The queen and the Commonwealth: A legacy of imperialist domination and oppression

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Some of the more grotesque historical distortions and outright lies trotted out since the death of Queen Elizabeth II relate to her supposed care and compassion for the citizens of the Commonwealth.

Such statements have been accompanied by film of her numerous visits to nations in Africa, India, Pakistan, and more occasionally Canada and Australia, doling out handshakes and handwaves to cheering crowds and meeting with various heads of state and the great and the good.

The impression is given of the Commonwealth as a beneficent institution in which the monarch rubbed shoulders with the leaders, citizens and her own "subjects" within the 56-nation entity—always with the merest suggestion that such a superior being from a vastly superior nation was doing a monumental favour to all who met her.

To understand the late queen's real motivations on these trips and her abiding "affection" for the Commonwealth means understanding the real function of an institution largely made up of former colonial possessions, used by British imperialism to bolster its diminished position as a major power on the world stage.

Britain had emerged from World War II permanently eclipsed by the United States. It was bankrupt and unable to maintain its far-flung empire. Along with France and the Netherlands and all the imperialist powers, the British bourgeoisie feared that a revolutionary upsurge in the colonies would coalesce with the movement of the working class in Europe, threatening the entire fabric of capitalist rule.

The US, confident of its ability to dominate the world and its markets by economic and military might, insisted on a change in approach towards the colonial countries: self-government would replace direct colonial rule. This policy was written into the newly formed United Nations, which provided an international cover for the dictates of US imperialism.

The granting of nominal independence to the national bourgeoisie was a vital part of the post-war arrangements whereby imperialism managed to restabilise itself for more than 40 years. The newly installed bourgeois regimes systematically suppressed the development of an independent revolutionary struggle by the working class and ensured the subordination of their economies to the imperatives of the world market, dominated by the same handful of imperialist powers that had directly ruled them.

Britain and France were forced to grant independence to their colonies, in some cases on the basis of a timetable ranging from a few years to a decade or more and in others only after bloody colonial wars as fought by the French in Algeria and the British in Kenya and Malaya.

The queen in her 1953 Christmas Day broadcast defined the Commonwealth as a family of nations that "bears no resemblance to the empires of the past. It is an entirely new conception, built on the highest qualities of the spirit of man: friendship, loyalty and the desire for freedom and peace. To that new conception of an equal partnership of nations and races I shall give myself heart and soul every day of my life."

The Commonwealth provided plenty of opportunities for sporting contests, economic aid and royal tours that cemented Britain's support for venal, one-party dictatorships that protected Britain's commercial interests.

Wherever Her Majesty's Government (HMG) felt its vital global interests were threatened, it had no hesitation in responding with illegal and inhumane methods, including torture, as in Commonwealth member states Aden, Cyprus, Kenya, Malaya, Uganda and Zimbabwe. There are no records testifying to the queen's opposition to that criminality.

The Mau Mau insurgency

One of the most notorious crimes was the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya in the closing days of British rule. It began shortly after then Princess Elizabeth left Kenya in February 1952 when she heard that her father King George VI had died—her baptism of blood as Britain's monarch.

Following in the traditions of the British Empire when confronted with dissent from its ungrateful subjects, the Royal Air Force carried out bombing raids between 1952 and 1956 that killed around 11,503 Mau Mau fighters, according to official figures. This was a gross understatement, designed to sanitise the brutality, with Harvard professor of history Caroline Elkins, Pulitzer Prize winner for *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, estimating that more than a dozen times that number, 150,000 Kenyans, were killed. By comparison, fewer than 200 Britons lost their lives.

Promoting Elizabeth's "highest qualities of the spirit of man" involved crushing the rebellion using show trials and the public hangings of more than 1,000 Mau Mau fighters, collective punishments such as the large-scale confiscation of livestock, fines and forced labour, the torching of entire villages and the massacre of their civilian inhabitants.

The colonial authorities used 25,000 troops to purge the capital Nairobi of Kikuyu people, who were placed in barbed-wire enclosures. In a two-week period, 20,000 male detainees were sent to be interrogated, while 30,000 women and children were placed in the

reserves, ultimately to be moved to militarised “protected villages” with 23-hour curfews. More than a million rural Kikuyu people were forcibly resettled into what were little more than concentration camps.

Thousands of people—estimates vary between 80,000 and 300,000—were detained in a network of prisons and forced labour camps, where atrocities were committed wholesale. Suspected rebels were transported with little food and water, and no sanitation. A brutal regime of interrogation developed, including beatings, starvation, sexual abuse and forced labour. Among those who were tortured was the grandfather of former US President Barack Obama.

A colonial officer described the conditions of the labour camps as “short rations, overwork, brutality, humiliating and disgusting treatment and flogging—all in violation of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

The authorities only lifted Emergency rule, which provided legal protection for the suspension of all personal freedoms and gave sweeping powers to the perpetrators of repression, in January 1960, a few years before independence in 1963. Colonial Secretary Oliver Lyttleton even defended making the possession of “incendiary materials” a capital offence.

That this brutality was official policy sanctioned at the highest levels had been covered up by the British government for decades, only coming to light after a 14-year legal battle by Mau Mau veterans seeking justice and compensation for their mistreatment. A vast archive of files from 37 former colonies, held at Hanslope Park in Buckinghamshire, had been kept secret for years.

After a court ruling in October 2012 that the veterans had the legal right to sue the British government and demand an apology and compensation, the government agreed to discuss a settlement. It wanted to avoid the prospect of further disclosures about the brutality of the British state against Commonwealth citizens, not just in Kenya but elsewhere in Africa and Asia.

Apartheid in South Africa

The media have tried to burnish the queen’s humanitarian credentials by pointing to her much-vaunted clash with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1986 over South Africa’s apartheid regime, expressing concern that Thatcher’s adamant refusal to impose sanctions on South Africa threatened the breakup of the Commonwealth.

What the media failed to point out was that the queen had not opposed South Africa’s apartheid policy that was put in place in 1948 and continued under her reign. She continued to rule as South Africa’s head of state until 1961, when it became a republic. Neither did she oppose South Africa’s membership of the Commonwealth. The South African government only withdrew from the organisation in 1961 when it became clear that the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference would reject its membership application, viewing South Africa as the embodiment of colonialism due to its racial segregation and brutal exploitation of workers.

By 1986, the mass uprising of urban youth and workers in South Africa’s impoverished townships had brought the country to the point of civil war, prompting foreign investors to withdraw, international banks to call in their loans, the currency to collapse, economic output to decline and inflation to rage.

It was this that finally forced the international and South African diamond, gold and platinum mining corporations—in which US and UK entities held major stakes—the banks and other major corporations to conclude that only Nelson Mandela, the African National Congress (ANC) and its partners, the Confederation of South African trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), could provide the capitalist class with a political life jacket. Mandela had been incarcerated since 1964 on Robben Island. Without their assistance, capitalism could not survive in South Africa and its collapse could trigger an eruption of political and social conflict in all the former colonies of the imperialist powers.

Thatcher and her co-thinker US President Ronald Reagan were the last major international supporters of the apartheid regime. The queen, in so far as she opposed Thatcher, had no moral qualms over apartheid, as the record shows. Rather, she too was persuaded by the sheer scale of class opposition of the necessity to change tactics in pursuit of the only political avenue that offered any possibility of defending Britain’s economic and political interests in the region.

South Africa was welcomed back into the Commonwealth in 1994 as Mandela became President. Neither he nor the ANC betrayed the imperialists’ hopes. Over the last 30 years, successive ANC governments, staffed by corrupt black billionaires, have created a society even more exploitative and socially unequal than the apartheid regime.

Britain’s role in these two critical experiences—many more could be cited—exposes the myth that the monarchy cared one whit about the peoples of the Commonwealth. None of this stopped the Right Honourable Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth of Nations, issuing a fawning eulogy to the queen, saying, “Her Majesty’s vision for the Commonwealth at the beginning of her reign has been fulfilled, fuelled by her dedication and commitment.” And it will not give pause to a single talking-head or political commentator as they cynically eulogise over Elizabeth before making their services available to her son and heir, Charles III.