

# Facts about Atrocity: Reporting Colonial Violence in Postwar Britain

by *Erik Linstrum*

In the historiography of British imperialism, the question of scale – local versus global, micro versus macro – is fraught with political implications. When historians trace globe-spanning networks of populations, commodities, capital and information, do they necessarily obscure the human cost of empire: the messy on-the-ground realities of conquest, coercion and exploitation? In the eloquent view expressed by some critics, global scales end up privileging narratives about metropolitan elites and therefore sanitizing the violence which made British rule possible.<sup>1</sup> The recent resurgence of interest in imperial violence has, after all, focused heavily on the sanguinity of settler colonialism, which took shape from intensely local struggles over land and identity.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the language of networks, movements, and flows is simply too distant, too impersonal, to do justice to the horrors of empire.<sup>3</sup>

The trouble here is that if we overlook one particular kind of global movement – the movement of information – we risk decoupling colonial violence from the state, the society and the culture which ultimately made it possible. Asking what metropolitan Britons *knew* about violence against colonized populations, arguably a matter of moral reckoning, involves recognizing at least that the use of force overseas inevitably reverberated in the metropole one way or another.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most notorious atrocities inflicted on British subjects in the colonies – the suppression of the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica in 1865, the Amritsar massacre in India in 1919, the Hola massacre in Kenya in 1959 – elicited widespread attention and impassioned responses in Britain.<sup>5</sup> Other events – like the aerial bombardment of Iraq after the First World War – were not quite *causes célèbres* but provoked controversy in Parliament and the press nonetheless.<sup>6</sup> Violent methods sometimes drew attention thanks to their defenders rather than their critics; Winston Churchill's surprisingly frank account of a 'punitive expedition' on the North-West Frontier of India in 1897 is an example of this.<sup>7</sup> Other kinds of knowledge were produced by the need to assess the effectiveness of violence and recalibrate it: for instance, the knowledge of bureaucrats, soldiers, and other counterinsurgency planners who recorded minutes on files, lectured at staff colleges, and crafted manuals of tactics and strategy.<sup>8</sup>

The history of knowledge about violence is, of course, inseparable from a broader debate about the impact of empire in Britain. Since John

MacKenzie's pioneering *Propaganda and Empire* (1984), the ubiquity of nationalist, militarist, and racist imagery has been seen both as quantitative evidence for the extent of that impact and as a motor of popular support for the use of force overseas. This was the world of what J. A. Hobson called 'jingoism' and George Orwell termed 'gutter patriotism': emotive symbols of identification and belonging which short-circuited critical scrutiny of empire's dark side. In the late nineteenth century Fleet Street newspapers transformed military leaders into heroic figures of Christian masculinity.<sup>9</sup> Between the wars, romantic visions of the unknowable and archaic Orient fed equally romantic visions of aerial bombardment as a panacea for restive subjects.<sup>10</sup> In the age of emergency after 1945, press and broadcast journalists dwelled sympathetically on the victimization of British settlers abroad while demonizing anticolonial rebels as bestial and bloodthirsty.<sup>11</sup> Pervasive stereotypes of Britishness and Otherness, in short, snapped the bonds of empathy and legitimized the oppression of populations overseas.

Recently, this familiar narrative has been called into question. Was public opinion really so malleable and imperialist propaganda so effective? Was British culture itself really so unitary and so closely tied to empire?<sup>12</sup> The more evidence we have about the actual reception of propaganda, for instance, the more ambiguous its impact seems.<sup>13</sup> Some would question the relevance of 'public opinion' altogether on the grounds that what the British saw and heard about their empire was less important than what they did *not* see or hear. The state that invented Official Secrets Acts and D-notices was adept at keeping embarrassing and controversial information from public view.<sup>14</sup> Media historians have shown that imperial officials discouraged critical journalism by wielding legal powers of suppression and manipulating press outlets with promises of access, advertising revenue, and personal relationships.<sup>15</sup> The 2011 revelation of an illegal, decades-old archive in the British intelligence facility at Hanslope Park – containing documents on torture from Emergency-era Kenya along with sensitive records from many other colonies – serves as a powerful reminder that secrecy and censorship were always pillars of imperial power.<sup>16</sup>

What is missing in the history of imperial violence is the vast terrain between these two poles – between propaganda and secrecy, between engagement and indifference, between jingoism and absent-mindedness. Public engagement with the dark side of the imperial project was uneven, fragmented and sporadic; long stretches of seeming indifference were punctuated by occasional moments of outrage. As the literary critic Mary Favret has observed, war has shaped British culture less as a proximate threat than as a vague and uneasy sense of connection with distant events.<sup>17</sup> We need to think more about epistemological gray areas and emotional gray areas – about uncertainty, ambivalence, and denial – as ways of relating to empire.<sup>18</sup> This article asks how these sensibilities operated in the period which has figured most prominently in recent reassessments of colonial violence: the

age of emergency after 1945, which saw the brutal and sometimes indiscriminate use of force, including torture, collective punishment, and coerced labour, across the British Empire.<sup>19</sup>

If knowledge about violence was more or less open in different ‘circles of knowing’, as sociologist Stanley Cohen has put it, then the military unit was the tightest circle of all – a community within which frank acknowledgments of extreme violence became possible.<sup>20</sup> Regimental magazines carried casual references to human trophies in Kenya.<sup>21</sup> Photo albums compiled by soldiers in Malaya interspersed images of insurgents’ severed heads with festive snaps of campfires and holidays.<sup>22</sup> Secrets held within the unit, moreover, had a tendency to seep into wider ‘circles of knowing’. Military doctors noticed suspicious injuries on the bodies of prisoners; the victims themselves filed complaints and signed petitions; enlisted soldiers made anguished confessions in letters home.<sup>23</sup> One soldier who served in Kenya showed his brother a photograph of ‘an African having his arms sawn off’; the brother, in turn, showed the photograph to his instructor in an extramural course in Scarborough; the instructor, New Left activist Peter Worsley, then tried (unsuccessfully) to get the image published in the press.<sup>24</sup>

With the continuation of National Service until 1960, hundreds of thousands of men who were not career soldiers found themselves serving in colonial counterinsurgencies. Compared to their seasoned counterparts in the regular army, they may have been more likely to share distressing details with family and friends. One young National Serviceman who spent two tours of duty in Cyprus between 1955 and 1958 told his father about ‘the rough stuff that the military teaches them’ – how, for instance, ‘fingers or thumbs inserted inside the mouth and a quick pull splits the sides of the flesh of the cheek’.<sup>25</sup> A Londoner with ‘friends and acquaintances who did their National Service in Kenya’ likewise heard ‘some horrible stories of happenings there’. He also had a close relative who served as an Army sergeant in Cyprus and came back remarking that ‘it is no use using rifle butts against Greeks, they are so greasy that only bayonets will do the trick’.<sup>26</sup> One ex-National Serviceman wrote to his Member of Parliament in 1960 describing the methods of torture – such as beating prisoners wrapped in wet blankets to avoid leaving visible marks – in which he and other conscripts were trained by Army intelligence officers.<sup>27</sup> In private conversations and whispered admissions like these, knowledge about violence spread to one person at a time.

Something happened, though, when this knowledge passed from the private sphere to the public sphere: firsthand testimony quickly receded into uncertainty and doubt. Some of the most widely disseminated narratives of British violence were, in a formal sense, fictional. The Mau Mau film drama *Something of Value* (1957) featured Rock Hudson asking, ‘Since when do we use torture?’ against a backdrop of piercing screams and barbed wire.<sup>28</sup> The debut novel by National Service veteran Simon Raven, *The Feathers of Death* (1959), quoted an unsavoury police inspector as saying, ‘“Treat ‘em

rough, that's what I say, show 'em who's master'".<sup>29</sup> Cyprus veteran Troy Kennedy Martin scripted a BBC teleplay, *The Interrogator* (1961), in which a Special Branch man 'too long in the bush' terrorizes an EOKA suspect into confessing.<sup>30</sup> These were disturbing glimpses of the dark side of empire. But they were blunted both by the vagaries of fictionalization and by an aesthetic which prized moral ambiguity, suggesting that neither side had clean hands in the dirty wars of empire.

In the literary world, moreover, there may have been an inverse relationship between the clarity with which violence was represented and the size of the audience. Mona Brand's play *Strangers in the Land* (1952) portrayed a verandah-dwelling, cocktail-sipping set of Malayan planters ruthlessly torching villages and keeping the severed heads of insurgents as trophies. But it ran only at the tiny, activist-run Unity Theatre in London because the office of the Lord Chamberlain banned it from the commercial stage.<sup>31</sup> Similarly confined to the *avant-garde* fringe was *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp*, an experimental piece which played at the Royal Court Theatre for just one night in 1959. Songs and improvised speeches by black performers alternated with readings from the text of the House of Commons debates on the fatal beating of Kenyan prisoners by British jailers.<sup>32</sup>

Another kind of public narrative about violence had stronger claims to factuality but appeared ambiguous for a different reason: it had partisan roots. When documentary evidence of colonial atrocity was publicized in the 1950s, it came overwhelmingly from the left wing of the British political spectrum.<sup>33</sup> The news that British troops in Malaya were decapitating the corpses of insurgents was broken by the *Daily Worker*, which ran a front-page photograph of a grinning infantryman holding his trophy in the air.<sup>34</sup> Reports that security forces in Malaya were keeping scoreboards and awarding prizes for enemy kills were publicized by the Cambridge-educated Communist John Eber.<sup>35</sup> In Kenya, the testimony of a former British Army lieutenant who claimed that he had been dismissed for refusing to commit atrocities was published and circulated by the Kenya Committee, which was founded by members of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1953. The *exposé* by disillusioned Kenya detention-camp officer Eileen Fletcher first appeared in the pacifist weekly *Peace News*, the official paper of the Peace Pledge Union. It is true that the most influential organizations to campaign against imperial violence – the Congress of Peoples against Imperialism and its successor, the Movement for Colonial Freedom – drew most of their support from the non-Communist left and numbered in their ranks dozens of Labour Party politicians. But it is telling that the leaders of these anticolonial pressure groups were terrified of appearing too close to Communism and ended up disavowed by Labour frontbenchers for precisely that reason anyway. The ideological and partisan divisions of the Cold War cast a shadow of suspicion on some of the most detailed allegations of abuse by British forces.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways, then, knowledge of violence was widespread. But it was also fragmented and ambiguous: whispered behind closed doors, performed on stage and screen, distorted by political battles. How could anything like ‘truth’ – a commonly held, socially meaningful body of knowledge – emerge from this underworld of rumours, representations, and allegations? In fact, even the professional journalists whose job it was to produce reliable knowledge about current events produced more doubt than certainty when it came to colonial violence. Paradoxically, it was not despite but because of their commitment to the pursuit of truth – embodied in ideals such as neutrality, factuality, and restraint – that reporters often failed to communicate the depth and breadth of violence in the colonies.

Of course, journalists were by no means immune from partisanship. Left-leaning papers, like the pugnacious tabloid *Daily Mirror*, trumpeted evidence of excessive force and found themselves resented by many British soldiers as a result.<sup>37</sup> Right-leaning papers, by contrast, played up military heroism and insurgent villainy while attributing humanitarian concerns to ‘the lunatic fringe of the extreme Left’, as *Daily Mail* reporter Fred Majdalany later put it.<sup>38</sup> But a significant swath of the British media in this period aspired to deliver news defined by accuracy more than ideology. The wartime examples of Reuters and the BBC – news organizations which burnished their reputations by projecting independence and impartiality despite close ties to the British state – cast a long shadow.<sup>39</sup> Amid rising costs and intensified competition from television, newspapers came under pressure to appeal to the largest possible audience, loosening their relationships both with political parties and with the ideological preferences of their proprietors.<sup>40</sup> The paternalistic ideal of the Victorian-era liberal press, ‘improving’ and ‘elevating’ a newly enfranchised electorate, was yielding to a new sense that readers wanted neutral information as much as – and perhaps more than – they wanted political instruction.<sup>41</sup> Revealingly, it was only in this period that many British papers abandoned a longstanding convention by placing news, rather than leaders or advertisements, on the front page: the *Manchester Guardian* in 1952, the *Scotsman* in 1957, the *Glasgow Herald* in 1958, and the *Times* in 1966.<sup>42</sup>

Mirroring these institutional changes, British journalists after the war increasingly defined themselves as professionals who observed rigorous standards to ensure the reliability of their output. In 1947, the newspapers owned by Lord Kemsley – including dailies in Manchester, Newcastle, and four other cities – started a scheme for new recruits to supplement on-the-job experience with lectures, seminars and courses at technical colleges. Five years later, a coalition of owners, editors, and trade unions founded the National Council for the Training of Journalists, which implemented a version of the so-called ‘Kemsley system’ on a national scale. Most aspiring reporters now had to meet minimum educational standards and navigate proficiency tests which assessed news judgement along with practical skills like shorthand and typewriting.<sup>43</sup> The journalistic career was, in short,

changing shape from a kind of ink-stained artisanship to a specialized and regimented vocation. The growing influence of trade unions in newsrooms reinforced the sense that journalists were less accountable to owners than to their own professional community.<sup>44</sup>

This heightened sense of independence often translated into an adversarial attitude toward established institutions like the military and the colonial service – and not only among reporters at left-leaning outlets like the *New Statesman* and the *Observer*. Officials continually clashed with journalists for producing counterinsurgency stories they saw as embarrassing, demoralizing, or subversive.<sup>45</sup> The *Times* correspondent in Singapore in the early 1950s, Louis Heren, was a self-described ‘Cockney radical’ who criticized the colonial elite for its ‘greed and opulence’, its ‘pompous and status-ridden’ ways, and its willingness to exploit ‘racial antipathies, resentments, and hatreds’. General Templer and his aides considered him a Communist and tried, unsuccessfully, to get him fired.<sup>46</sup> In Cyprus, the former foreign editor of Lord Beaverbrook’s *Daily Express*, Charles Foley, drove the government to distraction with his attacks on government policy in the pages of the newly founded *Cyprus Times*, prompting a raft of draconian censorship regulations and ending up targeted for prosecution himself.<sup>47</sup> In Kenya, a *Times* journalist observed in 1954, virtually the entire press corps was ‘anti-settler and they are very keen on ferreting out misbehaviour’.<sup>48</sup> The husband-and-wife reporting team who travelled to the colony for the BBC in 1955, Edward and Marjorie Ward, quickly decided that the white settlers there were unreconstructed racists – ‘so greedy and so stupid’, as one of them recalled later.<sup>49</sup> Settlers in Kenya returned the favour by labelling the reporters they encountered as ‘bloody Bolshies’ who did not understand the colonial way of life.<sup>50</sup>

Not every reporter in the colonies assumed such an oppositional stance, of course, and some grew close to the establishment figures they covered. When journalists on the ground appeared to lose their detachment, however, editors back home took note. The *Times*’s colonial editor worried in 1955 that the paper’s Nairobi correspondent was paying far too much attention to ‘petty squabbles within the administration’ while ignoring news from the detention camps.<sup>51</sup> The BBC’s head of foreign news, Anthony Wigan, complained that white Kenyan journalists were ‘hardly objective’; another BBC executive agreed that ‘many senior people in East Africa are undoubtedly greatly influenced by a narrow conception of their own local interests’.<sup>52</sup> Editorial higher-ups had at least two strategies at their disposal for policing standards of objectivity overseas. First, they issued story assignments of their own in addition to approving or rejecting pitches from the field. And second, they ensured that no one journalist had anything close to a monopoly on coverage of a story by dispatching processions of roving correspondents to supplement the output of locally based stringers. In Kenya, London-based colonial correspondent Oliver Woods regularly dropped in to do his own reporting while at least four different BBC correspondents filed



stories from there. In Cyprus, *The Times* had no fewer than eight reporters between 1955 and 1961.<sup>53</sup> Even pro-government or pro-settler journalists, therefore, had to work within the constraints of a system.

Overseas reporters may have felt these constraints more acutely than most. They were acutely aware that 'a good home story' was almost always 'more interesting to the general run of readers than a good foreign story', as an observer remarked in 1957.<sup>54</sup> At *The Times*, editors reminded their correspondents that the rising cost of newsprint prevented 'anything like a complete' treatment of international news and urged them to be selective.<sup>55</sup> At the BBC, foreign correspondents competed for space in a nightly half-hour programme, *Radio Newsreel*; some of them got more than eighty percent of their dispatches on the air while others managed a success rate of barely more than fifty percent.<sup>56</sup> Operating amid these pressures, reporters in the colonies had a powerful incentive to meet and even anticipate the expectations of their editors at home.<sup>57</sup> So what was news, according to the professional standards of the time, and how should it be presented?

As one contemporary handbook put it, the journalist's mission was 'the securing and presentation of facts accurately and in truthful perspective'.<sup>58</sup> Reliability mattered far more than originality; every piece of information which made it into print or on the air had to be confirmed and verified beyond all doubt. Journalism manuals singled out institutional sources of information – press attachés, government relations officers, libraries, and museums – as vital allies in the reporter's work. Standard reference books like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Who's Who* were considered indispensable tools 'every hour of the day and night'; so were press clippings from other newspapers.<sup>59</sup> Journalistic practice in these accounts was not a matter of investigation or representation so much as data collection: simply tapping 'the fountains of information from which flow rivers of facts'.<sup>60</sup> The first page of Charles Rigby's *The Staff Journalist* (1950) referred to the much-quoted wisdom of legendary *Manchester Guardian* editor C. P. Scott – 'comment is free, facts are sacred' – as 'something like Holy Writ'.<sup>61</sup> In the words of a rare contemporary who questioned the reigning empiricism, 'the average journalist ... in his simple, sentimental, and unthinking way ... still believes that most news is "natural" news, of which he is the mere recorder'.<sup>62</sup>

This was a code defined not just by accuracy but by objectivity. That is a notoriously amorphous term but, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have shown, the imposition of constraints on individual agency – through strict rules and automated procedures, through the cultivation of distance between the observer and the observed, through the accumulation of details rather than the construction of generalities – was always central.<sup>63</sup> The robust form of objectivity which prevailed in British journalism after 1945 enjoined a 'passive', almost 'stenographic', form of empiricism.<sup>64</sup> Reporters should confine themselves to collecting and disseminating facts beyond

dispute; anything that might draw attention to the correspondent's own subjectivity or agency was considered suspect. If 'advocacy' ever appeared in a news article, *Times* editor Ralph Deakin declared, 'we feel that it should be indirect, as though the Correspondent, in presenting a forefront of facts, were also presenting the best arguments, not as his own opinion, but as the best, or widest, or deepest opinion available in his territory'.<sup>65</sup> His successor, William Haley, likewise insisted that maintaining a position of detachment – reflecting reality rather than intervening in it – was essential. While obliged to report 'what is happening regardless of whether it reflects credit or discredit on the Government in power', Haley declared in 1953, 'the point is that a *Times* correspondent ... has to be above the battle, not one of the contestants'.<sup>66</sup>

One consequence of this sensibility is that the gap between what reporters knew, and what they communicated to the public, was sometimes vast. The colonial correspondent for the *Times*, Oliver Woods, paid annual visits to Kenya during the early years of the Mau Mau revolt. As early as December 1952, he told his colleagues in London, 'I am very distressed by the cases of "beating up" which continue to occur'. Some British-born Kenya Police Reserve officers at a station in Laikipia, he reported, were 'torturing prisoners, if what is alleged is true, in a sadistic manner'. At another police station where Mau Mau suspects were being held for interrogation, Woods himself 'noticed that two out of three had bandages around their heads'. A year later, in December 1953, Woods heard from a high-ranking British official – the Chief Native Commissioner, Edward Windley – that police reserve officers were torturing Africans at a station in Thompsons Falls and that the settler-dominated Kenya Regiment was 'shooting far too many Africans'. A brigadier in the King's African Rifles admitted to Woods that his own soldiers 'had been rather beastly to some prisoners'. George Kinnear told Woods that a *Standard* reporter 'had seen European police beating African prisoners on the head with revolver butts'.<sup>67</sup>

The damning details seemed to mount with every moment Woods spent in Kenya. And yet not one of them ever made it into the stories he published in *The Times*. The closest Woods came to exposing colonial violence was a single line in the second paragraph of a story, which ran on 6 November 1952, labelling police action as 'indiscriminate and rough'. The headline under which this story ran – 'Limited Results of Campaign against Mau Mau' – was revealing. British misbehaviour made news in this case not because it violated moral norms but because it revealed strategic failures: as Woods observed in the story, 'interrogation has alienated as many as it has deterred'.<sup>68</sup> In this context, a cursory and euphemistic reference to 'rough' treatment made far more sense than dwelling on the details of torture, which might risk the appearance of bias or sensationalism. Woods's impassive language, by contrast, insisted that violence merited public attention in a highly circumscribed way: not as the cause of pain and suffering, not as an



occasion for outrage, but as the object of a cost-benefit analysis for colonial policy.<sup>69</sup>

If Woods seemed to sanitize the ugly realities of empire, he did not do so from a sense of patriotic or sentimental attachment. As he confessed to his editor during a trip to central Africa in 1953, 'I don't really "like" white settlement at all, if one is looking at it in terms of likes and dislikes'.<sup>70</sup> From Kenya, he wired to his editors every scrap of evidence about torture which came into his hands. But he stopped short of filing a condemnatory story as he wrestled endlessly with the reliability and consistency of that evidence. He expressed frustration at his inability to piece together a mosaic of reliable facts; much of the information that came to him was unpublishable because secondhand, off-the-record, or both. As he put it in January 1954, 'it is very difficult to get the facts about brutality in Kenya. Where incidents occur, there is naturally a conspiracy of silence. This in turn produces rumours which on investigation nearly always turn out false ... It is very difficult to get any coherent picture out of all this'. Woods worried that even the firsthand evidence he possessed was not incontrovertible. While the sight of imprisoned Africans in bandages suggested that 'they had been hit at some time', he pointed out that 'it might have happened any other way'.<sup>71</sup> For Woods, as for many of his fellow journalists, the fear of printing an inaccurate fact outweighed the fear of concealing suggestive evidence.

For its part, the colonial state in Kenya worked to exploit those professional constraints by manipulating the information available to reporters. After Operation Anvil, a military action which removed almost the entire Kikuyu population from Nairobi in the spring of 1954, journalists struggled to find sources other than white British settlers, soldiers, and administrators in the city where they were based. One correspondent noted that few Africans 'dared to show their face' there while another was reduced to surreptitiously interviewing taxi drivers.<sup>72</sup> Officials, meanwhile, shrewdly leveraged their position to keep reporters close. They wielded the carrot of access, from interviews at Government House to Army missions in the jungle, along with the stick of vocal complaints about accuracy and fairness. A reporter who filed a critical story might find himself summoned for a dressing-down by the governor.<sup>73</sup> Even that passing reference to 'rough' treatment, Woods noted, had got the police commissioner 'after my blood'.<sup>74</sup>

Above all, officials shaped coverage by filling reporters' notebooks with a steady stream of facts and figures. Three times each day in Nairobi – at 11.0 a.m., 4.0 p.m., and 9.0 p.m. – press aides issued typewritten situation reports or 'sitreps' describing the latest military action and tallying the casualties on both sides.<sup>75</sup> They supplemented this ready-made copy with frequent not-for-attribution conversations, encouraging a sense of complicity and shaping the perceptions of reporters and editors without having to commit themselves in print. Quietly leaked numbers made a particularly strong impression on Woods. After a government source told him in December 1953 that 150,000 arrests to that point had led to just twenty-four official

complaints, Woods concluded that there may be 'a lot of rough stuff but I think there is little real sadism'.<sup>76</sup> Whether spuriously or not, sources from within the state bureaucracy could speak with the authority of a comprehensive knowledge which insurgents in the field had no hope of matching. Officials offered facts; rebels, whistleblowers and witnesses could reply only with anecdotes.

To be clear, *Times* coverage of the campaign against Mau Mau was not exactly a whitewash. The legal travails of security officers prosecuted for abuses were dutifully featured in courtroom dispatches. One of the most notorious of these cases, the 1954 court-martial of Captain G. S. L. Griffiths, proved so disturbing that the paper editorialized against soldiers who approached their duties in the spirit of 'an afternoon's shoot or a pig-sticking match'.<sup>77</sup> But these damning stories always had to coexist with reports about exculpatory investigations, government denials, and individual acquittals (including Griffiths's): a muddying of the waters which helped to validate the official line that abuses were rare and isolated rather than pervasive and systematic. Amid the swirl of charges and counter-charges, journalists hesitated to invest their own authority in support of one side or another. Weighed against assertions, both public and private, from a phalanx of official sources, the reliability of Woods's own observations appeared shaky – so they stayed unpublished in the 'Confidential Memorandum' file at *The Times* office on Printing House Square.

Governed by such exacting standards, even left-leaning journalists were prone to suppressing reports of violence. In 1958, the colonial correspondent for the *Observer*, Colin Legum, agreed to hold off publishing a damning letter from Kenyan detainees in the Mariira camp after officials responded with off-the-record rebuttals to specific allegations and a series of testimonials from medical and missionary observers. Although barred from visiting the camp to see things for himself, Legum ultimately printed a story – 'Kenya Frees 1,000 Each Month' – which accepted the rosy official narrative of a benevolent, rapidly disbanding detention regime.<sup>78</sup> At the more reliably partisan *Tribune*, a Labour bulwark, editor Mervyn Jones received bundles of photographs showing the abuse of African bodies at British hands. But Jones decided that, because 'no one could prove who was doing the killing and torture, or prove who it was that was suffering', the images could not be printed.<sup>79</sup>

The *New Statesman* trod cautiously with Kenya, too, despite its proud self-image as 'one of the text books of colonial liberation'.<sup>80</sup> Editorials did repeatedly condemn the excesses of settler behaviour while news reports related evidence of 'indiscriminate terror' and 'ruthless cruelty'.<sup>81</sup> But when editor Kingsley Martin in 1953 received letters from Africans detailing beatings, rapes, and other abuses suffered at the hands of security forces, he decided against publishing them. Although these accounts came from different witnesses, in different parts of the country, and in some cases were validated by locals he knew personally, Martin was haunted by the

possibility that nationalist partisans had fabricated the lurid details to advance their own agenda. ‘Is this propaganda?’, he wondered.<sup>82</sup> While the sceptical, independent sensibility of Martin’s *New Statesman* led to criticism of government claims, the same attitude could also silence nationalist voices.

This was not just a Kenyan story. Across the postwar empire, journalists struck notes of ambivalence and uncertainty when they tried to report about violence. In Cyprus, for instance, members of the press corps jokingly referred to Special Branch interrogators as ‘H.M.T.s’ – ‘Her Majesty’s Torturers’ – when talking among themselves.<sup>83</sup> While *Manchester Guardian* correspondent Nancy Crawshaw acknowledged in print that ‘rough handling takes place’ at the hands of British troops, she nevertheless stressed that allegations were ‘part of an intensive campaign to discredit the British’ and therefore ‘grossly exaggerated’.<sup>84</sup> The editor of the English-language *Cyprus Mail*, Kenneth Mackenzie, was likewise conflicted. He privately admitted that ‘our troops do go in for some pretty rough stuff’ but complained that the torrent of accusations and counter-accusations made it ‘almost impossible to ascertain where exactly the truth lies’. He represented this uncertainty in graphic form, with a hand-drawn sketch which showed the ‘Truth’ hovering somewhere between the ‘British Version’ at one extreme and the ‘Greek Version’ at the other.<sup>85</sup> (Fig. 1) The fact that anticolonial Cypriots were waging a well-organized campaign to dramatize and, in some cases, to fabricate abuses by British forces only heightened reporters’ reluctance to put their credibility behind lurid accusations.<sup>86</sup>

The BBC was, if anything, even more dogmatic than newspapers were about enforcing the dictates of objectivity. One BBC executive, without apparent irony, cited Charles Dickens to describe the work of overseas correspondents: ‘Their brief has been, to quote Mr. Gradgrind, “Facts alone are wanted in life . . . You are not to see anywhere what you don’t see in fact”’.<sup>87</sup> The director of foreign news, preparing for a special broadcast featuring overseas correspondents in 1955, reminded the BBC’s man in Nairobi that ‘we don’t want to get involved in any deep political questions, so you should keep your answers as factual as possible’. While the causes and consequences of the Mau Mau rebellion were considered off-limits, therefore, permissible topics included whether insurgent attacks had affected the reporter personally and whether he carried a gun.<sup>88</sup> This epistemological

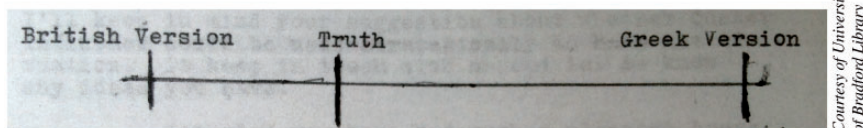


Fig. 1. The epistemological dilemma of the overseas reporter: *Cyprus Mail* editor Kenneth Mackenzie on “atrocious stories” in Cyprus, 1958.

conservatism – a concern with events rather than causes, consequences, or meanings – flowed from the top of the BBC hierarchy. New Zealander Tahu Hole, who served as news editor from 1948 to 1960, frustrated many correspondents by imposing a two-source rule and applying it in the most literal way imaginable. If Reuters ran an Associated Press story verbatim, for instance, Hole considered this confirmation for purposes of the rule.<sup>89</sup> By redefining reliability as replicability, this policy made it difficult, if not impossible, to report any information – the lonely whistleblower’s claim, the traumatized survivor’s fractured testimony – which strayed beyond the approved communiqués of official sources. The forces of professionalization – a growing dependence on rules, codes, and standards – had the effect of marginalizing voices beyond the state.

This is ironic because the usual story told about the BBC in this period centres on the broadcaster’s heroic willingness to challenge British power overseas. In 1956 Director General Ian Jacob stood firm against pressure from the Eden government at the height of the Suez crisis, broadcasting newspaper editorials critical of the invasion despite threats of a massive budget cut. Jacob responded with this stirring declaration: ‘If the BBC is found for the first time to be suppressing significant items of news, its reputation would rapidly vanish, and the harm to the national interest done in that event would enormously outweigh any damage caused by displaying to the world the workings of a free democracy.’<sup>90</sup> In covering the counter-insurgency in Kenya, though, that proud commitment to editorial independence would collide with other professional imperatives.

The BBC’s correspondent in Nairobi for most of the Mau Mau uprising, Ian McCulloch, had a penchant for ceremonial occasions and human-interest set pieces. He reported one story about the Archbishop of Canterbury laying the foundation stone for a memorial to victims of Mau Mau, and another – ideal for Empire Day, he said – about a ten-year-old settler girl who bandaged the wounds of an African farm worker after a Mau Mau attack. For Christmas 1954, he covered the lighting of the Christmas tree outside Nairobi city hall, a pageant featuring African carol singers, along with presents for needy children, and a speech from the colonial governor. It is little wonder that BBC executives were worried about the dangers of sanitized coverage. But when they dispatched other reporters to the colony, they learned that sceptical and probing reportage was far more vulnerable to accusations of bias than the dutiful stenography in which McCulloch specialized.

A special programme called ‘A Journey in Kenya’, narrated by longtime correspondent Edward Ward and scripted by his wife Marjorie Ward, aired on the Home Service at 7:30 in the evening on Tuesday 19 April 1955. It opened with a recording made in a village near Embu where security forces were carrying out a hut-to-hut search for Mau Mau insurgents. ‘Several shots have been fired’, Edward Ward said, ‘and now you can hear . . . this terrible eerie sound of the women wailing.’ After describing the body of a seventeen-year-old boy murdered by Mau Mau, Ward pointed out that far

more Africans than Europeans had died on both sides of the conflict. 'How many Mau Mau have been shot, hanged, killed with poisoned arrows, bombed?', he asked. 'There are no true figures – one knows only that 40,000 are in detention camps and prisons.' The programme employed voice actors to reconstruct a cocktail party, attended by the Wards in Embu, during which settlers casually referred to Africans as 'primitive savages' and expressed a desire to see them hanging from trees. When one settler complained that people back home did not appreciate the hardships of pioneer life on the East African frontier, Edward Ward replied with withering scepticism: 'Oh, come off it. You came out here to escape the English social revolution'.<sup>91</sup>

The reaction from the Colonial Office, then in the hands of a Conservative government, was predictably outraged. Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd complained that the programme 'displayed a clear bias against the European settlers' and pressed for the cancellation of a planned rebroadcast overseas.<sup>92</sup> More surprising, though, is that so few journalists within the BBC attempted to defend it. One staffer complained that 'the word "settlers" in this feature regularly introduces a point of view which is distasteful, extremist, or untenable', citing the use of actors' voices as an especially egregious offence.<sup>93</sup> Another faulted the Wards for taking 'sides against the settlers' and added: 'if it is true that in private in Kenya they made no secret of their anti-settler feelings, they were wrong to do so'.<sup>94</sup> Bowing to pressure, BBC director-general Ian Jacob decided to cancel the rebroadcast of the programme overseas. While 'containing a good deal of quite accurate reporting', he told Lennox-Boyd, it 'left out so much of what was required to make it a true representation of the highly complex situation that exists'. By expressing a point of view which seemed to emanate not from attributed sources but themselves, the Wards proved vulnerable to the charge that they had crossed the line between sceptical detachment and sceptical intervention.<sup>95</sup>

The BBC would never again cast such an unflattering light on the British counterinsurgency in Kenya. As late as 1958, a visiting correspondent for the television news-magazine programme *Panorama* was pitching softball questions to the officials in charge of detention camps and signally failed to challenge the evasive answers he received. When asked how Mau Mau detainees were induced to confess to having taken oaths, one camp commandant prevaricated: 'Well, it's very difficult to say. I, even myself, I wonder sometimes how they do confess ... It's really amazing how they do confess, I just don't know how it is.'<sup>96</sup> Here, as in other stories on Mau Mau, BBC journalists covered the detention camps as a bureaucratic problem of classifying and managing populations rather than as sites of extreme violence. From this perspective, constantly updated official figures on the numbers of detainees were among the most newsworthy items to emerge from the camps: a handy metric of progress toward the goal of winning hearts and minds.<sup>97</sup>

Whether on the airwaves or in print, most colonial violence made news only when the state was forced to recognize it. By journalistic standards, legal proceedings – criminal trials, court-martials, cases investigated by international bodies – and political debates were always unambiguously newsworthy. This had two important consequences. First, it encouraged reporters to adopt a legalistic mentality, adjudicating claims with rigorous standards of evidence which left a heavy burden of proof on the accusers. The very idea of the fact, as a discrete and documented unit of knowledge, was a legacy of the Anglo-American judicial tradition with its ingrained presumption of innocence.<sup>98</sup> In the colonial context, taking cues from the legal system also meant absorbing the values of an institutional culture which habitually deemed ‘native’ testimony untrustworthy and unreliable.<sup>99</sup>

Second, the dominance of procedural stories imparted an adversarial structure to news about violence, underlining journalists’ role as neutral arbiters rather than as active agents of knowledge production. They performed that role nowhere more clearly, perhaps, than in coverage of debates in Parliament. Commons debates had a potentially enormous impact on public awareness of colonial violence because a committed group of left-wing Labour and Liberal MPs (many of them associated with the Movement for Colonial Freedom) exploited that forum to hold the government accountable.<sup>100</sup> For journalists, though, this tactic suggested that allegations about torture demanded the same sceptical response as any other blow in a partisan tussle. It also reduced them to passively relaying claims and counter-claims lobbed across the dispatch boxes. This report, from an hourly news bulletin on the BBC Home Service in May 1952, provides a case in point:

Mr. [Tom] Driberg (Labour) asked what enquiries had been made into the methods used by police officers in interrogating suspects in Malaya. Mr. [Alan] Lennox Boyd [the Colonial Secretary] said there had been many rather wild accusations of ill-treatment and it was clearly in the Communists’ interests to propagate those stories. He said any specific allegations had been investigated, and in a few cases where cause had been shown, stern action had been taken. Mr. Driberg said the Colonial Secretary should be asked to investigate this subject. Mr. Lennox Boyd replied that more time and trouble should be devoted to considering the problem of the police officers themselves in their appallingly difficult task. He said much time spent in checking ill-founded allegations could have been better employed in helping to bring the dreadful war to an end.<sup>101</sup>

Distaste for partisan squabbling, in turn, provided an opening for observers who were so inclined to downplay the significance of torture. As one provincial paper put it in 1953, ‘the menace [of insurgency] cannot be fought



with votes or censure or by the exaggerated misgivings of armchair observers at home'.<sup>102</sup>

One possible explanation for this reluctance to condemn colonial violence is that the late twentieth-century idea of torture – as a specific and almost uniquely grievous violation of moral and legal norms – had not yet taken shape in the 1950s.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the memory of Nazi brutality in Europe – kept vivid in Britain after the war through newsreels, medical treatises, and survivors' testimonies – did not heighten humanitarian sensibilities so much as it set a lofty bar for recognizing future atrocities.<sup>104</sup> Journalists who saw action during the war may have witnessed death and disfigurement on a scale that cast the 'small wars' of the colonies into insignificance by comparison.<sup>105</sup> By the 1950s, meanwhile, practices of brutal and arbitrary imprisonment were associated with ideological dictatorships of the far left, in the Soviet Bloc, and the far right, in the Iberian Peninsula and South Africa.<sup>106</sup> Did the iniquities of the British Empire – popularly associated with Blimpish anachronism rather than totalitarian ruthlessness – even signify against a backdrop formed by the Holocaust, the Gulag, and apartheid? New Leftist Peter Worsley, for one, worried that an ongoing epidemic of state violence across the world had left Britons 'inured to the open brutalities of a Famagusta or the ruthlessness of a Captain Griffiths'. He added: 'To a generation reared on paper-back horrors of the concentration camp, another eleven [at Hola camp] make little impact'.<sup>107</sup>

The effects of desensitization, however, only went so far. In fact, many contemporaries did recognize 'ill treatment' in the British Empire as disturbing and illegitimate. While critics may not have privileged the language of 'torture', they still faulted security forces for inflicting beatings, harsh interrogations, and other abuses.<sup>108</sup> Certainly, when whistleblowers like Fletcher or journalists like the Wards reported on violence, they left no doubt about its injustice. When government officials responded in turn, they almost invariably attacked the credibility of the messenger, denied the details of specific cases, and insisted on exceptionalness of brutality rather than attempting to defend the conduct in question. In private, officials recognized that counterinsurgency tactics ran afoul of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), which is why they repeatedly sought vague blanket exemptions from the latter while energetically refuting formal complaints of misconduct.<sup>109</sup> In this period, at least, debates about colonial violence turned more on questions of fact than on questions of right and wrong.

Anyone who wanted to rationalize or defend colonial violence had a number of strategies at their disposal, including the demonization of insurgent movements, the mobilization of solidarity with British soldiers, and the exploitation of sympathy for British expatriates. But these approaches worked against an ever-present backdrop: the cultivation of doubt. Newspaper stories and radio broadcasts made allegations of violence visible while subjecting them to exacting standards of verifiability; they translated

traumatic experiences and moral outrages into empirical claims. Even as they disclosed the possibility that it might be happening, journalists made colonial violence increasingly unknowable. The denial of colonial violence among British observers was made possible, in part, by the production of deniability.

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## ABSTRACT

What did people in Britain know about the violence of counterinsurgency campaigns at the end of empire in the 1940s and 1950s? In many ways, British knowledge about colonial violence was widespread. But it was also fragmented and ambiguous: whispered among family and friends; dramatized in the fictions of stage and screen; and distorted by partisan and ideological battles. This article focuses on the response of journalistic outlets, including *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *New Statesman*, and the BBC, to reports about torture and other forms of brutality. Paradoxically, it was not despite but because of their commitment to the pursuit of truth – embodied in professional ideals such as neutrality, factuality, and restraint – that reporters often failed to communicate the depth and breadth of violence in the colonies. In the space between the familiar poles of propaganda and secrecy, epistemological grey areas and emotional grey areas – uncertainty, ambivalence, denial – defined British responses to colonial violence.