

Comparative Analysis of the Ethiopian and Kenyan Detention Systems¹

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Abstract:

Colonialism brought extensive suffering to Africans. One of its manifestations was the operation of concentration camps and detention camps in Italian-occupied Ethiopia and British-controlled Kenya. In both colonies, European powers faced resistance: in Ethiopia, an assassination attempt targeted the Italians, while in Kenya, the Mau Mau movement –primarily composed of Kikuyu people – revolted against British rule. To suppress these resistance efforts, concentration camps and detention facilities were established, where thousands of Africans lost their lives. This paper seeks to answer, among other questions, the following: What conflicts led to establishing concentration camps in the colonies under discussion, and what purpose did they serve? The comparative analysis focuses on the conditions in the camps, the treatment of internees, and the resulting mortality figures.

Keywords:

Ethiopia; Kenya;
concentration camps;
detention camp;
violence; colonial era.

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Introduction

The concept of concentration camps is very often associated with Nazi death camps, but the Germans had already established these types of camps long before. Indeed, concentration camps were not a new phenomenon. However, Nazi Germany was not the first to use these facilities. A concentration camp is not synonymous with a death camp. In the former, people were detained and subjected to forced labour, starvation, and torture, among other things. In the latter, the aim was to exterminate detainees as quickly and efficiently as possible (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025).

The first isolation camp in the United States was established in 1838 for the Cherokee Indians, but it functioned more as a reservation. The very first concentration camp (from the word ‘reconcentracio’, meaning to re-concentrate) is associated with the Second War of Independence in Cuba (1895–1898), during which Spanish colonialists confined civilians in concentration camps. The purpose and consequence were similar for the camps established then and used since isolation and surveillance, crowding people together, and poor conditions, leading to mass deaths (Pap, 2013, 235–236).

In the 20th century, the institution of concentration camps emerged in various African colonies, including British-controlled territories in South Africa, German Southwest Africa, but also in Ethiopia, which was invaded by the Italians, and Kenya, colonized by the British, both of which constitute the focus of this research.

This paper will give a historical overview of the colonial activities of the British and Italians in the areas under study and then briefly describe how the conflict between the colonizers and the Africans escalated into the establishment of concentration camps. After that, attention will turn to a comparison of concentration camps. First, I use the individualising comparative study to highlight the specificities of the two cases, thus examining the correlation between the retributive aspects (concentration camps) of German and British colonialism. Therefore, I am mainly comparing the research results of secondary sources – for which the findings of experts on African history are indispensable – and adding my own ideas. In my work, I employ the deductive method. This involves developing a set of criteria based on the existing literature, which enables me to make comparisons. By using these criteria, I can either confirm or reject the research questions I formulate and provide answers to them.

My goal is to create a concise summary that will examine the connections between the discussed cases, thereby contributing to comparative genocide research and research in Africa.

The comparative analysis will be carried out by asking the following research questions: (1) Who were the victims, and approximately how many Africans were interned by the colonialists? (2) How long were they in operation, and what were the reasons and objectives of the concentration camps? (3) What were the conditions, how many people died, and how were these ‘facilities’ liquidated? I examine the comparison from four perspectives: human factors, political and economic influences, the infrastructures built in the concentration camp system.

Historical background

Ethiopia

During the 20th century, European colonial powers succeeded in seizing nearly all territories across Africa, with Ethiopia standing as exception. Alongside the British and the French, the Italians also sought to claim the region, leading to a conflict between Ethiopia and Italy at the end of the 19th century. However, Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II decisively defeated the Italian forces. Capitalizing on this victory, Menelik initiated a policy of "preventive colonization," significantly expanding the territory of Abyssinia. Consequently, Ethiopia became the only African nation to engage in colonization within the continent, while Italy remains the only European colonial power to have suffered defeat at the hands of an African state (Búr, 2011, p. 22).

Following World War I, Italy once again attempted to occupy Ethiopia. However, lacking adequate military readiness at the time, it proposed a friendship treaty in 1928, aiming to secure greater influence over the region. By the 1930s, as the effects of the global economic crisis began to be felt, arguments in favour of an Ethiopian invasion gained momentum in Italy. The annexation was driven by multiple factors: Mussolini sought to enhance his prestige, requiring a decisive military victory to bolster support for his government. Additionally, the expansion of Italian "living space" became a significant objective, accompanied by the era's prevailing rhetoric of a "civilizing mission" (Campbell, 2017, p. 18).

Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia made efforts to modernize the country, but its military development lagged significantly behind that of European nations. As a result, Ethiopia, once a powerful and expansionist state, became a relatively easy target for Italy. In 1934, Italy prepared for the invasion of Ethiopia by building up its forces in Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. However, a *casus belli* was still lacking, and Italy struggled to find a pretext for attacking Ethiopia, which was also a member of the League of Nations. By late 1934, the Italians finally found the opportunity they had been waiting for: a shooting broke out at an Italian military outpost on Ethiopian territory, resulting in the death of thirty Italian colonial soldiers. The Italians claimed the incident occurred in Italian Somaliland and demanded compensation and an apology, but Mussolini's primary goal was to provoke Haile Selassie. The Ethiopian emperor brought the matter before the League of Nations, which imposed sanctions on arms imports for both nations. However, these measures disproportionately harmed Ethiopia. Ultimately, in the name of preserving European peace, the major powers chose to step aside, both France and Britain declared their neutrality. This inaction cleared the way for Italy to launch its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 (Campbell, 2017, pp. 18–21).

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia (also known as the Second Italo-Abyssinian War) was ultimately successful in 1936, resulting in the deaths of approximately 250,000–300,000 Ethiopians, including men, women, and children. To achieve victory, Italy deployed mustard gas, despite its use as a chemical weapon being prohibited by the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Additionally, Ethiopian prisoners of war were executed on Mussolini's orders, a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions, to which Italy was a signatory. King Victor



Emmanuel III adopted the title "Emperor of Ethiopia," and Rodolfo Graziani was appointed as Viceroy. Ethiopia was subsequently incorporated into the Italian colonial empire as part of Italian East Africa (1936–1941). This marked the zenith of European colonial expansion in Africa, leaving Liberia as the only African nation that was never colonized by European powers (Campbell, 2017, pp. 25–45, Búr, 2011, p. 46, Fage & Tordoff, 2004, p. 331, Grotius, 2025).

During the first year of the Italian occupation, Rodolfo Graziani sought to bolster his popularity by reintroducing almsgiving, emulating the Ethiopian emperor's tradition of distributing money while residing in the capital, Addis Ababa. On February 19, 1937 (Yekatit 12 in the Ethiopian calendar), Ethiopian resistance fighters carried out an assassination attempt on Graziani (Campbell, 2017, p. 47, Sáska, 2015, p. 25). Yekatit 12 is the Ethiopian calendar equivalent of February 19, hence the events became known as the Graziani or Yekatit 12 massacre (Forgacs, 2016, p. 306).

During the assassination attempt, the attackers threw several hand grenades at Italian officials gathered in the Gennete-Li'ul Palace. The likely aim was to cripple the Italian high command while simultaneously encouraging the civilian population to rise up in rebellion. At the time of the attack, approximately 3,000 Ethiopians were present in the palace courtyard. However, the attempt was unsuccessful, as no Italians were killed. Although Graziani was hospitalized, he recovered and continued to serve as Viceroy thereafter (Campbell, 2017, pp. 47–48, Sáska, 2015, p. 25).

Kenya

Kenya is an East African country characterized by significant ethnic diversity. The five largest ethnic groups are the Kikuyu (17%), Luhya (14%), Kalenjin (13%), Luo (10.7%), and Kamba (9.8%). Most of the population, 85.5%, identifies as Christian, while linguistically, English and Swahili are the dominant languages (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019, p 12, CIA, 2025).

By the 1890s, the British and the Germans had delineated their respective spheres of influence in East Africa, formalizing these arrangements through treaties. According to one such agreement, Germany recognized British colonial supremacy in Uganda and Zanzibar in exchange for concessions in other territories. In 1894, Britain declared Uganda, along with the region between Uganda and the coast – Kenya – a protectorate. The British East Africa Protectorate was subsequently declared a Crown Colony in 1920, officially becoming Kenya Colony (Fage & Tordoff, 2004, p. 317, Sík, 1964, p. 209).

In Kenya, as in South Africa, most of the land was owned by European settlers, while indigenous populations were forced into reservations. The colonizers employed a "divide and rule" strategy, creating separate reservations for ethnic groups such as the Kikuyu, Maasai, and Luo. Africans were not allowed to own land outside the designated areas; they could only lease land from European landowners, for which they were required to provide labour in return. Each adult member of the family had to work at

least 180 days annually for the settler in exchange for the land lease.³ The British imposed taxes on the indigenous population, requiring them to pay both a hut tax and a poll tax, which together equalled approximately two months' worth of an African worker's wages. As a result, many indigenous people were forced to migrate in search of employment. In response, the colonial government introduced a law in 1920 requiring any man leaving the reservation to carry a pass (*kipande*), which included his name, fingerprint, ethnic group, employment history, and the signature of his current employer. This pass was often kept in a small metal box and worn around the neck, earning the nickname "*mbugni*," or goat bell. Failure to carry this pass would result in a fine or imprisonment. To adapt to the new economic conditions, some Africans managed to undercut the settlers by offering surplus produce, such as maize, at lower prices than those set by the settlers. In response, the British implemented further economically oppressive measures, including banning the cultivation of the most profitable crops, such as tea, coffee, and sisal, and setting fixed prices for maize sales (Sik, 1964, p. 209, Elkins, 2005, pp. 15–16).

European colonization particularly affected the Kikuyu, as they relied on agriculture for their livelihood. Due to the settlers' encroachment, they lost more than 60,000 hectares of land. The shrinking of Kikuyu farmland led to a decline in soil fertility, as too many indigenous people were crowded into areas relative to their size. In addition to the economic hardship, the loss of land had significant social consequences. For a Kikuyu to become an adult, he had to own land: the man needed land to pay the bridewealth for his wife, while the woman would use the produce grown on the land to feed her family. As a result, a Kikuyu without land could no longer be considered a Kikuyu (Elkins, 2005, pp. 12–14).

The colony was governed through indirect rule, which relied on the leadership role of tribal chiefs. However, among the Kikuyu, there were no tribal chiefs, only elders and clan leaders who governed through councils. As such, the tribal chiefs were illegitimate constructs of colonial governance. The introduction of the "chieftaincy" contributed to internal conflict, as these chiefs participated in colonial oppression while also being corrupt and opportunistic (loyal chiefs were rewarded with larger landholdings) (Elkins, 2005, pp. 18–19).

In the 1920s, a political organization called the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) was established to oppose colonial rule. Its secretary was Johnstone Kenyatta (later known as Jomo Kenyatta). However, the British authorities reacted negatively to the KCA, labelling it as dangerous and subversive, and banned the organization at the onset of World War II. In 1944, it was reestablished under the name Kenya African Union (KAU) (Elkins, 2005, pp. 20–24, Anderson, 2005, p. 12, Rosberg & Nottingham, 1966, pp. 98–99).

World War II further exacerbated the existing issues of land disputes and economic oppression, collectively creating the conditions that gave rise to the movement known

³ In 1925, Africans had to work "only" 180 days, but by 1945 this had risen to 240–270 days among Kikuyu tenants. (Furedi, 2016, p. 216)

as Mau Mau, which the colonial authorities regarded as an unified entity. However, there was significant disagreement within the leadership, comprising members of KAU and other groups, regarding how to address the plight of Africans. From the moderate wing of the movement emerged a radical faction that advocated for violent methods and encouraged armed resistance among the Africans. Despite being outlawed by the colonial government, the number of Mau Mau resisters continued to grow. The Africans committed several acts of violence against settlers, prompting the governor to sign the Emergency Order on October 20, 1952, which marked the beginning of the colonial crackdown and the eventual suppression of the Mau Mau movement (Elkins, 2005, pp. 22–37).

Comparison of Detention Camps

The British had previously established camps for both the Boers and Africans, and the Italian colonizers also regarded these institutions as a well-proven policy. Deportation was a widespread practice in Italian colonies, particularly in Libya, even before the rise of fascism, and it was codified in the laws of 1926 and 1931. The primary objectives were to clear certain territories and isolate rebels. In eastern Libya, between 1930 and 1933, approximately 50% of the population was interned in sixteen camps. The conditions within these camps were universally appalling, leading to a mortality rate of up to 40% (Campbell, 2017, p. 33).

The duration of the camps differed between the two colonies. In Ethiopia, smaller prisoner camps operated for varying periods—some for weeks, others for months—while certain prisoners were detained for years and were only released upon the liberation in 1941 (Campbell, 2017, p. 225). In the case of Kenya, although releases were continuous, camps were still operating in 1959 to detain "hard-line" rebels, and the camp system was finally dismantled in 1960 (Elkins, 2005, p. 149, p. 159).

The number of detainees also varied between the two cases; however, both shared the characteristic that the colonizers deported Africans suspected of being connected to the uprisings and used the rebellion as a pretext to punish the colonial African population. According to one source, the number of detainees held in Addis Ababa was estimated at around 12,000 individuals. These Africans were first sent to various prisons, detention camps, or other holding centres, after which they were transferred to one of the concentration camps or, in some cases, executed. The detainees were first registered and then divided into two groups: those to be executed and those to be imprisoned. Any individual suspected of participating in the assassination attempt or having any connection to it was added to the group designated for execution, along with those listed on the death register, such as nobles, priests, and educated Ethiopians. In all other cases, imprisonment awaited the individual (Campbell, 2017, p. 224, p. 317).

Three major concentration camps were established for Ethiopians. The largest penal institution was in Akaki, on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, at the site of a former radio station. Akaki often served as a transit camp for many prisoners. From there, detainees faced two possible fates: execution or transfer to one of the two other camps, either in

Danane (a concentration camp near Mogadishu in Italian Somaliland) or on Nocra Island (a penal camp). Following the assassination attempt, approximately 3,000 prisoners were held in Akaki under appalling conditions in tents, cells, and barracks. Many prisoners designated for transport did not survive the journey. For instance, of the 1,100 prisoners transported to Danane, many died during the four-week trip due to disease or harsh conditions, such as extreme heat and heavy rains. However, Nocra was considered the worst of the camps. On the island, temperatures could reach approximately 50°C with 90% humidity, and prisoners also had to endure a lack of drinking water (Campbell, 2017, pp. 231–234).

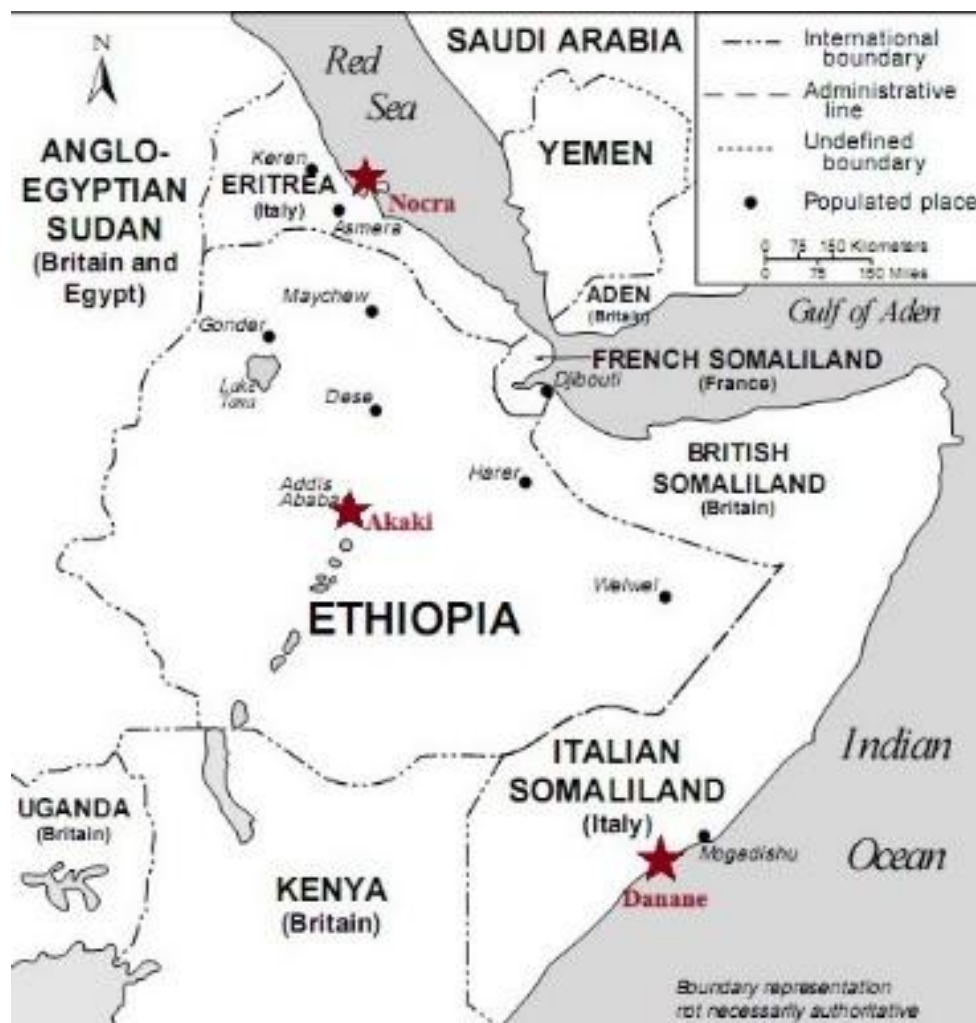


Figure 1: Map of Detentional Camps. Source: Sundin, 2020. (edited by the author)

In the case of Kenya, it is not possible to determine with precision how many Kikuyu camps were established by the colonial authorities or the exact number of detainees deported. This uncertainty arises because the number of prisoners associated with the Mau Mau movement continued to increase, prompting the establishment of new camps and prisons while others were simultaneously closed due to rehabilitation efforts. According to historian Caroline Elkins, there were over one hundred camps operated by the colonial administration (Elkins, 2005, pp. 149–151). Estimates suggest that during

the peak period of Kikuyu detention, their numbers may have reached as high as 70,000. Some sources indicate that the highest daily average was 71,346 detainees in December 1954; however, this figure gradually declined over time. It is important to note that this number does not include individuals who passed through the detention system or were held in other incarceration facilities. Other sources estimate that the number of detainees could have reached 80,000, with broader estimates ranging between 160,000 and 320,000 (Elkins, 2005, p. 429, Zane, 2019, Anderson, 2005, p. 313).

Even in the temporary detention centres established in Addis Ababa, the conditions were inhumane. The black-shirted guards often abused their power, using it for theft and extortion. Prisoners, who were near dehydration, were forced to pay the highest price for a small amount of water in exchange for their survival (Campbell, 2017, p. 189). In many places, prisoners were not provided with food, and particularly in prisons and police stations, torture was common. Diseases, especially typhus, also claimed many victims. One survivor gave the following testimony about the tortures: ‘ (...) *a prisoner who attempted to escape was flogged, (...) then they tied his legs together and turned him upside down, putting his head inside a tin which was filled with human excrement.*’ (Campbell, 2017, pp. 225–228)

In the case of Kenya, we cannot only speak of concentration camps, as the British established various types of camps based on their function and the "status" of the prisoners. There were transit camps, which were used to house Kikuyu individuals who were "waiting" to be deported to the reserves. The largest and most famous camps were in Nakuru, Gilgil, and Thomson's Falls. In these camps, as in the Ethiopian camps, the conditions were horrific—filthy, overcrowded, and lacking sufficient food or clean water. As a result, many suffered from diseases and malnutrition. In terms of medicine and food, the Africans were heavily dependent on the Red Cross and other voluntary organizations. Thousands of internees were forced to remain in the camps for months, or even longer, as there was not enough land for the Kikuyu or the reserves had become overexploited (Elkins, 2005, pp. 56–59). Shirley Cooke, a European representing settler, said the following about these camps: ‘*The reputation will live for years about these Transit Camps, and they will probably get the reputation of the concentration camps after the Boer war, memories of which live even today.*’ (Kenya Legislative Council Debates, 1953, p. 80)

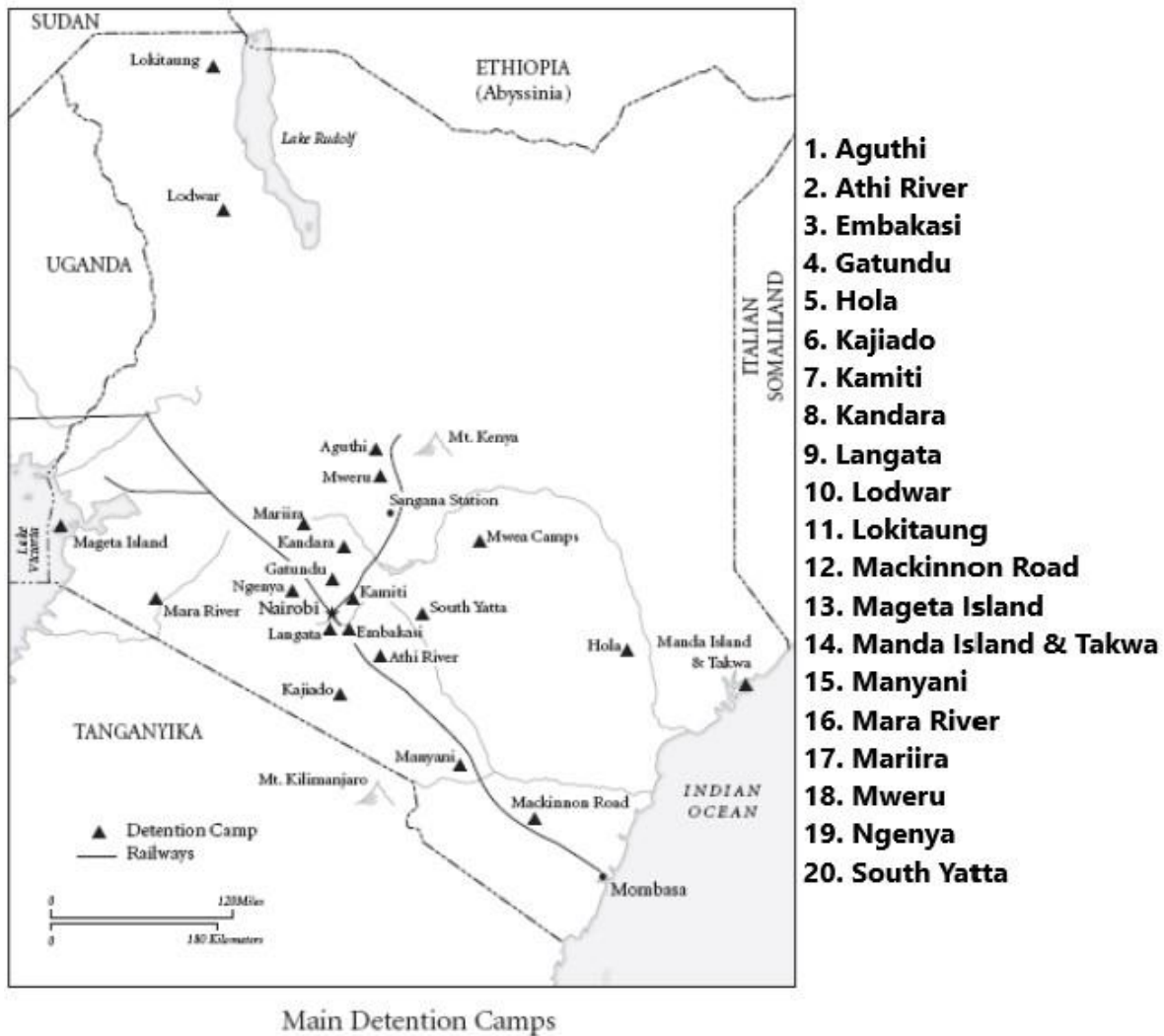


Figure 2: Main Detention Camps in Kenya. Source: Elkins, 2005, p. 150. (edited by the author)

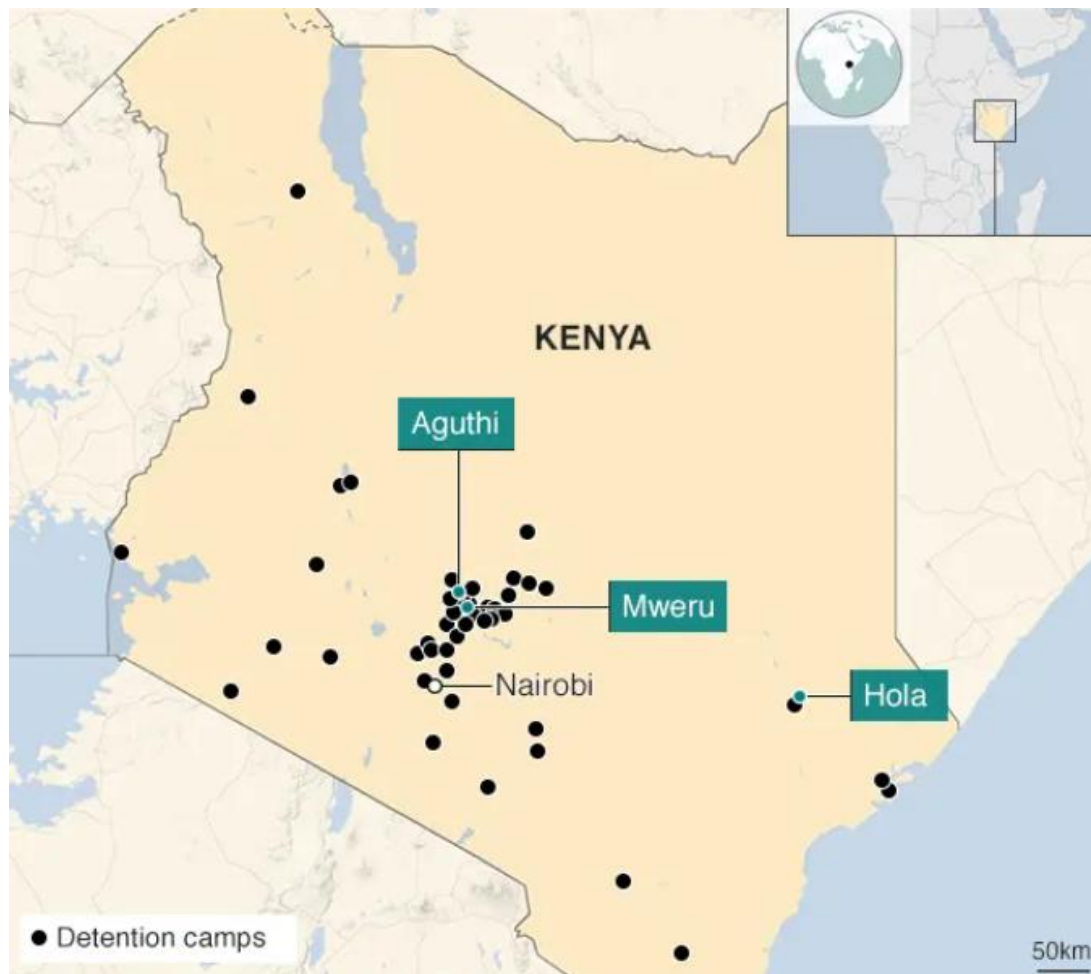


Figure 3: Locations of Mau Mau detention Camps. Source: Zane, 2009.

The Kikuyu suspected of being "connected to the rebellion" were placed in internment camps and divided into two groups: 1. those against whom legal proceedings could be successfully initiated, and 2. those who could not be convicted due to a lack of existing evidence and thus were "sentenced" to detention without trial. During the first year, most of the convicted were held in internment camps enclosed and guarded with barbed wire, while some were placed in prisons. The politically active and dangerous Kikuyu were interned in camps at Athi River and Kajiado, while another main camp was located on Lamu Island in the Indian Ocean. These camps housed the "intellectual" leaders of the Mau Mau, who were mostly from the educated class and therefore posed less of a military threat (Elkins, 2005, pp. 95–96).

Due to the high number of Kikuyu associated with the Mau Mau movement, the population in the camps continued to increase, prompting the British to initiate a "rehabilitation" program. The essence of this program was a civilizing mission, allowing the Kikuyu to confess their oath, which would enable their integration into the colonial economic and social system, while simultaneously suppressing the resistance. The British referred to this system as the *Pipeline*. The rehabilitation process began in the transit camps, where the Kikuyu were classified into three categories: 1. Whites (who were

allowed to return to the reserves), 2. Greys, and 3. Blacks.⁴ The "Greys" were sent to prison camps or labour camps, while the "Blacks," those deemed beyond rehabilitation or incapable of being civilized, were confined to special detention camps. The British considered the rehabilitation of women to be even more important, as they did not want to risk the next generation rising up or showing resistance against colonial rule in a similar manner (Elkins, 2005, p. 100, pp. 109–110, Rosberg & Nottingham, 1966, p. 341).

The rehabilitation programme has been a "success", with nearly 24,000 Kikuyu sent to „reception camps" and around 30,000 deported back to the reserves (Baggallay, 2011, p. 556). However, this did not resolve the main issue, namely the land question, which resulted in consequences such as hunger, the spread of diseases, and chaos. Consequently, the British colonial administration decided to implement a four-point plan,⁵ with the final point being the expansion of the detention camps. As a result, labour camps were established throughout Kenya, and prisoners were used as a source of labour. There were two types of labour camps: one type was established within the Kikuyu districts (Githunguri, Aguthi, Fort Hall) and primarily served to assist the poor and homeless, who were accused of having "soft" Mau Mau sympathies. Around two thousand Kikuyu – families – were deported to these camps, where they suffered a lot because of poor sanitation, but were considered better than transit camps. The other type of camp system consisted of punitive camps located outside the Kikuyu districts, where approximately 30,000 individuals were interned, deemed unable to return to the reserves. Although these camp systems differed, forced labour was characteristic of both types, as it provided the British with an opportunity to ensure the colonial development through the labour of the Mau Mau population. It was in this context that the international airport, now named Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, was constructed (Elkins, 2005, pp. 129–132).

During the time of the rebellion, several new camps were established, where the conditions were like those of the previously mentioned camps. The number of detainees continued to rise, and by the end of 1954, according to reports from the British colonial government, the number of deportees had reached approximately 52,000. Upon arrival, the *askaris* and British officers confiscated the Kikuyu's belongings and then forced them into a cattle dip full of disinfectant, which was originally intended for cattle. Afterward, the Africans' clothes were taken away, and they were given only a yellow pair of shorts, two blankets, and a metal wristband marked with a number for identification. In addition to the poor conditions and forced labour, daily torture and interrogations were common, during which inhumane methods of questioning were

⁴ This was later reformed in 1956 following a rebellion based on the colonial policy of "divide and rule": instead of "blacks", it became Z1 and Z2, instead of "greys" it became Y, and instead of "whites" it became X and C. (Elkins, 2005, pp. 368–369.)

⁵ The first point: their Kikuyu living in settlements inhabited by Europeans would have been placed in temporary camps until they could find a place for them in the reserves. Second point: they would have been placed in the reserves on the basis of the results of the interrogations, so those who were helpful would have had priority. Third point: a system was set up to help the Kikuyu poor. (Elkins, 2005, p. 128.)



applied. The dehumanization was further exacerbated by the camp commanders, who told the camp guards that the Kikuyu who had taken the oath were cannibals. They claimed that if the guards did not treat them properly (through beatings, torture, etc.), the Kikuyu would eat them as well. As a result, the guards did not view the Kikuyu as human beings, and, without restrictions or feelings of guilt, they were able to abuse and kill the prisoners. Sexual violence was one of the most common methods of torture, including sodomy with foreign objects, animals, and insects. The sexual abuse of men can be traced back to the European myth that African men possessed large penises, which they supposedly intended to use to rape European women. This type of "sexual threat" instilled fear not only in European women but also in European men, who attempted to compensate for this fear and assert European superiority through the acts of violence (Elkins, 2005, pp. 131–135, p. 146, pp. 208–209). One survivor said the following about the torture:

'The askaris then put his head [detainee] in the bucket of water and lifted his legs high in the air so he was upside down. (...) That's when (...) [a guard] started cramming sand in Peterson's [detainee] anus and stuffed it in with a stick. Then the other askaris would put water in, and then more sand (...).'" (Elkins, 2005, pp. 156–157)

Despite what they had witnessed and experienced, some Kikuyu collaborated with their captors in exchange for rewards and privileges, thereby placing themselves in a preferential position within the *Pipeline* system. There were also those who were exempted from forced labour and were given tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or performing office work for the camp commanders (Elkins, 2005, pp. 147–148).

In the Pipeline system, men were typically the ones incarcerated, but there was a camp specifically created for women, where those deemed too "hardline" were deported, as their rehabilitation was considered unfeasible. This camp, located in Kamiti, held several thousand women. Since the camp system consisted only of men, homosexuality was prevalent both among the prisoners and the camp personnel, as well as between the two groups. By exploiting sexual relations, prisoners could enjoy some form of protection (Elkins, 2005, pp. 151–152, p. 181).

Another form of detention emerged in Kenya in 1954, which involved the forced relocation of Kikuyu into emergency villages within the reserves. By the end of 1955, because of the ruralization process, more than 1 million Africans were forcibly removed from their land and placed into villages surrounded by barbed wire (804/845/854), a system consisting of 230,000 huts (Elkins, 2005, p. 235, Baggallay, 2011, p. 567, Scheipers, 2015, p. 688). This villagization program was only implemented in the Kiambu, Fort Hall, Nyeri, and Embu districts, not across all of Kenya. The aim of this "program" was also punishment: the Kikuyu's previous homes were scorched, and their belongings were confiscated. The primary focus was directed towards the Mau Mau women, as the forced resettlement allowed for the control and discipline of women,

with forced labour (hut construction, trench digging) being predominant. The conditions in these settlements were also harsh, characterized by overcrowding, hunger, and torture (Elkins, 2005, pp. 240–243, p. 409). Regarding torture, one Kikuyu woman said:

“I remember in our village there was a headman who had come from Kiamariga. He was a very cruel man. Whenever that headman desired a woman, and she refused him, he would take a beer bottle, then order an askari to hold one of the woman’s legs, and another to hold the other, wide apart. Then he would insert the bottle into the woman’s private parts and punch it up to the stomach. Many women died after having been treated that way. First, he beat them with sticks and kicks, but if they still resisted his advances, he used the beer bottle.... Nobody cared about them.” (Elkins, 2005, p. 245)

The mortality rates in the two camps associated with the Ethiopian assassination were significantly high due to the poor conditions: in the Danane camp, 51% of the detainees died, while in the Nocra camp, the death rate reached 58%. This means that out of the 1,100 prisoners in the Danane camp, 561 died, while in the Nocra camp, approximately 232 out of around 400 detainees did not survive the ordeal. In addition to the mortality rates in the camps, it is also important to examine the death rate in other detention facilities. Following the assassination, around 10,000–12,000 Ethiopians were arrested, of whom 700 were executed before the prisoner camps became overcrowded, and some were deported to prisons in Italy. Estimates suggest that 10% (940 people) of the remaining 9,400 detainees died during the first days due to poor conditions, treatment, diseases, hunger, and thirst. According to a report by a British envoy, 3,200 executions occurred, while Italian records state that 5,469 Africans were killed. However, interviews with Ethiopians suggest that most prisoners were released, with around 6,000—mostly women, children, and the elderly—being freed. Based on this, approximately 2,460 prisoners died in one of the detention facilities or during deportations and transfers. Overall, the total number of deaths during detention and in the concentration camps reaches 4,193 individuals (2,460+940+561+232) (Campbell, 2017, pp. 233–234, pp. 313–317). Thus, around 35% of the detainees (12,000 prisoners), while 4.2% of the population of Addis Ababa (100,000 people) died in detention centres.

In Kenya, many Kikuyu also died due to the poor conditions and diseases: the detainees were so overcrowded that they were forced to lie on the ground, often on top of each other. Drinking water was often obtained from drainage ditches and swamps, which led to further illnesses. Due to the harsh weather conditions and the weakened immune systems of the Africans, in addition to tuberculosis, other diseases such as typhus, pneumonia, leprosy, measles, dysentery, scurvy, pellagra, and kwashiorkor were prevalent. But some prisoners went mad and committed suicide or self-mutilation (Elkins, 2005, p. 144, p. 188). According to the Kenya National

Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), 90,000 Africans have been killed, tortured or mutilated in the past eight years, while other sources put the number of victims at between 11,000 and 90,000 (National Army Museum, 2025, Zurlo, 2023, p. 18). Thus, 6% (90,000) of Kenya's population of about 1.5 million (1948 estimate) – Kikuyu, Embu and Meru – died in some form of detention. (Elkins, 2005, p. 429, Crook, 2013, p. 32.).

Conclusion

Following the comparison of the Ethiopian and Kenyan detention systems, it can be concluded that this method was well known among European colonizers. Moreover, the British, through the establishment of concentration camps in South Africa, served as a model for other colonial powers. Numerous similarities can be identified between these institutions, including their primary purpose: punishment, retribution, and the suppression of rebellion. Additionally, poor living conditions – leading to disease – along with torture, abuse, and forced labour can be observed, all of which were intended to support colonial development.

It can be established, however, that the implementation of British detention practices evolved significantly over the years compared to the Boer camps. The use of various detention facilities reflects a shift toward irregular warfare, as both the Boers and Africans frequently employed guerrilla tactics against colonial forces in earlier conflicts. In response to asymmetric warfare, the British sought to expand their control over the civilian population, believing in both cases that civilians actively supported the guerrillas. Initially, this approach was punitive in nature but later transitioned to one with rehabilitative objectives. This shift is closely linked to the transformation of warfare itself. For a long time, European state powers perceived irregular warfare as an inferior strategy, assuming that adversaries lacked the necessary (military) resources to engage in conventional combat. However, following World War II, irregular warfare was reassessed both morally and legally. As a result, colonial powers no longer viewed guerrilla fighters merely as "savages" or illegitimate combatants. Instead, they began framing them as individuals fighting for misguided political ideologies—such as communism—or, in the case of the Mau Mau, as people trapped in archaic religious beliefs and practices, which were often pathologized as mental disorders (Porkoláb, 2020, pp. 19–20, p. 33, pp 51–60, Scheipers, 2015, p. 685).

Another key difference is that in the Kenyan camps, efforts were made to separate detainees into distinct categories, whereas in Ethiopia, the opposite approach was predominant. This suggests that Ethiopians were primarily gathered for punitive and retaliatory purposes, while in Kenya, rehabilitation was at least considered a potential option. This is further supported by the British strategy of establishing a larger number of detention facilities, as well as the prolonged process of their dismantlement. In contrast, the Italians operated only three major detention centers for the concentration of prisoners, indicating that their primary objective was the rapid gathering, execution, or punishment of individuals linked to the assassination attempt. This does not imply that the British were less violent or brutal. However, considering the Pipeline system

and the policy of villagization, it appears that the British were more focused on 'breaking', 're-educating', and ultimately 'utilizing' the Kikuyu population.

Overall, both detention systems were characterized by similarly harsh conditions. However, in the Kenyan facilities, certain advancements were observed in terms of infrastructure, construction, and administration. The difference in mentality is also evident in the fact that, while Ethiopia's detention centres were only dismantled after the end of the Italian occupation, Kenya's system was more influenced by the settler population. Over time, settlers came to view the British penal system as inadequate for managing the African population.

In this context, it is important to reiterate the sense of superiority colonial powers held over Africans. At the turn of the century, this superiority was primarily racial in nature, whereas by the time of decolonization, it had become somewhat more diffuse, incorporating psychological and psychiatric factors. As a result, colonizers positioned themselves as belonging to the "normal" group, while Africans – particularly those who had taken oaths of allegiance – were pathologized and categorized in ways akin to psychopaths. Thus, while rehabilitation was a genuine objective and represented a shift from the earlier goals of detention camps, it ultimately led to even more brutal methods (Elkins, 2005, p. 106–107, Baggallay, 2011, p. 557).

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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