MAU-MAUS OR MAO MAOS?

I. THE DIFFICULTY IN LETTING GO

Standing in the way of decolonization wasn’t Whitehall.

It was white Africa.

White settlers dominated the Union of South Africa

south Rhodesia

Kenya.

This was more than irritating.

It crimped any kind of self-determination for any black colony the British had.

Every step to self-determination would terrify and anger the whites.

What gets done in Uganda... how long before it’s done in Kenya?

As Nyasaland goes ... can South Rhodesia be far behind?

Especially since colonies with a lot of black self-rule are examples for your own black people to notice –

Maybe even safe havens for their revolutionaries and guerrilla movements.
Goodness knows, anybody who remembers the Jameson
Raid knows how that works!

How long before there are black nationalist Jamesons
making their raids?

The one power least fearful of that was the most independent: South Africa.

But that made Britain’s difficulty worse.

White eyes in East and Central Africa turned south.

They could get arms and support from South Africa.

Not to mention laws to model their own on.

Independence – man, it looked better to them every day,
and every apartheid measure that went on South
Africa’s books ..

and every directive from London about fair
treatment for their blacks.

How long before South Rhodesia defied the mother country?

How long before it asked to join the Union of South Africa?

And if it did, where were the British troops to keep it
loyal?
Imagine the scenario: South Rhodesia holds a vote to go into the Union of South Africa.

You’ve been preaching the right of people to rule themselves.

You gonna declare that referendum illegal?
You gonna keep them a colony against their will?

But let’s say it enters the Union.

Think: Anschluss? Austria? Munich? Sudetenland?

Think: who did the National party Boers support in the Second World War?

Think: how did the Boer republics get their land?

Five’ll getcha ten that they’ll invade and take Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.

And Kenya – the most developed, the richest, the most English part of East Africa.

It looks south, too. What’s to stop it from joining the Union?

Before you know it, one of two things has happened:
– either millions of blacks are worse off than they ever were under empire

cheap labor

virtual slaves

– or they take up arms, and you have race war from the Horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope.

And that means terrible wars. The black states of western Africa would join in.

Is this Fantasyland? Look on the ground:

– Afrikaners are moving into Rhodesia.

They’re coming to buy land and to vote.

Maybe 1 in 7 white people in South Rhodesia is from South Africa, and maybe 1 in 4 of the whites in the countryside.

North Rhodesia’s even higher: about 30% of the whites are Afrikaners in 1951.  

And the situation’s worsening, not improving.

From the end of the war on, for every 100 Englishmen who come to live in Northern Rhodesia, 174 Afrikaners do.

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47% of all South Rhodesia’s immigrants come from South Africa in 1949 and 64% a year later.

It’s a matter of months, not years, before there would be more Afrikaners than English-speakers elected to the legislative council!\(^2\)

– South Africa can cut off Rhodesia economically, with no trouble at all, to put pressure on them to join the Union.

– business and social ties go over the border.

Rhodessians play on the South African test teams

  cricket
  rugby

... in both, the two countries are merged already!

– in trade, Southern Rhodesia was part of the South African Customs Agreement.

– every bank ... most merchant houses of any size ... all the

\(^2\) Ronald Hyam, “The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953,” *Historical Journal*, 30 (March 1987): 171. None of this means that the fears British policy-makers had were really convincing. Odds are that, given the chance to bring in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa would have turned it down. South African economic pressure wouldn’t have been strong enough, in any case, to make South Rhodesia buckle. And while a lot of people talked wistfully of uniting with South Africa, they didn’t really trust the South Africans – especially the English-speakers, who would be turned into second class citizens in an Afrikaner-run South Rhodesia.

But the vital point here is, what did British policy-makers FEAR? not, were their fears valid? And the fear, there’s not the slightest question about.
commercial firms ... most of the newspapers

are subsidiaries of businesses in South Africa.

– every railroad works in tandem with South African Railways

– Southern Rhodesia has its own Afrikaner Nationalist Party.

– the Dutch Reformed Church there is insisting that Afrikaans be taught in all the Southern Rhodesian schools

From the pulpits their ministers are urging the parishioners to work to join the Union.³

And what if Rhodesia and Kenya start a revolution against England?

There’s not a darned thing England can do about it.

It’s not got the money.

It hasn’t got the manpower.

It hasn’t got the will.

But South Africa has all three.

Against South Africa, the Empire would lose, not win.⁴


What do you do? Answer: you treat the whites in Kenya and southern Rhodesia extra-gentle.

Try to make them look north and east, not south.

So if the white Rhodesians want to set up a federation with North Rhodesia and with Nyasaland –

give it to them!

A. The deer-track of self-government.

Self-government was an ideal, certainly.

The question was, on whose terms?

– Southern Rhodesia, for instance, wanted self rule.

Wouldn’t it be an excellent idea, they say, to amalgamate the two Rhodesias, Nyasaland, put their economic resources together and make them self-governing?

Sounds good. Sounds REAL good. Sure does.

Self-government ... much better than govt by colonial office.

Indeed it is.
Ask the 10,000 white miners and landowners and railwaymen in Northern Rhodesia, who want to amalgamate with the self-governing whites of southern Rhodesia.

They want away from the Colonial Office.

But the aim wasn’t democracy. It was to PREVENT any larger democracy.

It was to forestall self-government for the blacks.

... to make themselves overlords over the black population as never before.

Not at all surprisingly, the blacks of northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland were terrified of the consolidation idea.

They didn’t WANT the imperial government to give up its responsibilities.

The self-government people weren’t speaking for them...

And were not thinking of their interests.5


What they saw was an aggressive Union of South Africa that was looking north to expand. What if white Rhodesians had a revolution and decided to join them? For sure, the result would be that the states in between, the black Crown Colonies, would be given the same dose of apartheid that Pretoria was giving to its own blacks. The only way that could be prevented was by creating a Federation, big enough to stand up against South Africa on its own, and delectable enough a plum for white Rhodesians to share in that they wouldn’t be tempted by the forbidden fruits that South Africa had to offer. On this point, see Ronald Hyam, “The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953,” Historical Journal, 30 (March 1987): 145-70.
Consider, too, Nigeria. 20 million people – one third of the total population of the non-dominion empire.

Europeans ... a scattered few, officials and traders, missionaries and miners. Nothing else. Two thousand at most.

The soil of the country, the people of the land own.

The agricultural produce of the soil, they own.

There could have been plantation system here. British policy forestalled it.

No equivalent of the Dutch in Java or the British in Malaya

White owners, dark skinned workers.

But European companies dominate the wholesale trade and much of the retail trade in Nigeria.

Africans strongly oppose them.

Responsible government would mean government of Africans by Africans.

The problem of “communalism.”

Do you represent one man, one vote?
Or does each interest have a say?

Thus, in Kenya, the Indians want a franchise with standard common
to all races.

European settlers insist on representation by communities.

And define what share whites get, Indians get, Africans get.

This the British government dashed in 1923 by a simple pronouncement:

“Primarily Kenya is an African territory.”

Therefore, African interests come first.

They must come before immigrant communities, when they conflict
with the interests of those communities.

The King’s government is holder of a trust on behalf of that
African population.

It cannot delegate that trust.
It cannot share that trust.

So there can be no ‘responsible” government in Kenya.

Because self-government that Europeans wanted there was the power to
make themselves political masters over the many.

Self-government like that is exactly what African tribes most feared.
Imperial protection was their best hope, their best bet.

Yet the plain picture we get is that little or nothing was done after the war to give black Africans more of a say.

Go to Rhodesia in 1948. Not one single African sat on the legislative councils.

African interests were represented there by two members.

Both were white.

Go to southern Rhodesia, and you find 1.6 million Africans with no real rights.

And 6000 white settlers running themselves.

They had a parliament –

a prime minister –

and they ran the courts.  

Go to the Gold Coast. Oh, it got a new constitution in 1946. Labour gave it that much.

There would be six officials and six non-officials chosen to the Legislative, and 24 black unofficials would sit on it, too, and 18 of them would be elected.

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That sounds as if 18 out of 36 would be Africans elected, and maybe 9 more appointed.

Except that the elections weren’t really elections.

The members of the Council were chosen by meetings of the chiefs of the native states and clans.\(^7\)

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**B. Mau Maus**

Kenya was restive by the late 1940s.

Five million Africans ... 120,000 Asians and 30,000 europeans.

Yet it looked as if those minorities would have all the political power.

Of the Europeans, the ones who counted were the 9000 “settlers,” who farmed the white highlands.

Former black servicemen returned to find housing shortages and white line restrictions on where they could eat.

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There was no room for Africans in this system.

I give you Jomo Kenyatta.

Before the war, he’d been a name to reckon with.

He had done work at the London School of Economics.

He might have been a figure happy to join the white elite – if he were given the chance.

Certainly he had the talent for a place of responsibility.

But did he get it? Nooooo.

Coming home to Kenya in 1946, he wanted to go on the legislative council.

The governor wouldn’t allow it.

So he had to find his power base outside of the government...

as president of the Kenya African Union
as principal of the Kenya African Teachers College.

One might assume that Labour’s government would have done something to weaken the power of the white elite.

Instead, it strengthened it.

No steps were taken towards self-government.

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Africans found themselves more marginalized than ever, and still losing land.

The place where trouble began was among the Kikuyu tribe.

1.75 million of the 5.25 million Kenyans was Kikuyu.
Many were subsistence farmers on reservations.

And their birthrate was soaring -- so their farms got smaller and the land ever less, and over intensive.

So the soil eroded more and more.  

By 1948, about one in four had left the reservations -- they had no choice -- to work outside, as migrant laborers and farm workers and domestic servants.

Some took their families with them.

Some became squatters on European farms, with a small holding for up to three years.

But in return they had to put in 270 days of work on the farm.

If they wanted to leave, they had to get the landlord's permission!

It was based on a combined work permit and identity card, with their fingerprint, the Kipande it was called.  

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9 James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85, 176.

10 James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85, 176-77.
Many of the Kikuyu, without homes or a base, went to Nairobi

50,000 were there by the late ‘40s, begging and stealing.\textsuperscript{11}

Of all the tribes in Kenya, they were the biggest.

Whites thought them the brightest, too, and the least warlike.

Maybe. But that didn’t make them happy.

They were resentful of how whites had made farms of the Kikuyu land.

Since the turn of the century, 6 ½ million acres had been taken from them in the White Highlands.

Official ordinances had given it to some 9000 European farmers.

Their fathers and grandfathers had come over with the encouragement of the colonial government.

That government had worked in 1919 and 1945 to induce ex-officers to settle in a country where they could get cheap labor, where they could grow crops and where a nice climate was to be had.

\textsuperscript{11} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 177.
Among the colonists were some Boers, even.\(^\text{12}\)

White settlers had never felt secure with the Colonial Office being on the side of the Africans.

In 1946 they tried to have the Office control removed.

(Not successfully)

In 1951, they promised to take matters in their own hands, if there was any move to create a majority government in Kenya.

The struggle with the Mau Maus changed that.

They couldn’t do without the government.

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They didn’t dare consider a revolt.\textsuperscript{13}

But gratitude should have been their real feeling.

Since 1900, the government had given them the choicest land in Kenya.

It had evicted the Kikuyu and the Masai who lived on it.

All Africans became tenants-at-will of the Government.

They wanted deeds to the land they had.
They were refused it.

They were taxed to force them to work for cash wages on the white farms.

Needless to say, all of this left rancor among the Kikuyus over the land.

They wanted it back, and had for a long time.

They had started organizing in 1921, when they founded the Kikuyu Association.

Getting political say would let them reverse the legal processes that had seemed aimed to turn them into landless serfs.

The Kikuyu Central Association was even more militant.

It defended native customs and culture

\textsuperscript{13} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}. 176.
It resisted the encroachments of missionaries.

It supported polygamy, female circumcision, and the pagan songs and dances.

It pointed out that polygamy was okay in the Old Testamanet which said nothing against or about female circumcision.

It developed separate African churches... which built their own schools and training college.14

Education would let an African advance himself in Kenyan society.

It must NOT come thanks to the missions – which always had a condition attached.... a religious condition – and one forcing Africans to turn their back on many tribal customs, and cut themselves off from their own people.

In the 1930s, their voice was the KCA – Kikuyu Central Association. Its general secretary: Jomo Kenyatta.

He was the strongest voice and at the front of their struggles.

He was by the 1940s a Communist party member.

More important, he was closely in contact with other African nationalist leaders.

14 James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85. 177.
His approach was as much mystical and religious as ideological.

He had traveled widely.\textsuperscript{15}

He spent a long time in Britain, too.

He had great prestige among his people.

After the war, he came back from London to Kenya and used the Kikuyu moderates for radical ends.

He worked through the Kenya African Union, to push for advances in giving Africa a constitution.

His charisma is one reason that it had 100,000 members to it.

Nor was it all that unreasonable, his argument:

Europeans needn’t leave the country.

But it is time they start to act like guests in our house.

They came as strangers among us. We gave them much.

And now, they claim that our house belongs to them!

The land they tread on is ours.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet how slowly change came!

\textsuperscript{15} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 178.

\textsuperscript{16} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 178.
It wouldn’t be another Rhodesia, certainly. Four Africans went onto the Governor’s legislative council in 1944... to eleven European whites!

Kenyatta could live with that.

Gradualism was good enough. The white settlers could share power for now.

Kenyans would cooperate with colonial authorities.

He sat on the African Land Settlement and Utilization Board.

But the more he stayed moderate, the more the support for him dwindled. He was losing control of the movement.

Instead, a militant wing of the KAU was getting sick of waiting.

They were also sick of Kenyatta’s leadership.

By 1952, they were not saying nice things about him at all.

They were already turning to Mau Mau.

To hear M1 tell it, the Mau Maus were secret terrorist groups.

(The name has no actual meaning).

Ask whites, they would tell you it was

Anti-white
Anti-Christian
Pseudo religious
Tribalist
Terrorist

Murder and fear of murder would drive Asians and whites from Kenya. That was the plan.

Their oaths were sadistic.

Their rituals for initiation were bestial, even obscene.

– using the innards of a recently killed goat
– making a cross of blood and grain on the oath-taker’s forehead.

– arches of plaited banana stalks, hung with plants and parts of a goat.

You’d swear not to drink European beer.
smoke European cigarettes

And swear to hide firearms and ammunition.

You’d swear not to help the missionaries damage Kenya’s traditional cultural customs

... and to insist on removal the clitoris of his daughters (thre customary thing)

If you went into fighting units, there were fearsome oaths –
and a sexual aberration to go with it, involving the thorax of a goat, suspended between two small wooden stakes

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Fear of the supernatural made them fanatics, eager to kill in the most gruesome ways.

All this, whites would tell you.

They wouldn’t tell you that many men of education and ambition belonged, by 1950 ...

And that for all the talk of killing, they didn’t DO any of it.

Or that by 1952 there may have been 200,000 members.

Every decision was made by committee.

In each district of Nairobi, there was a secret Mau Mau committee.

Between the reserves, corresponding committees kept up links.

All through 1950 and 1951, the society grew.

And all through those years, colonial authorities got more nervous.

EVERYONE KNEW that these were Kikuyus.

And the Kikuyus had a predilection to savage cruelty..

to plan crime (they were more intelligent than other tribes)
They were the likeliest to become genuine gangsters.

Plainly, they were building up, for some trial of strength with the British authorities.

Mission schools were losing pupils. 3000 had quit their classes in one district alone.

Congregations were dwindling away.

There was intense pressure to drop out of mission life – and a lot of intimidation, too. ¹⁸

There were prosecutions – some convictions.

But the chiefs couldn’t control the Mau Maus inside the Kikuyu nation.

By October 1952, Kenya had a state of emergency.

The lancashire fusiliers had to be sent in to keep order.

Kenyatta was arrested, the Government being sure he was a Mau Mau himself (and he may have been, or may not – we just don’t know).

We do know that he had publicly denounced the Mau Maus

¹⁸ James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85. 179-80.
quite a few times.

We do know that Kenyatta was under strong attack by people in the Mau Maus as a sell out to whites.

We do know he never belonged to the Mau Mau Central committee.

We do know that the heads of the Mau Mau were alarmed at the effect of Kenyatta’s denouncing their movement.\(^{19}\)

Mau Mau leaders were arrested in sweeps.

It didn’t stop the violence. Actually, it accentuated it.

By arresting the leaders, Britain had put the organizations out of any person’s control.

And they ran very much amok.

Mau Maus weren’t able to cope as well as they might.

They had no guns and ammunition. No foreign powers provided them.

So they got them by stealing.

Most of their members had to be armed with machetes – *simis*, the blades were called, used to slash out undergrowth and to reap the crops.

\(^{19}\) James, *Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85*, 181.
Some guns were made locally, but they were more dangerous to the person shooting them than to anyone being shot at.\textsuperscript{20}

Most of their time was spent, not in raids to kill, but to forage for food to eat.

They found that especially hard to do, as time went on.

They did their best to stay away from government patrols ... knowing they would always be outgunned.\textsuperscript{21}

Still, they did very well.

Women fought as well as men, joined in raids, too.

\textsuperscript{20} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 182.

\textsuperscript{21} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 183.
They carried supplies, prepared meals, cared for the wounded.\textsuperscript{22}

As for Kenyatta, if the Colonial Office had wanted to make him a solid gold Hero, they couldn’t have done a thing differently.

The trial was a farce.

He was accused of being insincere in attacking the Mau Maus...
and of administering the Mau Mau oath

and of letting Mau Maus put his name into their songs
in place of Jesus Christ.

(Excuse me? For this you put someone into jail?)

From the time it opened, the British authorities meant to get a conviction.

To make it still more sure, they bought the judge by giving him a pay-off ten times the size of his annual salary

and helped re-settle him to some other country after the verdict came in.

The chief government witness lied.
The government knew he lied.

He hadn’t been given the Mau Mau oath at all – and Kenyatta certainly hadn’t given it.

\textsuperscript{22} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}. 183.
In return for giving it, he was promised in writing a flight out of the country to study at a university in Britain, and for the colonial administration to pay his way and his family’s way, and, when he came back, to get a government post.

Trying him and giving him a seven year jail sentence made him into a martyr for the Kenyan national cause.

When he was released, he could make any terms he wanted – and Kenya would back him up.23

Mau Maus themselves saw him as a fellow victim of government oppression.

What followed was a brushfire war that went on without stop for a year.

The British built up their forces to 10,000 men

With police and home guards, also.

They made a wide round up of Nairobi Africans.

27,000 Kikuyu suspects were taken into detention.

By the end of the war, a total of 90,000 had been jailed or sent to detention camps.

23 James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85. 180-81.
Experts were brought from Malaya to concentrate the Kikuyus under a “villagization” program, for security.

There were incursions into the mountains, with air support.

Whole villages, near the Mau Mau hiding places, were uprooted, so there would be nowhere for them to feed themselves.

All cattle of the loyal Kikuyu were impounded and penned and put under Home Guard watch, so that the Mau Maus couldn’t raid and get them for food.

It was more or less contained by the end of 1953 – but operations took all the way into October 1956.

What happened was really not white against Mau Mau.

It was a civil war among the Kikuyu.

The British raised Kikuyus for their side

The Mau Maus tried to win as many Kikuyus over as they could.

And each side went after the other, hammer and tongs.24

Both sides quickly went straight for terrorism, to get their way.

24 James, Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85. 183-84.
Not just the strong arm methods the Mau Maus were using already.

Menace was used on both sides.

Kikuyu men and women who wouldn’t go along were menaced.

Victims were usually beheaded.

Corpses were mutilated in awful ways – fingernails torn out and other things.\(^\text{25}\)

The Government created a Home guard, a special corps to guard villages and their stock and to help out the police.

They got spears at first, but later got rifles.

Villages were surrounded in barbed wire.

That way, Mau Maus couldn’t go into the forest, with supplies for their comrades by night.

Sand-bagged blockhouses were built, too.\(^\text{26}\)

Forced labor did it – Kikuyu forced labor in areas that needed to be punished for too much Mau Mau activity.

Naturally, the Home Guard became the first and worst victims of the Mau Maus. Quislings! traitors!

\(^{25}\) James, *Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85*, 183-84.

\(^{26}\) James, *Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85*, 185.
And the Home Guard were the most brutal group of all.

The fact is, there were always lots of Kikuyu glad to work for the Government and to resist the Mau Maus.

Home Guards freed the army and police from having to stay in one place, to defend the villages and guard detention camps.

They could go out on the attack and search and destroy.²⁷

Areas of the country were declared off limits to Kikuyus.

Any Kikuyu found there, if he didn’t stop when ordered, could be shot.

Any unauthorized person could be shot on sight.

Anyone owning guns or ammunition there could be shot, too.

Anyone taking an illegal oath could get 15 years in jail.

Royal engineers opened tracks into the region with Kikuyu labor.

They built operational bases around the edges of the forest.²⁸

Western newspapers described it as a case of civilization against barbarism.

Maybe it was. But who were the civilized people?

²⁷ James, *Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85*, 186.

Add up the figures, and you find that most of the killing wasn’t BY Mau Maus.

It was by the empire.

In the 15 months since the emergency began,

Only 16 Europeans killed and five wounded.
But 613 loyal Kikuyu had been slaughtered – 359 maimed.

Mau Maus had lost 3000 men
1000 more were captured.

By the war’s end, only some 30 Europeans had lost their lives
and more than 10,000 Kikuyu were killed by government forces.

157,000 suspects were arrested and screened – and 64,000 of them were
put up for trial.29

The “rehabilitation camps” were Government-run hells.

Prisoners were beaten and sometimes killed.

Over a thousand alleged rebels were hanged – one of the biggest and
rarest exercises in capital punishment in British imperial
history.

All this, the security forces had managed.

It was successful, but a very important turning point for the British planners back home:

Here was a determined and not very warlike African tribe.

They weren’t very big, and they weren’t covering much area.

Yet it took four years...

10,000 British and African troops
21,000 police
25,000 home guards

... to beat them.

It also cost five million pounds.

11,000 Mau Maus were killed, and 1,800 Africans on the British side.

Only about 80 of the Government forces lost their lives.\(^{30}\)

What did this say, except that Britain couldn’t rule Africa, except by consent? And that consent depended on her policy being credible with the dependent people, by convincing them that she WAS leading them to internal self-government and that independence, in time would surely come?

As for Kenya, whatever Britain’s long term ends, they were not met.

When the Mau Mau war wound down, politics revived.

A new political party, the Kenyan African National Union took as its slogan, “Freedom with Kenyatta.”

\(^{30}\) James, *Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85*. 188.
In August 1961, he emerged from prison, the new president of the KANU.\textsuperscript{31}

Kenyatta proved what the Empire needed all along.

Perhaps he did go to Moscow in 1929, as reports alleged.

In fact, he was a very conservative man.

He wanted, above all, national unity.

This required reassuring the Europeans in Kenya that self-rule wouldn’t be a disaster or bring chaos.

To those who demanded a revolution, to bring independence, he asked:

“If you cannot obey the present laws how will you be able to obey our

\textsuperscript{31}James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85.} 193.
own laws when we have them?\textsuperscript{32}

Whites would keep their property and their right to own it.

Mau Mau was a part of the past, to be forgotten.

In 1963, Kenya became independent.

There was no bloodbath – no revolution.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 193.

\textsuperscript{33} James, \textit{Imperial Rearguard: Wars of Empire, 1919-85}, 193.