

# Forgotten grubby conflict without pride or glory

## Britain's Gulag – the Brutal End of Empire In Kenya: Caroline Elkins

Jonathan Cape, £20

## Histories of the Hanged – Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire: David Anderson

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20

PROBING and painful, these two books have generated considerable attention and acclamation for their detailed accounts of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s and the brutal subjugation which was authorised by the Conservative Government at the time.

The source of the conflict was simple and avoidable: the land hunger of an impoverished and colonised people. To survive, Kenya's Kikuyu population needed the return of the land from which it had been displaced a half century before. Small bands of Mau Mau guerrillas set out to take it back by force. British security forces murdered, tortured or detained without trial all those who were suspected of involvement in the insurgency. They were assisted by well-armed and locally recruited home guards guided by hooded informants who helped to screen the whole Kikuyu population of Nairobi during Operation Anvil in April 1954, sending 20,000 suspects to prison camps.

At the time, the Mau Mau were represented as barbaric, anti-white and non-Christian terrorists who were destabilising and destroying a prosperous colony. It is certainly time to overturn that myth. But at no point should these fragmented bands of press-ganging, oath-imposing landless guerrillas, capable of slaughtering Kikuyu villages whole, be converted into popular, physical force

nationalists. That would be a makeover too far.

In her path-breaking oral history of the insurgency and its suppression, Caroline Elkins comes very close to making this mistake. Her focus is firmly on the routinised lawbreaking and brutality of the colonial Government and the white settlers. She tends to hear no evil when it comes to the atrocities and authoritarian practices of the Mau Mau. The account she provides is harrowing and important, but oral history of this kind is susceptible to exaggeration, nationalist pride, and the tricks of memory. Her unprecedentedly high calculations of Kikuyu dead and incarcerated have raised eyebrows among the informed. She pays very little attention to the rights and views of the Kikuyu in whose names the guns and machetes of the Mau Mau did not speak, or against whom they were turned – including future President Jomo Kenyatta, widely seen as a figurehead of the uprising by all parties to the conflict, but in fact a constitutional nationalist whom the Mau Mau considered assassinating.

Rather predictably, Elkins simply turns the conservative account of the insurgency on its head, exposing white Kenya and its supporters in London as the real barbarians. The politics of her narrative will appeal to those who like good causes simplified, but her partisanship and vulnerable methodology together make *Britain's Gulag* a partial and ultimately deficient history of the conflict.

It's easy to see why passion has over-ruled reason in her account. The sheer level of de-centralised brutality – in improvised detention centres run by white supremacist settlers, numberless unsupervised venues for torture, murder, prisoner abuse and the forced labour of at least 70,000 people – is deeply shocking. However, it's not the whole story, and to point that out is not to be soft on imperialism. David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* shows how the argument that the

colonial regime was guilty of repression, cover-up and the crude defence of landed interests can be effectively made through good historical research and analysis, in his case of the court records which remain of the backgrounds and actions of the 1,090 Kikuyu lynched by the state's special assizes. Police records, trials and testimonies reveal that Mau Mau violence was usually directed against other Kikuyu rather than white settlers, of whom only 32 were killed. Anderson's judicious investigation reveals that the conflict was "a story of atrocity and excess on both sides, a dirty war from which no one emerged with much pride, and certainly no glory."

Reading these two books raises the question of what the British Left was thinking and saying at the time. In fact, Labour Party concern rose dramatically during the mid 1950s, a period in which Fenner Brockway launched the Movement for Colonial Freedom with a focus on Kenya, and James Cameron exposed the colony's trigger-happy settlers in the *Daily Mirror*.

But it was Barbara Castle who emerged as the leading critic of policy and practice in Kenya, touring the colony and doggedly campaigning against the repression in Parliament and in *Tribune*. Castle's determination to unearth the truth about deaths during detention earned her the lifelong hatred of Kenya's siege mentality settlers – the attorney general in Nairobi called her "That Castellated Bitch" – but her crusade helped to prepare the minds of the public, civil servants and politicians for democracy and independence.

The Conservatives and the colonists won the dirty war against the Mau Mau, but they realised they had lost their long-term footing in Africa and conceded independence to democratic nationalists in Kenya in 1963.

In Kenya, there was no day of reckoning or reconciliation. Very few settlers, administrators or Kikuyu loyalists had been imprisoned or sacked for their activities during the 1950s. And, after independence, the Mau Mau were neither officially celebrated nor brought to account for their murders of Kikuyu civilians and executions of their opponents. As Anderson observes: "In Kenyatta's Kenya, there would be a deafening silence about the Mau Mau." The insurgency became a political trauma best forgotten in the interests of national unity.

With the exception of service families and migrant communities, the scale and brutality of the counter-insurgency operation has also slipped from memory here in Britain. The suppression of the Mau Mau was a conflict people were acutely aware of at the time, but the clash was described in simple and enduring terms, as the rule of law confronting terrorism, and as modern civilisation versus primitive savagery. Those terms must be changed, not simply reversed, if we are to understand what really happened, and that's why Anderson's account of this shameful episode is far superior to that presented by Elkins.

Kevin Davey



KENYA in the 1950s: a Mau Mau detainee is interrogated by a team of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru