

Britain's Noxious History of Imperial Warfare

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In his recent widely praised *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*, John Darwin, Professor of History at Oxford University, complains that even today there are historians of empire who “feel obliged to proclaim their moral revulsion against it, in case writing about empire might be thought to endorse it.” Apparently, he laments, there are still historians who consider it “de rigueur to insist that for them, empire was evil.” And, even more incredibly, there are some historians who “like to convey the impression that writing against empire is an act of great courage,” as if the supporters of the empire were lying “in wait to exact their revenge.” The mistake these anti-imperialists make is to assume that “empires are abnormal, a monstrous intrusion in the usually empire-free world.”¹

It is, of course, difficult to call to mind any particular historian who actually believes that the world has usually been “empire-free,” but there you go. Indeed competition between empires is more generally seen as one of the driving forces of this dreadful history, that in the last century consumed millions of lives. More to the point though, Darwin seems to believe that his new book is responding to some sort of anti-imperialist consensus, that the belief that the British Empire was a criminal enterprise has actually won the day and this has to be challenged.

This will come as something of a surprise to most people who are under the distinct impression that the exact opposite is the case—that there is a pro-imperialist consensus very much in place. The few thousand copies sold of the handful of books arguing an anti-imperialist case are completely swamped by the massive sales of the books of Niall Ferguson and company, some of which have been conveniently accompanied by successful television series. At Westminster senior politicians from both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party happily proclaim that the British Empire was a good thing and the time for apologizing is over. These same politicians are still absolutely addicted to intervening in other people's countries, with Afghanistan and Iraq now having been joined by Libya and Mali.

Far from an anti-imperialist consensus, what we have actually seen in recent years is a revival in the celebration of empire very much inspired by British participation in U.S. imperial wars. The context for contemporary studies of the British Empire is the fact that, even as I write, British troops are killing and being killed in Afghanistan. It is these wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq and the celebration of empire that has accompanied them that have prompted those few histories attempting to mount the sort of fundamental indictment of the British Empire that Darwin finds so ill-judged. The problem is not that there is too much anti-imperialist history, but that there is not enough. The fact remains that imperial history is still taught, researched, and written about within a comfortable consensus that extends from celebratory apologetics to the supposedly realistic “this is the way the world is” mode of apology. This consensus has to be challenged.

A useful test for any general history of the British Empire is its treatment of the Bengal Famine of 1943–1944. How does Darwin deal with this catastrophe in a book of over 400 pages? On page 346 it is referred to in passing thus: “(the Bengal Famine of 1943 may have killed more than 2 million people).” Hardly adequate! But this is still an improvement on his award-winning *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830–1970*, which does not mention it at all in over 600 pages of text. And similarly with his earlier *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World*. Once again the famine escapes attention.² To be fair, Darwin is far from alone in this neglect; indeed he is typical. Professor Denis Judd, for example, is the author of *Empire*, an acclaimed general history of the British Empire. In this volume he does not so much as mention the Bengal Famine. More surprisingly perhaps, he does not mention it in his history of the British Raj, *The Lion and the Tiger*, but most astonishingly, he does not even mention it in his biography of the Indian nationalist leader Nehru—who described the famine as “the last judgement on British rule.”³ Even the prestigious *Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, the summation of Anglo-American scholarship, fails to acknowledge the famine.⁴ It is worth remembering that this catastrophe was described by Lord Wavell, who took over as viceroy in the middle of the famine, as “one of the greatest disasters that has befallen any people under British rule.” It was, indeed, the worst disaster to inflict the subcontinent in the twentieth century, but one would never know this from any history of the British Empire. Why?

The neglect is neither accidental nor idiosyncratic, because too many good historians are guilty of the same offence. Rather it derives from the sheer enormity of what happened. It is incompatible with any benign interpretation of the British Empire, whether of the “celebratory” or “realist” kind, because to give it the attention it demands inevitably shifts the centre of gravity of any general history in an anti-imperialist direction. Consequently the Bengal Famine is written out of the record. This neglect is no better than the conduct of those Soviet historians who ignored or denied the terrible Ukrainian Famine of the early 1930s, although they at least had the excuse that they were working under the watchful eye of Stalin’s secret police! It seems fair to say that many of the historians who have neglected or ignored the Bengal Famine would not hesitate to condemn as criminal any other twentieth-century regime that presided over the deaths from starvation of so many of the people under its rule. What we confront here obviously goes beyond any notion of individual failings on the part of particular historians. What we are looking at is the systematic repression of one of the British ruling class’s guilty secrets.

This repression can no longer be tolerated. Since the original publication of *The Blood Never Dried* in 2006 Madhusree Mukerjee has published her *Churchill’s Secret War*, providing us with a powerful account of the famine and the British response. She argues that the generally accepted death toll of 3.5 million has to be revised upwards to over 5 million people. As she points out, throughout the famine India continued to export food. If this food had been used for famine relief, perhaps 2 million lives could have been saved. And, on top of this, the British did not ship emergency foodstuffs in sufficient quantity to India to alleviate the situation in Bengal. The British priority, she argues, was to ensure that there were no food shortages in Britain and to stockpile food ready for the liberation of Europe. As Churchill put it, Indians were used to starving. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Churchill’s attitude was informed by “a will to punish” the Indian people for whom he made clear his loathing on numerous occasions. In just about every War Cabinet discussion of India in 1943 Churchill displayed what she describes as an “inchoate rage.”⁵ His attitude seriously alarmed some of his colleagues. Churchill’s role in this catastrophe has, of course,

gone unremarked by his many biographers. At the very least, one would have expected *Churchill's Secret War* to have provoked debate and controversy, but, at least at the time of writing, one expected in vain.

While historians of the British Empire have so far remained relatively unmoved by any stirrings of anti-imperialism, there have been some significant developments in the history of recent British colonial warfare. The British military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a major reassessment of British post-1945 counterinsurgency. As recently as 2004 the military historian John Keegan, in his *The Iraq War*, could claim that counterinsurgency was an area of military activity at which the British were “without equal.” Thirty years of experience in Northern Ireland had apparently given the British “mastery of the methods of urban warfare” and he insisted that what “had worked in Belfast could be made to work also in Basra.” The British had fifty years experience of the battle to win “hearts and minds” and such a battle “was about to begin” in Basra.⁶ The battle was lost in the most humiliating way, dealing a serious blow to the British army’s reputation for counterinsurgency expertise and for restraint in such operations. The torturing to death of the Iraqi hotel receptionist Baha Mousa was merely the latest episode in a long history of such conduct.⁷

For many years it was claimed that an essential element of British counterinsurgency operations was that they were waged with minimum force. This was in marked contrast to the French and the Americans and was, it was argued, one of the main reasons why the British were so successful in defeating insurgency. In a special double issue of the academic journal *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, devoted to British counterinsurgency and published at the end of 2012, the editor, Matthew Hughes, states quite bluntly that the British “never employed minimum force in their imperial policing and counterinsurgency campaigns.” Indeed, the British use of force “is best viewed from a maximal and not a minimal position.”⁸ A new study of the suppression of the Kenyan Mau Mau rebellion, Huw Bennett’s *Fighting the Mau Mau*, similarly argues that whereas the doctrine of minimum force was once seen as underpinning British counterinsurgency operations, such a view is no longer tenable. What he describes as “the triumphalist orthodoxy” failed because of its inability to explain “the difficulties encountered in Basra and Helmand.” The idea that the British used minimum force he dismisses as “little more than romantic self-delusion.” Instead he argues that British counterinsurgency operations were informed by the “notion of exemplary punitive force, characterised by a rapid and harsh response to rebellion which punished the general population.”⁹

This view has been endorsed by David French, the foremost historian of the twentieth-century British army, in what is likely to become the standard history of British counterinsurgency, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency 1945-1967*. According to French, far from “being determined only to use minimum force,” the British “readily committed the maximum possible force they could deploy.” Indeed, he argues that the way British counterinsurgency campaigns have generally been portrayed is “at best ill-informed, and at worst almost the opposite of what actually happened.” He quotes a senior officer in Kenya in early November 1952 insisting that the Kikuyu had to be shown “that the government is much more to be feared than Mau Mau.” There was complete success in achieving that objective. This is all very different from “winning hearts and minds.” Instead the British employed exemplary force that was intended to intimidate the civilian population. The talk of “hearts and minds” was really just “good public relations. It helped disguise the sometimes unpalatable reality from the British public and the wider international community.” This, it seems fair to say, is now the consensus among academics researching

and writing in this field.

What about the use of torture? As French points out, there were “no manuals detailing how these techniques should be employed. They were taught at the Intelligence Corps training centre by word of mouth.” He quotes one former soldier remembering his 1949 Intelligence Corps training: “The tortures that were described to us had the advantage of leaving none of the visible traces that might be noticed...beating the prisoner after his body had been wrapped in a wet blanket, filling his body with water, and holding him against a hot stove.”¹⁰ Of course, recognizing the realities of British counterinsurgency does not necessarily lead to anti-imperialist conclusions; it can lead to the “realist” conclusion that if that is how an empire has to be ruled then so be it. But this is not something that most people are prepared to countenance, which is why so much effort is put into hiding the evidence and denying the truth.

Certainly the use of torture by the British has a much higher profile today than when *The Blood Never Dried* was first published. Of crucial importance here are the Mau Mau cases that are still the subject of ongoing legal action. Four Kenyan victims of torture, Ndiku Mutwiwa Mutua, Paulo Muoka Nzili, Wambugu wa Nyingi, and Jane Muthoni Mara, are suing the British government for what was done to them when they were in detention in the 1950s. Mutua and Nzili were both beaten and castrated; Nyingi was regularly beaten, subjected to water torture, and nearly beaten to death during the Hola Camp massacre (he was thrown on the pile of detainees who had been killed but then found to still be alive); and Jane Mara was regularly beaten and on one occasion raped with a heated bottle that a guard forced into her vagina with his boot. Three other women detainees received the same treatment after her. Their case has led to the “discovery” of the Hanslope Park archive of “misplaced” colonial documents, which included 294 boxes containing 1,500 files of Kenyan materials. According to David Anderson, one of the historians given limited access to the files:

Many of these documents contain discussion of torture and abuse and the legal implications for the British administration in Kenya of the use of coercive force in prisons and detention camps, by so-called “screening teams” and in other interrogations carried out by all members of the security forces.... Many of the documents provide copious detail on the administration of torture and substantive allegations of abuse...our listing of individual notified cases now stands at close to 500 examples.... This included the burning alive of detainees.¹¹

The files have revealed such gems as the letter Eric Griffiths-Jones, the Attorney General in Kenya, wrote to the colony’s governor, Evelyn Baring, in June 1957. He recommended that when Mau Mau suspects were beaten care should be taken that “vulnerable parts of the body should not be struck, particularly the spleen, liver or kidneys,” and that “those who administer violence...should remain collected, balanced and dispassionate.” This remarkable opinion from the colony’s senior law officer was, of course, widely ignored in practice, with prisoners beaten to death by men who were anything but “balanced and dispassionate.” Still, as he sagely warned the governor, “If we are going to sin we must sin quietly.”¹²

We British, of course, know how to deal with torturers. Take the case of the former Black and Tan and Palestine Police officer, Douglas Duff. In his memoir, *Bailing with a Teaspoon*, he wrote quite cheerfully of how during the 1920s:

I witnessed...many scores of cases where the “hoist”, or the “water-can” was employed. This latter method had the merit, from the investigators’ viewpoint, of leaving no traces for doctors to detect. The victim was held down, flat on his back, while a thin-spouted coffee pot poured a trickle of water up his nose, while his head was clamped immovably between cushions that left no marks of bruising.... Usually, we British officers remained discreetly in the background, not wishing to have the skirts of our garments soiled....

Not that Duff was without standards. Even he disapproved of a gloating British policeman he met in Nablus early in his career who “produced an old cigarette-tin containing the brains of a man whose skull he had splintered with his rifle-butt.”¹³ What became of Douglas Duff? He went on to become a minor TV celebrity, appearing as a panelist on the popular BBC quiz show *What’s My Line?*

None of the issues raised here are academic, of purely historical interest. *The Blood Never Dried* was written very much as a response to British participation in the Iraq war and although British troops have been withdrawn from that country, at the time of writing they remain in Afghanistan. Only recently British aircraft have been employed to bomb Libya, the country that has the dubious honor of being the first country to ever experience aerial bombardment, at the hands of the Italians, in 1911. Indeed, the aerial bombardment of 2011, in which the Italians participated, was an unwitting marking of that anniversary. And there are colonial wars still to come which our rulers will dress up as humanitarian interventions or as reluctant responses to “mortal threats” posed by a variety of “enemies,” yesterday Communists, today Islamists, tomorrow....

But in reality, these will be wars fought for different reasons altogether, for economic and strategic reasons that cannot be admitted in public for fear that popular opinion will rebel. They will, of course, be U.S. wars, waged with British support and participation. Public opinion will be against them, as was the case in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but the politicians will be enthusiastically in favor. This book hopes to contribute to the opposition to these future wars.

Notes

1. [↵](#)John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), xi, 6-7.
2. [↵](#)John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).
3. [↵](#)Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience* (London: Fontana, 1996); Denis Judd, *The Lion and the Tiger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Denis Judd, *Jawaharlal Nehru* (Cardiff: GPC Books, 1993).
4. [↵](#)Judith Brown and William Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
5. [↵](#)Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill’s Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during the Second World War* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 126, 128.
6. [↵](#)John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 175, 182.
7. [↵](#)See A.T. Williams, *A Very British Killing: The Death of Baha Mousa* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012).
8. [↵](#)Matthew Hughes, “[Introduction: British Ways of Counter-insurgency](#),” *Small Wars and*

Insurgencies 23, no. 4-5 (2012): 583.

9. ↵Huw Bennett, *Fighting The Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4, 83, 90.
10. ↵David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency 1945-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5, 7, 66, 162, 251.
11. ↵David Anderson, "Mau Mau in the High Court and the 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 710. See also in the same issue of the journal: Caroline Elkins, "Alchemy of Evidence: Mau Mau, the British Empire and the High Court of Justice," and Huw Bennett, "Soldiers in the Courtroom: The British Army's Part in the Kenya Emergency Under the Legal Spotlight."
12. ↵Ian Cobain and Richard Norton Taylor, "[Sins of Colonialists Lay Concealed for Decades in Secret Archive](#)," *Guardian*, April 18, 2010, <http://theguardian.com>.
13. ↵Douglas Duff, *Bailing With a Teaspoon* (London: J. Long, 1953), 46, 168.

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