

Released papers reveal attempts to cover up Britain's criminal past

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The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has released thousands of files it previously claimed were “lost” after Britain withdrew from its former colonies.

The papers reveal the barbarity of colonial rule, particularly when Britain sought to suppress the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Asia. They show that the FCO and its ministers were kept fully informed of the crimes committed by those running Britain's overseas territories.

The papers' release also highlights the efforts of successive governments, Conservative and Labour, to destroy and reclassify sensitive papers. The pre-existing colonial archive is largely devoid of any incriminating evidence, as officials at the time culled anything that might embarrass the government.

Far from being an exercise in “transparency”, the documents represent a further effort by the government to whitewash the infamous record of British imperialism.

Tony Badger, professor of history at Cambridge University, who is overseeing the transfer of the documents to the National Public Archive at Kew, said that most of the colonial records were culled and incinerated and the rest should have been published under the 30-year rule in the 1980s. The whole affair is “embarrassing, scandalous”, he commented.

The documents, now available with the rest of the colonial archive in the National Public Archive, only came to light as a result of a landmark High Court case brought by four Kenyan citizens who are suing the British government for the brutal treatment they received during the suppression of the Mau Mau uprising during the early 1950s when Kenya was a British colony. They maintain that the British government knew and approved of their mistreatment.

The victims' lawyers forced the release of documents

that had been kept secret for more than half a century. The judge granted the Kenyans the right to sue the British government for their ill treatment, opening the floodgates for many more such claims from people who have suffered at the hands of British imperialism.

The FCO had tried to hide 1,500 documents relating to the Mau Mau, removed from Kenya to Britain during the 1950s and up to independence in 1963, due to their politically damaging content. Lawyers representing the litigants submitted a Freedom of Information request in 2006 for “a final tranche of documents relating to the suppression of the Mau Mau held by the Public Record Office”, which was denied by the FCO.

The government finally released 300 boxes containing the 1,500 files in January 2011. They confirmed that ministers were indeed informed about the systematic torture being carried out by the colonial government and British army on Kenyan citizens.

A few months later, the FCO admitted that it had “found” more than 8,800 documents at Hanslope Park that it had previously refused to acknowledge even existed. These had secretly been “migrated” or taken from 36 former colonies, rather than being handed over to the newly independent states. The FCO claims that it is now releasing “every paper” it can.

The first batch of files to be published cover Aden (now part of Yemen), Anguilla, Bahamas, Basutoland (now Lesotho), Bechuanaland (now Botswana), British Indian Ocean Territories, Brunei, Cyprus, Kenya, Malaya (now part of Malaysia), Sarawak (now part of Malaysia) and the Seychelles. Files relating to other former colonies will be released between now and November 2013.

Harvard professor of history Caroline Elkins, Pulitzer Prize winner of *Britain's Gulag: The brutal end of empire in Kenya*, had privileged access to the Kenya

files. She wrote in the *Guardian* that “the FCO has culled files, requiring multiple requests for full disclosure, and still files have not been forthcoming.”

The process of document destruction and removal in Kenya began as early as 1958, she explained, five years before independence. It was highly organised by the Colonial Office, requiring massive administrative manpower on the ground. At the same time as the government was denying all allegations of brutality, not just in Kenya, it was systematically culling the evidence. It set in place procedures for designating files for destruction or removal, marking about 3.5 tons of documents for destruction, and thousands more for transfer to Britain.

The papers reveal that documents were destroyed after 1961, when then-colonial secretary Iain Macleod issued an order that no material that “might embarrass Her Majesty’s government”, that could “embarrass members of the police, military forces, public servants or others eg police informers”, that might compromise intelligence sources, or that might “be used unethically by ministers in the successor government” should be made available to post-independence governments.

Regarding the Mau Mau case, despite the vast number of files known to have been destroyed, the newly released files confirm what was already known. They provide detailed accounts of the use of collective punishment such as the large-scale confiscation of livestock, fines, forced labour and the burning of entire villages, as well as the case of a man said to have been “roasted alive”.

Other documents cover some of the most egregious activities committed by officials running Britain’s overseas possessions. These include:

- Accounts of successive governments’ efforts to forcibly deport Chagos Islanders from the British Indian Ocean territories and deceive parliament and the public over the decision to give the US a military base in Diego Garcia.

- Plans in 1941 and 1942 to test chemical weapons in what is now Botswana.

- Secret plans to deport a Greek Cypriot leader, despite starting talks with him to end a violent rebellion in 1955.

- Secret monthly reports by the director of intelligence in British-controlled Malaya during the 1950s detailing the “elimination of ranking terrorists”.

The Malayan files also contain references to material being destroyed.

But there is evidence that these documents have been pruned. Dr. Laleh Khalili, a senior lecturer in Politics of the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, said that in the context of Aden, where torture and ill treatment were widespread in the 1960s, most of the files related to fisheries.

The Malaya files largely covered 1955-1957, not 1948-1951, when half a million civilians were resettled in the “New Villages” that provided the model for President John F. Kennedy’s “strategic hamlets” programme for the resettlement of the “Viet Cong” in South Vietnam.

Professor Elkins too confirmed that the files appear to have been trimmed, with many of the files from the 12 colonies relating to finance, tourism, administration and the like. She said, “The first release of the ‘migrated archives’ is, at first glance, lacking in substantive files, particularly for former colonies like Cyprus and Malaya where future lawsuits potentially loom”.

Notwithstanding the cull and redactions, the documents the FCO sought to keep under wraps provide further evidence of the crimes and ferocious violence used to suppress anti-colonial struggles and in defence of its imperial possessions and profits.

This takes on greater significance given Britain’s turn once again towards a neo-colonial policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and in the future Syria and Iran. The appalling violence and the depraved and criminal conduct against the civilian population are the logical conclusion of colonialism and the imperial nature of these wars.



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