

Confronting Britain's Legacy of Torture



Protesters demonstrate outside the Home Office in London in 2018. (David Mirzoeff / Global Justice Now) (CC BY 2.0)

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British politics is presently mired in the second general election campaign in three years, thanks to the grinding parliamentary impasse precipitated by Brexit. One of the most important features of the clamor surrounding Brexit is that very few other political issues are getting the sustained scrutiny they demand, or rather, that every piece of current affairs information is filtered through the lens of our faltering, exasperating withdrawal from the EU. Enormous and urgent issues, from climate catastrophe to austerity budget cuts, from rising homelessness to the financial crisis in the National Health Service, are all taking a back seat to Brexit, which has acted as the determinant of every political conversation in Britain since 2016. These have been boom times for those in British politics who want to get their way while avoiding accountability.

For example, David Cameron's Conservative government, which announced the 2016 referendum that started it all, has another piece of urgent unfinished business. In 2010, Cameron announced a judge-led inquiry into [Britain's role in the U.S.-led post-9/11 rendition and torture program](#). Over the last decade, British authorities have consistently refused (or failed) to [conduct this inquiry](#) and recently, the government presided over by arch-Brexitteer, [unapologetic racist](#) and [serial liar](#) Boris Johnson [refused to continue inquiries](#), kicking British accountability for torture into the long grass once again.

There is a great deal of other torture news in Britain, some of it to do with our complicity in the torture program, much of it to do with historical abuses, some of it to do with our immigration detention system, all of it routinely buried under the agonizing slew of second-by-second analysis of Brexit. Last week, for instance, [allegations resurfaced that the UK military and government ministers suppressed evidence of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan](#). Three weeks ago, [a Nigerian man was found dead in British immigration detention](#) in conditions of incarceration that human rights groups characterize as torture. A UN expert has argued that the treatment in British detention of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange [has amounted to psychological torture](#), and this week has seen medical professionals emphasize [his need for treatment for the injuries and depression that have resulted from his stay in Belmarsh prison](#).

[Recently, a court in Belfast ruled that British treatment of Irish prisoners during the Troubles should correctly be described as torture](#). One of Johnson's election pledges is to [shield British veterans from prosecution for murders committed during the Troubles in Ireland](#). There's a debate over here about [whether MI5 should be required to abide by the law](#), which has led to credible allegations that the British Security Services are seeking to evade accountability for extrajudicial murder and torture. And of course, as a background to all of this, the Home Office's Hostile Environment policy [introduced by Theresa May](#) has [made life for immigrants incredibly difficult](#) and has seen [lifelong UK residents deported](#). Torture remains a British problem, and we Brits need to be better at confronting it and dealing with it.

The root cause of this refusal to account for torture is a pathology in British life, of which Brexit is only the latest and wildest symptom. Britain has never honestly reckoned with itself over the precipitous and carnage-filled loss of its empire in the 20th century. Contemporary conversations about empire are routinely dominated by imperial nostalgia and amnesia, with little understanding of the crucial role played by violence, extortion, slavery and torture in our centuries-long global ascendancy. As a consequence, there is little understanding of why torture, as an issue that connects them all, still matters in today's Britain.

Violence, Empire and Secrecy

"Torture is as British as suet pudding and red pillar-boxes."

[Ian Cobain, *Cruel Britannia*](#)

We Brits, in general, are pretty poor at coming to terms with our imperial past, both in terms of what our centuries of global domination entailed and how that domination continues to have consequences in the present. British imperial amnesia manifests as a reluctance or inability—part failure, part refusal—to understand our imperial past in historical and political context. When the subject of empire comes up, it is generally considered both that the British empire was a benevolent project and that British decolonization was both regrettable and relatively painless. We may be aware of flashpoint events, such as the massacre of civilians in [Amritsar in 1919](#) or on [Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972](#), but the general understanding is that events like these were discrete, shocking excesses, rather than acts that could more usefully be understood as part of a constant pattern of violent colonial policing.

In 2016, the market-research company [YouGov published a poll](#) showing that "by three to one, British people think the British Empire is [something to be proud of rather than ashamed of](#)." Popular historians and broadcasters, generally of a right-wing persuasion, such as [Niall](#)

[Ferguson](#), [Jeremy Paxman](#) and [Andrew Marr](#), have published tome after tome in the last decade without countenancing a serious consideration of the way that violence and coercion underpinned the establishment, daily running and dissolution of the British empire. Hip-hop musician and activist Akala, for example, writes in his book, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*, that “decolonisation may well turn out to have been the most significant historical process of the second half of the twentieth century, but you would never know this from mainstream historiography.” (Here I’d like to insert an element of autobiography: I left my secondary education without any awareness that Britain had ever been an imperial power, let alone [one of the biggest slavers in history](#).)

This ahistorical and reactionary understanding of empire is bolstered by the brasher proclamations of such public intellectuals as [Bruce Gilley](#) or [Nigel Biggar](#), who are openly celebratory of what they describe as the virtues of the British empire. Gilley, for instance, wrote in a controversial 2017 article titled “The Case for Colonialism,” that he was in favor of “the civilising mission without scare quotes” and that “Western and non-Western countries should reclaim the colonial toolkit and language as part of their commitment to effective governance and international order.” Earlier this year, Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg went so far as to [defend the British use of concentrationary incarceration during the Boer War](#) on BBC’s flagship political discussion show “Question Time,” arguing, in his studied, arrogant drawl, that concentration camps designed to demoralize and starve their inhabitants were safe, comfortable and constructed in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Rees-Mogg’s insouciant apologia for concentration camps is a particularly interesting—and shocking—case of the casual dismissal of colonial violence found throughout elite British political discourse. Our national blind spot is particularly pronounced, however, when it comes to the bloodshed of decolonization. As noted scholar of postcolonial Britain [Paul Gilroy](#) wrote in 2004, “[T]he mysterious evacuation of Britain’s postcolonial conflicts from national consciousness has become a significant event in its own right.” Britain’s decolonizations were marked by torture to the extent that it can be seen as a characteristically colonial form of violence, in settings as diverse as Aden (today’s Yemen), Cyprus, Kenya and Northern Ireland, to name but a few.

But Britain also has a long history of [obscuring or withholding historical records of imperial violence—even, at times, deliberately destroying archival materials](#)—and as a consequence, mainstream accounts of Britain’s geopolitical role and colonial history [remain generally positive](#). In ordinary conversations, people are much more likely to mention our infrastructure projects abroad (“We gave them the railways”) than they are to acknowledge the systematic racism and violence that underwrote British power, as though we built the railways in India out of a sense of benevolent generosity toward the local population rather than to facilitate our extractivist pillage of the subcontinent.

It is true that a growing body of academics, journalists and writers, such as Priyamvada Gopal, Kim Wagner, Brian Drohan, Darius Rejali, Catherine Elkins, Bob Brecher, Ruth Blakely, Sam Raphael and Ian Cobain, have been conducting extraordinary research aiming to reorient the conversation about colonial violence, empire, anticolonialism and British innovations in the systematic use of torture as a tactic of imperial government. Nonetheless, torture features in our national political conversations at best as a side issue, as something that somehow does not really involve us.

Where Is the British Torture Debate?

Other democracies with histories of torture and other human rights violations, such as the U.S. and France, have conducted high-profile and often bitterly acrimonious public debates over torture. As I have [written elsewhere](#), these debates have often played out through culture. In 1960s France, for example, public intellectuals such as [Henri Alleg](#), Jean-Paul Sartre and [Albert Camus](#) took high-profile positions in the debate over the systematic torture that the French military was committing in the course of its long colonial war in Algeria.

More influential, perhaps, was ex-paratrooper [Jean Lartéguy's novel, *The Centurions*](#), written in 1960 at the height of the war. The novel won the prestigious Prix Ève-Delacroix and sold over half a million copies, so it was one of the defining texts of the Algerian conflict in terms of the effects it would have on the ways that French colonial violence was publicly interpreted. Its major contribution to the world has been a particularly powerful and influential dramatization of the [ticking-bomb scenario](#), a justification for emergency torture in which countless innocent lives are saved when French soldiers torture a terrorist into revealing the locations of 15 bombs scattered throughout Algiers. By narrating this thought experiment as a compelling story, this novel was able to popularize the justification for torture to the extent that it became one of the determining dimensions of the political debate in France at the time. In contrast, other forms of cultural production that explored the issue of torture from a position that was less sympathetic to the French military, such as Jean-Luc Godard's [Le Petit Soldat](#), Alleg's torture memoir, *The Question*, or Gillo Pontecorvo's anticolonial classic [The Battle of Algiers](#), were expressly censored by the French government. The division, violence and unrest of the period of French decolonization, of which the debate over torture was vitally emblematic, led to crises in public life and the end of the Fourth Republic.

Similar cultural dynamics played out in the U.S. after 9/11. Thrillers like [24](#), [Daredevil](#), [Unthinkable](#) and [Zero Dark Thirty](#) have positioned torture as necessary and effective by telling stories remarkably similar to *The Centurions*. Grizzled, combat-worn heroes who know how the world *really* works commit torture and save the world by doing the dirty work. Anti-torture thrillers have appeared, too, ensuring that the debate at least appears more nuanced in 21st-century America than in 1960s France. Consider, for instance, [Rendition](#), [Extraordinary Rendition](#) or [The Report](#).

But Britain's record of torture has not attracted as much public discussion. The only comparable literary narrative about Britain that I have been able to locate is Robert Ruark's [Something of Value](#), a long, brutal novel about the violent British response to the Kenyan Mau Mau uprising that uses the unsavory and dehumanizing central metaphor that counterinsurgency in Kenya was another form of big-game hunting. But Ruark was an American; British writers dared not make such openly racist and violently triumphalist literary statements. Major writers of the period of decolonization, such as Graham Greene, Ian Fleming and John le Carré, did not investigate or tell stories about British torture, often preferring instead to focus their attention on the torture committed by the Soviet Union in the course of the Cold War.

It might also be tempting to argue that Britain is rhetorically inoculated from its own history of torture through the circulation of uncritically patriotic narratives, such as the ever-expanding James Bond franchise. After all, Bond shows us the best of Britain, projecting strength, style and sex appeal, and only ever suffering torture, never inflicting it. It is more accurate, though, to say instead

that torture is positioned, in much mainstream British discourse that addresses the issue, as not a British problem or as something that Britain simply does not do.

Why? Back to Brexit

The British attitude to torture—a mixture of coy denial, willful ignorance and sordidly enthusiastic perpetration—is connected to Brexit much more intimately than is apparent at first flush. One of the major attractions of Brexit for “Leave” voters was the idea that, after the great liberation of Brexit, Britain would no longer be bound by the rules of the European Convention on Human Rights, long seen by British Conservatives as an unnecessary impediment to British sovereignty. Indeed, Tory Prime Ministers Cameron and May repeatedly promised to [tear up](#) or [replace](#) the Human Rights Act, which integrates the ECHR into British law; May in particular was keen to [disregard human rights legislation in the pursuit of her security agenda](#). There is a strong case to be made both that the freedom to withdraw human rights from people—in particular (but not exclusively) terrorism suspects, that is, those the authorities are most likely to want to torture—was one of the major attractions of Brexit, and that Brexit will make Britain’s human rights record worse.

For example, [the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s 2019 report](#) states that “the removal of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights from domestic law through the EU Withdrawal Act may result in a loss or weakening of some rights protections (for example, Article 1 on human dignity). In addition, the U.K.’s future extradition arrangements with the EU and future funding to prevent violence against children, young people, women and other groups at risk, and for women’s services, including for victims of domestic violence, remain uncertain.” Yet “Leave” voters are more likely to assert that the desire to scrap human rights legislation has more to do with undoing regulatory integration with the EU than it is about stripping rights from terror suspects—as though the two reactionary impulses could not coexist.

Northern Ireland also presents an interesting case. The province remains part of the British union, but every attempt so far to negotiate a Brexit deal seems to have been conducted in arrogant ignorance and contempt of the historical circumstances and colonial dynamics unique to the region that charge the issue with a very urgent, life-and-death significance. A hard border in Ireland would likely have terrible consequences for the population of the six counties, but our government seems not only not to care about this but not even to entertain a cursory understanding of it.

This discussion of Brexit, partition and human rights is important enough. But it misses the bigger picture: The fact remains that in Britain, torture is a big elephant in the room, bigger, even, than this election and bigger than Brexit. Torture is an issue that synthesizes historical injustice, continuing complicity, foreign policy and domestic politics, our human rights record and our political, moral and ethical values today. In particular, it is significant that torture is difficult to integrate into the antagonistic idiom of most political talk, which tends to focus on the electoral and managerial matters of whether one party or another should be voted for. This is because torture is one of those rare issues on which there is a bipartisan consensus: Both major ruling parties in Britain, the Labour Party as much as the Conservatives, are historically complicit in it. It may be the Conservative Party’s Rees-Mogg defending concentration camps and its Boris Johnson quietly closing down the torture inquiry, but it was Tony Blair’s Labour Party that took us to war in Iraq and [allowed British airports to be used for extraordinary renditions](#).

We in Britain need to face the fact that we are a torturing nation, as well as a nation of genteel, afternoon tea-drinkers; that we have been historic innovators in torture, as well as experts in fine manners. After all, to conclude with another autobiographical aside, it was at a pleasant Christmas party that I spoke to a soldier who told me, while we were wearing party hats and drinking wine, that the way to avoid breaking the law when committing [waterboarding](#) is to half-drown people with diesel fuel instead (because [diesel-boarding](#) is not legally recognized, neither is it legally prohibited). We need this national conversation urgently.