

The Mau Mau Insurrection: The Failed Rebellion That Freed Kenya

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Abstract

During the British Empire's colonial occupation of Kenya, which began in 1895, a new sense of Kenyan nationalism emerged. Between 1952 and 1956, the combined Kenyan tribes—united for the first time and calling themselves the Mau Mau—launched a violent guerilla war against the occupying British forces. Militarily, the Kenyans were no match for the seasoned soldiers, yet the rebellion became a significant cause of the ultimate British decision to withdraw from the Kenyan colony. Policy makers in the British metropole—the political and cultural center of the British Empire—grew concerned that any reprisal against further Mau Mau insurgent action would lead to socio-political repercussion that the dwindling empire could ill afford. By 1954, in response to their own political fears, the colonial government, in full cooperation with the Home Office, increased the repression of the native Kenyans in an attempt to cover up the abuses the Kenyans suffered under British rule. It was not until 2005 that investigative historians uncovered evidence of these abuses, and by 2011 thousands of documents offered incriminating evidence of both colonial abuse and the complicity of the central government. This paper examines how fears of socio-political repercussions over colonial abuses in Kenya led directly to the decision to decolonize. At the core of this anxiety lay the Mau Mau rebellion and the British governments attempts to obfuscate the true nature of the insurrection.

Introduction

British forces faced little resistance in their initial efforts to colonize the nation of Kenya in 1895. European governments had been carving up the continent of Africa for decades and had become adept at managing native populations. The colonial governors in Kenya kept relative peace through the mid-twentieth century. In response to growing dissatisfaction with imperial rule, Kenyans, led by the large Kikuyu tribe, staged a violent revolt against the British colonists in 1952.¹ The insurgency was known as the Mau Mau rebellion, so named after the title given to the Kenyan freedom fighters by British soldiers. British de-colonization occurred twelve years later in 1964, after more than a decade of guerilla warfare. During this time, the once tribally oriented natives gained a sense of national identity. This nationalistic identity, born under imperial subjugation, was synonymous with the insurrectionist Mau Mau warriors in the minds of the British government. Their nationalist ideas represented a substantial threat to the stability of the Kenyan colony. The rebellion also renewed interest in Kenya in the metropole and abroad as allegations of mistreatment caused embarrassment to both colonial officials and those in the British Home Office. The insurrection did not defeat Britain militarily, yet the fear of potential repercussions that further violence might precipitate did influence policy in Britain.² Kenyan independence is a direct result of British anxiety that socio/geopolitical repercussions—including the loss of Britain’s “special relationship” with the United States in a modern era of

¹ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry and Holt, 2005), 338.

² Colonial Secretary Ian Macleod claimed suffrage as a necessity as far back as 1960 but with little result other than exciting the Kenyan peoples and putting on a show for political motivations.

multiculturalism, and U.S. anxieties that communistic ideology would infiltrate a weak Africa—would prove substantial, if not disastrous, should hostilities with the Mau Mau resume.

Kenya maintains an important position in the discussion of African decolonization. It was, along with Uganda, the earliest African colony to win its freedom from the British Empire by way of military and nationalistic uprisings.³ The cascade of decolonization that followed was controlled by a British Parliament that recognized the difficulties of maintaining colonial possessions in the face of metropolitan, international, and colonial pressures. By 1980, the British Empire had relinquished all colonial holdings in Africa. The Mau Mau and other colonial freedom fighters created an environment that destabilized British relations at home and abroad leading to the eventual dissolution of a nearly four-hundred-year old empire.

The British initially entered Kenya in 1895 to create a rail system from the Port of Mombasa directly to Lake Victoria, cementing their power and access to raw materials in the region. During the expedition, Britons recognized a favorable climate and rich agricultural soil. The early colonists quickly ousted the native population from the best lands in the “White Highlands.” The Kikuyu tribe, the largest in Kenya, was taxed by the British government in order to provide early

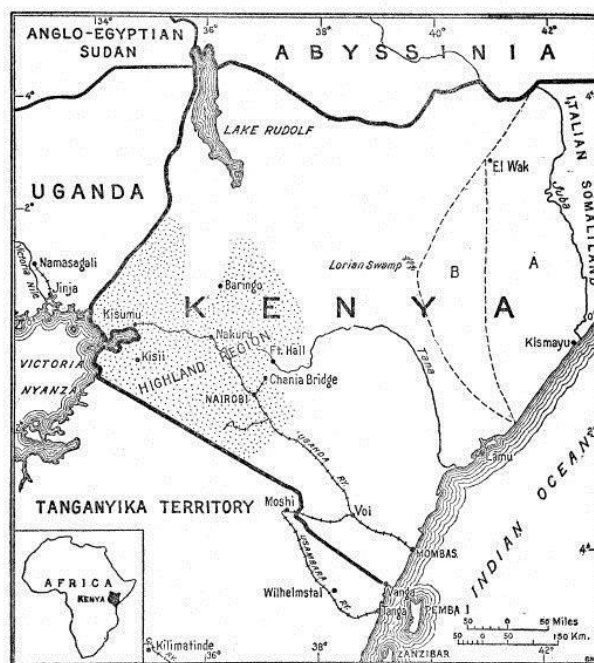


Figure 1 Map of Kenya: circa 1920, WWW.Worldhistory.Biz

³ Parsons, *The Second British Empire*, 172

settlers a means of obtaining labor.⁴ The Kenyans had to work for the British in order to pay the new taxes. Control of the populace through the combination of force and manipulative measures followed only after the Kenyan colony had been reworked into a British-style bureaucratic system, placing the Kenyans, from the British perspective, under legal colonial authority.⁵

From the moment the British appropriated power from the native population in 1920, the history of Kenya was written by government documents. Examination of these documents, later used to condemn the colonial system, shows acceptance of physical violence as useful in controlling the native populace as well as knowledge of colonial abuses in the highest level of government.⁶ However, prior to the additional news coverage provided by the Mau Mau rebellion, British societies understanding of Kenya and Kenyans was shaped by pulp and propaganda. Popular culture reacted to tales of savage natives terrorizing British colonists, thus allowing for popular magazines to titillate and alarm their thousands of subscribers with fabricated stories and articles about anachronistic native persons.⁷ Although these articles were made for entertainment, the argument must be made that the social consciousness must have accepted them on some level, as no outcry in favor of the Kenyans had been recorded at this time. More serious articles were printed that displayed a decidedly racist and Anglo-centric

⁴ Cynthia Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 91.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Documents Relating to the Deaths of Eleven Mau Mau Detainees at Hola Camp in Kenya* (London: H.M.S.O., 1959).

⁷ Clyde Wolfe, "I Was a Victim of the Mau Mau Ant Torturers," *Man's Action* 1, no. 11 (1960): 36-37, 46.

perspective that Kenyans were “incapable of self-rule” and should be grateful for the intervention of the British who had “it in their nature to rule over others.”⁸

Kenyans eventually rebelled against their serf-like status which led to severe restrictions and brutal treatment of any captive “insurgents.”⁹ The mounting public and international pressures, which Prime Minister Harold McMillan (1957-63) had been able to control before the rebellion, led to the belief that Kenya was no longer a viable colonial acquisition. McMillan—under pressure from the United States, reeling from the Suez debacle and preparing to run for re-election—sought to end the debate by agreeing to decolonize Kenya.¹⁰ Although a momentous political movement, decolonization did little to create a revisionist history of colonial Africa for several decades.

Historiography

The traditional British history of Kenya, controlled by the colonial government, is replete with propaganda and misinformation. The efforts of modern historians have exposed these misconceptions to acknowledge the native population as freedom fighters, protecting their lands from oppressive foreign occupiers. Through the investigative work of scholars such as Caroline Elkins, the history of British Kenya has undergone remarkable revision. Elkins leads this

⁸ Olga Watkins, “The Indian Question in Kenya,” *Fortnightly Review* 114 (1923): 95-103.

⁹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton), 146.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 328.

revisionist historiography with her pursuit of secret British government documents, interviews with native Kenyans, and her defense of her groundbreaking *Imperial Reckoning*.

The history of colonial Kenya was difficult to navigate before Elkins' discoveries and revisionist work. Earlier historians of the Kenyan people were stymied by a lack of documentation. Further, disparate languages, customs and cultures made a unified history of the population impossible as perspectives on the Kenyan culture were irredeemably dissimilar even within the native population.¹¹ *Education in Kenya: A Historical Study* by James R. Sheffield displays another common theme: a (possibly) unconscious perspective of a benign colonial government's attempts to educate and civilize the tribal natives. These early attempts at understanding the societal nature of the Kenyans were also generally from a pre-postcolonial academic perspective. They sought to understand rebellion and colonial rule but without an anti-imperial bias that may have been unpopular at home. It should also be noted that Nairobi, the capitol of Kenya, where many early historians conducted their research, was well-developed and comfortable by European standards. This city of European privilege would have housed wealthy, colonial landowners who extolled the virtues of Kenyan colonialism, doing much to allay any scandal that close research may bring to bear.

In 1998, Caroline Elkins discovered a folder marked "secret" in the British archives that detailed Hola camp superintendent Terence Gavaghan's "dilution technique" of torture.¹² Hola camp was created by the colonial governor to house Mau Mau detainees and was run by commandant Gavaghan. To further substantiate the evidence that she discovered, Elkins went to

¹¹ Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya*, 91.

¹² Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 320.

Kenya and conducted extensive interviews. She presented her findings in her 2005 book *Imperial Reckoning* in which she detailed the detention of 1.5 million Kenyans and the systematic torture of prisoners by colonial powers. Elkins' discovery spurred on a new movement in the legacy of Kenya's history. Other authors, notably David Anderson, published similar, though less radical, revisionist works the same year.

Elkins came under immediate and intense scrutiny by critical academics such as Bethwell Ogot, a senior Kenyan historian, who published a searing rebuttal of her claims in the *Journal of African History*.¹³ As Elkins' book is primarily supported by personal anecdotes made by the survivors she interviewed, he accused her of sensationalism and outright fabrication. He argued her numbers as well as her facts to be significantly overestimated. Elkins' extensive reference section is significantly shorter when personal interviews are removed. Many of the interviews are titled "anonymous" making her case that much harder to substantiate. However, the corroborating, although less antagonistic, works by Anderson and Kenyan native Mugo Gatheru were enough to spur surviving victims of Hola to sue the British government for recognition of colonial abuses and restitution for their suffering.¹⁴ Gatheru was raised in colonial Kenya and offered a first-hand account of colonial atrocities from a native perspective. He would later receive his education in law in England, making him an educated Kenyan voice that was hard for British political leaders to ignore. For his part, Anderson provided examples of how the British government used propaganda to quell social unrest in Kenya. He asserts powers in colonial

¹³ Marc Perry, "Uncovering the Brutal Truth About the British Empire," *The Guardian.com* (2016).

¹⁴ R. Mugo Gatheru, *Kenya: From Colonization to Independence, 1888-1970* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2005),

Kenya and the British metropole, including the Prime Minister, were complicit in the cover up of abuse in the colony.¹⁵

During the investigation leading up to the 2011 lawsuit, documents previously believed destroyed were re-discovered. They not only revealed systematic abuse and torture, but implied the complicity of the British government.¹⁶ Elkins, Anderson, and Gatheru were vindicated in their revisionist theories of the colonial abuses in Kenya, especially in regards to the Mau Mau and Hola detention center. The histories, for the moment, were disseminated by the press as a matter of global interest in the litigation against the British Government.

The release of many of the documents—300 boxes have been released but 13 are still “missing”—spurred other academic authors to renew the investigation into colonial Kenya as well as its inclusion into discussions of imperial injustice. Gillian Fazan sought to understand the plight of Kenyans’ public health and how global conflict affected social and political change in Kenya in *Colonial Kenya Observed*.¹⁷ Micki Hudson-Koster published an amazing treatise on the Mau Mau titled *The Making of Mau Mau: The Power of the Oath*; it provides a fascinating insight into the Kenyan freedom fighters: who they were, what they believed and how they lived during the occupation.¹⁸ The Mau Mau had turned a historical corner as they were no longer

¹⁵ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 327.

¹⁶ Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Further Documents Relating to the Deaths of Eleven Mau Mau Detainees at Hola Camp in Kenya* (London: H.M.S.O., 1959).

¹⁷ S. H. Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed: British Rule, Mau Mau and the Wind of Change*, ed. John Lonsdale (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. 2015),

¹⁸ Mickie Hudson-Koster and Edward Cox. *The Making of Mau Mau: The Power of the Oath*, 2010.

seen simply as victims of imperial might, but were recognized as a unique culture who added depth and value to the global story of which they were a part.

Currently, the Mau Mau are in the public sphere once more as more victims seek restitution from the British government in an ongoing lawsuit. The current lawsuit seeks compensation for emotional trauma experienced during the occupation.¹⁹ The history of the Mau Mau is not yet complete: the disclosure of the missing file boxes, the satisfactory resolution of the court process and having their history, both pre and post-colonial, fully documented will do much to conclude the revisionist histories published by historians from 2005 onward.

Although treated individually by revisionist historians, the causation of decolonization due to (A.) fear of a Mau Mau resurgence causing political sanctions, combined with (B.) United States' interference, based on anti-communist ideology, to create an intense anxiety in the British metropole. This dual causation has not been sufficiently examined and is the subject of this paper.

A History of Kenya

Pre-colonial Kenya was populated by diverse tribes that competed for grazing and agricultural territory and water; tribes were too small to create a centralized governmental system but were patriarchal in nature. Several tribes would often merge to create a clan which facilitated the growth and safety of individual nuclear families while ensuring genetic health. While some Kenyan natives were herders and farmers, fishing and hunter-gatherer tribes were

¹⁹ Perry, "Uncovering the Brutal Truth About the British Empire."

predominant. Although some Arab settlers and European explorers had made contact with various Kenyan tribes, there seems to have been little cultural exchange before the nineteenth century.²⁰

In 1895, British extended rule to include Kenya as the East Africa Protectorate. The original plan was simply to facilitate construction of a rail line from the port of Mombasa directly to Lake Victoria, creating a strategic link with British-held Uganda. During the construction of the rail line, British officials discovered a climate they found agreeable and recognized the agricultural promise of the region—the fertile, nutrient-rich soil being especially suitable for the production of tea and coffee.²¹ The earliest colonists quickly secured the most profitable lands in the Rift Valley and Highlands for white usage only.²² Trade from coffee was an immediate financial success, made possible by the labor of the reluctant native population.²³ Railroad construction may have caused the initial bitterness between the British and Kenyans, but it was the unfair land use restrictions which resulted in violent protests by the native tribes. British colonial police responded to the violence with swift, military brutality; rather than cowing the Kenyans, this action unified the tribes in an anti-imperialistic attitude.²⁴

At the conclusion of the First World War, Kenya received a massive influx of white settlers which resulted in a deepening sense of national identity among tribes which united

²⁰ Norman Miller and Rodger Yeager. *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1994. 7-8; Gatheru, *Kenya*, 31.

²¹ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 49.

²² *Ibid.*, 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 2.

against a common threat.²⁵ Coupled with this new-found sense of unity came a willingness among Kenyans to use violence to reclaim their land. By 1920, more than 25,000 British colonists, mostly farmers, had relocated to Kenya.²⁶ In order to make space for the incoming colonists, British forces removed more than one million Kenyans from their homes and stripped them of their lands. The British government continued to take native Kenyan land during the Second World War to house a military base while Kenyans provided nearly 100,000 native troops to the British war effort. These returning troops, having experienced life outside of Africa, came home with firmly entrenched concepts of nationalism, self-rule and modernization. In 1947, reacting to increasing pressures and abuses of white Europeans, Kenyans elected Jomo Kenyatta to lead the Kenyan African Union (KAU). The KAU represented the united, nationalistic front of Kenyans tribes who demanded representation in government as well as the return of their lands.²⁷

These new nationalistic perspectives facilitated the unification and cooperation of several tribes. The result was an ideologically motivated, militaristic band of freedom fighters whose sole intention was to overthrow the small minority of white settlers.²⁸ The colonial police stationed in Kenya, recognizing the disproportionate numbers, the unfamiliar and unforgiving terrain, as well as following a political agenda that did not allow for negotiation, desperately pleaded for military intervention. British policy makers were slow to respond to such requests,

²⁵ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 138.

²⁶ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 75.

²⁷ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 131.

²⁸ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 193.

believing the Kenyans to be inferior “savages” incapable of becoming a serious military threat. Further, British Parliament did not recognize the legitimacy of the Kenyan political party the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA)—predecessor to the Kenyan African Union (KAU)—thereby portraying these “Mau Mau” as terrorists rather than political insurgents.²⁹ Creating the fiction of rebellious savages with no political motivations reassured policy makers and the public alike that the insurrection would quickly be quelled and that Britain was acting within moral boundaries.

While there is no agreement on the etymological origins of the moniker Mau Mau, there is one theory that seems the most plausible. A Kikuyu prisoner was being interrogated by the colonial magistrate in 1950 and his response was “Maundo maumau nderiruo ndikoige,” which translates as “Those things I was told not to reveal.”³⁰ The term Mau Mau became the name used by the British, historians and the Kenyan rebels themselves.

The Mau Mau should not be seen as a political, religious or cultural movement. Rather, the rebels who came from the forty tribes of Kenya to enlist in the Mau Mau movement symbolized a nationalistic sensibility learned from shared experiences with the colonists. Perhaps one reason the Mau Mau were continuously underestimated in the metropole was the Kenyan ability to adhere to tribal loyalties concurrently with those of the rebellion. This divided aspect, as seen from the outside, would confuse colonial officials as to the true number of insurgents as well as the depth of their loyalty. Further adding to this sense of British overconfidence was the idea that the Mau Mau were a rag tag band of jungle warriors whereas, in

²⁹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 49.

³⁰ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 148.

truth, they followed commands from central leadership in Nairobi that coordinated military action.³¹ As confidence and respect grew among the tribes of Kenya, more and more flocked to the Mau Mau cause. In order to create a sense of unity, ancient tribal traditions of oathing ceremonies were practiced.

The Oath itself was a secret, sacred right that was morally and spiritually binding. There are no records of the oath but several of its aspects have been pieced together. They are thought to include “If I know of any enemy of our organization and fail to kill him, may this oath kill me,” and “If I reveal this oath to any European, may this oath kill me.”³² This last pledge might explain why we know so little of the details surrounding the vows themselves. The ceremony would include the slaughter of a goat and a ceremonial bite from its flesh.³³ Reports of these practices were perverted by some English who sought to demonize the Kenyans to the British people. *Candour*, a conservative publication in England, reported the ceremony as comprising of bestial and cannibalistic acts with vows that included cannibalizing their enemies and sharing their wives with their fellow Mau Mau.³⁴ No historical record supports such obviously inflammatory speech, yet examining other publications of the time show anti-Kenyan sentiment remained strong until after the events of Hola camp became public knowledge. Hola camp gained its notoriety as only those Mau Mau who would not renounce their oath were sent there.

³¹ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 143.

³² Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ A.K. Chesterson, “Mau Mau Oaths and Ceremonies,” *Candour Supplement* (1960).

Mainstream media outlets, such as *The Daily Mirror*, ran articles refuting the governments' propaganda with articles reporting on the brutality of colonial subjugation while legitimizing colonial efforts by referring to the Kenyans as "beastly" and "savage."³⁵ Eventually, European clergy joined with Labour Party representatives and the African press to publicly denounce British colonial crimes. By 1952, however, public opinion had been fundamentally influenced by ceaseless government propaganda efforts which delivered increasingly horrific disinformation concerning the nature of the Kenyan people.³⁶

Britain's decision to label the rebels as terrorists by not recognizing the KAU as a legitimate political entity enabled colonists to treat all Africans as insurgents and, as such, a threat to their personal safety and British property. These colonial farmers, many of whom had military backgrounds, had been battling the Kenyans for years; they understood the terrain and knew the region as well as the natives they ousted. The British government capitalized on the idea the colonists were "kith and kin", turning public sympathy in favor of the colonists while further entrenching the idea of Kenyan savagery in the public mind.³⁷ The government also argued that the Kenyan people could not be "considered civilized nor possess a legitimate political center" if local "farmers" were able to subdue the insurgents.³⁸ In the face of this

³⁵ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 307-308.; See bibliography for depiction in a popular men's magazine of the era for a pulp and yet accepted idea of the average Britons concept of a Mau Mau warrior. Propaganda went so far as to insinuate cannibalism.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 4.

³⁸ Farmers being well educated and wealthy Britons. Many had served in the English military and came to Kenya armed. A fair comparison might be to the South African Boers which translates directly as farmers as to their willingness and ability to fight.

propaganda, the African demands for self-rule were met with incredulity and open scorn in the metropole. However, some politicians drew the connection between the colonial farmers in Kenya and the bloody, costly conflict fought by the Boers. Furthermore, the British government was keeping close watch on the economically and politically disastrous rebellions in colonial French Algeria.

The Mau Mau defined success as survival against the vast martial resources of the British Empire and, by that definition, they were successful. Guerilla action had greatly subsided by 1955 and Britain recalled a significant portion of troops, artillery and armored cars against the advice of Lt. General Lathbury—who recommended the British army remain in Kenya—under the authority of the War office, as colonial forces had proven ineffective at coping with the insurrection.³⁹ Lathbury, many of the colonists, and some key figures in government now operated under fearful speculation that a resurgence in violence was inevitable as a result of the military withdrawal. Parliament now feared any public disturbance or demonstration in Kenya to be a product of the Mau Mau. This put enormous pressure on Kenyan Colonial Governor Sir Evelyn Baring (1952-59) to maintain the appearance of peaceful coexistence. Where previously civil disobedience had been swiftly and brutally quelled by the British army, the colonial governor now gave in to minor demands from the native public rather than risk reigniting the guerrilla warfare. Alan Lennox-Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1954-59, was concerned the growing civil discontent was “strikingly reminiscent” to the atmosphere in Kenya directly before the “Mau Mau rebellion.” This marked the first time a public official recognized the violence as a rebellion rather than terrorist activity. The climate of anxiety was fueled by

³⁹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 54.

fears of further violence in Kenya, but policy makers were also beginning to fear a socio-political nightmare should hostilities resume.⁴⁰

The source of this anxiety was due, in part, to a secret labor camp created to house the most radicalized of the Mau Mau; the colonial government determined these prisoners high risk as they would not recant the Mau Mau oath. The Hola detention camp was one of hundreds built during the insurgency but was known to the Kenyan population for its daily use of torture, castration, starvation, and other abuses as punishments. On March 3, 1959, the Home Office's fears were realized as colonial police massacred eleven inmates at Hola. In an act of defiance, eighty-eight detainees dropped to the ground and refused to work on the basis they were political prisoners and not subject to work detail.⁴¹ Guards threw the prisoners into a ditch and beat the defenseless men until the soldiers "were too tired to continue."⁴² *Time Magazine* reported the massacre as described by doctors from the Red cross who were on humanitarian duties in the camp.⁴³ International opinion condemned the murders while the British public demanded an immediate investigation. For its part, the British government distanced itself from colonial affairs and left the colonial governor to handle the crisis. The colonial Governor in Britain renamed the camp Galole while Kenyan Colonial Governor Baring destroyed any documents that may have embarrassed himself or the British government. When asked why he destroyed such

⁴⁰ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 293.

⁴¹ Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Documents Relating to the Deaths of Eleven Mau Mau Detainees at Hola Camp in Kenya*.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 344.

crucial evidence, he indicated he simply had no room for storage.⁴⁴ With the investigation thus stymied, no prosecution was possible although the camp was eventually shut down in the wake of harsh public and international criticism.

In an effort to re-establish a relative peace in the colony, the British farmers agreed to allow Kenyans their own colonial representation. However, the British government—embarrassed by Hola and concerned with maintaining the appearance of imperial strength and stability—refused their notions of “settler diplomacy.” The British colonial government, in their effort to diffuse the negative publicity, would regard every Kenyan lobby, boycott or demonstration, every organization or parade as a potential for Mau Mau activity. Kenyan nationalism was on the rise and the Colonial forces regarded all Kenyans as Mau Mau whereas before they distinguished between insurgent and civilian. It was at this point of heightened anxiety that Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (1957-63) stated he was reluctant to continue colonial rule of Kenya “because of the Mau Mau and all that.”⁴⁵ Since 1956 and the end of the guerilla war, little organized violence was seen from the Mau Mau and yet four years later, the threat of a resurgence dictated political discussion in parliament.⁴⁶ Lennox-Boyd argued for a multicultural Kenya, governed by the British colonial office, while other members of parliament desired more military reprisals, even though the realistic consideration of Kenyan violence was negligible. After the horror of Hola camp, however, the “radicalized” Mau Mau had moved from violent opposition to a more political agenda. They rejected a multicultural Kenya and demanded self-rule. The extreme methods Britain used to defeat the Mau Mau galvanized the

⁴⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 372.

⁴⁵ This reference is from Macmillan’s personal diary as read 19 Dec. 1961.

⁴⁶ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 249.

Kenyans into a politically savvy, nationalistic, unified political entity. The shared cultural experiences from the Great War and decades of foreign occupation instilled a desire for self-reliance, civil liberties and political autonomy. The success of the revolutions and the outrage at Hola camp gave them strength and purpose.

In an astounding, almost willful, lack of comprehension of the political fervor in the colony, Hola camp Commandant G.M. Sullivan adopted the “Cowan Plan.”⁴⁷ Still fearing an international political disaster, the colonial government sent more Kikuyu to prison camps, forcing Gavaghan, now the Camp Superintendent, to find new methods of controlling the growing numbers of prisoners. The plan, defined as “rehabilitation through work,” was implemented by working prisoners so hard they were too tired to resist. Cowen instructed Sullivan to work the inmates with little food or rest and if they resisted “They would be manhandled to the site of work and forced to carry out the task.”⁴⁸ The Chief of the Colonial Police, Colonel Arthur Young, who had fought during the revolution, found conditions so repugnant he repeatedly and formally made complaints to Governor Baring concerning the “revolting crimes” against the prisoner populations.⁴⁹ What Young could not have known was that Gavaghan had received explicit approval from Lennox-Boyd to treat the prisoners “the

⁴⁷ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 346.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

rough way.”⁵⁰ Baring, who expressed his concerns, was also assured by Lennox-Boyd that “London stands by Gavaghan and his methods.”⁵¹

As the Office for Colonial Affairs still refused to acknowledge the political motivations of the Kenyans, they were unwilling to negotiate or compromise with the native peoples. The Kenyan people were aware the camps were employing brutal tactics in their efforts to “rehabilitate,” including genital mutilation and rape.⁵² Ironically, the British colonial authorities were further radicalizing Kenyans with oppressive policies meant to subdue them. More Kenyans were taking the Mau Mau pledge now than during the rebellion, and yet Gavaghan continued the brutality within the camps with the full consent of London. There is no direct evidence that Britain even considered Kenyan independence at this time. Shifting global power and the fear of bad press on the international scene pushed the British to accept this process as inevitable.

Global Geopolitics

By the end of 1959, the importance of Kenya had grown beyond agriculture and exploitation, becoming Britain’s last stronghold in Africa which now boasted a strategic military base. The international community had begun expressing anti-colonial sentiment that spiked anxiety in Britain as another outbreak of violence in Kenya would bring severe political pressure.

⁵⁰ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 348.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 302.

Britain stated it would continue the “peaceful” development of Kenya while fearing the United States-led United Nations could cost them their hold in Africa.⁵³ McMillan had intelligence reports from the Colonial Office as early as 1957 that warned British absence from East Africa would result in “greater Soviet intrusion in the area.”⁵⁴ Any further military action against the Mau Mau could cost Britain their friendly standing with the West. Even a relatively minor incident could convince Western powers that Britain was continuing to promote white supremacy in underdeveloped nations. The United States, whose “opinion was always critical,” was especially concerned with the political situation in Kenya as the possibility of Mau Mau looking to the Soviet Union for support was very real.⁵⁵ International concerns and pressure from the U.N. compounded anxieties that further rebellion would cost the British prestige, votes and colonial resources.

These anxieties were realized in 1961 as American President John F. Kennedy addressed the United Nations. Kennedy expressed sympathy for the Kenyan peoples and their desire for self-rule. British officials were more certain than ever that Mau Mau activity would bring U.S. pressure against their rapidly dwindling imperial possessions.⁵⁶ The British Empire had already suffered an embarrassing political defeat in 1956 to the United States. Britain and France had invaded Egypt with the intent of controlling the Suez Canal but were forced to withdraw due to U.S. and Soviet pressure. Britain was forced to recognize their influence was waning and

⁵³Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 253.

⁵⁴ Parsons, *The Second British Empire*, 172

⁵⁵ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 253

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

became desperate to keep both colonial power as well as international influence. Decolonization became a central issue to Parliament in response to unfounded feelings of anxiety that a Mau Mau resurgence would create a negative effect on their special overseas relationships as “post war debt forced Britain to play second fiddle to the anti-imperial United States in the cold war.”⁵⁷ The reality was that the Mau Mau, as a militant organization, had been silent for half a decade.

The United States was promoting its own agenda to create a unified African bloc capable of withstanding communist ideology.⁵⁸ France and Germany, who were economically surpassing the struggling United Kingdom, were also developing their relationship with the United States, this put further pressure on Britain to improve their own relationship with the American government. Britain sought to maintain the global appearance of a liberal democratic and modern power while continuing to promote pro-white policy in the colonies. The fear of their imperial legacies overshadowing the multi-cultural persona they maintained and weakening their status with the U.S. brought de-colonization one step closer to realization. Pressured by Labour Party rhetoric of “one man, one vote” democracy, Lord Home of the Commonwealth Relations Office argued Britain must grant independence to Kenya by 1969.⁵⁹ More conservative recommendations suggested a twenty-year withdrawal. The decision was no longer whether or not to de-colonize Kenya, but rather when decolonization would occur.

⁵⁷ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 249.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Prime Minister Macmillan considered protecting the special relationship with the U.S. during the Cold War era as far more practical than retaining a questionably profitable Kenyan colony.⁶⁰ His policies reflect an interest in international stability and political modernization that also reflects his doubts about maintaining any imperial possessions. Upon his election, Macmillan represented the third consecutive, conservative P.M. and would be succeeded by a fourth. Exempting the post war years of Clement Attlee (1945-51), Britain had maintained conservative leadership for thirty years. Macmillan faced fierce opposition from the Kenyan settlers who had assumed the role of elite “aristocrats” in their rule of Kenya.⁶¹ He had no doubts about the catastrophic economic sanctions the U.S. could bring to bear nor the power of his own constituency when roused, as he had seen both in action after the humiliating resolution of the 1956 Suez Crisis.⁶² Macmillan and Lennox-Boyd both concluded that any colonial instability would severely jeopardize their political standing, internationally as well as at home, and could negatively impact the economic and political power of Britain on a global scale.

With the specter of the Hola massacre still in the public mind, African leaders began a campaign across European universities inspiring students and members of academia to condemn British foreign rule.⁶³ Firsthand accounts of the horrors of Hola camp created new interest in investigating the potential government cover up. Newly radicalized Britons cast severe doubts on the multiracial ideology the British government portrayed. The very repression used to

⁶⁰ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 41-42

⁶¹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 355-56.

⁶² Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 249

⁶³ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 161, 173.

maintain the fiction of a peaceful Kenya was a driving force behind the abrupt change in public opinion about maintaining the Kenyan colony.

There can be no doubt that British law makers chafed against American intrusion as “the United States never took a kindly view to Britain’s possession of a colonial empire” and, as such, “were not averse to interfering in Kenya.”⁶⁴ Further, although the American government propagandized their support of colonial subjects, they financially supported freed colonies to “induce loyalty against communist intrusion.”⁶⁵ Historian Max Beloff, who discusses the “catastrophe of decolonization,” wonders how the global community supported American pressures against colonialism while the U.S. was, itself, a colonial empire which subscribed to the “Monroe Doctrine”, had a lengthy and bloody history in the Caribbean, and were arguably the “dominant, albeit informal, imperial power.”⁶⁶

In February of 1960, Macmillan gave his famous “Wind of Change” electoral speech in which he argued for radical change in Kenya and hinted that democracy might be an option.⁶⁷ Macmillan feared that an overly quick withdrawal would spur settlers to violent action to maintain their colonial status while too slow an evacuation might convince the Mau Mau to resurface in violent rebellion.⁶⁸ Whether due to it being an election year or true sympathy for Kenya, Macmillan had replaced Lennox-Boyd with the anti-colonial Iain Macleod (1959-61).

⁶⁴ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 253.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 254

⁶⁶ Parsons, *The Second British Empire*, 237.

⁶⁷ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 168.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Macleod immediately initiated a moderately paced four-year withdrawal from Kenya. Macleod thought this timetable quick enough to pacify the Mau Mau, yet slow enough to allow the European settlers to sell their properties and conclude any business in Africa.⁶⁹ Being a relative newcomer to colonial politics, Macleod recognized that unfounded anxieties about the Mau Mau had dictated Kenyan policy for too long. Although, he understood the socio-political ramifications of an aggressive resurgence, no militant action nor sign of remilitarization had been seen in years; thus, Macleod approached the Kenyan withdrawal from a humanitarian perspective rather than a militant one.⁷⁰ To Parliament, Macleod's apparent lack of political concern combined with his inexperience greatly heightened their anxiety of political repercussion and he was replaced in late 1961. What Macleod failed to grasp was that Parliament feared any social development that was not controlled by Western powers and that mirrored Western structure would be perceived by the U.S. as Marxist Leninist strategies.⁷¹ He was replaced by Reginald Maulding who, perhaps seeing political opportunity, convinced parliament that a slower withdrawal would be tolerated by the international community. Furthermore, his racially-driven speech fed into parliamentary fears of a Mau Mau revitalization and exploited the idea that continued tribalism made the Kenyans incapable of self-rule; the most he would concede was a coalition government.⁷² Once more, British legislation was being

⁶⁹ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 328.

⁷⁰ Gatheru, *Kenya*, 169.

⁷¹ Parsons, *The Second British Empire*, 193.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 172.

dictated by fear of further insurgent activities whose possibility existed only in government propaganda.

Frustrated by broken promises, and perhaps sensing the dissension in Parliament, the Kenyan people staged several large nationalistic demonstrations. In 1962, Parliament wrote the London Agreement in which Kenya gained parliamentary representation and, as a result, Jomo Kenyatta was reinstated as leader of the Kanu-Kadu government, serving as Kenya's first president from 1962-78. Kenya officially joined the Commonwealth—a British-led intergovernmental organization of free states—in 1963, with Kenyatta serving as the first Prime Minister. As the London Agreement was not universally accepted, the Kenyans bought out the lands owned by the white settlers to protect themselves from further violence.⁷³ In 1964, Kenya became a free Republic.

Conclusion

The power of the Mau Mau was not in their military might but the legacy of fear they instilled in both the colonial government and that of the metropole. The struggles and deprivations visited upon the Kenyans at the hand of British farmers and soldiers swayed a public subject to decades of government and social propaganda that painted the Kenyans as vicious savages. After the events at Hola, both colonial and British governors recognized the socio-political implications that full public knowledge of the camp conditions might cause. The constant state of political anxiety convinced the British Prime Minister that the benefit to cost

⁷³ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 247.

ratio of keeping the Kenyan colony was not worth the risk of jeopardizing the U.K.'s "special relationship" with the United States.⁷⁴ The Mau Mau were not successful against the British military in a classic sense. Rather, the nationalistic sensibilities learned under the heavy hand of British oppression united the myriad tribes of Kenya into a powerful, unified, political movement. The trend toward nationalism was distinct from the military aim of the freedom fighters, and yet to the British Parliament, they were synonymous. The unified Kenyans were a threat to the stability of the colony as well as to the socioeconomic stability and prestige of the British in the global community. Though the fear was misplaced, and Kenyan involvement misunderstood, the anxiety surrounding the Mau Mau shaped British policy that would contribute to the end of British colonial power in Africa by 1980.

Epilogue

Class and ethnic struggles marked post-colonial Kenya as nationalism gave way to tribalism in the abrupt shift into self-rule. Kenyatta remained President of Kenya and maintained relative stability in the nation until his death in 1978. The power vacuum led to violence as factions vied for power. The Garissa and Wagalla Massacres of 1980 and 1984 were both ethnic in origin, while the attempted coup by the Kenyan Air Force in 1982 was a desperate plea for international assistance that set the Kenyan army against friends and family who served in the air force.⁷⁵ In 2001, Kenyan politics stabilized under a coalition government between two of the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁷⁵ Norman Miller, *Kenya*, 101.

largest parties. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) was led by Kwai Kubaki until 2013, when Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo Kenyatta took office; he still serves as President.

Today, the specter of colonial abuses continues to haunt the British government. In 2009, based on the research of Caroline Elkins and others, five Kenyan survivors of Hola detention camp sued the British government for restitution for colonial abuses.⁷⁶ The subsequent court proceedings were a litany of abuses by colonial authorities. Prosecutors presented evidence of sodomy, rape, castration and murder. Telegrams between Lennox-Boyd and the colonial government detailed the burning of inmates alive as well as castrations, the breaking of bones and other abuses.⁷⁷ The claimants in this case all suffered severe physical trauma. Although, the current administration rejects liability for the crimes of the colonial government, enough evidence of parliamentary knowledge and complicity in the events led to the settlement of a shared twenty million pounds to over five thousand Kenyans.⁷⁸

In 2011, Caroline Elkins tracked down thousands of documents in the British National archives that the colonial government of Kenya had attempted to destroy, unaware duplicates were being preserved by other departments.⁷⁹ These documents corroborate many of the claims made by Hola prisoners. The telegrams, court records and correspondences sparked a second class action lawsuit for Kenyans who survived the British occupation, suffering emotional but

⁷⁶ Peter Biles, “Mau Mau Massacre Documents Revealed,” *BBC.com* (2012).

⁷⁷ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 302.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Elkins. *Imperial Reckoning*, 374.

not physical abuse.⁸⁰ Certain communiques prove, incontrovertibly, that in 1961, Macleod, in order to distance the government from colonial abuses, initiated Operation Legacy, which ordered colonial representatives to destroy over eight thousand documents concerning any evidence of wrongdoing or racial prejudice.⁸¹ These documents proved vital in confirming the complicity of the British government in colonial atrocities. The politically embarrassing episode will haunt the British administration for the foreseeable future. The lawsuit is expected to last until 2017.

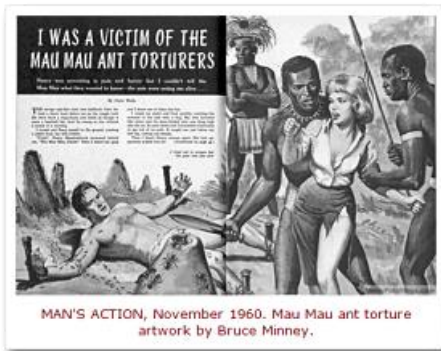
⁸⁰ Biles. "Mau Mau Massacre Documents Revealed."

⁸¹ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 371.

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