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# Fighting the Mau Mau

The British Army and Counter-Insurgency  
in the Kenya Emergency

Huw Bennett

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## Fighting the Mau Mau

British Army counter-insurgency campaigns were supposedly waged within the bounds of international law, overcoming insurgents with the minimum force necessary. This revealing study questions what this meant for the civilian population during the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s, one of Britain's most violent decolonisation wars. For the first time Huw Bennett examines the conduct of soldiers in detail, uncovering the uneasy relationship between notions of minimum force and the colonial tradition of exemplary force where harsh repression was frequently employed as a valid means of quickly crushing rebellion. Although a range of restrained policies such as special forces methods, restrictive rules of engagement and surrender schemes prevented the campaign from degenerating into genocide, the army simultaneously coerced the population to drop their support for the rebels, imposing collective fines, mass detentions and frequent interrogations, often tolerating rape, indiscriminate killing and torture to terrorise the population into submission.

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*The British Army and Counter-Insurgency  
in the Kenya Emergency*

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Huw Bennett



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## Abbreviations

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ADALS	Assistant Director of Army Legal Services
AG	adjutant-general
BEM	British Empire Medal
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	commander-in-chief
CO	Colonial Office
CO	commanding officer
CPEC	Central Province Emergency Committee
CPM	Colonial Police Medal
CSCCC	Chief Secretary's Complaints Coordinating Committee
CSM	company sergeant-major
DALS	Director of Army Legal Services
DC	district commissioner
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DDOps	deputy director of operations
DEC	district Emergency Committee
DIS	director of intelligence and security
DMIO	district military intelligence officer
DO	district officer
DOKG	district officer Kikuyu Guard
FIA	field intelligence assistant
FIO	field intelligence Officer
GM	George Medal
GOC	general officer commanding
G(Ops)	General Staff Operations Branch
GSO1 Ops (K)	general staff officer, grade I, operations, Kenya
HAA	heavy anti-aircraft artillery
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICRCG	Inter-departmental Committee on the Revision of the Geneva Conventions

IMT	International Military Tribunal
IWMD	Imperial War Museum Department of Documents
IWMSA	Imperial War Museum Sound Archive
JAPOIT	joint army-police operational intelligence teams
JSCSC	Joint Services Command and Staff College
KAR	King's African Rifles
KCPIS	Kenya Colony political intelligence summary
KGCU:	Kikuyu Guard Combat Unit
KIC	Kenya Intelligence Committee
KICFA	Kenya Intelligence Committee fortnightly appreciation
KISUM	Kenya intelligence summary
KNA	Kenya National Archives
KPR	Kenya Police Reserve
KRA	Kenya Regiment Archive
MELF	Middle East Land Forces
MIO	military intelligence officer
MM	Military Medal
NAM	National Army Museum
OC	officer commanding
ODRP	Oxford Development Records Project, Rhodes House, Oxford
PA	prohibited area
PEC	provincial Emergency Committee
PMIO	provincial military intelligence Officer
QPMG	Queen's Police Medal for Gallantry
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
RMO	regimental medical officer
RSM	regimental sergeant-major
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SBFIS	Special Branch fortnightly intelligence summary
SFT	special force team
SIB	Special Investigations Branch
sitrep	situation report
TCT	tracker combat team
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
VCIGS	Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff
WOPC	warrant officer platoon commander

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This book is dedicated to my family and to Claudia. They have helped me realise a childhood dream to write military history, and read and listened to my thoughts on this topic beyond any reasonable expectation. Most importantly, they reminded me that some things matter even more than military history.

# Introduction

---

Recently home from a two-year stint commanding the security forces in Kenya, General Sir George Erskine went to Camberley to lecture on the 1955 Army Staff Course. After a few introductory remarks, General Erskine turned to a problem faced by every commander-in-chief dealing with a major rebellion. Would it be necessary to declare martial law? Since the ‘unfortunate experiences’ under Oliver Cromwell, British officers have regarded martial law tentatively. Concerned about legal constraints on the army, Erskine found to his relief that:

the Government of Kenya were determined to use the very considerable powers at their disposal to the fullest extent. They could and did pass Emergency regulations of severity and entirely appropriate to the military requirements.<sup>1</sup>

His former colleague and successor, Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Lathbury, clashed with the Kenyan Attorney-General in November 1955. A roving police inspector discovered that the army were retaining prisoners for operational purposes beyond the time limits permitted. A senior staff officer in East Africa Command railed at these complaints, advocating a ‘first class show-down on the grounds that it is not possible to fight a war within the concepts of British Common Law’.<sup>2</sup>

Whether in Surrey or Nairobi, British Army officers of the 1950s understood that the law was malleable to their definition of necessity. Since then the permissive nature of law in the decolonisation era has been largely forgotten. A triumphalist attitude grew in the 1960s into an orthodoxy within the military and academia. That orthodoxy discarded observations such as the two made above in 1955. It arose as a reaction to British decline, a need to feel that despite the Empire’s demise, the British were in *control* of the process. The control was provided by

<sup>1</sup> Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) Library, ‘The Mau Mau Rebellion’, lecture given by General Erskine to the 1955 Course, Army Staff College, Camberley, 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> The National Archives, Kew (TNA), WO 276/430: Letter from [illegible], Lt.-Col. GSO1 Ops (K), to Chief of Staff, East Africa Command, 4 November 1955.

military professionalism, an expertise to be envied around the world. To enhance the myth's potency, French and American incompetence were loudly decried.<sup>3</sup> What came to dominate the orthodoxy was a conviction that British success in counter-insurgency derived from a determination to conduct operations within the law. Robert Thompson was a leading expert on counter-insurgency warfare who served in the Malaya Emergency and advised the American government in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> He articulated the sentiment most influentially in 1966: 'the government must function in accordance with the law'.<sup>5</sup>

An organisational principle translated this abstract commitment into a practical rule. No more force should be used than the situation demands. Gradually the literature on British counter-insurgency, and the army itself, came to believe that this doctrinal precept represented reality. Apparently the principle of 'minimum force' resulted from both Victorian morality and the pragmatism of a small imperial army which could ill afford massive repression.<sup>6</sup> When countering revolt, the aim was always to contain rather than extirpate resistance through minimal rather than exemplary force.<sup>7</sup> From long experience the army had learnt that exemplary, excessive force provoked the population and was counterproductive to restoring the peace.<sup>8</sup> For some time, virtually all writers on the army since 1945 have identified minimum force as a key characteristic of British counter-insurgency.<sup>9</sup> The orthodoxy held that

<sup>3</sup> For a major reassessment of the French in Algeria, see M. Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For studies of his role in Vietnam, see I. F. W. Beckett, 'Robert Thompson and the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, 1961–1965', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 8 (1997), 41–63; P. Busch, 'Killing the "Vietcong": The British Advisory Mission and the Strategic Hamlet Programme', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 25 (2002), 135–62.

<sup>5</sup> R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), 52.

<sup>6</sup> R. Thornton, 'The British Army and the Origins of its Minimum Force Philosophy', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 15 (2004), 83–106.

<sup>7</sup> C. Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 18.

<sup>8</sup> T. R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–60* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), 17–62.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Charters, 'From Palestine to Northern Ireland: British Adaptation to Low-Intensity Operations', in D. A. Charters and M. Tugwell (eds.), *Armies in Low-Intensity Conflict: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Brassey's, 1989), 194; K. Jeffery, 'Intelligence and Counter-Insurgency Operations: Some Reflections on the British Experience', *Intelligence and National Security*, 2 (1987), 119; A. J. Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 221; C. J. McInnes, *Hot War, Cold War: The British Army's Way in Warfare 1945–95* (London: Brassey's, 1996), 117; J. Pimlott, 'The British Army: The Dhofar Campaign, 1970–1975', in I. F. W. Beckett and J. Pimlott (eds.), *Armed Forces and Modern Counter-Insurgency* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 23; R. Popplewell,

adherence to law could eliminate a dilemma in counter-insurgency warfare. Insurgents deliberately hide among the population. For the state, the core challenge is how to target insurgents without harming civilians. The debate on British counter-insurgency concluded that minimum force provided the answer. This is a seductive interpretation because it softens the loss of empire by elevating the British Army to a professional standard that all others failed to achieve.

Understanding violence in Britain's counter-insurgencies is impossible without recourse to the archives. Until recently these records have been neglected. In consequence, the doctrine-centric orthodoxy, elevating the importance of minimum force, has not been systematically challenged. In 2009 a group of Kenyans who alleged mistreatment at British hands during the Emergency began legal proceedings against the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Two years later this led to the discovery of a hidden colonial archive at Hanslope Park, home to Her Majesty's Government Communications Centre. The papers contain records from thirty-seven British colonial territories, and consist of 8,800 separate files. They will all have been placed in the National Archives, file series FCO 141, by the end of 2013. The author of this book has acted as an expert witness in the Mau Mau case at the High Court in London, giving him privileged access to all of the files concerning Kenya. With the kind agreement of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, a number of these archival records are presented in this book for the first time, in addition to a wider range of sources from archives in Britain and Kenya.

The literature on the Kenya Emergency's origins, conduct and consequences is rich and diverse.<sup>10</sup> This book is the first to take a detailed look at the British Army's role. But it is not a comprehensive, chronological military history. The focus is directly on the orthodoxy about British counter-insurgency. Two major questions drive the analysis. How important was the concept of minimum force in determining how the army used force? And how should the army's behaviour towards civilians best be understood? The argument is that in reality the army never succeeded in separating insurgents from civilians. The inherent dilemma about identification, violence and legitimacy has never been resolved. For this reason, the minimum force notion has merely aimed to paper over the cracks of a deep problem without any clear solution.

“Lacking Intelligence”: Some Reflections on Recent Approaches to British Counter-Insurgency, 1900–1960’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 10 (1995), 337.

<sup>10</sup> For useful reviews, see S. L. Carruthers, ‘Being Beastly to the Mau Mau’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), 489–96; B. A. Ogot, ‘Review Article: *Britain’s Gulag*’, *Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), 493–505.

Prompted by crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, writing on British counter-insurgency has taken a more critical turn.<sup>11</sup> Writers observed how the triumphalist orthodoxy failed to explain the difficulties encountered in Basra and Helmand. The British government's participation in human rights abuses, including those at Guantanamo Bay, attracted significant attention. At the same time as the debate on contemporary policy reignited, the historical literature underwent a revival. The interest in counter-insurgency dovetailed with the release of primary sources. A major comparative historical study by David French demonstrates just how often the harsh methods described in this book were employed to crush rebellions throughout the post-war British Empire.<sup>12</sup> Original historical work has been produced on conflicts such as Palestine, Malaya and Northern Ireland.<sup>13</sup> These studies show how the army used a greater degree of force than is normally acknowledged, at times leading to torture and illegal killing. Others have argued that the army's own

<sup>11</sup> D. Betz and A. Cormack, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy', *Orbis*, 53 (2009), 319–36; D. Branch, 'Footprints in the Sand: British Colonial Counterinsurgency and the War in Iraq', *Politics & Society*, 38 (2010), 15–34; W. Chin, 'Why Did It All Go Wrong? Reassessing British Counterinsurgency in Iraq', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2008), 119–35; W. Chin, 'The United Kingdom and the War on Terror: The Breakdown of National and Military Strategy', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30 (2009), 125–46; A. Danchev, 'The Reckoning: Official Inquiries and the Iraq War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19 (2004), 436–66; A. Danchev, 'Accomplicity: Britain, Torture and Terror', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8 (2006), 587–601; R. Kerr, 'A Force for Good? War, Crime and Legitimacy: The British Army in Iraq', *Defense and Security Analysis*, 24 (2008), 401–19; R. Kerr, *The Military on Trial: The British Army in Iraq* (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2008); G. Rangwala, 'Counter-Insurgency amid Fragmentation: The British in Southern Iraq', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32 (2009), 495–513; A. Roberts, 'Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan', *Survival*, 51 (2009), 29–60.

<sup>12</sup> D. French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945–1967* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> H. Bennett, 'Detention and Interrogation in Northern Ireland, 1969–75', in S. Scheipers (ed.), *Prisoners in War* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 187–205; K. Hack, 'Screwing Down the People: The Malayan Emergency, Decolonisation and Ethnicity', in H. Antlöv and S. Tonnesson (eds.), *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism* (London: Curzon, 1995), 83–109; K. Hack, "'Iron Claws on Malaya": The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30 (1999), 99–125; M. Hughes, 'The Banality of Brutality: British Armed Forces and the Repression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–39', *English Historical Review*, 124 (2009), 313–54; S. Newbery, 'Intelligence and Controversial British Interrogation Techniques: The Northern Ireland Case, 1971–2', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 20 (2009), 103–19; J. Norris, 'Repression and Rebellion: Britain's Response to the Arab Revolt in Palestine of 1936–39', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36 (2008), 25–45; N. Ó Dochartaigh, 'Bloody Sunday: Error or Design?', *Contemporary British History*, 24 (2010), 89–108. S. Shoul, 'Soldiers, Riot Control and Aid to the Civil Power in India, Egypt and Palestine, 1919–39', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 346 (2008), 120–39.

doctrinal publications omitted any substantial reference to minimum force during the colonial era.<sup>14</sup>

To a certain degree, these writings repeat a point made forcefully in earlier scholarship. John Newsinger, in particular, has questioned the mythology surrounding British counter-insurgency since the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> But because archival records were unavailable to substantiate the critique, it failed to displace the orthodoxy. Therefore the account offered here is the first book-length examination of how the British Army treated civilians in one of its major post-war counter-insurgencies. The archival sources, including new material released under the Freedom of Information Act, allow for an understanding of how the army itself thought about and conducted the Emergency.

The argument is developed in nine chapters. [Chapter 1](#) describes the evolution of the Kenya Emergency from the military perspective. The conflict is placed into four periods in order to set out the major events and operations. By doing so, the key continuities and innovations in the strategy for defeating the Mau Mau, and their relationship to wider events, is demonstrated. In [chapter 2](#), the structure of civil-military relations is dissected, by looking at how the main political groups interacted with the army. The three most important groups were the provincial administration, the European settlers and the British political class. Each held multiple, contradictory views about the Emergency, and exerted an identifiable influence on the army, which is analysed in depth. [Chapter 2](#) also examines the committee system which mediated civil-military relations, minimising frictions to promote a coordinated approach to defeating the Mau Mau.

[Chapter 3](#) addresses a central claim in the orthodox interpretation of British counter-insurgency: that soldiers operated within a legal framework. The chapter dissects how the British government and armed forces understood the legal regime relevant to colonial rebellions after 1945. Widespread violence against civilians could occur in the colonies partly because such acts were considered within the bounds of international law.

<sup>14</sup> B. Reis, 'The Myth of British Minimum Force in Counterinsurgency Campaigns during Decolonisation (1945–70)', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34 (2011), 245–79.

<sup>15</sup> M. Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage, 2003); J. Newsinger, 'Revolt and Repression in Kenya: The "Mau Mau" Rebellion, 1952–1960', *Science and Society*, 45 (1981), 159–85; J. Newsinger, 'A Counter-insurgency Tale: Kitson in Kenya', *Race and Class*, 31 (1990), 61–72; J. Newsinger, 'Minimum Force, British Counter-Insurgency and the Mau Mau Rebellion', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 3 (1992), 47–57; J. Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency: From Palestine to Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

The British government and army evidenced a conservative attitude, and awareness about even existing provisions was patchy. These attitudes reflected systematic weaknesses in the international legal regime itself. Arguably British conservatism was far from atypical. Three structural contradictions in international law undermined universal protections, and proved a problem for the British in practice. These were, first, the conflict between the military need for reflexive obedience and the legal requirement to refuse illegal orders; second, the conflict between military necessity and legal restraint; and third, the overly narrow codification which produced different rules for fighting non-Western opponents. Part of the reason why atrocities happened in the Empire was because they were not construed as international crimes. Government policy aimed to minimise the interference of international law in colonial emergencies. Knowledge within the armed forces about international law in general terms was poor, while the duty to obey all orders was paramount. As a result, soldiers sent to Kenya knew nothing about any formal obligations to prevent abuses committed against civilians.

Chapter 4 asks how far the army's internal doctrinal principles made up for this permissive attitude regarding international law. The chapter defines the concept of minimum force and outlines its development in official and semi-official documents. Without doubt the concept enjoyed wide circulation in military circles, and permeated doctrine throughout the twentieth century. But the idea must be appreciated on a rather more critical basis than is often the case, both in theoretical and practical terms. Arguably, the concept is only helpful in understanding actual behaviour when studied alongside the equally prominent idea of exemplary force. Exemplary force seeks to target whole populations in order to punish insurgents, and to warn others not to support the rebellion. It is by nature indiscriminate and terrorising. By tracing formative military experiences in the run up to the Kenya campaign, the chapter shows how minimum and exemplary force often co-existed.

In the fifth chapter attention returns to Kenya, to explore the impact of the minimum force ideal on military operations. Rather than deploying the full force of its military power in Kenya, the government calibrated violence at a level below the potential for all-out genocidal war. Minimum force mattered to how the army fought the campaign, and relied on tight discipline. Chapter 5 looks at how the army dealt with the inevitable offences committed by soldiers. A series of measures, involving orders, meetings and inquiries, succeeded in preventing soldiers from completely running amok. Chapter 6 argues that restrained conduct required more than military discipline. Operational policy also needed to distinguish between legitimate targets and innocent civilians.

Legally defined zones with distinct rules of engagement, developed prisoner policies, and special forces methods sought to control and limit the use of force.

Chapter 7 argues that despite avoiding the maximal possible violence, the army engaged in widespread violent coercion of the civilian population throughout the Emergency. This included forced population movement, beatings, rape, torture and shootings. These actions did not result from poor command and control, or a breakdown in military discipline. A determination to teach the Kikuyu a lesson drove a policy of punishment. The key policies in this respect are examined in broad terms, and at the micro level. Chapter 8 shows how these policies were connected to the structure of military discipline. General Erskine initially wanted to conduct a restrained campaign. Following resistance from the Governor, the settlers and some soldiers, he compromised. In effect, discipline in Kenya was negotiated between commanders and troops. Thus harsh measures against the Kikuyu population resulted from disciplinary compromise and strategic necessity.

Chapter 9 assesses how far civil-military relations influenced the implementation of policy. In most spheres the army prevailed, and in many areas strictly under civilian control soldiers exerted a strong influence. Soldiers and civilians broadly agreed on the need to crush the Mau Mau rebellion swiftly and harshly, before it undermined British rule and spread to other tribes.

# 1 'A determined campaign against the terrorist bands'

---

The Mau Mau movement wrought violence on Kenya for much of the 1950s (see [map 1](#) for Kenya Colony). Confined mainly to the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru tribes of the central highlands, unrest had been gathering pace for several years before the government declared an official State of Emergency in October 1952. The rebellion was devolved and complex in organisation and motivation. A large number of grievances were involved, ranging from an anti-colonial desire to expel Europeans, to dissatisfaction with imposed agricultural techniques. Probably the most important single cause of the revolt was the belief that the Kikuyu had been cheated out of their rightful lands by European settlers. Despite the anti-colonial dimension, the conflict is normally now described as a civil war within the Kikuyu, as the squatters (temporary workers on European farms) fought against the landed establishment. Important alliances were forged between the rural dispossessed and urban activists in Nairobi.<sup>1</sup>

The rebellion was limited geographically, mainly to the Central and Rift Valley Provinces, and to Nairobi (see [map 2](#)). So in most of Kenya life carried on as normal during the Emergency. Out of a total African population of around 5 million, the 1.4 million Kikuyu were nearly all considered unreliable by the government. At this point the Asian community in Kenya stood at about 97,000, and the European settlers at 29,000. The settlers dominated local politics, and there was no democracy for the Asians or Africans in the country. The origins of the conflict can be seen in the Kikuyu's poor economic conditions, the lack of political representation, and a growing land hunger as the population

Chapter title from TNA, CO 822/378: Kenya Intelligence Committee fortnightly appreciation (KICFA) 7/53, 30 June 1953.

<sup>1</sup> R. Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188. John Lonsdale provides the following explanation for the meaning of the term 'Mau Mau': 'in Swahili *ka* is a diminutive prefix, *ma* an amplifying one, enhanced by repetition. *Mau* would thus connote something larger than *Kau* (the colloquial form of the Kenya African Union).' J. Lonsdale, 'Mau Maus of the Mind: Making Mau Mau and Remaking Kenya', *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), 393–421.



Map 1 Kenya Colony



Map 2 Administrative areas affected by the Emergency

mushroomed. Perhaps the most convincing account of the brewing troubles argues that these causes prompted three political blocs to emerge by the 1950s. The conservative element in Kikuyu society comprised chiefs, headmen and senior Christian elders, who believed in supporting the colonial project. The moderate nationalists, such as Jomo Kenyatta and Koinage wa Mbiyu, were westernized, believing in social progress and political representation. These moderates formed such groups as the Kikuyu Central Association and later the Kenya African Union. The third group, the militant nationalists, first appeared in the 1930s. They gave shape to the Mau Mau in the 1950s and grew more influential as the failure of the moderates to achieve any meaningful progress became obvious. By 1952 Mau Mau attacks on settler property and on perceived collaborators were becoming widespread in Kikuyuland.<sup>2</sup>

Ten months into their campaign in Kenya, the army staff received a depressing progress report. It diagnosed a failure to disrupt the Mau Mau gangs, ineffective tactics, lack of discipline and efficiency in many military units, poor liaison with other security forces and incorrect intelligence methods. The author concluded that 'The military has, therefore, failed.'<sup>3</sup> Yet just over three years later, the military campaign against the Mau Mau was won, the gangs (as the authorities described them) were reduced to negligible proportions and the civil authorities were able to govern largely without military help. Compared with many other insurgency wars, the military phase lasted for a short period. The British Army performed a decisive role in crushing the rebellion relatively quickly. Drawing on experience, commanders knew how to coordinate their forces with the civil powers in overwhelming insurgency by force. Holding the population in place through the exercise of drastic restrictions on normal liberties, the army simultaneously sought to eliminate the armed rebels by killing or capturing them. The delicate balance required in targeting these two groups – the population as a whole and the armed gangs – shifted throughout the conflict. But the determination to coerce both at once remained a constant.

How the army tried to defeat the Mau Mau can best be understood in four distinctive, though in some senses overlapping, periods. From the declaration of the Emergency in October 1952, through to June 1953, the campaign lacked strategic leadership and sufficient forces to defeat the Mau Mau. The second period began when General Sir George Erskine arrived in June 1953. During his early military career Erskine

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), 9–53.

<sup>3</sup> TNA, WO 276/382: Memorandum by C. C. T. Aston on the Emergency Operations, 11 August 1953.

served in Ireland and India, and fought in Europe and the Middle East in the Second World War. For over a year he commanded the famous 7 Armoured Division, including in Normandy. From September 1944 he headed the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force's mission to Belgium, and in 1945 served as the deputy British military governor in Germany. After the war his most important post was in Egypt, where he commanded British troops from January 1949 until April 1952. During this period, widespread anti-British violence took place, and escalated to quite serious levels in Suez, Ismailia and Cairo.<sup>4</sup> These experiences, in colonial policing, major combat command, civil-military cooperation and suppressing rebellion, would prove highly relevant in Kenya. During his tenure of command Erskine attempted to introduce strategic direction and bring the various security forces under his control. The third period was the war's most decisive. It began with the massive security sweep through Nairobi, Operation Anvil in April 1954, and the taking control of the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Reserves away from the Mau Mau. The fourth period witnessed the final surrender negotiations and large-scale, and then small special forces, operations in the forests to destroy the few remaining gangs, with the military finally handing over control to the civil power in the last areas in November 1956.

### Opening moves, October 1952 to June 1953

When Governor Sir Evelyn Baring declared a State of Emergency on 20 October 1952, the military response to the Mau Mau began. But the police and administration had been countering growing violence throughout the year.<sup>5</sup> Arson attacks against European settler properties were common in 1952, with over sixty such crimes recorded from January to March around the town of Nyeri alone.<sup>6</sup> Settler farmers were not the only victims, with thirty-four Africans murdered between 1 August and 20 October.<sup>7</sup> From the year's start the settler community agitated for tough action, and the police responded, arresting 547 Kikuyu 'preventatively' in September.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Erskine, Sir George Watkin Eben James (1899–1965), by H. Bennett, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2011), online edition, at [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/97289](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/97289), accessed 1 June 2011.

<sup>5</sup> F. Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (London: James Currey, 1989), 3; D. A. Percoc, 'British Counter-Insurgency in Kenya, 1952–56: Extension of Internal Security Policy or Prelude to Decolonisation?', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 9 (1998), 50–9.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya: 1952–56' (doctoral thesis, Cambridge University, 1993), 20.

<sup>7</sup> D. Branch, 'Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, 1952–60' (doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2005), 76–8.

<sup>8</sup> Furedi, *Mau Mau War*, 116, 119.

A major problem right from the outset was identifying exactly who in the Kikuyu population supported the Mau Mau. An intelligence drought severely hampered what operations could achieve, though many went ahead regardless.

Operation Jock Scott was conducted by the police and army in cooperation, setting a pattern for the future. Launched on 20 October, it aimed to decapitate the Mau Mau leadership; 150 members of the Kenya African Union, a legal organisation connected (erroneously) with the Mau Mau, were arrested. At the same time, the 1 Lancashire Fusiliers arrived from Egypt and immediately set about patrolling the settled areas in a bid to reassure the European inhabitants. In addition to the Fusiliers, the forces in Kenya comprised five King's African Rifles (KAR) battalions, a battalion of the territorial Kenya Regiment, the East Africa Armoured Car Squadron and the 156 (East African) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery (HAA).<sup>9</sup> The KAR, the armoured car squadron and the artillery all consisted of African troops from Britain's colonial territories in East Africa, officered by British Army men on secondment, and were part of the regular chain of command. The Kenya Regiment was also officered by regulars on secondment, but the majority of the rank and file were European settlers, although a small number of Africans served with the unit during the Emergency. For administrative and financial purposes the Kenya Regiment came under the Kenya government, but for discipline and operations it followed the normal British Army chain of command.<sup>10</sup>

Military operations in the first months were quite seriously flawed. The initial arrests failed to halt the violence, but generated complacency in the government, which was subsequently sluggish in mounting offensive operations.<sup>11</sup> When these offensive sweeps eventually happened, in Kiambu and Nyeri, they achieved no tangible results.<sup>12</sup> The Kenya government came under criticism for lacking a clear strategy, reacting in a frantic and ad hoc manner to the Mau Mau.<sup>13</sup> Attacks on Europeans initially exerted a disproportionate influence on deployment decisions,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> TNA, WO 276/542: Booklet 'The Story of the Kenya Regiment T.F. 1937-1959'. For a debate about how 'British' the Kenya Regiment and KAR were, see R. Thornton, "'Minimum Force": A Reply to Huw Bennett', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 20 (2009), 215-26; and H. Bennett, 'Minimum Force in British Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 21 (2010), 459-75.

<sup>11</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 32-3.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> B. Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination* (London: James Currey, 1990), 347; W. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 81.

with small units scattered throughout the Rift Valley to protect the settlers.<sup>14</sup> As a result, some saw the opening months as nothing more than a ‘phoney war’, with confusion on both sides.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to the operations launched by three full brigades later on in the Emergency, the opening months certainly lacked large-scale military operations. However, the ‘phoney war’ tag, reflecting a eurocentric refusal to take African violence seriously, is deceptive. Such a characterisation masks the growing violence seen throughout this period. Both settler and government action accelerated the onset of the rebellion by radicalising a large proportion of undecided Kikuyu into supporting the Mau Mau cause either actively or passively through providing food and information.<sup>16</sup> Some even describe the period as one of ‘pre-emptive repression’ by the state.<sup>17</sup> Large numbers were expelled from their homes in the Rift Valley by settlers paranoid that each formerly loyal Kikuyu employee was waiting for nightfall to exert a bloodthirsty treachery with panga and spear.<sup>18</sup> The government viewed such (hugely disproportionate) retaliation as inevitable.<sup>19</sup> By doing nothing to stop the settlers, who often evicted their labour with illegal force, the government condoned their behaviour. While evicting all Kikuyu from areas where alleged Mau Mau crimes had occurred only became official policy on 15 December 1952, the authorities assisted with evictions before this date.<sup>20</sup> In the week following a violent attack on the Meiklejohn residence in Thomson’s Falls in late October, resulting in Commander Meiklejohn’s death and his wife’s mutilation, the Lancashire Fusiliers removed 750 Kikuyu men and 2,200 children during a large sweep through the surrounding area.<sup>21</sup> In another case, after a European was killed in Leshau on 22 November, 4,324 Kikuyu were evicted.<sup>22</sup>

Several units mounted sweep operations throughout November. The 156 HAA Battery formed into sixteen motorised infantry patrols, each about ten men strong, and worked alongside various KAR units (and later independently).<sup>23</sup> By 12 November both police and army units were engaged in extensive and continuous sweeps through the Kikuyu

<sup>14</sup> Heather, ‘Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya’, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Berman, *Control and Crisis*, 348; Percox, ‘Counter-Insurgency in Kenya’, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Percox, ‘Counter-Insurgency in Kenya’, 67. <sup>17</sup> Furedi, *Mau Mau War*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Heather, ‘Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya’, 41. A panga is a heavy bladed tool, similar to a machete, used for agricultural work, but also lethal as a weapon.

<sup>19</sup> Percox, ‘Counter-Insurgency in Kenya’, 62.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 68. The primary evidence does not fully clarify the distinction between autonomous settler removals and official government practice.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 90. <sup>22</sup> Furedi, *Mau Mau War*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Oxford Development Records Project (ODRP), Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, University of Oxford: P. E. Langford, MSS Afr. 1715.

Reserves.<sup>24</sup> These sweeps suffered from an intelligence deficiency and thus innocent persons were adversely affected. The police were in a poor position to provide accurate intelligence on which to base operations. There was hardly any substantial Kenya Police presence in the Reserves, the first posts having been built in these areas in 1943. At the Emergency's declaration, the police Special Branch, responsible for political policing, comprised only four officers and a handful of rank and file.<sup>25</sup> Another common type of operation was the screening of all persons in a given location, usually with the aid of loyalist chiefs, the administration and police. The exact meaning of 'screening' varied. The common denominator was the extraction of information from suspects. Soldiers wanted information to launch operations, policemen wanted information to secure criminal convictions, Special Branch and military intelligence men wanted information for building their intelligence networks, and the administration wanted information to punish and/or rehabilitate Mau Mau adherents. From early November 'A' Company of 23 KAR constantly took prisoners and searched property for signs of collusion with the Mau Mau. In a typical action on 28 January 1953 they helped screen 1,500 people at Limuru, resulting in 96 arrests.<sup>26</sup>

November also saw the extension of powers to magistrates for trying Mau Mau offences, alongside new regulations facilitating the seizure of property and increased penalties for certain crimes.<sup>27</sup> In December Governor Baring announced a new Emergency tax, levied against all Kikuyu, which proved extremely unpopular.<sup>28</sup> Similarly controversial with the African population, the trial of the popular and respected political leader Jomo Kenyatta began on 3 December, leading to his conviction for leading the Mau Mau.<sup>29</sup> On the military front Baring requested a director of operations in November and again in December, but the War Office instead appointed Colonel G. Rimbault as Personal Staff Officer, a position with limited authority.<sup>30</sup> His appointment reflected a wider failure on the part of the War Office to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. This was again evident when the reluctance to send more British battalions led to the overstretching of KAR units.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 64.

<sup>25</sup> D. Throup (1992), 'Crime, Politics and the Police in Colonial Kenya, 1939-63', in D. M. Anderson and D. Killingray (eds.), *Policing and Decolonisation: Politics, Nationalism and the Police, 1917-65* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 129, 139.

<sup>26</sup> ODRP, H. N. Clemas, MSS Afr. 1715.

<sup>27</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 38.

<sup>28</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 64. <sup>29</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 49.

<sup>31</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 62.

Perhaps given the worrying conflicts going on in Korea and Malaya, the refusal to prioritise Kenya in late 1952 to early 1953 should be considered reasonable.

In January 1953 substantial sweep operations pushed into the forests for the first time. After declaring the northern Aberdare Mountains area a prohibited area (PA) for all civilians, the army and police launched Operation Blitz on 6 January.<sup>32</sup> In PAs troops could open fire without warning. The PA policy received official sanction from Whitehall in late February on the condition that it was restricted to really dangerous areas, clearly defined, given adequate publicity, and that a reasonable amount of time elapsed between giving notice and starting operations.<sup>33</sup> The Blitz operations were confined to the forest fringes and thus the Mau Mau avoided the security forces fairly easily by moving deeper into the dense forests.<sup>34</sup> Still suffering from manpower shortages, the security forces were limited in their ability to launch offensives by the constant demands for static protection. Even when not on the offensive, the government found protecting all those vulnerable a difficult task.<sup>35</sup> But the pressure to do so mounted as attacks on settler farms increased in the first months of the year, creating a febrile atmosphere among the settlers.<sup>36</sup> The brutal murder of the Ruck family, including a young child, at Kinangop on 24 January radicalised the settlers more than any other incident so far in the Emergency.<sup>37</sup>

One solution to the manpower problem appeared to be creating Kikuyu, Embu and Meru Home Guard units, some of which existed in an unofficial capacity before the Emergency was declared. They were best organised in Nyeri, and by March 1953 there were 18,000 Home Guards in Central Province.<sup>38</sup> The nature of the Guard changed as the war did. Initially founded to protect chiefs and headmen, their role changed over 1953 as units began to patrol large areas and fight in combat. The abiding image of these units was of the increasingly ubiquitous fortified posts, surrounded by spike-filled moats, barbed wire and overlooked by watchtowers. Each post typically held ten rifles and shotguns allocated to the most trustworthy men, the rest carrying pangas, spears and other traditional weapons. When not manning the post, the Home Guard patrolled localities, guarded schools, escorted chiefs and headmen, acted as guides for the military and participated in

<sup>32</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 57.

<sup>33</sup> TNA, CO 822/442: Copy of draft reply, Secretary of State for the Colonies to Baring, in reply to his telegram of 24 February 1953, no date.

<sup>34</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 71.

<sup>35</sup> Branch, 'Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion', 96.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 91. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> Branch, 'Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion', 83–4.

screenings. They normally operated in the Reserves, leaving the forests to the police and army.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout February important changes were made to the command and control structure in Kenya. Major-General William Hinde arrived on the first of the month to take up the post of Chief Staff Officer to the Governor.<sup>40</sup> He spent a month touring the affected areas in order to draw up recommendations for combating the insurgency.<sup>41</sup> Aside from proposing social measures to win over the population, Hinde wanted the army to be active on offensive operations, and ended the unsuccessful 'grouse shoots' in favour of smaller-scale patrols.<sup>42</sup> In suggesting these approaches Hinde laid some of the groundwork for Erskine's fuller strategy developed several months later. He optimistically believed that the Mau Mau could be beaten with existing resources, reflecting the poor intelligence on the enemy at the time.<sup>43</sup> The Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Field Marshal Sir John Harding, visited from 19 to 24 February. He took a less optimistic view and decided that further British battalions and air support were required, marking a growing prominence for the army in the conduct of the Emergency.<sup>44</sup> Harding recognised the need to curb the 'European hotheads', to develop an overall plan and to ensure that everybody worked to it effectively rather than pulling in different directions. As a result of his visit, the KAR battalions were brought up to strength, and 1 Devonshire Regiment, 1 Royal East Kent Regiment (The Buffs) and two brigade headquarters were earmarked for Kenya.<sup>45</sup>

Two events on a night in March 1953 escalated the conflict, pushing London into promoting Hinde to Director of Operations, and later sending General Erskine out to win an increasingly messy war.<sup>46</sup> On 26 March the Mau Mau attacked Lari village and Naivasha police station almost simultaneously. At Lari the Mau Mau massacred 120 civilians, while the raid at Naivasha, releasing prisoners and stealing arms and ammunition, greatly embarrassed the government. Lari represented the beginning of an assault on the Home Guard aimed at discouraging loyalism.<sup>47</sup> These events forced the authorities to realise that the Mau Mau was a serious, organised movement that would not go

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 110, 112.      <sup>40</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 71.

<sup>41</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 59.

<sup>42</sup> A. Clayton and D. Killingray, *Khaki and Blue: Military and Police in British Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1989), 256.

<sup>43</sup> Heather, 'Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya', 62.

<sup>44</sup> M. Carver, *Harding of Petherton* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), 63.

<sup>45</sup> TNA, CO 822/442: Report by CIGS on his visit to Kenya, 27 February 1953.

<sup>46</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 73.

<sup>47</sup> Branch, 'Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion', 129.

away quickly.<sup>48</sup> A week later the government decided to systematically arm the Home Guard and appoint European officers to oversee them.<sup>49</sup> Judicial powers were enhanced and security force activities intensified.<sup>50</sup> In early April a major sweep took place around Kariokar in Nairobi, detaining or sending to the Reserves around 800 Kikuyu.<sup>51</sup> Intelligence reports noted how patrols by 23 KAR and the Home Guard ‘met several groups of terrorists’ in the Kiambu area near Lari. In one night the Home Guard claimed to have killed twenty-one, and 23 KAR another twenty-four (plus thirty-six wounded) ‘in a running fight with a large semi-armed gang’. The report concluded, ‘Most of those killed and wounded were thought to be involved in the LARI massacre.’<sup>52</sup> Who the others were is unclear. Following Lari, the security forces scarcely cared to pause and ponder such questions.

Having acclimatised and trained in Nyeri, The Buffs and the Devons were ready for operations by late April and fully deployed by 10 May. They formed part of the new 39 Brigade with responsibility for the Aberdares forest area, while 70 (East Africa) Infantry Brigade operated in the Reserve areas.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile Hinde modified the colony’s command system in a bid for greater coherence. He personally headed the Director of Operations Committee, below which were joint operations committees sitting from colony down to district level, with representatives from the military, police and administration.<sup>54</sup> They directed all operations by security forces and were distinct from the Emergency Committees, which focused specifically on policy matters.<sup>55</sup> In May the unwieldy Governor’s Emergency Committee was replaced by the smaller Colony Emergency Committee, below which the existing provincial (PECs) and district Emergency Committees (DECs) were expanded in the Rift Valley and settled areas to include an unofficial European member. The authorities hoped that coopting the settlers would curtail their excessive behaviour.<sup>56</sup> This proved a little hopeful.

Other organisational reforms in May were of greater long-term importance. The military’s operational intelligence capability received a boost with the creation of provincial and district military intelligence

<sup>48</sup> See Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 119–80.

<sup>49</sup> Branch, ‘Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion’, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 133.

<sup>51</sup> Heather, ‘Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya’, 75.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, WO 276/379: Northern Brigade intelligence summary, 4 April 1953.

<sup>53</sup> Heather, ‘Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya’, 85.

<sup>54</sup> For further discussion of the command system, see [chapter 2](#). The administration of the country was divided into the following levels: colony, province, district, location, sub-location.

<sup>55</sup> Heather, ‘Counterinsurgency and Intelligence in Kenya’, 82. <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

officers (DMIOs), aided by field intelligence assistants (FIAs). These officers were specifically tasked with enhancing the intelligence network, and in particular giving new vigour to the army's relations with the Special Branch. The new system gradually improved intelligence collection, collation, analysis and dissemination.<sup>57</sup> On 29 May the War Office announced that East Africa, previously subordinate to Middle East Land Forces (MELF), would become an independent command, reporting directly to London and with Erskine as the commander-in-chief.<sup>58</sup> This marked a turning point in the professionalisation of the war's conduct. But it should not be interpreted as meaning that strategy prior to Erskine's arrival completely lacked coherence. As of 19 May, the security forces had managed to wound 343 Mau Mau and kill 619 of them. They had also, by 31 May, arrested 103,379 people, of whom 89,820 were screened.<sup>59</sup> An intelligence report from this time concluded that the government's failure to destroy the Mau Mau should be considered against broad success in preventing the insurgency spreading to other tribes and provinces, described as the 'Government's primary task'.<sup>60</sup> The need to demonstrate the state's commitment to crushing internal revolt to a wider audience than just the Kikuyu explains much about the use of force in the opening stages of the Emergency, and indeed beyond. Within Kikuyuland the insurgency had spread quickly, from Kiambu and Nairobi to Fort Hall, where it remained at its most fierce. By August 1953 it would spread to Embu, Meru and the Rift Valley areas adjacent to Central Province.<sup>61</sup> Rather than quelling the uprising, government action actually exacerbated the problem. This is especially true of the population movements taking place, with even Baring admitting that it 'has probably led to a further facilitation of gang recruitment and some diversion of effort on the part of the forces of law and order'.<sup>62</sup>

### **Erskine develops an operational plan, June 1953 to April 1954**

General Erskine's arrival on 7 June 1953 came to mean both a decline in settler influence over the campaign and the beginning of the end for the

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. <sup>58</sup> Percox, 'Counter-Insurgency in Kenya', 75.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, CO 822/373: Special Branch fortnightly intelligence summary (SBFIS) 5/53, Appendix A, 31 May 1953.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, CO 822/378: KICFA 4/53, 15 May 1953.

<sup>61</sup> Branch, 'Loyalism during the Mau Mau Rebellion', 129.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, CO 822/442: Savingram from Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 24 February 1953.