

KENYA: Mau Mau Uprising, 1952–1956

TYPE OF CONFLICT: Anticolonial

PARTICIPANT: United Kingdom



After Britain succeeded in conquering Kenya in 1900, it embarked upon a program of encouraging substantial English colonization of the country. From 1901 onward, thousands of English settlers, many of them from South Africa, came to Kenya seeking their fortune as large-scale farmers. They were joined by a large number of Indian immigrants, who came either to help build the railroads or as merchants eager to serve Kenya's growing economy. Most of the Europeans settled in the Kenyan highlands around Nairobi, which was a city designed by the British to be Kenya's capital.

This influx of foreigners disturbed many Kenyans, particularly when the British government gave the Europeans land that had once belonged to Africans, or attempted to have forced-labor laws passed (the European settlers were frustrated by the Kenyans' unwillingness to work long hours on their coffee and tea plantations).

By the 1920s, Kenyans had begun to organize political resistance to the Europeans. The most prominent of these groups was the Young Kikuyu Association (YKA), founded in 1921. The Kikuyu, making up 25 percent of the population, were Kenya's largest ethnic group and lived directly adjacent to the area of greatest English colonization. Living next door to Nairobi gave them opportunities for education that raised their level of political sophistication. Living beside the English also meant that the Kikuyu were the group most likely to suffer from settler arrogance, land grabbing, or attempts at imposing forced labor.

The young Kikuyu men in the YKA were upset that Africans had no say in Kenya's governance. Kenya had been transformed from a protectorate into a colony in 1920, and Europeans were given the right to elect representatives to the legislative council of the new colony. Even the Indian immigrants were given minority representation in 1927, but the Africans were only represented informally by a single white missionary.

Growth of the Mau Mau

In 1944, a broader-based movement was organized around the Kenya African Union (KAU), which included members of all ethnic groups, although the Kikuyu were still the dominant group. In 1947, Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu and former member of the YKA, was chosen to be president of the KAU. Kenyatta traveled the country gathering support for his goal of making Kenya an African country run by Africans.

Kenyatta found a receptive audience. Many Kenyans had fought for the British during World War II and resented coming home to a country where they still had few economic opportunities and fewer political rights. They felt it unfair that 40,000 Europeans and 100,000 Indians should have more wealth and power than Kenya's 5 million Africans. They were also angered by British attempts to change their

KEY DATES

- 1901 English colonists begin to settle in Kenyan highlands, displacing native Kikuyu farmers.
- 1921 Anticolonial Kikuyu organize the Young Kikuyu Association (YKA).
- 1944 A broader anticolonial movement emerges with the founding of the Kenya African Union (KAU).
- 1950 Kikuyu begin organizing an underground anticolonial militant organization known as the Mau Mau.
- 1952 Mau Mau begin raids on white Kenyan farms; the government declares a state of emergency.
- 1953 The British begin a massive military campaign against Mau Mau militants; Jomo Kenyatta, head of KAU and future president of independent Kenya, is sentenced to six years imprisonment for inciting a Mau Mau uprising.
- 1956 British colonial authorities declare the defeat of the Mau Mau movement.
- 1963 Kenya wins its independence from Britain on December 12.

culture—including attacks by missionaries on the Kikuyu practice of female circumcision.

In 1950, the Kikuyu began to organize a secret organization known as the Mau Mau. The origin of the name is unclear, but the Mau Mau were dedicated to throwing the English settlers out of Kenya. New initiatives to the secret society were made to swear ritual oaths dedicating themselves to the cause of Kenyan independence. Sometimes Kikuyu were intimidated into swearing the oaths. Having taken the oath, most felt tied to the cause. To tradition-minded Kikuyu, the oaths were terrible and binding, dedicating them to a lifelong commitment to the Mau Mau. Better-educated Kikuyu were less susceptible to such mystical beliefs but joined the Mau Mau because they believed in its goals. The British authorities banned the Mau Mau in late 1950, but the secret society continued to grow.

Mau Mau Revolt

Rumors of Mau Mau activity were widespread by mid-1952. English settlers demanded action on the

part of the government but were ignored. Prominent Kikuyu chiefs who argued against joining the Mau Mau were being killed. It seemed possible that the entire Kikuyu nation would be converted to Mau Mau and that the movement might then spread to other Kenyan ethnic groups.

Finally, in October 1952, the government declared a state of emergency and ordered 183 known members of Mau Mau arrested, including Kenyatta. Kenyatta always denied leading the Mau Mau movement, but it was clear that he was deeply sympathetic to, if not directly involved in, its goals. In 1953, Kenyatta was found guilty of inciting the Mau Mau and sentenced to six years in prison.

Despite the jailing of their supposed leaders, the Mau Mau continued to strike in late 1952 and early 1953. Most of their targets were Kikuyu who refused to join their cause, but they also murdered some English settlers in a brutal fashion, using knives and machetes to hack the victims to death. Europeans in Kenya responded by marching through downtown Nairobi and demanding firm government action. The British at first were helpless in the face of

these attacks, as the Mau Mau operated in small bands of guerrillas and would fade into the thick forest at the first sign of heavily armed troops.

Mau Mau activity increased after March 1953, with entire villages of non-Mau Mau Kikuyu attacked and burned to the ground. Although the Europeans continued to demand more government action, throughout the Mau Mau rising, it was the Kikuyu loyal to Britain who suffered the greatest number of casualties.

British Sweeps and Detention Camps

In June 1953, the British began to organize an effective campaign against the Mau Mau. First, they worked to strengthen the Kikuyu Home Guard, giving its units weapons so they could protect their own villages. At the same time the British targeted areas where there were believed to be high concentrations of Mau Mau sympathizers. Troops were sent on sweeps through the forests and villages looking for Mau Mau followers. In open areas the soldiers had the right to

stop and question any suspicious-looking persons; in the forest they could shoot to kill without warning.

The British had 10,000 regular troops at their disposal, divided evenly between British battalions and the King's African Rifle (KAR) battalions (the KAR battalions consisted of black troops led by white officers). They also could use some 21,000 Kenyan police and 25,000 Kikuyu Home Guards, although the latter were reserved almost entirely for defensive purposes.

Opposing them, the Mau Mau had an estimated 12,000 militants, supported by some 30,000 followers who provided safe havens and helped to keep them supplied. Only about 2,000 of the Mau Mau had modern rifles; the rest used knives, spears, and homemade gunpowder weapons.

Despite the Mau Mau's poor equipment, the terrain in which they operated made it extremely difficult for the British to defeat them. Thick forests, rugged hills, fast rivers—all made movement by regular troops difficult. The irregular soldiers of the Mau Mau, however, knew the region well and could move more quickly through it than their opponents. The



British colonial forces in Kenya set up detention camps for those suspected of Mau Mau activities in the early 1950s. Eventually more than 100,000 Kiyuku were taken prisoner. (Terrence Spencer/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

possibilities for ambush in the thick woods helped to compensate for the Mau Mau's lack of modern rifles.

Nevertheless, the British slowly beat down the Mau Mau resistance. Sweeps rounded up tens of thousands of Kikuyu. Those who were suspected of Mau Mau activities were put in detention camps. Eventually more than 100,000 Kikuyu would spend at least some time in the camps.

Many other Kikuyu were forced to relocate into villages, which caused some difficulty. Most Kikuyu operated small farms; in Kikuyu tradition, centralized villages were the exception rather than the rule. But the small farms were isolated and vulnerable, and their scattered nature made it impossible for the British security forces to determine which were loyal and which were supporters of the Mau Mau. Although it was resented by the Kikuyu, the campaign to house Kikuyu in villages made it easier for the British and the Kikuyu Home Guard to defend against Mau Mau attacks; loyal Kikuyu were encouraged to dig ditches filled with stakes around their villages.

Some Mau Mau bases were in especially hard-to-reach areas. In particular, the bases in the central forest and in the rough woods around Mount Kenya were very hard for British troops to reach quickly. The British compensated for this difficulty by using aircraft to bomb the more inaccessible Mau Mau camps.

Mau Mau Defeated

In April 1954, having successfully cleared most of the countryside, the British targeted Nairobi itself. About 65,000 Kikuyu lived in Nairobi, making up about one-third of the population. The British army, in an operation code-named "Anvil," sealed off the city and went from house to house looking for Mau Mau. They detained more than 30,000, of whom they decided 16,000 were active or passive Mau Mau supporters. These were added to the growing numbers in the detention camps.

Operation Anvil broke the back of the Mau Mau resistance. Much of the Mau Mau's support had come from the Kikuyu of Nairobi, and without access to those resources, the units in the forest began to lose hope. The general population of Kikuyu also became more willing to help in operations against the Mau Mau guerrillas.

The British were able to use brainwashing techniques on some captured Mau Mau, changing them from opponents into collaborators. These turncoat Mau Mau were then used to help hunt down their fellows, leading special fast-moving tracker teams into the Kenyan woods. Those Mau Mau who could not be talked into surrendering could be caught or killed.

By 1956, most of the Mau Mau had been caught. The most prominent Mau Mau leader, Dedan Kimathi, was captured and executed in October of that year. Kenya was once more firmly under British control.

Aftermath

During the war 10,500 Mau Mau died, and another 75,000 Mau Mau and alleged supporters were arrested and detained. The Mau Mau had succeeded in killing 1,800 African civilians, along with 58 European and Indian civilians; the British army had lost 63 British soldiers and 534 Africans.

The Mau Mau rebellion failed because it had been poorly equipped and extremely disorganized, and because its operations were characterized by brutal methods that repelled those it was supposed to attract. But it still took the British four years—and £55 million (\$250 million)—to defeat the uprising. And they only succeeded after they had placed a large percentage of young Kikuyu males into detention camps. The uprising had made it clear to Britain that holding on to Kenya was not viable in the long term. Kenyan nationalism had only been slowed, not defeated.

In 1957, the British allowed Africans to be elected to Kenya's legislature, although only in limited numbers. In 1961, Africans won a majority of seats in a newly created legislative council. Kenyatta was freed by the British in late 1961 and became Kenya's first prime minister. On December 12, 1963, Kenya became completely independent.

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See also: Anticolonialism.

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LIBERIA: Doe Coup, 1980

TYPE OF CONFLICT: Coups



Liberia is Africa's oldest republic, founded by freed slaves and free blacks from the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. From the first colony in 1822 through independence in 1847 and up to the American Civil War and emancipation in the 1860s, some 20,000 descendants of North American slaves settled in what is now Liberia. They were joined by some 5,000 to 10,000 "recaptureds," Africans seized from illegal slaving ships after the trans-Atlantic trade was outlawed by the British and Americans in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In the latter years of the century, the Americos—as the North Americans were called—and the recaptureds were joined by several thousand West Indians. Together, these groups formed the class that ruled Liberia during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Unlike African colonies ruled by Europeans, Liberia had no racial barriers. Many of the indigenous peoples—particularly the offspring of important personages among the country's sixteen ethnic groups—were formally adopted by Americo families and assimilated into what Liberians called "civilized life."

Thus, the Americos, who never represented more than 2 to 3 percent of the population, were able to constantly reinvigorate their numbers.

Most of the Americos lived in the coastal settlements, where they engaged in commerce, selling the products of the Liberian countryside—including timber, coffee, cotton, gold, and diamonds—on the world market. At the same time, they zealously defended their hard-won independence against the encroachment of the aggressive European powers that surrounded them. Still, by the early twentieth century, the country was in serious financial trouble, deeply in debt to European bankers.

Between the 1920s and the 1940s, the Americos tried several schemes for rescuing their country from the British receivership in which it had been placed in the early 1900s. One plan involved working with Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born African-American leader from Harlem who wanted to establish settlements for American blacks in Liberia. But the relationship was a rocky one. The conservative Americo elite became concerned that Garvey's plans to lead a decolonization movement from its base in Liberia would invite the wrath of European imperialists. When Garvey was convicted of mail fraud in the United States and deported to Jamaica, the plan collapsed.

A second scheme involved the exportation of indigenous laborers to the cocoa and sugar islands of Fernando Po, then a Spanish colony off the coast of Nigeria (and now a part of Equatorial Guinea). But the plan smacked too much of forced labor and even slavery and was shut down after a League of Nations investigation in the late 1920s. Finally, the only successful plan to put Liberia on the road to financial security involved rubber. By the 1920s, the United States was the world's largest rubber consumer—largely for tires for the new automobile industry—but it had no supplies of its own and was paying exorbitant prices to the British-controlled rubber cartel of Southeast Asia. In the

KEY DATES

- 1847 Liberia becomes Africa's first independent republic, led by former slaves and free blacks who have emigrated from the United States.
- 1971 Long-time president William Tubman dies and is replaced by Vice President William Tolbert.
- 1979 Mass rioting breaks out across the country in response to a rise in the price of rice, the staple food of most Liberian poor.
- 1980 A small group of military men under the leadership of Master Sergeant Samuel Doe invade the executive mansion and murder Tolbert; Doe becomes the leader of Liberia.
- 1990 In the wake of an invasion by rebel forces, Doe is trapped in Monrovia and murdered by rebel leader Prince Johnson on September 9.

mid-1920s, Harvey Firestone—head of the tire company that bore his name—decided Liberia was the ideal place to set up the world's largest rubber plantation.

By the beginning of World War II, the Liberian economy was beginning to get back on its feet. Rich sources of iron ore were discovered and exploited, just in time for the huge demands of the postwar global capitalist boom of the 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, there rose to power in 1944 a new and dynamic president of Liberia, William V.S. Tubman. Tubman was determined to open up Liberia to world trade. He was also a master politician. Over the course of his long tenure as president—from 1944 until his death in 1971—Tubman dramatically expanded the Liberian economy while incorporating the vast indigenous population into the political system for the first time.

In some ways, this was the golden age in Liberian history. A rudimentary transportation system was constructed; the capital, Monrovia, was modernized; schools and hospitals were built—all on the revenues generated by the burgeoning rubber and iron industries. But there was a downside to this period as well. Tubman would brook no opposition and used his several security forces to crush any signs of dissent. While maintaining the appearance of electoral politics, Tubman's True Whig party—which had been in power continuously since the late 1800s—won every campaign by a landslide.

Growing Unrest

During the 1970s a downturn in the world's economy undermined the demand for Liberian iron and rubber. Tubman's successor—the long-serving vice president, William Tolbert—inherited a declining economy, as well as a population with rising expectations. Many of the new graduates from the indigenous groups expected to be rewarded with good-paying jobs in the upper echelons of the Liberian government and business community. But as the pie shrank, the ruling Americos more jealously guarded their perquisites.

Protest movements grew, both among the newly educated indigenous population in Liberia and among the many Liberians studying at American universities. The Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) borrowed heavily from political currents in both America and Africa. They blended civil rights rhetoric with African nationalism, demanding a more inclusive political order and an end to the corruption of the Tolbert administration. By the mid-1970s, they began to agitate both among the student and intellectual population of Monrovia and in the military.

The Liberian military was ripe for change. Since its founding as the Liberian Frontier Force in 1909, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) had been ruled by an officer corps of elite Americos, though with