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978-0-521-13090-5 - Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization

Daniel Branch

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Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya

Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization

This book details the devastating Mau Mau civil war fought in Kenya during the 1950s and the legacies of that conflict for the post-colonial state. There were as many Kikuyu who fought with the colonial government as there were loyalists who joined the Mau Mau rebellion. Focusing on the role of those loyalists, the book examines the ways in which residents of the country's Central Highlands sought to navigate a path through the bloodshed and uncertainty of civil war. It explores the instrumental use of violence, changes to allegiances, and the ways in which cleavages created by the war informed local politics for decades after the conflict's conclusion. Moreover, the book moves toward a more nuanced understanding of the realities and effects of counterinsurgency warfare. Based on archival research in Kenya and the United Kingdom and insights from literature from across the social sciences, the book reconstructs the dilemmas facing members of a society at war with itself and its colonial ruler.

Daniel Branch is currently Assistant Professor in African History at the University of Warwick. Previously, he taught at the University of Exeter and was a Fellow of the Macmillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. His articles have appeared in a number of journals, including *African Affairs*, the *Journal of African History*, *Africa Today*, and the *Review of African Political Economy*. He is currently working on two forthcoming book projects and is co-editing (with Nicholas Cheeseman) a volume on Kenyan politics since 1950.

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*Counterinsurgency, Civil War,
and Decolonization*

DANIEL BRANCH

University of Warwick



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For my parents

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In times of peace and prosperity, both cities and individuals can have lofty ideals because they have not fallen before the force of overwhelming necessity. War, however, which robs us of our daily needs, is a harsh teacher and absorbs most people's passions in the here and now.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 3.81.5.

*'Now', I said, 'there is no need for you to speak,
You filthy traitor; for now, and to your shame,
I will take back a true report of you.'*

Dante, *Inferno*, XXXII 109

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Preface

‘Contemporary history,’ writes Eric Hobsbawm, ‘is useless unless it allows emotion to be recollected in tranquillity.’¹ Unfortunately, tranquillity has not been a luxury afforded to this book. The research and writing of it has coincided with a tremendous reawakening of the public memory in Kenya and Britain of the Mau Mau war of 1952–1960. The history of the anti-colonial rebellion was largely silenced in national debate in Kenya during the presidencies of Jomo Kenyatta (1963–1978) and Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002).² The war was too contradictory to be claimed by the new nation-state as one of national liberation after independence in 1963. Lacking a clearly defined nationalist ideology and restricted to the hills of the Kikuyu-dominated Central Province, the Mau Mau insurgents were not explicitly national in either intellectual or operational scope. Furthermore, those who clung to the memory of the insurgency as a tool of political mobilisation after 1963 were those unwelcome in the state institutions of post-colonial Kenya: the poor, the landless, and the opponents of the capitalist development path followed by successive post-colonial regimes. Most significantly, the war was not the neat conflict of the nationalist imagination.³

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Could It Have Been Different?’ *London Review of Books* 28 (2006).

² Marshall Clough, ‘Mau Mau and the Contest for Memory,’ in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003).

³ Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo, ‘*Matunda ya Uhuru*, Fruits of Independence: Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya,’ in *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority and Narration*, eds. Elisha Stephen Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (Oxford, 2003).

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The war did not simply pit oppressive British forces against noble Kenyan nationalist rebels. Instead, it took the form of a civil war within Kikuyu society as so-called loyalists from among that community forged alliances with the colonial government and turned on their fellow Kikuyu Mau Mau within the ranks of the insurgency. As many Kikuyu fought with the colonial government as did those against it. It was the success of that process of alliance-building that allowed some of these loyalists to assume key positions of power within the state before and after the British departure. And it was the post-independence presence of these loyalists within the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), the civil service, the boardrooms of the private sector, and Kenyatta's inner circle of advisers that required Mau Mau to be buried as a subject for public discussion. Precisely because of this attempt to silence an inconvenient past, the history of the Mau Mau war became embraced by opposition figures after independence. Politicians, novelists, academics, and pro-democracy activists turned to an ever more stylised and heroic Mau Mau to critique the elitist focus of Kenyatta and Moi. In the rebellion's history, these critics found a mirror to hold up against the growing prevalence of official corruption and the declining opportunities to express discontent within formal political institutions. Within this alternative and politicised rendering of the past, loyalists were represented as colonial quislings and the betrayers of the nation.

It is no surprise, therefore, that what appeared at the time to be a triumph for the forces for democracy in 2002, at which point KANU were removed from power, was accompanied by an explosion of interest in the Mau Mau war. Although the government of Mwai Kibaki proved to be no more interested in promoting democracy and ending corruption than its predecessors, it enthusiastically supported this rediscovery of the past.⁴ For example, a task force was formed to investigate the viability of a truth and reconciliation commission to examine crimes committed by the state during the colonial and post-colonial period. The group's findings, though, were largely ignored.⁵ At times, this effort by the state has assumed the form of farce. In 2003, for example, senior figures within the government were happy to welcome to Kenya Lemna Ayamu, an Ethiopian farmer claimed by two Kenyan journalists to be another of

⁴ Parselelo Kantai, 'Death of the Kenya Dream?' *East African*, 31 July 2006.

⁵ Government of Kenya, *Report of the Task Force on the Establishment of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission* (Nairobi, 2003).

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Mau Mau's leaders, Stanley Mathenge.⁶ Mathenge was, in Mau Mau's mythology, claimed to have fled north to independent Ethiopia during the war to escape the British. Most likely, he died like thousands of his followers, in the forests of Central Kenya. Needless to say, once the hoax was exposed shortly after the arrival of Ayumu in Nairobi in mid-2003, the government quickly washed its hands of the affair. Other efforts by the government to encourage Mau Mau's renaissance were of far greater significance and longevity. Between 2003 and 2007, the government legalised the Mau Mau organisation itself and assisted efforts by victims of atrocities committed in colonial detention camps to seek compensation from the British government.⁷ A statue of Dedan Kimathi, unveiled with great ceremony, was erected in 2007 by the government in downtown Nairobi.⁸

The politics of this reclaiming of Mau Mau by the state is only now becoming apparent. Although billed as a democratisation of the past, more instrumental motives can be identified on the part of the government. First, mirroring Kenyatta's consolidation of power within an inner circle of advisers from his own Kiambu district, Kibaki swiftly became reliant on what is often termed a 'Mount Kenya mafia' of key supporters. Reminding Kenyans more generally of a presumed debt to Central Kenya derived from the sacrifices Mau Mau supporters made for independence served as a crude ideological justification for this regionalisation of power. Second, celebrating Mau Mau's memory was also an attempt to snatch the legacy of the rebellion from the group known as Mungiki, part criminal gang, part Kikuyu cultural revival movement, and part private political army. Mungiki, which means 'multitude' in the Kikuyu language, is a group made up of discontented, unemployed youth from Nairobi and the towns of the Central Highlands. Mungiki has periodically clashed with state security forces, resulting in significant fatalities. The group's leaders see in Mau Mau a precedent for violent protest against the Kikuyu elite who have failed to redistribute wealth and opportunity among the ethnic community the Kikuyu elite claim authority

⁶ Mburu Mwangi & Tigist Kassa, 'The Puzzle Remains as 'Gen Mathenge' Comes Home,' *Daily Nation*, 31 May 2003.

⁷ Chris McGreal, 'Mau Mau Veterans to Sue Britain Over Torture and Illegal Killings in Kenya,' *The Guardian*, 6 October 2006.

⁸ Wanyiri Kihoro, 'Kimathi's Battle for Recognition Finally Won,' *The Standard*, 14 March 2007.

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over.⁹ By appropriating the legacy of Mau Mau, leading figures within the government sought to delegitimise Mungiki, thus participating in a broader effort to retain Kikuyu support for Kibaki's government and to silence the intense class tensions that have marked the politics of the Central Highlands over the past century.

Within this new wave of public memorialisation of the conflict, the role of loyalists has once again been silenced. Mau Mau has finally become the war of national liberation, as foreseen at independence by Mazrui, with the contradictions of such a representation simply ignored.¹⁰ The public depiction of the war now matches that held privately by many in Kenya. Although what follows here overwhelmingly relies on archival sources, memories of countless conversations with Kenyans held during the research and writing of this book between 2002 and 2007 will remain vivid for years to come. Whether in conversations with Mau Mau veterans, former loyalists, or the elderly relatives of friends, discussions about this research project principally took the form of stories of suffering, pride, and, above all, pain. Despite enthusiastically volunteering their most personal memories and opinions of the 1950s, few Kenyans outside of academic institutions agreed with the topic of this book. Nearly all, even former loyalists, thought it more important to record the memories of those who had fought the hardest against British colonialism and had lost the most as a result.

It was into this intensely charged political atmosphere that Caroline Elkins released her *Imperial Reckoning* – published in Britain as *Britain's Gulag* – in early 2005.¹¹ Echoing the nationalist representation of the Mau Mau war, Elkins focused on the British response to what she portrayed as unified Kikuyu insurgency. Loyalists were barely considered within the book. Elkins repeated claims of torture in detention camps, similar to those found in the voluminous number of memoirs written by Mau Mau veterans. However, she went further than even those authors by arguing Britain had overseen an 'incipient genocide'¹² that claimed

⁹ David Anderson, 'Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Kenya,' *African Affairs* 101 (2001); Peter Kagwanja, 'Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca? The Mungiki, Ethnic Violence and the Politics of the Moi Succession in Kenya, 1987–2002,' *African Affairs* 102 (2003).

¹⁰ Ali Mazrui, 'On Heroes and Uhuru-Worship,' *Transition* 11 (1963).

¹¹ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005).

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

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the lives of ‘perhaps hundreds of thousands.’¹³ Such allegations garnered much attention, and the book received a Pulitzer Prize in 2006. Among academics, the book has been less well received. The methodology behind some of the most contentious claims has been called into question.¹⁴ Moreover, respected figures from within the fields of imperial and African history have fiercely criticised Elkins’s arguments.¹⁵ The use by the Kibaki government of Elkins’s work as an intellectual prop during the reclaiming of Mau Mau’s history is an additional matter of concern. Although Elkins’s intentions have never been anything other than worthy, the wisdom of allowing her book’s launch in Nairobi to become an official event at which both the justice and constitutional affairs minister, Kiraitu Murungi, and vice-president, Moody Awori, spoke is questionable.¹⁶ Both were subsequently named in investigations into gross corruption overseen by the Kibaki regime and have proved to be among the president’s closest allies.¹⁷

The controversy created by Elkins has ensured tremendous interest in every setting at which the preliminary findings of this research project have been presented. The study of Mau Mau has benefited immeasurably from the interest of a talented cadre of scholars, from both Kenya and beyond. Few such tightly defined periods of time in the history of such a small area of the world can have been subjected to such intensive scrutiny as Kenya’s Central Highlands for the years between the end of World War II and independence in 1963. Historians, anthropologists, and political scientists have explored the roots of the Mau Mau insurgency within the colonial political economy of Kenya, detailed the movement’s members, described the events of the 1950s, and considered the tortured position of memories of the rebellion within the politics of the post-colonial state. To them, and particularly to David Anderson and John Lonsdale, I owe a tremendous intellectual debt. Yet, this book hopes to stimulate new lines of thinking about Mau Mau by placing

¹³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹⁴ John Blacker, ‘The Demography of Mau Mau: Fertility and Mortality in Kenya in the 1950s, a Demographer’s Viewpoint,’ *African Affairs* 106 (2007).

¹⁵ Susan Carruthers, ‘Being Beastly to the Mau Mau,’ *Twentieth Century British History* 16 (2005); Bethwell A. Ogot, ‘Britain’s Gulag,’ *Journal of African History* 46 (2005); Derek Peterson, ‘The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees,’ *Journal of African History* 48 (2008).

¹⁶ *The Nation*, ‘Kenya Wants Apology From UK Over Colonial Evils,’ 4 March 2005.

¹⁷ Andrew Teyie, ‘A Case to Answer,’ *The Standard*, 31 March 2006.

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the insurgents' indigenous opponents and the violence of the conflict at the heart of the analysis. It attempts to do so by engaging with literature concerned with similar events outside of Kenya.

The reception given to Elkins's book, and to that of David Anderson, whose *Histories of the Hanged*¹⁸ was published on the same day, has much to do with a revived interest in imperialism, detention, and torture. This trend can be attributed to the revelations of the treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib, the use of detention without trial at Guantánamo Bay, and the misadventures of the United States and Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan. Britain's experience in Kenya and during its other late colonial wars was proffered by both critics and supporters of American foreign policy variously as a warning or lesson from history on the conduct of counterinsurgency campaigns on the global periphery.¹⁹ Again driven by current events, similar figures have turned their attention to another related field of study. Over the past decade, civil war has emerged from the margins of academic research to assume a central position within the study of political violence in the modern world. But explaining these conflicts presents a very different challenge to scholars than explaining international war, which previously dominated the attention of social scientists. This book is underpinned by a belief, encouraged by the work of Stathis Kalyvas, that civil wars are defined by their ambiguity.²⁰ Definite divisions between combatants, such as that between loyalists and Mau Mau, are the product of these wars, not their catalysts.

This book was written and researched during political and academic firestorms that relate immediately to what is written herein. The arguments of the book attempt to engage directly with these current debates surrounding the questions of the place of the history of Mau Mau within Kenyan politics, the lessons of imperialism, the nature of contemporary warfare, and the dynamics of civil wars. The main purposes of the book are, first, to describe the ambiguity that characterised the war's early stages and to explain how from it the cleavage between Mau Mau supporters and loyalists emerged. The book then considers the significance

¹⁸ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London, 2005).

¹⁹ See, for example, Caroline Elkins, 'The Wrong Lesson,' *The Atlantic Monthly* 296 (2005); Michael Howard, 'What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism,' *Foreign Affairs* 81 (2002); John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2005).

²⁰ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2006).

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of violence as a force in directing the trajectory of the war. The final objective is to explore the legacies of the conflict.

Kenya after 1963, or at least its Central Highlands, needs to be understood as much as a post-conflict as a post-colonial society. The two great abstractions of modern African politics, the nation and the ethnic group, have been allowed to distract us from examining the fractious divides within Kikuyu society that were created in the 1950s and exist up to the present. Underpinning so much of political debate since, the divides of the Mau Mau war continue to resurface in contemporary affairs.

Any attempt to write about a civil war fought within living memory necessarily engages with memories of hard-won struggles and bitter loss, whether they be found in letters and reports in the archive or in the words and behaviour of informants. Trying to dispassionately peel back these layers of emotion to answer research questions formulated in distant offices is the biggest challenge facing any academic attempting to understand and explain civil war violence. Although that emotion is unquestionably more immediate and all-enveloping while conflicts are still raging or have only recently concluded, 50 years is clearly insufficient time for it to have dissipated. Whether Hobsbawm was right to argue that renders what follows as useless is for the reader to decide.

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FIGURE 1. Map of Kenya.