

Boris Johnson says we shouldn't edit our past. But Britain has been lying about it for decades

Wednesday 17 June 2020, by [MONBIOT George](#) (Date first published: 16 June 2020).

If we really shouldn't lie about our history, as the prime minister says, let's finally open up about the atrocities of empire

When Boris Johnson claimed last week that removing statues is “[to lie about our history](#)”, you could almost admire his brass neck. This is the man who was sacked from his first job, on the Times, for lying about our history. He fabricated a quote from his own godfather, the historian Colin Lucas, to create a sensational front-page fiction about [Edward II's Rose Palace](#). A further lie about history – his own history – had him [sacked from another job](#), as shadow arts minister under the Conservative leader Michael Howard.

But, Johnson tells us: “We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend [to have a different history](#)”. Yet lies and erasures are crucial to the myths on which Britain's official self-image is founded, and crucial to hiding the means by which those who still dominate us acquired their wealth and power.

Consider the concentration camps [Britain built in Kenya](#) in the 1950s. “What concentration camps?” you might ask. If so, job done. When the Kikuyu people mobilised to reclaim the land that had been stolen from them by British settlers and the colonial authorities, almost the entire population – over 1 million – were herded into [concentration camps](#) and fortified villages. One of these camps, as if echoing Auschwitz, had the slogan “[“Labour and Freedom”](#)” above the gates. Even Eric Griffith-Jones, the attorney general of the colonial administration in Kenya, who was complicit in these crimes, remarked that the treatment of the inmates was “[“distressingly reminiscent of conditions in Nazi Germany”](#)”.

Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of prisoners died. Many succumbed to hunger and disease, including almost all the [children in some camps](#). Many others were murdered. Some were beaten to death by their British guards. One, as the governor of Kenya, Sir Evelyn Baring, acknowledged in a secret memo, was [roasted alive](#). Others were anally raped with knives, rifle barrels and broken bottles, mauled by dogs or electrocuted. Many were castrated, with a special implement the British administration designed for the purpose. “By the time I cut his balls off,” one of the killers boasted, “he had no ears, and his eyeball, the right one, I think, was hanging out of its socket”. Some were rolled up in barbed wire and kicked around the compound until they bled to death. If you know nothing of this history, it's because it was systematically censored and [replaced with lies](#) by the British authorities.

Only in 2012, when a group of Kikuyu survivors sued the British government for their torture and mutilation, was an archive, kept secret by the Foreign Office, [discovered](#). It revealed the

extraordinary measures taken by colonial officials to prevent information from leaking, and to fend off questions by Labour MPs with outright lies. For example, after 11 men were beaten to death by camp guards, Baring advised the colonial secretary to report that they had died from [drinking dirty water](#). Baring himself authorised such assaults. In implementing this decision, Griffith-Jones warned him, "If we are going to sin, we must [sin quietly](#)". When questions persisted, Baring told his officials to do "an exercise ... on the dossiers", to create the impression that the victims were hardened criminals.

As it happens, Baring was the grandfather of Mary Wakefield, the wife of Boris Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings. Last month, her own [truthfulness was called into question](#) as an article she wrote in the Spectator, discussing her experiences of coronavirus, created the strong impression that she and Cummings had remained in London, rather than travelling to Durham, against government instructions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Baring's family fortune was made from the ownership of slaves, and the [massive compensation](#) paid to the owners when the trade was banned.

The hidden Kikuyu documents that came to light in 2012 were part of a larger archive, most of which was systematically [destroyed by the British authorities](#) before decolonisation. Special Branch oversaw what it called "[a thorough purge](#)" of the Kenyan archives. Fake files were inserted to take the place of those that were expunged. "The very existence" of the deleted files, one memo insisted, "should never be revealed". Where there were too many files to burn easily, an order proposed that they "be [packed in weighted crates](#) and dumped in very deep and current-free water at maximum practicable distance from the coast". So much for not editing or censoring our past.

The same deletions occurred across the British empire. We can only guess at what the lost documents might have revealed. Were there more details of the [massacre of civilians in Malaya](#)? Of Britain's dirty war in [Yemen in the 1960s](#)? Of the catastrophic [famine the British government created](#) in Bengal in 1943, by snatching food from the mouths of local people and exporting it? Of its atrocities in [Aden](#) and Cyprus? One thing the surviving files do show us is the British government's secret [eviction of the inhabitants of the Chagos Islands](#) in the Indian Ocean, to make way for a US airbase. The Foreign Office instructed its officials to deny the very existence of the indigenous islanders, so that they could be removed without compensation or parliamentary objections.

The erasures and deletions continue. In 2010, the disembarkation cards of the Windrush generation of immigrants from the Caribbean [were all destroyed](#) by Theresa May's Home Office. Many people suddenly had no means of proving their right to citizenship of this country, facilitating May's [cruel and outrageous deportations](#). In 2013, the Conservatives [deleted the entire public archive](#) of their speeches and press releases from 2000 to 2010, and blocked access to web searches using the Wayback Machine, impeding people trying to hold them to account for past statements and policies.

This week, the prime minister asked the head of his policy unit, Munira Mirza, to [set up a commission on racial inequalities](#). She is part of a network of activists whose entire history is, in my view, confused and obfuscated. It arose from the Revolutionary Communist party and Living Marxism magazine. As these names suggest, they purported to belong to the far left, but they look to me like the [extreme right](#). In 2018 I discovered that one of its outlets, Spiked magazine, had been [heavily funded by the US billionaire Charles Koch](#). Other sources of funding remain obscure. In common with some of her comrades, Mirza has [cast doubt on institutional racism](#). Her new role has caused dismay among anti-racist campaigners, who fear yet more editing of history.

Lying about history, censoring and editing is what the political establishment does. The histories promoted by successive governments, especially those involving the UK's relationship with other nations, are one long chain of lies. Because we are lied to, we cannot move on. Maturity, either in a person or in a nation, could be defined as being honest about ourselves. We urgently need to grow

up.

George Monbiot

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