Mau Mau: Understanding Counter-Insurgency

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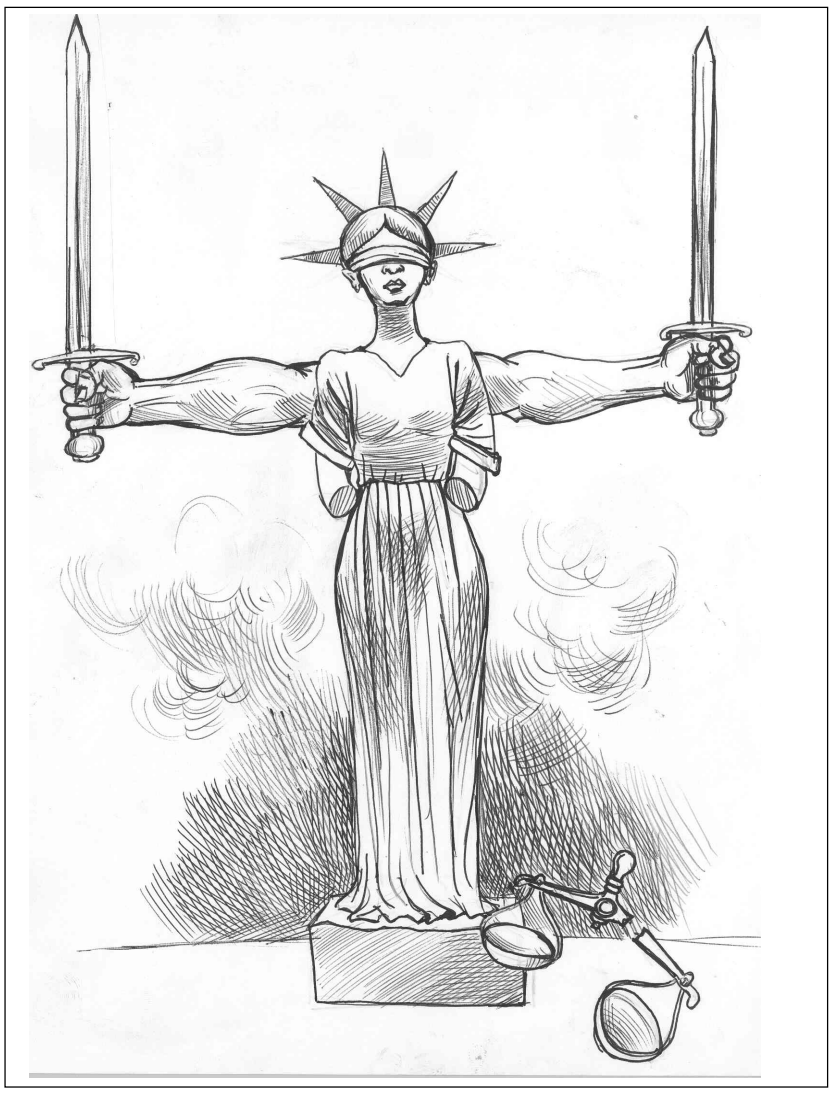
Imperial Reckoning, The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya
by Caroline Elkins
Henry Holt, 2005, 475 pages, $27.50, ISBN-0-8050-7653-0.

Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire
by David Anderson
Norton, 2005, 406 pages, $25.95, ISBN 0-393-05986-3.



Who authored the atrocities linked with the Mau Mau? How did Mau Mau, which began as an armed movement against settler power in the White Highlands of Kenya, turn into a civil war among the Kikuyu of the Central Province?

The Mau Mau killed only 32 white settlers. "More European civilians would die in road traffic accidents between 1952 and 1960," notes Anderson. Other Mau Mau victims included some 200 British regimental soldiers and police and 1800 African civilians. The numbers explode when we come to count the Mau Mau dead. The official figure is that of 12,000. Anderson says it is "more than 20,000." But Elkins presents a radical reappraisal of the counter-insurgency both in *scale* and human *cost*: "If the Kikuyu population figure in 1962 is adjusted using growth rates comparable to the other Africans, we find that somewhere between 130,000 and 300,000 Kikuyu are unaccounted for. … I now believe that there was in late colonial Kenya a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people"

The education of Caroline Elkins began in 1995 when she decided to write a doctoral dissertation on the 80,000 Mau Mau detainees during the 1952-58 Emergency. Knowing that three different departments had followed their track, she expected to find 240,000 files in the London archives – but found none. Even the Kenya archives yielded only a few hundred files.

The surviving records were duplicitous. The daily average of 80,000 obscured the fact that the total detained was between 160,000 and 320,000. The systematic destruction and distortion of documentary evidence about the Mau Mau emergency was no doubt part of a continuing "state-imposed amnesia."

To cut through it, Elkins set out in search of survivors of the Emergency. Her ambition was to shift the search-light from the Mau Mau to the British, and it succeeds spectacularly. In contrast, David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* relies on more conventional documentation, mainly 800 surviving testimonies of the 1,090 who were hanged during the Emergency. Not surprisingly, his findings by and large confirm official claims of the number of Mau Mau killed.

Though it reads at times as a charge sheet, *Imperial Reckoning* offers more, including the voices of the victims. Yet, Elkins is unable to explain the outcome of the war: that the British were able to win the middle ground and impose a political settlement that isolated the Mau Mau. Because she writes a narrative with the conclusion very much in mind, Elkins weaves the narrative around the confrontation between militants and Loyalists – which is how the story ends, but not how it begins. In the process, she loses conceptual sight of the middle ground. The great merit of Anderson's political and social history of the Mau Mau war is that it focuses on the battle for the middle ground.

Both books need to be read together. If Elkins' truly innovative oral research for the first time brings out the enormous scale and murderous consequences of the British counter-insurgency, its human cost, Anderson's political acumen gives us the clues necessary to reflect on the lessons of a counter-insurgency that succeeded in its own terms.

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"Some of the most aristocratic immigrants ever to populate the British empire," Kenyan settlers reveled in a life of "gentrified leisure" – "sex, drugs, drink and dance, followed by more of the same" – driven by hedonism and the lash of the infamous *kiboko*, a whip made of rhinoceros hide.

A battery of laws underwrote settler privilege at the expense of native lives: peasants were herded into officially-demarcated native reserves; administrative regulations forbad them to grow the most lucrative crops (coffee) and forced them to sell others (maize) to state marketing boards at a price that protected settlers from native competition; a Hut and Poll tax – the cash equivalent of two months' labor a year – compelled them to work for cash no matter the returns; and the law tracked their movement by requiring that every native carry a pass.

Unlike Elkins who traces the development of African politics into two great tendencies - pro- and anti-colonial - Anderson highlights the moderate middle ground between the conservative *Kikuyu Association*, which brought together leading Kikuyu chiefs and senior Christian leaders, and Mau Mau militants**.**

The birth of *moderate* nationalism occurred around two fissures: land and culture. The Church became an issue when missionaries decided to modernize the Kikuyu way of life. When the Church demanded in October 1929 that all Christians sign a pledge against female circumcision, there were massive defections, leading to the formation of independent churches and schools to defend "Kikuyu tradition." The movement received powerful backing from newly formed political groups like the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and then the Kenya African Union (KAU). Around the same time, the 1932 Colonial Land Commission turned down Kikuyu demands for the return of "lost lands." Instead, its report called on the Kikuyu to increase the carrying capacity of their land by marshalling compulsory communal (mainly female) labor to build terraces and check soil erosion. Kikuyu opinion was outraged.

If the battle of the peasantry in the reserves for land and for the defense of culture provided the ground for the development of moderate nationalism, it is the great historic battle that squatters waged against settler power for the right to live (land and freedom) that was the springboard of *militant* nationalism. Squatters came from among landless peasants. By 1940, they numbered 150,000; one in every eight Kikuyu was a "squatter" on a European farm, laboring for a third of the year in return for a plot to cultivate and permission to graze cattle.

The World War further altered the balance of forces on the Highland by bringing material prosperity to settlers and political power to settler-dominated district councils. But it also thrust 75,000 peasants and squatters into the colonial army. When demobilized, many of them would provide leadership and men for the Mau Mau forest militias. For the moment, though, the initiative lay with settler-dominated Councils, which used their new powers to revise annual squatter contracts to limit their access to land. As evictions began, squatters from over 400 farms attempted to strike but the 1947 strike failed. Over 100,000 squatters were forcibly 'repatriated' between 1946 and 1952.

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Squatters found it difficult to organize – except in one place, Olenguruone, where they dipped into tradition to forge a wider unity. Taking an oath traditionally meant for male elders in times of crisis, they administered it to all: men, women and children. Some went a step further, taking different oaths, each signifying a higher level of commitment. The oath-taking ceremony symbolized spiritual rebirth. Two of the most common pledges went thus: "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." A Mau Mau was a Born-Again Kikuyu.

As evictions began and the oath reached the Kikuyu of Nairobi and central Kenya, it was taken up by urban militants organized as *Muhimu* (Kiswahili for 'significant'). Later to become the Mau Mau Central Organizing Committee, the militants of Muhimu were recruited from three different groups: trade unionists (Fred Kubai, Eluid Mutonyi, Charles Wambaa, John Mungai), ex-servicemen (Waruhiu Itote – known as General China), and urban criminal gangs, particularly 'the Forty Group' (Mwangi Macharia, Stanley Mathenge).

Beginning with key trade unionists, selected criminals, and Nairobi's Kikuyu taxi drivers, the Muhimu mounted a membership drive and took over the leadership of KAU (except in Kiambu), going so far as to summon Kenyatta to Nairobi in early 1952 to threaten him with death should he not carry out Mau Mau directives. The colonial government estimated that the first oath had been taken by nearly 90% of the entire Kikuyu population of 1.5 million and that the seventh and final killing oath called the *batuni*, had been taken by a good 10% by 1952.

Nairobi was a racialized city where police patrolled first European and then Asian quarters, leaving criminal gangs to control African shanties and housing estates. All Mau Mau had to do to control African areas was to penetrate criminal gangs. Further, as ethnic separation broke down in the cramped and racially segregated living quarters of African Nairobi, Kikuyu militants began recruiting members of other ethnic groups, particularly the Kamba. With the prospect of Mau Mau turning into a multi-ethnic Kenyan insurgency, notes Elkins, "one of the British colonial government's greatest nightmares was becoming a reality."

Mau Mau violence became prominent with the murder of Chief Waruhiu wa Kungu of Kiambu, the Paramount Chief of Central Province, on 9 October 1952. Eleven days later, Governor Baring declared a state of emergency in the colony. Anderson says the militants (Stanley Mathenge, Dedan Kimathi) fled to the forest as the moderates – including Kenyatta – awaited their fate. But more likely it was the political wing, moderate *and* militant, that was picked up as the military wing fled to the forest.

The British responded with the proclamation of an Emergency on 9 October 1952, first isolating the 20,000 Mau Mau fighters in the forest by cutting off their supply lines, to Nairobi and to the Kikuyu countryside, and then confronting them with a roughly equal force.

Both operations were inspired by precedents. Operation Anvil, which cordoned off the city of Nairobi for a month-long sector-by-sector purge, was patterned on the "clean-up" of the then Palestinian city of Tel Aviv by the British military before the Second World War. Every Kikuyu who was not a Loyalist was treated as a confirmed

oath-taker. In a month, half (24,100) of those screened (50,000) had been detained – without a single trial having been held. With the introduction of communal detention orders, the number doubled in six months.

Forced villagization too had precedents: Alfred Milner's herding of Afrikaaners into barbed-wire villages during the Boer War, leaving "tens of thousands of women and children" dead from disease and starvation; and Templer's more recent resort to barbed-wire villages during the communist insurgency in Malaya in the early 1950s. Forced villagization began with entire villages being set on fire. Their houses and property burnt, over a million Kikuyu were forced into some 800 barbed-wire villages between June 1954 and October 1955.

In contrast to the conventional notion that the counter-insurgency was aimed against Mau Mau militants, Elkins recognizes that the British interned practically the entire Kikuyu population as Mau Mau. But how do you intern an entire people without taking them on? Key to this was turning the insurgency inward, into a battle of Kikuyu militants against Kikuyu loyalists, thereby turning the Mau Mau insurgency into a civil war.

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Though resistance to Mau Mau began with the churches, it is the Governor's order of November 1952 that led to the reorganization of Church-led resistance groups as a militia named the "Home Guard". Henceforth, recruitment would be done by chiefs and headmen. That was the first step in the making of the civil war. The second step was taken by the Mau Mau when they targeted the Home Guards and their families.

The turning point came with the night of 26 March, 1953, at Lari, the site of two successive massacres, the first by Mau Mau and the second by Home Guards on the night of 26 March, 1953. In an eye-opening chapter, Anderson links the massacres to a history of colonial land appropriation which left its victims to haggle over a compensation which was neither fair nor comprehensive.

The vast majority of the 400 killed at Lari had been women and children. Anderson refers to General Itote's account of a debate in the Mau Mau forest camps in July, 1953, reflecting growing doubts about the killing of women and children. Did critics sense that if the pursuit of justice gave way to vengeance, it may drown the struggle in its own blood? Did its spectacular expansion in Nairobi bring undesirable elements (criminals) and practices (coerced fund-raising and oaths) into Mau Mau?

Even then, how important was terror as a Mau Mau practice? The colonial government and the settlers claimed it was routine. One of the worst incidents occurred when Joseph Kibunja was murdered on 15 September 1952 for refusing to take the oath, and the community was forced to participate in the decapitation of his body "to show they were not afraid to murder the enemies of Mau Mau." Anderson assures us that while "disturbing," the Kibunja murder was an "utterly exceptional case." Mau Mau violence was usually organized in liaison with local people; rebels often knew victims personally. General Erskine, the commander of British forces in Kenya during the Emergency, was surprised by the strength of local support for rebels, describing Kikuyu locations of Western Murang'a as "nothing more than Mau Mau republics." Even Home Guards were infiltrated by rebels; according to the Government's own estimates, almost half had taken the oath.

To be sure, we are talking of a trend here. When the city poor hit back between June and December 1954, it was without direction from any committee or liaison with elders in the countryside. The result was a mix of the spectacular, as they freed 296 Mau Mau from Lukenya prison, and the disastrous, as they set about murdering suspected informers, sapping the morale of Kikuyu communities. Did the influence of fresh recruits, including criminal elements, increase with the jailing of the political leadership at the outset of the Emergency? And did it proliferate when those who fled to the forest set up several parallel militias – with the result that Mau Mau never again had a unified leadership?

The Kenyan historian, Bethwell Ogot, has identified four categories of recruits: the *constitutionalist* landed gentry, *traditionalists* who believed the Mau Mau had subverted Kikuyu cultural practices by misusing the oath, *opportunists* and *Christians*. Whereas the landed gentry (among whom were chiefs) were the backbone of the Loyalists, we need to focus on the Christians – who were both the most numerous and the most ambivalent – to follow the downward slide of the anti-colonial struggle as the Mau Mau broadened their target beyond informers to include those Christians who refused to take the oath as well as to join the Loyalists.

How many of those who sought to occupy a middle ground were killed and how many joined the Home Guards? By March 1954, there were 25,600 Home Guards – 14,800 full-time – manning over 550 fortified posts in a rapidly militarizing countryside. Loyalists were never paid but received privileges. Loyalists – and never an ex-Mau Mau however much he or she confessed – were issued Loyalty Certificates which allowed them to move freely, to be exempt from special taxes, to have preferential access to commercial licenses and to have the right to vote. Later, they had free access to the property and labor of those herded into barbed-wire detention villages.

With Lari, the Mau Mau began to target, less and less the settlers on the Highlands or even less the colonial power itself, but increasingly those they perceived as local beneficiaries of colonial power, first a combination of Kikuyu chiefs and Christians and the Home Guards, and then those who would seek to occupy the middle ground. As this happened, neighbors – even relatives – turned out to be on opposite sides in a rapidly brutalizing civil war. As the Mau Mau lost the middle ground, the British were able to implement a political settlement that would isolate the Mau Mau.

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The Emergency was a state of exception: violence, not law, was its organizing principle. The Kikuyu countryside was like a stretched-out detention facility. Every Kikuyu who was not a Loyalist was treated as a confirmed oath-taker. This much is clear from the nature of *screening*: "If the screening team was dissatisfied with a suspect's answers, it was accepted that torture was a legitimate next resort. … The screening teams whipped, shot, burned, and mutilated Mau Mau suspects, ostensibly to gather intelligence for military operations, and as court evidence."

The regime of torture gave plenty of room for perversions to flourish. Elkins recounts these, sometimes in gruesome detail. Settlers set up illegal, informal, sometimes mobile, screening centers. One settler claimed that he "could get a very good idea as to how many oaths a man had taken just by looking at him." Another – nicknamed Joseph Mengele of Kenya – operated his own screening camp and boasted that his exploits "included burning the skin of live Mau Mau suspects and forcing them to eat their own testicles."

Then there was the slow and protracted method of torture, reminiscent of the worst of brutalities in the Rwandan genocide. In the words of an interrogator at the Special Branch center: "By the time I cut his balls off he had no ears, and his eye ball, the right one, I think, was hanging out of its socket. Too bad, he died before we got much out of him."

Often, sadism mixed with cruelty as when whites used villagers for target practice, or when they delighted in specially humiliating occupants of detention villages: "The Johnnies (whites) would make us run around with toilet buckets on our heads. … The contents would be running down our faces and we would have to wipe it off and eat it, or else we were shot." Another common practice in the detention villages was that of the confessional *baraza* (public meeting): "Those taken to the front of the crowd were often stripped naked and forced to lead the rest of the village in rounds of anti-Mau Mau songs. When the music stopped and the questioning began, those who refused to confess were beaten, often unconscious. … Some people who had refused to confess were put in sacks, one covering the lower part of their bodies while the other covered their upper part. Then petrol or paraffin would be poured over the sacks, and those in charge would order them to be lit. The people who refused to confess … were always killed in order to instill fear into others who might think of concealing the truth." At the same time, "confession did not mean an end to forced labor … only that they were spared from death, for the time being."

As one reads through Elkins' extended descriptions of the regime of torture, one is struck by its predominantly *sexual* nature. Male detainees were often sexually abused "through sodomy with foreign objects, animals, and insects, cavity searches, the imposition of a filthy toilet bucket-system, or forced penetrative sex." A common practice during interrogation was to squeeze testicles with pliers. The Christian Council of Kenya complained to the Governor that Mau Mau suspects were being castrated, citing an instance of a man who "had his private parts laid on a table and beaten till the scrotum burst because he would not speak."

Women had "various foreign objects thrust into their vaginas, and their breasts squeezed and mutilated with pliers." Variations abounded, with sand, pepper, banana leaves, flower bottles (often broken), gun barrels, knives, snakes, vermin, and hot eggs being thrust up men's rectum and women's vaginas.

The regime of torture was authored by an amalgam of two forces – the White settlers and the Kikuyu Loyalists – under the watchful and benign eye of the British colonial establishment, which was preoccupied with getting results so long as costs were politically acceptable. To contain that cost, they put a tight lid on information, discrediting anonymous accounts as irresponsibly dramatic while responding with extreme brutality to any individually authored account: a detainee who managed to smuggle out a signed statement was paraded, his fingers were chopped off and then he was hanged. The regime of torture outlasted colonialism because its agents did. As Elkins reminds us, among those who cut their battle teeth in the Mau Mau war was Idi Amin, then a soldier in the King's African Rifles, dispatched from Uganda to wage and learn counter-insurgency in the Kikuyu reserves.

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These books do not just dwell on atrocities – what the British did to the Kikuyu. Two valuable chapters focus on the life of militants, in the detention camps (Elkins) and in the forest (Anderson).

How does one survive torture, day after day, and for those who did not break, literally for years? The short answer is that survival was not an individual but a collective strategy. To face an organized camp administration, detainees evolved their own structure of committees: "There was the welcoming committee, the judicial committee, the rehabilitation committee, the debate committee, the mending committee, the medical committee; the list went on and on. Overseeing all was the Executive Committee. Selected by the detainees, its members were often singled out because of their ability to arbitrate disputes, their knowledge of colonial and international law, and their understanding of the political scene in both Kenya and Britain."

If the administration tried to run the camp as a torture chamber and a sweat shop, the detainee committees tried to turn it into a school and a market place. There were dozens of literacy classes: "Some camps had virtual schools, with forms or grades starting at Standard I and going all the way up to Standard IX. There were also lectures and discussions on politics, history, law, geography, and religion – all were wildly popular with the detainees." A former detainee explained how he survived the ordeal that was the camp: "You see, our classes and our teachers kept me alive. They were as important as our miserable food rations." To maintain morale and to recruit new members, militants organized oathing ceremonies in the camps. Guards demanded huge bribes – several packs of cigarettes or few days of ration – to look the other way.

Faced with a regime that tried to break their spirit, detainees endeavored to engage the camp personnel individually, most often through black markets and bribery. To explain how the same guards who brutalized the detainees could engage with them as buyers and sellers, even co-conspirators, J.M. Kariuki, a former compound leader and author of *Mau Mau Detainee,* narrated (and Elkins cited) the Kikuyu allegory about the dog, the jackal and the man: "We say that when a man takes a dog out hunting a jackal, the dog will run far ahead out of sight and start playing with the jackal in a hidden place because they are really the same kind. When the man catches up with them the dog will straightaway begin barking fiercely and chasing the jackal again for a safe distance. This is because it is the man who gives the dog food which it will not get if it disobeys orders."

Inevitably, there were those who broke. The most famous of the detainee-collaborators was Peter Muigai Kenyatta, Jomo's own son, and the best known compound leader was J. M., later an M.P. in independent Kenya. Relations in the camp resembled a tug-of-war. As camp authorities targeted waverers with privilege, and shuffled guards to cut short any relationships with detainees, detainees targeted informants.

Anderson focuses on senior Mau Mau commanders in the forest: Waruhiu Itote (General China), Dedan Kimathi and Stanley Mathenge. Recruits came into the forest in waves, first Muhimu activists and ex-squatters, then refugees fleeing persecution. As the numbers increased, from 12,000 (October 1952) to 24,000 (December, 1953), the camps moved deeper into the forest. But after Operation Anvil and forced villagization, life in the forest turned into "a grim struggle for survival." Not only had the baton passed from political to mili-

tary leaders, the latter were organized as eight separate militias, with the largest 4-5,000 strong. The tension between commanders became evident once the British captured one of them (General China) and were able to turn the distrust between commanders to advantage.

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Wars are fought with words as much as with weapons. If the point of weapons was to vanquish the enemy, the point of words was to rein in waverers and to isolate the enemy. British discourse on the Mau Mau ranged from the patronizing to the dehumanizing to the eliminationist. The *patronizing* discourse focused on the Mau Mau as a cultural aberration: the Kikuyu had either to convert to Christianity (as in J. C. Crothers, *The Psychology of the Mau Mau*) or to return to genuine tradition (as in Louis Leaky, *Defeating the Mau Mau*).

The *dehumanizing* discourse was openly racist and painted the Mau Mau as "vermin" that were "cunning" and "blood-thirsty" like other predatory animals. The *eliminationist* perspective brazenly claimed that "the only good Kuke is a dead Kuke" or that Mau Mau – in the words of the Colonial Secretary – was "the horned shadow of the Devil himself."

If the British justified terror as necessary to get their message across to "savages," the Mau Mau were also prone to mimic the British: Anderson cites the case of the infamous General Tanganyika who was "advised by a woman prophet that a European be sacrificed in the manner a Kikuyu elder had been killed, buried live in the ground." And so, Gray Leakey, a cousin of Louis Leakey, was taken captive and led into the forests of Mount Kenya, high up on the mountain, where "he was buried alive and upside down in deep red soil." As gory stories of Mau Mau violence made the round, settlers rationalized their own violence as preventive.

A common theme among settlers and colonial officials contrasted ritual details of the oath and the bloody nature of Mau Mau killings with pangas, or machetes, with European notions of *normal* violence. Anderson comments instructively: "Here e to face. To kill in this way required commitment and determination. The European imagination found it difficult to understand how such attacks could be perpetrated unless the killers were in some way possessed or controlled by dreadful forces they could not defy." Surely, the "Kikuyu who had taken the oath were no longer in their right minds; they had been transformed and brutalized." In that case, how could their actions be explained by killer and victim were locked together,
face any legitimate grievances, even if the grievances were otherwise acknowledged as real? Is it surprising that when Kenyatta tried to explain the nature of grievances that led to the Mau Mau, Judge Thacker simply shrugged it away: "Grievances have nothing whatever to do with Mau Mau and Mau Mau has nothing whatever to do with grievances."

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As Anderson notes, not only African nationalism but white power too was on the march in Africa in the 1950s. The National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948, Rhodesia's settlers amalgamated the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland into a federation in 1951, and Kenya's settlers hoped for a federation of East Africa. All three projects unraveled, beginning in Kenya. If the great war shifted the locus of power from London to the settler state in Kenya, the Mau Mau shifted it right back to London. The arrival of General George Erskine a few weeks after Lari signaled the beginning of the demise of settler power. General Erskine was no friend of settlers, writing to his wife: "I hate the guts of them all, they are all middle-class sluts." One of his first orders asked the security forces to stop "'beating up' the inhabitants of this country just because they are the inhabitants." Politically astute, he recognized that Mau Mau would be contained if Kenya were purged of settler power: "in my opinion they want a new set of civil servants and some decent police." That, in short, was the British agenda for an independent Kenya.

Unlike the French in Algeria, the British succeeded in turning the anti-colonial and anti-settler struggle in the White Highlands into a civil war among the Kikuyu. This allowed them to win the middle ground and cap the Emergency with a political settlement led by Jomo Kenyatta who personified that middle ground. It is worth mulling over Elkins' account of the exchange between Governor Baring and President Kenyatta when the two met at State House, Nairobi, in October 1965:

> After some initial pleasantries the former jailor turned to his onetime captive, gestured, and said: "By the way, I was sitting at that actual desk when I signed your detention order twenty years ago." "I know," Kenyatta told him, "If I had been in your shoes at the time I would have done exactly the same." The nervousness evaporated, and the room erupted in relieved laughter. With everyone still chuckling, the new President chimed in, "And I have myself signed some detention orders sitting right there too."

Rather than see this as confirmation that Kenyatta was but a colonial stooge, it is more illuminating to think of independence as a compromise between a decolonizing Britain and moderate nationalists at the expense of White settlers and Mau Mau militants, immediate adversaries at the start of the Mau Mau war.

It was an outcome achieved at an astronomically high cost. Elkins sums up the testimony of survivors: "Many of these women think of the entire Central Province as a kind of mass unmarked grave." If these books can trigger soul-searching on the crimes of modern Western empires – even if half as serious as the post-war soul-searching on German crimes in Europe – they will mark a major contribution to understanding the ongoing struggle for land and freedom in the erstwhile colonies.