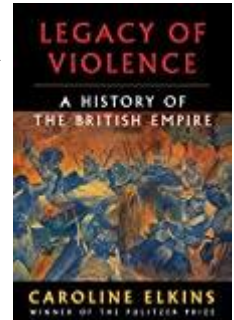


**Caroline Elkins.** *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022. x + 875 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-307-27242-3.



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In *Legacy of Violence. A History of the British Empire*, Caroline Elkins takes aim at the idea that the British Empire was a benign imperialism. To the contrary, Elkins insists, the British Empire was infused with coercion and violence. Her subject is not the full-scale military violence (of which, of course, there was plenty) but state-controlled violence against civil society whether it was Irish nationalists, Arab protestors or Jewish Zionists, Malaysian communists or Mau Mau guerrilla fighters. Elkins demonstrates that it mattered not which political party was administering the empire; when push came to shove, all were prepared to abandon the precepts of Britain's liberal traditions. At some point, Liberal, Labour, and Conservatives all reached for the whip of coercion to make a mockery of the nation's humanitarian principles and its commitment to the rule of law.

This complicity in violence ran wide and deep: it was true even of someone like Hugh Foot, scion of a distinguished and truly Liberal family, brother of the radical Labour politician Michael Foot, who had been part of the tough measures de-

ployed against the Arab Revolt in Palestine, and, as the last governor of Cyprus, was willing to cover up the abuses committed by the military that he knew occurred and personally abhorred. Indeed, it is precisely this recurrence of evasion and denial about the extent and systematic nature of imperial violence within British political culture which Elkins identifies as the consistent and profound hypocrisy of Britain's "liberal imperialism." Imperial culture and practice combined a complacent superiority and confidence in its own righteousness with a willingness to engage in the "methods of barbarism" first revealed in the concentration camps of the South African War of 1899-1902, and followed by later refinements of organized terror in interwar Palestine, forced removals of postwar Malaya, and the "gulag" that was erected to combat Mau Mau in Kenya in the mid-1950s.

In this respect, the British exercise of imperial power was essentially no different from its European counterparts, even though the latter were routinely contrasted unfavorably with the

British. The difference between Britain and the other imperial nations, perhaps, lay in the power of the narrative that emerged during the mid-eighteenth century which claimed that British imperial policy was animated by liberty and freedom. This allowed the ugly side of empire to be both excused and forgotten and its power was such that British imperial violence could be perpetrated with smooth urbanity by a political class which effectively asserted—and generally believed in—the high ideals and noble goals of the British imperial project.

Although this is a story that could be pushed back to the very beginnings of the empire, Elkins's main focus is on the twentieth century, when the confidence in a benevolent British Empire was most pervasive. An opening survey of nineteenth-century liberal imperial ideology and some attention to celebrated episodes of imperial violence such as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 then shifts to Ireland after the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and to Iraq in the 1920s, and Palestine in the interwar period. It was in these locations that the modern methods of imperial coercion and violence were devised and tested. The bulk of her book, however, is devoted to the end of empire after the Second World War, when Britain engaged in a series of continuous "small wars" in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and, later, Ireland again, along with other places that do not receive much attention here like Aden and the Trucial States. The events in these places were the proving grounds for the techniques of "counterterrorism" that have been a key part of Western military strategy in the recent past. For Elkins, the experience of these colonies disturbs the conceit that Britain's exit from its empire was an elegant and honorable escape. And, of course, she is right. It was also true, however, that wrapping up the empire was a multivariate activity, conditioned very much by the particular circumstances of particular places. Violence was not absent from places like Ghana, the West Indies, or Nigeria for example. But neither

was it the main narrative. And this suggests that the story Elkins tells is itself partial.

Although there are over six hundred pages of text in the book, and its title suggests a broad history, in fact Elkins's focus is narrowly focused both in time and scope. Her concern is really with high politics. She is interested in the techniques that the British state erected to cope with challenges to its imperial power in the twentieth century. Holding the story together, and one of the fascinating themes of this book, are accounts she presents of the imperial careers that were built by these experts in "counterterrorism" as they combatted the insurrections that perpetually burned in one part of the empire or another. Elkins puts flesh on these sinews of imperial violence, identifying the men—some of whom she has interviewed—who were practiced torturers and experts in the techniques of tough interrogation. Their skills were transferable. In the interwar years, those who had cut their teeth battling Irish nationalists were to be found applying their skills in the Palestine Police. Some of these people then transferred to Malaya in the early 1950s to cope with the communist insurrection and later were to be found in Kenya, where their experience was deployed against Mau Mau.

This is a story that deserves to be documented, and the author demonstrates an impressive command both of archival research and of the secondary literature. Much of the tale she tells has been lying in plain view for a long time, but Elkins is the first to put it together in such complete detail. Furthermore, it is a chronicle that has been with Elkins for a long time. In *Imperial Reckoning. The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (2005) she documented in close detail the instruments of oppression that the British reflexively called upon to deal with the threat to imperial rule posed by Mau Mau. The account Elkins offered in that book was key to a celebrated case brought against the British government for compensation by some victims of British brutality in Kenya.

Elkins was an expert witness at that trial and instrumental in the related discovery of a “secret” archive of documents dating from the end of empire that the British authorities had removed from their colonies precisely to hide evidence of its policies of violence. The present book closes with a full account of these events.

This new book generalizes the arguments of *Imperial Reckoning* to other parts of the empire. It is no surprise, therefore, that the best chapter in the book is the one on Kenya. It is tightly argued, efficiently presented, and readable. For the rest, the book suffers grievously from its size: it is ungainly and overly digressive. Any subject that pops up in the narrative is the opportunity for a lengthy diversion. Mention of the South African War or the Red Cross, for example, is occasion for overly long diversions into origins or potted histories that impede the narrative. In the chapter on Palestine, the arrival of an official to run the Palestine Police directly from Ireland makes the point about imperial careerism, but Elkins then veers off toward a discussion of the history of the Zionist movement, the Balfour Declaration, the nature of Ottoman rule, the problem of Jewish settlements, and Vladimir Jabotinsky before eight pages later getting back to the official in question, a man with the unbelievably apt name of Henry Tudor! It beggars the imagination that this ponderous style would have escaped the attention of expert readers, and it is even more surprising that the publishers Alfred Knopf put the book out in its current form. Knopf was once known for the creative role that its editors played in the production of its books. But this one evidently was not subject to an editorial red pencil.

If the book tends to overstuff its argument, it is also a book that is curiously thin in its conceptualization. Nuance and subtlety are strikingly absent throughout all the key arguments of the book. There is the implicit assumption, for example, that empire posed binary choices; that the actors in the story faced a ready alternative between violence

and nonviolence; and that the adoption of violence represented a hypocritical betrayal of Britain’s liberal ideals. Yet, as we know, the context of violence is always more complicated than this. The social relations of empire cannot be reduced to simple binaries. Empire was an entangled series of encounters in which violence was prominent but was accompanied by a range of other social interactions that included the agencies of reciprocity, engagement, negotiation, and cooperation between Indigenous groups and the imperial presence. The complexities of imperial rule are entirely absent from this book. It is telling, for example, that when Indigenous people do appear in this book it is either (justifiably) as victims or, more simply, as collaborators with empire.

The empire presented in this book is solely that of the primacy of imperial power exercised through coercive violence. It is an updated version of older writings on empire that centered conquest and power. The problem is, of course, that power, like violence, is more than one-dimensional. Imperial power, for example, rested on Indigenous toleration and participation in the process of rule, even as it was also threatened by Indigenous agency: thus, it was always in danger of meeting its own fragility. British will to rule was a necessary precondition of the British Empire, but it was not the sole requirement. The resort to the order of violence Elkins analyzes was a reflexive response to power that was threatened. And for much of the empire—particularly those parts that Elkins writes about—this recognition was always embedded within the colonial mentality. This recognition inserted a frailty in the imperial enterprise that was suddenly exposed when all of the coercive offensives that Elkins writes about suddenly collapsed. And they collapsed less because the imperial rulers faced military defeat and more because—for a series of complex reasons—the colonizers themselves lost confidence in their ability to rule. The threat of violence was not absent from this consideration. British prime minister Harold Macmillan’s “winds of change” speech to the South

African Parliament in 1960 came directly after the massacres of white settlers in the Congo, watched with twitchy nervousness by the British settlers in the Central and southern African colonies.

Violence, like power, then, is a complicated entity. State-sponsored violence of the type that preoccupies Elkins is characteristic of all state systems as they face threats to their legitimacy. In that respect there was nothing particularly distinctive about colonial violence. What made colonial violence truly different was that it was a feature of *everyday life* for colonized peoples, who never knew when it would strike out at them, nor from which source it would come. This is not the kind of violence that Elkins documents. She makes much of the preparedness of the British liberal state to institute lawlessness through the law, but this has a deeper history beyond the twentieth century, and it was always the reality at the quotidian level for the subjects of empire.

Similar kinds of qualifications also apply to the most important theme of the book: the way empire exposed the hypocrisy that underlay British liberal sentiments. There is much that could be said about this. Elkins is quite right to identify the challenge that the exercise of imperial power presented to liberal ideology. This has been itemized by many other commentators. It is very easy to use the ugly history of Britain's actions in its empire to humble and shame the corpus of liberal ideology. Of course, John Stuart Mill's writings helped legitimate imperial dominance; and, naturally, James Fitzjames Stephen openly touted the exercise of brute power to maintain British rule. With the condescension that posterity bestows on those who peer back from the comfortable perch of their superior understanding of racial politics, it takes little effort to put those icons of the past in their proper place.

As this suggests, there is a surprisingly prosaic dynamic of history underpinning this book. The complicit relationship between liberalism and empire is oversimplified simply by highlighting the

inconsistencies between liberal values and imperial practice. The historical dynamic between liberalism and empire is not captured *just* by acts of betrayal of faith. Moral scrutiny may have a place in historical explanation, but moral scrutiny is hardly a substitute for historical explanation. By contrast, deeper insight into the historical dynamic between liberalism and empire is gained by recognizing how empire induced fractures, confusion, dissonances, and tensions within liberal ideology. These are not matters that can be put to rest simply by the exposure of deceit and chicanery. The issue of the British Empire was a subject of debate and contest between different and competing visions of liberalism, and the dynamic was one that spread far and wide, with positive and negative historical outcomes. The conjuncture of liberal values and ideology, and empire did not *simply* justify empire: it also shaped the formation of anticolonial politics within Britain and, most importantly, amongst Indigenous groups in the empire. Elkins makes much of the failure of the British in their empire to live up to their commitment to human rights under the Geneva Conventions, and of the incomplete protection those Conventions provided to colonial subjects. All of that is true. Nonetheless, those Conventions and Britain's need to be tied to them also provided a conceptual and rhetorical framework for Indigenous politics to challenge imperial sovereignty. Britain thus discovered that she had helped create a system that could be turned against her in the international arena, where the claims of Indigenous people for their own sovereignty were heard.

In the final analysis, of course, this book is very much of its time. The virtue of Elkins's book is that it makes the case for writing the history of the British Empire as a story of sanctimonious deceptions, double-dealing, and complicity with violence and racial capitalism. The problem with the book is that it illuminates the need for a more nuanced, complex, and (dare one say) dispassionate attitude toward the imperial factor in British history. Since the Brexit campaign, the British Empire has

moved to the center of contemporary political debate and contest within Britain. It is not a new role for the empire to be an object of political contention; this function of empire follows from the way British identity and empire have been paired from the very moment “Britain” was imagined politically. The difference today is that the debate revolves around an historical artifact that is fast disappearing into the mists of the past where, perhaps, it will become more fully the property of history rather than a construction onto which contemporary political debates and judgements are projected.

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