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The Mau Mau Rebellion

HIST498

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The colonialization of Africa was long underway by the time the British moved into Kenya in the late 1800s. Rather Africa was opened for colonialization for some time, “the story of pacification and effective occupation of Kenya was no different from what happened all over Britain’s empire at the close of the nineteenth century.”¹ Indeed the occupation of African states had transformed the continent into a hodgepodge of differing colonies. The occupation of spaces as defined by European imperialist created conflict between the indigenous peoples and those sent in to occupy the space and such conflicts were plentiful. The anti-colonial rebellion of the Mau Mau led the British to engage in torture in order to suppress the rebellion. What is not as well known or perhaps what is not well discussed is whether the use of torture was an effective strategy in suppressing the complicated trajectory of this anti-colonial rebellion. This paper will lay the foundation for the conflict between the British and the Mau Mau and will be followed by a discussion of the torture practices employed by the British and whether or not said torture practices were effective.

Foundation for Conflict

Kenya is an area rich in resources, with a climate ideal for agriculture. There are several reasons for why the British wanted Kenya, other than a simple power grab. The natural resources that can be found in Kenya include crops such as tea, coffee, and maize.²In addition to the valuable resources, Kenya has access to the ocean and the interior of Africa, and the climate as well as the land is desirable to entice settlers to the area. In the later years of imperialist control, Kenya housed several bases for the British during WWII.

¹ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 4.

² Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company; Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press

The conflict between the British and the Mau Mau did not occur suddenly. Rather it was the results of policies and attempts to control the indigenous peoples by the British that are largely to blame. Taxes, land ordinances, and force labor were problematic and only increased tensions between the two groups. Attempts by the British to placate the Mau Mau, their supporters, and members of other tribes also had adverse effects. The indigenous tribes have little representation in the government and the representation that was present was hand selected by the British government itself.³ Kenyan children received no education and when attempts were made by the East African Association these were quickly disbanded while the children of settlers were able to receive a free education. So the indigenous peoples have no representation, no access to education, and they are being forced into doing work for the British settlers.

As previously mentioned land ordinances, taxes, and force labor intensified the conflict. The Crown's Land Ordinance (1915) allowed the Governor to abolish the rights of ownership of land by Africans and allowed the Governor to sell or lease the land to non-Africans, essentially European settlers.⁴ Land ordinances such as the Crown's Land Ordinance were not uncommon but were conceived as a legal way to take land from the indigenous peoples. Taxes were also utilized as a control mechanism to ensure that European settlers had access to labor.

The poll tax made it so that "every able-bodied African over the age of eighteen has to pay the government a poll tax of twenty-four shillings a year."⁵ If one was unable to pay this tax then they could get a job working for the government on European plantations. The British were creating serfdom by tying the indigenous peoples to the land through the use of the Kipande and the Native Registration Ordinance. The Native Registration Ordinance (1921) states, "there shall

³ Padmore, George. 1953. "Behind the Mau Mau." *Phylon* 355-372

⁴ Padmore, George. 1953. "Behind the Mau Mau." *Phylon*

⁵ Padmore, George. 1953. "Behind the Mau Mau." *Phylon* 359

be allotted to each District by the Chief Registrar special Index Letters and a group of numbers to distinguish the Registration certificates of Natives registered in the respective Districts.”⁶ This certificate contained identifying information of the individual carrying it as well as their employment history. The certificate, or Kipande, also contained the information regarding the name of the individual’s father, the wages they earned, and the age or year of circumcision.⁷ Furthermore, public authorities or a representative thereof can demand the production of the certificate at any time.⁸ This allowed the British to track the physical movements and the changes in employment of the indigenous population. Another ordinance was the East Africa townships Ordinance (1908) later known as the Mombasa Township Rules (1922). This ordinance required certain occupations to register their businesses or trade and pay a fee; such occupations included meat sellers and bakers⁹, thus allowing the British to regulate these particular markets.¹⁰

Also prior to World War II, the British were also limiting what farmers could produce and in doing so made it so that indigenous farmers were prevented from growing the most gainful cash crops such as coffee. Not only were there changes in agricultural production, there were societal changes as well. The British created a structural hierarchy in a previously formlessness society by introducing chiefs who were tasked with maintaining order.

“The chiefs merely capitalized on the opportunities that came with the power they derived from colonial rule....they proceeded to do away with local Kikuyu competition

⁶ Malpass, H. 1922. *The Official Gazette of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya*. Nairobi, Government Printer, 250

⁷ Malpass, H. 1922. *The Official Gazette of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya*. Nairobi, Government Printer

⁸ Malpass, H. 1922. *The Official Gazette of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya*. Nairobi, Government Printer

⁹ Meat sellers and bakers were required to pay a fee of 40 shillings per year to maintain their registration and ability to sell their goods.

¹⁰ Malpass, H. 1922. *The Official Gazette of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya*. Nairobi, Government Printer.

by forcing the entrepreneurial masses out of the peasant economy and into the colonial wage market.”¹¹

Even though there are increasing divides amongst tribes, this is pushed aside during WWII when Kenya experienced an economic boom. This boom was the result of being forced to provide the British with goods and products. In order to meet the demand of the British, traditional farming practices were ignored in favor of European farming practices. Such practices included cultivating every parcel of land possible and not allowing the land to rest.

After the war Kenya was seeing an economic decline. The European farming practices had destroyed the land and made it extremely difficult to produce crops for sale and for consumption. During this time there is also new legislation such as the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts as well as other ordinance designed to help the British at the expense of the Kenyans but disguised to be a supporting tool for the betterment of the Kenyans.

There also continued to be divides within the indigenous groups between the well-to-do chiefs, and everyone else. When Kenyan troops returned home from fighting on behalf of the British, they demanded land and freedom and were largely ignored. There was a larger goal many of the indigenous peoples to remove British colonialism and their exploitative practices¹². This further intensified conflict between indigenous peoples and the British similar to what the British were experiencing in other colonies such as India.

Use of Torture

¹¹ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 19

¹² Wa-Githumo, Mwangi. 1991. The Truth about the Mau Mau: The Most Popular Uprising in Kenya. *Transafrican Journal of History*

The act of torture can be difficult to conceptualize especially when considering the time period in which this particular torture was occurring. The European Convention on Human Rights states that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”¹³ Another definition of torture is, “the infliction of severe bodily pain, as punishment or a means of persuasion.”¹⁴ The conceptualization of torture will be referenced when discussing the effectiveness of such practices.

The British perceptions of the Mau Mau and their supposed leader Kenyatta were negative to say the least; “it saw both as unremitting evil, to be stamped out; Mau Mau had to be destroyed.”¹⁵ In order to control the Mau Mau and rumored supporters it was necessary to control and ensure that there were limited opportunities for rebelling. The first step was to create a scenario that warranted increase mechanisms of control. In October of 1952, a state of emergency was declared after violence continued to rise in Nairobi and a supporter of British colonialism, Senior Chief Waruhi was assassinated.¹⁶ This state of emergency marks the beginning of increasing use of violence against Mau Mau, their supporters, and the indigenous population as a whole.

The state of emergency was in response to attacks against white settlers as well as individuals believed to be British supporters, regardless of color. Such an emergency can be used to restrict the movement of people and allow the British government to increase their presence and power within the country. The emergency also prohibited all African political

¹³ European Court on Human Rights, 1950. 6

¹⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, 2016

¹⁵ Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 250

¹⁶ Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press

organizations.¹⁷ From here there were several actions that took place across the country and often occurred simultaneously, such actions include screenings, mass deportations/villagisation, and the creating of detention camps. Within each of these are evidence of torture in order to obtain information about the Mau Mau so that the British could stop the rebellion.

Screenings

It is interesting to note that the indigenous peoples, more specifically the Kikuyu do not have a translation for the term screening. This is because there is no word in their language that fully captures the experiences and actions in regards to the screenings that took place.¹⁸

Screenings took place across the country as a way to collect information about the Mau Mau in regards to the oath, who was involved, and how they gathered their resources. Oathing was a ceremony wherein individuals pledged their support for the cause and promised not to reveal its secrets.¹⁹

There were several groups of individuals that were involved in the screening process, including but not limited to settlers, British District officials, and African loyalists²⁰. The involvement of such a variety of individuals highlights the complexity of the conflict in Kenya; it was not simply British colonialists versus indigenous peoples. Having African loyalists made screenings and the identification of Mau Mau possible. Screenings could take place in government approved screening centers such as Bahati or Subukia or in illegal centers that were

¹⁷ Wa-Githumo, Mwangi. 1991. The Truth about the Mau Mau: The Most Popular Uprising in Kenya. *Transafrican Journal of History*

¹⁸ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company

¹⁹ It was also thought to be bad luck to reveal the secrets of the Mau Mau oath and one could be punished or killed for telling the secrets.

²⁰ Bennett, Huw. 2011. "Soldiers in the Court Room: The British Army's Part in the Kenya Emergency Under the Legal Spotlight." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*.

not government controlled and thus less restricted in what could be done in those particular places. There were also screening parades where loyalists, covered in sacks (gakunia)²¹, selected suspected Mau Mau and Mau May supporters to be screened as they were paraded by the group.

In the beginning the individuals accused of being Mau Mau or Mau Mau supporters were brought forth before a committee of local men and women who would question them to determine whether or not they had taken an oath. This committee would interrogate the suspected individual and they were able to subject said individual to fines, imprisonment, or removal from their job.²²As the British began to lose control, the interrogations and subsequent actions became more violent. Individuals were whipped, burned, mutilated, and from one woman's firsthand account, "women used to have banana leaves and flowers inserted into their vaginas and rectums, as well as have their breasts squeezed with a pair of pliers...even men had their testicles squeezed with pliers..."²³ No one escaped screenings and being found to not support the Mau Mau did not absolve anyone from screenings or from being tortured.

Mass Deportation/Villagisation

Torture was also a mechanism utilized during the mass deportation and villagisation of civilians. The mass deportations were the first assault aimed directly at the civilian population thought to be Mau Mau supporters. Many of the indigenous peoples lived outside reserves in loosely tied groups or tribes. It would be easy to provide the Mau Mau hiding in the forests with resources and weapons because they were not limited in their living spaces. Therefore, it was

²¹ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company

²² Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company

²³ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 68

believed that if the civilians were relocated to villages within reserves and within defined spaces, they would not be able to help the Mau Mau.

In 1954, the War Council decided to mandate forced villagisation wherein civilians would be relocated to specific districts or villages²⁴. The villages that civilians were forced into had no shelters, food, or access to supplies and were often surrounded by barbed wire in order to keep people contained.²⁵ This was reminiscent of previous attempts by the British to corral people and maintain them within one area. Violence in the villages occurred often at the hands of the Home Guards.

The Home Guards were Africans loyal to the British which meant that the violence perpetuated at their hands was personal in nature. The individuals in the Home Guard would be willingly violent against their neighbors and individuals they had some familiarity with. Furthermore, the majority of the violence in the villages were aimed at women regardless of age. During this time there were numerous gang rapes and several incidents of brutalization against women. “Mothers and daughters were sometimes raped together in the same hut by white and black members of the security forces. At gun point other were given the choice between death and rape.”²⁶

Detention Camps

The British also set up camps that allowed them to further screen and interrogate suspected Mau Mau and their supporters. There were different types of camps such as work

²⁴ Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press

²⁵ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company

²⁶ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 247

camps (44), holding camps (2), special detention camps (7), exile camps (4), and women and juvenile camps (2). The level of cooperation of an individual in conjunction with their ethnicity and district of origin would dictate which of the camps they would be sent to.

There were two types of camps, relief camps and work camps. The relief camps were used to support the Swynnerton Plan. The Swynnerton Plan was a way to improve farming throughout Kenya because it was believed that Africans were not capable of taking care of the land.²⁷ In order to adequately preparing the land to British standards, individuals in reserves and working camps were used for free labor.

The work camps, on the other hand, were overtly punitive. An individual describes the process of entering the holding camp, Manyani; “The askaris on either side were beating us with batons as we passes between them...”²⁸ The more punitive camps were used to control the Mau Mau while also trying to ensure the continued stronghold by the British.

Effectiveness of Torture

A discussion regarding the effectiveness of torture in Kenya is difficult and this difficulty is attributed to how effectiveness is conceptualized. Depending how on effectiveness is defined and the supposed purposes of the use of torture one could argue that torture was both effective and ineffective in Kenya. If the purpose of torture was to continue imperialist control of Kenya and stopping the Mau Mau rebellion, then it could be suggested that torture was effective. Some Mau Mau who were tortured gave up important information. Furthermore, relocating civilians and suspected supporters certainly cut off the supply lines for the Mau May hiding in the forest.

²⁷ Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau from Below*. Athens: Ohio University Press

²⁸ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 134

Torture was also ineffective in that the British eventually lost control of Kenya and they were unable to civilize the people to their standards and expectations. The British had to leave Kenya because of the response to the Hola massacre and the fact that they would not be able to continue their abusive practices. As previously mentioned torture and the mass deportation and detention camps help formally end the Mau Mau uprising. What is interesting is that within the detention camps the Mau Mau still worked together to survive and maintain their oaths (if one was taken). So within the detention camps and less often the reserves there remained an informal organization of Mau Mau.

The use of torture was effective until it wasn't and it created an event that forced the British to leave Kenya, the Hola Massacre. The Hola massacre occurred in March of 1959. Reports by British authorities suggested that some detainees at the Hola camp had died due to drinking contaminated water. This excuse was accepted even by those who were openly speaking out against what was occurring in Kenya. This sets off a change reaction where those speaking out called for formal government investigations and for individuals to be held responsible for the incidents at Hola after was later revealed that the deceased detainees were actually violently killed. The empire in Kenya was undone not by a simple decision to leave but by the atrocities committed within it.²⁹

Responses to Torture

There seemed to be little concern from British leaders in Britain about the use of torture in Kenya. "Prime Minister Churchill, and later Eden and Macmillian, as well as the colonial secretary and his men on the spot, were willing to accept the use of brute force and systemized

²⁹ Carruthers, Susan. 2005. Being Beastly to the Mau Mau. *Twentieth Century British History*, 16(4)

violence to save civilization in Britain's far-flung corners of the world."³⁰ If it meant preserving the integrity of the British colony in Kenya, it was acceptable to use torture and other abuses.

Perhaps what is the most intriguing aspect of this conflict is that the British essentially created the Mau Mau. They created a group that was deemed a threat to the British government while simultaneously describing them in a matter that advocated for British control through any means necessary including but not limited to torture. Blundell was a member of the war council and the Minister without Portfolio to Kenya. In a speech to the Royal Empire Society and the Royal African Society in November 1954 he states, "there is, of course, an element of atavism and also an element of tribalism in the Mau Mau movement" and he continues by stating he would tell the Kikuyu people that "unless you co-operate with the Government you will lose the benefits of civilization."³¹

Conclusion

Colonialization of African states was occurring prior to the British colonialization of Kenya. Although the British were able to control resources and create trade routes throughout the country, it was not an area that was willingly controlled in the mid-1900s. That being said, the rebellion by a faction of the Kikuyu created further tensions within the state. This rebellion led the British to engage in acts of torture in order to maintain their colonial rule over Kenya. The use of torture is well documented in exchanges between British leaders and is corroborated by the victims themselves. Although the use of torture was not effective at keeping Kenya under imperialist British rule, it did impact the stability of the country in a way that allowed a similar

³⁰ Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York : Henry Holt and Company, 352

³¹ Blundell, Michael. 1995. "The Present Situation in Kenya." *African Affairs*, 101

system to come into place that had characteristics of the British Empire but presented in a different image. “In the end, the fruits of freedom were going to be divided between Kenyatta’s emerging oligarchy, the loyalists, and those settlers who remained in Kenya. It was a scenario that the British colonial government had fantasized about for years, albeit with a slight twist.”³²

³² Elkins, Caroline. 2005. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 361

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