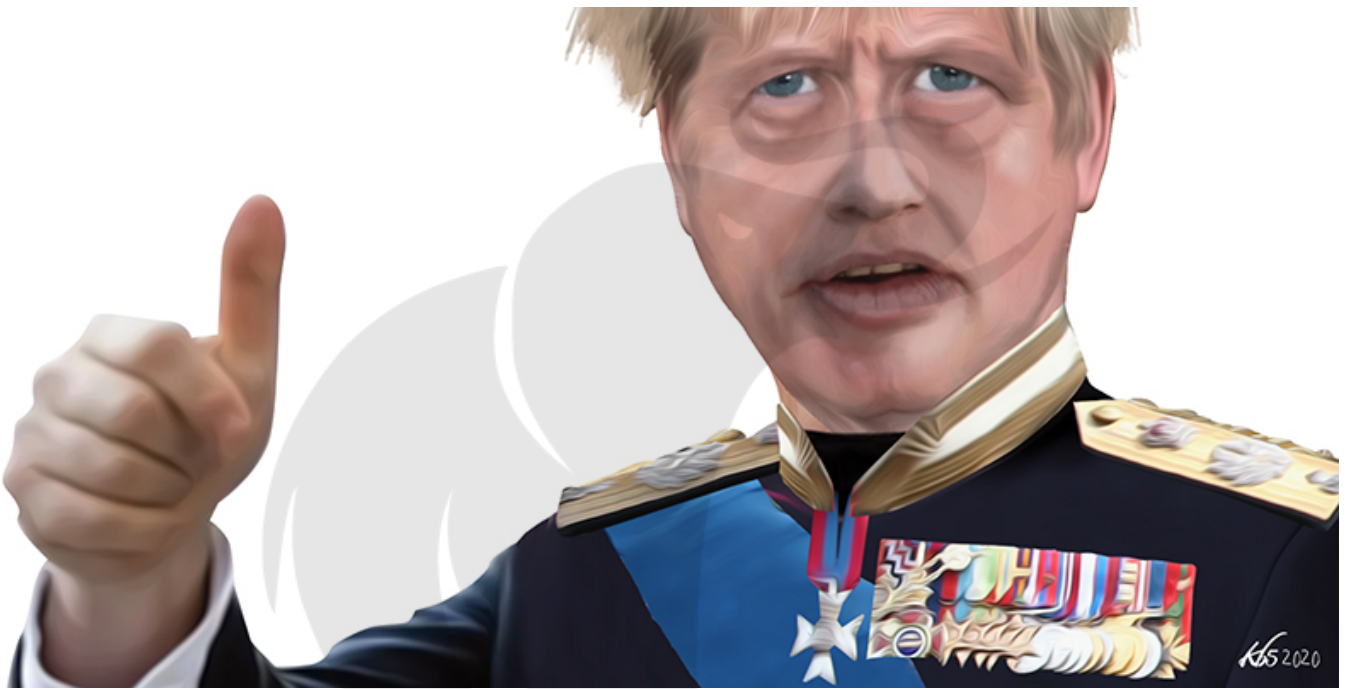




The Nostalgia for Empire Is a Product of Whitewashed British History

By Lauren Brown



With his penchant for colonial nostalgia, the UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson does not bode well for the development of a society which would recognise its history of imperial brutality. Instead, the leadership of Boris Johnson is ensuring the continuance of the prevailing understanding of the British empire as "[something to be proud of.](#)"

Some lowlights.

In 2002, Johnson wrote for the right-wing [Telegraph](#) newspaper that former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair's visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo would mean that "the pangas will stop their hacking of human flesh, and the tribal warriors will all break out in watermelon smiles." The fact that the man who wrote these words later became Foreign Secretary for Britain is astounding.

Also in 2002, Johnson stated that Africa "may be a blot, but it is not a blot upon our conscience." He argued that "The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not [in charge any more.](#)"

In 2016, Johnson waded into a confrontation with then-President of the United States, Barack Obama, when he stated that the removal of a bust of Winston Churchill from the Oval Office was perceived by some as "an ancestral dislike of the British Empire." This dislike, Johnson argued

stemmed from Obama's "[part-Kenyan ancestry](#)." (Obama had replaced Churchill with one of Martin Luther King Jr., "[to remind him of the people who helped get him there](#)."—Ed.)

Though Johnson didn't say more, he was alluding to Obama's paternal grandfather, Hussain Onyango Obama. The old man "had served with the British army in Burma during the second World War and later found work back in Kenya as a military cook." As the UK Times revealed in 2008:

Like many army veterans, he returned to Africa hoping to win greater freedoms. But his aspirations soon turned to resentment of the occupying British. He became involved in the Mau Mau independence movement and was arrested as early as 1949, probably on charges of membership of a banned organization. During two years' detention he was subjected to horrific violence, according to the story's authors, Ben Macintyre and Paul Orenogh. Tortures inflicted on Kenyan prisoners sometimes involved such barbaric implements as "castration pliers."

In 2011, a group of former Kenyan freedom fighters, then in their 70s and 80s [took the British government to court in London](#) over torture within the detention camps set up during the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya from 1952-1960. The rebellion has remained a controversial topic and a traumatic segment of both British and Kenyan history. The [system of detention camps](#) housed the accused Mau Mau warriors and supporters, who mostly consisted of the Kikuyu people.

These camps were built under the façade of rehabilitation—in reality, they were punitive institutions, which detained 80,000 Black Kenyans. The camps allowed [brutal interrogations](#), which often consisted of torture and in some cases, murder. Some accounts of the barbarous actions taken by camp officials can be found in the [British National Archives](#), though many were destroyed upon the eve of Kenyan independence. These acts of torture were carried out all in the name of maintaining British colonial sovereignty.

The memory of the Mau Mau rebellion in British history has been overshadowed by the official account of the rebellion provided by the British government. As a result, for decades the former detainees of these camps have gone without apology or recognition for their suffering.

However, with the advent of the 2011 Mau Mau court cases, it seemed that the former detainees may finally receive some form of justice. During this case, the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) were brought to court by ex-detainees and tried for their crimes—since then, many more cases concerning over [40,000 Kenyans have followed](#).

However, the Mau Mau court cases resulted in the Hanslope Park Scandal. Where the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) were revealed to have been secretly withholding thousands of documents from the colonial era, under the guise that government officials did not know that they existed.

When the court case began, the FCO tried to cast off responsibility. They stated that the responsibility for these grievances had been passed on to the Kenyan government upon independence. The FCO also argued that the case could not go to trial due to a lack of evidence. Once the court case had begun, the FCO were asked if they were withholding any documents in relation to the case, to which they originally answered, no.

After pressure from the court and historians, the FCO were forced to admit that they were secretly holding 1,500 colonial documents at the Hanslope Park location. It was later disclosed that this government location held a further 20,000 undisclosed files from 37 former [colonies](#).

The existence of the hidden documents at Hanslope Park can provide insight into how public history in the UK has been influenced by the government's attempts to disseminate its preferred narrative

of empire.

The court case resulted in the British government providing monetary compensation to 5,200 Kenyans. They also decided to pay for the erection of a memorial in Nairobi which was completed in [2015](#). Accordingly, it seemed that the British government may have finally begun to face to consequences of colonial rule. However, it is unlikely that such a movement will continue if Boris Johnson becomes the next head of state.

Even now, four years on from the memorial's completion, Britain's commemoration and representation of the Mau Mau rebellion has failed to accurately represent its events. Upon the day of the unveiling of Nairobi's new Mau Mau monument, the British High Commissioner stated that "we should [never forget history](#)." Yet, Mau Mau has continued to be an era of British history which has been misrepresented to protect the idea of the Great British Empire.

In May 2019, the [Imperial War Museum](#) in London contained no mention of the Mau Mau rebellion. Considering the truly imperial nature of the conflict. It is damning to the British heritage industry to see no discussion of this within the museum.

However, the [National Army Museum](#) contains a small exhibit discussing the rebellion. The discussion of the Mau Mau rebellion was featured in a display with the word "torture" directly behind a small collection of Mau Mau weapons. Underneath them, lay the words "is torture justified if it provides valuable intelligence?" In the context of the Mau Mau rebellion, the "valuable intelligence," which interrogation attempted to collect, was to be used to prevent the liberation of oppressed African people from the violent grip of the British empire.

Upon reading this, it seemed that a more historically accurate representation of the Mau Mau detention camps would be apparent in this display. Yet, the exhibit only highlights that "torture and summary executions occurred in British detention camps." Little detail was provided, and the extent of the violence was left undiscussed. The display only revealed that 11 detainees were killed at the infamous [Holo camp](#) and 20 Mau Mau suspects were killed at Chuka camp. Interestingly, this exhibit stated that the Mau Mau fought against the British "often with brutal methods." This has signified that the British were somewhat justified in their actions.

The exhibit states that it was "alleged" in 2009 that 90,000 Kenyans were "executed, tortured or maimed" in the conflict. There has been no text added to the exhibition to highlight that the findings of the trial.

This limited discussion of the rebellion, has done little to deconstruct British colonial myths. Evidently, British public history of the rebellion has provided little insight to the disgraceful activities of the colonial authorities during this period.

More must be done to ensure that the history of the British empire is represented bereft of ideas of British imperial piety and the archaic ideology of the civilizing mission. It is exceedingly clear that this notion is a not priority for a Prime Minister who believed that "the best fate for Africa would be if the old colonial powers ... [scrambled once again in her direction](#)."

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