



# Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya

By Caroline Elkins

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**Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya** By Caroline Elkins

**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.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Amazon.com Review**

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*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

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.

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### **From [The New Yorker](#)**

When the British left Kenya in 1963, they built bonfires and burned the meticulous records they kept. Most of these dealt with a period known as "the Emergency," when the colonial government attempted to stamp out the Mau Mau movement—an inchoate drive for "land and freedom," notorious for its machete killings—that arose among the Kikuyu, a hill-dwelling farming tribe and Kenya's largest ethnic group. Elkins, working in archives and traveling throughout Kenya, has undertaken an extraordinary act of historical recovery, to find out what the burned documents would have told us: the British, in their "civilizing mission" to pacify the colony, created a cruel system of detention centers, where interrogations often ended in death. With the moral fervor (and, occasionally, the overreachings) of a prosecutor, Elkins provides potent evidence of how a society warped by racism can descend into an almost casual inhumanity.

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