

How Britain crushed the "Mau Mau rebellion"

Channel Four TV's Secret History—Mau Mau

Barbara Slaughter
15 September 1999

Secret History, a series currently showing on Channel Four television in Britain, claims to "tell the truth that lies behind official stories about the past. Overturning clichés and demolishing sacred cows, the series presents history as it should be — warts and all."

Mau Mau, screened on August 24, certainly reveals aspects of the history of British imperialism in Africa previously hidden from view. The story of what is known as the "Mau Mau rebellion" (from 1952 to 1959), and the response to it by the colonial government and European settlers, is told through documentary footage, narration and interviews with participants from both sides, plus background material on the Channel Four web site.

The programme begins by describing the participants in the uprising as a "gang of freedom fighters called 'Mau Mau', who had vowed to free Kenya from colonialism at any cost....To the British, the uprising was such an outrageous attack on colonialism, that it justified any response, and that response when it came, would be brutal and shocking."

Film footage and commentary paints a vivid picture of Kenya before the uprising, with smug Europeans living a life of idle luxury based on African land and labour. But in the post-Second World War world, resentment against colonial rule increased. One by one, African countries demanded self-rule. John Maina Kahihu from the Mau Mau's political wing said, "In 1942 we had fought for the British. But when we came home from the war they gave us nothing."

The settlers felt themselves immune to the changing times. Willoughby Smith, a district officer in the Colonial Service from 1948 to 1955, testifies to this. "The settler knew a lot about how to use African labour. But he could not see what the use of that labour and the production of money was beginning to bring about. He could not see the political change."

The fiercest opposition to the colonial authorities came from the Kikuyu tribe who, 50 years earlier, had been evicted from their traditional areas to make way for the European farmers. By the end of the Second World War, 3,000 European settlers owned 43,000 square kilometres of the most fertile land, only 6 percent of which they cultivated.

The African population of 5.25 million occupied, without ownership rights, less than 135,000 square kilometres of the poorest land. On the "native reserves" much of the land was unsuitable for agriculture. The poor peasants had been forced to abandon their traditional methods of extensive agriculture and did not have access to the new technology that would make intensive agriculture viable. The population could not feed itself and the peasants were desperate.

The commentary explains, "Rumours began to circulate about the formation of a secret society amongst the Kikuyu, Kenya's largest tribe, one-fifth of the population. It was called the Land Freedom Army (LFA). It was forcing Kikuyu to swear an oath to take back the land the white

man had stolen.... Any African who refused the oath or was loyal to the colonialists was likely to be brutally murdered. The secret society acquired a new name, though no one knew where from. It was called 'Mau Mau'."

The designation "Mau Mau" was never used by the Kikuyu and does not exist in their language. It was, most probably, invented by the British as part of an attempt to demonise the Kikuyu people. Professor Lonsdale, an historian, explains how the movement was portrayed by the settlers and the government as "the welling up of the old unreconstructed Africa, which had not yet received sufficient colonial enlightenment and discipline, which proved that colonialism still had a job to do."

The core of the LFA was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), which was formed in 1924. Its original programme was a combination of radical demands such as the return of expropriated lands and the elimination of the passbook scheme, (similar to the internal passport system in South Africa), with a striving to return to the traditional pre-colonial past. In the late 1930s the KCA led a wave of mass peasant struggles against the forced sale of their livestock to the government.

Much of this political background was not explained in the programme, so it appeared that the Mau Mau arose spontaneously in 1952.

In the 1950s the KCA began conscripting support from the Kikuyu masses, believing it was possible to consolidate their support through the administration of "the oath".

Jacob Njangi, an LFA fighter, explains, "We used to drink the oath. We swore we would not let white men rule us forever. We would fight them even down to our last man, so that man could live in freedom."

When a staunch British loyalist, Chief Waruhi, was killed on 7 October 1952, the government saw the LFA as the first serious threat to colonial rule in post-war Africa. Two weeks later, on 20 October, a state of emergency was declared.

Thousands of British troops and equipment were flown in to "clear the colony of the menace of 'Mau Mau'". Over 100 leading members of the Kenya African Union, a political party demanding greater African self-rule, were arrested. Along with others, Jomo Kenyatta was put on trial for subversion.

History Professor John Lonsdale explains that despite the fact that Kenyatta had publicly denounced 'Mau Mau' and advocated peaceful change, "the British and the white settlers were convinced that he was the brains behind the movement.... But they couldn't get the evidence." Nevertheless, Kenyatta was found guilty of incitement and imprisoned in a remote part of Kenya for seven years hard labour.

Ten days into the start of emergency rule, almost 4,000 Africans had been arrested, but the attacks from the LFA continued. A wave of hysteria swept through the European settlers. In January 1953, after the killing of a European farmer and his family, angry settlers stormed government house

demanding stronger action. In fact, more white settlers died in road accidents on the streets of Nairobi during the emergency than at the hands of the LFA.

On 25 March a loyalist village was destroyed and most of the inhabitants were killed, including Chief Luka and his family. The programme shows how the British portrayed this event as the slaughter of innocent Kikuyu. But it did not explain that a short time before almost 100,000 Kikuyu farm workers and their families had been evicted from their homes in the Rift Valley—where they had been living as squatters on settler farms—and driven back to the reserve. Some of them had already been evicted 20 years earlier, to make way for European settlers. Chief Luka, who had been personally rewarded with good land, negotiated this government "land exchange scheme". The farm workers vented their anger against the chief, whom they considered to be responsible for their plight.

In a revenge attack the following day, 10 times more Kikuyu were killed by government forces and more houses were destroyed.

The LFA faced the full force of British colonial power. The unequal nature of the conflict was illustrated by shots of fully armed British soldiers inter-cut with LFA fighters armed only with bows and arrows and spears. The forests of Mount Kenya, where the LFA had their base camps, were designated a "prohibited area" and heavily bombed.

Peasants living on the fringes of the forest were evicted from the land, their animals confiscated and crops and huts burned to clear the way for the "free fire zone". Thousands were herded into overcrowded, heavily militarised "protected villages".

The Channel Four web site provides more material on the policy of terror employed by the British. In the "free fire zones" "any African could be shot on sight.... Rewards were offered to the units that produced the largest number of 'Mau Mau' corpses, the hands of which were chopped off to make fingerprinting easier. Settlements suspected of harbouring 'Mau Mau' were burned, and 'Mau Mau' suspects were tortured for information."

Reports of brutality by the British forces began to appear in the press. The *Daily Worker* carried a report under the headline: "Officer who quit says, 'It's Hitlerism'". The officer concerned was 19-year-old Second Lieutenant David Larder, who after killing an African, chopped off his hand. Afterwards he wrote home in anguish asking, "What has happened to me?"

Other reports told of officers who paid their men five shillings a head "for every 'Mau Mau' they killed". One soldier testified in court that his officer had said he could shoot anybody he liked as long as they were black, because he wanted to increase his company's score of kills to 50.

In late 1953 the British opened a new campaign, code named Operation Anvil, to cut off the supply network to the LFA. The first target was Nairobi, which was believed to be the centre of their organisation. On 24 April 1954, the police rounded up all the African inhabitants in the city—around 100,000 people. The 70,000 Kikuyu were separated and screened. Of them, up to 30,000 men were taken to holding camps. The families of the arrested men were pushed into the already overcrowded native reserves.

In rural areas Kikuyu were forced into fortified villages, where they lived under 23-hour curfew. This policy, known as "villagisation", was claimed to be "purely protective and beneficial for the Africans". It gave the colonial authorities total control over the Kikuyu.

Taking the Mau Mau oath was made a capital offence. Between 1953 and 1956 more than 1,000 Africans were hanged for alleged Mau Mau crimes. Public hangings, which had been outlawed in Britain for over a century, were carried out in Kenya during the emergency

Professor Lonsdale explains, "A mobile gallows was transported around the country dispensing 'justice' to 'Mau Mau' suspects.... Dead 'Mau Mau', especially commanders, were displayed at cross-roads, at market places

and at administrative centres."

In 1954 one-third of all Kikuyu men were said to be in prison. These detainees had not been convicted of any crime and were held without trial. The British government insisted that every prisoner had to denounce "the oath" and submit to a "cleansing ceremony".

By 1956 the LFA had been militarily defeated, but the camps still held 20,000 detainees who refused to confess to taking the oath, so the emergency remained in force. The huge cost involved forced London to demand that a faster way be found to "cleanse" detainees of their oaths.

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

John Nottingham, a district officer in the colonial service from 1952 to 1961, explains, "The way that it found was that if you beat them up enough then they would confess an oath. So what you do is beat them up and then you give them a bit of paper and a piece of blunt pencil and say, 'Confess! I took it! I took it! I took it! You are now a human being again.'"

In the programme, John Cowan, Senior Superintendent of Prisons in Kenya from 1957 to 1963, calmly explains the rationale behind one of the most brutal episodes in the war against the LFA—the Hola Massacre. "I think that Christianity had been tried and hadn't succeeded with them. And they needed a sort of moral compulsion ... to confess their oaths. In one of my camps there was a small faction of 'Mau Mau' detainees who were difficult. There was a procedure implemented there, which was successful. We had to coerce them into confessing. We used a little bit of force on them.... I never saw a man, in all the time I was there, having had force used on him in any worse condition than an amateur boxer getting out of a ring."

Cowan's method proved effective and he was asked to write a report on how to deal with a group of hardcore detainees, held at the Hola Camp, who had declared themselves political prisoners. With violence now enshrined as official policy, Cowan outlined a scheme to make the Hola detainees submit to authority. The first thing was to get them to obey work orders. He explained that should the detainees not immediately "prove amenable to work", then "they should be—in the phrase—'manhandled' to the site of work, and forced to carry out the task."

On 3 March 1959, 85 prisoners were marched out to a site and ordered to work. One of the detainees, John Maina Kahihu, speaking with quiet dignity described what happened: "We refused to do this work. We were fighting for our freedom. We were not slaves.

"There were two hundred guards. One hundred seventy stood around us with machine guns. Thirty guards were inside the trench with us. The white man in charge blew his whistle and the guards started beating us. They beat us from 8 am to 11.30. They were beating us like dogs. I was covered by other bodies—just my arms and legs were exposed. I was very lucky to survive. But the others were still being beaten. There was no escape for them."

Afterwards 11 men lay dead and 60 were seriously injured. The prison officials attempted a cover-up by claiming that the men had died from drinking contaminated water. But the story found its way back to London and the truth could not be suppressed.

Cowan's remarks, looking back on those terrible events, are chilling. "I didn't feel guilty, I don't think. I don't think that's quite the word.... I felt extremely sorry that it had gone wrong, but not actually guilty."

When reports of the massacre reached Britain there was political uproar. Suddenly it was the British authorities that were exposed as brutal thugs. Within weeks, London closed the Kenyan camps and released the detainees. The Mau Mau oaths, which had dominated the crisis, suddenly became irrelevant.

In 1960 the state of emergency was lifted. The LFA death toll during the emergency was 11,500, of whom around 1,000 were hanged. Eighty thousand Kikuyu were imprisoned in concentration camps. One hundred and fifty thousand Africans, mostly Kikuyu, lost their lives, with many

dying of disease and starvation in the "protected villages". On the other side, the KFA killed around 2,000 people, including 32 European civilians and 63 members of the security forces.

In 1961 Jomo Kenyatta was freed from jail and in 1963, four years after the Hola massacre, Kenya was granted independence.

The film ended with LFA fighters, in tribal dress, entering the arena where the independence celebrations were being held. The commentary tells us that they are "die-hard 'Mau Mau' who had always vowed to stay in the forest until the day Kenya was free."

The implication was that their freedom had finally arrived. One has to look to the programme's web site to read that "most of these same men and women who had fought for 'Mau Mau' gained little benefit. In the newly independent Kenya, they were excluded from public life and preferment, the spoils of independence going to the wealthy and educated Africans who had a vested interest in marginalising them. A black elite simply replaced the white one."

Kenya was not alone in achieving political independence. In 1960 Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, in his "wind of change" speech, recognised the necessity for Britain to find a new form of rule in its colonial possessions in Africa.

In Kenya political control was passed into Kenyatta's "safe pair of hands" and the European settler farmers found that they were more prosperous after independence than they were before.

Of the many striking images in the documentary, the most memorable is that of John Cowan, sitting in his comfortable sitting room enjoying his retirement. He exemplifies the propensity of the British ruling class for extreme violence when its interests are threatened.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact