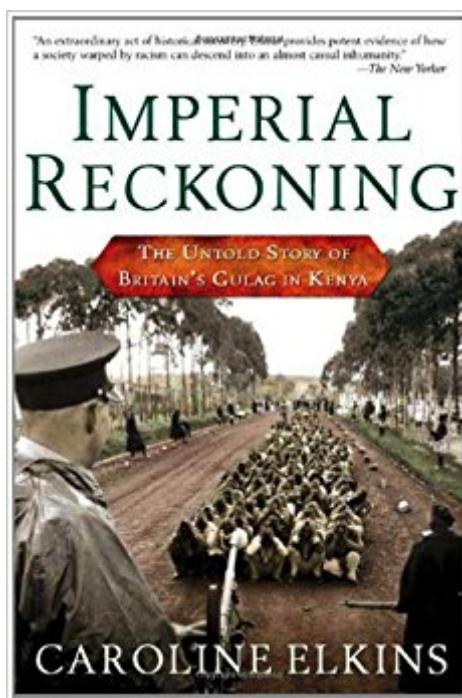


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# Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story Of Britain's Gulag In Kenya



## **Synopsis**

A major work of history that for the first time reveals the violence and terror at the heart of Britain's civilizing mission in Kenya. As part of the Allied forces, thousands of Kenyans fought alongside the British in World War II. But just a few years after the defeat of Hitler, the British colonial government detained nearly the entire population of Kenya's largest ethnic minority, the Kikuyu—some one and a half million people. The compelling story of the system of prisons and work camps where thousands met their deaths has remained largely untold—the victim of a determined effort by the British to destroy all official records of their attempts to stop the Mau Mau uprising, the Kikuyu people's ultimately successful bid for Kenyan independence. Caroline Elkins, an assistant professor of history at Harvard University, spent a decade in London, Nairobi, and the Kenyan countryside interviewing hundreds of Kikuyu men and women who survived the British camps, as well as the British and African loyalists who detained them. The result is an unforgettable account of the unraveling of the British colonial empire in Kenya—a pivotal moment in twentieth-century history with chilling parallels to America's own imperial project. *Imperial Reckoning* is the winner of the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Forty years after Kenyan independence from Britain, the words "Mau Mau" still conjure images of crazed savages hacking up hapless white settlers with machetes. The British Colonial Office, struggling to preserve its far-flung empire of dependencies after World War II, spread hysteria about Kenya's Mau Mau independence movement by depicting its supporters among the Kikuyu people

as irrational terrorists and monsters. Caroline Elkins, a historian at Harvard University, has done a masterful job setting the record straight in her epic investigation, *Imperial Reckoning*. After years of research in London and Kenya, including interviews with hundreds of Kenyans, settlers, and former British officials, Elkins has written the first book about the eight-year British war against the Mau Mau. She concludes that the war, one of the bloodiest and most protracted decolonization struggles of the past century, was anything but the "civilizing mission" portrayed by British propagandists and settlers. Instead, Britain engaged in an amazingly brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing that seemed to border on outright genocide. While only 32 white settlers were killed by Mau Mau insurgents, Elkins reports that tens of thousands of Kenyans were slaughtered, perhaps up to 300,000. The British also interned the entire 1.5 million population of Kikuyu, the colony's largest ethnic group, in barbed-wire villages, forced-labour reserves where famine and disease ran rampant, and prison camps that Elkins describes as the Kenyan "Gulag." The Kikuyu were subjected to unimaginable torture, or "screening," as British officials called it, which included being whipped, beaten, sodomized, castrated, burned, and forced to eat feces and drink urine. British officials later destroyed almost all official records of the campaign. Elkins infuses her account with the riveting stories of individual Kikuyu detainees, settlers, British officials, and soldiers. This is a stunning narrative that finally sheds light on a misunderstood war for which no one has yet been held officially accountable. --Alex Roslin

In a major historical study, Elkins, an assistant professor of history at Harvard, relates the gruesome, little-known story of the mass internment and murder of thousands of Kenyans at the hands of the British in the last years of imperial rule. Beginning with a trenchant account of British colonial enterprise in Kenya, Elkins charts white supremacy's impact on Kenya's largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, and the radicalization of a Kikuyu faction sworn by tribal oath to extremism known as Mau Mau. Elkins recounts how in the late 1940s horrific Mau Mau murders of white settlers on their isolated farms led the British government to declare a state of emergency that lasted until 1960, legitimating a decade-long assault on the Kikuyu. First, the British blatantly rigged the trial of and imprisoned the moderate leader Jomo Kenyatta (later Kenya's first postindependence prime minister). Beginning in 1953, they deported or detained 1.4 million Kikuyu, who were systematically "screened," and in many cases tortured, to determine the extent of their Mau Mau sympathies. Having combed public archives in London and Kenya and conducted extensive interviews with both Kikuyu survivors and settlers, Elkins exposes the hypocrisy of Britain's supposed colonial "civilizing mission" and its subsequent coverups. A profoundly chilling

portrait of the inherent racism and violence of "colonial logic," Elkins's account was also the subject of a 2002 BBC documentary entitled Kenya: White Terror. Her superbly written and impassioned book deserves the widest possible readership. B&w photos, maps. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

I found this account of how Britain handled the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya eye-opening and tragic. The author gives a good historical background to the revolt, although she is too sympathetic to the Kikuyu custom of female genital mutilation. Faced with an uprising, the British adopted many of the techniques used by the Japanese in their POW camps. While the Japanese were rightly condemned, the British covered up their misdeeds, with authority from the Governor and the Colonial Secretary. If nothing else, this book shatters the myth of the "benevolent" White Imperialist.

I grew up in Kenya in Kikuyu and I always heard stories from my grandmother and great grandmother how horrible the British were, but I was young and had no idea how bad it was for our grandparents who survived the colonial period. I wept for my grandparents when I read this book, its unimaginable how cruel and sadistic the British colonial masters were. What's even more sad is that some of the same cruel colonialists still live in Kenya today since not all the settlers moved away after independence. The majority of settlers moved to Rhodesia and South Africa after independence but a large number of them remained and still occupy vast tracts of prime land in a free, independent and democratic Kenya to this date. There is no statute of limitations for murder and I hope that in the near future we will be able to track down any settler still living in Kenya who is guilty of murder and torture of Africans and make them pay for their past sins. I for one don't think they should be living a life of luxury in Kenya when they have the blood of so many on their hands. I intend to use my meager resources to find them, expose them and hope that one day they face justice.

This is an amazing book, that should be a recommended reading in every high school. The story of the mau-mau was something I did not know a lot about, and this book was an eye-opener. Caroline Elkins has done a great job in thoroughly researching what many wanted buried forever, and bringing out all the sadism and savagery in vivid detail. One of the best books I have read, ever.

The book, while highlighting a tragic chapter in the history of the Kenyan people as well as the horrific consequences of a paternalistic British colonialism, feels long. This book presents fact after

fact connected to the brutal colonial policy of the British in Kenya. I can't think of one example of "benevolent colonialism" and how the British ruled in Kenya will make you sick. How the British could on one hand demonize the Nazi camps in WW2 yet turn around and brutally treat the Kenyan people is mind boggling. While the Mau Mau movement certainly acted in brutal ways at times, it's hard to know what really came first... Mau Mau brutality or British brutality. That said, the book feels a bit long. Imagine trying to hold your breath underwater for a long period of time. At some point you have to come up to breathe. When fact after fact of brutality is recollected it seems like it has no end. At many points I had to put the book down because it was just too much. The research done seems top notch but the point was made by chapter 3 or 4. I read this book in preparation for a trip to Kenya this summer. It does give me some modern day historical background that will help in relating to the Kenyan people.

This is a difficult book to read, for this soft hearted retired nurse. I expected better from our friends the Brits. This gulag was a hell hole for the natives contained in it. Even before they got to the gulag they were beaten and killed, while they were being processed to determine whether or not they had taken the Mau Mau oath. The British rulers were having to deal with Mau Mau and their attacks on the white settlers in Kenya. But every native was not a Mau Mau. Terror on the part of the Brits because they knew the capabilities Mau Mau created brutality and this book pretty well spells it out. Could the Brits have done what they did without resorting to violence? I won't even try to answer that.

This was an excellent book. It goes to show that what we were fed in the news media at the time was mostly rubbish. That none of these people were held to account is terrible. The British went there, kicked the local people off their land and took it over. The cruelty inflicted on the locals is appalling. I know British people who were there at the time. I will certainly look at them with a different attitude. And then there were the religious missionaries who said nothing. What would you expect.

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