



Brutality in an Age of Human Rights: Activism and Counterinsurgency at the End of the British Empire by Brian Drohan.

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Review by Helen O'Shea, The Open University (o.s.helen@open.ac.uk).

In January 2019, the British government announced it would pay £1 million in compensation to thirty-three Greek Cypriots, all former suspected anti-colonial insurgents belonging to the armed guerrilla group EOKA¹ that led the campaign to end British rule in Cyprus in 1955–59. Following claims of human rights abuses during the island's struggle for independence, the minister of state for Europe, Sir Alan Duncan, confirmed that the government had reached an out-of-court settlement. He pointedly expressed regret, but not liability, for the actions of certain members of the British administration stationed in this former colonial hotspot. This legal action itself followed the announcement in June 2013 that over five thousand Kenyans would be awarded damages of nearly £19.9 million for torture and abuse inflicted on them during the Kenya Emergency in the 1950s.

While this ground-breaking case marked the first time victims of colonialism were able to claim compensation from the British government, more startling for historians was that it led to the release of 1.2 million formerly secret files held by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Historian and military officer Brian Drohan has mined these materials, known as the “Hanslope disclosure,” and others in depositories elsewhere in Europe, to reveal in striking detail “the paradox of an international politics meant to advance rights and freedoms that existed alongside the simultaneous employment of systemic, brutal counter-insurgency methods” (4) during the post-World War II era of British counterinsurgency. Among others, Amnesty International (AI), the European Commission of Human Rights (ECmHR), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have documented Britain's widespread human rights abuses. But Drohan reveals for the first time that its colonial administrators had to negotiate with human rights activists and use “cooperative manipulation” to dissemble practices like illegal detention and coercive interrogations. Rather than trying to assess the direct impact of external pressures, the author concentrates on the role of reputation management in counterinsurgency strategy and tactics.

Drohan's three case studies—Cyprus (1955–59), Aden (1963–67), Northern Ireland (1969–76)—shed light on both policy changes and continuities in Britain's handling of the social, political, and legal effects of human rights activism. His analysis of the Cyprus Emergency demonstrates that British counterinsurgency after 1945 featured forceful imperial action. A revivalist power was striving to maintain, not dismantle, global empire in key strategic regions.² Its intent to initiate what John Darwin has termed the “fourth” British empire partly explains the costly counterinsurgency campaigns of the era, as well as British administrators' willingness to engage in torture and widespread repression.

1. Εθνική Οργάνωσις Κυπρίων Αγωνιστών, lit. “National Organization of Cypriot Fighters.”

2. See, further, Ashley Jackson, “Empire and Beyond: The Pursuit of Overseas National Interests in the Late Twentieth Century,” *English Hist. Rev.* 122 (2007) 1350–66.

Throughout, Drohan clarifies the contradiction between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of universalism and human rights on the international stage after the UN's Universal Declaration (1948), the Geneva Conventions (1949), and the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) (1950), and, on the other, the façade of legality around counterinsurgency campaigns. It was during this "strange triumph of human rights"³ that Greece formally lodged the first interstate case with the European Commission (7 May 1956), with Britain as the respondent state. Drohan builds here on the work of Brian Simpson, who showed that Britain's ratification of the ECHR indicated that "an export trade in human rights had suddenly taken on the appearance of an import trade, and a most unwelcome one at that."⁴

The Suez crisis brought into sharp focus the strategic value of Cyprus, despite its lack of suitable harbors and airfields. So, too, Drohan shows that by the early 1960s, as the sun was rapidly setting on Britain's formal empire, its geopolitical interest in maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil demanded coercive strategies to curb the growing threat of Arab nationalism, particularly in the Radfan in Yemen. This even as it was trying to preserve its reputation as an upholder of human rights and justice in the face of growing international criticism, not least from the newly established AI.

The case of Northern Ireland diverged from those of Cyprus and Aden, given the shift of power from the military to policing, but it fits the book's focus on human rights. In all three cases, officials often avoided real scrutiny and "security imperatives often trumped legal procedure" (28) by means of arbitrary emergency regulations and the appearance of cooperation. For example, as Drohan shows, Sir John Harding, when governor of Cyprus, "had the power to order the immediate arrest and indefinite detention of anyone found not guilty in the courtroom" (28), while the newly created Special Investigations Group worked to systematically counter allegations of human rights violations. In Aden, such tactics included rejecting calls by the ICRC to inspect prison conditions following large-scale detentions from December 1963 onward; by the time the ICRC's request was granted in 1965, "most Radfan refugees had returned home and British forces had opened a new prison with facilities capable of satisfying ICRC humanitarian standards" (112). When the AI delegate, Selahaddin Rastgeldi, found evidence of torture in the South Arabian Federation during his fact-finding mission, the Foreign Office "manipulated the situation by publicly undermining AI's credibility and quietly limiting the scope of the enquiry to prevent possible future legal action against British officials" (136).

In Northern Ireland, too, obfuscation abounded. Internment without trial, interrogations using the "five techniques" of wall-standing, hooding, subjection to noise, sleep deprivation, and starvation were commonplace during the Troubles. When the Irish government lodged an interstate application with the ECmHR (Dec. 1971), Prime Minister Edward Heath "spied the opportunity to appear cooperative by making a political concession on the use of the five techniques while retaining the option of employing harsh methods in the future" (167).

As recourse to emergency measures again becomes common, regimes struggling to confront terrorism and the philosophical, ethical, legal, and practical issues of emergency law are receiving increased attention. Further study of similarities between the post-World War II period and the crisis of liberal imperialism in the later nineteenth century could clarify the contrast between the ideal of equality under law and the reality of racial discrimination and repressive practices.

3. See Mark Mazower, "The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933-1950," *Hist. Journ.* 47 (2004) 379-98.

4. *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2001) 923.

The author further debunks the myth of a beneficent colonial rule that won hearts and minds and made minimal use of force. He contrasts specific British administrations' uneven application of colonial law and manipulation of human rights rhetoric with the consistent efforts of human rights activists. In the context of the current debate over colonial-era reparations and compensation claims for alleged human rights abuses, Brian Drohan's timely and salutary addition to the literature will be of critical interest to legal practitioners, historians, and political scientists.