Colonising and Exterminating? Memories of Imperial Violence in Britain and France

Stephen Howe

In 2005 there appeared, almost simultaneously, two highly controversial books which renewed or intensified debate on colonial legacies and in particular the role of atrocity, massacre and even genocide in these. In Paris, there was published Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison’s Coloniser, exterminer. Sur la guerre et l’État colonial, and in London and New York Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya by Caroline Elkins.¹

Both books have evoked considerable criticism, both from specialists and in wide-ranging public debate. Le Cour Grandmaison’s selective use of sources, alleged neglect of internal debates and complexities among colonialists, his focusing on only the most spectacular incidents of colonial violence (‘une anthologie des horreurs coloniales’, say Gilbert Meynier et Pierre Vidal-Naquet), and his frequently white-hot rhetorical language, are said by critics to contribute to an over-polarised debate.² Related charges have been brought against Elkins’ work: that hers is a one-sided analysis too inclined to place all blame for violence on the British, the settlers, and their allies the Kikuyu ‘Loyalists’; that she reproduces some outworn and inaccurate stereotypes of Kenyan settlers as a decadent aristocracy leading lives of dissolute pleasure, and depicts pro-British Africans as merely greedy, brutish exploiters. The Emergency, it is pointed out, was many things, but one of them, clearly, was a Kikuyu civil war. This dimension, while not quite missing, is grossly underplayed in Elkins’ account.³ Elkins’ picture of British colonial policy and ideology, again, oversimplifies –mostly reducing them to a crude and virulent racism, and the idea of a colonial ‘civilising mission’. The clichéd and largely inapt Nazi analogies which she, like Le Cour Grandmaison, too often invokes have also drawn fire; while her claims about devastating demographic change seem weakly grounded.⁴

³ For a major new contribution on this, see now Daniel Branch, Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
But both books can also aptly be seen as ‘signs of the times’: times in which widespread, often agonized or tempestuous reappraisal of the colonial record and its legacies has become a major part of both the historiographical and the public-cultural landscape in both Britain and France. Within this new, or renewed, atmosphere of controversy the role of violence, repression and atrocity in Empire, and in its representations and memories, has drawn especial, and especially heated, attention—in which those two books and the former colonies on which they respectively focus, Algeria and Kenya, have featured strongly.5

Partially parallel developments have been taking place in other European countries. Belgium has, since the publication of equally contentious works by Daniel Vangroenweghe, Jules Marchal and (in translation) by Adam Hochschild, and more especially since the opening of the ‘Memory of Congo’ exhibition at the Tervuren Africa Museum, also in 2005, been confronting a brutal imperial past more fully than ever before.6 In Germany, a small flood of new work on the colonial past has included a particularly intense and sharply contested focus on mass killings in South-West Africa (now Namibia) in the early 20th century, with strong claims being made of a fairly short and direct road from this genocidal violence to that of the Nazi regime.7 The German debates too really started in 2004-5, with the anniversaries of the outbreak of Herero revolt and of the Berlin Africa conference—which had also ‘given’ the Congo to Belgium’s King Leopold.

I shall focus in this article on the recent British, and wider ‘British world’, controversies, though with some fairly frequent side-glances at the still more recent but perhaps even more stormy French debates, and looking especially at how a range of claims about colonial massacre, atrocity and genocide have been made, used and contested.

Imperial Anniversaries and Afterlives

The politics of the anniversary are—as the German-Namibian case just noted might imply—themselves quite often of historical importance, in that ‘significant’ anniversaries may precipitate or provide a focus for both professional and wider public debate over history and memory. In 2007, in Britain, for instance, a number of Empire-related milestones were marked: the 200th anniversary of Britain’s Abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the fiftieth of Ghana’s independence, the 25th of the war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands, the 300th anniversary of the Union of England and Scotland, and the 150th of India’s 1857 revolt plus the 60th of its (and Pakistan’s) independence. These various commemorations provided, in their different ways, occasions for heightening and sharpening what had already been a steadily growing debate over the legacies and significance of Empire for British history and identity. Argument has ranged from how the Empire’s history should be taught (if at all) in schools and in the new ‘citizenship education’ prescribed both for students and for applicants for citizenship, through such apparent trivia as whether exhibition panels at the National Archives building in Kew by implication or omission distort imperial history, to sharp dispute over potential official apologies for such past imperial misdeeds as the Atlantic slave trade or (most recently) the former policy of exporting ‘unwanted’ British children to the colonies.8

These debates on the meanings and legacies of Empire have become ever more closely intertwined with ones over national identity itself, as both politicians (none more intensely than Prime Minister Gordon Brown) and academics have engaged with the meaning and future of Britishness.9 In this, obviously enough, recent and present British contestations over colonial pasts significantly parallel the concurrent French ones, and those which have emerged in most other formerly imperial states. Almost equally self-evidently, though, each of these is shaped by significantly different intellectual climates and political contexts. For the United Kingdom, the politically salient challenges include a sense of threat from European integration far more acutely felt than appears to be the case for the French, and nationalist assertions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which (despite Breton and other regionalist or nationalist claims, which in reality are by comparison quite weak) have no real equivalent across the Channel. A sense of shared or affirmative, let alone


pride-enduring Britishness is quite widely believed to be in terminal decline or crisis. Attempting in the face of these and other tests to construct an affirmative reappraisal or ‘modernised’ vision of Britain and Britishness is widely perceived to find some of its major obstacles in the legacies of Empire.

Fully comparative studies of these phenomena – of the political determinants and implications of new disputation over colonial histories – are only just now beginning to emerge. In light of this, as well the fact that the debates in question themselves remain in full flow, any suggestion about their parallels or divergences must necessarily be provisional and tentative. However, one might venture that thus far a number of significant differences as well as evident similarities have become apparent, as between Britain and France. Although the relevant French debates have emerged, or re-emerged, more recently than the British ones, they have done so with a kind of intensity unmatched so far in Britain: if major contributions to the British argument have, as suggested, been a steadily accumulating and perhaps accelerating flow, in France there has been something more like a flash-flood since 2005. British post-imperial argument has ranged across numerous, globally scattered, sites of the former Empire, from Kenya to the Caribbean, Acadia to Australia, while that in France has focused overwhelmingly on Africa and most particularly and intensely on Algeria. The role of the law – parliamentary or judicial acts and decisions apparently mandating particular views of history, of Empire, of slavery or genocide, as in the law concerning the slave trade (21 May 2001) with the subsequent attempt by some activists to prosecute historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau under its provisions, and that requiring schools to teach the ‘positive role’ of the French colonial presence,

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particularly in North Africa (23 February 2005) with subsequent historians’ campaign against it and its eventual repeal.\(^\text{13}\) This has no parallel in the UK, where so far the parliamentary and legal systems have (happily, in most historians’ eyes) always abstained from such intervention. There is perhaps a stronger rhetorical insistence in France on links between current debates over multi-culture and urban politics and colonial legacies—for instance, the late-2005 French urban disturbances were widely described in ‘colonial’ terms, whereas British urban riots or uprisings from the early 1980s onwards were very rarely so, and usually only by commentators from the far left.\(^\text{14}\) Conversely, British historical reappraisals have been more obviously, directly and pervasively fed by current foreign policy issues than have France’s: in particular, British forces’ involvement in and losses from the Iraqi and Afghan conflicts, prompting a highly charged search for connections and parallels with past Britain’s imperial wars, including those in the very same countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Different key concepts have been in play—most strikingly the label ‘postcolonial’ has had only a recent if dramatic presence in France whereas it has been the ‘commonsense’ of Anglophone academia for a few decades.\(^\text{15}\) Some have seen the recent and strong coming of post-colonialism to French intellectual circles as politically very significant, though it is less clear exactly what this significance is. Some seem to view the very use of the term as not just intellectually but politically insurrectionary, whether they welcome or fear that supposed confrontation.\(^\text{16}\) In France, the new emphasis on the imperial past is sometimes seen as a direct and powerful challenge to central national ideas, especially Republican universalism. In Britain, though as I have indicated, and shall explore further below, there have been close and challenging interactions, on the whole imperial history has posed only a

\(^{13}\) Among many discussions see Claude Liauzu and Gilles Manceron (eds.), *La Colonisation, la loi et l'histoire*, Paris, Syllepse, 2006.


more diffuse, multi-front, almost guerrilla-war-like provocation to central ideas about national identity.17

Remembering and Forgetting

It is, however, the similarities rather than the differences which are most evident. In both countries a powerfully pervasive trope of the past few years—among, again, both scholars and political commentators—has been to urge that a widespread, in part willed or manufactured, oblivion concerning the imperial past took hold during and after the loss of Empire itself. Both France and Britain, it is suggested, found it painfully hard to come to terms with imperial decline and concomitant fall of national pride. Forgetting was both accompaniment to and attempted salve for what, in the British case, was recently baptised ‘postcolonial melancholia’.18 Colonial history was assigned to a separate and marginalised, almost ghetto-like, academic sphere, rather than something recognised as central to French and British history and profoundly constitutive of national identities. The academic ‘backlash’ against such separation and marginalisation had, in the British case especially, been underway for some time, much of it under the rubric of a ‘new imperial history’.19 More recently, it has emerged in the wider public sphere too: in some eyes, a return of the repressed, an overcoming of amnesia. Yet in both countries there remains among those urging on such a ‘return’ a shared worry about the sheer ignorance of the general public on imperial history; a parallel concern that it is so little taught in schools or addressed (except sometimes in nostalgic or insufficiently critical ways) in the mainstream media.

The relative balances of ‘forgetting’ and of obfuscatory nostalgia have, however, perhaps been rather different in the two cases: the former more powerful in France, the latter in Britain. Some historians suggest that the experience of decolonisation was especially painful and even shameful for France, especially in light of the bitter wars in Indochina and in North Africa. It was simply less plausible for French than


for British politicians and publicists retrospectively to present decolonisation as an essentially peaceful, voluntary, planned and successful process –though a ‘myth’ of this kind was certainly adumbrated in relation to France’s sub-Saharan African colonies. Both Britain and France experienced numerous wars of decolonisation: for France; Vietnam 1946-54, Morocco 1952-56, Algeria 1954-62, Cameroon 1955-8, plus –more massacre than war– Madagascar 1947-8; for Britain; Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden, plus, after the end of formal imperial control, Dhofar and Borneo. For both, they were mostly small, guerrilla-type conflicts –at least as viewed from the métropole, though not necessarily so from the colony itself. Even at Diên Biên Phu, far the biggest and arguably the only, full-scale pitched battle in any of France’s or Britain’s wars of decolonisation, the French garrison never numbered over 15,000 men. And of these, less than 3,000 were mainland French– as against 2,500 North Africans, nearly 4,000 Foreign Legion (many of them, notoriously, being veterans of Hitler’s armies) and 5,400 Vietnamese.

Yet one must also underline the difference in scale between French and British military involvements. The French armed forces’ commitment in Indochina peaked at about 150,000 men from French, Foreign Legion and African units, plus twice that many Vietnamese; total casualties amounted to at least 75,000 dead and missing including roughly 15,000 metropolitan French. That in Algeria was over 400,000 strong for much of the war, with a casualty list of 17,456 dead plus about 3,000 French civilians killed. All Britain’s commitments were by comparison modest: 40,000 in Malaya, 25,000 in Cyprus, never much over 5,000 (excluding local levies and police) suppressing Mau Mau. In Kenya, just 12 British soldiers were killed, plus 32 white settlers and 63 Europeans in the police and Royal African Regiment. In Malaya, 519 soldiers died, in Cyprus 156, Palestine 127, Borneo 114 (most of them Gurkhas); Suez 10 French and 22 British. Figures given for British forces killed in Aden clash wildly, but none reaches three figures.

Of course, death-tolls among Britain’s and France’s adversaries and civilians were vastly greater. But here too, the French-imperial experience was, simply, far bloodier. French statistics suggest 169,000 Algerian dead in their independence war, as well as over 40,000 missing, presumed dead. Algerian estimates range much higher. For Vietnam, only guesstimates are possible: ranging between 400,000 and a million dead, at least half of them civilians. Two events not usually classified as wars also exacted massive losses: an abortive insurrection in Madagascar in 1947 cost between 11,000 and 80,000 lives (though the lower figure seems the more likely); one in the French Cameroons in 1955-8 almost as many. Official British figures for Malaya and Kenya give 6,711 and 11,503 (or by another accounting 10,527) ‘terrorists’, 2,473 and 1,877 civilians killed respectively –with grave doubts as to how many of the former were actually combatants, in both cases; and with a later Rand Corporation estimate more than doubling the Malayan death toll. There have been suggestions, most sweepingly by Caroline Elkins in the work referred to at the outset of this article, that the Kenyan fatalities were many times greater than admitted or
estimated, ‘perhaps hundreds of thousands’. These claims, though, have attracted little expert support, even if few now doubt that civilian casualties were far higher than the official figures.

There is no serious doubt that in every conflict mentioned above, the British and French forces were responsible for widespread atrocities, including murders of civilians and of prisoners. Suggestions that British counter-insurgency operations were characterised by a unique restraint seem hard to sustain. Even in combating the 1940s Jewish revolt in Palestine – the conflict where media attention, domestic political pressures and perhaps the ‘European’ character of the rebels imposed the tightest restraints on military behaviour – there were well-attested war crimes including several killings of prisoners and at least one random machine-gunning of Tel Aviv shops and cafes. A decade earlier in the same place, suppression of the Palestinian ‘Arab Revolt’ had, as a number of recent studies show, been accompanied by war crimes on a considerably greater scale. There can be little question but that when other modern British colonial counter-insurgency campaigns, as in Malaya, Cyprus or the several South Arabian involvements, are subject to comparable kinds of academic scrutiny, somewhat similar (or, for Malaya, perhaps considerably worse) episodes of military brutality will be uncovered.

Yet, with all due caution and all possible vigilance for a British author’s own potential biases, it would seem correct to say that just as the scale of France’s wars of decolonisation was far larger than Britain’s, so abuses by security forces were also more numerous and perhaps more systematic. Torture in Britain’s late colonial conflicts never seems to have become routine as it was for the French in Algeria, nor do there appear to have been large-scale individual massacres on the scale of Setif and other Algerian incidents. As Matthew Hughes suggests in relation to the ‘Arab Revolt’: ‘Faced with similar disturbances, other imperial powers responded much more harshly than the British did in Palestine, as even a cursory glance at other twentieth-century counter-insurgency campaigns shows, whether it is the Spanish in the Rif mountains, the Germans in Africa before the Great War and during the Second World War, the Japanese in China, the Italians in Libya, the French in Algeria, the Americans in Vietnam, the Portuguese in Africa or the Soviets in

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20 C. Elkins, Britain’s Gulag, op. cit., p. xvi.
21 One such incident which attracted an unusual degree of publicity at the time has recently been reconstructed in detail by David Cesariani, Major Farran’s Hat: Murder, Scandal and Britain’s War Against Jewish Terrorism 1945-1948, London, Heinemann, 2009.
23 Perhaps the bloodiest single incident in Britain’s post-1945 colonial wars was that at Munuga, Kenya in June 1953, with approximately 400 civilian victims – murdered by Britain’s Kikuyu ‘Loyalist’ auxiliaries rather than British troops as such; see D. Branch, Defeating Mau Mau, op. cit., p. 61-62.
Afghanistan... This does not excuse British abuses in Palestine but it provides some comparative context.24

Exhuming Atrocity

There is thus some warrant in the historical record –so far as the latter is, slowly and unevenly, becoming available to us– for the fact that atrocities in wars of decolonisation, or accusations of them, not only became the focus of greater domestic political storms in France than in Britain at the time, but have been so more also in the current moment of rediscovery and reappraisal. In France, as noted, this has focused overwhelmingly on Algeria –and has at times been so heated that historian Benjamin Stora, one of those at the heart of the debates, reportedly receive death threats for his writing both from French ultra-rightists and from Algerian Islamists. The public controversy might be said to have ignited when in June 2000 Le Monde published an interview with Louisette Ighilahriz, an Algerian woman detailed how she had been repeatedly tortured, and accused top French military officials of active complicity in this. Debate sharpened and expanded when General Paul Aussaresses, a member of the French Special Services in Algeria, first gave a newspaper interview and then, in May 2001, published his memoirs of service in Algeria, Services spéciaux: Algérie, 1955-1957. He detailed routine use of torture and summary executions, and was essentially unapologetic about it all.25

Some critics noted during these media and political storms that debate over torture and other crimes of state should not be focused so exclusively on Algeria, since there was clear evidence of their widespread character during the Indochina war and other episodes. More generally, the impassioned attention in 21st century French debate to the 1950s-60s Algerian situation may, so far at least, have led to striking neglect of other imperial massacres and brutalities. The initial conquest of northern Algeria too involved widespread atrocities –as Le Cour Grandmaison has been only one (and in critics’ eyes by no means the most scholarly or careful) of those who have recently ‘rediscovered’. Yet so too, as another new work details, was the supposedly more peaceful later occupation of the Algerian Sahara.26 The French colonial impact in west and north-central Africa was also accompanied by brutal, frequent massacre.27 A still

wider accounting, a harder coming to terms with the colonial past in all its multiple forms and locations, seem to many to remain on the future agenda for historians of France and for a wider public there.

Yet that is surely no less true for Britain. We have noted that when comparing post-1945 wars of decolonisation, and perhaps even the wider record of colonial conquests and wars since the later nineteenth century, it is widely held that Britain’s imperial record was less bloodstained than France’s. Even if this is indeed so, however, it may well be that the picture changes radically if we take a wider and a longer view.

If, for example, we turn to what was, in British eyes, the greatest trauma of the Victorian Empire, the 1857 uprising in India, this actually claimed strikingly few British lives—especially when the real figures are set against the extraordinary structure of martyrology and demonology with which Victorian Britain enveloped victims and mutineers respectively. Of 11,027 British military dead, more than four-fifths succumbed to disease or heatstroke. As usual in colonial wars, no one thought it worthwhile attempting a tally of Indian casualties. Estimates range very widely indeed. And these included many thousands of massacred prisoners and civilians. The famous method frequently used to execute captured mutineers, that of blowing them from the mouths of cannon, was deliberately chosen to evoke the utmost horror in both Hindus and Muslims, since it made either burning or burial of the dead impossible.

British ideas and images of the revolt continued—to a disconcerting extent, right up to the present—to revolve around supposedly bestial murders of whites by Indian mutineers and rebels, with events at Cawnpore their most intense focal point. The facts of Cawnpore are, however, still disputed. Certainly there was an apparently treacherous attack on British troops and civilians who were abandoning the area under the terms of an agreed truce. Later, most of those who had survived this affray—the great majority women and children—were massacred. Three facts may, however, be noted in partial mitigation of the slaughters. First, the initial attack on the departing garrison may not have been ordered by any Indian leader, but might very likely have been spontaneous. And it may have been a response to what was perceived as a British act of treachery: the white troops, probably as a result of panic, probably fired first. Second, the subsequent massacre of the surviving prisoners was very probably prompted by news of the atrocities British forces had been committing in Benares and elsewhere. And third, the killings were carried out not by the ‘rebel’ leader Nana Sahib’s troops—who apparently refused to have anything to do with the business—but by a small number of civilians.28 Whatever the precise truth, it is clear

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that the number of white civilians wantonly killed in these and other incidents was a tiny fraction of the number of Indian non-combattants slaughtered by British forces.

It is moreover striking that despite the initial waves of British hysteria over 1857, the canonical images of Indian savagery mostly formed only much later. In fact, the first major British chronicler of the revolt, Sir John Kaye, produced what was in many respects a remarkably balanced picture. Not only did he recognise that there were deep social roots, and genuine desires to throw off an understandably resented foreign rule, underlying the rising. He openly and repeatedly proclaimed that followers of the Mughal Emperor were not ‘rebels’ or ‘traitors’ but loyal, often immensely courageous supporters of a legitimate cause. Kaye also constantly went out of his way to discount or disprove false stories of Indian atrocities during the rising. While Kaye devotes considerably more space to Indian than to British atrocities —both in absolute terms, and even more so in proportion to the likely actual number of victims— and makes some rather half-hearted pleas in extenuation for the latter, he none the less disdains to conceal the extent of British troops’ misdeeds. Perhaps most interestingly, he is forthright about the role of racial hatred in these: ‘From western warfare there has been absent that which in the East has been most perilous of all, the difference in colour. The very sight of a dark man stimulated our national enthusiasm almost to the point of frenzy. We tolerated those who wore our uniforms and bore our arms, but all else were, in our eyes, the enemies and persecutors of our race.’

In some cases, Kaye is seemingly frank about atrocities visited on innocent victims. In others, he is insistent that justice, of however rough a sort, was duly done. It is evident, however, that Kaye thought such exercises in ‘righteous retribution’ to be more the exceptions than the rule. He is quite obviously agonised by some of what he describes: ‘Martial Law had been proclaimed... soldiers and civilians alike were holding Bloody Assize, or slaying Natives without any assize at all, regardless of sex or age... Englishmen did not hesitate to boast, or to record their boasts in writing, that they had ‘spared no one’ and that ‘peppering away at niggers’ was very pleasant pastime, ‘enjoyed amazingly’... I merely state these things. There are some questions so stupendous that human weakness may well leave it to Almighty Wisdom to decide them.’ From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, that last sentiment may perhaps appear as an evasion. In its context, just a few years after the event and in the atmosphere of its composition, it might seem more noble.

Mukherjee’s long, angry ‘Reply’ in the same issue, p. 178-189 which indicates how raw the emotions in such spheres might still be as between some British and Indian historians.

Sir John Kaye died with his work uncompleted—he had taken the story up only to the fall of Delhi, and had not discussed the Mutiny’s progress in some regions at all. George Bruce Malleson took over the role of semi-official historian. Malleson neither pursued Kaye’s interest in the revolt’s social origins nor shared his relative honesty about the nature and relative scale of the two sides’ atrocities. In Malleson’s work there was already marked the steady late Victorian and Edwardian degeneration of historiographical truthfulness about British India. And this degeneration was indeed startling, with subsequent generations of British chroniclers of 1857 plumbing seemingly ever new depths in both bias and racism. If today the overt racism is seemingly gone, Victorian stereotype has proved remarkably durable. In an account published as recently as 1985, rather gratuitously inserted into a glossy coffee-table history of British Indian architecture, all the Victorian clichés of the ‘Mutiny’ are replayed. The predictable three passages in the drama are highlighted: Cawnpore in pride of place, the defence of the Lucknow Residency second, the assault on Delhi a poor third. The account of Cawnpore is drawn entirely from the more gruesome passages of British military memoirs. That of Lucknow describes the siege as ‘the British Thermopylae, an epic struggle against overwhelming odds’, and in a picture caption, astonishingly, as ‘the epic of the race’. Even a far more detailed and more scholarly narrative which appeared in 2002, by Saul David (at the time of writing the most recent major survey of 1857 by a British writer) not only continues to call the events a ‘Mutiny’ (a misleading and diminishing label generally now repudiated by scholars) but gives enormous space to anti-British atrocities and remains largely silent about anti-Indian ones. Outside of specialist academic circles, almost nobody in Britain—even during the ‘anniversary’ year of 2007—seemed to attend to the multiple and often heated Indian debates over the rebellion’s significance and contemporary meaning. Nor was there even any apparent British reaction to the claims by Amaresh Misra—wild as they undoubtedly are, and almost a mirror-image of British silence about the Raj’s atrocities—that across 1857 and the ensuing years British forces killed as many as 10 millions Indians in a fully genocidal ‘holocaust’ of revenge.

Aside from Misra’s very questionable assertions, few historians have attempted to argue that British policy in colonial India was genocidal in either intent or effect. Nor—Le Cour Grandmaison’s somewhat loose rhetoric aside—have such claims often been made in relation to France in Algeria, or indeed any other passage in modern French colonial history. The matter is, again, very different when we take a wider view of colonial history: and it is a charge far more widely and hotly debated in

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38 For a small sample of these see Economic and Political Weekly special section, May 12, 2007, including: Michael H Fisher, ‘Multiple Meanings of 1857 for Indians in Britain’; Bismawoy Pati, ‘Historians and Historiography: Situating 1857’; and Jyotirmaya Sharma, ‘History as Revenge and Retaliation: Rereading Savarkar’s The War of Independence of 1857’.
relation to British imperial legacies than to French ones. This is for a simple reason: ideas of colonial genocide have in the main been associated quite specifically with settler colonialism, and this was a ‘British world’ phenomenon on a vastly greater scale than it was a French one.

**Settlers and Genocides**

Indeed it is arguable, and has been argued with great force, that it was in the creation of settler colonies that Britain was most distinctive in modern world history, far more than in any other relevant regard. There was, as the most wide-ranging modern historian of the phenomenon, James Belich, argues, indeed a distinctively, uniquely Anglophone ‘settler revolution’ across the long nineteenth century: ‘the Anglo divergence’, as he calls it. It was explained and celebrated at the time in pseudo-racial terms, as a product of ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ and its virtues. In reaction, today, there has been a tendency to downplay, diminish, or even deny a genuine Anglophone divergence. Yet it was a phenomenon of such uniqueness, such globally transformative significance that we cannot ignore it.

Belich suggests four types or stages of British world colonisation: Incremental; Explosive; Recolonisation; and Decolonisation. The incremental stage was the relatively slow growth of settler populations from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth. Explosive colonisation then ensued, driven by multiple new pressures and opportunities. The agricultural and industrial revolutions were the most obvious of these, but there was also a crucial transformation in attitudes to settlerdom. Before about 1800, emigration was in general unfavourably viewed: emigrants were abject or undesirable types. Increasingly as the 19th century wore on, they came instead to be celebrated. Belich’s acid test for a settlement ‘explosion’ is of major settler cities’ decennial doubling in population, which very many urban centres in the Americas, Australasia and southern Africa experienced repeatedly. What they almost all had in common was their being populated mainly by British-born or – descended settlers. France, by contrast, established few real settler colonies, early on in the Americas (where all failed either to remain under French sovereignty or to gain independence) and much later in Algeria, and none which experienced truly ‘explosive’ colonisation.

The crucial relevance of this to debates over colonial violence lies in the argument, made in recent years in many different contexts and with unprecedented force, that settler colonialism is inherently bound up with extreme, pervasive, structural and even genocidal violence. Whilst some suggest that all forms of Empire-building have

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41 Among others, Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: Genocide and Extermination in World History from Carthage to Darfur*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007; Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of
been associated with genocide and mass murder—the best known early advocates of such a view being the French-Antillean thinkers Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire—and non-settler colonialism too, as in German Southwest Africa or King Leopold’s Congo, clearly involved cases of pursuit of something at least close to genocidal policies, it is the settler colonies where the strongest arguments and the fiercest debates have clustered. And quite simply, since Britain (and, before a United Kingdom or a compound British identity were formed, England) founded more and more successful, ‘explosive’ settler colonies than anyone else, so probably more alleged or potential cases of pre-twentieth century genocide occurred in the British world than anywhere outside it. Some scholars, notably Mahmood Mamdani, have argued that even ‘indigenous’, postcolonial mass murders in Africa have invariably been the product of a settler-native dialectic and a colonial legacy.

Few such claims, though, relate to British colonialism in Africa or Asia. In the latter there were, with the ambiguous and partial possible exceptions of Shanghai and Hong Kong, no British settler colonies. In Africa, possible British-settler genocides have been argued to include the fates of the amaHlubi in Natal in the 1870s, and of the Cape San; but neither case has drawn wide attention. For British North America and for Australasia, however, the case for numerous genocidal episodes—by even restricted definitions, since large-scale deliberate killing was repeatedly involved—seems to me very strong; even if in most cases, as is well known, that was not the main cause of the destruction of native societies, which came from disease. The numbers of individuals killed or allowed to die may have been greater in the course of Iberian colonial incursions to central and southern America, but if our key criterion is peoples, rather than individual human beings, destroyed, there have surely been more—even many more—destructions or near-eliminations of peoples, of distinguishable ethnic, cultural or linguistic communities, by Anglophones than by any other perpetrator. There have indeed been several hundred of them, across the Americas and the Pacific. In both Australia and North America, indigenous population losses were probably over 90% of the pre-contact totals. North American, mainly Anglo-British, colonisation was clearly more destructive in proportional terms than Latin: if not in absolute numbers.

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43 This is not the place even to broach discussion of the very vexed issue of how to define genocide, though that question has indeed been near the heart of many recent exchanges over claims about colonial genocide.

44 In my own view, perhaps the best global overview is Mark Levene, Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, London, I.B. Tauris, 2 Vols, 2005.
Yet it might still be doubted how ‘British’ many of these annihilations really were. Many stages and episodes in the destruction of native peoples were carried out by ‘private enterprise’ settler initiatives rather than by state forces. Indeed Alison Palmer suggests that for Australia—and perhaps North America, or the wider Anglo-sphere, too—a distinctive category of societal rather than state-led genocide should be employed.\textsuperscript{45} This must however be qualified by the extent to which, across many places and times, at least the local state agencies acquiesced in the massacres, or more or less covertly participated in them. Moreover, in both Australasia and North America the local agents of the state were generally settlers themselves. They can be said to have been directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of colonial genocides and had an interest in the protection of perpetrators. Perhaps more crucially, these grim affairs have come, quite generally, to be seen as episodes in Australian or American, Canadian or New Zealand history, not that of Britain or even what historians have come increasingly to write of as the ‘British World’. Passionate recent Australian debates over colonial ‘genocide’ have continued to be seen as, indeed, specifically Australian affairs, little noticed in Britain and certainly not apprehended as parts of British historical argument. Australian critic John Docker decries this tendency: ‘I think something we might call ‘Empire denialism’ is at work in these discussions. One talks of ‘white Australian history’, but of course it was the British who colonized Australia and all over the world.’\textsuperscript{46} The events also often seem to be thought of as belonging only to the distant past or the earliest stages of colonial settlement. This is quite erroneous. Large-scale massacre of Native Americans in parts of the USA continued into the 1880s. In Australia, the last reliably attested large-scale murders of Aboriginals were as late at 1926 (Forrest River) and Coniston (1928). Aboriginal population levels did not begin to recover until the 1950s and after.

If these disputes were indeed to be ‘repatriated’ to Britain it would evidently be likely to have a significant impact on the way the colonial, and moreover the national, past is debated there. There has been slow, uneven but real progress, accelerated by the 2007 bicentenary commemorations of Britain’s role in Atlantic slavery and its abolition, in coming to think of African enslavement and the New World plantation complexes as part of British history with significant entailments for the present, not just something ‘out there’ and ‘back then’. A similar process in regard to the fate of Aboriginal Australians or to the monstrous destructiveness of Britain’s Indian army in 1857 would surely have equally profound and perhaps beneficial effects. To consider whether these might, or should, lead to syndromes of guilt or shame, to

reparations or official apologies, is beyond my scope here. Yet they might perhaps lead to new kinds of rememoration.

**Rememorating Empire**

African-American novelist Toni Morrison coined that word ‘rememoration’ to describe acts of remembrance which not only commemorate the dead, but attempt to break the cycles of trauma amidst which they died, and whose recurrence will otherwise trap the living in endless repetition. Through rememoration, the dead speak to us: if we listen, we may learn how not to repeat their suffering. The task of ‘rememoration’ may not really be the historian’s, though of course the ‘politics of memory’ and its relation to historical consciousness has been one of the great historiographical growth areas of recent years.

Shahid Amin has recently argued that critique of the nationalist narrative of India’s colonial past must move beyond the territory of ‘the evidence’ and into the realm of narration. An innovative history requires not just ‘new sources’ and newer interpretations, but new ways of narrating what he calls recalcitrant events: ones whose very telling calls into question the terms on which the big story has been told. The master saga of nationalism, he says, is built around the retelling of a certain canon of events, woven into a story the triumph of good over evil. The power of such histories lies not in the not only making people remember events from a shared past. The nationalist master narrative also induces a selective national amnesia in relation to specific events which would fit awkwardly with, even seriously inconvenience, the neatly ordered pattern. Stories of imperial violence, let alone genocide, challenge that selective amnesia and thus the entire national story.

But what of those who feel passionately that they, their ancestors, their histories and memories, are among the forgotten rather than the forgetters? Most colonized, enslaved or massacred individuals remain almost wholly lost to history: mute, faceless, nameless. It is that particular, profound dimension of lostness, of inability to connect personal, familial and community ‘memory’ with the monuments and rituals of national remembrancing and canonical national pasts which, I think, gives today’s debates over imperial violence their special, additional, painful intensity. Descendants of the colonised may, almost as much as those of the enslaved, feel an almost unique sense not just of critical alienation but of near-total disconnection from the monumental, canonical, official —and thus sadly often also the academic— claims of academic History. It is surely part of the historian’s proper task to work, so far as possible, towards overcoming that. At the very least, she or he could well recall

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that words of that most ‘establishment’ of imperial historians, Sir John Kaye, who has been a kind of hero for this little story.

But there is one great lesson to be learnt from the tragedies of Benares and Allahabad. It is the great lesson of Universal Toleration. An Englishman is almost suffocated with indignation when he reads that Mrs. Chambers or Miss Jennings was hacked to death by a dusky ruffian; but in Native histories, or, history being wanting, in Native legends and traditions, it may be recorded against our people, that mothers and wives and children, with less familiar names, fell miserable victims to the first swoop of English vengeance; and these stories may have as deep a pathos as any that rend our own hearts.49

**The author**

Stephen Howe is Professor in the History and Cultures of Colonialism at the University of Bristol, UK. His most recent book is the edited collection *New Imperial Histories* (Routledge, 2009). *The Intellectual Consequences of Decolonisation* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in 2010.

**L’auteur**


**Abstract**

This article traces some aspects of recent British debates over ‘memory’ of the imperial and colonial past, offering points of comparison between these and the parallel French discussions which have emerged still more recently but with great force. It focuses especially on the role which arguments over imperial violence and atrocity, including claims about colonial genocide, have played in these.

**Résumé**

Cet article retrace les débats survenus ces derniers temps en Grande-Bretagne sur la mémoire du passé impérial et colonial et les compare aux polémiques françaises qui se sont développées très récemment et très vigoureusement sur le même sujet. L’auteur s’intéresse plus particulièrement aux travaux des historiens portant sur la violence coloniale et les atrocités impériales, voire sur les génocides coloniaux présumés, et évalue leur rôle dans ces débats.

**Keywords:** Colonialism; Empire; Genocide; Massacre; Memory.

Mots-clés : Colonialisme ; Empire ; Génocide ; Massacre ; Mémoire.