



BOOK REVIEW

## Erik Linstrum. *The Age of Emergency: Living with Violence at the End of the British Empire*

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Between the 1970s and 2000s, the end of the British Empire was largely conceived by many in the West as a mostly peaceful affair. Generally, historians argued that, unlike their French and Dutch counterparts, British colonial administrators were able to achieve a smooth “transfer of power” and were even able to maintain a degree of goodwill among the people and governments of their former colonies. This myth has never had much traction in post-colonial societies, where most people associate the last days of empire with grotesque violence, catastrophic loss, and enduring conflict. In the last twenty years, important scholarship, including seminal works by Caroline Elkins and David Anderson, has confirmed for historians what people living in former colonies have always known—that the British state had no intention of giving up all its colonies after 1945. On the contrary, it initiated a series of brutal wars to maintain its hold in Africa and Asia. In his new book, Erik Linstrum makes an important contribution to this body of work. Linstrum challenges the notion that the end of World War II inaugurated peace in Britain, arguing that while the years of total war were over, Britain remained a society at war. In the postwar period, British forces and colonial armies confronted anticolonialists and launched counterinsurgency campaigns across the empire, including in the Malay Peninsula (1948–60), Kenya (1952–60), and Cyprus (1955–59).

How did British society learn to live with these wars and crucially how did they justify the mass violence carried out by their government not only against militant revolutionaries but also against civilians? Linstrum answers this question by providing a cultural and political history of the myriad responses of various factions of British society to the devastation taking place in Kenya, Cyprus, and Malaya. Some scholars, such as Paul Gilroy, have argued that colonial administrations and the British Foreign Office deliberately and systematically hid their activities from the public and thus the vast majority of British people were unaware of the atrocities being committed in their name. There is certainly some truth in this proposition, but Linstrum argues that the process of concealment was never fully complete, and information could and did pierce through the canopy of imperial silence. In this context, supporting these wars, tacitly or otherwise, was a political *choice*. The book shows that many people made that choice and were hence complicit in the collective punishment of people in Kenya, in Cyprus, and in Malaya. Equally, the book uncovers the efforts of those who made the opposite choice—who ensured that the reality of the colonial wars made it to the British public. These messengers came from all sorts of political backgrounds. Members of communist and socialist political parties such as E. P. Thompson and Peter Worsley were among the wars’ harshest critics. Émigré organizations, particularly groups

led by African figures such as Mbiyu Koinage and Joseph Morumbi, brought attention to the wanton massacres taking place in Kenya and elsewhere. Many soldiers and volunteers became whistleblowers, like the social worker Eileen Fletcher who published eyewitness accounts of the harrowing conditions she had witnessed in detention camps in Kenya.

Linstrum thus makes clear that there was no dearth of knowledge about what was taking place in the empire. In fact, the British government was fully cognizant that it needed to counter antiwar and anticolonial narratives. Hence, they created an information machinery that disseminated a legitimating language for extraordinarily brutal wars. Far from always hiding their activities, government officials justified ruthlessness by pointing to the animalistic nature of the enemy. A colonial lexicon of terror was activated and used to dehumanize colonial populations, decontextualize armed struggle, and describe anticolonial protestors as irrational, inhumane, and hateful terrorists. The Mau Mau in Kenya were regularly portrayed as barbarians by officials as well as by reporters and journalists. Servicemen called for wars of extermination in Malaya with one general comparing insurgents there “to mosquitos who could never be eliminated one at a time” (p. 94). Underscoring the inhumane nature of the colonized people was critical to justify going beyond the conventions and laws of war when fighting them. It was also important to delegitimize those who spoke against these wars. For example, when Labour MP Barbara Castle raised alarm about the vicious acts carried out by colonial armies, her colleagues and members of the public labeled her a traitor, whose dangerous words harmed the morale of British soldiers. Other institutions also followed the government line. While many Anglican clerics such as Trever Huddleston and Michael Scott widely condemned the counterinsurgencies, the Church of England officially supported the war efforts and called on the British people to trust their government. Similarly, while individual journalists were sympathetic to anticolonialists and had disdain for settler populations, their stories went through a carefully ordered system of editors and producers in newsrooms who ensured that the general reportage of colonial wars was sparse, dry, and nonprovocative. Meanwhile, British fascists, who enjoyed a resurgence during this period, celebrated colonial wars as a testament to the continued virility and prowess of the empire and its sons.

In short, Linstrum shows, in meticulous detail, the creation of a modern ideological and communications apparatus that enabled the British colonial state to control the portrayal of colonial wars and create narratives that justify and even applaud them. He successfully chronicles the extent to which ordinary Britons believed and promoted those narratives. We hear very little from the colonized populations themselves, but Linstrum’s scholarship highlights the necessity of reading imperial history to understand Britain today. Sadly, not for the last time, a state and society denied the humanity of entire peoples and punished them for demanding the return of their land and their liberty. If we can find some solace, it is in the fact that such colonial missions are never successful, that the colonized are able to assert their humanity even in their death and that history acknowledges those who stood by them, even when it was perilous for them to do so.