

Just or Injust: Scholarly Attitudes on the Moral Legacy of British Response to the Mau Mau Rebellion

Richard Kim, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Sarah Walshaw's History 344 course *Themes in Modern East Africa*. The assignment asked students to write a literature review on the historiography of an important event in East African history. The literature review was not intended to be exhaustive of all scholarly works written about a selected topic but rather to explore the historiography in a limited way by framing a specific question or theme. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

In 2006, the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction was awarded to Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, which detailed the Mau Mau rebellion of early 1950s Kenya and, in so doing, pointed a damning finger at the moral legacy of British imperialism. Despite this prestigious award, the book received more mixed reviews among historians. Some praised Elkins' original research on the detention camps while others criticized her as "being blinded by prosecutorial zeal" to the extent that she was a mere political activist masquerading as a historian.¹ While many historians today are certainly no enthusiastic supporters of British imperialism, that they felt ambivalent towards Elkins' work is not entirely surprising considering the rich historiography of the Mau Mau rebellion that offers many lenses through which to assess British moral legacy. This essay, then, will review the academic literature to show how scholars have varied in assessing British responsibility for the horrors of the Mau Mau

¹ Pascal James Imperato, "Differing Perspectives on Mau Mau," *African Studies Review* 48, no. 3 (2005), 150.

rebellion. To do so, this review will narrow its focus on the logic of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*.

Jus ad bellum, literally meaning “right to war,” refers to the causes under which armed force can be justifiably used. One aspect to *jus ad bellum* hinges upon force being the only effective option. In the context of the Mau Mau rebellion, the colonial government of Kenya and British press painted the Mau Mau as atavistic, uniquely savage, and even deranged.² This framing of the Mau Mau as psychotic killers stressing their irrationality implicitly argued that any non-violent response would be ineffective. Following Kenyan independence, this colonial framing came under attack in 1966 by John Nottingham and Carl Rosberg through their seminal work, *The Myth of “Mau Mau”*, which asserted that the Mau Mau were not deranged thugs motivated by atavistic tribalism, but rather modern nationalists.³ In the authors’ view, these Kikuyu nationalists were left with little choice but to adopt a militant approach since the colonial government had steadfastly refused, in the decades prior to the rebellion, to enact urgently needed political reform to give Kikuyu a meaningful voice in politics. According to this logic, Mau Mau rebels were perfectly rational agents who could have been negotiated with nonviolent political reform, thus invalidating the invalidity of nonviolent response as claimed by the colonial government. As influential as this nationalist interpretation has been, later generations of scholars have come to dispute it based on the rebels’ failure to build loyalty among non-Kikuyu minorities or the localized nature of the conflict which did not extend beyond the Central Province of Kenya.⁴ Nevertheless, this radical rethinking of the Mau Mau inspired other historians to follow with their own revisionist interpretations. For instance, David Throup highlighted how the colonial government had favoured white settler agriculture over African agriculture. Hence, in his opinion, the real roots of the rebellion were the ill-conceived economic policies that created a large

² John Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," *The Journal of African History* 31, no. 3 (1990), 397-398.

³ John Nottingham and Carl G. Rosberg, *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya* (New York: Praeger, 1970), xvi-xvii.

⁴ Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 170.

class of disaffected, landless, homeless, and impoverished Kikuyu men.⁵ In contrast, Luise White pointed out how colonial imposition of ideal marriage roles and gender relations had created resentment among young Kikuyu men who lacked either social or financial capital to attain this ideal.⁶ While these revisionist scholars varied in attributing the rebellion's cause, their common point was that the colonial government had failed to pay sufficient attention to Kikuyu grievances, whether these grievances arose from nationalist, ethnic, socioeconomic, anti-colonial, or gender-based concerns. Hence, they agreed for the most part that the colonial government should have sought to address these grievances rather than assuming brute force was the only effective option.

The second aspect to the logic of *jus ad bellum* is the perpetrator's motive. If, as discussed above, the colonial government was indeed mistaken in their belief that force was the only effective solution, then one could at least defend the morality of its actions on the basis of good intentions. On this point, the academic view is divided between those who see British response as complying with eventual plans for decolonisation and those who see it as resisting plans for decolonisation. This latter view sides with an anti-colonial framework that casts the colonial government as complicit with the self-interests of the racist, white settler community, which was the opinion of Arghiri Emmanuel.⁷ Dane Kennedy, on the other hand, rejects this view for the overly simplistic depiction of white settlers as uniformly racist.⁸ He instead points to the substantial strain of liberal paternalism among white settlers and colonial officials.⁹ This motive to modernize Africans and lay the foundations for eventual decolonisation is why they felt so threatened by the Mau Mau, whom they believed to represent barbaric atavism borne from the difficulties of transitioning from tribalism to modernism. As such,

⁵ David W. Throup, "The Origins of Mau Mau," *The Royal African Society* 84, no. 336 (1985).

⁶ Luise White, "Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (1990).

⁷ Arghiri Emmanuel, "White-Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism," in *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, ed. Teodor Shanin Hamza Alavi (London: Macmillan Education, 1982).

⁸ Dane Kennedy, "Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25, no. 2 (1992), 243.

⁹ *Ibid.*

British response was motivated by a paradoxical union between liberals who approved decolonisation and conservatives who disapproved it.¹⁰ However, David Percox, who investigated whether the liberals' intentions went any further than mere rhetoric, concluded thus:

Moreover, only when the military campaign was over were the 'major' political reforms which arguably anticipated decolonisation implemented. At no stage did the British COIN [counter-insurgency] campaign in Kenya constitute part of a Colonial Office plan for decolonisation. . . . Decolonisation in Kenya was not conducted *through* counter-insurgency, but *after*.¹¹

This debate on whether or not the colonial government had morally justifiable motives was more recently injected with fresh air by Caroline Elkins who, using previously classified documents and oral testimonies, reassessed British intentions of rehabilitation. Through this research, she revealed the scandalous nature of the so-called rehabilitation system which was not only extremely understaffed due to its shoestring budget, but also frequently equated rehabilitation with physical and emotional abuse.¹² This was how she came to the dramatic conclusion that they were more comparable to gulags than genuine rehabilitation camps. While her critics have argued that Elkins exaggerated the estimates of possible Kikuyu casualties and relied too heavily on alleged testimony, a later study by A.R. Baggallay which examined another declassified War Office file corroborated the phony nature of well-meaning rehabilitation.¹³ One War Office report even admitted that "rehabilitation is a name only."¹⁴ Hence, as it currently stands, it appears difficult to state that British response was guided wholly on morally justifiable motivations.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ David A. Percox, "British Counter-Insurgency in Kenya, 1952-56: Extension of Internal Security Policy or Prelude to Decolonisation?," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 9, no. 3 (1998), 90-91.

¹² Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

¹³ A. R. Baggallay, "Myths of Mau Mau Expanded: Rehabilitation in Kenya's Detention Camps, 1954-60," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 3 (2011), 571-572.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The third and final aspect to *jus ad bellum* concerns the validity of a threat. As already noted, the Mau Mau were initially characterized as uniquely savage. The Mau Mau's oath-taking ritual which involved the mutilation of a goat highly offended Christian sensibilities, as did the manner of killing which left victims' corpses hacked to pieces. The fact that Mau Mau occasionally killed even women and children, as infamously exemplified in the Lari Massacre, further intensified the fears of the white settler community.¹⁵ Nevertheless, John Lonsdale has offered an alternative way to contextualize these sensationalized killings. In his view, since the official data listed 12,590 Mau Mau killed in action and 1,880 civilians killed by Mau Mau, of which only 58 were non-Blacks, Mau Mau killing appears restrained, especially if the majority of Kikuyu had taken at least one Mau Mau oath as some believed.¹⁶ However, this comparison of casualties does not account for the sheer scale of military force brought down upon the Mau Mau as outlined by John Newsinger.¹⁷ That the Mau Mau failed to inflict as much violence as they took could be more reasonably attributed to this overwhelming military mobilization and ample support given to loyalists by the colonial government. Regardless of the government's responsibility for making armed rebellion inevitable or the dismissal of the possible effectiveness of non-violent response, the Mau Mau clearly did engage in brutal slaughter and posed a threat to Kenya's internal stability. Nonetheless, this disproportionate use of force leads to one last separate issue to consider when assessing British moral legacy: *jus in bello*.

Jus in bello, literally meaning "right in war," refers to the conduct under which armed force can be justifiably carried out. Applied to the Mau Mau rebellion, one must examine whether or not British use of force was excessive and violated due process of law. Now even back at the time of the rebellion, there were individuals such as D. H. Rawcliffe, a white settler, who claimed that physical abuse was rampant for any Kikuyu detainee.¹⁸ However, the traditional, pro-colonial view usually marginalises any unlawful violence on unconvicted suspects

¹⁵ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, 51-52.

¹⁶ Lonsdale, "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya," 398.

¹⁷ John Newsinger, "Minimum Force, British Counter-Insurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 3, no. 1 (1992).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

by arguing that such cases were isolated incidents, and when they did occur, it was usually a non-military member acting outside the official policy.¹⁹ This view has become increasingly untenable over time. Historian Anthony Clayton, all the way back in 1976, examined documented behaviour of security forces to argue that unlawful violence had indeed been the norm, not the exception, official policy be damned.²⁰ More recently, David Anderson examined many previously declassified files to argue not only that suspects were detained without fair trial and then regularly tortured, but also that capital sentences were frivolously handed out in so-called fair trials which accepted even the flimsiest of testimonial evidence.²¹ Elkins' research on detainment and rehabilitation camps, as already discussed, further corroborates this grim view. If Britain did use disproportionately coercive and unlawful measures to suppress both actual and suspected Mau Mau rebels, then one final point to consider is whether this can really be considered excessive. Counter-insurgency warfare is a type of conflict in which the exact number or identities of the enemy cannot be nailed down. Given this fog of war, casting as wide a net as possible may be rational according to military logic. As military historian David French summarises the logic of British counter-insurgency strategy: "That the innocent were bound to suffer alongside the guilty was inevitable, acceptable, and could be beneficial."²² However, Percox argues that the colonial government's very choice to meet the Mau Mau threat with disproportionate force by detaining any suspected Mau Mau supporters and expelling Kikuyu squatters from settlers' farms *en masse* did not constitute sound military rationale as it merely compelled Kikuyu who were already disaffected with colonial rule to join guerrilla forces.²³ Similarly, modern-day military analysts and army generals such as Johnathan Dowdall and David Petraeus respectively agree that this traditional mode of counter-insurgency that punishes civilians is counter-

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

²¹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of the Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

²² David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

²³ Percox, "British Counter-Insurgency in Kenya, 1952-56: Extension of Internal Security Policy or Prelude to Decolonisation?."66

productive, as recent U.S. military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown.²⁴ In summary, the assessment of British moral legacy in its response to the Mau Mau rebellion in the context of *jus in bello* principles has become viewed in more and more negative light over time.

While historians often note that colonised peoples have had difficulties in grappling with colonial legacies since achieving independence, perhaps the same could be said of the colonisers, at least in historiography. Discussion on the extent to which British rule can be held morally accountable for its forceful suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion has certainly proved neither static nor one-sided; some saw British actions in more favourable, though not entirely agreeable, light while others saw it in a more wholly negative light. This paper has attempted to provide a brief review of the academic literature on this topic with respect to the logic of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Through this review, one can see that while Mau Mau did indeed kill many civilians, historians have come to dismiss the initial assertions of the colonial government that force was the only effective option and that it was judiciously used with the best of intentions, such as eventual decolonisation, in mind. By doing so, scholarly consensus on the Mau Mau rebellion, if there is such a thing, has gradually, though not smoothly, inched towards a more morally negative interpretation. Hence, the fact that Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning* drew both enthusiastic praise and sharp criticism can perhaps be attributed to her methodology and dramatic rhetoric as much as this ever-changing debate on the true nature of the Mau Mau rebellion.

²⁴ M. L.R. Smith Jonathan Dowdall, "Counter-Insurgency in the Grey: The Ethical Challenge for Military Conduct," *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 1 (2010).

Bibliography

Anderson, David. *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of the Empire*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.

Baggallay, A. R. "Myths of Mau Mau Expanded: Rehabilitation in Kenya's Detention Camps, 1954-60." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 3 (2011): 553-78.

Carl G. Rosberg, John Nottingham. *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya*. New York: Praeger, 1970.

Elkins, Caroline. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt, 2005.

Emmanuel, Arghiri. "White-Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism." In *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, edited by Teodor Shanin Hamza Alavi, 88-106. London: Macmillan Education, 1982.

French, David. *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Imperato, Pascal James. "Differing Perspectives on Mau Mau." *African Studies Review* 48, no. 3 (2005): 147-54.

Jonathan Dowdall, M. L.R. Smith. "Counter-Insurgency in the Grey: The Ethical Challenge for Military Conduct." *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 1 (2010): 34-60.

- Kennedy, Dane. "Constructing the Colonial Myth of Mau Mau." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25, no. 2 (1992): 241-60.
- Lonsdale, John. "Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya." *The Journal of African History* 31, no. 3 (1990): 393-421.
- Maloba, Wunyabari O. *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Newsinger, John. "Minimum Force, British Counter-Insurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 3, no. 1 (1992): 47-57.
- Percox, David A. "British Counter-Insurgency in Kenya, 1952-56: Extension of Internal Security Policy or Prelude to Decolonisation?". *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 9, no. 3 (1998): 46-101.
- Throup, David W. "The Origins of Mau Mau." *The Royal African Society* 84, no. 336 (1985): 399-433.
- White, Luise. "Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (1990): 1-25.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Richard Kim, 2018

Available from: <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwc>