

# Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya

a book review  
by

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Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. London: Jonathan Cape. 2005. pp. xiv, 475.

Caroline Elkins, now Assistant Professor at Harvard University, spent ten years researching the real history of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya and the systematic brutality with which the British colonial bureaucracy put it down. Had her work been less thorough, had she been content with the surface of the story which initially emerged from the highly censored records, her report might have been quite different. Elkins tells us: "When I presented my dissertation proposal to my department in the winter of 1997, I was intending to write a history of the success of Britain's civilizing mission in the detention camps of Kenya" What drew her into the lower depths of the true history of the Mau Mau rebellion was the absence of records about it. The author found obvious gaps in the usually meticulous records, some missing and others "still classified as confidential some fifty years after the Mau Mau war" (Elkins 2005: x)

The Kikuyu people in Kenya found their land being confiscated and their labor coerced by British "development" projects such as the building a railroad, the growing of cash crops to repay British taxpayers for this expensive scheme, and ultimately the influx of white settlers to exploit land use and native labor. Some thirty thousand "coolies" from India were imported to build the railroad, many of whom were killed or maimed in the back-breaking work. Completed in 1901, the Uganda Railway consisted of hundreds of miles of track stretching from Mombasa to Lake Victoria and beyond. British military strategists believed this rail line gave them quick access to Uganda where they feared some rival, possibly Germany, might gain control of the headwaters of the Nile. Because the native way of life centered on family-cooperative subsistence farming, they were resistant to incorporation into cash-crop plantation agriculture. The colony therefore resorted to importing white settlers from England and South Africa in hopes of producing the money needed to pay off the enormous cost of this military-industrial feat.

Resistance among the Kikuyu people took the form of a loose affiliation of organizations which came to be known as Mau Mau. Loyalty to the people's struggle against loss of land and their traditional way of life caused them to bond together through a time-honored practice of oath-taking, a practice which came to involve almost the entire population of Kikuyu communities and smaller numbers of people from neighboring tribes. So effective was this organization that the colonial bureaucracy sought to break it at any cost. The alleged barbarism of the Mau Mau became legendary, though in fact, as Elkins shows, far fewer people, white and/or black, died at the hands of the Mau Mau than the thousands of Kikuyu killed by the Colonial bureaucracy and their Kikuyu loyalist collaborators.

As Elkins describes it, the British occupation of Kenya provides a good example of Maxime Rodinson's contention that settler colonialism is intrinsically genocidal. Though the Kikuyu retreated further into the interior to escape their deprivations, the British military launched a series of punitive raids designed to force the natives to submit. "There is only one way of improving the Wakikuyu," Francis Hall wrote to his father, "[and] that is wipe them out; I should be only too delighted to do so, but we have to depend on them for food supplies." Of course Hall, an officer in the Imperial British East Africa Company, was unaware that he was echoing precisely the sentiments of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Prospero reminded his daughter that they could not eliminate Caliban completely because they needed him to cut wood for their fire and haul water for their cooking. In campaigns of extermination reminiscent of those carried out a century earlier against the Native American indigenous peoples, British army officers like Captain Richard Meinertzhagen "launched several attacks that included wiping out an entire village of men, women, and elderly (the children were spared) using bayonets, rifles, machine guns, and fire (Elkins 2005: 3).

What emerges from this meticulously researched study is the delineation of a plan for the subordination and, ultimately, the destruction of an entire native population. As the book unfolds, there is a terrible feeling of *déjà vu*—we recognize the same plan that is right now being used in Iraq and in Palestine and in Chechnya. Through a system called the "Pipeline", the British colonial authorities rounded up and detained in squalid barbed-wire concentration camps the entire Kikuyu population, segregating men from their families, putting women and children in equally ghastly enclosures in which slave labor and indoctrination were enforced by beatings, starvation, and torture. Prisoners were rounded up indiscriminately, held without charge or any legal appeal, classified according to the degree of their commitment to Mau Mau, and then the necessary degree of violence was applied to either exact cooperation or, in the case of the unbreakable resisters, to inflict torture including castration and finally death. Almost the entire Kikuyu people had bound themselves to resist the loss of their lands and their freedom through a series of oaths, and it was the purpose of the "Pipeline" to break this solidarity and the individual will of the entire people.

The complete picture of Britain's practice in Kenya which emerges from Elkins' exhaustive research is terrifying. On the one hand, there was a war in which the Mau Mau used effective guerilla tactics to defeat well-armed and trained military forces at great cost in lives and suffering.

On the other hand, there was a war against the entire Kikuyu people. Women would return from a day of forced labor to be subjected to interrogation and torture designed to make them confess and repudiate their Mau Mau oaths. Meanwhile, collaborators who accepted the rewards of treachery against their own people, were given protection and were allowed to live comfortably while the resistance perished.

Some of the practices of the Colonial officers were assaults on the psyche and cultural sensibilities of the Kikuyu people. One woman from Myeri District told Elkins:

At one point the villagers were ordered to remove every article of clothing and remain stark naked. You cannot start to imagine the shame and embarrassment we felt when, without any consideration for the small children, we were told to arrange ourselves in two rows, one for the men and the other for the women, old and young alike. To everyone's horror we were ordered at gunpoint to embrace each other, man with a woman, regardless of whether the man happened to be your father, father-in-law, or brother. It was all so humiliating that one woman hanged herself later, as she felt that she could not continue to live with the humiliating experience of having been forced to embrace her son-in-law while both of them were naked. In our custom that is a curse. (Elkins 2005: 249)

Any reader familiar with other insurgencies will recognize in Elkins' portrayal of the British genocide against the Kikuyu in Kenya the similarity to tactics used for example by the Israelis to break down individual Palestinian resistance in prison through torture and genital mutilation; to break down the culture by house demolition, forced population removal, the practice of breaking into refugee homes; to humiliate the father in front of his children, and to destroy supplies of foodstuffs; to create divisions in resistance groups by "turning" members into collaborators, and to target resistance leadership for special brutality and frequently for extra-judicial execution. Common also to the Kenya scenario and Palestine is the indiscriminate rounding up of males between 14 and 45, incarceration without charges or trial, and torture designed to break the spirit. Underlying the entire genocidal effort is the diversion of land from subsistence farming, grazing, and olive and grape husbandry, to Jewish-only settler colonies and roads, and to intensive-irrigation agricultural projects to produce cash crops for export. Land that should be the new Palestinian state is expropriated for high-rise apartment buildings—bedroom communities for Jews who work in the high-tech industries of Tel Aviv or Haifa.

Caroline Elkins' fine book presents us with the paradigm of British imperial colonial practice which has forced thousands of Africans to flee their homelands in leaky boats and risk death to escape expropriated land that can no longer support their traditional agricultural systems. In Kenya the indigenous population was removed from their original villages, driven into the highlands, then forced into artificial villages surrounded by barbed wire with watch towers and moats from which the only escape was capitulation or death.

This appalling story has no happy ending. Unfortunately, the heroic resistance of the Mau Mau insurgency was officially neglected in Kenya both under Jomo Kenyatta and his successor Daniel Arap Moi, while collaborators and white settlers continued to enjoy the best farm land and a leisurely lifestyle unrepentant and unpunished for their part in the brutal destruction of a whole community.