British Colonial Atrocities

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Concentration camps and Britain's gulag

The Anglo-Boer War Concentration Camps (1900-1902)

The concentration camp was not invented by the Nazis. It was invented — or at least independently developed on a large scale — by the British Empire during the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa. When the guerrilla tactics of the Boer commandos proved impossible to defeat by conventional military means, the British commander Lord Kitchener adopted a scorched earth policy: Boer farms were burned, livestock slaughtered, and Boer civilians — primarily women and children — were herded into concentration camps, ostensibly for their own protection.

The camps were catastrophically mismanaged. Overcrowded, with inadequate food, contaminated water, and almost no medical care, they became death traps. Measles, typhoid, dysentery, and pneumonia swept through the camps. The mortality rate among children was particularly devastating. By the end of the war, approximately 26,000 Boer women and children had died in British concentration camps — a figure that scandalised international opinion and was exposed by the campaigner Emily Hobhouse, who visited the camps and published a devastating report.

What is less often noted — even in South African historiography — is that there were also separate concentration camps for Black Africans in the Anglo-Boer War. Approximately 115,000 Black Africans were held in these camps, in conditions even worse than those of the Boer camps. Approximately 20,000 Black Africans died in these camps. Their deaths received almost no attention at the time and remain largely unacknowledged in popular accounts of the war — a reflection of the racial hierarchy that governed whose suffering was counted and whose was not.

The Mau Mau Emergency: Britain's Gulag in Kenya (1952-1960)

Perhaps the most thoroughly documented British colonial atrocity in Africa is the suppression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s — an episode that the

British government attempted to conceal for decades and that was only fully exposed through the work of historians and a landmark court case in the 2010s.

The Mau Mau movement — formally the Kenya Land and Freedom Army — arose from the Kikuyu people's overwhelming grievance about land dispossession. The British settler colony in Kenya had taken the most fertile Kikuyu land for European farms, reducing the Kikuyu to labourers on land that had been their own. By the early 1950s, a militant wing of the independence movement had turned to armed resistance. The British declared a State of Emergency in October 1952 and responded with a campaign of detention, torture, and collective punishment that the historian Caroline Elkins, in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book Imperial Reckoning, described as a 'British gulag.'

The scale of the British response was staggering. Between 1952 and 1960, the British colonial administration detained approximately 1.5 million Kikuyu — the majority of the entire Kikuyu population — in a network of detention camps and what were called 'villages' (essentially fenced enclosures in which the entire rural Kikuyu population was confined). In the camps and villages, detainees were subjected to systematic torture: beatings, electric shocks, sexual violence, sleep deprivation, and what the British administration called 'the dilution technique' — a programme of forced confession that involved escalating violence.

> *"I went from camp to camp. In each one, I found the same thing: men and women who had been beaten, burned, sexually violated, and systematically broken. And I found the same denial from the British administration — that none of this had happened, that it was all Mau Mau propaganda. The documents tell a different story."*
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> **— Caroline Elkins, Imperial Reckoning (2005)**

The extent of the British atrocities in Kenya was suppressed for decades. When Kenya became independent in 1963, the British government systematically destroyed thousands of colonial-era documents that might have exposed the scale of what had happened, in an episode later described as 'Operation Legacy.' The documents that survived were classified and withheld from researchers. It was not until 2012, when a group of elderly Kenyans who had been tortured in the camps brought a legal case against the British government, that a cache of 1,500 files covering 37 former British colonies was discovered in a secure government facility and eventually released. The

British government settled the case in 2013, paying £19.9 million in compensation to 5,228 Kenyan victims — an acknowledgment of liability, if not a full reckoning.

Other British Atrocities: A Pattern, Not Exceptions

The Anglo-Boer War concentration camps and the Kenya Emergency were not aberrations in an otherwise benevolent colonial record. They were the most well-documented examples of a pattern of extreme violence that ran throughout British colonial rule in Africa. In 1897, the British bombarded and burned the great city of Benin, Nigeria, looting its extraordinary bronze art collection — artworks still housed in the British Museum, despite Nigeria's repeated demands for their return. In 1905, the British mounted a military expedition against the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria, killing thousands and forcing submission. In Sudan in 1898, Kitchener's forces desecrated the tomb of the Mahdi and his skull was used as an inkwell. In Sierra Leone, the Hut Tax War of 1898 was suppressed with mass hangings. In Nyasaland (Malawi), the Chilembwe Rising of 1915 was put down with executions and collective punishment.

The pattern is clear: wherever African peoples resisted British colonial rule — and they did so repeatedly, with extraordinary courage — the British response was disproportionate, brutal, and designed not merely to defeat the immediate resistance but to terrorise the broader population into submission. This was not the action of individual bad actors. It was colonial policy.

British Colonial Atrocities: Key Figures
Anglo-Boer War (1900-1902): approximately 26,000 Boer women and children died in concentration camps; approximately 20,000 Black Africans died in separate camps.
Mau Mau Emergency (1952-1960): approximately 1.5 million Kikuyu detained; systematic torture documented by historian Caroline Elkins.
2013 settlement: British government paid £19.9 million to 5,228 Kenyan torture victims — an acknowledgment of liability.
'Operation Legacy': the systematic destruction and concealment of colonial-era documents by Britain at the point of decolonisation across dozens of former colonies.
1897 Benin Expedition: British forces burned Benin City and looted its bronze art, still held in European museums today.

Key Takeaways

British colonial rule in Africa included some of the same patterns of mass violence found under Leopold's Congo and German South West Africa: the Anglo-Boer War concentration camps, which killed both Boer and Black African civilians in devastating numbers, and the systematic torture and mass detention of the Mau Mau Emergency in Kenya, deliberately concealed for decades through the destruction of official records. These were not isolated incidents but a recurring colonial policy response to African and Boer resistance. The next lesson turns to that resistance directly — the armed uprisings, women's movements, and cultural preservation that met colonial violence at every stage.