The ‘Mau Mau’ revolt in Kenya is an almost forgotten incident in British colonial history. At the time it was portrayed as a barbaric tribal response to the pressures of modernisation, as a reversion to primitive superstition and blood-crazed savagery caused by the inability of the African to cope with the modern world. This racist caricature disguised the grim reality of a revolt against oppression, exploitation and injustice that was to be crushed with incredible brutality and ruthlessness. The scale of the repression unleashed during the Kenya Emergency remains unprecedented in the history of the postwar British counterinsurgency campaigns.

There seems little doubt that if African protest in Kenya had been opposed only by the British government and its colonial administration then concessions would have been made. The British, however reluctantly, would have initiated the process of seeking a neo-colonial resolution of African demands and thereby avoided the large-scale bloodletting that was to come. This was to be accomplished elsewhere, in Ghana and Nigeria, for example. In Kenya, the Africans confronted not just the British government, but a white settler community that had interests distinct and separate from those of the Imperial homeland and that was prepared, in defence of those interests, to unleash repression on a scale that the British themselves would not have regarded as productive. Whereas at the start of the 1950s the British still perceived their interests as identical with those of the settlers, by the end of the 1950s they had separated out their interests and were prepared to sacrifice the settlers in order to safeguard them. The settlers in Kenya, unlike their ‘kith and kin’ in Rhodesia, did not have the necessary social weight to attempt going it alone. In the last instance, they were dependent on the British government and could
be ‘betrayed’ if a deal with moderate African nationalists proved necessary. It was the ‘Mau Mau’ revolt that, even in defeat, forced the British down this road.

The Kikuyu and revolution

The ‘Mau Mau’ revolt was largely confined to the Kikuyu tribe, which had borne the brunt of the socially disruptive impact of European rule and settlement. For the Kikuyu, the white settlement was an unqualified disaster. As well as occupying part of their tribal lands, it also occupied lands into which they would have eventually spilled over had the Europeans never come. Now the settlers penned them in. By 1948 one and a quarter million Kikuyu were restricted to landholding in 2000 square miles of tribal lands, while 30 000 settlers occupied 12 000 square miles, including most of the land worth cultivating.

On the Kikuyu reserves there was widespread poverty, unemployment and under-employment, and chronic overpopulation. There was bitter resentment amongst the great mass of the Kikuyu against those who were prepared to collaborate under the status quo. In the 1947 Kiambu District Annual Report, E.H. Windley wrote of a ‘tendency to create a landlord class’ in the reserves, and many other observers commented on the increasing differentiation among the Kikuyu peasantry, the mass of whom were sinking deeper into poverty and economic insecurity, while at the same time a ‘kulak’ gentry class was emerging that supported the government.1 By 1953 almost half the population of the Kikuyu reserves was without land. This process of differentiation was to provide the basis for the civil war within the Kikuyu that became an important aspect of the ‘Mau Mau’ revolt.

Over the years of colonial settlement, some 120 000 Kikuyu had been forced off the reserves and had settled as squatters on European farms, with a patch of land for themselves in return for their labour. They were, in effect, tenant farmers. Increasingly, their position as independent producers came under attack from their European landlords, who sought to transform them into agricultural labourers without viable landholdings of their own. Whereas before the Second World War a labour rent of 90 days a year had served as payment for five or six acres of land, by 1946 a labour rent of 240–70 days was being demanded for one and a half acres of land. Frank Furedi has estimated that the real income of the Kikuyu squatter population may have fallen by as much as 30 to 40 per cent and that this deterioration was accelerating during the late 1940s. A bitter hatred of the white settlers