

Emergency Exits: Britain's brutal counterinsurgency wars, retreat from empire and historical memory

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The Imperial War Museum's *Emergency Exits* is a remarkable exhibition focusing on Britain's brutal suppression of three late-colonial insurgencies—Malaya (now Malaysia), Kenya and Cyprus—in the 1950s.

It is significant because, perhaps for the first time, a major national war museum has assembled an exhibition whose narrative exposes the embedded violence of empire. It documents the draconian measures Britain took to preserve the economic and geostrategic advantages of empire in the aftermath of World War II. Clearly and effectively, it demonstrates that Britain's "Emergencies" were not aberrations or moral lapses but the predictable outcome of an imperial system in crisis.

Crucially, all the imperialist powers feared that the end of World War II would trigger widespread communist revolutions, as had happened after World War I with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Expectations in the colonies were high. The war had weakened Europe's empires and emboldened the resistance of colonial workers who had fought for "democracy" against fascism, only to return to colonial rule, repression and poverty. Imperial Japan's rapid conquest of Europe's Southeast Asian colonies shattered any notion of European invincibility. US imperialism sought to dismantle these empires for its own interests.

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had agreed on the Atlantic Charter in 1941, defining their stated principles for the post-World War II world order: self-determination, no territorial aggrandisement, free trade, economic cooperation and freedom of the seas. The Charter of the newly established United Nations did not abolish colonialism outright, but it did include the principles of equal rights and self-determination, which became the legal and moral basis for decolonisation and, in effect, declared colonialism illegitimate.

Britain, weakened by war and having already lost India (1947) and Palestine (1948), was unwilling to relinquish its privileged access to raw materials, settler economies and overseas bases in its remaining colonies. It faced a massive economic crisis, including the burden of wartime debt, dollar shortages and the collapse of sterling as a global currency.

As the exhibition explains, the issue facing Britain was how to retreat from empire while retaining its advantages. When insurgent movements in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus sought independence on terms that threatened imperial interests, Britain fought wars it branded "Emergencies" because the term gave colonial authorities sweeping powers of repression and coercion without risking their insurance cover for financial losses that accompany declared wars.

Emergency Exits does more than document Britain's late-colonial wars. It reveals a repertoire of counterinsurgency techniques — enclosure, resettlement, administrative control, detention, and psychological warfare — that have recurred in many conflicts since. The exhibition illuminates not only the past but practices that continue to shape state responses to uprisings and territorial conflicts today. This includes US President

Donald Trump's proposal for a modern-day version of the British East India Company to oversee the resettlement of the Palestinians in "humanitarian encampments" where they would work under slave labour conditions for regional capitalists.

But *Emergency Exits* is significant not simply because it depicts the brutality of empire. Many museums now acknowledge "difficult histories", adopting a "decolonial" tone that is apologetic, sentimental or moralistic. What distinguishes this exhibition is the sober way it uses archival material to reveal the material logic behind imperial brutality. It shows empire as a system of economic extraction defended through organised coercion. In doing so, it provides—albeit neither intentionally nor explicitly—compelling confirmation of Lenin's *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*.

The wars and violence that accompanied the acquisition and control of empire are well known. The exhibition reminds us of this by referring to Lord Kitchener's brutality at Omdurman (1898) during the bloody conquest of Sudan and his establishment of concentration camps in South Africa during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) to suppress resistance.

By contrast, the wars that accompanied the "exit" from empire and "independence", while no less violent, are—apart from a few exceptions—far less well known, for reasons that will be considered later.

The exhibition provides a devastating rebuttal of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio's ignorant speech at the Munich Security Conference last month, praising Western colonialism and imperialist power and lamenting the post-war demise of Europe's "vast empires extending out across the globe" built and maintained through countless atrocities. He echoes the ideology of Cecil Rhodes, founder of De Beers diamond mining corporation, whose infamous statement in 1877 opens the exhibition: "I contend that we are the finest race in the world and the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race".

The exhibition furnishes concrete evidence that Britain's imperial order was sustained not via benevolence and progress, but through systematic coercion, mass repression and the violent suppression of popular movements. It collapsed because it could not withstand the mass mobilisation of colonised workers, peasants, and youth.

Empire as an economic system

The three colonies are explained in the exhibition in terms of their resources: rubber and tin in Malaya, land and labour in Kenya, and Cyprus's geostrategic location. These were not incidental details but the

economic foundations of British power in the mid-20th century. To cite but one example, Malayan rubber was Britain's biggest dollar earner in 1947, bringing in \$200 million, compared to the British manufacturing industry's \$180 million. In 1950, Malaya's tin and rubber accounted for 15 percent of the sterling area's total dollar earnings and were a crucial source of revenue to pay war debts to the United States.

The "Emergencies" examined in the exhibition were fought to preserve these foundations at a moment when Britain's global position was collapsing. While the word "capitalism" is not mentioned, the evidence presented in the exhibition—of plantations, mines, settler land grabs and corporate interests—makes the underlying system unmistakable. The violence that accompanied and followed the establishment of empires was not incidental. It is the mechanism by which extraction is maintained in the absence of consent.

Conscription into Britain's armed services continued after World War II until 1960. As one of the conscripts, speaking about his rotation in Malaya in 1950, explained, "They said they had National Service to train people in case there was a world war, but that wasn't the real reason. They needed the men at that time because we still had an empire to police."

Counterinsurgency as Class War

The exhibition gives voice to the colonised working class and rural poor: squatters in Kenya, rubber tappers in Malaya, trade unionists and youth in Cyprus. These are the people who rise up, organise, strike, sabotage and demand land, wages and political power.

The British state responds with the instruments of class repression: mass detention, forced resettlement, collective punishment, psychological warfare, torture and interrogation. This is counterinsurgency: a state of war against a non-state adversary, a colonised population no longer willing to accept dispossession. The violence does not denote the failure of empire but its very essence.

It is impossible to ignore the similarities between these violent methods and those being employed in Gaza today. This is no coincidence. The methods developed against the Irish and later the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 in Palestine, and the personnel who authored them, would transfer from one counterinsurgency to the next.

Where *Emergency Exits* is most powerful is in its use of material evidence. The exhibition does not rely on rhetoric; it lets Britain's colonial subjects speak. And what they reveal is a machinery of suppression that was systematic, bureaucratic and class-directed.

The Malayan "Emergency": forced resettlement and the militarisation of everyday life

Widespread unemployment, low wages, and soaring food costs following the war led to rapid growth in trade union membership, communist party membership, and the number of strikes. Colonial authorities responded with ever-increasing brutality. Britain used attacks on rubber plantations, carried out in revenge for the killing of left-wing activists, as the pretext to declare the Malayan "Emergency" (1948-1960) in a bid to protect its economic and colonial interests.

It sparked a guerrilla war by communist pro-independence fighters of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party, aimed at winning independence for Malaya by targeting tin mines and rubber plantations. British tactics combined

fighting insurgents in the jungle with separating MNLA insurgents from local support, mainly in Malaya's Chinese community, and included scorched earth policies to starve the MNLA.

Sir Gerald Templer, Britain's High Commissioner who had taken part in the suppression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, combined military force with an emphasis on controlling the population by winning "hearts and minds", an approach copied in later Emergencies. This included separating insurgents from local communities, intelligence gathering operations and turning one ethnic group or community against another.

Among the exhibits are aerial photographs of the militarised "New Villages," set up under the infamous "Briggs Plan" that forcibly resettled around half a million of the rural poor, mainly ethnic Chinese, in what were little more than concentration camps, surrounded by barbed wire fencing and ringed with watch towers. Identity cards were used to control movement, while propaganda leaflets threatened starvation, revealing a counterinsurgency strategy built on population control rather than battlefield victory. The aim was to starve insurgents of food and medicine and prevent them from recruiting new members. People were searched as they entered and left their villages to ensure they were not passing supplies to the MNLA.

Colonial authorities used both local and imperial forces to support Britain. They recruited local people to the Home Guard to patrol villages and support the army and police. These unpaid volunteers became a key part of the colonial campaign, deepening social and ethnic divisions within Malaya. They also relied on troops from other parts of the Commonwealth, with some serving in two or three "Emergencies".

Kenya: detention, torture and the criminalisation of land claims

The Kenyan "Emergency" was Britain's response to the Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1960), when landless peasants, especially the Kikuyu community who had been pushed into "reserves" to make way for white settler farms, attacked the farms from scattered forest camps. Under the leadership of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), a peasant guerrilla movement, they sought land reform and an end to colonial rule. The colonial authorities sent in locally recruited soldiers or police to protect the farms.

More than a million people suspected of maintaining links with Mau Mau were forced to move into the so-called "colonial villages", surrounded by trenches and stakes. Conditions were so bad that many died due to illness, disease, hunger or the harsh burden of forced labour.

More than 80,000 Kenyans were rounded up and detained in prison camps without trial during the "Emergency", with guilt often assumed. Detention became a form of collective punishment. Forced labour and torture were used to "rehabilitate" Kenyans and rid them of the ideas promoted by Mau Mau. Those sent to the colonial villages could not travel or work without the necessary permits.

As in Malaya, the authorities recruited tens of thousands of Kenyan loyalists to fight the Mau Mau. In the run-up to independence, loyalists controlled most of the key positions in business and politics.

The exhibits include statements by Kenyans testifying to the arrests, torture, sexual assault and humiliation they suffered in the villages and the camps. The landless were criminalised, while the settlers were protected. Violence was not rogue behaviour; it was policy.

Cyprus: surveillance, intelligence and the war of information

The exhibition's explanation and portrayal of the Cyprus "Emergency" is the weakest. In April 1955, the far-right Greek Cypriot organisation EOKA, which sought unification with Greece (Enosis), began terrorist attacks against the British administration in Cyprus. This was unacceptable to Britain, given Cyprus's position at the crossroads of three continents and its hosting of the most important Anglo-American signals intelligence site.

EOKA's social base was not the urban proletariat but the Greek Cypriot bourgeoisie and pro-Enosis petty-bourgeois layers tied to landlord, commercial and nationalist interests. These social layers saw union with Greece as a means of securing their property, status, and influence in the region, and of escaping British colonial rule on terms favourable to local capital and propertied classes. Its operations targeted not only British forces but also leftists and trade-unionists in both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities who sought working-class unity across communal lines.

Later that year, Cyprus's governor Robert Harding who had served in Palestine, Malaya and Kenya and had full military and political power, declared a state of "Emergency" and introduced a raft of unprecedented measures including curfews, checkpoints to control people's movements, collective punishments, evictions from homes, shop and school closures, the establishment of internment camps, the indefinite detention of suspects without trial, torture and abuse, and the imposition of capital punishment for offences such as carrying weapons, incendiary devices or any material that could be used in a bomb.

Unable to extract much useful intelligence because of support for EOKA among the Greek Cypriot community, he used divide-and-rule tactics, turning to the Turkish Cypriot population and the Turkish government as a means of blocking the demand for Enosis and paving the way for the intercommunal strife that was to lead to the division of the island in 1974. In 1960, Britain established Cyprus as an independent state, separate from Greece, while retaining two separate bases on the island.

While Britain suppressed all three insurgencies, the organised resistance ultimately forced it to grant independence. But as the exhibition explained, each country was scarred by its experiences of Britain's divide-and-rule tactics, which set the scene for further conflicts.

The politics of memory in the former colonies

One of the most striking revelations of *Emergency Exits* emerges not from what is displayed, but from what is absent elsewhere. Malaya/Malaysia, Kenya, and Cyprus — the three theatres of Britain's late-colonial counterinsurgency — have no major national museums dedicated to these insurgencies. There are scattered plays (such as last year's staging in Kenya of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*), local memorials, partisan narratives and occasional artistic interventions, but nothing comparable to a sustained, state-supported public reckoning.

This absence flows inexorably from the class composition of the ruling elites that took power after independence. As the old adage, commonly attributed to that arch imperialist Winston Churchill, goes, "History is written by the victors".

In Malaya and Kenya, but not Cyprus, the insurgencies were class uprisings as much as anti-colonial struggles. They were led by plantation workers, landless peasants, trade unionists and youth movements whose demands for land, wages, and political power threatened not only the colonial state but also the post-colonial elites who inherited power after independence.

In Malaya, independence was handed to conservative nationalist parties aligned with plantation capital; the communist-led guerrilla movement

was criminalised and erased from national memory.

In Kenya, the Mau Mau revolt, a landless peasants' movement, was suppressed in public discourse for decades, while political power was consolidated around land-owning families and former colonial collaborators. Kenya's first post-colonial president, Jomo Kenyatta, famously denounced Mau Mau in front of 30,000 people in 1952, saying "Mau Mau has spoiled the country. Let Mau Mau perish forever. All people should search for Mau Mau and kill it."

He struck a deal with British imperialism, which viewed him as a reliable defender of imperialist interests. The Stalinist and "left" nationalist leaderships subordinated the working class, the leading force against colonialism after World War II, to bourgeois nationalists like Kenyatta and the more radical petty bourgeois forces of the Mau Mau.

In each case, the ruling class that emerged after independence had no interest in memorialising movements that challenged the very foundations of their authority. To commemorate these insurgencies honestly would require confronting unresolved questions of land redistribution, labour exploitation, ethnic division, and the unfinished business of decolonisation.

Silence, therefore, became a form of control. Paradoxically, as the IWM exhibition reveals, Britain—the former imperial power—is now able to display the violence of its late-colonial wars with a degree of candour that would be politically impossible in the countries where those wars were fought.

This is not because Britain is more honest. Far from it. As the exhibition explains, the colonial authorities secretly removed or destroyed "sensitive" documents before independence to avoid embarrassing the government. In 1961, the Colonial Office issued explicit instructions applicable across the empire to destroy any material that might "embarrass Her Majesty's Government." The exhibition notes add that in the years following the Emergencies, British official photography emphasised the humanitarian role of the armed forces.

In 2011, the government, fearing leaks and widespread dissemination of the truth in the era of WikiLeaks, suddenly "discovered" a long-hidden cache of colonial files, including 300 boxes containing nearly 1,500 files relating to the suppression of Mau Mau and 8,800 boxes of files from 36 other colonial countries, stored at a Foreign and Colonial Office archive in Hanslope Park. Nevertheless, a significant body of colonial-era material remains there, including 88,000 Hong Kong colonial government records, embargoed till 2047. Since 2011, a handful of victims of colonial abuse have brought and won legal cases that led to apologies and, in some cases, compensation from the British government.

The IWM can reveal these atrocities because it evidently believes that Britain is no longer threatened by the insurgent movements of the 1950s. The empire has gone. The political and economic stakes have evaporated. Honesty and openness may be the best way of restoring public trust.

But in Cyprus, Britain's RAF Akrotiri and Dhekelia bases are providing support to the US-led military onslaught against Iran, a war aimed at re-establishing direct imperialist subjugation of the Middle East. A demonstration in recent days in Cyprus's capital, Nicosia, included a banner that read, "British Bases Out".

For Malaya and Kenya, the stakes remain acute. The social forces that led the insurgencies—peasants, workers, the dispossessed—remain marginalised. The inequalities that fuelled revolt remain unresolved. The post-colonial states typically rest upon the very structures the insurgents sought to dismantle.

Britain can exhibit (for now) what it once concealed, whereas the former colonies must suppress what they cannot acknowledge. *Emergency Exits*, therefore, reveals not only the violence of empire but also how memorialisation is shaped by class power, political fear and the unresolved issues of decolonisation.

That said, the mainstream media has not reviewed the exhibition,

indicating the sensitivities that still surround Britain's violent retreat from its imperial possessions. Moreover, its counterinsurgency apparatus was continued in Northern Ireland, Afghanistan and Iraq, with legal cases and human rights litigation ongoing.

The insurgencies in Malaya and Kenya were led by landless peasants, plantation workers, miners, and youth. Their demands—land redistribution, political rights, the dismantling of colonial structures—were the “bourgeois?democratic” tasks that the national bourgeoisie in the modern era, with the rise of the working class as a major force in society, was historically unable to carry out.

Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution demonstrates that the colonial peoples cannot achieve their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights and social equality—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie. In the imperialist epoch, the realisation of such democratic and national tasks, associated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie, requires the working class to take power. Victory in this struggle can be secured only as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution, placing the resources of the national and global economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

After independence, power passed to conservative nationalist elites, land?owning families, business interests aligned with imperial capital and bureaucratic strata trained under colonial rule. These groups inherited not only the state but also the imperial logic of suppressing the working class, the rural poor and insurgent memory. To commemorate the revolts honestly would require confronting unresolved questions of land, resources, labour and class power — questions that remain politically explosive.

And this pattern—the bourgeoisie's inability to complete the democratic tasks of the revolution, and its consequent need to suppress the memory of those who attempted to do so—stands as one of the most powerful vindications of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. The class that inherited the state cannot afford to remember how it was won.

The expunging of this history in the former colonies is not an accident. It is the material expression of a comprador bourgeois class that fears the social forces that made independence possible. The suppression of insurgent memory becomes a continuation of counterinsurgency by other means.

Emergency Exits, by exposing the violence of late empire and revealing the silence that surrounds it elsewhere, makes one thing unmistakably clear: the history of imperialism is not only a struggle over which class controls land, resources and labour—via capitalist exploitation and war—it is also a struggle over who gets to remember and who is required to forget.

“Emergency Exits: The Fight for Independence in Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus” is on at the Imperial War Museum in London until March 29, 2026. Further online resources associated with the exhibition are available here, including a large print guide.



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