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MAU MAU BLASTERS:
THE HOMEMADE GUNS OF THE MAU MAU UPRISING

by

JAMES EDWARD STODDARD
B. A. University of Central Florida, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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Major Professor: Ezekiel Walker

ABSTRACT

The Mau Mau Uprising was a violent anticolonial struggle that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. During the Uprising, firearms were extremely difficult for Mau Mau fighters to obtain. The few precision weapons they could acquire came from raided government armories or those found on the battlefield. In order to make up the difference, the Mau Mau leadership turned to resources that were more readily available and relied on the ingenuity of their supporters. The result was a series of homemade firearms manufactured by Mau Mau fighters and sympathizers. This thesis argues that homemade guns were a unique example of the successful adaptation of firearms technology. In addition, the Mau Mau made the guns integral to their military efforts. To this day, the guns hold a prominent place within Mau Mau historical memory.

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I would like to thank the many individuals who made this thesis possible. Dr. Ezekiel Walker, my advisor, for guiding me in my research and writing. When I first came across these homemade guns, I had little knowledge of the Mau Mau and their struggle for land and freedom. Thank you for your guidance and trust. It allowed me to discover this treasure trove of history. Dr. Rosalind Beiler, you were the first professor I took a course with at the University of Central Florida. Since day one, you have graciously provided me with invaluable insight and advice. As a member of my thesis committee, you drove me to ask penetrating questions which elevated my research and writing. I also want to extend my deepest thanks to Dr. Amelia Lyons. As graduate director, a member of my thesis committee, and my friend, you are a compass and confidant. Semper Fidelis.

Thank you to my brother, Joseph, for assisting me in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London. Thank you to the librarians and archivists who assisted us in our work at the IWM. The Dr. Simon Barton Research Grant made our work at the IWM possible. Thank you to my friends and colleagues at UCF, especially Walter Napier. Thank you for helping me keep my crayons sharp. Thank you to my sons, Raylan and Logan. You were young when I wrote this and did not always like that I was tucked away in my office. I hope one day you will read this and understand why. Finally, my wife, Danielle. I cannot thank you enough. Without your love and support, I would not be in a position to do this kind of work.

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TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS

- 1895: British form the East Africa Protectorate (EAP)
- 1920: Out of the EAP, the British form the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya
- 1935: Italians invade Ethiopia
- 1939: Great Britain enters the Second World War
- 1941: Kenyan soldiers assist in removal of Italians from Ethiopia
- 1943: The King's African Rifles deploy to Burma
- 1945: The Second World War Ends
- 1948: Mau Mau forms in secret
- 1952: British declare State of Emergency in Kenya, Mau Mau Uprising officially begins
- 1953: First homemade guns produced
- 1954: Waruhiu Itote captured and interrogated
- 1957: Dedan Kimathi captured and executed
- 1960: British end the State of Emergency, official end of Mau Mau Uprising
- 1963-1964: Kenya transitions to an independent nation
- 2003: Government of Kenya lifts ban on Mau Mau

MAP OF COLONIAL KENYA

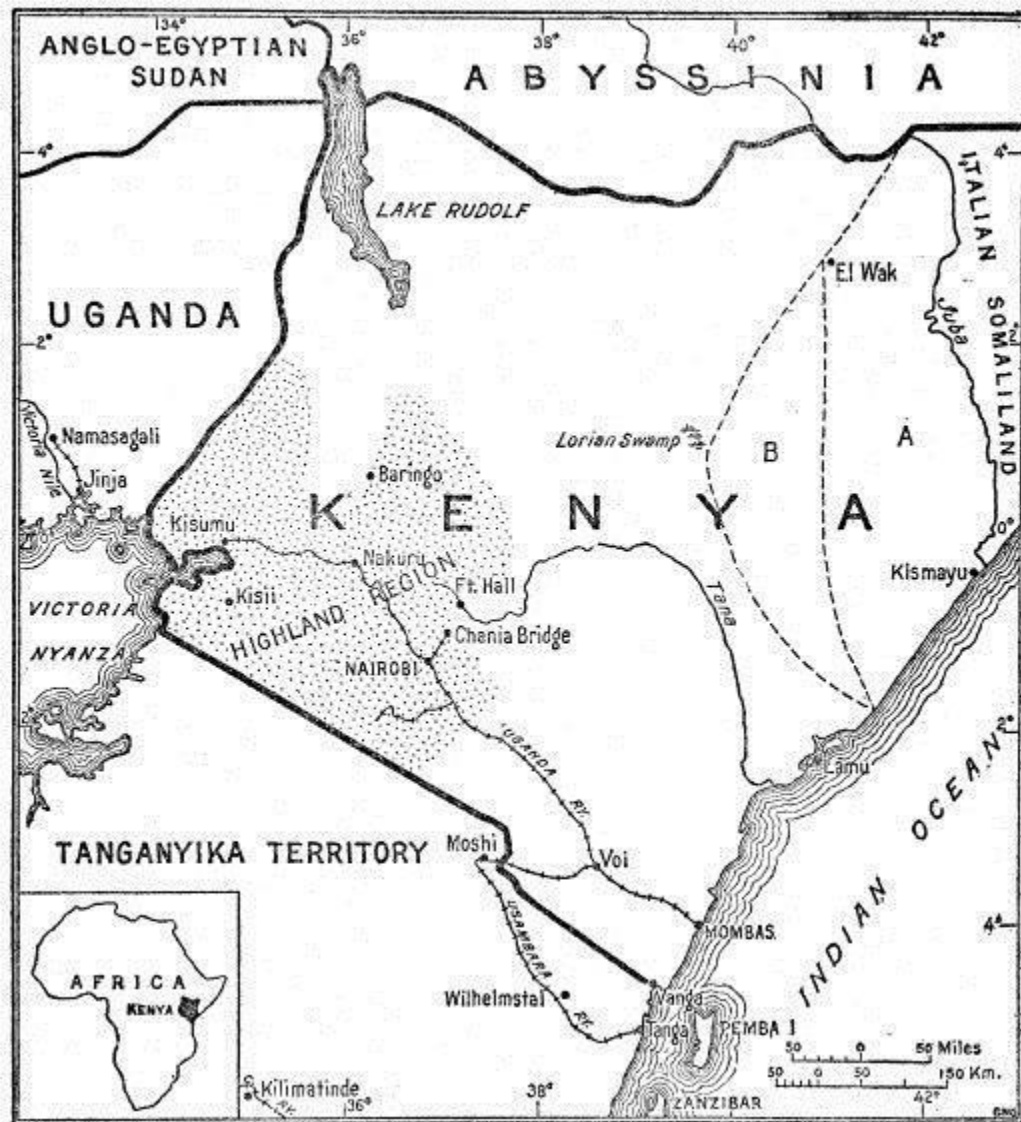


Figure 1: Map of Kenya: circa 1920¹

¹ Joshua Scullin, "The Mau Mau Insurrection: The Failed Rebellion that Freed Kenya," History Undergraduate Thesis (Tacoma: University of Washington Tacoma Digital Commons, 2017), 5.

INTRODUCTION

The Mau Mau Uprising was a violent anticolonial struggle that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The British formed the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya out of their East Africa Protectorate in 1920. As Kenya developed into a white settlement colony, Europeans confiscated ancestral lands from Africans. During the period of decolonization that took place after the Second World War, Kenya became a hotbed for political anticolonial activity, particularly within the Kikuyu community. The Kikuyu were the largest tribal ethnicity within Colonial Kenya. After decades of oppression, theft, and violence perpetrated by the British, the Kikuyu movement known as Mau Mau rebelled against British colonial rule. The Mau Mau sought the forceful expulsion of the British from Kenya in order to regain their land and freedom. The British responded to the outbreak of violence by declaring a State of Emergency on October 20, 1952.²

After the colonial government declared an emergency, firearms became extremely difficult for Mau Mau fighters to obtain. The few precision weapons Mau Mau could acquire came from raided government armories or guns found on the battlefield. In order to make up the difference, the Mau Mau leadership had to arm their fighters in another way. They turned to readily available resources and relied on the ingenuity of their supporters. The result was a series of homemade firearms manufactured by Mau Mau fighters and sympathizers. This thesis argues that homemade guns were a unique example of the successful adaptation of firearms technology. In addition, the Mau Mau made the guns integral to their military efforts. To this

² S. H. Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed: British Rule, Mau Mau and the Wind of Change* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 195.

day, the guns hold a prominent place within Mau Mau historical memory. Homemade guns represent a concrete example of an oppressed people finding an uncommon way to obtain the necessary firepower in order to confront their enemy.

To substantiate my argument, I developed a series of research questions. My research started with a fundamental question. Why was it necessary for the Mau Mau to construct their own firearms? During the era of decolonization, one can find any number of armed struggles for independence. Yet, none of these conflicts feature an improvised firearm. Such rebellions and revolutions were further complicated by the involvement of Cold War superpowers. The superpowers often armed their chosen side with AK-47s or M-16s. The Mau Mau Uprising stands outside this norm. Why was Mau Mau the exception and what other factors led to the creation of homemade guns? The next set of questions I developed dealt with the technical and mechanical aspects of the guns. Who designed the guns, how did Mau Mau source parts, and how were the guns constructed? How prominent were the homemade guns as Mau Mau weaponry? How important were the guns to the Mau Mau movement? These questions became the foundation of my research. Their answers, naturally, led me to more questions.

Decolonization in Africa came on the heels of the Second World War. Many Africans who fought in that war also fought for their own independence in the subsequent decades. This drove me to ask, how did World War II affect Kenya and its people? How were Mau Mau fighters influenced by that war? Did they receive training that helped them to develop the homemade guns? The answers to such questions led me to the strategic and tactical implications the firearms had on Mau Mau military efforts. Did the guns alleviate the KLFAs' chronic lack of

manufactured precision weapons? How were they implemented at the small unit level? Did the guns foster a dichotomy between the tactical effectiveness and the strategic goals of the KLFA?

Throughout my research, I found conflicting perspectives within the context of memory. The conflicts made me curious about the overall historical memory of the homemade guns. How have Mau Mau and British veterans remembered the homemade guns? How have their opinions shaped historical memory? Is there a balance between their differing recollections that can create a more accurate picture? The above questions guided my overall research and the arguments of the thesis.

Historical Context for the Development of Mau Mau

The British settlement of Kenya began in earnest with the £6.5 million construction of the Uganda Railway. Completed in 1901, it tied the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa to the interior Lake Victoria. More important than the financial cost, British expansion into Kenya killed thousands of, stole property from, and disrupted the lifeways of Africans who lived in the railway's path. Upon the railway's completion, British Parliament concerned itself with ways to recoup funds expended on the project. Great Britain charged the first commissioner of the territory, Charles Elliot, with finding a solution. In Elliot's opinion, the local African populace was too sparse and uncivilized to form an economy around the railroad. Willing to seize more land from indigenous Africans, Elliot and Parliament promoted white settlement of the colony as a solution to their economic problem. The British government enticed white settlers from the

metropole and South Africa with low interest loans, subsidies, and long-term leases.³ The Kikuyu people were the hardest hit by the influx of white settlers. Their ancestral lands were in the highland region of Kenya. Not only did the highlands contain a long portion of the railway, it was agriculturally and pastorally fertile. White settlers took the highlands for themselves and forced a great number of Kikuyu into urban areas and reserves. In many ways, the grievances of the Mau Mau began with the Uganda Railway and its ramifications.

As white settlement grew, the British codified theft and subjugation of the Kikuyu into race-based laws. The regulations forced many more Kikuyu to leave their ancestral lands and relocate into reserves and urban areas. Punitive taxation disenfranchised Kikuyu from participation in elections. A pass and identification system restricted their freedom of movement. And, to prevent Kikuyu from competing with white farmers, the British instituted market restrictions on Kikuyu grown crops. Unable to freely compete for sales, many Kikuyu turned to the tightly controlled urban wage labor market.⁴ The British rebranded the few Kikuyu who stayed on their ancestral lands as “squatters.” Their land now controlled by white settlers; Kikuyu resided on it at the pleasure of the new landowner. The landowners benefited from this situation because they used the Kikuyu “squatters” as agricultural labor in a system akin to feudalism or sharecropping. As white landowners embraced mechanized farming, however, they forced many of the remaining Kikuyu into the overcrowded reserves and urban areas.⁵

Politically active Kikuyu pointed to such abuses as their chief complaints against the British. In

³ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 1-11. At first, leases lasted ninety-nine years. Eventually, settlers obtained an extension to 999 years.

⁴ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 15-16.

⁵ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 23-25.

1948, a group of Kikuyu swore a secret oath to forcibly remove the British and restore Kikuyu land and freedom. Four years later, the Mau Mau began an open rebellion against British colonial rule. To maintain the appearance of a domestic dispute, the British declared the situation an emergency. In reality, this was a full-scale revolt by the Mau Mau and the British response was one of a counter-insurgency.

Historiography of Mau Mau

The first historical works on Mau Mau came from the British and, primarily, served as attempts to explain away and disparage the movement. These early works, written during the Uprising, set the tone for the first few decades of scholarship. In addition to British scholars, British military personnel who served in Kenya during the uprising contributed to the overall tone of the early historiography. These biographical adventure histories, along with the official British perspective, contributed greatly to the historiography. After Kenya's independence, Mau Mau adherents began to tell their version of the history of the event in the form of memoirs. During the cultural turn, scholars of Mau Mau incorporated these memoirs into their own research. Their groundbreaking research challenged the conventional narrative. Critical eyes then turned toward activities of the British, while others discussed the Mau Mau in the larger contexts of decolonization, nationalism, and memory. The present section highlights the significant works that defined the trends and shifts of this historiography.

Considered official reports on the Mau Mau Emergency, early entries in Mau Mau literature led with sensational titles and stories of savagery. Three works of particular interest are Ione Leigh's *In the Shadow of the Mau Mau* (1954), Ian McDougall's *African Turmoil*

(1954), and C. T. Stoneman's *Out of Barbarism* (1955).⁶ These three works exemplify the trend of Mau Mau scholarship during the time of the Emergency. Each offers a similar arc and tone. The authors began with a history of Kenya before the Mau Mau. Adoringly described as a bountiful and peaceful place, the authors blissfully overlooked the draconian measures placed on the indigenous population. The authors described the Kikuyu as loyal servants and hard workers that suddenly turned on their paternal masters. The narratives then shifted to the conflict as it was at the time of their writing. They invariably painted the Mau Mau as the aggressors, deranged by an oath to a barbarous ideology. The authors were quick to point to violence on behalf of the Mau Mau, describing events such as the Ruck family murders, but hesitate to describe the rampant violence conducted at the hands of the British. From their perspective, the severity of the British response was acceptable in order to crush the Mau Mau. Since these authors wrote during the conflict, they concluded with a look forward. Generally, they advocated for the traditional civilizing mission of Great Britain to help the Kikuyu move beyond Mau Mau. Their point of view disregarded the legitimate grievances of Kikuyu and other native Kenyans, thus helping to cement the perspective of the British on the Mau Mau narrative. Leigh, however, did provide some space to hear from Mau Mau fighters. In one example, he reprinted an excerpt from a manifesto written by a Mau Mau leader.⁷ While these works do not reflect academic scholarship by today's standards, they are important to the historiography of the Mau Mau. Along with military and newspaper reports, they set the narrative's tone for decades and shaped the conventional history of the Uprising.

⁶ Ione Leigh, *In the Shadow of Mau Mau* (London: W. H. Allen, 1954); Ian McDougall, *African Turmoil* (London: Elek, 1954); C. T. Stoneham, *Out of Barbarism* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1955).

⁷ Leigh, *In the Shadow of Mau Mau*, 190-191.

Those who fought against the Mau Mau provided the next contribution to the historiography. Ian Henderson grew up in the Central Province of Kenya. He spoke Kikuyu and developed close ties with native Kenyans. As a member of Special Branch, he took part in raids and arrests during the Emergency. In 1956, Henderson led a team to find Dedan Kimathi, one of the last holdouts of the Mau Mau leadership. Henderson's autobiography *The Hunt for Kimathi* (1958) tells this story.⁸ Similarly, *Bwana Drum* (1964), written by Dennis Holman, tells the story of David Drummond.⁹ He shares a similar background to Henderson and is responsible for the capture and conversion of over forty Mau Mau fighters. Both men received acclaim and praise at the time of their exploits. Later in life, Henderson found himself at the center of a controversy regarding his methods as a member of Special Branch. Their books read like adventure novels. Though they are not academic in nature, they are no less important to the literature. Indeed, they represent a wider context for the historiography of the Mau Mau. Because the British controlled the narrative in and out of academia, the Mau Mau entered popular culture as a villain in tales of 'real life' heroism. Despite the potential for exaggerated details and hyperbole, these works do have academic use. Both Henderson and Drummond demonstrate respect for their foe, especially in terms of ingenuity and bush craft. On multiple occasions, they mention the homemade firearms used by the Mau Mau, a unique aspect of weaponry in this conflict. The voice and agency of the Mau Mau begins to grow with these books as well. Kimathi has a miniature biography in *Hunt* and the converted Mau Mau are integral to the narrative. Indeed, some go on to lead their own pseudo gangs.¹⁰ Though

⁸ Ian Henderson, *The Hunt for Kimathi* (London: Hamish & Hamilton Ltd, 1958).

⁹ Dennis Holman, *Bwana Drum* (London: W. H. Allen, 1964).

¹⁰ Pseudo gangs were comprised of former Mau Mau fighters who left the movement in support of the British forces. Individuals like Henderson and Drummond used them to infiltrate Mau Mau gangs. For more information, see Frank Kitson, *Gangs and Counterr-Gangs* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960).

Henderson and Drummond are the filters for this information, these works take the Mau Mau fighters beyond the mindless savage trope of earlier works. Moreover, having fought alongside the Mau Mau, they were the first writers to describe them with such depth and respect.

When hostilities ceased in 1960, historical surveys of the Mau Mau Uprising began to take shape. F. D. Corfield authored one of the first comprehensive works on the Mau Mau in the years after the Uprising, but before independence. While he did not have the long perspective of time, published in 1960, *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* went to great lengths in explaining what happened in the preceding years. Unlike previous reports, such as Leigh or Stoneman's, Corfield used statistical analysis and other academic methods to attempt to explain the Mau Mau. Despite this, he still holds a decidedly British point of view. Instead of beginning with the romantic glory days of Colonial Kenya, though, he sought the roots of Kikuyu political activity. His analysis of oathing is of keen interest. He does not dismiss the Kikuyu belief in the power of an oath as an uncivilized belief in witchcraft. Instead, he uses it to inform his analysis and explain the awesome power an oath had over a Kikuyu individual.¹¹ Corfield's work on firearms is also valuable. In this chapter, he studies the data of lost and stolen precision weapons to explain the firearm black market that the Mau Mau operated. He provides the first published analysis of how many precision weapons the Mau Mau obtained during the conflict. He also dedicates a portion of this chapter to the homemade firearms of the Mau Mau.¹² He has some preliminary numbers on how many of these homemade guns were in circulation and provides a detailed description of their construction.¹³ Though he does not present direct analysis linking

¹¹ F. D. Corfield, *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau: A Historical Survey* (Nairobi: Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1960), 163.

¹² Corfield, *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 230-231.

¹³ Corfield, *The Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 233.

precision and homemade guns, one can see from the numbers that homemade guns were of common use. In doing so, he demonstrates the agency and ability of the Mau Mau to forge their own way when precision weapons became scarce.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, a heavily debated form of scholarship entered the Mau Mau discourse. These contributions came from the Mau Mau themselves. These works consist of memoirs, autobiographies, and life histories that provided the point of view of the movement's adherents.¹⁴ In their time, Western and, even some, Kenyan scholars dismissed these writings as biased, because these works contradicted the British-centric narrative of Mau Mau history. In the late 1990s, Marshall S. Clough's *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, and Politics* argued that these narratives were crucial and valid contributions to the historiographical debate surrounding the Mau Mau.¹⁵ To bolster his argument, he selected thirteen important works written by various Mau Mau adherents. These narratives span twenty-five years and provide an inclusive scope for his analysis. Clough's cultural discourse analysis is an important contribution. His is the first work to argue the Mau Mau point of view as a valid part of the conversation. His methodology demonstrates how subaltern voices, previously barred from the larger historical debate, are necessary for a more complete understanding of the event. Arguably, his work created a pathway for the works of the twenty-first century that turned the Mau Mau narrative on its head.

¹⁴ Examples of such memoirs are Josiah Mwangi Kariuki. *'Mau Mau' Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of His Experiences in Detention Camps 1953-60* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963); Donald L. Barnett, and Karari Njama. *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (London: The Garden City Press Limited, 1966); and Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

¹⁵ Marshall S. Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, & Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 5.

In 2003, two high profile scholars of Kenyan and Mau Mau history came together and produced an edited volume that attempted to highlight the Mau Mau movement's contribution to nationhood. E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale's *Mau Mau and Nationhood: Arms, Authority, and Narration* weaves this complex tale of national history by compiling contributions from both veteran and trendsetting Mau Mau scholars.¹⁶ Earlier works discussed the role of nationalism in the Mau Mau struggle, but this work surpasses them with intricacy and nuance. Each author provides a chapter that exposes factors that demonstrate the Mau Mau's contribution to an independent Kenyan state. In doing so, these historians put forth a larger argument about the similarities between Kenya's struggle for national identity and other pluralistic states inside and outside of Africa.¹⁷ Often, historians place Africa on the outside of world history's narrative of political modernity. The chapters within this edited volume demonstrate how the events of the Mau Mau Uprising have parallels in other regions and nations. *Mau Mau and Nationhood* also acts as an appetizer to the developing research methodologies and arguments put forth in the early twenty-first century.

In 2005, two groundbreaking works on the Mau Mau Uprising changed the direction of the historiography. The first of these contributions is by Caroline Elkins. Written over the course of a decade, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* exposed the atrocities that occurred within the British detention and rehabilitation camps. Prior to her publishing, the narrative of this system suggested a successful civilizing mission on behalf of the British. What she unearthed completely dispelled this myth. Rather than a small population of

¹⁶ E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale, *Mau Mau & Nationhood: Arms, Authority & Narration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Odhiambo and Lonsdale, *Mau Mau & Nationhood*, 1-3.

radicalized fighters in need of reform, she argues that the British detained about 1.5 million people, or nearly the entire Kikuyu population, over the course of the Emergency.¹⁸ In addition to compelling statistics, Elkins also compiled innumerable stories of torture and abuse. She built on the civil strife between Mau Mau and loyalists and, largely for the first time, exposed the plight of Kikuyu women. Her findings were so controversial at the time, that some corners of academia argued that she based her research on hearsay oral histories and made much of the book up. Lawsuits filed by Mau Mau and Kikuyu survivors since the time of her book's publishing forced the declassification of many documents, thereby vindicating her work to skeptics.¹⁹

The second groundbreaking book of 2005 was David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. Like Elkins, Anderson exposed the British side of the conflict. He based his research methods on the colonial court testimonies, documents, and execution orders filled by the British for convicted Mau Mau fighters. Just like the outrageous gulag system, he argues Britain also strayed from standard practices in the realm of judicial capital punishment. According to court records used by Anderson, 1,090 Kikuyu received the death penalty based on guilty verdicts at trial.²⁰ This detail drove much of Anderson's research. Because of his work, Anderson acted as an expert witness in the lawsuits discussed above.²¹ Both Elkins and Anderson gave voice and agency to the Mau Mau in a new

¹⁸ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, xiv.

¹⁹ Matt Kielty, producer, "Mau Mau," Radiolab (podcast), July 3, 2015, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/mau-mau/>.

²⁰ Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 7.

²¹ Kielty, "Mau Mau."

and refreshing way. Much like the work of Clough, the Kikuyu point of view took a giant leap forward in Mau Mau scholarship.

In the years since the publishing of Elkins and Anderson, Mau Mau scholarship has continued this new trajectory. Three recent authors demonstrate different variations of this trend. Daniel Branch's *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* brings to the fore the Kikuyu loyalist.²² While the Mau Mau Uprising was, on the surface, a rebellion against the British, this third group created an internecine struggle within the Kikuyu community. While many loyalists did actively fight on behalf of the British, some earned the title simply for refusing to support the Mau Mau. Branch's work expertly details the role and struggle of this sometimes-overlooked party. He also moves beyond the Uprising itself and explains how political elites used these divisions to consolidate their power in an independent Kenya.²³

The second recent contribution comes from Myles Osborne. In the spirit of Clough, he compiles Mau Mau memoirs, but instead of using multiple authors, he focuses on one individual. *The Life and Times of General China: Mau Mau and the End of Empire in Kenya* uses the various writings of Waruhiu Itote to tell Kenya's story of decolonization.²⁴ Itote was a prolific writer and proud member of the Mau Mau. Osborne includes an abridged version of Itote's autobiography, a transcript of his interrogation and trial, his letters as a political figure in the independent Kenyan government, and a eulogy from his funeral. In addition to these primary

²² Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War, and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²³ Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya*, 52.

²⁴ Myles Osborne, *The Life and Times of General China: Mau Mau and the End of Empire in Kenya*, ed. Myles Osborne (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publications, 2015).

sources, Osborne provides historical analysis of the Mau Mau, Itote, and the documents surrounding him. Though this is an edited volume of mostly primary sources, it makes an important contribution to the broader historiography by providing a window into the life of a man who played a large role on both sides of Kenyan independence. Historians of Mau Mau and Kenya should value highly works such as this for the insights they can provide.

The third work is by Nick van der Bijl. His work titled *The Mau Mau Rebellion: The Emergency in Kenya 1952-1956* focuses on the shooting war from the point of view of the British soldier.²⁵ While much of the scholarship discusses the military aspects of the conflict, few delve below the ranks of the senior staff and officers. Van der Bijl offers a comprehensive work that illuminates this otherwise overlooked aspect of life during the Uprising. In many ways, his work brings Mau Mau scholarship full circle. It began with the official top down British perspective and, overtime, transitioned into the Mau Mau perspective. This latest contribution returns to the British point of view, but with a bottom up twist. These three recent works demonstrate the latest trends and methods of Mau Mau scholarship and offer great opportunities for future work.

This thesis builds on these recent trends in Mau Mau historiography. It transcends the conventional scholarship on the homemade guns by providing a systematic and comprehensive account of the motivations for fashioning the guns as well as an analysis of their technical and mechanical dimensions thus contributing to the broader literature of the history of technology.²⁶

²⁵ Nick van der Bijl, *Mau Mau Rebellion: The Emergency in Kenya 1952-1956* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2017).

²⁶ Examples of works that deal with the history of technology, and specifically firearms in Africa, are Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measures of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the*

In addition, the Second World War had great effects on Mau Mau leadership. Veterans of that war fought on all sides of the Uprising and they add to the richness of the narrative. Therefore, this work also contributes to the historiography of military and veterans' history.²⁷ As the very individuals who dealt with the homemade guns firsthand, the words of Mau Mau adherents and British soldiers strongly influenced this work. Thus, this thesis contributes to the historiography of memory as well.²⁸

Sources and Methodology

The foundational primary sources of this research are the homemade firearms themselves. Currently the Imperial War Museum in London houses eleven such examples. The 1st Battalion of the Royal East Kent Regiment, better known as the Buffs, obtained most of these examples during the Emergency. The guns came to the United Kingdom as war trophies and now reside in vast firearms collection maintained by the IWM. During the summer of 2018, I visited the IWM and inspected eight of these eleven examples. The remaining three are on display at the IWM's Manchester location. Fortunately, the museum's website has all eleven weapons as digital exhibits.²⁹ In addition to images of the weapons themselves, the site offers a description,

Nineteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and William K. Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁷ Examples of works that deal with military and veterans' history, and specifically African veterans, are Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006); H. Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1956); and Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans And France In The Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁸ Examples of works that deal with the history of memory, and specifically African memory, are Robert Buijtenhuijs, *Mau Mau Twenty Years After: The Myth and the Survivors* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1973) and Marshall S. Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, & Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

²⁹ "FIR 11303," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036461>.

historical context, and, when available, how the weapon came into the possession of the IWM. During my time with the guns, I took numerous photographs, measurements, and detailed notes regarding their composition and functionality.

While at the IWM, I also spent time in their reading room sifting through various documents held in their archives. These included private papers compiled by individuals who spent time in Kenya and interacted with Mau Mau. Their files contained notes, manuscripts, and declassified intelligence reports. There were also propaganda magazines published by the British that depicted brutal attacks by Mau Mau in graphic detail. Like Elkins, I saw little to suggest any British wrongdoing, save a few vague newspaper clippings and a handwritten letter from a detainee. Some of these private papers have corresponding oral histories, like that of Terrance John Image. His and other oral histories are available on the IWM's website.³⁰ Listening to these firsthand accounts of British soldiers and civil servants amplified the detail of the primary documents. For example, Image, as the commandant of a Mau Mau detention camp, was the addressee of the detainee letter mentioned above. During his oral history, Image discussed this letter and others like it.³¹ This firsthand research at the IWM was invaluable to this thesis.

On the other hand, similar oral histories or private papers of former Mau Mau are not so readily available. In order to overcome this gap in primary sources, I relied on memoirs written by Mau Mau adherents. In this way, the voice of the Mau Mau is present throughout this work.

³⁰ "Image, Terrance John (Oral History)," Imperial War Museum, Accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80011939>.

³¹ Terrance John Image, interview by Conrad Wood, August 21, 1991, reel 1, Terrance John Image Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

I used Mau Mau memoirs to address their reasons for the need and construction of the guns, to analyze the relationship of the Second World War and Mau Mau leadership, to determine the homemade guns effects on Mau Mau tactics, and to place the guns within Mau Mau collective memory. In order to check the bias of these writers, I regularly balanced their narratives against academic secondary sources.

Organization

The homemade guns of the Mau Mau are an important and, heretofore, overlooked aspect of the Mau Mau Uprising. In order to argue their importance, this thesis contains three chapters of supporting evidence and analysis. Chapter One contains two sections. The first discusses the relationship between the Second World War and the Mau Mau's logistical ability to develop and field the homemade guns. The second section argues why the Mau Mau saw a need to develop homemade guns. Chapter Two also contains two parts. Part one details the technological aspects of the homemade guns. The second part of the chapter analyzes the dichotomy that existed between the tactical and strategic effectiveness of the guns. Finally, Chapter Three endeavors to find a balance in the historical memory of the homemade guns.

CHAPTER ONE: WORLD WAR II VETERANS IN MAU MAU AND THE NEED FOR HOMEMADE GUNS

The colonial regime in which the Mau Mau movement existed influenced its development and course. The goals of the movement are apparent in the name the fighters chose for their army, The Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). Kenya's experience as a British Colony in the Second World War and the difficulty of acquiring firearms during the Uprising shaped the Mau Mau movement's ability to achieve its goals. This chapter contains two parts. The first discusses the African, Kenyan, and Kikuyu experiences in the Second World War. I argue that the support roles that most Mau Mau veterans of World War II filled positioned them well to develop homemade guns during their anticolonial struggle.. The second part of this chapter focuses on why there were not enough manufactured guns within Kenya to arm the KLFA. The Mau Mau attempted to overcome this need by developing homemade firearms. Additionally, I argue the prominence and importance of the homemade guns to the Mau Mau movement.

Part One: Kikuyu Kenyan Veterans of World War II and Mau Mau

The Second World War exacerbated the process of decolonization in Africa. To understand the Mau Mau and their homemade firearms, an account of the Kikuyu Kenyan experience in the Second World War is necessary. The following section attempts to do so by broadly explaining the role of Africa and Africans in World War II; the use of the King's African Rifles (KAR), including a case study of the 11th Kenya Battalion; and an analysis of the support role of most Kikuyu Kenyans during World War II. In doing so, I argue that the support role

filled by Kikuyu in World War II had a greater effect on the development of homemade firearms during the Mau Mau Uprising than the rare instance of frontline training and combat in World War II.

Africa and Africans in the Fighting of the Second World War

When global war broke out for a second time in the twentieth century, Africa was a battleground as well as a source of men and materiel for the conflict. In some ways, the Second World War began in Africa before any fighting took place in Europe. In October of 1935, Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, known to Europeans as Abyssinia.³² During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Italy colonized a few African territories. In 1896, they attempted and failed to colonize Ethiopia. Italy's second campaign in 1935 was a brutal reprisal for its defeat four decades earlier. Due to Ethiopia's proximity to British East African colonies, Great Britain quickly developed a response to Italian aggression. They established East Africa Command, based in Nairobi, and then realigned existing colonial forces to repel a potential Italian invasion from Ethiopia.³³ Italy held Ethiopia until the British, using their African colonial forces, and patriotic Ethiopians, led by Haile Selassie, removed the Italians and restored Ethiopian sovereignty in 1941.³⁴

Other African regions became embroiled in conflict as the Second World War progressed. North African territories, held by France and Great Britain, entered the war when Germany

³² Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2012), 379; David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer Inc, 2010), 7.

³³ Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 172-3.

³⁴ Shillington, *History of Africa*, 380; Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 7.

invaded France in 1940. When Paris fell in June of 1940, Brazzaville in French Equatorial Africa, became the capital of Free France in exile. It was from this location that the Free French amassed troops to march north into Vichy North Africa.³⁵ By 1941, the German army moved into the Vichy French Territories of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Germany also sent troops to Libya to support their Italian allies. In 1942, Allied Forces, including colonial troops, pressed from Egypt in the east and Morocco in the west to squeeze the Axis powers out of North Africa.³⁶ By 1943, over half of the soldiers in the Free French Army were *tirailleurs*, colonial troops recruited from French West and Equatorial Africa.³⁷

In all the campaigns in Africa, Africans themselves played important roles. Over a million troops came from the continent, fighting under the flags of their respective imperial powers.³⁸ Great Britain alone used over 500,000 African troops in the British army to fill combat and support roles.³⁹ They forced thousands more African civilians to produce food and war materiel for the front. In Nigeria, the British forced 18,000 laborers to work in tin mines.⁴⁰ In Kenya, the British installed a conscripted labor force that, by 1943, totaled over 18,000 civilians.⁴¹ White settlers in Kenya took advantage of British colonial policy during World War II to force more Kikuyu off of ancestral lands and into reserves. When the Mau Mau rebelled in the years after World War II, the reserves served as fruitful recruitment grounds for their cause.⁴²

³⁵ Shillington, *History of Africa*, 384.

³⁶ Shillington, *History of Africa*, 382-384.

³⁷ Shillington, *History of Africa*, 384; Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 6.

³⁸ Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 6-8.

³⁹ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 180.

⁴⁰ Shillington, *History of Africa*, 385.

⁴¹ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 198.

⁴² Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 200.

Beyond the continent, Africans served in combat and support roles in the European, Middle East, and Asian theaters of war.⁴³ In Burma, for example, Great Britain sent three African divisions, totaling 120,000 men, to fight the Japanese.⁴⁴ Of these three divisions, it is the 11th East African Division (11th E. A.) that is most pertinent to this thesis, due to the roles of members from subordinate units on both sides of the Mau Mau conflict. The 11th E. A. formed in 1943, out of the 11th and 12th African Divisions. These two divisions were heavily involved in the Abyssinian Campaign that removed Italian forces from Ethiopia.⁴⁵ The 11th E. A. primarily consisted of troops drawn from Kenya, Uganda, Nyasaland (modern day Malawi), and Tanganyika (modern day Tanzania). The backbone of the 11th E. A. was the KAR Regiment. Within the regiment were battalions formed along colonial lines, i.e. the 11th Kenya Battalion KAR, the 26th Tanganyika Battalion KAR, and the 44th Uganda Battalion KAR. At the brigade level, though, the units mixed. Per the above examples, these three battalions formed the 25th East African Brigade. The 11th E. A. had three such brigades, divisional artillery, engineers, and various support units.⁴⁶

The King's African Rifles

The KAR formed in 1902. Originally, it was comprised of six battalions, five of which came from pre-existing units. The British enforced a color line from the inception of the KAR.

⁴³ Theresa Krininger, *Africa in World War II: the forgotten veterans*, July 5, 2015, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/africa-in-world-war-ii-the-forgotten-veterans/a-18437531-0>.

⁴⁴ Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 8.

⁴⁵ *East, West and South Africa 1930-1947: East Africa 1940-1947*, British Military History, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.britishmilitaryhistory.co.uk/docs-e-w-s-africa-1930-1947-east-africa-east-africa-1940-1947/>; Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 189-92; Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 173-75.

⁴⁶ *11th East Africa Division*, Burma Star Association, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.burmastar.org.uk/stories/11th-east-african-division/>; Fazan, *Colonial Kenya Observed*, 176-7.

Officers were white Europeans and troops were black Africans. As time went on, the British Army allowed Africans to fill some non-commissioned and junior officer ranks.⁴⁷ The initial purpose of the KAR was colonial security.⁴⁸ Battalions formed based on colonial territory and, only on rare occasions, did any mixing occur. Both colonial administrators and tribal chiefs preferred this model. This practice remained in place up through the 1950s.⁴⁹ The KAR saw action in both World Wars and fought against the Mau Mau.

At the start of the Second World War, the KAR comprised seven battalions, which contained 2,900 men. As rifle battalions, their chief role still focused on colonial security and, after 1935, maintaining a sharp eye on Italian activity in Ethiopia. By the wars end, the KAR grew to forty-three battalions of over 323,000 African soldiers that served all over the globe.⁵⁰ The KAR increased to such levels due to a massive recruiting campaign. For the most part, Britain did not use blatant conscription to fill the ranks of the KAR.⁵¹ Instead, recruiters used coercive means to fill recruit quotas. The use of coercion over conscription allowed Great Britain to deny allegations of force to fill the ranks. Coercion tactics included pressuring tribal chiefs, the lure of adventure and money, the use of propaganda broadcasts and films, and offering the chance to prove one's manhood.⁵² With the exception of soliciting tribal chiefs, these recruiting tactics were more severe versions of those used to recruit white soldiers into the

⁴⁷ Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank and File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999), 105-110.

⁴⁸ *The King's African Rifles*, Land Forces of Britain, The Empire and Commonwealth, October 7, 2006, accessed February 26, 2020,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20071015190456/http://www.regiments.org/regiments/africaeast/regts/kar.htm>; Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 15-16.

⁴⁹ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 478; Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 186.

⁵⁰ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 181; Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 38 and 44.

⁵¹ Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 43-44.

⁵² Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 45.

British army. When the British used outright conscription, it targeted educated and literate Africans to fill technical positions within the KAR. This demographic was less inclined to join the army due to coercive means. Educated and literate Kenyans had greater opportunity in civilian life as compared to the less educated and illiterate. As previously mentioned, the British relied on conscription to create a massive African civilian labor force.⁵³

The 11th Kenya Battalion of the King's African Rifles

In 1946, the 11th Kenya Battalion KAR (11th KAR) published a unit history. The experiences of this battalion provide a historical basis for the stories of glory and valor that many Mau Mau generals claimed as their own. The battalion formed in early 1941. Recruits from Kenya formed most of the companies, though there was some supplementation of recruits from Uganda.⁵⁴ The 11th KAR first saw action when they quelled fighting in Somalia after the defeat of the Italians in 1941.⁵⁵ During 1942, they returned to Kenya for further training. It was at this time that the 11th KAR upgraded from a group of rifle companies to a fully equipped front-line battalion. This meant the addition of mortar and machine gun sections, as well as specialist units.⁵⁶ Future Mau Mau leaders claimed this training as their first exposure to real weapons and tactics. In mid-1943, the 11th KAR sailed to Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka).⁵⁷ Ceylon served as a staging and training area for their eventual deployment to the Burma Front.

⁵³ Killingray, *Fighting for Britain*, 45.

⁵⁴ T. H. Birkbeck, "11th King's African Rifles History," General T. H. Birkbeck Papers, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.

⁵⁵ Birkbeck, 11th KAR History, 2.

⁵⁶ Birkbeck, 11th KAR History, 4.

⁵⁷ Birkbeck, 11th KAR History, 6.

The Allied goal in Burma was to wrest control of the area from the Japanese and restore an overland route to China.⁵⁸ While in Burma, the 11th KAR encountered the enemy several times. According to the unit history, their first major engagement occurred at a place called Habari Hill. During a patrol of the area, a patrol from B Company came across an enemy position. The company sent additional patrols to support them. A firefight ensued as the Japanese withdrew to a stronger position, leaving behind a weapon and supply cache. Over the next few days, as A and C Companies joined B, the 11th KAR cleared out the Japanese and renamed the area Jambo Hill.⁵⁹

The patrols, ambushes, counter-ambushes, and defensive tactics used by the 11th KAR to defeat the Japanese on Jambo Hill were, in their nature, the same as what the Mau Mau forest fighters used on Mount Kenya and the Aberdares. But how many future Mau Mau trained and fought as infantrymen in the Second World War?

Kikuyu and WWII Support Roles

Waruhiu Itote, the future Mau Mau General China, was a member of the 36th Tanganyika Battalion, KAR. He too served in Burma; however, not as an infantryman. Despite his own boasts, he was a mess steward, likely attached to the 36th KAR from the East African Military Labor Service (EAMLS).⁶⁰ Due to the nature of jungle warfare, though, it is entirely possible he

⁵⁸ Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 351.

⁵⁹ Birkbeck, 11th KAR History, 11-13.

⁶⁰ Timothy Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks: Colonial Military Service and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army in Kenya's National Imagination," *Journal of African History* 58, no. 2 (2017), 298. According to Parsons, Itote coming from EAMLS explains how a Kikuyu Kenyan was a member of a Tanganyika battalion. Unit cohesion was unlikely to be negatively affected because, on paper at least, a mess steward would not be on the front line with the regular infantrymen.

experienced combat, as he claims in his memoir. He discusses the ferocity of the enemy, the spirit of men in combat, and the harsh jungle terrain.⁶¹ His experience alludes to an important, and according to Timothy Parsons, overlooked aspect of Mau Mau veterans of World War II. Few Kikuyu, and even fewer Mau Mau leaders, trained and fought as infantrymen in the Second World War. Most of Mau Mau veterans of World War II served in non-combatant support units.⁶²

The reason for the lack of Kikuyu as infantrymen goes back to British recruiting practices within Kenya. Two race-based factors framed the British recruitment of Africans in Kenya. The first dealt with white Kenyan leadership. Kenya was a settler colony and, as such, the maintenance of white rule was paramount. British settlers were concerned with military-trained Africans, especially the Kikuyu, within their midst. It was within the Kikuyu ancestral lands that most white Europeans settled. Because of Kikuyu proximity to the white population, colonial leadership pushed for the recruitment of Kikuyu and other nearby tribes into labor and support units.⁶³ The second factor dealt with the British belief in the colonial paradigm of martial races. This was the belief that certain tribes and peoples were predisposed to warfare and others were not. The British military believed that unlike the Kamba people, for example, the Kikuyu were not of the build or disposition for combat. In addition, many Kikuyu were literate and educated in colonial schools. This meant the British saw the Kikuyu as well suited to clerical and logistical duties.⁶⁴ While Parson's work goes a long way to dispel the myth of the World War II

⁶¹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 24.

⁶² Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks," 297.

⁶³ Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks," 296.

⁶⁴ Parsons, "Mau Mau's Army of Clerks," 296.

infantrymen turned Mau Mau warrior, it also helps explain the occurrence of homemade firearms.

Pulling the trigger of a homemade firearm at close range does not depend on extensive tactical military training. Their conception and construction are the remarkable aspects of these weapons. The ability to field such a firearm relies on the resources to build and distribute it. Gun makers constructed homemade firearms from pieces of local infrastructure. A major necessity for funneling these parts from urban areas to gun factories in the forests were individuals trained in logistics. Once the parts arrived, skilled mechanics were necessary to design and construct the guns. The Mau Mau relied on logistics once again to distribute these guns to the fighters in the field. All the while, administrative oversight helped ensure organization and accountability. Logistics, mechanics, and administration were the support positions that educated Kikuyu individuals filled during the Second World War.

As members of the EAMLS and the African Auxiliary Pioneer Corps (AAPC), Mau Mau leaders trained in the unsung skills of warfare. Some, like Itote, found themselves attached to front line units, such as the 11th and 36th KAR. In the process, the terrain and the enemy blurred the line between combatant and noncombatant. In the jungle, without proper infantry training, they developed some ability to survive and fight. Other Mau Mau leaders who served in the EAMLS and the AAPC stayed within Kenya. In the process, they gained knowledge of the British military's standards and practices. This was invaluable knowledge to have during the Uprising, as the Mau Mau fought the British army and the KAR. No doubt, many Mau Mau fighters exaggerated their experiences in World War II to gain prestige and leadership roles. Whatever experience they gained, glorious or unsung, helped in their struggle for land and

freedom. More specifically, though, their training in the support aspects of war greatly facilitated the Mau Mau's ability to produce homemade firearms.

Part Two: The Need for Homemade Guns

It was in the immediate post-World War II years that the Mau Mau movement began in Kenya. Their numbers were small in the beginning, which meant theft or illegal purchase of firearms was enough to arm Mau Mau fighters. Henry Kahinga Wachanga, who served as a Mau Mau General Secretary from 1952 to 1955, describes such procurement methods in his 1975 autobiography. As Wachanga recalls, Mau Mau raiders targeted the shops and homes of non-Africans. The Mau Mau then funneled the stolen weapons to the forests for disbursement among the troops.⁶⁵ Waruhiu Itote, better known by his nom de guerre General China, boasted of stealing seven guns by himself prior to 1952.⁶⁶ However, a few factors developed as the Uprising went on that made such methods insufficient. The growth of the Mau Mau movement, the effective counterinsurgency tactics of the British, and the lack of an outside state sponsor to supply weapons challenged the Mau Mau ability to arm KLFA fighters. This section will focus on those factors, as well as argue the prominence and importance of the homemade guns used to overcome such challenges.

Much of the specific information about these homemade guns comes from the autobiography and interrogation of Itote. As a general, he was a ranking member of the Mau Mau movement. Itote commanded KLFA in the Mount Kenya and Nyeri sectors, second only to

⁶⁵ H. K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 24.

⁶⁶ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 98.

the supreme military leader of the movement, Dedan Kimethi.⁶⁷ As a young man, Itote fought for the British in World War II as part of the 36th King's African Rifles (KAR). Stationed in Tanganyika (present day Tanzania), the unit deployed to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) for training. Itote saw combat in Burma, as the KAR was integral to the Allied effort in expelling the Japanese from the British colony.⁶⁸ According to Itote, it was his time serving abroad that began his questioning of colonial rule. In the beginning of his autobiography, *Mau Mau General*, Itote recalls two seminal conversations in his life. The first occurred with a white English soldier. They talked of nationalism and the war effort. The English soldier suggested that Itote reconsider his motivations for fighting with the British to secure their empire. The second conversation was with an African American soldier. They talked of Christianity and of identity. Itote claims he had many more conversations like these during the war, but these two talks caused him to begin identifying as a Kenyan and opening his eyes to a wider world.⁶⁹ This foundation helped to place Itote in a position of leadership within the movement and as an authority on its homemade guns.

Not Enough Guns to Go Around

According to Itote, it was the growth of their movement and the commencement of attacks on Europeans that drove the demand for guns beyond the black market and theft.⁷⁰ In addition to growth of the Mau Mau, the weapons supply within the cities began to dry up.

⁶⁷ Ian Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China: Mau Mau and the End of Empire in Kenya*, ed. Myles Osborne (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publications, 2015), 148.

⁶⁸ Myles Osborne, "Introduction," in *The Life and Times of General China: Mau Mau and the End of Empire in Kenya*, ed. Myles Osborne (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publications, 2015), 11.

⁶⁹ Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967), 9-15.

⁷⁰ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 97-98.

Colonial government forces recognized how the Mau Mau obtained precision weapons and made efforts to clamp down on the sources. In round up operations, such as Operation Jock Scott, colonial government forces casted a wide net and pulled Mau Mau leadership and any suspected supporters off the street.⁷¹ The colonial government also set up checkpoints in order to stop and search anyone suspected of Mau Mau sympathies. The British did not exclude Kenyan women from these tactics. Indeed, many Kikuyu women were members of the Mau Mau Passive Wing.⁷² This was the Mau Mau support element that worked in urban areas and the reserves. In addition to smuggling weapons, the Passive Wing moved information, food, and other supplies to the Militant Wing, the fighters in the forest.⁷³ To effectively search those suspected of being Mau Mau, the British enlisted European and African women into the Kenya Police Reserve.⁷⁴

Another constraint on the supply of precision firearms was the lack of external support for the Mau Mau movement. Within the context of the Cold War, it was common for rebellions to ally themselves to larger ideologies. In doing so, they garnered favor from the two global superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Mau Mau was an exception to this standard. There are several reasons for this isolation. First off, this was a rebellion in a British colony in Africa. Because of long-standing political relationships, the U.S. feared that supporting such a rebellion would undermine British colonial authority. Ebere Nwaubani, in his book *The United States and Decolonization in West Africa, 1950-1960*, argues that the United

⁷¹ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 48.

⁷² Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 51.

⁷³ *A Handbook on Anti-Mau Mau Operations* (St. Petersburg: Hailer Publishing, 2006), 3.

⁷⁴ E. Montgomery Campbell, "Women Against the Mau Mau," Mrs. E. Montgomery Campbell Papers, Imperial War Museum, London, 2.

States had a policy of non-interference in the affairs of the European colonial powers in Africa.⁷⁵ Secondly, even though certain Kenyan leaders spent time in the Soviet Union, the Russians viewed the Mau Mau “as an alienated and backward tribal uprising.”⁷⁶ This was also prior to the Khrushchev policy of supporting all African liberation struggles. This policy came into effect in 1961, when Kenya was already on the path to a negotiated independence from Great Britain.⁷⁷ British authorities were aware that the Mau Mau enjoyed no Soviet support and did their best to suppress any rumors to the contrary. It was in the British interest to maintain the perception that this was a domestic dispute instigated by tribal upstarts. Thus, the British decision to call the situation in Kenya an emergency and not a rebellion, revolt, or war. In their opinion, increased global attention or involvement could only exacerbate a tenuous situation. When it came to the supply of arms, the Public Relations Office in Nairobi rebuffed all claims and rumors of Soviet supply.⁷⁸ The Mau Mau also could not rely on supply from neighboring African states and territories. At the time, Ethiopia was the only independent African state adjacent to Kenya. According to General China, he sent teams to smuggle weapons and ammunition into Kenya from Ethiopia, but these attempts were perilous and often unsuccessful. Ethiopian border troops engaged these teams, costing lives and time.⁷⁹ The remaining territory surrounding Kenya comprised of colonies controlled by Great Britain and Italy. The aforementioned factors, combined with Mau Mau oathing procedures and brutal tactics, isolated the movement from

⁷⁵ Ebere Nwaubani, *United States and Decolonization in West Africa, 1950-1960* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), xviii.

⁷⁶ Andrew Mumford, *The Counter-Insurgency Myth: The British Experience of Irregular Warfare* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 68.

⁷⁷ Mumford, *The Counter-Insurgency Myth*, 68.

⁷⁸ A. S. Cleary, “The Myth of Mau Mau in Its International Context,” *African Affairs* 89, no. 355 (April 1990): 240-241.

⁷⁹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 76.

external support. It was in this environment that General China and other Mau Mau leaders began to develop homemade firearms.

Prominence and Importance of the Homemade Guns

In January 1954, General China led some of his men to a weapons cache in order to rearm. Prior to obtaining the weapons, colonial police and KAR troops engaged this contingent of Mau Mau. Shot during the firefight, China had little choice but to surrender to the KAR troops.⁸⁰ Shortly after his capture, China underwent a lengthy interrogation conducted by Assistant Superintendent of Police Ian Henderson. Henderson was uniquely qualified to perform this duty. Though he was a European by birth, his parents raised him in Nyeri. As a youth, he became fluent in the language of the Kikuyu.⁸¹ During the Uprising, he worked with Special Branch. His chief mission was to infiltrate Mau Mau gangs and persuade them to turn to the side of the Government. His interrogation of General China led to the greatest understanding of Mau Mau movements and organization that the British would have during the conflict.

Per his interrogation, China claimed his factory produced an average of forty-two rifles per week at the time of his capture.⁸² Based on this rate of production and additional information divulged by China, Henderson put the total number of homemade guns in the Mount Kenya region at 1,250. This estimation placed homemade guns at seventy-five per cent of all Mau Mau firearms in the area.⁸³ Indeed, one should avoid applying these numbers directly to all the areas

⁸⁰ Osborne, "Introduction," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 19.

⁸¹ Osborne, "Introduction," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 20; Henderson, *The Hunt for Kimathi*, 36-37.

⁸² Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 173.

⁸³ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 181.

that the Mau Mau operated. This high percentage does suggest, however, that homemade guns were by far the most prominent firearm issued to the Mau Mau fighter.

It is clear from the source material that Mau Mau fighters, such as General China, were extremely proud of their achievement in arms production. From the perspective of Mau Mau leadership, the homemade guns were necessary in order to offer any level of resistance to the British. On the other side of the conflict, though, it appears that a change in the British perception of these guns has occurred over time. Primary sources from the time and immediately after the Uprising show an appreciation for these weapons, at least for their lethality if not their ingenuity. Indeed, the British featured these weapons in anti-Mau Mau propaganda.⁸⁴

Since the end of hostilities, non-Kenyan writers overlooked the weapons. They were no longer tools of war but labeled as ceremonial and symbolic.⁸⁵ The first works on the topic of Mau Mau focused on the British end of the struggle. Indeed, many of these books came out during the Emergency itself. Leigh's *In the Shadow of the Mau Mau*, McDougall's *African Turmoil*, and Stoneham's *Out of Barbarism* all paint a picture of African savagery and British civility. Works, such as these, helped to establish the early narrative of Great Britain crushing the rebellion of the Mau Mau and establishing the required level of civilization for an independent Kenya. The homemade guns do not make any real appearance in these works. Potential reasons for this could be a lack of awareness by the authors or a willingness to overlook any level of skill in their adversary.

⁸⁴ *Mau Mau: A Pictorial Record* (Nairobi, English Press LTD), Major W. A. F. Maynard Collection, Imperial War Museum, London; *The Mau Mau in Kenya*, Major W. A. F. Maynard Collection, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁸⁵ "FIR 11303," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036461>.

The homemade firearms gained prominence in British writing with the debut of biographies and autobiographies of individuals who fought the Mau Mau. The most prominent of such works is the autobiography of Ian Henderson. In addition to his interrogation of General China, Henderson pursued Dedan Kimathi, the military leader of the Mau Mau. This search is the focal point of his book, coauthored by Philip Goodhart, entitled *The Hunt for Kimathi*. Henderson had a keen awareness and combatant's appreciation for these guns. During his pursuit of men like China and Kimathi, he engaged with Mau Mau fighters. On at least one occasion, he received a gunshot wound in his left arm.⁸⁶ Statistically speaking, this bullet very likely came from a homemade gun. In a more peaceful interaction with a group of Mau Mau fighters, Henderson offered a detailed description and analysis of these homemade firearms. "Some were homemade guns which had been manufactured with an undisputed ingenuity from length of piping, bicycle frames, and scraps of wire and metal they had found lying about the countryside, but these were often more dangerous for the man who fired them than their target."⁸⁷ This single sentence says a great deal. First, Henderson acknowledges the ingenuity of these guns. He used similar terms previously heard from General China. This is at least one example of a European appreciating these African firearms. Second, he corroborates China's description of materials used to make the guns. This suggests that the components were recognizable in their new form. Last, Henderson reaffirms their danger to the shooter. Potentially, this meeting took place early on, before the weapons became safer. Another, more likely, possibility is that the stigma of danger remained attached to these weapons despite improvements.

⁸⁶ Henderson, *The Hunt for Kimathi*, 40.

⁸⁷ Henderson, *The Hunt for Kimathi*, 109.

Four years after the Emergency ended, another book written about a British officer whose mission was to infiltrate the Mau Mau debuted. Entitled *Bwana Drum*, it told the story of David Drummond. The author, Dennis Holman, conducted extensive interviews with Drummond and his associates in order to write this book. Holman tells the stories of gun factory raids, provides a complete description of homemade guns, and states that the rank and file Mau Mau fighter carried a homemade gun. Indeed, it was this type of weapon that they most associated with their movement, allowing them to identify as a true forest fighter.⁸⁸ In addition, Holman makes it clear that Drummond regarded the importance of homemade guns when he sent out teams to infiltrate Mau Mau units. A key aspect to the team blending in were the improvised guns. Drummond recognized that a lack of homemade guns would give them away as outsiders.⁸⁹

Both works provide excellent firsthand accounts of engagements with the Mau Mau. In many respects, they are the British versions of Itote's autobiography. In that regard, it is plausible to assume some hyperbole and exaggeration of events. Envisioning these works as a Venn diagram, though, helps to elucidate some potential truths. All three demonstrate great respect for homemade guns as weapons. There is no discussion of them as ceremonial pieces. Both Itote and Henderson make extremely similar descriptions of these weapons. In Holman and Itote, the pride the fighters have for these guns is apparent. In many ways, the homemade gun is the Mau Mau calling card. Such commonalities make clear the prominence and importance of homemade guns as tools of war in the Mau Mau Uprising.

⁸⁸ Holman, *Bwana Drum*, 34, 50, 84.

⁸⁹ Holman, *Bwana Drum*, 99.

The homemade guns manufactured by the Mau Mau are an important example of agency on behalf of an oppressed people. Those committed to the Mau Mau cause found a unique way to obtain items that they otherwise could not. They did not have an external state sponsor to supply their cause with arms and aid. The firearm restrictions in place in Colonial Kenya effectively disarmed them before there was a rebellion. Once in a state of emergency, the regulations tightened further, effectively shutting down the black market. Resorting to theft did not cover the gap. Where similar initiatives might have crumbled, the Mau Mau found another way. They rapidly developed and constructed their own firearms. Production was large enough that these guns became the primary firearms of the KLF fighter. As such, these weapons helped to dictate both Mau Mau and British tactics. They also hold an important place in Mau Mau memory as a unique example of improvised weaponry.

CHAPTER TWO: MAU MAU HOMEMADE GUN TECHNOLOGY AND TACTICS

The Mau Mau created a unique weapon in their homemade guns. They used local resources to source parts and constructed the guns in factories deep in the forest. Once in the hands of Mau Mau fighters, the homemade guns influenced the type of tactics employed by KLFA. The following chapter contains two sections. The first section details the technological aspects of the homemade firearms, namely their sourcing, construction, and mechanics. The section also details how the Mau Mau overcame ammunition and explosives shortfalls. The second section focuses on the chronic precision firearms shortage during the Uprising. It argues that this shortage drove Mau Mau operations to procure more weapons and, in the process, their homemade guns tactically influenced how the Mau Mau carried out these operations.

Part One: Homemade Gun Technology

In order to understand how the Mau Mau used their homemade guns, it is important to explain the technology behind the guns. Using Mau Mau logistical channels, gun parts traveled to factories in the foothills and forests. Within the factories, engineers constructed and tested homemade firearms. This section details the methods the Mau Mau used to source parts for their homemade guns. It also describes the construction process and the mechanical operation of the guns.

Sourcing, Construction, and Mechanics

According to General China's autobiography, in early 1953 the idea to construct firearms occurred to him and his comrades.⁹⁰ Because even the parts to make firearms were so difficult to come by, these gun makers looked to resources more readily at hand. China described the sourcing for these parts in the following way:

The stock itself was fashioned from the wood of the *Muthiti* or *Thirikwa* tree, which never cracks under any weather conditions. The barrel, generally made from water pipe, was fastened to this, and a smaller pipe or piece of iron, one which would fit smoothly within the barrel, was used as a hammer. The hammer was released by a mechanism built out of a barbed wire spring and a piece of car or bicycle tube.⁹¹

The components of these homemade guns came from sources readily found in Kenya's natural and urban environments. Itote also speaks to the ingenuity of these gun makers. From easily found items, the manufacture of rifles, shotguns, and pistols took place. Though rudimentary in their parts, combining them created a simple to use and lethal weapon.

The examples of these homemade guns housed at the IWM in London corroborate China's description (See Figure 1).⁹² They present a good cross section of the types of firearms made by the Mau Mau. They all feature a hard-wooden stock and a smooth bore barrel made of water or gas pipe. The seven rifles inspected have an average overall length of 91.14 cm. The average barrel length is 44 cm. All but two fire with a "sling-shot" method. That is to say, the operator pulls a bolt or firing pin back against a spring or rubber strap and releases the pin to fire the round. Most contain a feature to hold a loaded round in place. This is typically a metal clip

⁹⁰ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 103.

⁹¹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 103.

⁹² "FIR 11303," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036461>.

or collar slipped over the end of a cartridge. They all lack sights for target acquisition, thus suggesting a short-range point and shoot type weapon. These limitations go well with Wachanga's descriptions of Mau Mau ambushes.⁹³



Figure 2: Example of simple Mau Mau homemade firearm.⁹⁴

Their inherent danger to the shooter is also apparent. The combination of water pipe and smooth fitting iron may effectively ignite a cartridge, but a misfire was also possible. A misfire can occur when there is an improper seal around the cartridge, allowing gas and fire to escape the firing chamber. Such an event could cause these weapons to explode, potentially injuring the operator. This danger is more apparent when one examines the specific pipes used to construct the barrels. One such example housed at the IWM uses a length of seamed pipe for the barrel.⁹⁵ As opposed to pipe milled as a tube from the start, seamed pipe starts as a flat strip. A metal worker bends the strip into a circular tube and then welds the tube at the seam.⁹⁶ This creates a serviceable water pipe, but a structurally weak gun barrel. It is no surprise that this particular

⁹³ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 73-74.

⁹⁴ Photo taken by author at Imperial War Museum

⁹⁵ "FIR 11302," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036463>.

⁹⁶ "What is Seam Pipe," United Steel Industry, last modified March 5, 2018, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.united-steel.com/newsshow/281.html>.

example has a barrel rupture in the firing chamber. China was extremely aware of these dangers, particularly with the early models. Due to the danger and lack of durability over time, standard practice required that each gun only fire twenty-five rounds.⁹⁷ It is unclear if an armorer refit or destroyed the firearm at this point. One suspects that, due to the severe shortage of firearms, all salvageable parts from a gun were repurposed to a new weapon. The severity of punishment for the loss of a firearm and the Mau Mau's attention to firearm maintenance and cleanliness helps to substantiate this assessment.⁹⁸

After the construction of some prototypes, China opened a gun factory at his headquarters on Mount Kenya. According to his description, he began this operation with twenty engineers and added to their ranks from the companies under his command. An individual named Ruku served as the foreman and production of these guns became rapid and, somewhat, standardized.⁹⁹ Overtime, China increased the number of engineers and innovations took place. The most common innovation was an improved trigger mechanism. The IWM has two examples of such an improvement.¹⁰⁰ Instead of the "sling-shot" method of igniting a round, these examples involve triggers and springs that release the firing pin into the cartridge. In lesser numbers, China's factory developed magazine fed rifles.¹⁰¹ The IWM has a few examples of magazine fed rifles but describes the magazine of at least one as a "dummy." This particular weapon, though, constructed by Simon Peter Ngatia Macharia (General Doctor Russia), may not have been made

⁹⁷ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 183.

⁹⁸ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 183.

⁹⁹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ "FIR 8286," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036466>; "FIR 11307," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30036464>.

¹⁰¹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 104.

under the direction of General China (See Figure 2).¹⁰² The magazine area is lacking a spring to elevate the next round into the firing chamber. It is possible that this weapon once contained a spring that is now missing. This weapon also shows another level of sophistication. It contains a working bolt action with a firing pin. While most of the weapons viewed at the IWM rely on a nail secured by a spring or rubber strap to strike a round, this one conceals the striker in a bolt (See Figure 3). This creates a safer firing mechanism than other examples and demonstrates a sophisticated level of engineering.



Figure 3: Mau Mau homemade firearm, built by General Doctor Russia, with “dummy magazine.”¹⁰³



Figure 4: Mau Mau homemade bolt and firing pin, built by General Doctor Russia.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² “FIR 8286”

¹⁰³ Photo taken by author at Imperial War Museum

¹⁰⁴ Photo taken by author at Imperial War Museum

Of note is the homemade pistol housed at the IWM (See figure 4).¹⁰⁵ General China considered pistols too unsafe to the shooter. On his orders, gunmakers manufactured very few pistols.¹⁰⁶ The pistol held at the IWM is an apparent exception. It is a hybrid of homemade and premanufactured parts. It features a rifled barrel from a .22 caliber pistol. Based on the barrel's style and length, it likely came from a revolver. It has a front sight, unlike the other homemade weapons found at the IWM. The barrel rests on a hinge, which swings open "shotgun style" in order to load a round. The weapon also contains a premanufactured hammer, possibly from the same initial weapon that the barrel came from. The stock and grip are original parts carved from wood. It also features a functioning trigger and safety. One speculates that this piece belonged to a high-ranking individual, as it is a handgun and made from premanufactured parts.



*Figure 5: Mau Mau homemade pistol.*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ "FIR 3528," Imperial War Museum, accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30035910>.

¹⁰⁶ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 183.

¹⁰⁷ Photo taken by author at Imperial War Museum

Ammunition and Explosives

While the Mau Mau saw great success in constructing their own firearms, an obstacle that was more difficult to overcome was the acquisition of ammunition. The design of their homemade guns called for a modern cartridge, just as European manufactured firearms did. After the British declared a state of emergency, if colonial authorities found an African in possession of even a single round of ammunition the punishment was death.¹⁰⁸ Such a danger heightened the scarcity of available ammunition for the Mau Mau to obtain. In the beginning of the Uprising, gunmakers test fired homemade guns before issuing them to fighters. As ammunition scarcity grew, this practice ended.¹⁰⁹

According to China, the Mau Mau could not produce their own ammunition as they did firearms.¹¹⁰ They also did not have the capability to reload spent rifle and pistol casings with new projectiles and propellant. British service rifles of the time primarily fired a .303 caliber rifle round. This made the .303 the most common type of ammunition in the area. Therefore, Mau Mau gun makers endeavored to build firearms to support this caliber round. The British were aware of this fact and placed ammunition security at the highest priority.¹¹¹

Theft and the black market did supply some relief, but the Mau Mau employed a few more creative ways to overcome the ammunition shortage. Primarily, the Mau Mau filed down larger ammunition or packed wadding around smaller ammunition to fit their homemade weapons. The second path they pursued worked best for shotgun ammunition, as it was easier to

¹⁰⁸ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 183.

¹¹⁰ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 105

¹¹¹ *A Handbook on Anti-Mau Mau Operations*, 4.

manipulate without negatively affecting its use. Engineers at China's gun factory would open a shotgun cartridge and remove a portion of its gunpowder within. They would then use it to fill other shotgun shells, making up the difference with crushed glass.¹¹² According to Wachanga, Dedan Kimathi ordered gun makers to mix ground up ivory into their gunpowder. Kimathi claimed that doing so would ensure their rounds fired properly.¹¹³ Perhaps this was superstition, as there does not appear to be a practical reason behind this method. The most elaborate tactic involved spent casings found after a battle. China, and likely other commanders, directed fighters to retrieve these valuable objects. They would then trade the empty brass for fresh ammunition with KAR troops who were sympathetic to the Mau Mau cause. The KAR troops would conceal the transaction by claiming they consumed all their rounds in a firefight and needed to restock on ammunition.¹¹⁴

In addition to manufacturing firearms and modifying ammunition, Mau Mau engineers constructed hand grenades. According to Wachanga, engineers would fill a can with "gunpowder, broken glass, stones, and petrol."¹¹⁵ They then inserted a flammable wick for ignition. Thus, creating a particularly nasty improvised explosive device. It is likely that this device would vary in size. Smaller cans, such as soup or vegetable cans, lent well to hand grenades. Larger cans created larger explosives. Wachanga claims the lethal range of these hand grenades was forty square yards.¹¹⁶ If this is an accurate assessment, these improvised hand grenades were much more lethal than a modern hand grenade. A modern hand grenade has

¹¹² Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 75.

¹¹³ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 42.

¹¹⁴ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 105

¹¹⁵ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 43.

¹¹⁶ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 43.

a lethal range of about 6 square yards.¹¹⁷ It is probably more accurate to describe Wachanga's forty square yard estimate as the weapon's casualty producing radius. The casualty radius is the range in which the density of shrapnel exploding out from the grenade is enough to cause serious injury. Regardless of the specifics, these were lethal weapons used to good effect by the Mau Mau, particularly in tight quarters and ambushes.¹¹⁸

Part Two: How Firearm Acquisition and Homemade Guns Dictated Tactics

As an insurgency, the people and resources the Mau Mau could bring to their cause limited their strategic goals. Plainly, their primary goal aimed at the restoration of Kikuyu land and the independence of Kenya. To understand their enemy, the British military published the *Handbook on Mau Mau Operations*. In it, the British offered their definition of Mau Mau strategic goals, which "is to expand the security threat to an extent which will be beyond the capacity of Government to contain. The strategical aim has the ultimate objective of forcing Government to meet Kikuyu political demands."¹¹⁹ To this end, the Mau Mau movement comprised a Militant Wing and a Political Wing. Initially, the Political Wing led the movement towards its strategic aims. Mau Mau's political leaders laid an ideological foundation in the years leading up to the declaration of the Emergency.¹²⁰ Early colonial government action targeted and then arrested men believed to be Mau Mau political leadership in Operation Jock Scott.

¹¹⁷ "M67 Fragmentation Grenade," Military Analysis Network, last modified January 5, 1999, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/m67.htm>.

¹¹⁸ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 43.

¹¹⁹ *Handbook on Mau Mau Operations*, 3.

¹²⁰ Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1971), 35.

Thus, the heads of the Militant Wing, already operating in the forests, were the only leaders left in the field. From this point on, the Militant Wing began to direct the movement.¹²¹

The *Handbook on Mau Mau Operations* also provides a definition for the tactical goals of the Mau Mau: “to expand its military forces and deploy them to the extent necessary to achieve the strategical aim.”¹²² The following section focuses on the Militant Wing’s ability to prosecute these tactical aims. It argues that the procurement and construction of firearms became a chief focus of Mau Mau tactical operations outside of the forest, therefore limiting the ability to achieve strategic aims overtime. Woven throughout this section are British counter-insurgency efforts to curtail these operations.

Battles for Weapons to Fight More Battles

As early as 1948, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA), a political predecessor to the Mau Mau movement, began stockpiling arms and ammunition. The British banned the KCA at the outset of the Second World War in an attempt to consolidate power within the colony. Post-war, certain members of the KCA saw an armed rebellion as the only way to gain Kenyan independence. KCA members and sympathizers exploited lax ammunition dump security and poorly enforced firearm laws to obtain these items. They acquired nearly 400 firearms and well over 100,000 rounds of ammunition between 1948 and 1952.¹²³ When the British government declared the a state of emergency in 1952, new firearm laws went into effect. At the same time,

¹²¹ Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 42.

¹²² Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 35.

¹²³ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 225-229.

though, the civilian populace increasingly carried firearms for protection. Mau Mau and Kikuyu sympathetic to the movement targeted these people and their homes to obtain firearms.¹²⁴

According to Waruhiu Itote, Mau Mau youths preferred the rural homes of Europeans. At the point of a panga, many Europeans surrendered their firearms without a fight. Itote goes on to brag that he personally acquired seven weapons in 1952 in this manner.¹²⁵ Itote often overemphasizes Mau Mau exploits, but the scenario he describes is plausible. The statistics in Corfield's *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* demonstrate the Mau Mau ability to obtain stolen weapons in the beginning of the Uprising, even if they had a difficult time holding on to them. Government authorities recovered the majority of weapons lost or stolen in any given year during the state of emergency.¹²⁶ Especially after Operation Anvil in 1954, the acquisition of firearms became a major focus of Mau Mau raids.¹²⁷ As Itote states, "At times our shortage of weapons made our activities seem like a series of battles to get weapons to fight more battles."¹²⁸

Raids for weapons and supplies became the chief operational method for Mau Mau fighters. Since they had to leave the forest for a raid, they were also the most dangerous operations to undertake. While in the forest, the Mau Mau were able to move about silently and keep out of sight. This forced British and colonial troops to search the Mau Mau out, often with little success. According to oral histories conducted in the 1980s of former KAR British officers, forest patrols rarely encountered any Mau Mau fighters. In their opinion, the area was too vast

¹²⁴ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 230.

¹²⁵ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 97-98.

¹²⁶ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 230 and 233-234.

¹²⁷ Claude E. Welch, *Anatomy of Rebellion* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1980), 298.

¹²⁸ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 97.

and their numbers too small to cover it effectively.¹²⁹ However, when the Mau Mau raided urban areas, contact between both sides was commonplace.

Two of the more infamous raids are the attacks on the Naivasha Police station in 1953 and the Lukenya Prison in 1954. Dedan Kimathi, the highest ranked Mau Mau fighter in the Aberdares, led the raid on Naivasha. In this single raid, the Mau Mau obtained forty-seven precision weapons, including eighteen machine guns, and 3,780 rounds of ammunition.¹³⁰ The attack on the Naivasha Police Station proved to be the most successful raid pulled off by the Mau Mau during the Uprising. It also cemented the status of Kimathi as the military leader of the forest fighters. The raid on Lukenya Prison, while not as successful as Naivasha, was the largest raid put together by Mau Mau fighters active in Nairobi. The Mau Mau committed three of their generals and over one hundred fighters to this raid. With them, they carried thirty rifles, six Bren submachine guns, and five pistols. The raid was a great show of force and led to the acquisition of weapons, ammunition, and uniforms.¹³¹

Not all raids were as successful though. Many proved to be more trouble than they were worth. Of these, the failed raid in near Mathira in January of 1954 hurt the Mau Mau cause unlike any other. During the preparations for this raid, government forces wounded and captured Waruhiu Itote, then known as General China. Colonial police and a KAR battalion discovered Itote and his men; at that point, a firefight erupted.¹³² Because of a chronic precision firearms shortage, the Mau Mau risked much to obtain more guns. Not only did this failed raid remove

¹²⁹ Iain Ferguson, interview by Conrad Wood, November 17, 1987, reel 2, Iain Alexander Ferguson Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England; Roy Stockwell, interview by Conrad Wood, November 19, 1987, reel 2, Roy Zandebor Stockwell Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

¹³⁰ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 231.

¹³¹ Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 52-53.

¹³² Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 161-162; Osborne, *Life and Times of General China*, 1-2.

Itote from the battlefield, but also, because he survived, it allowed him to become an intelligence asset for the British. In an interrogation that lasted sixty-eight hours, Itote divulged the inner working of the Mau Mau organization.¹³³ It was the single greatest intelligence achievement of the conflict. In an attempt to expand their military forces, the Mau Mau lost one of their most experienced generals.

Close Quarters Combat

As discussed in the previous chapter, the decreasing ability to acquire precision firearms was one of the causal factors that drove the Mau Mau to develop their homemade guns. Just as the scarcity of these weapons dictated raiding tactics, so too did the homemade firearms. The smoothbore of the homemade gun required the operator to fire at close range.¹³⁴ Additionally, most of the homemade weapons required manual reloading. After each successive shot, the danger of an accidental discharge increased. This is because the increase in the weapon's temperature could prematurely detonate the gunpowder in a cartridge. Not only could this cause the gun to fire when the shooter was not ready, it could also injure the shooter or a comrade.¹³⁵

Mau Mau leadership took all these potential dangers into consideration when it came to the tactical implementation of these homemade firearms. According to Henry Wachanga, a Mau Mau fighter in the Aberdares, there were several standing orders regarding firearm usage. For example, no one was to fire any rounds unless ordered to by a superior. This helped to ensure

¹³³ Osborne, *Life and Times of General China*, 145.

¹³⁴ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 233.

¹³⁵ Henderson, "The Interrogation of General China," in *The Life and Times of General China*, 183; Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 38.

the element of surprise in an ambush or raid. Once given the order to fire, Mau Mau fighters fired only one round, unless specifically ordered otherwise. This helped to mitigate the dangers of an accidental discharge and conserve limited ammunition. Each fighter carried five rounds of spare ammunition. These extra rounds were only for pressing a victory or covering a retreat. Lastly, the loss of a weapon was punishable by death.¹³⁶ It is hard to know how rigidly Mau Mau leaders enforced these rules. It does seem clear from the oral histories of British soldiers that the Mau Mau preferred ambushes and broke contact quickly.¹³⁷

Within the forest, the ambush was the Mau Mau tactic of choice for engaging with their enemy. A common method of guerilla forces around the world, ambushes allowed the Mau Mau to dictate the location and duration of contact. This ability is important when fighting an enemy with superior weaponry and technology. In *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, Henry Wachanga described the typical Mau Mau ambush,

We would ambush them with ease, for we placed guards at all entrances into the forest. When the enemy approached, these guards would move quickly away and report the number of approaching enemy and the type of weapons they carried. The leader would then delegate a number larger than that of the enemy to ambush them. The remainder of the Mau Mau would then go to about half a mile from camp, leaving only sentinels to mark whether or not the enemy discovered the camp. The ambush would be quickly laid along the foot-path the enemy was using. It would be at a place of dense forest which afforded good cover. The Mau Mau Fighters would hide very close to the path at regular intervals. One ambusher would be placed about one hundred yards farther along the path. He would be armed with a .303 rifle with a tin can attached to the muzzle. When fired, it sounded like a mortar and made the enemies drop to the ground very quickly. He would not fire until the enemies were all even with the Mau Mau hiding along the path. After he fired his single shot, and the security forces dropped down, the Mau Mau along the path leaped from their hiding places and either opened fire at close range, or slashed them with their mabanga. A man

¹³⁶ Wachanga, *Swords of Kirinyaga*, 38 and 57.

¹³⁷ Ferguson, Wood, reel 2; John Pomeroy Randle, interview by Nigel de Lee, December 13, 1999, reel 23, John Pomeroy Randle Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

with a bugle was the first man along our line of hidden Mau Mau. He began to blow the bugle as the ambush began. Should any soldier attempt to escape he would be thrown into confusion and plunge deeper into the forest rather than run towards the bugler. The forest was like a house to us, but was a torture chamber to the security forces.¹³⁸

Within this scenario, Wachanga demonstrates Mau Mau tactical superiority and control of the battlefield within the forest. Two key factors that create this situation for the Mau Mau are knowledge of the terrain and intelligence of the enemy situation. As a guerilla force fighting in their homeland, the Mau Mau have natural terrain knowledge. Wachanga details this asset when he talks of guards at the forest entrances, the Mau Mau's ability to know the security force's path of travel, the use of the densest section of that path for cover and concealment, and the scattering of security forces deeper into the forest. The guards also act as intelligence collectors when they report to their leader the size and armament of the approaching force. This intelligence report allows the Mau Mau leadership to decide whether to engage their enemy and deploy their forces appropriately. It is important to note that Wachanga states that Mau Mau leadership deployed a larger force than the one approaching. Arguably, this was not always possible. One surmises that if fighter suppository was not possible, the Mau Mau remained hidden.

In Wachanga's scenario, however, the Mau Mau set up and sprung the ambush. He describes a basic linear ambush. In such an ambush, the assault team lines up along the enemy's avenue of approach. Security units protect the assault team's flanks and rear. When the enemy enters the kill zone, the assault team opens fire and engages the enemy.¹³⁹ In addition to these standard tactics, Mau Mau ambushes contained some unique aspects as well. The simulated

¹³⁸ Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*, 73.

¹³⁹ Headquarters, The Department of the Army. *Field Manual 7-85: Ranger Unit Operations* (Washington, D. C.: Department of the Army, 1987), 6-9.

mortar fire helped to close a gap in fire support. As Wachanga described, the sound of mortar fire was enough to make security forces take cover and signal the assault team to open fire. It is likely that the firearms used by the bulk of the assault team were homemade. Wachanga alludes to them when describing the ambush taking place at close range and the use of mabangas, a type of machete. The bugler is a third unique aspect. The standard linear ambush can use a support element to press a victory within the kill zone.¹⁴⁰ The bugler, like the simulated mortar, serves as a faint of such a support unit. The bugler tricks the security forces into thinking they cannot escape in the direction they came because more Mau Mau could be in that direction. Therefore, to flee the kill zone, they disperse into the deeper areas of the forest. The bugler creates uncertainty and confusion, increasing the Mau Mau ambush effectiveness. Despite the Mau Mau's fire and technology inferiority, their use of terrain, intelligence, and buglers allowed them to create a torture chamber in the forest.

The Dichotomy of the Homemade Guns

Because senior Mau Mau leadership largely rested in the Militant Wing after October 1952, larger political goals took a back seat to military objectives. This is not to say that military leadership was not ideological, in fact this led to many disagreements at the highest levels, but prosecuting an insurgency from the forests prevented ideological leaders from achieving political goals in urban areas. Effective counter-insurgency methods enacted by the British further hemmed in Mau Mau military capabilities. These factors drove the KLFA to take increasingly risky actions at the tactical level, often for not much reward. Despite their logistical and

¹⁴⁰ *Field Manual 7-85*, 6-9

engineering abilities to craft and field homemade firearms, the need for precision weaponry and ammunition became an overarching priority for Mau Mau leadership. The need for precision weaponry influenced the type of offensive mission Mau Mau fighters undertook and their homemade guns narrowed the scope of their capabilities within said mission. Within the forest, Mau Mau fighters held the tactical advantage. Their ability to ambush British patrols left the forests as the last held terrain of the Mau Mau Uprising. Forest ambushes, however, were defensive maneuvers. They relied on the British patrolling into a kill zone. As Mau Mau numbers declined, less contact occurred in this manner. The arms and ammunition expended in ambushes drove the Mau Mau to conduct offensive raids to supply defensive ambushes. Thus, the homemade guns fostered a dichotomy between tactical abilities and strategic goals. The chronic lack of precision weaponry created a space for the homemade gun to flourish, but at the cost of broader strategic capabilities.

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORICAL MEMORY OF THE HOMEMADE GUNS

Historians began to take notice of memory in the 1980s, following a growth in public interest for autobiography, family genealogical history, and museum studies.¹⁴¹ As historical memory gained use professionally, scholars debated its usefulness and accuracy. Supporters of using historical memory saw a way to engage with new sources and amplify their research. Detractors saw subjective information that flew in the face of objective historical research.¹⁴² In many ways, historians of Africa have embraced historical memory. African peoples have a rich oral tradition that has passed a collective memory down through generations. Scholars who pursued this as a source found ways to fill gaps in the traditional historical record. Jan Vansina developed the methodology for studying oral tradition and treating it as history. Published in 1985, his *Oral Tradition as History* laid the foundation for all subsequent studies of African oral history.¹⁴³ Anne Bailey used this type of research to great effect in her study of Eweland on the former Slave Coast of Africa. She used oral tradition and collective memory to add to the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade.¹⁴⁴

Memory and oral history are also useful when groups or individuals destroy traditional historical sources. This was the case of Caroline Elkins' research in Kenya. While researching *Imperial Reckoning*, she discovered that when the British left Kenya they destroyed their records on a grand scale. This left her with many questions regarding the detention complex the British established during the Mau Mau Emergency. She interviewed hundreds of former Mau Mau

¹⁴¹ Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations*, no. 69 (2000), 127.

¹⁴² Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," 130.

¹⁴³ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹⁴⁴ Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 2-14.

adherents to uncover their history.¹⁴⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, I used memoirs and oral histories to place the homemade guns within the historical memory of Mau Mau. My research demonstrates that the guns are, for different reasons, important to both Mau Mau and British memory. I also attempted to strip away the extreme bias of both sides and find a balanced memory of the guns.

Scholars have written academic works focusing on the historical memory of the Mau Mau, but nothing specific to the memory of homemade guns. One excellent example is Robert Buijtenhuijs' *Mau Mau Twenty Years After*. In that work, he explored how the memory and myth of Mau Mau influenced Kenyan politics and discourse in the two decades following independence. Marshal S. Clough's *Mau Mau Memoirs* is another groundbreaking work on this subject. He used memoirs written by Mau Mau as primary sources and demonstrated how these writers changed the traditional narrative of the Emergency. The research presented in this chapter adopted a similar methodology. It too treated these memoirs as primary sources. Secondary sources, such as Clough and Buijtenhuijs, served to amplify detail and context. This chapter also analyzes recorded oral histories from British veterans who fought the Mau Mau. While there are several British Mau Mau memoirs, some of which this thesis cites, I believe these recorded oral histories serve as a more direct link to British historical memory of Mau Mau. These two type of primary sources help to make a new contribution to the secondary source literature.

¹⁴⁵ Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, xii-xvi.

Memoirs by Mau Mau

This section analyzes the treatment of the homemade guns in memoirs written by former Mau Mau. Focus on these memoirs is important because it is necessary to hear the voices of individuals who used these weapons. The memoirs of interest to this section are *Mau Mau Detainee* by Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *Mau Mau from Within* by Karari Njama, and *Mau Mau General* by Waruhiu Itote.¹⁴⁶ Published in the immediate decade following the close of the Emergency and Kenya's independence, these works offer firsthand accounts and opinions of the homemade firearms. Not only are these three works in conversation with one another, but they also directly and indirectly address the standardized Mau Mau narrative of the time. This thesis has relied on these sources in earlier chapters. In those cases, they served to explain the construction, need for, and use of homemade firearms. For the purposes of this chapter, these works serve as primary sources of memory to explain the Mau Mau recollection of these weapons.

During and shortly after the Mau Mau Uprising, the British and other outsiders controlled the narrative of Mau Mau and Kenyan memory. Early reports, such as F. D. Corfield's 1960 historical survey *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, attempted to cement the West's understanding of what took place during the conflict. His report claimed that the Uprising stemmed from, what he saw as, the typical friction associated with an uncivilized group encountering a civilizing force. He believed the speed with which the civilizing process took

¹⁴⁶ Josiah Mwangi Kariuki. *'Mau Mau' Detainee: The Account by a Kenya African of His Experiences in Detention Camps 1953-60* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963); Donald L. Barnett, and Karari Njama. *Mau Mau from Within: Autobiography and Analysis of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* (London: The Garden City Press Limited, 1966); and Waruhiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

place is what exacerbated this friction into outright conflict. Corfield does acknowledge the land dispute at the center of the Mau Mau cause, but he attributes the movement's violence to its adherent's primitive tribal nature.¹⁴⁷ When Corfield addresses the homemade guns, he treats them as almost an afterthought in a larger chapter about firearms. He provides a factual description of their construction and then editorializes their performance and effectiveness.¹⁴⁸ In general, his report offered statistics and a detailed explanation of events from the British perspective but furthered the Western idea of primitive Africans unwilling to accept civilization. Regarding the homemade guns, he labeled them as a means of attaining "Dutch courage,"¹⁴⁹ despite their ubiquity on the battlefield.

However, with the arrival of Kenya's independence, the Mau Mau themselves began to offer a rebuttal to the British-centric narrative. These refutations took the form of memoirs, in which Kikuyu Kenyans offered their perspective of events and, often, exposed atrocities perpetrated by the British. Because of their boldness and detail from the Mau Mau side of the story, these memoirs regularly gained the attention of readers outside of Kenya and became a form of political discourse within it.¹⁵⁰

Mau Mau Detainee was the first of this kind of memoir. Josiah Mwangi Kariuki artfully described his life in the early days of the movement and the seven years he spent as a prisoner in fourteen different detention camps within Kenya.¹⁵¹ *Detainee* tore at the very foundation of

¹⁴⁷ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 263-264.

¹⁴⁸ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 233.

¹⁴⁹ Corfield, *Origins and Growth of Mau Mau*, 233. "Dutch courage" is a slang term defined as artificially induced courage, typically, due to the consumption of alcohol. Corfield's use of the term exchanges the homemade guns for the consumption of alcohol as the means of artificial courage. "Dutch Courage;" Merriam-Webster Dictionary, last modified 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Dutch%20courage>.

¹⁵⁰ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 3.

¹⁵¹ Kariuki. *'Mau Mau' Detainee*, 27.

academic and political thought on the Mau Mau movement and the Emergency. Kariuki even took issue with the use of Mau Mau as a name of the movement.¹⁵² When he used the term, he placed it within quotation marks to highlight this point. Kariuki's dedication to reclaiming the language of Mau Mau runs throughout his memoir. No longer were adherents "terrorists" or "gangsters." Kariuki recast them as "freedom fighters." Kenyan politicians looking to ingratiate themselves to former Mau Mau after independence often took up this language. This practice still holds true today and demonstrates *Detainee's* lasting influence on Kenyan political culture.

Kariuki became politically active in the movement in the early days of the Uprising. He served as a liaison and procurement officer prior to his detainment. The hotel he operated in Nakuru served as a front in support of his efforts. Government forces detained Kariuki in his hotel on October 28, 1953, just over a year after the British declaration of the Emergency.¹⁵³ Despite his early detention, Kariuki remained engaged in the movement. He gained knowledge of the fighting and methods of firearms manufacturing from contact with other prisoners. He makes it clear that the procurement of arms and ammunition were of the highest priority for the Mau Mau but offers a defensive motive for this goal. From his perspective, the need for firearms was due to the overwhelming military response of the British. To explain his point, Kariuki relates a Kikuyu parable. He likens the Mau Mau to children tossing a panga, a type of machete, at an adult who responds by skillfully throwing it back at the child.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, according to Kariuki, had the British not responded with machine guns and aerial bombs, the Mau Mau would not have stolen and built firearms to refit their initial armament of knives and spears. Just as

¹⁵² Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 50-51.

¹⁵³ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 71.

¹⁵⁴ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 61.

Kariuki recast the language regarding Mau Mau, he repurposed the need and use of the homemade guns. This placed the homemade guns within the context of a defensive last resort, rather than a means of bolstering up the courage of fighters, as Corfield claimed.

Additionally, Kariuki uses the homemade guns as one of the dividing lines between two factions within the Militant Wing of the movement. The KLFA was the organized military effort. The *Komerera*, on the other hand, were more akin to a militia. While the KLFA had rank structure, discipline, and a logistical network, the *Komerera* were a less organized unit. They acted more desperately to procure food and weapons. The KLFA set up regular camps deep within the forests, whereas the *Komerera* hid within the Reserves and the edges of the forests. According to Kariuki, the KLFA fought the war as cleanly as a group could, but he laid the preponderance of Mau Mau atrocities at the feet of the *Komerera*.¹⁵⁵ In Kariuki's eyes, the KLFA was a noble force with the means and ability to set up firearm factories in the forests and mountains. He disparagingly states that the *Komerera* "did not have the skill to make their own guns," likening them to a rabble who would kill their own to acquire food and supplies¹⁵⁶ Kariuki established an interesting dichotomy and, in doing so, struck at the monolithic structure of the Mau Mau favored by the British.

In 1966, three years after the publication of *Mau Mau Detainee*, a second memoir contributed to the Kenyan side of the story. Unlike Kariuki, however, Karari Njama did fight in the forest and relied on homemade firearms to advance the cause. *Mau Mau from Within* detailed the extensive experiences of Njama during his time as a guerilla fighter the Aberdares.

¹⁵⁵ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 125-126. *Komerera* is Kikuyu for "those who are awake when they are thought to be asleep."

¹⁵⁶ Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee*, 126.

Njama was born in 1926 to a “squatter” family in the Rift Valley. “Squatters” lived a feudalistic life on land stolen from them by white European settlers.¹⁵⁷ When Njama was twelve years old, he began his formal education at a nearby school. When his father died, he left school and went to live in the reserves. Though he only attended school for two years, he made the most of it. He became an avid reader and even worked for a short time as a teacher.¹⁵⁸ No doubt his literacy and formal education helped place Njama at the side of Dedan Kimathi. In addition to serving as the Field Marshal’s secretary, Njama operated as a liaison officer between the scattered commands and camps in the Aberdares Range.¹⁵⁹ As a liaison officer, Njama traveled between camps, relaying orders from Kimathi and conducting inspections. During his inspections, he often remarked about homemade guns or, as he called them, *banda*.¹⁶⁰

According to Njama, Kimathi had a great interest in manufacturing firearms. Njama recorded an example of this at a five-day meeting of Mau Mau leadership at Mwathe. This meeting took place in August 1953, just ten months after the Declaration of Emergency. During that period, Mau Mau fighters operated in an ad hoc way. The leadership within the Aberdares region decided to institute some level of organization and unified command. Most of their decisions confirmed what developed organically, but they also solidified areas of responsibility

¹⁵⁷ Though a European model, settler colonists brought some feudalistic practices to Kenya. The colonists saw squatting as a way to cultivate large tracts of land without incurring the full costs. They allowed the native Kenyan squatters to remain on their land in return for payment, typically in the form of crops or livestock. Sometimes the landowner chose to develop the land for his own use. Such actions typically forced the squatters into the Reserves. This practice was a chief grievance of the Mau Mau Land and Freedom Army.

¹⁵⁸ Barnett and Njama. *Mau Mau from Within*, 81-82, 88-89.

¹⁵⁹ Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 11.

¹⁶⁰ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 493. *Banda* is term used by the forest guerillas for their homemade guns.

and rank structure.¹⁶¹ During this important time, Kimathi instructed his generals on the priority of manufacturing firearms. According to Njama, Kimathi ordered,

I want to see every warrior with a gun and you must work hard to achieve this in as short a time as possible. You must collect dues from our members, as much as you can, and spare the money for buying ammunition, medicine, clothing, stationary, and guns-factory equipment. It has been reported to me that an excellent blacksmith has entered the forest in the Ruthani area and that he can make guns with no difference from the manufactured ones. We would be very glad and if this proved true we would require a smith for every camp to get together and be taught by him. I hope that this would improve and quicken our supply of arms.¹⁶²

In the days before he said this, Kimathi gained official recognition as the supreme commander of the Aberdares region and the entire KLFA. His desire to take time to express the importance of making guns and suggesting ways to do it, demonstrates the importance of these weapons to the movement.

In addition to this, Njama provides other instances of Kimathi and his headquarters issuing orders regarding homemade guns. For example, two months prior to the Mwathe meeting, Kimathi sent a written order to the various leaders within his region. The order was regarding a planned raid. It contained seven points on how to conduct the raid. In the seventh point, Kimathi ordered his guerillas to seize all available water pipe in the area. Specifically, sizes one and a half to three quarters inch in diameter. The express purpose for this pipe was for making gun barrels.¹⁶³ As noted in Chapter Two of this thesis, a water pipe was the most common type of material used for the construction of a homemade gun's barrel. A second example comes from the headquarters camp at Kariaini. The headquarters ordered, likely at the

¹⁶¹ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 225-226.

¹⁶² Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 255.

¹⁶³ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 196.

behest of Kimathi, that guerillas were to obtain from nearby reserves the necessary tools and equipment to construct gun factories.¹⁶⁴ Njama's recollections demonstrate that the methods of gun manufacture interested the highest levels of Mau Mau leadership. While many of the weapons appeared as simplistic and haphazard to the British, much thought and planning lay behind their construction.

Despite their importance to the KLFA's military effort, the drawbacks to these guns exist in Mau Mau memory as well. In *Mau Mau from Within*, Njama recalls a negative personal experience with a *banda*. One afternoon, Njama volunteered for sentry duty and posted up at a stream crossing near camp. As the day wore on, a thick mist reduced his visibility to fifty yards. After some time, a small enemy force entered the area. Njama, armed with a homemade gun, took aim at his enemy. He pulled the trigger, but the weapon misfired. He cocked the weapon again and attempted to fire a second time. The gun failed again. He then moved to a new position, loaded a fresh round and tried a third time. Nothing. After this third misfire, Njama fled the area to warn his comrades.¹⁶⁵

Njama's story is quite remarkable; he was lucky to escape the area with his life. Throughout his memoir, Njama says positive things about homemade guns. This story is a rare exception. One reason for telling it may have to do with what happened the following day. While he did disparage that particular weapon, he still held faith in the gun-manufacturing plan. The next day, he told some fellow guerillas about his experience. He showed them the weapon and pulled the trigger. This time the gun fired. The men inspected the firearm and decided that

¹⁶⁴ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 231-214.

¹⁶⁵ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 404-405.

the moisture from the mist prevented the spring from operating correctly. According to Njama, the guerillas told him they distrusted the homemade guns because of such problems. Njama reassured them that, while his weapon failed, the majority of their *banda* operated just fine, especially in good weather.¹⁶⁶

This anecdote serves more than one purpose. At the time of the incident, it reassured his comrades that the homemade guns were useful tools. Regarding historical memory, Njama reinforces his support of Kimathi's gun manufacturing plans. Since his execution in 1957, Kimathi gained the status of a martyr. Njama was politically wise to remain supportive of something he saw as a Kimathi initiative. *Mau Mau from Within*, while lengthy and full of detail, is mostly restricted to the Aberdares region of the rebellion. The other key forest theater was Mount Kenya. For that region, it is necessary to turn to General China.

Waruhiu Itote, known as General China, is a fountain of information about the homemade guns of the Mau Mau. Because of his direct involvement with the first examples of homemade guns, his memoir, *Mau Mau General*, and his Interrogation Report reside at the center of this thesis. Itote does not credit himself with the idea of manufacturing guns in the forest, he attributes that to General Tanganyika, but he may well be the midwife of the invention.¹⁶⁷ As the most prominent Mau Mau leader to write a memoir, he provides excellent insight for historical memory purposes.

According to Itote, the first homemade gun experiments took place on Mount Kenya in early 1953. He and Tanganyika detonated a .303 caliber round with a nail.¹⁶⁸ That risky

¹⁶⁶ Barnett and Njama, *Mau Mau from Within*, 406.

¹⁶⁷ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 103.

¹⁶⁸ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 103.

procedure was a fitting start to the process. It demonstrated the great need for firearms in the early months of open warfare and the lengths certain people were willing to go to make up the gap. Itote talks of the excitement shared when their experiment worked and, though sparsely written, this enthusiasm comes across nearly seventy years later. Itote also names the first two gunmakers as Ngoma and Waiwai. These men created the first two working prototypes. Itote sent the two guns to Dedan Kimathi for inspection. Kimathi praised them and, to Itote's displeasure, sent the guns to Mau Mau fighters in the reserves.¹⁶⁹ This is likely when Kimathi developed his enthusiasm for homemade guns that Njama expresses in his memoir.

Once his Mount Kenya factory was up and running, Itote reports rapid advances with the manufacturing process and in the quality of the final product. According to Itote,

Twenty experts began work with me, and each company sent another twenty for training. Ruku, a young man from Murang'a, was in charge of the operation, and no weapon could leave the factory until he signed a release order. His assistants included Mukungi of North Tetu; Kamirigiti from Nanyuki; Kamwana from Mathira; and our original inventors, Waiwai and Ngoma Kagio. As more and more people learnt how to make guns, it was no longer possible to pinpoint any invention or innovation as being the work of one particular person. At the same time, and perhaps more than anything else, the proliferation of this skill and its improvement demonstrated that our men were equal in intelligence to anyone. Had we had the opportunities, many of us would have gone far in such fields as engineering.¹⁷⁰

Itote describes nothing but success. A key takeaway from this statement is the pride Itote had in his engineers. Throughout Kenya's colonial period, the British held back the Kikuyu and other indigenous peoples. The majority of them became alienated farmers, forced to squat on land

¹⁶⁹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 103. It is unclear if the recipients were *Komerera* or not. Itote and Kimathi's relationship functioned, but had its fair share of friction. While General China was subordinate to Field Marshal Kimathi, distance allowed for a decent amount of independence for the Mt. Kenya commander. After Itote's capture and cooperation with the British in 1954, Kimathi labeled him a traitor. For further reading on Itote and Kimathi's relationship, see the Introduction to Myles Osborne's *The Life and Times of General China*.

¹⁷⁰ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 104.

they once owned or move into reserves. As the British brought technological advances, they allowed relatively few Kikuyu into these areas of expertise. Itote is keenly aware of the perception of his people held by Western readers, thus his point about equal intelligence and opportunities.

It is also important to understand the body of *Mau Mau General* only describes the beginning of gun factories on Mount Kenya. The appendices of Itote's memoir and his interrogation by Ian Henderson provide amplifying detail. Itote started with this small cadre and, in about a year's time, developed a network of factories servicing forty companies within his *Hikahika* Battalion.¹⁷¹ The main factory remained under his command at his *Barafu* 25 Headquarters. Itote claims over 500 forest fighters guarded this one factory. In it, engineers turned out an average of forty-two guns per week.¹⁷² In addition to manufacturing firearms, it served as the schoolhouse for future gunmakers. Itote sent these graduates to engineer units at the company level on Mount Kenya or into the Passive Wing. Passive Wing gunmakers operated "one-man factories" in the reserves. Between May 1953 and his capture in January of 1954, Itote claimed around 400 such engineers received training to operate in the reserves.¹⁷³ In this case, Itote's 1954 interrogation substantiates his 1967 memoir, therefore, increasing the credibility of his claims.

Analyzing *Mau Mau from Within* and *Mau Mau Genreal* together highlights the bias of memoirs and the nuance required when using them as primary historical sources. Because of the

¹⁷¹ Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 292. *Hikahika* is Kikuyu for "hurry hurry."

¹⁷² Itote, *Mau Mau General*, 296-297; Osborne, "The Interrogation of Waruhiu Itote (General China)," *The Life and Times of General China*, 181. *Barafu* is Kikuyu for "ice."

¹⁷³ Osborne, "The Interrogation of Waruhiu Itote (General China)," *The Life and Times of General China*, 172.

credibility of the relevant portions of Itote's memoir, it seems he does not receive the credit due to him in *Mau Mau from Within*. This creates an interesting disagreement within Mau Mau historical memory. Based on Itote's memory and his interrogation, it appears that the *Barafu 25* factory was up and running well before Kimathi's orders at the Mwathe meeting. Therefore, Itote and his Mount Kenya factory network led the way on the actual manufacture of firearms. Kimathi's Aberdares factories had to play catchup after his August 1953 order. Njama does not ignore Itote entirely, but when he mentions the general, it is not in relation to homemade guns. This omission is likely two-fold. First, Njama is a Kimathi acolyte and never served under Itote. As noted above, he remained a loyal Kimathi promoter after the field marshal's execution in 1957. Second, Njama potentially still saw Itote as a collaborator in 1966, the year he published *Mau Mau from Within*. The fact that Itote experienced success in the Kenyatta administration may have increased Njama bitterness towards someone who he saw as a disgraced Mau Mau leader.¹⁷⁴

All three memoirs mentioned above offer a different Mau Mau perspective of the conflict. Their differing points of view added layers to a narrative that, at the time, was much less complicated. On the other hand, reports, such as Corfield's, and other Western works placed the Mau Mau on a spectrum ranging from "savage" to "menace." Kariuki stretched that spectrum all the way out to "freedom fighter," thus forever changing the language of Mau Mau. His use of the homemade guns as a dividing line between the KLFA and the *Komerera* did much the same. Clearly, he did not view all Mau Mau fighters equally. Njama's work recalls the spread and use of *banda* within the Aberdares region. For reasons previously argued, he accredited Kimathi

¹⁷⁴ Osborne, *Life and Times of General China*, 250. In 1964, Itote received a position in the National Youth Service and gained national recognition for his work.

with much of this proliferation. Njama's experience with a faulty gun added a dose of lethal reality to this dangerous program. The memoir and interrogation of Itote added a timeline, names, and organization to the memory narrative. He explained not only why the Mau Mau needed to create their own guns, but also how they did so. One cannot say that without Itote, there would be no homemade guns. However, based on his account, it is hard to see how they could have become the primary firearm of the movement without him. The disagreements between Njama and Itote introduce political and geographical differences to the narrative. Taken as a whole though, it is clear that homemade guns are an important aspect to Mau Mau fighters and their historical memory narrative. Another group had firsthand experience with these guns. The next section focuses on their perspective.

Oral Histories of British Veterans of the Mau Mau Uprising

The IWM archives contain a number of oral history interviews related to Mau Mau. Oral history is an important aspect of historical memory. It serves as an avenue for historians to capture the stories of individuals that experienced historical events. The IWM's Mau Mau oral histories are audio recordings. The recordings of interest to this thesis feature interviews with British regular army officers, KAR troops, and civil servants that were present in Kenya during the State of Emergency. While the histories offer a great variety in experience, rank, and type of service, they only offer the British perspective. The museum's lack of Mau Mau or loyalist Kikuyu oral histories is a glaring loss to the record. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the oral histories available can serve as a counter perspective to the memoirs discussed above. The histories selected feature direct commentary on homemade firearms.

On September 12, 1956, Detainee 1540 penned a letter to the Officer in Charge of the Mathira Works Camp. According to his letter, he surrendered to Government forces as a Mau Mau fighter and confessed to his crimes. His real name was Simon Peter Ngatia Macheria, but he admitted to being the gunmaker known as General Doctor Russia. The man he wrote this letter to was Terrance John Image.¹⁷⁵ In 1991, Image provided an oral history to the IWM. In that interview, he discussed his time as a prison officer in Kenya during the Mau Mau Uprising.¹⁷⁶ Image arrived in Kenya in January 1956. His first post was to a convict prison in the northern part of the colony. He recalls only one Mau Mau detainee within that prison. The rest were individuals convicted of non-Mau Mau crimes.¹⁷⁷

By late 1956, he was the commandant of the Mathira Works Camp at Karatina. Unlike his previous posting, this camp dealt strictly with Mau Mau detainees. According to his interview, he was in charge of the administration of the camp, not of the rehabilitation of Mau Mau insurgents. Image makes it clear that the British and loyal Kikuyu who dealt with rehabilitation were separate from his own prison officers.¹⁷⁸ This distinction is noteworthy. The rehabilitation process is fraught with charges of abuse and improper treatment of individuals believed to be Mau Mau adherents.¹⁷⁹ In fact, the crux of Macheria's letter to Image refers to ill treatment and confinement. Macheria reiterates that he surrendered under amnesty and showed

¹⁷⁵ "Mau Mau Detainee's Letter, 1956," Imperial War Museum, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030002625>.

¹⁷⁶ "Image, Terrance John (Oral History)," Imperial War Museum, Accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80011939>.

¹⁷⁷ Terrance John Image, interview by Conrad Wood, August 21, 1991, reel 1, Terrance John Image Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

¹⁷⁸ Image, Wood, reel 2.

¹⁷⁹ Caroline Elkins explored and exposed the atrocities that took place under the guise of rehabilitation in her groundbreaking 2005 work *Imperial Reckoning*. While Image's interview took place long before her writing, it is likely he was well aware of what occurred. The subtext of his statements suggests an attempt to distance himself from any abuse that took place during his time as commandant.

government forces his camp and gun factory.¹⁸⁰ Image claimed that detainees often wrote to him as commandant to seek better treatment and to demonstrate that they no longer abided by their oaths as Mau Mau.¹⁸¹ It is possible that Macheria's abilities as a gun maker prevented him from enjoying the benefits of amnesty. He built at least one homemade gun housed at the IWM. It is one of the more sophisticated examples in their collection. It features a working bolt action, magazine, and trigger.¹⁸² Based on this evidence, Macheria was very skilled at his craft. Image provided the letter to the IWM archives, but it is unclear if he intervened in the detention of Macheria. Image's oral history as a prison officer stands out among the collection at IWM. Because of the difficult history surrounding the prison system in Kenya, few people involved may have been willing to discuss their time there. It is fortunate that Image decided to tell his story. Among other aspects, he provides an excellent memory of a Westerner interacting with a Mau Mau gun maker.

The majority of the IWM's Mau Mau oral histories come from soldiers who served in Kenya during the Emergency. These histories are important to Mau Mau historical memory because they provide the point of view of men who engaged directly with the Mau Mau. Great Britain relied on a variety of forces to put down the Uprising. In addition to colonial forces based within Kenya, such as the KAR, they deployed British Army Regulars.¹⁸³ These soldiers came primarily from the Devonshire Regiment (The Devons) and the Royal East Kent Regiment

¹⁸⁰ Detainee's Letter.

¹⁸¹ Image, Wood, reel 2.

¹⁸² "FIR 8286.

¹⁸³ Robert Buijtenhuijs, *Le Mouvement 'Mau Mau': Une Révolte Paysanne Et Anti-Coloniale En Afrique Noire* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1971), 214.

(The Buffs). John Pomeroy Randle and Dennis James Dell served in these units and deployed to Kenya.

John Randle was an officer with the Devons in Kenya between 1953 and 1955.¹⁸⁴ During his interview, he discussed search and destroy procedures for flushing out Mau Mau forest fighters. Randle's unit operated in the Aberdares and spent two or three days at a time in the forest. While there, he and his men patrolled in squads within predesignated areas. When they encountered Mau Mau activity, his platoon rallied to that location.¹⁸⁵ This type of patrolling to contact is a tactic used in counterinsurgency when small units are responsible for large areas. Most of the time they did not encounter actual Mau Mau fighters on these patrols.¹⁸⁶ This is not too surprising. The tactics his unit employed allowed the Mau Mau to determine contact. When they came across a Mau Mau camp or cache, they collected or destroyed whatever weapons, supplies, and intelligence available.¹⁸⁷ Randle does not mention finding homemade guns specifically, however, Dennis Dell does remember them.

As an enlisted man, Dell served with the Buffs from 1961 to 1962.¹⁸⁸ He and his men used very similar tactics to Randle. Despite the fact that this was in the year preceding independence, British troops still operated against the remaining Mau Mau forces in the colony. According to Dell, the Buffs searched the reserves and forests for weaponry and other contraband. Dell recalls regularly finding homemade guns. He remarks that they seemed more

¹⁸⁴ "Randle, John Pomeroy (Oral History)," Imperial War Museum, accessed February 12, 2020, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80019800>.

¹⁸⁵ Randle, de Lee, reel 23.

¹⁸⁶ Randle, de Lee, reel 23.

¹⁸⁷ Randle, de Lee, reel 23.

¹⁸⁸ "Dell, James (Oral History)," Imperial War Museum, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80032542>.

dangerous to the shooter than his intended target.¹⁸⁹ In fact, many of the oral histories from white KAR soldiers express a similar idea as well.¹⁹⁰ Were they really that dangerous and useless?

Balancing the Historical Memory of the *Banda*

It is clear that British soldiers' negative sentiments have influenced historical memory of the guns. The reasons for this are manifold. The British effectively suppressed the Mau Mau Uprising. Whether or not the Mau Mau helped to achieve Kenyan independence often receives a political response rather than a historical one. The British were also the first to make a historical argument regarding the Mau Mau and their homemade guns. The Corfield Report and early academic writings told the British side of the story. Memoirs written by former Mau Mau responded to a narrative that the West already believed. This is a case of the collective memory of one side outweighing the other. How can one find a balance to determine a more accurate historical memory?

It is true that the homemade guns could harm their shooter. One of the examples held at the IWM demonstrates this. This particular gun has a ruptured chamber. It appears that when its user attempted to fire, the bullet exploded in the chamber, potentially injuring the user.¹⁹¹ The anecdote of Njama's three misfires is another example of a weapon malfunction. Obviously, the use of any homemade or improvised weapon poses a significant threat to the one wielding it.

¹⁸⁹ Dennis James Dell, interview by James Atkinson, 2012, reel 3, Dennis James Dell Oral History Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

¹⁹⁰ Ferguson, Wood, reel 2; Stockwell, Wood, reel 2.

¹⁹¹ FIR 11302

However, the level of danger that the British remember does not seem to bare out in memories of the Mau Mau themselves. In the works reviewed in this chapter, the Mau Mau extol these weapons. The sheer number of homemade weapons used in the field also counters the British recollection. The goal of leaders like Itote and Kimathi was to force out the British from Kenya. They believed homemade guns would provide them a way to achieve this goal. If the guns were as dangerous as the British remember them to be, then why did the Mau Mau leadership want them in the hands of every freedom fighter? Itote himself saw deficiencies in their mission objectives. It is a giant leap, however, to assume Mau Mau leadership purposely armed their fighters with weapons that helped their enemies more than it hurt them. Based on Itote's memoir and the different examples housed at the IWM, the dangers present in early models likely decreased over time. As gunmakers, like Macheria, became more proficient in their craft, their ability to overcome earlier deficiencies developed as well. The British memory of the guns most likely demonstrates a shared memory of something they dismissed as a poor excuse for a firearm. British collective memory also shows racial bias against their African adversaries. The positive bias of the memory held by the Mau Mau cancels out this negative bias of the British. The balance of the historical memory suggests that the guns were, overall, useful and effective tools at the tactical level. While they did not close the firepower gap between the belligerents, these guns helped narrow it. In addition, they should be remembered as a unique demonstration of ingenuity and resourcefulness in a time of rebellion and decolonization.

CONCLUSION

In the early days of their uprising, the Mau Mau could not field enough weapons to arm the KLFA. Theft and left behind firearms did not fill the gap. Strict firearms laws enacted and enforced by the British Colonial Government exacerbated the firearms gap. Unlike other liberation movements of the time, Mau Mau did not earn support from an outside group. Instead of their military aspirations dying on the vine, they engineered a way to build their own firearms. Designed by intelligent and creative individuals, Mau Mau gunmakers built these weapons out of Kenya itself. Trees from its forest, pipes from its infrastructure, and springs from its urban centers. In the hands of a Mau Mau forest fighter, as the primary type of firearm in the movement, it became a deadly item of pride and status. Their lethality gained the respect of the Mau Mau's adversary.

As colonial troops fighting under the flag of Great Britain during the Second World War, future Mau Mau leaders experienced the world beyond Kenya. Some saw combat in the Far East, but most of these Kikuyu soldiers served as clerks and logisticians. These were the necessary skills to source and deploy their improvised firearm. It was these less glorious, but no less important, aspects of warfare that informed the Mau Mau generals. When the Uprising came, the KLFA developed their strategic goals of an independent Kenya. However, their battles took place at the tactical level. Their chronic firearms shortage relegated much of their offensive operations to weapon raids. Armed with their homemade guns, they enforced strict rules of engagement to maximize surprise and minimize the dangers of their own weapons. Within the forests and foothills, the KLFA waged a defensive guerilla campaign. Masters of the bush, they determined when and where they would meet their enemy. Through ingenuity and

creativity, they turned simple ambushes into torture chambers for the British. Yet, the tactical success that their homemade guns gained them, limited their ability to achieve strategic goals. Eventually, the counter-insurgency techniques of the British pushed the remaining hardcore of the Mau Mau deep into the forest. Forcing Mau Mau fighters into desperation, many were captured or killed venturing out for food, while others surrendered and served in pseudo-gangs.

The homemade guns remain central in Mau Mau memory and hold a prominent place in their memoirs. Detainees, soldiers, and generals knew of the guns' importance to the movement. They remember the pride and danger of using their *banda*. The British, too, remember these guns. They discovered them in weapons caches and lying in wait for them in ambushes. Not surprisingly, they had a low opinion of such a rudimentary weapon. But this opinion does not counter the fact that the guns displayed ingenuity and resourcefulness. Homemade guns narrowed the firepower gap in a lopsided conflict.

In November 1971, a Mau Mau veterans organization gathered at a solidarity meeting held for President Jomo Kenyatta. The members dressed in the garb of the forest fighter, clothes of animal skin and dreadlocked hair. They attended the meeting on behalf of the Kenyatta government to rally ex-Mau Mau to his Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) party. This, and other groups like it, acted as special interest and lobbyist groups for various reforms in Kenya. After nearly a decade of independence, Kenyatta and his party actively sought the support of Mau Mau veteran groups. While there, the group posed for a photograph and held a large sign that read in part, "...MAU MAU IS STILL ALIVE / HANG ALL CONSPIRATORS. WE ARE

READY WITH / OUR PANGAS AND OUR HOME MADE GUNS...”¹⁹² Taken at face value, these veterans were ready to physically enforce their views in a way only the Mau Mau could. The specific reference to homemade guns demonstrates their cultural importance. They are, indeed, the calling card of the Mau Mau, an item unique to their struggle for land and freedom.

¹⁹² Robert Buijtenhuijs, *Mau Mau Twenty Years After: The Myth and the Survivors* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1973), 132 and photograph section; Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, 229.

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