irregulars.

(Reid 1997: 81)

Cosgrave wrote on 7 February 1918 about the policy of the Assam Administration in putting down the present rebellion:

The question of policy is not an easy one and I think that in addition to complete disarmament of certain areas and tribes it will be necessary to have out during the next rains a considerable number of Military Police in outposts while some new bridledpaths notable one from Shugnu to Lenacot must be made.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the method invented in the second phase of operation in practice amounts to military occupation of the Kuki hills.

However, as Richard O'Connor rightly said the 'mobility allowed farmers to escape the impositions of states and their wars' (cited Scott 2009: 4). On the other hand, living within the state meant, virtually by definition, taxes, conscription, corvee labour and, for most, a condition of servitude; these conditions were at the core of the state's strategic and military advantages (Scott Scott 2009: 7).

### *Area of operations*

An extract from the proceeding of the Chief Commissioner of Assam was, for instance, lucid in this respect. It described the 'Kuki rising of 1917–1919' as 'the most formidable with which Assam has been faced for at least a generation', covering an area of 'over some 6,000 square miles of rugged hills surrounding the Manipur Valley and extending to the Somra Tract and the Thaugdut State in Burma'.<sup>32</sup> The area of operation, as described by Webster, is 'a vast area of wild, mountainous and sparsely populated country'.<sup>33</sup> For the purpose of operations the whole 7000 square miles of Kuki hills was divided into six areas (see Figure 3.1):

- 1 Northwest: Jampi area – between the Barak and the cart road – with its Supply Bases at Bishenpur, Henema and Tapoo,

- 2 Southwest: Henglep area with supply base at Moirang,
- 3 South: Manlun and Lenacot area based on Imphal and Chin Hills main bases,
- 4 Southeast: Mombi (Lonpi) area with its supply base at Suganu,
- 5 East: Burma road area with supply base at Imphal/Palel and Tamu,
- 6 Northeast: The Northeast or Aishan area based on Kohima and Homalin main bases.

Shakespear (1980: 231) further divided the Northeast area into three sub-areas: Chassad area, east of the valley, with a supply base at Yaingangpokpi; North Tangkhul area, northeast of the valley with its supply base at Tadapa and the North Somra and Tuzu river area, southeast of Kohima with a supply base at Melomi. These areas were to assigned military commanders:

- 1 Northwestern Hills (Jampi Area): Major Marshall, Lt. Walker, Capt. C.E. Montefiore, Lt. Needham.
- 2 Southwestern Hills (Henglep Area): Capt. Goodal, Capt. Fox, Lt. Carter.
- 3 Southeast (Lonpi Area): Capt. Coote and Lt. Askwith
- 4 Eastern Hills (Chassad Area): Capt. Parry and Black
- 5 Northeastern hills (Tangkhul and Somra Area): Lt. Mawson, Capt. Prior and Lt. Rees.

With the demarcation of the whole Kuki hills into areas with their main bases, each area was enclosed by a chain of military outposts and was provided with substantial numbers of flying columns whose duty was to expeditiously hunt the Kukis from pillar to post, burnt down their villages, destroy their properties, foods and live-stock and to frustrate cultivation and any attempt to rebuild their villages.

### **The second 'Punitive Measures' 1918–1919**

In order to pacify the Kukis once and for all, military operations were launched as previously planned on 15 November 1918 by the Assam Rifles. The Burma Military Police could only join the operations in the beginning of December due to outbreak of epidemic. Incursions were made into the Kuki Hills and stockades, and villages and properties were destroyed. During the operations in Burma the knowledge and

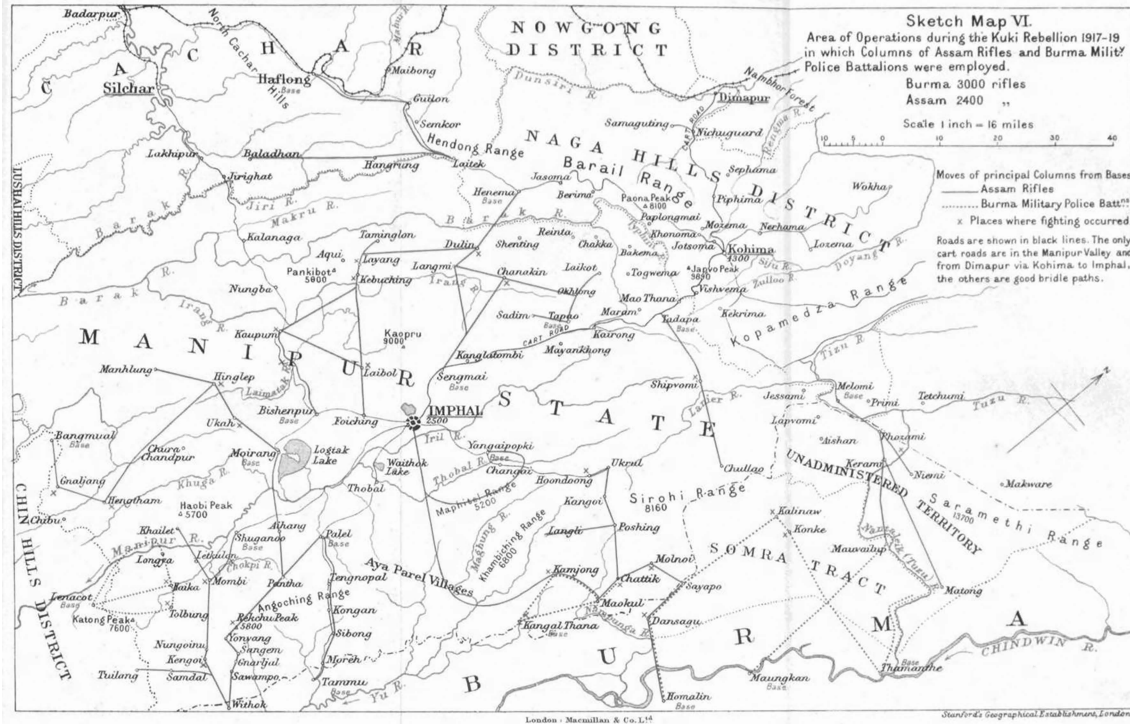


Figure 3.1 Area of Operations during the Kuki Rebellion

Source: L.W. Shakespear. *History of the Assam Rifles.*



previous experience of Ffrench-Mullen was much utilised by the GOI, Burma, and Mr. Henry Keary. In the words of Wright:

His knowledge of the country, of the history and events of last year's operations, of tactical points, of the characters of the senior officers and troops at my disposal, as well as the character of the opposing tribes, was most valuable asset to me throughout, enabling me to make plans and dispositions with absolute confidence in their correctness.<sup>34</sup>

In these operations, coordination among various columns was emphasised. The strength of British forces in the second phase of operations was 6234 combatants, 696 non-combatants – from Assam Rifles and Burma Military Police.<sup>35</sup>

### *Concentration camps*

One of the most difficult tasks before the military police officers was the distinction between rebel villages and so-called 'friendlies' who are cohabiting the hills at not so distant locations; more so, the friendlies in rebel villages. Colonel L.W. Shakespear (1980: 230) described this situation:

A difficulty existed in the numbers of friendly villages in amongst the rebel localities, and it was often not easy to distinguish these people from those to be dealt with. This was to a certain extent overcome during the hot weather by the Political Agent arranging for concentration camps in the Manipur valley to which all these friendlies were advised to repair in order to avoid the wrath to come.

In order to hard-press the rebels, the Area Commander 'collect men, women and children in certain concentration camps, where they were fed and maintained till the guns were surrendered'.<sup>36</sup> The concentration camps not only served the purpose of confining the women, children and the aged in appalling living conditions; it also served as a temporary camp for the interrogation and torture of rebels caught or surrendered. The concentration camps during the first phase of 'punitive measures' were mainly for the British 'friendlies'. However, in the second phase of operations in 1918–1919, it was mainly for the Kuki 'rebels'.

*Counter-guerilla operations*

During the first phase of operations the advantage the Kukis had was carefully taken into account, 'who know their hills and forests, carry no packs, do not bother themselves over supplies, who are rarely seen in their forests, and who are adepts at guerilla and jungle warfare' (Shakespear 1980: 236). The rearmed Assam Rifles and Burma Military Police were not only trained in Stokes mortars, Lewis guns and rifle bombs, but also in counter-guerilla warfare. From the experience during the first operations itself, it was felt 'the wisdom of having a large number of small columns operating at one time is clearly proved'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in the whole Kuki hills, 'a series of separate operations carried on simultaneously'.<sup>38</sup> The mobility and coordination of the Kuki fighters, which was to their advantage in the first operations, was noted carefully, and to limit their movement several bases were established and the opening of outposts and flying columns between bases limited the movement of the Kuki fighters by the ubiquitous presence. In the South, Southeast and Northeastern areas, in order to limit the movement and also prevent the escape of the Kuki fighters the Chin and Lushai borders were secured and guarded, and they escaped into the Somra tracts.

In order to illustrate such coordinated and brutal operations, the Northwest area is taken into account. This area, which is about 640 square miles in extent, was subdivided into two political areas: Jampi and North Silchar Road Area. It was penetrated from four directions by four military columns – Captain Montefiore from the north, Major Marshall from the east, Lieutenant Walker from the south and Captain Copeland from the west. These four columns advanced towards this area from their respective advanced bases, i.e. Bishenpur, Henema and Tapoo, on the pre-arranged date of 15 November 1918. The concentration of rebel Kukis were identified through informants and troops quickly moved towards such villages and gave a surprise attack. In the Jampi sub-area Macquid reported:

The Chanachin garrison under the command of Subedar Hari Ram, 3rd Assam Rifles, surprised Laiyang with a loss to the Kukis of 28 killed and many wounded. The whole live and dead stock of the village fell our hands and the village was burnt.<sup>39</sup>

After rebel villages were overthrown and burnt, permanent posts were formed in strategic villages. If rebel Kuki chiefs fled their

village, they had to be chased until caught, killed or surrendered. In the North Silchar Road sub-area, the 'main objective was the death, capture or surrender of the two rebel chiefs, Tinthong and Enjakhup', and three columns under Major Marshall, Captain Montefiore and Copeland respectively marched towards a strongly built and well placed Kolkang, and the concentration village was attacked. Unable to withstand the modern weapons, Tintong and Enjakhup, with a large following of men, women and children, dispersed and fled. Lieutenant Walker and Captain Copeland were in pursuit of the two principal rebel chiefs. Finding themselves hard pressed, both Tintong and Enjakhup dropped their followers and moved towards the south. With information that the two rebel chiefs would be heading towards Ukha territory, orders were sent to immediately block the passes. Completely exhausted and hungry, Tintong demanded aid and food from Ngullen, chief of Khongyang, whom the British friendly chief made him prisoner. Enjakhup, on the other hand, headed back towards Kolkang, who was ambushed by Captain Copeland and was captured. With the capture of these two rebel chiefs all active opposition in the Northwest area ceased and this area was by February reported as 'thoroughly subjugated'.

### *Forbidding cultivation*

After having put the Kuki civilian population in concentration camps and a proclamation was made 'forbidding cultivation', an order was passed enforcing a blockade to food supply from the neighbours. And, 'had they not surrendered by the end of March, they would have been too late to prepare the ground for the next harvest, and would in consequence have been faced with a famine'.<sup>40</sup> After having a disruption of two agriculture seasons, most of their food-grains destroyed and their movements restricted by the ubiquitous presence of the British troops in the Kuki hills and cutting off access to neighbouring villages, it was difficult to continuously supplement their dietary needs from the forest produce. Reid (1997: 80) reported: 'More serious was the destruction of considerable quantities of grain and livestock and the interference with cultivation'. As 'The rebels, who by this time were beginning to feel the pinch of hunger were impressed by the ubiquity of the forces opposed to them, and the first of the leading rebel chiefs surrendered in December' (Reid 1997: 81).

*Using 'friendlies'*

The policy of 'divide and rule', as a mechanism to maintain colonial rule by identifying and manipulating various divisions in order to prevent unified resistance to rule, was also used in the Kuki Punitive Measure. The policy attempts to prevent unity ever dividing the peoples of India one against the other (Stewart 1951: 53, 57). As in the case of the Lushai expedition 1850 where Colonel Lister recommended the formation of a Kookie levy to be employed as scouts in the southern jungles, to collect information concerning the Lushais, and the events which were occurring on the other side of our frontier, as well as to keep a watch over the Kookies in our own territory and Manipur (Woodthroe 1980: 15.), the Lushai and Chin friendlies were used as spies and fighters in the Kuki operations. Reid (1997: 81) wrote: 'In the south eastern hills, friendly Chins, and in the southwest Lushai and friendly Kukis, were armed and employed as scouts and irregulars'. Keary reported that the Chin friendlies in Burma

rendered useful service. They prevented an influx of rebel refugees into Burma territory on any scale, and, when pitted against an approximately equal force of Kukis led by two prominent chiefs, they routed it with loss and pursued relentlessly, killing one chief and driving the other to submission.<sup>41</sup>

Macquoid also reported: 'Lieutenant Rundle and his Chin Friendlies, in a running fight in pursuit of a rebel gang, killed Ngulbul, chief of Longya, on the Special List, who, together with Ngulkhup, Chief of Mombi, were the leading chiefs of these areas'.<sup>42</sup> Hard pressed on all sides, Ngulkhup also soon gave up resistance.

Whereas the opposition started from the month of March 1917, an active warfare and counter-operations went on for more than one year (December 1917 to May 1919), suspending two agriculture seasons, and with systematic destruction of villages, properties and all sources of livelihood. The counter-operations, carried out with 'continuous active service in mountainous country', was carried out by the combined forces of Assam and Burma Military Police – 6234 combatants, 696 non-combatants, 7650 transport carriers, etc.<sup>43</sup> It was the 'largest series of military operations' in the eastern frontier of India, eclipsed only by the Second World War in the region in 1944 (Shakespeare 1980: 235–236). Robert Reid (1997: 80) also reported that: More than 6,000 combatants, about 8,000 transport coolies and non-combatants, two provincial governments (Assam and Burma) and one

princely state (Manipur), all under the supreme direction of the Government of India, took active parts in suppressing the Rising. Besides the Assam Rifles and Burma Military Police, some regular troops such as Sappers and Miners and the Manipur State Military Police also gave their cooperation.

In the second operations, the Kuki fighters put up a much stronger resistance than the previous winter. Despite this stronger force of resistance, the losses on the part of the British troops were minimal due to their previous training before the operations, and the use of stockade mortars was very much feared by the Kuki fighters, though only few were used in the operations. The organised resistance against the British ended with the surrender of Pache, Chief of Chassad, on 5 March 1919. By the beginning of April, troops gradually withdrew and the war came to an end.

### Conclusion

The military tactics largely followed in the Kuki Punitive Measures can be broadly termed as scorched-earth, counter-guerilla warfare. In this operation against the Kuki rebels, 'scorched-earth policy' was largely deployed to crush the morale of the Kukis. In other words, the new strategy was a 'morale warfare' in which indiscriminate destruction of the 'rebel' villages, granaries and jhum fields was carried out. It also involved the capturing of any 'rebel' Kukis and incarcerated them in 'concentration camps', 'regrouping' of the 'friendly' hill populations in the valley or around the military outposts in the hills. For this purpose, the whole 'rebel areas' were divided into six areas under different commands, and each area was provided with a base camp in the valleys. A series of military outposts were created across the sector area, each equipped with a 'flying scout' whose duty was to pursue the 'rebels', to carry out the 'scorched earth' policy being projected to deprive the 'rebels' a home and food supply. The whole idea was to break the spirit of Kukis and to 'crush his morale' so that they surrender and submit themselves to the British. Various forms and techniques of threats and intimidations were also served to the whole Kuki populace. It was also a sort of coercive diplomacy or forceful persuasion, besides practicing the usual divide and rule policy followed not only between various communities cohabiting this 7,000 square miles of hilly area, but also within the various Kuki clans.

As the 'most serious incident in the history of Manipur' and the 'largest series of military operations conducted' in the Northeast frontier, brutal punitive measures were adopted and inhuman treatment

and torture were meted out to the Kukis for their defiance of authority. The uprising was suppressed by ‘force of arms’ to crush the ‘morale’ of the Kukis by identifying them as ‘enemy’ and harass them so as to force them to submission.

After the brutal suppression of the uprising, ‘the Kukis were now made to open up their country by constructing fair bridle paths through their hills connecting with points in the Manipur and the Chindwyn valleys, and also connecting the various posts with each others’ (Shakespeare 1980: 237). Elsewhere I had written that:

The war could have still continued had not the British went rampaging the Kuki villages by destroying houses and paddy stocks, finding the weaknesses of a Kuki man who has great love and responsibility to his family. The Kuki chiefs and warriors fearing an impending outbreak of famine surrendered to the British and this marked the end of the war.

(Haokip 2006)

What is glaringly intriguing is ‘the degree to which concern over the acquisition and control of population was at the very centre of early statecraft’ (Scott 2017: Chapter 5). Today guerilla warfare has become the only technique deployed to fight the indomitable state and its forces. This warfare system is adopted by the liberation fighters in Northeast India into impenetrable jungles, and despite military technological advancement, the state forces still cannot fully overcome the barriers of terrain and guerilla warfare techniques. It was indeed the Kuki fighters who employed this art of warfare as a way of organised resistance to repressive forces of the state.

### Notes

- 1 British Library, London (BL), Asian and African Collections (formerly Oriental & India Office Collections) (hereafter AAC), Indian Office Records and Private Papers (hereafter IOR&PP), IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1919: J.E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to The Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Shillong, 7 November 1917.
- 2 Documents of the Anglo-Kuki War 1917–1919, edited by D.L.Haokip, 2017, H.W. Cole to B.C. Allen, 17 March 1917 (hereafter Documents of Anglo-Kuki War).
- 3 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1919: J.E. Webster to the Secretary to the Government of India, Shillong, 7 November 1917.

- 4 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1919: J.E. Webster to the Secretary to the Government of India, Shillong, 7 November 1917.
- 5 Documents of Anglo-Kuki War, 705 M.S. J.C. Higgins to Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 24 November, 1917.
- 6 Documents of Anglo-Kuki War, No. 705 M.S. J.C. Higgins to Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 24 November, 1917.
- 7 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1919, File No. 2686/1919: ‘Report on the Rebellion of the Kukis on the Upper Chindwin Frontier and the operations connected therewith’ by J.B. Marshall, DC, Upper Chindwin District, Indian Office Record, British Library, London.
- 8 Documents of Anglo-Kuki War, No. 705 M.S. J.C. Higgins to Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, 24 November, 1917.
- 9 *Thingkho le malchapom* is a small bunch of wooden sticks and king chilli bind together. It is sent to different villages as a message to inform an emergency situation that requires an urgent need for a united fight against an enemy. It is dispatched as a relay from one village to the next adjoining village and so on until the last remaining village is reached.
- 10 For instance, the chief of Songpi village, Mr. Semthong Kuki, was friendly to the British throughout the ‘rebellion’. Due to his loyalty and friendliness Songpi became the headquarters of one of the three subdivisions set up in the hills, which today is the headquarters of Churachandpur district.
- 11 Manipur State Archives (hereafter MSA), R-2/230/S-4: Higgins Tour Diary, December 1, 1917.
- 12 MSA), R-2/230/S-4: Higgins Tour Diary, December 24, 1917.
- 13 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1918: J.E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Shillong, 3 December 1917.
- 14 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1918: J.E. Webster to the Secretary to the Govt. of India, Shillong, 3 December 1917.
- 15 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of February 1918
- 16 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave for the month of March 1918.
- 17 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of January 1918.
- 18 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, Report of Webster, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, 27 June and 8 July, 1919.
- 19 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of March 1918.
- 20 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1918: Letter from J. E. Webster 3 December 2017.
- 21 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary to Chief of the General Staff, Shimla, June 1919, ‘Despatch on the Operations against the Kuki tribes of Assam and Burma’, November 1917 to March 1919.

- 22 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: C.E.K. Macquoid, General Officer Commanding, Kuki Punitive Measures letter to Lieutenant General Sir Henry DU. Keary, Commanding Burman Division, Controlling Kuki Punitive Measures, Imphal, Burma dated 5 September 1918.
- 23 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): From the Henry Keary, General Officer Commanding, Burma Division to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, Simla, No. N.E.F.O.P.B. – 69, dated 5 September 1918.
- 24 The wanted rebels on the list were: Semchung of Ukha, Pakang of Hen-glep, Ngulbul of Longya, Ngulkhup of Lonpi, Leothang of Goboh, Pache of Chassad, Ngulkhokhai of Chassad, Tintong of Laijang, Enjakhup of Thenjang, Heljason of Loibol, Mangkho-on of Tingkai, Khotinthang of Jampi, Chengjapao of Aisan and Lungholal of Chongjang.
- 25 Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of February 1918, Manipur State Archives, R-1/S-A/12.
- 26 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, Telegram from the Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Burma, Rangoon to the Secretary to the Govt. of India in the Foreign & Political Department, Delhi 5 January 1918.
- 27 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of February 1918.
- 28 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, Simla, June 1919.
- 29 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): From Henry Keary, General Officer Commanding, Burma Division to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, Simla, No. N.E.F.O.P.B. – 69, dated 5 September 1918.
- 30 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: Brigadier General C.E.K. Macquoid, D.S.O., General Officer Commanding, Kuki Punitive Measures letter to Lieutenant General Sir Henry DU. Keary, Commanding Burman Division, Controlling Kuki Punitive Measures, Imphal, Burma dated 5 September 1918.
- 31 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave for the months of January & February 1918.
- 32 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, Mss. Eur E 325/13: 1920, 'Extract from the proceeding of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in Political Department' by A.W. Botham, 27 September 1920.
- 33 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/PS/10/724: 1917–1920, File No. 383/1918: Letter from J. E. Webster, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, dated 3 December 2017.
- 34 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary to the Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, Simla, June 1919.
- 35 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919, 'Despatch on the Operations Against the Kuki Tribes' Macquoid to Keary, 27 April 1919, Appendix – III.
- 36 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: Macquoid to Henry D'U Keary, 27 April 1919, Despatch on the Operations against the Kuki tribes of Assam and Burma, November 1917 to March 1919.
- 37 MSA, R-1/S-A/12: Tour Diary of W.A. Cosgrave, Political Agent in Manipur, for the month of February 1918.



- 38 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: Macquoid to Henry Keary, GOI, Kuki Punitive Measures, Imphal, 27 April 1919.
- 39 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: Macquoid to Henry D'U Keary, 27 April 1919, Despatch on the Operations against the Kuki tribes of Assam and Burma, November 1917 to March 1919.
- 40 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary, GOI, Burma Division, to Chief of General Staff, Army Headquarters, India, Shimla in June 1919.
- 41 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42 (1919): Henry Keary, GOI, Burma Division, to Chief of General Staff, Army Headquarters, India, Shimla in June 1919.
- 42 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: Macquoid to Henry Keary, GOI, Kuki Punitive Measures, Imphal, 27 April 1919.
- 43 BL, AAC, IOR&PP, IOR/L/MIL/17/19/42: 1919: 'Despatch on the Operations Against the Kuki Tribes of Assam and Burma, November 1917 to March 1919', Brig-Gen. CEK Macquoid, General Officer Commanding Kuki Punitive Measures to Lieut-Gen. Sir Henry D.U. Keary, Commanding Burma Division, Controlling Kuki Punitive Measures, 27 April 1919, Appendix - I.

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