

Why did Britain fight a war against the Mau Mau movement in Kenya?

Written by anon

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There are few, if any, topics in modern history that have been brushed under the carpet in the manner of the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s. A Guardian review of the two major works on the topic, *History of the Hanged* by David Anderson and *Britain's Gulag* by Caroline Elkins, speaks of "a collective amnesia of a repression reminiscent of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union"[1]. With deeper research, the reasons for this become strikingly apparent. The considerable brutality perpetuated by both belligerents was not only horrifying, but to this day remains a cause for grave embarrassment. Deflected by the British as their ill management of a spiraling civil war and by Kenyan testimonials as repression that was tantamount to ethnic cleansing, the period sheds a negative light on both belligerents.

This said, the period preceding the 'Emergency' of 1952-59 has basic tenants that can be seen as pivotal in propagating the bloodshed. The hugely divisive and unfair existence of a settler economy was crucial in rising tensions, yet does not stand as a lone factor. The simultaneous manipulation of the Kikuyu peoples and more specifically, the forging of elites that didn't previously exist inspired significant resentment. Peripheral features, such as a post-war psyche centering on a substantial movement against fascism amongst the Kenyan public and the lack of an institutional security force allowed physical threats on the ground to transpire into the mindset of the masses. Of course, a significant contribution from the Mau Mau was telling in the spillover into conflict. Almost impossible to define as a movement, their seemingly pervasive practice of oath taking became commonplace throughout Kikuyu communities and contributed greatly to radicalizing certain societal elements to revolt against the British and their accomplices. This paper will pursue the notion that, whilst these factors all played their part, they were in fact largely subservient in terms of relative causation to the economic and social repression instilled by the Colonial government to protect an indignant settler population.

Before this paper slides into what could be deemed as an apologist interpretation of Kenyan behaviour leading to the war, it is of paramount importance to explain the traditional British narrative and explain why they felt compelled to confront the Mau Mau challenge. Bluntly put, it is not clear how to define the Mau Mau. With a litany of almost euphemistic phrases to address them, the 'enemy' was seen as an intangible movement that lacked any real national legitimacy, hence the name Mickey's, or Mau Mau, rather than the 'Kenyan Land and Freedom Army' as sections of the native population knew them. Rather, they were seen as an atavistic tribal movement that had sought to radicalize elements of Kikuyu society through a barbaric pursuit of forced oath taking.

Traditionally consigned to the male population, the oaths were imposed upon women and children, and contained practices, described by even the fiercest anti-British critic Caroline Elkins, as "appropriately horrid"[2]. There can be no doubt they polarized Kikuyu society, and the presence of loyalist Kikuyu in the emergency that would follow substantiates the British claim that they were putting down a dangerous radical force. Testimonials to the 'righteousness' of British action in defending the Kikuyu can be seen in The Times' archives, where it is written "The Kikuyu have mastered Western superficial techniques of pressure... the Mau Mau plans to reach objectives by means of terrorism"[3] Such a testimonial can also be used to interpret the decision to act as one confronting the repeated attacks upon European settlers and their livestock. The most notable of these attacks was the murder of the Rucks, a settler family, whose six year old child Michael was found hacked to death in his bedroom. Therefore, claims of

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British self-defence are quite viable in determining the origins central to the Emergency. Yet it can be said with conviction that whilst Mau Mau violence was dire and certainly necessitated a response, it was also borne out of circumstances created by the Colonial enterprise, lifestyle and policy agenda that flourished in the preceding years.

The term “Settler Economy” has a multiplicity of connotations in how it can be said to have provoked violence in Kenya. Having arrived in 1902, primarily to fund the new Ugandan Railway, settlers’ subsequent expansion into vast acres of land occurred simultaneously to the rapid increase in the size of the indigenous Kikuyu population. The natives were denied the same intrinsic rights and became products of the emerging colonization of their own land. Thus it can be said that the settler economy provoked violence as a result of both economic and social injustice. The process of land grabbing, or what could be more tentatively described as land acquisition, is acknowledged by David Anderson as simply typical of the methodology Britain would follow in its Imperial Project, suggesting the expansion was built on the foundations of “pious imperialism that echoed the partition of Africa”[4] that had begun several decades before.

Economically, the government went at great length to maintain the lifestyle of the settlers. The land that the Europeans would acquire ran in tandem with the land that the Kikuyu would lose, and would thus instigate worrying levels of overcrowding. Caroline Elkins laments this as the single greatest issue facing the Kikuyu, stating the root of the problem was the scarcity of land in relation to population size, which would subsequently translate to “an agitated group of homeless and property-less people in a land they had considered their own”[5]. After appropriating almost 60,000 acres of land previously belonging to the Kikuyu people, the white farmers would then require a suitably sizeable labour force. The Colonial government introduced several laws and prejudiced practices to make sure this was provided.

The most notable were the Resident Labourers Ordinances, which prescribed certain conditions on which Kikuyu labourers leaving their reserve may enter into voluntary contracts of employment on non-native farms. In essence this provided a catch-22 situation for the natives, as it meant having to choose between the desperate quality of life within their current plots, or to choose being subjugated by the White landowners. Hansard records this as a grave cause for concern, even in the House of Lords, with Baron Ammon suggesting the Kikuyu would have “to accept or starve”[6].

The banning of their ability to grow their own cash crops squeezed the Kikuyu’s economic rights even further. This heavily restricted income and chance of competition with the European Settlers, but eliminated subsistence farming, a basic way to provide food for one’s family. The Colonial government’s Native Registration Amendment Ordinance of 1920 meant the introduction of Kipande, an identity document of basic personal details, fingerprints, and an employment history. It was a degrading and dehumanizing reminder of foreign occupation, with African males required to wear it at all times around their necks. Again, there was little alternative to complicity, as waged labourers were exempt from detested tasks, such as conscription to the British Army, meaning the embarrassment of Kipande was the ‘favourable’ option. Such repression was always logically going to push segments of the Kikuyu population, already teetering over the brink, towards militancy. As one delves into the life of a European settler, the emerging native resentment was surely an inevitable and directly consequential response to such abhorrent economic repression. An emotional Niall Ferguson unapologetically reflects on how he enjoyed “a sense of unshakeable security... a magical time”[7] during his upbringing in Kenya.

Such a lifestyle is above all, fascinating, in that it occurred after a period that Bernard Porter quite correctly states as “wracked by war, with much bloodshed and unspeakable atrocities”[8].

This sense of social helplessness, ultimately propagating Mau Mau insurgency and radicalization, was not simply as a matter of unequal lifestyles, but also a culmination of a social engineering program embarked upon by the Colonial government. It is worth noting that the dire poverty in the urban areas of Kenya, also meant that migration to the cities brought little, if any, respite from the squalor, with Anderson noting, “If you had a black skin, Nairobi was a place of work, not leisure”[9]. Such conditions undoubtedly pushed aspects of the population towards militancy, with huge shantytowns containing around 80,000 Kikuyu. The aforementioned policies in the country undoubtedly contributed to the social despair in the cities. However, it was projects such as the Kipande that truly led to a surge in seemingly

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sustainable resentment. Yet even more potent in doing so was the forging of elites, or Chieftains, amongst the ordinary Kikuyu society that had traditionally been devoid of such a hierarchical notion.

These chiefs were prioritized by the British and aligned to a principle of strategic middlemen carried across many of the colonies. They enjoyed greater plots of land and were much wealthier than ordinary Kikuyu; Elkins blasts their lives as “everything that was corrupt about Britain’s civilizing mission”[10]. No flashpoint prior to the ensuing conflict presented this disgust as plainly as the assassination of Senior Chief Warhiu on the 20th October 1952, which immediately preceded the initiation of Operation Jock Scott, the first formal move by the Army. It must thus also be said a lack of understanding and a degree of naivety of the Kikuyu society contributed to escalating tensions. The air of naivety around the attempts to structure Kikuyu society is embedded in the knowledge that 1819 deaths of ‘ordinary’ civilians would follow in the conflict. This surely exemplifies the fact that the society as a whole did not embrace Mau Mau violence, and thus needed not to have their lifestyles doctored so perniciously by the British.

Such treatment also intensified some of the more idealistic aspects of the Kenyan people. Whilst the Mau Mau clearly did not have outright legitimacy in terms of numbers, even less so through their appalling methods of making their oath-taking programme binding, certain general features contributed to their claims of national imperative and made them a greater existential threat to the British. Quite obviously, they were able to play on the notion of Britain being little more than recent conquerors[11], but more crucially, the post-war, anti-fascist mantra that had pervaded both the civilized and so-called uncivilized world showed the actions of the British as intrinsically self-serving and exploitative. After serving for the Imperial army in the war, surely the Kikuyu’s claims for self-determination, or at the very least, improved treatment were suitably substantiated. Such hypocrisy is visible in the legislative council of 1952, which even after its enlargement contained one African nomination to the Executive council. There were 14 representing the European settlers[12].

Conversely whilst the British treatment of the Kikuyu may have been at best questionable after the defeat of fascism, the decision to go to war with the Mau Mau could be seen as aligned to such a fight and principle. The lack of “public clamour against deployment to defeat the Mau Mau”[13], as noted by John Darwin, is telling in that the British people saw this as a justifiable course of action. Yet such a view is evidently subjective, as Elkins unsurprisingly condemns what describes as “convoluted logic” that the British people, probably through a lack of fair information, “could not understand”. Further to this, it doesn’t negate the true motives underlying a desire for conflict with the Mau Mau, being the protection of a hugely discriminatory Settler economy.

It seems unfortunate in the midst of historical and political debate the loss of human life becomes incorporated into a sea of contention, rather than cause for the solemn respect that such tragedies should command. Yet, it could also be said that the human instinct to relinquish personal blame for such terrible outcomes means arguments over causation will persist. This said, the central cause to the instigation of the tragic seven years of rebellion, or emergency, in Colonial Kenya between 1952 and 1959 has to be due to Britain’s terrible management of its territorial holdings. By protecting a hugely unfair and unjust settler economy, be it through various Ordinance laws or the treatment of squatters, combined with the racially motivated separatism instilled into the poverty ridden cities, such as Nairobi, the British provoked a seemingly vile resistance movement in the form of the Mau Mau. There can be no excuses for the manners in which they conducted their oath taking, yet if one is to ask questions of how they could do such a thing, one must also be concerned as to the circumstances that provoked them to do so. Ergo, the British decision to go to war may have been determined by their own actions, rather than that of their adversaries.

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