

British Memory of Colonial Brutality in Kenya and Elsewhere

Written by Laura Routley

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/08/too-long-ago-and-anyway-the-other-guy-was-worse-british-memory-of-colonial-brutality-in-kenya-and-elsewhere/>

LAURA ROUTLEY, MAY 8 2013

Too much time has passed for a fair trial, argued the British government's representative Barrister Guy Mansfield QC in July 2012. This defence was not accepted and the subsequent legal defeats of the government have resulted in an agreement to compensate Kenyan prison camp survivors of the "Kenyan Emergency", from 1952-1960. Mr Nzili, Mr Nyingi and Mrs Mara, the individuals who pursued the legal case, were victims of organised officially sanctioned brutality and torture—castration, sexual abuse, and severe beatings—at the hands of the British authorities. There are thousands more Kenyans who suffered similarly. Subsequent to these legal defeats, there has been a grudging agreement in recent days from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office that British colonial history needs to be debated as the testimonies and documentary evidence challenge "long-cherished views" of this period of British colonial exploits.

The question of the passage of time was also raised in February when British Prime Minister David Cameron visited the memorial to, but did not apologise for, the Amritsar Massacre conducted by the British Indian Army in 1919, because, he said, it would be wrong to "reach back into history".

Cameron does reach back into history, however, as his plans for a £50 Million program of events and activities to commemorate the First World War shows. Although both the Amritsar Massacre and the Kenyan emergency postdate the First World War, it is not the passage of time that is the key point here. Rather, the First World War, for Cameron, is a fundamental part of British national consciousness. His observation overlooks the orchestration of the memorialisation of the First World War by state powers that have attempted to shape and reify processes of memory and forgetting into particular forms of narrative: in other words, to give the First World War a particular place in the national consciousness. His plans for further commemoration are thus a continuation of this deliberate positioning.

Yet, productions of a particular narrative are only ever partly successful. As Jenny Edkins details in her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, memorialisation of the First World War in the UK was contested, in the first instance by the bereaved who refused to be involved in state memorialisation that gave "meaning where there was none" (p.230). The production of these linear, meaningful, narratives involves forgetting as well as remembering. It includes the marginalisation of elements of the First World War including the over one million Indian troops who fought with the British on the Western front and the profound impacts of the East African campaign on what is now Kenya.

How traumatic, brutal events are remembered or forgotten *is* political. Their remembrance and forgetting is part of the process by which the certainties of everyday politics and the imagined community of who 'we' are gets produced and reproduced. This production of a 'we' (in this case British-ness) is twofold; firstly it is about distinguishing who is included in the 'we', but more than this, it is about the nature of who 'we' are.

The atrocities committed in Kenya in the late 1950s and the Amritsar massacre are disruptive to narratives about who the British 'we' is. Their resonance is dangerous, disquieting, disruptive and therefore requires containment. Isolating them as dim and distant history, rather than as an interruption to narratives about who we are, does just this.

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Whilst Cameron sees the First World War –or a particular version of the First World War–as part of the history that “make[s] us who we are today”, brutality in Kenya and India (and elsewhere) are not.

As Himadeep Muppidi notes in *Colonial Signs of International Relations* the argument that ‘the other guy was worse’ – that other European powers’ colonial behaviour was more brutal – is a frequent refrain in discussions of colonial atrocity. This scapegoats in two ways: firstly by emphasising the ‘normality’ of these kinds of activities–others were doing them too–and secondly, by highlighting that even in this context ‘we’ were less culpable.

Tim Stanley, writing in *History Today* acknowledges that in the labour camps set up by the British during the Kenyan Emergency “torture was common and ignored by the colonial administration”; however he goes on to argue that “... it should be remembered that Britain was not as savage or superior as the French were in Algeria or the Portuguese were in Angola.” Why then should it be remembered? Is it so that even as there is an admission of *some* responsibility for the suffering of others, our identity is shored up in terms of ‘our’ *relative* benevolence? Colonial histories are complicated and contested–all histories are. But who would ‘we’ be if we allowed the testimonies of Mr Nzili, Mr Nyingi and Mrs Mara to interrupt the (re)telling of the linear narrative of who the British are? Our national consciousness is important –just ask David Cameron.

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