

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE COLONIAL LEGACY? IMPERIAL MORES AND ENDURING CLASSISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Introduction

■ The death of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8, 2022 has rekindled across the world the debate about the legacy of the British Empire, given the historical ties between the British monarch and the imperial order. Although Elizabeth II's personal legacy has often been romanticized, she has also played an institutional role at the end of the British Empire.

In colonial countries that wanted to gain their independence, the final years of the Empire were a period of authoritarian rule, abuses and violence. This brutal legacy is by no means consistent with Elizabeth II's portrayal as a genteel champion of peaceful decolonization. Today, inquiries into past colonial injustices seem more necessary than ever, especially given the imperial amnesia that is so widespread in the UK. The oblivion coexists with a selective nostalgia for the imperial rule that has recently inflated, as well as with an upper-class paternalism preserved since imperial times.

The transition from the British Empire to the Commonwealth of Nations didn't involve significant structural reforms or new symbols of national identity. The responsibility for past colonial injustices including massacres, rapes, famines and so on was never seriously addressed by the British establishment. Harvard historian of the British Empire Maya Jasanoff wrote in a piece published by the *New York Times* on September 10, 2022, "Mourn the Queen, not her empire" that the late Queen "helped obscure a bloody history of decolonization whose proportions and legacies have yet to be adequately acknowledged"!

Great Britain was a crucial ally of the United States during WWII. After the defeat of the Axis powers by the Allies, no one questioned British political structures or imperial practices. The country was also seriously affected by the war and the victory over Nazi Germany was followed by years of economic austerity. Official historical narratives still emphasize heroism and post-war hardships, downplaying or hiding altogether the issues that eventually led to the independence of many colonies and the crumbling of the Empire.

The British Empire has been a clear example of government by racist double standards: rights, liberties and rule of law in Britain and abuses, corruption, and violence in remote colonies. At a closer look, however, even if formal liberties have been legally recognized in Britain for centuries, fair chances to succeed are even now less democratically spread across British society. Classism, or the discrimination against people with a lower socioeconomic status, is common on the British job market. Although the access to higher education at top universities (Oxford and Cambridge) from state schools has become more frequent over the last decades,² the old bias in favor of students from privileged backgrounds who are recognized through an upper-class accent lives on. In the United Kingdom, the gold standard remains the King's English that is only shared by a privileged minority.

Anti-immigration sentiments with xenophobic undertones are often unapologetically expressed by conservative politicians and journalists, currently under the guise of an 'anti-woke' crusade. A hardline conservative journalist like Douglas Murray may be said to epitomize this right-wing self-congratulatory, anti-immigration and 'anti-woke' movement, although his latest book, *The War on the West* has apparently failed to convince even British conservatives about the urgency to engage in an intricate culture war.³ Moreover, the intellectual frivolity of dedicating an entire book to argue against the 'danger' of wiping out the West through a war of ideas became even more obvious when Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, waging a real war against the Western values of democracy and human rights.

The history of the British Empire promoted by the conservative intelligentsia is full of triumphalism and half-truths. For example, great emphasis is placed on the Act of Parliament that decided to abolish slavery in 1807, decades before the US Civil War. This rhetoric understates the fact that all compensations for freeing slaves were paid to former slave owners, thus making them and their heirs very rich. Former slaves didn't receive any reparations for their brutal subjugation to other human beings.

Although courses in Postcolonial and African Studies are offered by many British universities, in the mainstream public discourse the history of colonial violence is covered by conservative narratives. There is evidently also a progressive minority, usually younger, that is keen to bring up the injustices of colonialism. Not surprisingly, British progressives often share to a larger degree the preference for an elected head of state. Many of them believe that modern societies may outgrow the need for monarchic symbols that incidentally preserve paternalistic social hierarchies.

Historical amnesia, combined with a selective imperial pride, has very likely influenced the vote to leave the European Union at the 2016 Referendum. It has already been argued that the Leave vote has conveyed an ideological clash between the older generations' nostalgia for old-fashioned imperialism and a more cooperative and solidarity-driven spirit within the European Union that used to hurt British narcissism⁴.

Of course, many other countries in the EU also had colonies in the past and their dark legacies are worth exploring as well. Nevertheless, despite some remaining imperial myths in other European cultures, the outdated colonial spirit has been questioned to a large extent in favor of more democratic values. The problem with British nationalism seems to be that it is still ridden with an overblown sense of belonging to an extinct Empire, the legacy of which is not critically examined. On the contrary, imperial rituals and traditions invented centuries before and expanded in order to represent colonial authority in British India and Africa, such as Jubilees, coronations, royal weddings and funerals (Hobsbawm, E.–Ranger, T. 1983: 120–262) are still meant to keep alive 'the splendor' of British monarchy.

Amidst the current UK cost of living crisis, the coronation of King Charles III on May 6, 2023 has been blamed by anti-monarhist pressure groups such as Republic for being too extravagant. The imperial habit of grand royal rituals, usually exploited by consumer-oriented firms, was reenacted in 2023 with enough pomp to look preposterous, especially during a period of economic hardship.

In the same vein, imperial symbols like the Order of the British Empire, a distinction that has the motto "For God and for the Empire" and is still bestowed by King Charles III on various individuals, sound rather obsolete and bombastic today. If we consider the imperial legacy of racism, theft, genocide and oppression it may even be morally insensitive to keep such a high distinction under this name.

The 'civilizing mission' – the ethos of the former Empire

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the British rule over faraway nations that were seen as barbarian was justified through a 'civilizing mission'. While the notion was by no means new and has also justified the Spanish domination over and violence against American natives, this 'civilizing' ethos has been known to legitimize many unjust British laws, aka colonial dictates, against the natives in colonized Asian and African countries. In Africa, such laws took the land of natives and enabled white settlers who belonged to the British gentry to set farms and cultivate 'cash crops' (tea, coffee, and so on). Many colonial laws were set in order to make Africans dependent on wages for labor on their former land. That was followed by missionary attempts to convert the natives to Christianity, so as to limit cultural traditions such as polygamy or female circumcision.

Although one may argue that women's rights were implicitly promoted through noble missionary expansion overseas, it was done at the cost of depriving colonies, especially in Africa, of many resources and in order to condone many abuses and crimes perpetrated by white landlords. There was also a less than implicit ideology of white supremacy in the colonial worldview, since racial inferiority was often associated with the natives' 'savagery.'

The British Empire also exported a private-school kind of paternalism (Elkins 2005) which presumed that the innocent indigenous mind had to be improved by harsh methods. Initially, the settlers regarded most natives as child-like creatures who needed discipline. But later, when they refused to conform to their 'civilized' expectations, they treated them like wild beasts.

The righteousness displayed by the British colonialists in Asia and Africa also conveyed a sense of British superiority over other races (Elkins 2005: 83–84). Such 'moral superiority' was of course compatible, in their own minds, to the torture and suppression of rebels or people suspect of being rebels, as they effectively did during the Malaya Emergency (1948–1960) and the Kenya Emergency (1952–1960), in order to preserve the dwindling imperial order.

The repressive stage of the British domination in Kenya

The history of the colonial domination of Kenya by the British Empire shows how the white settlers managed to influence a colonial agenda that favored only their economic interests, while inflicting many grievances on the natives (Elkins 2005: 30–61). Furthermore, since young white settlers were later directly involved in the repression of the Kikuyu population, at the height of the Mau Mau uprising in the early 1950s, they were responsible for the torture, illegal detention and murder of many people, some of whom were innocent children. Even if most historians of the Kenyan war of independence against the British Empire don't go as far as to compare it to Nazi Germany, the atrocities committed against Kikuyu rebels, not to mention women, children and elderly people during the Mau Mau revolt are a very murderous chapter of the history of the Empire.

The colonial administration allowed for illegal centers of 'screening', that is harsh interrogation of people with supposed Mau Mau connections. The screening was usually coordinated by white officers, some of them very sadistic and experienced in torture. White officers were assisted by 'loyalists' (Elkins 2005: 62–90). The 'loyalists' also belonged to the Kikuyu tribe, being distinguished and heavily rewarded by the British administration for their active role in the brutal repression of the Mau Mau uprising. Later, after Kenya's independence in 1963 the British authorities handed the political power to the same loyalists. To this day, Kenya's political class is dominated by descendants of those who have benefited from British rule.

The cruelty of many black loyalists who tortured their fellow Kikuyu was often more egregious than the one displayed by the Europeans. This chapter of history allows for a more nuanced approach of colonialism than the one that only blames settlers with lighter skin color for all abuses and atrocities committed in remote areas of the Empire. As in the case of the African slave trade, which heavily involved black Africans who sold captured black people to Western slave owners, the historical facts may prove more complex than a simplistic binary ideology of white supremacy. There seems to be nothing inherently good or bad in the ethnicity or skin color of human individuals, although most historical trends seem to suggest that a darker skin tone is often associated with a more vulnerable socioeconomic status.

After the notorious Operation Anvil that purged Nairobi of all Mau Mau suspects in April and May 1954, the British administration built detention camps to which they deported the Kikuyu individuals they considered more radically involved with Mau Mau. They also coerced many detainees to labor although they managed to avoid formal charges of breaching the ILO Convention through an artifice borrowed from Malaya's colonial government: they claimed that most prisoners worked voluntarily, even if the reality was very different (Elkins 2005: 128–130).

The British colonial government in Kenya also violated the Geneva convention through the harsh way in which they treated Kikuyu POWs. The colonial administration classified prisoners according to white-grey-black categories and invented a 'Pipeline' system by which 'whites' were considered clean and sent back to Kikuyu reserves, 'greys' were sent to work camps and 'blacks' were considered irredeemable and sent to detention camps.

These classifications could change according to the level of cooperation of detainees with colonial authorities, since screening that squeezed confessions and intelligence was a constant process. During the interrogation the screening teams often whipped, burned, sodomized, castrated and forced to eat feces suspects whom they believed could be hard core Mau Mau adherents. One such suspect, a man who survived the torture and eventually confessed, recounted that after refusing to talk about his Mau Mau activities, one of the European settlers ordered the native soldiers (*ashkari*) to force scorpions into his back private parts until he began making up stories and giving names (Elkins 2005: 132–135).

The Pipeline system was predicated on the idea of increasing cooperation of the detainees with the colonial government. It wasn't intended as ethnic cleansing of the Kikuyu population. However, the brutal methods applied during screening and in detention camps caused the death of an unknown number of Kikuyu, which is believed by historians to be far higher than the official figure of 11000. According to the history reconstructed by Caroline Elkins, the British colonists effectively built 'a Gulag' in Kenya and dehumanized detainees, many of whom didn't survive the abuses.

In addition, terrible sanitary conditions in camps led to the Manyani typhoid outbreak in 1954. The British press, including some relatively conservative newspapers such as the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* brought to the public the news of the outbreak and pleaded for urgent remedies. However, in 1954 a new Colonial Secretary took office. His name was Alan Lennox-Boyd and he was a Tory with aristocratic pedigree, elite education, and a high-minded sense of duty. Unfortunately, he also possessed an authoritarian sense of moral righteousness and used to dismiss every African project of independent rule. After a choreographed visit to Kenya and an inspection of the Manyani camp in 1954, he misinformed the House of Commons about the actual sanitary conditions. His cover up couldn't prevent the eventual disaster, and countless detainees perished in that epidemic. Others died of nutritional diseases or waterborne infections such as dysentery, diarrhea and vitamin deficiencies (Elkins 2005: 145–148).

With some notable exceptions, such as Tom Askwith's Department of Community Development and Rehabilitation, most colonial structures during the Kenya Emergency were inhumane or utterly repressive, while at the same time the colonial administration and the Colonial Secretary in London tried to misinform the general public about the gravity of the situation overseas. Even Askwith's Department needed to make serious compromises due to its tiny budget that only amounted to 0.5% of Kenya's colonial budget. At one point, about half of the staff employed as rehabilitation officers were in fact screeners. One of them was Peter Muigai Kenyatta, Jomo Kenyatta's son, a loyalist converted from a former detainee who was notoriously cruel during interrogations, brutalizing detainees to force them into confessions from his new position of authority.

Elkins has counted over a hundred camps built in the Rift Valley and the Central Province as part of the Pipeline system (Elkins 2005: 154–191). This amounts to an African 'Gulag Archipelago' that, apart from specialized Postcolonial Studies, is very seldom mentioned in most conversations about the 20th Century atrocities.

The aristocratic backbone of colonial rule: the Kenyan case

Kenya was colonized not only by a strong foreign government that imposed unjust laws on the native population, dressed up in 'civilizing' rhetoric, but, even more importantly, through European settlers whose demographic mission was to eventually turn it into a white country. The social origin of settlers was usually aristocratic. Many were younger sons who didn't inherit land and titles and therefore were ready to settle elsewhere, taking advantage of the farming opportunities created by the colonial government on 'available land'. In Kenya, that 'available land' traditionally belonged to the Kikuyu, an agriculturist tribe settled in a fertile highland area that was known during the imperial times as the 'White Highlands'.

The Kikuyu consequently lost control over their land and many became squatters on European farms. They worked on those farms, thus getting permission to

cultivate a portion of the land for themselves and their families. The settlers were always lobbying the colonial government for more privileges at the expense of the natives. Indeed, most colonial laws in Kenya were dictates that favored the white upper-class settlers by impoverishing the African natives.

After the Mau Mau revolt began in 1952, most Kikuyu lost their squatter status and were sent to overcrowded reserves. Those who were suspected of Mau Mau activities were passed through screening and later through the 'Pipeline' system. Screening was similar to the third degree and not everyone was able to survive it.

As we have already seen, many British settlers supervised screenings in both formal and informal centers and ordered the use of brutal methods on the most hard core suspects. This supervision was again predicated on the British private-school system of educating ignorants, in this case the savage natives, through harsh discipline. Paternalistic behavior was of course more extreme against Mau Mau 'terrorists', since most settlers believed that brutal methods were fit to beings who ceased to belong to humankind. Although the British colonial settlers wanted to appear 'benevolent', their behavior to the anti-colonial Kikuyu in the Pipeline system was similar to what the Nazis did to Jews in concentration camps and the communists did to their ideological enemies in the Gulag.

The harsh repression of colonial uprisings was politically sustained by Tory governments. Perhaps the most famous Tory supporter of preventing the dissolution of the Empire at all costs was Winston Churchill, who in November 1942 had declared to the House of Commons that he had not become the King's First Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. Coincidentally or not, fast forward to the 2010s the Brexit propaganda was backed by prominent members of the same Tory party, beside the far-right populist UKIP led by Nigel Farage, that was also known as the 'Brexit' party.

British (post-)colonial classism

The debate over a classism that is inherent in socioeconomic structures is anything but recent in the UK. For decades there has been a public pressure on the top British universities (Oxford and Cambridge) to admit freshmen students from more socially diverse backgrounds. Figures obtained through social research show that they did.⁵ Likewise, the educational hierarchy that started from primary school and placed the alumni of private schools in the most favorable position has been balanced by higher academic standards in some state sponsored schools.

However, according to the *Diversity in Journalism* report from National Council for the Training of Journalism, in 2022 80% of British journalists came from professional or upper-class backgrounds. That figure has increased by 5% since 2020, when 75% of journalists came from privileged backgrounds.⁶ Such data reveal an industry that is highly unrepresentative and socially biased, while being very adept at forming the narrative. No wonder that the British media often perpetuates

stereotypes about the ‘bigoted working-class’ which voted for Brexit and dislikes people with different lifestyles, when actual research shows that the British working-class tends to be more tolerant than the upper- and middle-class.⁷

In the British Parliament, the representation gap is even wider. According to a 2022 study of the Institute for Public Policy Research cited by the *Guardian*, only 7% of the MPs can be considered working class, while the percentage of the working class in the UK population is around 34%. This figure looks better however than the staggering 1% working-class Tory MPs.⁸ The presence of multiracial conservative MPs, one of whom is the incumbent prime minister Rishi Sunak, doesn’t change that picture.

Classism does not mean only a socioeconomic bias in favor of the privileged classes. It also implies that everyone who comes from a lower background, either from a working-class or an immigrant family, and wishes to be successful in the UK is encouraged to boost their chances by learning how to mimic the upper-class behavior, attitude and pronunciation. Such is the ‘education’ project of London’s ‘finishing schools’ of etiquette and manners.

Although it may seem far-fetched to connect this enduring classism of British society with its colonial legacy, we must not forget that the symbolic foundation of the British Empire was the monarchy (aka “the British Crown”), supported by the nobility. The imperial mindset and the ‘civilizing mission’ came from an upper-class elite that believed in its own moral and intellectual superiority and cultivated a high-minded sense of duty that was usually expressed through patronizing behavior. The same trust in the intrinsic qualities of upper classes appears to influence even today the selection of ‘public voices’ in both British media and politics. The social background of the elite hasn’t changed much since imperial times.

What is more, the above figures show that the classist bias has even increased in the media over the last two years. Whether or not Brexit pride has been a factor, by encouraging British society to refocus on imperial righteousness and lost grandeur, is an open question. It seems clear however that a more socially diverse representation is not a genuine priority in Britain today.

Old mores perpetuated through conservative propaganda look safer than ‘progressive experiments’. Conservative propaganda has explicitly adopted a defensive discourse over the last years: the post-Brexit UK is portrayed as the last citadel against far-left ‘woke’ trends endorsed by both the US current Democratic administration and the EU. Once again, the UK has a mission to save civilization against extremist barbarians that topple statues and want to ‘change the world’ by destroying it.

Colonial nostalgia and failed transnational cooperation

The United Kingdom has closed up ‘the process of decolonization’ in the late 1960s. In 1975, it joined the European Union. To many, this seems a short period over which it is understandably difficult to reform old institutional practices.

The transition from imperial domination to 'partnership', first in the Commonwealth, then in the EU, wasn't however intended as a radical move from paternalistic diplomacy and politics to a more cooperative approach. On the contrary, the UK was known to exploit its membership to the EU to enhance its political control and promote its economic interests.

The old habit of leading other countries by colonial dictates has reemerged to a lesser extent through the ability of the UK to negotiate an opt-out of the Schengen acquis that was incorporated in the EU legal framework in 1999 by the Treaty of Amsterdam. The UK has also managed to preserve the British pound after the introduction of the Euro as a single currency.

Even long before Brexit, British exceptionalism was plainly asserted inside the EU. The UK usually demanded special treatment from the EU and resisted many Brussels policies. The psychological foundation of such exceptionalism could hardly be described in any other terms than a post-imperial syndrome.

That syndrome has become even more evident during the Brexit negotiations with Brussels. Then, the UK adopted a victim-like mentality for the populist camp, defensively fantasizing about a reversed colonial position. In this narrative, the EU bureaucrats were mercilessly trying to 'colonize' Britain. Such populist discourse may also reflect an inability to conceive transnational cooperation outside the imperial logic of domination and victimhood.⁹

Brexit propaganda and imperial pride

After the 2016 Brexit Referendum, the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated a special 'Brexit' issue in which it interpreted the British choice to leave the EU as rooted in a narcissistic nationalism and persisting imperial mindset.

According to a postcolonial perspective, the UK suffered from the anxiety to unleash, as an EU member, its old colonial structures and cultural hierarchies¹⁰, most of which acknowledged the British superior values and skills over the awkwardness of 'savages'. The Brexit anti-immigration campaign of a populist like Nigel Farage was based on this very assumption of British superiority. The colonial history of Britain that is so little discussed and critically examined in the UK provides, according to the same analysis, a key to the Brexit campaign and the interregnum of Brexit negotiations.

It is also significant that the Brexit campaign has exerted a particular fascination on those who have witnessed the collapse of the Empire. The EU destabilized their sense of national pride and self-esteem by increasingly demanding policies (Beaumont 2018).

What was also challenged by the EU was the sense that Britain alone possessed the compass of 'Western civilization', especially through its enlightened upper classes. The idea of allowing 'less civilized' members of the EU, especially bureaucrats from new, Eastern European member-states, to dictate to Britain whatever laws and policies they should adopt, was clearly insufferable for nationalists.

Brexit propaganda has therefore relied on a nationalism rooted in nostalgia for imperial domination. That domination has been the undisputable achievement of the British upper classes. The latter have 'benevolently' spread civilization in backward countries around the globe. No wonder that conservatives are still vociferous supporters of Brexit, even after two years outside the EU in which the British market has adversely felt the effects and the average cost of food has increased with about 6% per year.¹¹

Concealments, abstractions and settlements

The history of British colonial repression during the Mau Mau uprising that I evoked here to illustrate the brutal reality of imperial domination was largely reconstituted through interviews with Kikuyu survivors by historian Caroline Elkins in her 2005 book, *Imperial Reckoning*, as a research into claims made by Mau Mau veterans during a lawsuit. Elkins mentions that British colonial authorities were eager to conceal records by locking them away in forgotten archives. According to her, other records of the Mau Mau suppression were 'cleansed' (Elkins 2005). Some relevant records have been later rediscovered however and used to support the claims. But the pattern was to conceal the unsavory side of detention in camps and to leave untouched the files concerning detainee reforms and the 'civilizing mission'.

After the collapse of colonial rule, the concern of the British administration has been how to save face in front of public opinion. They didn't want to appear guilty of oppressing and terrorizing native people, even if they couldn't entirely hide from the press and the Labour political opposition their deeds during the Kenya Emergency.

A psychological explanation of the British reluctance to apologize for past colonial oppression is offered by Philipp Wüschner (Wüschner 2017). He points out that a feeling of shame, like the one caused by the imperial crumbling, that doesn't transform into guilt can effectively lead to a 'narcissistic rage' that ignores the situation of the ones who have been wronged and only feels sorry for 'the loss of social recognition.' After losing an empire, the narcissistic self would feel even more hurt by recognizing its injurious past.

In more material terms, after suffering a humiliation in the post-WWII era of austerity, when taxes on inheritance diminished the wealth of British aristocracy, in recent decades the upper class has managed to thrive again. Today, it is still amassing capital, has privileged access to education and political influence and enjoys unparalleled social prestige. Since the ties between the upper class and the imperial history of Britain are so strong, that class is particularly interested in a self-aggrandizing version of the colonial past that praise the British contribution to expanding civilization, the formal abolition of slavery in 1807, the introduction of modern governance system and industrialization, and so on. The self-image of the old aristocracy depends upon the past splendor of the Empire and its positive impact upon less civilized nations.

When explicit apologies for colonialism and slavery are demanded, as it was the case during the 2022 Caribbean royal tour of Prince William and his wife Catherine, it seems easier for a member of the British royal family to revert to abstract condemnations ('slavery was abhorrent')¹² rather than inquire into the responsibility of their own predecessors for past colonial crimes. Likewise, during the then-Prince Charles's visit to Canada in 2022, indigenous leaders asked for a royal apology over the 'assimilation and genocide' of indigenous children. In reply, the royal only 'acknowledged' failures in the treatment of indigenous people.

Equally tone-deaf is a generic condemnation of racism by the British royal family that fails to address particular injustices, like the ones perpetrated against African natives during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. Even if senior royals like Prince William and King Charles III occasionally address 'conscious' issues such as diversity and inclusion and denounce the horrors of slavery, a comprehensive royal apology for past colonial injustices is still hard to imagine. Even more unlikely is a policy of postcolonial reconciliation implemented by the British government. That would involve an expression of guilt that may be strongly rejected by the post-imperial narcissistic self of older generations. For the royal family, addressing colonial injustices would mean tarnishing Queen Elizabeth II's legacy, by admitting her complicated role at the end of the Empire.

Historian Maya Jasanoff reminds in her New York Times piece that shortly after Elizabeth II learned of her father's death and her ascension to the throne from the Treetops lodge in Kenya, British colonial authorities suppressed the Mau Mau revolt and established a vast system of detention camps in which tens of thousands were tortured, raped, castrated and killed!¹³

However, given the fact that the Colonial Secretary at the time, Alan Lennox-Boyd, was known to be a master of disinformation, even the Queen may have been kept in the dark in regard to the extent of the Mau Mau's repression carried out in her name. Or else, she could have been given the 'flowery officialese' during briefings, to use a phrase employed by a BBC correspondent writing about the Mau Mau Massacre on November 30, 2012.¹⁴ Historians doubt that, but as long as there are no available proofs of the monarch being cognizant of the brutality of her colonial government against the Kikuyu, we can at best surmise that she didn't know everything. Whether or not she wanted to know more, given the sensitive issue of detention camps and massacres so soon after WWII, is another question left unanswered.

Eventually, in 2013, the British government paid around £20m in the lawsuit brought against it to the High Court by four Mau Mau veterans. As I already mentioned, the claims were also based on the extensive research undertaken by Caroline Elkins. Another crucial research into the claims belonged to the historian of East Africa David Anderson, author of the book *Histories of the Hanged. The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. In addition, some records of the interrogations that were previously concealed have resurfaced, thus providing a stronger support to the claims.

Following the survivors' victory in the court case, William Hague, the then Foreign Secretary, gave a statement to the House of Commons expressing the British government's regrets 'that these abuses took place.' A final result of the settlement agreement was the unveiling in 2015 of a memorial in Nairobi commemorating the victims of colonialism.¹⁵

Concluding remarks

The passing of Queen Elizabeth II has reignited questions about British imperial history and her own responsibility for the colonial legacy of violence. However, this international debate doesn't seem to inspire the British establishment to come to terms with this controversial legacy.

The Brexit agenda has in fact relied upon imperial nostalgia and outdated nationalism. Brexit triumphalism is being voiced today by a jingoistic media despite growing living costs and other adverse effects of departing from the EU.

Self-aggrandizing propaganda seems still very convenient to the British upper classes. After all, imperial history wouldn't have been possible without the British noble ruling class. Most of their descendants are therefore inclined to overstate the positive impact of the Empire and forget about the rest.

Classism is still an issue in British society. Not only did imperial structures rely on social hierarchies, but most British institutions rewarded the merits and obeyed the authority of individuals coming from privileged backgrounds. Although that kind of hierarchy is more flexible today, it still exists.

The specter of the British Empire keeps haunting those who have witnessed its humiliating demise. The Brexit vote was proof that imperial nostalgia may as yet cater for political delusions. Similar delusions have fueled the faith in British exceptionalism during the UK membership to the EU. The re-enactment of royal rituals such as the pompous coronation of King Charles III on May 6, 2023 is proof of imperial traditions still being used to reinforce British nationalism, as well as the belief in UK's structure of government, whose predictability is "unique".

Yet, if British conservative politicians from Winston Churchill to Boris Johnson have bolstered nationalist sentiments through imperial rhetoric, not all conservatives worldwide were equally impressed with the achievements of the British Empire. For the right-wing individualist philosopher Ayn Rand, for example, the only two invaluable contributions of the British Empire to civilization have been the afternoon tea ritual and the detective novel.

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Notes

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