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Book Review

Sub-Saharan Africa

David Anderson. *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: W. W. Norton. 2005. Pp. viii, 406. \$25.95.

Caroline Elkins. *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt. 2005. Pp. xvi, 475. \$27.50.

Mau Mau, the colloquial term for the 1950s armed uprising by poor and landless Kikuyu against the British settler regime in Kenya and its more prosperous Kikuyu allies, has captivated the imagination of Westerners and Kenyans alike for the last fifty years. The naked brutality of the Mau Mau war, known at the time as the Mau Mau emergency, and the British crackdown that followed produced a shock to Western sensibilities that still reverberates. The fratricidal nature of the conflict, which pitted Kikuyu against Kikuyu, also continues to influence contemporary Kenyan politics and culture profoundly. Although precise figures are not available, Mau Mau is almost certainly one of the most written-about events in twentieth-century African history. **1**

These works by David Anderson and Caroline Elkins are the most recent contributions to the substantial historiography of Mau Mau. A non-Africanist, or even a non-Kenyanist, might reasonably enquire why we need more Mau Mau books. Simply put, we still do not fully understand the origins, nature, trajectory, and legacy of the Emergency. The British administration and the postcolonial Kenyan government willfully destroyed or locked away sensitive Mau Mau-related records to cover up the most brutal and embarrassing aspects of the war. Colonial officials burned pages and pages of documents on the eve of independence in 1963 and sent three hundred boxes of material (which measured over one hundred feet long when stacked end to end) covering intelligence reports, collective punishments, and detentions back to London, where they remain sealed. Files in Britain's Public Records Office show that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pretended not to know the location of these vital documents when the Kenyan government asked for them back in 1967. Historians have therefore had to work with frustratingly limited and fragmentary evidence in trying to understand the Emergency. The slow dribble of new information over the last fifty years has necessarily required revisions in the history of Mau Mau. **2**

Anderson's book is based on new evidence consisting of court records of the capital trials of roughly three thousand alleged Mau Mau supporters. Chillingly, 1,090 of these men went to the gallows, which was twice the number of rebels that the French executed in Algeria. This rich legal trove, which sat largely unnoticed in the Kenya National Archives, consists of court transcripts, witness statements, confessions, and pleas for clemency. Anderson's stated goal is to use the new legal evidence as the nucleus of a new "informed and candid general history of the survey of the Mau Mau war" (p. 395). In an unflinching indictment of the colonial legal system, he documents how the Kenyan authorities perverted British standards of justice by changing the rules of evidence, coaching witnesses, rigging trials, and broadening the range of capital offenses to include mere association with the Mau Mau. Although the book is centered on the courtroom, Anderson skillfully broadens **3**

his narrative analysis to provide new and important perspectives on the entire war. His is the arresting story of a "dirty war" where the true allegiances of the combatants were fuzzy and ill defined and where people on both sides committed atrocities.

Mau Mau scholars and general readers do indeed have a great deal to learn from Anderson's book. The brilliant chapter on the infamous "Lari massacre" is its high point. This chapter masterfully complicates the conventional explanation of Mau Mau as a straightforward anticolonial struggle by illustrating how one half of the Lari community turned on the other over intensely bitter conflicts around land and authority. Anderson also provides a much-needed corrective to popular accounts of the Emergency, which focus on the numerous Mau Mau "generals" and "field marshals" who claimed leadership of the revolt. These men are largely remembered as heroes in contemporary Kenya, but our fixation on them makes the Mau Mau forces appear like a comic opera army with more colonels than corporals. Anderson uses legal records to recover the role of Mau Mau subalterns, most of whom died at the end of a rope, who were "ordinary foot soldiers," food carriers, couriers, recruiters, oathers, fundraisers, assassins, and enforcers. Conversely, he also shows that some of the men who went to the gallows were intimidated or even press-ganged into taking up arms. **4**

Where court records underpin Anderson's study, Caroline Elkins's book is based primarily on six hundred hours of interviews with three hundred Kenyans who were detained and brutalized by the colonial government for their alleged association with Mau Mau. Faced with the impossible task of determining which Kikuyu they could trust, colonial authorities used the State of Emergency to justify the wholesale extralegal imprisonment of over one hundred thousand men, women, and children. Elkins balances her first-person accounts with a thorough reading of the available colonial archives and an impressive survey of the established literature. Although she opens with the curious statement that she intended to write a history of the "success of Britain's civilizing mission in the detention camps" (p. xii), her book charges British settlers, policemen, soldiers, and administrators with creating a colonial gulag that was intended to punish, if not wipe out, the entire Kikuyu population. **5**

This charge is sensational, but Elkins's book does indeed make a significant contribution to our understanding of Mau Mau. That the Kenyan security forces and prison staff were guilty of atrocities is well known, but Elkins is the first to tell the personal stories of their victims. Chillingly, she also has interviews with surviving European settlers and policemen, most of whom are not cited by name, who acknowledge, in one case cheerfully, that they tortured and murdered Mau Mau suspects. The almost unimaginable catalogue of horrors endured by Elkins's African informants included beating, burning, electric shock, rape, castration, facial disfigurement, and sexual violation. These accounts are difficult to get through, but the book commands the attention of the new generation of imperial apologists who have sought to rehabilitate imperialism by painting the British Empire in rosy colors. **6**

Unfortunately, there are places where this book's conclusions are not as impressive as the depth and breadth of its evidence. Elkins charges that the settlers and colonial regime had a hidden agenda that inspired "a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people" (p. xvi) She tries to substantiate this in part by using 1948 and 1962 census figures to show that the Kikuyu population grew more slowly than neighboring ethnic groups. She suggests that the "missing" 130,000 to 300,000 people were either killed during Mau Mau or were not born because of the wholesale devastation of the Kikuyu heartland. Elkins explicitly equates this to the Holocaust by comparing Mau Mau supporters to Jews, Armenians, and Tutsis, a link she defends with quotes from contemporary anticolonial critics in Britain and Kenya who likened the Mau Mau detention camps to concentration camps. But the use of Nazi comparisons by British politicians, missionaries, and journalists to criticize the colonial regime does not prove that Kenyan officials and settlers were seeking to emulate the Nazis. After all, many of the rootless Kikuyu young men in Nairobi who became the backbone of the Mau Mau called themselves "young Hitlers" to demonstrate their toughness. Elkins is right to try to explain how citizens of a liberal nation could behave so brutally, but if there was a British Sonderweg or peculiar path that led to the horrors of the Mau Mau detention system, surely it ran through the Boer War concentration camps (which Elkins barely mentions) and the Malaya strategic villages rather than the Nazi death camps or Stalin's gulags? **7**

To her credit, Elkins is a passionate advocate for her informants, but her failure to fully contextualize their testimonies paints an often simplistic view of Kikuyu society that glosses over Mau Mau's intensely internecine nature. For Elkins, Mau Mau was a war between the heroic Kikuyu majority and a small clique of self-interested, chiefly collaborators known as the "loyalists." In reality, many, if not most, Kikuyu faced execution or detention if they sided with Mau Mau or intimidation and murder by the guerillas if they did not. Some were loyalists by day and Mau Mau by night. Elkins refers to these people as "double agents" and accepts their story that they were true supporters of the rebellion all along. Yet in modern Kenya, where the Mau Mau are now largely remembered as nationalist heroes, very few survivors of the era will admit to being loyalists. Even more troubling, Elkins does not fully discuss her supporting role in the BBC documentary "White Terror" (2002), which contributed to a London law firm's efforts to win reparations for the victims of the British security services. It is not difficult to imagine how the prospect of financial compensation which, according to the BBC, could amount to hundreds of thousands of pounds, might influence the memories of Elkins's informants. **8**

Both of these books broaden our understanding of the Mau Mau war significantly, and it is inevitable that they will be read together and compared. Although Anderson and Elkins clearly have different agendas, their vastly different conclusions stem primarily from the strengths and limitations of their evidence. Elkins's open embrace of the Mau Mau cause appears to come from her genuine compassion for her informants, but this empathy has brought her perilously close to advocacy. Anderson, conversely, seems to have intentionally steered clear of oral history in favor of the more fixed legal records, despite the fact his epilogue shows that he spoke with some of the Lari survivors. His book may well replace Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham's classic *The Myth of "Mau Mau": Nationalism in Kenya* (1966) as the seminal history of Mau Mau. **9**

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