

Mau Mau: The Epic Calm of State Violence in Occupied Kenya

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To the silence of virtually the entire corporate media, it was revealed last April that thousands of documents recording Britain's crimes against humanity were destroyed to prevent their exposure by post-independent governments. The 8,800 surviving papers from 37 former colonies were transferred to a secret Foreign Office archive at Hanslope Park, 55 miles north of London, safe from the prying eye of the public. This cautious act, typical of violent and unaccountable states, was clearly in breach of legal commitments for the files to be transferred to the public domain. This was well understood by Iain Macleod, secretary of state for the colonies, who in 1961 ordered that any papers which 'might embarrass Her Majesty's government,' 'embarrass members of the police, military forces, public servants or others eg police informers,' or that might be 'used unethically by ministers in the successor government' be systematically destroyed. When a file selected for destruction was to be removed from a group of files to be kept in place, a 'twin file' (or a dummy) was put in its place.

A few months after the exposure, in October 2012, the High Court ruled that three elderly Kenyans who claim to have been detained and tortured by British forces during the Mau Mau rebellion have the right to sue the government for damages. The three Kenyans, Paulo Muoka Nzili, Wambugu Wa Nyingi, and Jane Muthoni Mara, had suffered 'unspeakable acts of brutality,' as their lawyers put it. Mara, just fifteen when she was arrested, recalled how a black soldier, under the orders of a white army officer, filled a bottle 'with hot water and then pushed it into my private parts with his foot. I screamed and screamed. Other women held at the camp were raped the same way.' Her lawyer, Martyn Day, commented that 'there will undoubtedly be victims of colonial torture from Malaya to the Yemen, from Cyprus to Palestine, who will be reading this judgment with great care.' The historic ruling in October, Makau Mutua recently wrote in Kenya's *Daily Nation*, is 'a game changer that may rewrite the history of colonial brutality.' *Leigh Day & Co*, the law firm representing the trio, has told *Liberty Magazine* that they are appearing in court on May 13th due to the British government's appeal.

Currently, the relatives of 24 unarmed rubber plantation workers massacred by British troops are struggling through British courts for a public inquiry, with Kenyan human rights activists estimating that over 5,000 of the 70,000 illegally detained by British colonial authorities are still alive, and who may consequently feel encouraged to bring their claims against the government (although the actual number of detainees is likely to be quadruple the official estimate, as Caroline Elkins observes in her monumental study *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, since the colonial authorities documented only the net number of detainees, and not the gross figure).

These announcements would be of no surprise to historian Mark Curtis, who estimates that the number of deaths in the post-war world for which Britain bears 'significant responsibility' is at around ten million (erring on the side of caution, as he stresses), taking into account such atrocities as the wars in Malaya (1948-1960) and Kenya (1952-1960), Indonesian atrocities (both during the 1965 coup and in East Timor from 1975), the Shah in Iran (1953-1979), the Falklands War (1982), US aggression in Central America (1980s), the bombing of Yugoslavia (1999) and Afghanistan (2001), and the invasion of Iraq (2003). Of

these ten million deaths, Britain has 'direct responsibility' for between four and six million: 'Often, the policies responsible are unknown to the public and remain unresearched by journalists and academics' (the friendly historian Dominic Sandbrook can still claim with a straight face in 2010 that 'Britain's empire stands out as a beacon of tolerance, decency and the rule of law ... Nor did Britain countenance anything like the dreadful tortures committed in French Algeria').

Curtis adds in *Unpeople* that 'humanitarian concerns do not figure at all in the rationale behind British foreign policy,' and are occasionally evoked purely for 'public-relations purposes.' These rhetorical (and in the case of Hanslope Park, secretive) methods of self-preservation have stymied attempts to bring Britain's brutal history in Kenya to the public eye. It is little known or discussed, for instance, either in academic seminars or the popular press, that Britain bombed villages in the impoverished African nation and forced many into concentration camps, having long had land interests in the region. This particular assignment in the 1950s was the spiritual successor to similar work during the Second Anglo-Boer War, which included 'scorched earth' policies and civilian internment into similar concentration camps. Indeed, the early bombing of Malaya in the 1950s was also one of the many inspirations for the US bombing of Vietnam, and its use of the horrific chemical Agent Orange can be seen as a nod to Churchill's favourite toy, poison gas (which he believed would spread a 'lively terror' amongst 'uncivilised tribesmen and recalcitrant Arabs,' beginning a harsh legacy of British violence against the Kurds and Afghans).

As Curtis details in *Web of Deceit*, Britain's current of institutionalised racism in Kenya, and its declaration of the state of emergency in October 1952, was largely the cause of the subsequent war, contrary to standard accounts. This act of conscious and deliberate state terrorism allowed the occupying colonial authorities and their *gendarme* to crush the nascent threat of independent, nationalist development. The British lacked any evidence to suggest that the rebels were part of an international communist conspiracy, so the natural alternative was to present them 'as straight out of the heart of darkness – as gangsters who indulged in cannibalism, witchcraft, devil worship and sexual orgies and who terrorised white settlers and mutilated women and children.' As Cranford Pratt records in a series of essays on *The Transfer of Power in Africa*, the Governor of Kenya explained that Britain was in Africa to 'to develop and civilise as part of what I may call Western European civilisation and economics.'

Labour MP Barbara Castle's calls for an independent investigation into the torture of Kenyans were correspondingly dismissed with contempt by her superiors during the time of the occupation. As she explained in September 1955 to the Labour-supporting *Tribune*: 'In the heart of the British Empire there is a police state where the rule of law has broken down, where the murder and torture of Africans by Europeans does unpunished and where the authorities pledged to enforce justice regularly connive at its violation.'

The war had absolutely nothing to do with the textbook 'Soviet threat,' but rather, as the Foreign Office quietly disclosed, it was 'very much in the defence of [the] rubber industry', then partially under British control. The same could be said of the situation in British Guiana in 1953, when London sent warships to overthrow the democratically elected Cheddi Jagan whose actions were undermining Britain's commercial interests (any sensitive papers relevant to this event were destroyed, however, at Macleod's orders).

In 1955, three years after the beginning of the Mau Mau rebellion, the British governor of Kenya expressed his 'determination to persevere in the task to which we have set our minds – to civilise a great mass of human beings who are in a very primitive moral and social state' (the usual enlightened excuse for colonial exploitation). Elkins also revealed in *Britain's Gulag* that British forces even detained the entire 1.5 million residents of Kikuyu in concentration camps and reinforced villages. Here thousands died from dysentery and typhoid when they weren't being used as slave labour, with the gates to many camps bearing Nazi-style slogans like 'Labour and freedom' while the national anthem was broadcast from loudspeakers. Even after independence in 1963, the political vacancies created by decolonization were mostly filled by 'onetime loyalists,' Elkins comments.

Although atrocities were committed by both Mau Mau and colonial forces, 'the sheer number of deaths at the hands of the government forces,' writes Curtis, 'shows that there was an extensive shoot-to-kill policy and that killings were conducted with impunity. Colonial forces killed around 10,000 Africans. By contrast, the Mau Mau killed 590 members of the security forces, 1,819 Africans, and 32 European and 26 Asian civilians. More white settlers were killed in road accidents in Nairobi during the emergency than by Mau Mau.' Catholic missionaries also preached 'with a Bible in one hand and [a] gun in the other,' as one anonymous survivor told Elkins. Occasionally they took some time off from spreading the good word during the day to hunt down Mau Mau rebels during the night, loving their neighbours with peculiar aggressiveness. Not long after the Emergency was declared, Harry Cross, a London constable recruited as an inspector by the colonial police, wrote to former colleagues about the 'Gestapo methods' being employed by the British: 'It's not uncommon for people to die in the cells.'

Torture was widespread in the camps. According to the accounts Elkins gathers in *Britain's Gulag*, the British cut off prisoner's ears and gouged out their eyes. They dragged people behind Land Rovers to disintegrate their flesh. Pliers were used to mutilate women's breasts when they weren't being gang-raped by the guards, often with broken bottles, vermin and hot eggs being thrust up their vaginas. Inmates were mauled by dogs and electrocuted. Men were anally raped using rifle barrels, knives, snakes and scorpions. A special tool was created by the British to crush and then rip off the testicles of prisoners. What especially pleased many guards was to hold a man upside down with his head in a bucket of water as sand was forced into his rectum with a stick. Pins were pushed into the sides, buttocks, fingers and heads of prisoners. Mark Curtis elaborates in *Web of Deceit* that other techniques included pouring paraffin over suspects before setting them set alight and burning eardrums with cigarettes.

Duncan McPherson, an assistant commissioner of police who opposed these methods, explained: 'I would say that the conditions I found existing in some camps in Kenya were worse, far worse, than anything I experienced in my four and a half years as a prisoner of the Japanese.' An estimated 150,000 Africans died as a result of British policies in Kenya, taking place between episodes of horrific torture at the hands of military and home guards (our pride and joy), according to Canon Bewes of the Church Missionary Society. Independent settler groups displeased with Britain's tactics were also formed to counter the Mau Mau. One settler with the Kenya Police Reserve's Special Branch described to Elkins an interrogation of a Mau Mau suspect: 'By the time I cut his balls off he had no ears, and his eyeball, the right one, I think, was hanging out of its socket. Too bad, he died before we got much out of him.' In a secret memo, attorney general of the British administration in Kenya, Eric Griffiths-Jones, expressed with dreamlike detachment his lack of concern for such

prisoners, though he empathised with the guards: 'The psychological effects on those who administer violence are potentially dangerous; it is essential that they should remain collected, balanced, and dispassionate.' A few lines later he cautioned that 'If we are going to sin, we must sin quietly.'

Lower levels of torture were also applied to British prisoners in Cyprus. The prison camps were home to forced labour and torture and, to historian V. G. Kiernan in his illuminating study *European Empires from Conquest to Collapse*, 'were probably as bad as any similar Nazi or Japanese establishments' (Ian Cobain's recent study *Cruel Britannia: A Secret History of Torture* explores this particular case in great detail). As Curtis and Elkins both make clear, British policy in Kenya to a significant extent helped shape it into the impoverished nation it is today, as the disintegrating empire shielded itself with manic and brutal desperation from the threat of Kenyan freedom.

The Hola massacre of 1959 can provide a final, revealing insight into common colonial mentalities and practices. After 11 prisoners were clubbed to death by guards at a detention camp in Hola, the *East African Standard* – and later *Time* magazine – exposed the massacre to international shock. At this point the British colonial authorities, as declassified letters reveal, understood the game was up and proceeded to release prisoners from various camps. The *New Statesman* also compared the Hola massacre to the crimes of the Nazis, and the British people's apathy towards it to that of the German people under Hitler. Indirectly, then, the exposure led to the withdrawal of the colonial authorities four years later – an observation fresh in the minds of Nzili, Nyingi and Muthoni as they continue their bitter legal struggle, and a point well worth bearing in mind as we watch the next generation of torture victims finding themselves at odds against the forces of state violence.