The British government’s offer of monetary compensation of £20 million to over 5,000 living Kenyan survivors of systematic torture during the Mau Mau anti-colonial revolt is a historic reckoning with an ugly past. Instead of bringing the sordid chapter of crimes committed against nationalist movements to closure, this settlement is bound to trigger other claims in the former colonies of Pax Britannica.

It also augurs a thorough re-evaluation of European colonial empires and their tactics of control. The myth that the British were far more enlightened, benevolent, and liberal in their self-anointed “civilizing mission” in Africa and Asia than the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, or the Belgians is due for a revision. According to a groundbreaking book, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*, by Harvard University historian Caroline Elkins, as many as 300,000 Africans were butchered in the 1950s upon the orders of racist British officers determined to stamp out the Mau Mau guerrillas. Usage of Nazi-style concentration camps, attempts to exterminate entire ethnic groups, aerial bombardment, collective punishment, and slave labor were just some of the despicable acts committed by the British in central Kenya, where the Kikuyu peasants had rebelled against colonial expropriation of land.

Desperation to hang on to empire in Africa after the loss of India in 1947, as well as the dehumanization of black people as “rabid dogs” and “ulcers” by the British military commanders, combined to produce a sinister machine of state terror.

That such savagery could happen barely a few years after the Nazi Holocaust of World War II, where the British claimed to have fought on behalf of liberty against fascism, reveals how demeaning colonialism of all shades was in terms of hierarchically ordering human beings.

The counter-insurgency strategies Britain deployed in Kenya and Malaya in the 1950s went on to become classics, adopted by armies of post-colonial states that inherited some mantles from their former masters and also got sucked into Cold War. But what was never officially acknowledged until the Mau Mau compensations case was that these examples of “successful” and militarily innovative means of crushing insurgencies came at the cost of unbelievable human suffering.

As Mau Mau veterans lamented after the British foreign secretary expressed “sincere regret” for the abuses of the 1950s, the payouts that living victims will now receive are hardly proportionate to the pains Kenyans endured. When the sun was finally setting on the British Empire around 1961, the British secretary of state for the colonies ordered a huge cover-up operation, instigating the purging of thousands of files containing sensitive and incriminating evidence of military abuses of natives. His stated goal was to prevent newly independent nations of Africa and Asia from using those records to “embarrass Her Majesty’s government.”

Whatever formerly classified information has come to light in the litigation on behalf of the Mau Mau survivors is thus only the tip of the iceberg. Sarmila Bose of Oxford University has argued that the British used similar methods of terror against the Quit India movement in 1942-43, particularly indiscriminate aerial bombing, machine gunning of civilians, rampant torture, and sexual assaults in places like Midnapore.
If one goes back to the aftermath of the anti-colonial revolt of 1857 in northern India, historian Amaresh Misra has documented in his book, War of Civilisations: India AD 1857, that the British unleashed an “untold Holocaust” that killed nearly 10 million natives. Such spine-chilling facts take the sheen off British imperialism, whose defenders pretend that it was more benign and softer than other European empires. Colonialism of all hues was a blood-soaked, limitless criminal enterprise.

Arguments about the benefits that British colonialism brought to the colonies, marshaled by apologists like the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson tend to do a balance sheet of “achievements” on the credit side and “sins” on the debit side. They maintain that the British abolished slavery, ran incorrupt administrations, brought free markets and advanced communications technologies, and developed the concepts of good governance and rule of law. Ferguson’s oft-cited conservative classic, Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World, applauds the British for bequeathing all the celebrated virtues of modernity to the colonies.

But when we consider that these same institutions of modernity were harnessed to commit genocides and plunder the natural wealth of the colonies—not unlike what the Belgians did in the Congo—a different picture of Pax Britannica emerges. It is not a mathematical equation between pluses and minuses of empire, but rather a totality based on the core principles of inequality, exploitation, and violence. The British may indeed have been more tolerant than other European colonialists when natives were not rebelling, but the scale of violence perpetrated by the former when faced with periodic mass movements and revolts was no less barbaric. The “sins” were premeditated and ghastly while the “achievements” were incidental.

British Prime Minister David Cameron’s visit earlier this year to the massacre site of Jallianwala Bagh in Indian Punjab and his comment that what occurred there was “a deeply shameful act” was a step in the right direction, but too little and too late. Reparations for colonial excesses are contentious topics, especially on the question of the legal liability of contemporary governments for the crimes committed by their predecessors in much earlier eras. The longer the lag since the abuses were committed, the harder it is to establish guilt or account for the full truth.

The best model for swift and meaningful reparations is that of Germany paying Israel for the Nazi Holocaust as early as 1953, just a few years after the genocide of the Jews. For descendants of the unrecognized millions who perished under British rule, the Mau Mau redemption is worth savoring. But it is also a reminder that the actual perpetrators and their immediate successors, who were directly answerable, escaped justice.