Who authored the atrocities linked with the Mau Mau? How did Mau Mau, which began as an armed movement against settler power in the White Highlands of Kenya, turn into a civil war among the Kikuyu of the Central Province? The Mau Mau killed only 32 white settlers. “More European civilians would die in road traffic accidents between 1952 and 1960,” notes Anderson. Other Mau Mau victims included some policemen, irregular soldiers and police and 1800 African civilians. The numbers explode when we come to count the Mau Mau dead. The official figure is that of 12,000. Anderson says it is “more than 20,000.” But Elkins presents a radical reappraisal of the counter-insurgency both in scale and human cost: “If the Kikuyu population figure in 1962 is adjusted using growth rates comparable to the other Africans, we find that somewhere between 130,000 and 300,000 Kikuyu are unaccounted for.” I now believe that there was in late colonial Kenya a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people.

The education of Caroline Elkins began in 1995 when she decided to write a doctoral dissertation on the 80,000 Mau Mau detainees during the 1952-58 Emergency. Knowing that three different departments had followed their track, she expected to find 240,000 files in the London archives – but found none. Even the Kenya archives yielded only a few hundred files.

The surviving records were duplicous. The daily average of 80,000 obscured the fact that the total detained was between 160,000 and 320,000. The systematic destruction and distortion of documentary evidence about the Mau Mau emergency was no doubt part of a continuing “state-imposed amnesia.”

To cut through it, Elkins set out in search of survivors of the Emergency. Her ambition was to shift the narrative from the Mau Mau to the British, and it succeeds spectacularly. In contrast, David Anderson’s History of the Hanged tells more conventional documentation, mainly 800 surviving testimonies of 800 who were hanged during the Emergency. Not surprisingly, his findings by and large confirm official claims of the number of Mau Mau killed.

Though it reads at times as a charge sheet, Imperial Reckoning offers more, including the voices of the victims. Yet, Elkins is unable to explain the outcome of the war: that the British were able to win the middle ground and impose a political settlement that isolated the Mau Mau. Because she writes a narrative with the conclusion very much in mind, Elkins weaves the narrative around the confrontation between militant groups, which is how the story ends but not how it begins. In the process, she loses conceptual sight of the middle ground. The great merit of Anderson’s political and social history of the Mau Mau war is that it focuses on the battle for the middle ground.

Both books need to be read together. If Elkins’ truly innovative oral research for the first time brings out the enormous scale and murderous consequences of the British counter-insurgency, its human cost, Anderson’s political acumen gives us the context necessary to reflect on the lessons of a counter-insurgency that succeeded in its own terms.

“Some of the most aristocratic immigrants ever to populate the British empire,” Kenyan settlers revelled in a life of “centrifugal leisure” – “sex, drugs, drink and dance, followed by more of the same” – driven by hedonism and the lash of the infamous kiboko, a whip made of rhinoceros hide. A battery of laws underwrote settler privilege at the expense of native lives: peasants were horded into officially-demarcated native reserves; administrative regulations forbade them to grow the most lucrative crops (coffee) and forced them to sell others (maize) to state marketing boards by marshalling compulsory communal labor to build terraces and check soil erosion. Kikuyu opinion was outraged.

If the battle of the peasantry in the reserves for land and for the defense of culture provided the ground for the development of moderate nationalism, it is the great historic battle that squatters waged against settler power for the right to live (land and freedom) that was the springboard of nationalism. Squatters came from among landless peasants. By 1940, they numbered 150,000; one in every eight Kikuyu was a “squatter” on a European farm, laboring for a third of the year in return for a plot to cultivate and permission to graze cattle.

The World War further altered the balance of forces on the Highlands by bringing material prosperity to settlers and political power to settler-dominated district councils. But it also thrust 75,000 peasants and squatters into the colonial army. When demobilized, many of them would provide leadership and men for the Mau Mau forest militiamen. For the moment, though, the initiatory lay with settler-dominated Councils, which used their new powers to revive annual squatter contracts to limit their access to land. As evictions began, squatters from over 400 farms attempted to strike but the 1947 strike failed. Over 100,000 squatters were forcibly “repatriated” between 1946 and 1952.

Squatters found it difficult to organize – except in one place, Olenguruone, where they dipped into traditional Kikuyu rituals for a greater unity. Taking an oath traditionally meant for male elders in times of crisis, they administered it to all: men, women and children. Some went on to step further, taking different oaths, each signifying a higher level of commitment. The oath-taking ceremony symbolized spiritual rebirth. Two of the most common 20th-century witch rituals were that of any enemy of our organization and fail to kill him, may this oath kill me,” and “If I reveal this oath to any European, may this oath kill me.” A Mau Mau was a Born-Again Kikuyu.

As evictions began and the oath reached the Kikuyu of Nairobi and central Kenya, it was taken as an expression of what was called Muhimu (Kiswahili for ‘significance’). Later to become the Mau Mau Central Organizing Committee, the militants of Muhimu were recruited from three different groups: trade unionists (Fred Kubai, Eliud Mutonyi, Charles Wambaa, John Mungai), ex-servicemen (Waruhinu Itoke – known as General China), and urban criminal gangs, particularly the ‘Forty Group’ (Mwangi Macharia, Stanley Mathenge).

Beginning with key trade unionists, selected criminals, Nairobi’s Kikuyu taxi drivers, the Muhimu mounted a membership drive and took over the leadership of KAU (except in Kiambu), going so far as to summon Kenyatta to Nairobi in early 1952 to threaten him with death should he not carry out Mau Mau directives. The colonial government estimated that the first oath had been taken by nearly 90% of the entire Kikuyu population of 1.5 million and that the seventh and final killing oath called the hatunji, had been taken by a good 10% by 1952.

Nairobi was a racialized city where police patrolled first European and then Asian quarters, leaving criminal gangs to control African shanties and housing estates. All Mau Mau had to do to control African areas was to penetrate criminal gangs. Further, as ethnic separation broke down in the cramped and repressive segregated living quarters of African Nairobi, Kikuyu militiamen began recruiting members of other ethnic groups, particularly the Kamba. With the prospect of Mau Mau turning into a multi-ethnic Kenyan insurgency, notes Elkins, “one of the British colonial government’s worst nightmares was becoming a reality.”

Mau Mau violence became prominent with the murder of Chief Waruhiu wa Kagum of Kiambu, the Paramount Chief of Central Province, on 9 October 1952. Eleven days later, Governor Baring declared a state of emergency in the colony. Anderson says the militants (Stanley Mathenge, Dedan Kimathi) fled to the forest as the moderates – including Kenyatta – awaited their fate. But more likely it was the political wing, moderate and militant, that was picked up as the military wing fled to the forest.

The British responded with the proclamation of an Emergency on 12 October 1952, first isolating the 20,000 Mau Mau fighters in the forest by cutting off their supply lines, to Nairobi and to the Kikuyu countryside, confronting them with a roughly equal force.

Both operations were inspired by precedent. Operation Anvil, which cordoned off the city of Kisumu by a sea of security-sector-by-sector porgy, was patterned on the “clean-up” of the then Palestinian city of Tel Aviv by the British military before the Second World War. Every Kikuyu who was not a Loyalist was treated as a confirmed
Though resistance to Mau Mau began with the churches, it is the Governor’s order of November 1952 that led to the reorganization of Kikuyu movements as a militia named the “Home Guard.” Henceforth, recruitment would be done by chiefs and headmen. That was the first step in the making of the civil war. The second step was taken by the Mau Mau when they targeted the Home Guards and their families.

The turning point came with the night of 26 March, 1953. In an eye-opening chapter, Anderson links the massacre to a history of colonial land appropriation which left its victims to haggle over a compensation which was neither fair nor comprehensive.

Mau Mau however much he or she confessed – were all killed. Those they perceived as belonging that would isolate the Mau Mau. And as court evidence.”

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Wars are fought with words as much as with weapons. If the point of weapons was to vanquish the enemy, the point of words was to rein in waverers and to isolate the enemy. British discourse on the Mau Mau ranged from the patronizing to the dehumanizing to the eliminationist. The patronizing discourse focused on the Mau Mau as a cultural aberration: the Kikuyu had either to convert to Christianity (as in J. C. Brotherson, The Psychology of the Mau Mau) or to return to genuine tradition (as in Louis Leaky, Defeating the Mau Mau).

The dehumanizing discourse was openly racist and painted the Mau Mau as "vermin" that a European be sacrificed in the manner a Kikuyu elder had been killed, buried alive in the ground. "And so, Grey Linekey, a cousin of Louis Leakey, was taken captive and led into the forests of Mount Kenya, high up on the mountain, where "he was buried alive and uprooted down in deep red soil." As gory stories of Mau Mau violence made the round, settlers rationalized their own violence as preventive.

A common theme among settlers and colonial officials contrasted ritual details of the oath and the bloody nature of Mau Mau killings with pangs, or machetes, with European notions of normal violence. Anderson comments instructively: "Here e to face. To kill in this way required com- mitment and determination. The European imagination found it difficult to understand how such attacks could be perpetrated un- less the killers were in some way possessed or controlled by dreadfull forces they could not defy."

Surely, the "Kikuyu who had taken the oath were no longer in their right minds; they had been transformed and bru- talized." In that case, how could their actions be explained by killer and victim were locked together, face any legitimate grievances, even if the grievances were otherwise acknowledged as real? Is it surprising that when Kenyatta tried to explain the nature of grievances that led to the Mau Mau, Judge Thacker simply shrugged it away: "Grievances have noth- ing whatever to do with Mau Mau and Mau Mau has nothing whatever to do with griev- ences."

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As Anderson notes, not only African nation- alism but white power too was on the march in Africa in the 1950s. The National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948, Rhodesia’s settlers amalgamated the two Rhodesias and Nyasaland into a federation in 1951, and Kenya’s settlers hoped for a federation of East Africa. All three projects unraveled, beginning in Kenya. If the great war shifted the locus of power from Lon- don to the settler state in Kenya, the Mau Mau shifted it right back to London. The arrival of General George Erskine a few weeks after Lari signaled the beginning of the demise of settler power. General Erskine was no friend of settlers, writing to his wife: "I hate the guts of them all, they are all middle-class slugs." One of his first orders asked the security forces to stop "beating up" the inhabitants of this country just be- cause they are the inhabitants." Politically astute, he recognized that Mau Mau would be contained if Kenya were purged of set- tier power: "in my opinion they want a new set of civil servants and some decent po- lice." That, in short, was the British agenda for an independent Kenya.

Unlike the French in Algeria, the Brit- ish succeeded in turning the anti-colonial and anti-settler struggle in the White High- lands into a civil war among the Kikuyu. This allowed them to win the middle ground and cap the Emergency with a political set- tlement led by Jomo Kenyatta who personi- fied that middle ground. It is worth mull- ing over Elkins’ account of the exchange between Governor Baring and President Kenyatta when the two met at State House, Nairobi, in October 1965:

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