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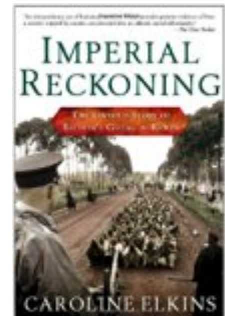
Caroline Elkins. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005. 496 pp. $27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8050-7653-0.



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Caroline Elkins's *Imperial Reckoning* is a study of the British response to the Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya in the 1950s. While the history of the Mau Mau or, more correctly, Land and Freedom Army, has engaged the attention of some scholars, the subject has not aroused popular interest in the same way the independent struggles in Portuguese and French empires have. It is as if British imperial scholarship, which at one point dominated colonial historiography, wanted to retain a sanitized version of the empire's disintegration. After all, India, the jewel of the British empire, gained independence nonviolently, while minor players such as the Gold Coast were granted freedom on a silver platter. Elkins's study of the Mau Mau and the British response to it puts to rest such sanitized interpretations of the fall of the largest seaborne empire in human history.

As a colony Kenya provided all the lures of a tropical fairyland: fertile highlands free of malaria, blue skies year round, exotic wild life, picturesque landscape and all that within a day's drive from the coast. Unlike the typical working-class overseas immigrants, whose rationale for leaving Europe included the privilege that whiteness afforded in the colonies, Kenyan settlers either boasted a genuine aristocratic pedigree or at least affected some Oxfordian pretensions. By the time the Mau Mau uprising began in 1952, Kenya had become home to about 50,000 well-entrenched Europeans, notorious for their fanatic race outlook as much as for their claim to blue blood.

The relationship between the white settlers and the local African farmers during this period can be best characterized as that of a zero sum game. In just over a generation, the latter had witnessed their population reduced to a society of squatters or altogether pushed into "tribal" reserves. They had lost their political freedom and become a servile class, not to mention a sense of social alienation the elders must have felt as their children joined mission schools by the droves. Their men who fought against the Japanese in Burma, and against Nazism and Fascism in Europe and Africa, had returned home not as war heroes but as potential troublemakers that required constant government vigilance.

While postwar political developments at home can be described as more of the same, few of the politically conscious Kenyans could ignore the "winds of change" blowing elsewhere. Indonesia and India had gained independence by the late forties, followed by the overthrow of the pro-British Egyptian monarchy some years later. By the early 1950s, in short, Kenya like most other colonies was ready for some political tremor. What few foresaw was, nevertheless, the level of violence to which Britain would resort in trying to contain this nationalist stir.

The exact circumstances leading to the Kikuyu anticolonial insurgency remain a mystery. Initiation rites such as the partaking in animal sacrifice and the swearing of a series of oaths gave the Mau Mau its secretive and almost religious aura. Members called themselves the Land and Freedom Army, but the British referred to them as Mau Mau, a derogatory term of unknown origin. Guerilla-style military operations, aimed mostly at settlers in isolated farmsteads, began in early 1952. Then came the turning point late that year. On October 21, following the assassination of a well-known loyalist chief, Governor Evelyn Baring declared a state of emergency. Immediate victims of the crackdown included the overseas-educated Jomo Kenyatta and a few more Kikuyu notables, whom Baring locked up for several years in the desert district of Lokitaung.

As subsequent investigations would reveal, the conservative Kenyatta had little to do with the underground resistance. The Land and Freedom Army had in fact been made up of loosely organized bands of peasant fighters with a sprinkle of World War II veterans here and there. Baring would provide the forest fighters their rallying figure, thanks to the trumped up charges that turned Kenyatta into a nationalist super hero.

By 1953 the colony had mobilized fully its resources to contain the insurgency. The well-publicized disproportionate use of military force, including aerial bombardment, constituted only one half of the story behind the British war in East Africa. The unconventional other half, little known in the outside world and now remembered by even fewer Kenyans, is the subject of Elkins's study. Unconventional anti-insurgency tactics included summary executions; electric shock; mass killings; mass deportations; slave labor; the burning down of villages and similar collective punishments; starvation; threatening harm to wives and children; sodomization and rape; and soaking prisoners with human waste. When the emergency ended seven years later, African death due to such acts of cruelty ran perhaps as high as 300,000, almost thirty times the mainstream figure of 11,000 (p. 366). By contrast, insurgents had killed about eighteen hundred loyalists as well as thirty-two settlers.

Albeit on a much more minor scale, the British reign of terror in Kenya almost paralleled Nazi racial atrocities. Moreover, it happened in just less than a decade since World War II, as the West was still coming to grips with the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust. Unlike the gas chambers, however, the world would know little of the Kenyan concentration camps even half a century after the fact. This collective amnesia is the background against which Elkins establishes London's colonial excesses, thereby deconstructing the ***Pax Britannica*** image.

Basing her argument on various sources of evidence, from recently declassified archival materials to oral interviews with ex-colonial officials and Mau Mau survivors, Elkins challenges the conventional interpretation of the British response to Mau Mau as measured and within the realm of "civilized" behavior. "I've come to believe that during the Mau Mau war British forces wielded their authority with a savagery that betrayed a perverse colonial logic," the Harvard professor writes, adding: "I now believe there was in late colonial Kenya a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people, a campaign that left tens of

thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, dead" (pp. xv-xvi).

Anecdotal examples lend credence to Elkins's argument that the British engaged in more than a mere anti-insurgency operation. A settler in the Rift Valley province, remembered by the locals as Joseph Mengele, ran his own interrogation camp where suspects were castrated and forced to eat their testicles, or burned alive (p. 67). Another notorious group, popularly known as the Kenya's SS and made up of mostly South African police, was in charge of the Mbakasi labor camp, now the site of the Kenyatta International Airport, where tortures and murders happened regularly behind closed doors (p. 86). Sadists and race fanatics in fact seemed to have found a common ground in the anti-Mau Mau operation. One American, who volunteered his service as interrogator, boasted of his preference for the knife so as to inflict a slow and painful death in full view of other suspects. Another British officer remembered how he and two other white colleagues stood and grinned as their Alsatian reduced a healthy prisoner into a heap of blood and scattered flesh in a matter of minutes (pp. 85-86).

Of course, there is no such a thing as a clean war. But the collaborative accounts by over a hundred informants, whom Elkins interviews in person, demonstrate that such gruesome mayhems and racist orgies remained the rule, not the exception in screening centers and detention camps across Kikuyuland in the 1950s.

The campaign for "hearts and minds," as the officials ironically dubbed the anti- insurgency war, focused on the detention camps or the pipeline. From 1954 on, the camps hosted about 80,000 detainees at any given time, which means hundreds of thousands of men must have been rotated through them by 1960. The pipeline began in cities or villages where thousands would be rounded up randomly and put on packed trains and buses for undisclosed destinations. Once in the remote holding centers, the ordeal of detention life would start, accompanied by hard labor and punctuated by a series of interrogation or screening tortures. Those who confessed or "spat back the oath" would be sent to rehabilitation centers, while hardcore Mau Mau adherents were transferred to special camps where back-breaking labor and tortures of all sorts claimed many more lives.

Women, while a small fraction of detainees, made up an important component. Over four thousand women went through the pipeline each year. About 15 percent of them were interned with their young ones while many others gave birth in detention (p. 227). In general, men ran the female holding centers with all the consequences it entailed. In one instance, however, an eccentric female settler, the notorious Katherine Warren Gash, reigned over the screening process with as much terror as any of her male counterparts (p. 222).

The frequent accusations against women dealt with taking the oath or passing information to the forest fighters. The range of tortures they suffered, from the insertion of foreign objects in their vaginas to having their breasts cut off by pliers, was proof that the interrogators made little distinction between actual combatants and those with supporting roles. In fact, given the presence of children in the detention camps, the psychological trauma faced by female detainees was much worse than that suffered by husbands and brothers.

Where Elkins's study is equally at its best in reconstructing the gender dimension of British war crime in Kenya is in her discussion of the forced villagization. About 1.5 million Kikuyus, almost the entire population, were resettled in 804 villages. Barbed wires and spiked trenches surrounded the villages so as to strangulate the fighters in their forest hideouts by denying them access to civilians. Since a large number of men were already in detention camps, villagization affected mostly women, children, the old and the

disabled. Evictions, which often began with the burning down of villages, took place with no advance warning, with many dying in the process and others barely making it out alive. In the makeshift villages the excesses from the detention camps were reenacted: rape, forced labor, torture, diseases, and famine. Villagization would succeed in severing the fighters' lifeline, but at the cost of tens of thousands of civilians, mostly women and children (p. 234).

Although Elkins's central theme is British war crime in Kenya, she also addresses the topic of African agency, especially the ingenuity with which detainees responded to camp life. While no doubt many succumbed to tortures and the incessant psychological warfare, others devised various techniques of resistance: from engaging in discreet letter writing campaigns to using the prison ground for the recruitment of new Mau Mau converts. Complementing detainee resistance from within was the overseas lobby by a small but vocal group of Labour MPs such as Barbara Castle and Fenner Brockway. However, just as the home guards got in the way of detainee resistance, so did the stonewalling of the Colonial Office and the British government against such voices of conscience.

A groundbreaking contribution to colonial historiography, *Imperial Reckoning* is a timely publication in light of the recent scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Methodological questions may be raised about Elkins's liberality with figures as well as the authenticity of individual testimonies that make up the bulk of her sources on torture and detention. But one has only to remember the German genocide in Southwest Africa, the death of millions in Leopold's Congo, or the Italian use of chemical weapons in Ethiopia, to know that the onus of disproof for such data lies on defendants of empire.

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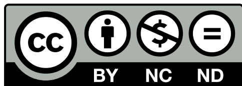

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