Secret British Colonial Archive Finally Released: Britain’s Orwellian Empire Revealed

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After his death, George Orwell’s terrifying vision in Nineteen Eighty-Four of a future in which the past could be erased and rewritten at will by a faceless bureaucracy was quickly appropriated in the US and Britain for the purposes of Cold War propaganda. The novel was taken as confirmation of a worldview that divided the globe according to an almost ontological opposition, between a ‘free world’ that clung to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and a ‘them’ who were not only violent and cruel (after all, hadn’t ‘we’ had recourse to massive violence, from the fire-bombing of Dresden to Hiroshima and Nagasaki?), but who offended against the very laws of empirical truth and the sanctity of the historical record. But without in any way detracting from the crimes of the Soviet empire or the Communist Party regime in China, in reality the calculus of violence and horror in the postwar world was never so neatly and cleanly divided, especially once the populations excluded from the Cold War algebra of ‘us’ and ‘them’ begins to be taken into account—namely the populations of the ‘Third World,’ upon whom so much of the bloody Cold War was fought out. The upcoming disclosure of a massive haul of some 8,800 secret files—which one respected British historian has called “the ‘lost’ British Empire archive” (BBC News, 17 April 2012)—may require a rethinking of the whole Cold War narrative. For while the Cold War warriors of the West rightly denounced Stalinist and other regimes for their horrifically cynical and insidious rewriting of the past—airbrushing out not only individuals, but whole institutional structures of criminality, and indeed the fate of whole populations—these archives suggest that the decolonizing British state was also guilty of manipulating the historical record and hiding major crimes against humanity, albeit on a scale that has still to be assessed and fully understood.

The secret colonial archive is comprised of thousands of documents that detail the military and police activities of British colonial administrations in 37 British colonial territories, from Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Aden—the scenes of high profile late-colonial wars—to much less well-known and often overlooked colonial flashpoints, such as the Chagos Islands, Guyana, Botswana, and Lesotho. As the prospect of national liberation loomed in each territory, British officialdom conducted a wholesale program of stripping the colonial archives, extracting
incriminating documents that recounted acts of murder, torture, and wide-scale human rights abuses, and ‘repatriating’ them to Britain. Significant instances of crimes that are recorded in these files that have emerged so far include the reported murder and torture of Mau Mau insurgents in Kenya in the 1950s, the alleged operation of a secret torture center in Aden in the 1960s, and the forced removal of Chagos Islanders to make way for the massive US base on Diego Garcia (Guardian, 18 April 2012). There are indications that documents were also removed that might embarrass British allies, especially the United States.

However, in British law such documents once ‘repatriated’ should have become available for public scrutiny; instead they were hidden, and their existence denied. The secret archive only came to light in 2011 as the result of a court case taken by five elderly Kenyans, who sued the British government claiming that they had been tortured during the Mau Mau Emergency, an uprising led by the Kikuyu people against British rule that lasted from 1952 to 1960, and which resulted in an estimated death toll of between 25,000 and 300,000 (Guardian, 21 July 2011). Historians working for the claimants began to unearth evidence of a secret trove of documents that had been deliberately ‘disappeared’ by the Foreign Office, and which appear to record not only atrocities in Kenya, but also a whole host of criminal state actions across the late-colonial world. According to Professor David Anderson of Oxford University, “the British Government did lie about this,” and as he observes “this saga was both a colonial conspiracy and a bureaucratic bungle” (BBC News, 17 April 2012). Shamed by the revelations in court, the British Government has promised full disclosure, with documents being released incrementally in tranches from this month through to the end of 2013. This is a massive archive, and clearly no firm conclusions can be drawn at present. It will need the scrutiny of activists, civil rights professionals, academics, and civil society groups from across the world to begin to make sense of the material, and to begin to understand its importance not only for the historical record, but also for current political circumstances.

Yet even at this early stage, the revelation of this secret archive offers an important insight into the ways in which the British government cynically and quite deliberately sought to reconstruct the postwar record in order to manipulate wider perceptions of the West’s postwar global role. While sometimes conducted hastily, the winnowing of the colonial archive was calculated and designed with systematic intent. Files that could be left behind after independence were classified as “legacy,” while those considered too sensitive to fall into the hands of post-independence governments were designated as “watch,” and could only be handled by colonial officials who were “British subject[s] of European descent” (BBC News, 17 April 2012).
However, not only was the historical record being quite deliberately edited, but in truly Orwellian fashion the process of censorship was itself carefully concealed. As The Guardian newspaper reports:

Painstaking measures were taken to prevent post-independence governments from learning that the watch files had ever existed. One instruction states: “The legacy files must leave no reference to watch material. Indeed, the very existence of the watch series, though it may be guessed at, should never be revealed.” [Therefore, when] a single watch file was to be removed from a group of legacy files, a “twin file”—or dummy—was to be created to insert in its place. If this was not practicable, the documents were to be removed en masse. (Guardian, 21 July 2011)

Given the complicated and time-consuming nature of the process of combing through the files, it appears that in their haste officials increasingly resorted to the wholesale destruction of sections of the colonial archive. A memo from April 1961 advises: “To obviate a too laborious scrutiny of ‘dead’ files, emphasis is placed on destruction—a vast amount of paper in the Ministry of Defence secret registry and classified archives could be burnt without loss” (BBC News, 17 April 2012). The secret cache of 8,800 files is thus most likely the reduced remnant of a much larger ‘ghost’ archive, comprising files destroyed not only to hide evidence of criminal actions but also to conceal the very program of concealment itself. Although initial indications suggest that this archival destruction was conducted on a massive scale, its full extent may never be known.

The intellectual legacy of the Cold War was the starkly melodramatic opposition of ‘free world’ and ‘evil empire’ so memorably rehearsed by President Ronald Reagan. However, one unacknowledged consequence of the overwhelming focus on the crimes of the Soviet regime was the airbrushing from popular consciousness of the continuing historical role of British colonialism in the postwar period, and its continuity with the emergent US hegemony. The aggressive defense of a late colonial edifice based in the Middle East, East Africa, and the Far East—regions that continue to number among the central battlefields of the US ‘war on terror’—was at the time a serious embarrassment to the Western Cold War vocabulary of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy.’ But it now transpires that the West’s capacity to win the propaganda battle was not simply a matter of the best arguments winning the day, but depended on the bureaucratic manipulation of the past and the systematic liquidation of extensive sections of the historical record.

Orwell himself was in fact much less convinced by the Cold War’s stark oppositions than his subsequent promoters were willing to concede. As a former colonial policeman in Burma, he wrote about the insidious suppression of independent thinking among European
colonial administrators in his 1934 novel *Burmese Days*. And although routinely read as a straightforward Cold War text, his more famous novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* involves a more complex geopolitical vision than it is usually given credit for. As Orwell explained in a letter to Roger Senhouse dated 26 December 1948, rather than focusing exclusively on the critique of totalitarianism, the novel also sought “to discuss the implications of dividing the world up into ‘Zones of influence,’” an insight that had been prompted by the news of the collaboration between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin in organizing the postwar world.¹ In Orwell’s mind, the suppression of autonomous political action by the emerging geopolitical power blocs of East and West was intimately bound up with the suppression of individual freedom of thought and the destruction of a historical record that functioned according to shared norms of inclusiveness, accuracy, and fidelity to verifiable data. We might speculate with good reason, then, that Orwell would not only have welcomed the revelation of the secret imperial archive, but might not have been so surprised to learn of it in the first place.

Notes

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