

DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON MAU MAU

Caroline Elkins. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt, 2005. xvi + 475 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$27.50. Cloth.

David Anderson. *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. ix + 406 pp. Maps. Tables. Photographs. Notes. Glossary. Chronology. Index. \$29.95. Cloth.

David Lovatt Smith. *Kenya, the Kikuyu and Mau Mau*. Eastbourne: Anthony Rowe Ltd., 2005. 358 pp. Map. Photographs. Notes. Appendixes. Index. £18.00. Paper.

Historians have long viewed Mau Mau as both a nationalist movement and a civil war between those who joined its ranks and the Kikuyu who refused to join for a variety of reasons. These included adherence to Christianity, employment in the colonial administration, revulsion with the content of oath-taking ceremonies, and rejection of insensate killing and violence. The preponderance of evidence suggests that some one hundred whites, eighteen hundred Africans, and twelve thousand Mau Mau adherents died during the slightly more than seven years of the Emergency, which lasted from October 21, 1952, until January 12, 1960. Some eighty thousand people (mostly Kikuyu), or 1 percent of Kenya's then eight million population, were held in detention for varying periods of time, and 1,090 men were hanged for various crimes related to Mau Mau activities.

The importance of Mau Mau to the decolonization process in Kenya and its unique and complex characteristics ensure that it will continue to be examined by historians, political scientists, and sociologists. Each generation brings to endeavors of this kind the intellectual influences that have shaped its critical thinking and attitudes toward the certitude of received knowledge. It is thus not only history that can be reexplored in the future, but also how scholars of past generations have interpreted the forces that shaped it.

Under the influence of the New Left, some historians of the 1970s made efforts to bring into their historical narratives those who had previously been excluded, including women and minorities. As Robert J. Norrell has observed, "Influenced by the countercultural influences of the '60s, those practicing this 'new history' often dismissed old history as biased in favor of white, male elites in the west, and tended to celebrate those forgotten people without subjecting them to the same tough-minded criticism that they were applying to the old elites" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 2005). In the 1980s, New Left countercultural scholars found a compatible intellectual harbor in postmodern thought, and especially in Jacques Derrida's grand theory of deconstruction. The net effect of this was

replacement of carefully reasoned objectivity with strident explicitness and a tendency toward intellectual exhibitionism. Taken to its extreme, deconstruction is forged in a hermeneutics of suspicion and antifoundationalism and denies the objectivity of any reality. Instead, relativism replaces objectivity and is driven by perspectives heavily textured by gender, class, ethnicity, or race. In the view of some postmodern thinkers, the elusive nature of objective truth gives license to a deconstruction of received knowledge, varying interpretations of historical evidence, and the need to create revisionist narratives framed by antifoundationalism.

The influence of these powerful intellectual forces is evident in two of the books under review here: Caroline Elkins's *Imperial Reckoning* and David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged*. For the benefit of American audiences, the former has been purged of its hyperbolic British title: *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. One does not have to read many pages of this volume to detect that there is an stronger influence at work here than that of postmodern deconstruction, although in order to understand it fully one must examine *ex parte* evidence nowhere divulged by the author in her book. This evidence is readily available in the popular press and media, however, since Elkins is a prominent political activist who for some time has been campaigning for monetary compensation for the alleged victims of British efforts at defeating Mau Mau. Yet, as the author of this work, she has attempted to drape herself uniquely in an academic mantle, namely her assistant professorship in Harvard's history department. There is obvious subterfuge here: In failing to inform readers of her primary role as a political activist, she has attempted to camouflage the bias this clearly imparts to her historical narrative.

Elkins is an advocate of a justice of inequality, cast against a background canvas in which the British and Christian and loyalist Kikuyu are the enemy and Mau Mau adherents and sympathizers the heroes. She demands reparations for the latter, heaps scorn and invective on the former, and stridently criticizes Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, for his policy of reconciliation. By remaining mute on the issue of reparations for the victims of Mau Mau, she concludes, in effect, that they deserve none. She glosses over Mau Mau atrocities such as the Lari Massacre, in which 120 innocent Kikuyu men, women, and children were burned or hacked to death and others were mutilated by Mau Mau insurgents, gives no details on Mau Mau oathing ceremonies with their degrading sexual perversions and egregious abuse of catamite boys, and gratuitously and inappropriately analogizes British detention camps to the Soviet gulag and Nazi concentration camps.

Elkins takes special aim at the British system of detention camps established primarily for those who were committed through oaths to take part in Mau Mau criminal activities. This system of camps was also rehabilitative in nature, the ultimate goal being to release detainees back into society. Detention without trial always provides fertile ground for dispute, with

cogent arguments put forward for and against. Elkins does not expend much ink on this issue, but rather bears down on the inhumane treatment to which detainees were allegedly subjected. To sustain her claims, she relies primarily on oral testimony from selected survivors, supplemented by weak analyses and historical analogies. Thus, for example, she declares that the camps “were not wholly different from those in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia” (153); indeed, they bore “a striking resemblance to the brutal dehumanization and transformation of the Jews in the Nazi system” (398). “Like the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Mau Mau had few defenders,” she maintains, quoting a Mau Mau defense attorney, Fitz de Souza, as stating that the British were engaged in “a form of ethnic cleansing” (89). She pursues the genocide theme, arguing that the Mau Mau were for the whites and loyalist Kikuyu “what the Armenians were for the Turks, the Hutu to the Tutsi, the Bengalis to the Pakistanis, and the Jews to the Nazis,” going on to characterize British efforts to contain Mau Mau as “incipient genocide” (49). Thus, through inappropriate analogies and inflammatory rhetoric, Elkins attempts not so much to present truth supported by incontrovertible evidence, but rather to solicit broad public support for her crusade on behalf of Mau Mau adherents and sympathizers who were detained. In effect, her book is less a serious scholarly narrative and more a political brief crafted in popular language in the interests of a group of people whom she considers victims of a past wrong and worthy of reparations.

In order to further her cause and put a human face on alleged British oppression, she has chosen to showcase Terence Gavaghan, a career colonial official who, beginning in April 1957, was placed in charge of the Mwea group of rehabilitation camps. During the year he was in charge, twenty thousand detainees were released after renouncing their Mau Mau oaths. Gavaghan brought to this endeavor impressive credentials, having previously served in the colonial administrative service in Kenya in various postings that included Kitui, Nyanza, Kisii, Kisumu, Kakamega, Mandera, Mombasa, Kiambu, Taita-Taveta, Samburu, and Nyeri. Following his assignment as Officer in Charge of Rehabilitation of Mau Mau Detainees, he became Under-Secretary for Africanization of the Overseas Civil Service and Interim Permanent Secretary in the cabinet office. In 1962–63, the United Nations asked him to assume the chairmanship of the Administrative Unification Commission of Independent Somalia/Somaliland. Following this, he served as a consultant for a number of United Nations agencies and nongovernmental voluntary organizations.

In her chapter “Detention Exposed,” Elkins continues the attack on Gavaghan that she began in a documentary called *Kenya White Terror* that was aired on November 17, 2002, on the BBC2. Relying largely on information provided by Elkins, the producer cast Gavaghan as the poster boy for alleged British brutality against Mau Mau detainees. After investigating the issue of fairness, OFCOM, the independent regulator and competition

authority for the U.K., ruled that part of this broadcast was unfair to Gavanagh (see www.ofcom.org.uk), a finding that the BBC2 broadcast to its viewing public on February 22, 2005 (a statement was also broadcast on BBC World, February 19, 2005).

A major defect in *Imperial Reckoning* is the bias and subjectivity with which Elkins has researched the available evidence and drawn conclusions from it. Much of her narrative is based on interviews with former Mau Mau adherents and sympathizers, conducted for the most part over a brief period in 1998 and 1999. While she claims that interviews were conducted over a six-year period, 1998–2004, it is clear from her notes that most were clustered in a short period of time. Such a hurried and compressed documentation of fifty-year-old recollections cannot produce the same result as a measured and methodical interviewing process spread over several years and based on interactions with large numbers of diverse informants. According to the book's notes, it appears that she interviewed a total of 139 people, of whom some 36 percent described alleged brutality while in detention. Although she examined documents in the Public Record Office and consulted other primary source materials, she assesses the former as corrupted by previous intentional purges in the interests of a conspiratorial cover-up. She asserts that over time she developed a certain sense that "told me when something just didn't seem right" (xiii). Thus, instead of objectively evaluating the evidence, she came to rely on "a certain sense" she had about it. While this subjective subversion of objective reality represents an expression of the *mise en abyme* theory of the arch-deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller, it fails to convince reasonable people.

Further, Elkins's estimate that up to three hundred thousand Kikuyu may have disappeared during the Emergency is based on flawed deductions from the 1948 and 1962 censuses that would astonish demographers. In an attempt to add some credibility to her statistical assertions, she cites Fitz de Souza, who represented Mau Mau adherents in judicial proceedings. He is quoted as saying: "By the end, I would say there were several hundred thousand killed, . . . one hundred thousand easily, though more like two to three hundred thousand. All these people just never came back when it was over" (366). This statement, with its broad range of estimates and de Souza's implied ability to track so many people, simply lacks credibility. Blinded by prosecutorial zeal, he and Elkins have in essence attempted to do fancy statistical turns on thin data in order to promote their belief in "incipient genocide."

There is no doubt that some detainees were subjected to various forms of treatment that were considered harsh even by the standards of the times. However, Elkins fails to illuminate this convincingly by ignoring contrary evidence, using analogies to Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulag, and placing a heavy reliance on the largely uncorroborated fifty-year-old memories of a few elderly men and women interested in financial reparations. Former detainees with legitimate grievances are not well

served by this approach, in which strident rhetoric often crowds out a methodical assessment of credible supporting evidence. In the end, *Imperial Reckoning* rests heavily on fragile testimony, faulty data, and unconvincing intuition. It informs readers more about Elkins and her crusade than about the complexities of Mau Mau and the human tragedies associated with it.

David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged*, in contrast, reflects his scholarly gravitas. A former director of the Center for African Studies at the University of London and currently a lecturer in African studies at Oxford University, he has attempted to write a revisionist history that sharply challenges the conventional wisdom concerning the 1,090 men who were hanged for Mau Mau–related offenses. His book reflects both meticulous and comprehensive research and a sincere effort at a balanced rendering of conclusions about the judicial processes through which these men were condemned to death.

The author begins with a readable and comprehensive introduction to the social, economic, and political conditions that eventually led some Kikuyu to a violent expression, through Mau Mau, of their desire for freedom and equity. He thoroughly examines earlier Kikuyu efforts at mobilizing political will through the Young Kikuyu Association in 1920, the Kikuyu Central Association in 1926, and the Kenya Africa Study Union in 1944. Similarly, he provides insightful coverage of the critical land crisis that affected the Kikuyu, particularly in the Central Province in the 1940s. As he explains, steady population growth on limited agricultural lands combined with few alternatives to farming created desperate economic conditions for many Kikuyu. The occupation of prime agricultural lands by European farms, and the social, economic, and political disparities between them and the Kikuyu, only served to heighten tensions as the 1940s drew to a close. He sums up the growing stresses in the Kikuyu population: “Land hunger provoked by population pressures and worsened by the return of squatters, increasing social differentiation and the acquisition of land by a relatively few powerful individuals, were all part of the same problem. In tackling these issues, the colonial state was severely constrained by its past policies and its present alliances” (31). One comes away from the early chapters of this book with a clear understanding of the root causes of Mau Mau and why the colonial government was both unwilling and unable to avoid the tragic crisis that engulfed it and most of the peoples of Kenya for more than seven years. In providing this background, Anderson has drawn upon a range of primary and secondary sources.

At the heart of *Histories of the Hanged* are the 1,090 men who were hanged for a variety of acts related to Mau Mau. Of these, 346 were charged with murder (71 for their role in the Lari Massacre), while twice as many were convicted of administering oaths, arms possession, or association with Mau Mau. During the period of these hangings, the Kenya judicial system

also executed 246 non-Mau Mau murderers by hanging, indicating that in colonial Kenya at this time this practice was generally reserved for the capital offense of murder. Thus the use of hanging for offenses other than murder represented a marked departure from existing judicial guidelines and reflected a significant modification of the latter through law, decree, and regulatory actions during the Emergency.

Anderson assumes an enormous burden of proof in his reexamination of the court trials, the investigations and interrogatories that preceded them, and the verdicts that resulted from them. This form of Monday-morning quarterbacking, which tends to meet with mixed public reaction, occasionally leads to dismay when it is shown that criminals have escaped punishment for terrible crimes or that the apparently innocent have been given harsh sentences. Matters are rendered more complex when one places such trials in their historical and cultural contexts. Punishments that may have seemed reasonable in the historical past often appear inappropriate and cruel when measured by later societal values, attitudes, and standards.

Anderson proves himself remarkably diligent in examining the trial records of the 1,090 hanged. His examination reveals some instances of judicial bias and corruption, tainted testimony, questionable evidence, confessions extracted under torture, and seemingly arbitrary and inconsistent judgments. However, these occasional imperfections in judicial processes do not support the author's claim of widespread victimization due to a mass miscarriage of justice. While he persuasively demonstrates that in some instances the punishment imposed was excessive and that men such as Jomo Kenyatta were imprisoned for acts they did not commit, in many other cases the evidence for murder convictions was overwhelming and cannot be brushed aside. The author's efforts at generating latter-day pity for the hanged are often thwarted by his inability to portray any of them as heroic victims and by the fact that some of them publicly expressed pride in the callous killing of which they were convicted. The debate, therefore, centers not so much on whether or not they should have been punished, but rather on the nature of the punishment; indeed, a hovering presence in Anderson's account is the debate over capital punishment itself. On this subject, today's sharp lines separating opposing opinions were less clear in the mid-twentieth century, not only in Kenya but elsewhere.

One comes away from reading *Histories of the Hanged* with enormous respect for Anderson's meticulous research and for the rigor of his scholarship. However, while he gives voice to those who were hanged, he does not persuade us that they should not have been punished in some form.

David Lovatt Smith, the author of the third volume under review, *Kenya, the Kikuyu and Mau Mau*, served as a field intelligence officer among the Kikuyu in the Central Province during the Emergency. He brings to his account first-hand experiences and observations and the results of archival

research, interviews, and communications with other former colonial officials. While Elkins and Anderson approach Mau Mau from an antifoundationalist perspective in the interests of producing revisionist history, Lovatt Smith attempts objective reconstruction based on the evidence and textured with newer revelations provided by informants and correspondents. Like Anderson, his initial chapters cover the historical background of Kenya Colony and Protectorate and are comprehensive and well written.

In chapter 5, "Sundowners and Sweat," he tackles the thorny issue of European settlement on land that the Kikuyu later claimed was rightfully theirs. In vivid detail, he describes the complexity of Kikuyu land tenure traditions and the findings of both the 1929 Committee of Kikuyu Land Tenure and the 1934 Kenya Land Commission. As he documents, Kikuyu claims that the British appropriated their land for white settlement were not wholly untrue. He also details how this issue eventually came to be the leading Kikuyu grievance as a burgeoning population ran out of available space on which to cultivate subsistence crops. An expedient colonial-era solution to this problem in the 1930s was to encourage Kikuyu squatters to rent small parcels on European farms for the production of subsistence or cash crops. However, this provided only temporary relief from a problem that continued to be exacerbated into the 1950s.

Lovatt Smith describes in great detail the Kikuyu Guard, which comprised those loyal to the government and functioned as a militia in the Reserves. Eventually the British recruited 4,620 men into the Guard and gave them basic military training. Their importance in defeating Mau Mau had less to do with their own security operations than with their role in releasing members of the King's African Rifles and the Kenya Police for military actions in the forests of Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains. The British also created pseudo-gangs comprising loyalist Kikuyu whose members operated in the forests and dressed like Mau Mau gang members.

In an appendix, the author reprints a 1961 report from the unnamed district officer of Limuru who candidly admitted, "Many criminal acts were perpetrated by loyalists in the name of the government at the height of the Emergency, as well as the opportunity of settling old personal scores. . . . If the loyalists are examined, it will be seen that over 50 percent were those with land or property as they had more to lose than the majority of Mau Mau active wing who were recruited in large numbers from dissident landless" (339–40). It is through such revelatory documents that Lovatt Smith informs his discourse, amplifying the objective evidence that has long formed the basis of received knowledge about Mau Mau. Similarly, he elucidates the various issues associated with the detention camps, especially the subject of discipline enforcement, about which he reproduces a lengthy memorandum, "Use of Force in Enforcing Discipline," written by the Kenya Minister for Legal Affairs, Attorney General Griffith-Jones. He does not shy away from discussing the issue of alleged abuse of detainees,

but provides impressive evidence that such acts were rare and unusual.

While Lovatt Smith pursues the theme of reconciliation, Elkins and (to a lesser extent) Anderson revive allegations of victimization that are a half-century old, but they do so only on behalf of Mau Mau members and supporters. Both Anderson and Lovatt Smith apply rigorous scholarship to their endeavors, while Elkins often relies on frail anecdotal evidence to produce a sweeping indictment of British colonial administrators and loyalist Kikuyu. The simultaneous publication of these books once again demonstrates the challenges inherent in establishing objective truth and how differing perspectives, attitudes, values, and goals can strongly influence historiography. For these reasons alone, all three are well worth reading.

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