

Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire by Caroline Elkins review - the brutal truth about Britain's past

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In shocking, meticulous detail, an acclaimed American historian uses 'lost' records from 37 former colonies to reveal the barbarity of the British empire and the hubris that fuelled it

Caroline Elkins made front-page headlines a decade ago when [her research](#) into Britain's brutal suppression of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya in the 1950s resulted in a high court case and, uniquely, reparations to 5,228 surviving Kenyans who, the British government accepted, had been subject to years of systematic torture and abuse. That case relied on evidence uncovered in Elkins's 2005 book, [Britain's Gulag](#), which had argued that up to 320,000 Kenyan Kikuyu people had been held in British detention camps as part of a campaign of terror that "left tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, dead" and untold numbers of lives ruined by forced labour, starvation, torture and rape.

When Elkins's book came out, her findings - partly based on the testimony of Kikuyu survivors - were widely dismissed as, at best, exaggerations by a generation of historians wedded to stubborn ideas of Britain's "enlightened" and "benign empire". Her history was dramatically vindicated, however, when an unknown cache of 240,000 top secret colonial files, removed from Nairobi at the time of Kenyan independence in 1963, were disclosed on the eve of the 2011 trial. The files had been stored in a high security foreign office depository at Hanslope Park, near Northampton. At the time of that high court victory, Elkins noted that she had for years put on hold a wider inquiry into the methods of British colonial governance in the years after the second world war, in order to substantiate the survivors' case, research that would now be illuminated by the fact that the secret document store also held "lost" records from 37 other former colonies. She was both vindicated and outraged by the discovery: "After all these years of being roasted over the coals, they've been sitting on the evidence? Are you frickin' kidding me? This almost destroyed my career."

This book, a decade on, is that wider history that Elkins had postponed. Partly resting on the Hanslope Park files, it argues that the sadistic methods that marked the last acts of empire in Kenya were not an anomalous aberration but learned behaviours of imperial power. Her detailing of this reality involves a deconstruction not only of the self-delusion, seductive mythology and doublespeak of the largest empire in human history, but also the deliberate official destruction of large parts of its historical record.

She coins the term 'legalised lawlessness' to describe how Britain spread the rule of law

As a result of her work on Kenya, Elkins, 53, a native of New Jersey, is now not only professor of history and African and African American studies at Harvard, and founding director of its Center for

African Studies, she is also the subject of a proposed *Erin Brockovich*-style film. There is nothing about her work that suggests any of the easier of Hollywood narratives, however. *Legacy of Violence* is a formidable piece of research that sets itself the ambition of identifying the character of British power over the course of two centuries and four continents. Elkins, perhaps minded of her previous brush with controversy, sometimes approaches her task with the meticulous doggedness of a trial lawyer rather than a storyteller in search of an audience. Examining the Boer war, the Irish war of independence, the uprisings in India, Iraq and Palestine, as well as British rule in Cyprus, Malaya and Kenya, she insists that such appalling acts as the Amritsar massacre, far from being – as Churchill argued in parliament – “an event that stands in singular and sinister isolation” were much closer to being a default position.

This often gruesome history is bookended by two trials. The Mau Mau court case and the trial of Warren Hastings, the first governor of Bengal, more than 200 years earlier. Hastings was impeached by the Whig MP Edmund Burke on charges of extortion, embezzlement and unlawful killing, from all of which he was ultimately exonerated. Elkins identifies that seven-year legal proceeding as the moment when the British government and its elite intellectual culture convinced itself of the principle that guided future conquests: that the means of sustaining power always justified the end.

Elkins coins the term “legalised lawlessness” to describe the self-serving methods by which Britain spread the rule of law and then viciously bent it to serve imperial ends. The first half of her book examines how this hypocrisy was rooted in the supremacist underpinnings of classical liberalism, the pervasive idea that “backward” societies would be transformed by the violent application of free trade and religious education. As David Livingstone’s rallying cry had it, as he hacked through far-off jungles with that trusty machete labelled “paternal despotism”: “Christianity, commerce and civilisation!”

Elkins has scant interest in the familiar ‘contextual’ narratives of the ‘white man’s burden’

The blood-red thread through all of that history, in Elkins’s persuasive reading, is a strain of moralising superiority that convinced successive generations of politicians, from Benjamin Disraeli to Clement Attlee, that restive subject populations must be periodically taught a lesson in the realities of “civilised” power. “The moral effect of immediate mass destruction,” as Elkins describes it. She painstakingly traces how the personnel and methodologies of suppression and torture were passed between territories, at the same time that sentimental propaganda campaigns told a different story of those conquests: from the Nobel laureateship of Kipling to the Boy’s Own potboilers of George Alfred Henty (25m copies of whose books remained in circulation in the 1950s).

Her history shows how the barbarity behind imperial pomp and civilising mission statements was perfected in the long tail of empire after the first world war, an account that begins with Arthur “Bomber” Harris serving his apprenticeship wiping out villages in Mesopotamia (Iraq) in 1923. In making this case, Elkins stops short of suggesting that the outcomes of imperial ambition were uniformly hellish – “the [British empire](#) and totalitarian regimes were not the same thing, even if some eyewitnesses reported striking similarities” – but she has scant interest in the familiar “contextual” narratives of the “white man’s burden”. She writes with a distrust of the kinds of dramatic or emotional set pieces that threaten to sentimentalise this sweep of history. (It is telling that in the 50 close-typed pages of her bibliography she refers to only one volume of Jan Morris’s Pax Britannica trilogy, the books that most persuasively look for a balance between imperial ambition and brutal devastation.)

In many ways, of course, this long history could not be more timely. Elkins offers an open and shut case for those who believe that Rhodes must fall. Her book should, you hope, also find its way into

the hands of at least some of that 60% of the nation who, when polled in 2014, thought the British empire was, in general, “something to be proud of”.

Tim Adams

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