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To cite this article: Poppy Cullen (2016): Operation Binnacle: British plans for military intervention against a 1965 coup in Kenya, *The International History Review*, DOI: [10.1080/07075332.2016.1261917](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1261917)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1261917>



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Published online: 01 Dec 2016.



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Operation Binnacle: British plans for military intervention against a 1965 coup in Kenya

Poppy Cullen 

ABSTRACT

In April 1965, the rumour of a potential Kenyan coup was brought to British attention. This was a moment of raised tensions in the government of President Jomo Kenyatta, who secretly asked the British government for a military commitment to support his government if a coup was attempted by Kenyan Vice President Oginga Odinga. The British military responded by making an extensive military plan to intervene, code-named Operation Binnacle. They sent ships to Mombasa and put troops on alert. This article assesses these plans as a case study of the logic, and limits, of British military interventionism in the years after decolonization. It highlights the importance of studying plans, even when not carried out, and of taking seriously the attitudes and fears of contemporaries. Although a coup was highly unlikely, British reactions are revealing of their concerns about independent Kenya, including possible Soviet involvement. Operation Binnacle was a serious British response to the threat, as they saw it, which a coup would cause to their interests. These were extensive enough that the British government was prepared to intervene militarily, during a brief moment when military interventionism in Africa was still seriously considered as a possible policy choice.

KEYWORDS

Kenya; Britain; military intervention; coup; Oginga Odinga

In April 1965, the rumour of a potential coup in Kenya was brought to British attention. Oginga Odinga, Kenya's vice president, and the Kenyan with the closest Soviet connections, was the rumoured plotter, supported by surreptitious arms shipments from the eastern bloc. In the Kenyan Parliament, MP Thomas Malinda alleged that 'arms and ammunition are continuously being smuggled from communist and other foreign countries into or through Kenya for the purpose of staging an armed revolution to overthrow our beloved Government'.¹ This was a moment of raised tensions in the government of President Jomo Kenyatta, who secretly asked the British government for potential assistance in the form of military support. On 8 and 10 April, the Kenyan Army made raids on offices and homes of Odinga and other radical leaders, confiscating weapons including pistols, sub-machine guns and ammunition.² Throughout the previous months, arms had arrived from Czechoslovakia and Poland.³ On 14 April, a Soviet ship *Fizik Lebedev* arrived in Mombasa loaded with weapons and military advisers rumoured to be intended for a coup. Yet, fairly quickly the situation quietened. No coup or action against the government was attempted and the Soviet ship was rejected by Kenyatta, signalling the wider rejection of Soviet influence in Kenya.

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Subsequently, most historians have concluded that the prospect of a coup was highly unrealistic. It seems unlikely Odinga believed he could succeed in a coup or had plans to carry out an attempt. Hornsby does treat this more seriously, arguing that 'Kenyatta had at least one agent in the Odinga group, who kept him informed of his opponents' plans ... Radical politicians of the time confirm off the record that some form of action was planned'.⁴ But there is, so far, no definite evidence of this, and in the most convincing account of post-colonial Kenya, Branch argues that 'Without any further documentation, it is reckless to conclude that a coup was imminent when the weight of other evidence suggests that such an event was highly unlikely'. Rather, he suggests Kenyatta and his closest allies 'were paranoid and overreacted to unsubstantiated gossip', or that 'the threat, such as it was, was deliberately exaggerated' as a reason to take political action against Odinga, as occurred in the following weeks and months.⁵ Parsons has also highlighted that Odinga was ethnically Luo, and, 'given the underrepresentation of Luos in the Kenyan Army, it is unlikely that Odinga realistically believed that he would be able to manage a military coup'.⁶ The lack of retaliation against anyone potentially involved in a 1965 coup plan is further evidence that Kenyatta himself may not have taken this too seriously. After an army mutiny in 1964, 43 were tried and 170 dismissed;⁷ in 1971, following revelations of a coup plan, 12 were imprisoned for an 'otherwise innocuous, hapless and vague plot',⁸ and after Kenya's first attempted coup in 1982, the Air Force was disbanded. In 1965, however, there were no repercussions. It seems reasonable to conclude that a coup attempt was not imminent in April 1965. It is more likely that Kenyatta's allies talked up this threat as a clear pretext for moving against Odinga in the factional politics of the time.

And yet, this public narrative, and the likelihood of a coup occurring, is only part of the story. What this misses, and the subject of this article, is the British reaction to the idea of a coup. On 5 April, Kenyatta asked the British for a military commitment to support his government if a coup was attempted, and the British government responded by making an extensive military plan to intervene, code-named Operation Binnacle. Although historians of Kenya have recognized the existence of these plans, their conclusions that a coup was unlikely mean they have paid limited attention to the extent of the British response.⁹ This was no piece of political theatre made to discourage a coup: all the British planning was private, shared only with a few leading Kenyans, and some of the planning was not even shared with them. This was a serious British response to the threat, as they saw it, which a coup would cause to their interests. In the mid-1960s cold war, Kenya appeared as possibly the next African country to join the eastern bloc, removing British influence from Kenya and a British ally in Kenyatta.

This article reassesses these plans from the British standpoint as a case study of the logic, and limits, of British military interventionism in the years after decolonization. It explores the rumours of a coup, and the reasons for the British reaction, as well as situating this plan within the context of British military interventionism in the mid-1960s, and finally discussing the plans made by the British government and military for intervening in Kenya. Although a coup was highly unlikely, it is worth taking seriously the attitudes and fears of contemporaries. These are revealing of British concerns about Africa more widely, and of Kenya specifically. In most former British colonies in Africa, the British government had rarely managed to maintain the degree of post-colonial influence hoped for before decolonization. Kenya was an exception where, under Kenyatta's leadership, the British did still have a close relationship which was viewed as worth protecting. The British

government took the idea of a coup seriously, making plans, putting troops on alert, and ready to undertake military action to support Kenyatta's presidency.

Coup rumours

In early 1965, Kenya had been independent for less than two years. The country was led by Kenyatta, and a single party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), since the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) had voluntarily disbanded and crossed the floor in 1964. Despite being a one-party state, KANU was clearly divided, with rival factions based around the 'radical' Odinga and 'conservative' Tom Mboya, Minister for Economic Planning and Development.¹⁰ Kenyatta had supported Odinga immediately after being released from detention in 1961, but by early 1965 saw Odinga as the greater threat and favoured the conservatives.

In late 1964 to early 1965, British observers were uncertain about the stability in Kenya. Gertzel has described the first years of independence as having 'an atmosphere of apparent political crisis'.¹¹ In September 1964, one British diplomat described that 'Kenya at present is temporarily and superficially stable, in the sense that no major upheaval seems likely to occur within the next four months', and 'An Odinga attempt at a coup d'état therefore seems unlikely in the near future'.¹² But longer term forecasting was uncertain, and stability believed to depend on Kenyatta personally. On 24 February 1965, MP Pio Pinto was assassinated.¹³ Pinto had been a leading nationalist since prior to independence, both before and after his imprisonment during Mau Mau. He was a Specially Elected MP and key ally of Odinga, and had extensive external connections due to his involvement in other nationalist causes in India, Goa and Portugal's African colonies. Although two were arrested and one charged with Pinto's murder, there was speculation that the Kenyan political establishment had orchestrated the killing, with Kenyatta's approval.¹⁴ Pinto was described after his death by Britain's Deputy High Commissioner, Henry Stanley, as 'possibly the most dangerous Communist influence in Kenya, because of his acute intelligence and talent for intrigue' and he highlighted 'much concern about this apparent evidence of the introduction of violence into politics'.¹⁵ By 10 March, Stanley reported the possibility of 'quite serious tension and trouble for the Government later this year' although not 'any immediate threat'. He did not speculate openly upon a coup, but that 'failing wise and energetic treatment, these difficulties could boil up into something unpleasant later this year'.¹⁶ In early 1965, although not imminently predicted by British policy-makers, the prospect of a coup appeared within the realm of possibility.

On 5 April, the British High Commissioner in Nairobi, Malcolm MacDonald, met the Kenyan Attorney General, Charles Njonjo. MacDonald telegraphed the Commonwealth Relations Office with a record of their conversation:

there are reports that Mr. Odinga and his associates may attempt some kind of armed or other action to seize power in Kenya during this month of April ... Njonjo said that Kenyatta expresses a strong hope that it might be convenient for a British ship or ships (such as an aircraft carrier) to be in neighbouring waters during this month, as a matter of their routine exercise. If the Government were in serious difficulty here, they would wish to ask for the help of British troops to maintain law and order until the crisis had passed.¹⁷

Kenyatta, via Njonjo, sought British aid in the case of a potential coup, although the word coup was not mentioned in MacDonald's telegram, suggesting perhaps some uncertainty about what form any action would take. Njonjo was one of Kenyatta's closest loyal allies. He was also an Anglophile who dressed in pin-striped suits with a rose in his button-hole, had been educated and practiced as a lawyer in Britain, and had access to British Ministers, Prime Ministers, and the British High Commission in Nairobi. Close British relationships with Njonjo probably encouraged them to take his message seriously.

MacDonald's position was also significant. MacDonald went to Kenya in 1963 as the final Governor, became Kenya's only Governor General and then High Commissioner in 1964. From his arrival, MacDonald had a crucial role in reshaping perceptions in London about Kenya and Kenyatta. While the British government had previously promoted KADU, MacDonald favoured Kenyatta's leadership and KANU success as 'the best result for Kenya'.¹⁸ Indeed, in January 1965, one official recorded that 'Mr. Kenyatta, under the patient guidance of the new Governor, Mr. MacDonald, emerged as a moderate leader pursuing a policy of national reconciliation'.¹⁹ The implication was clear that MacDonald had been instrumental in changing Kenyatta's ideas and attitude—and making these more favourable to British interests. MacDonald also formed a very positive relationship with Kenyatta personally. He wrote warmly about Kenyatta as one of the influential people he had met over his career in his 1972 book *Titans and Others*.²⁰ This relationship was crucial: MacDonald seems to have trusted Njonjo and Kenyatta that a coup was at least possible, even with little other evidence, and MacDonald wanted to show British support for the president. In his telegram to London, he highlighted that 'Although Kenyatta and his principal colleagues are inclined not (repeat not) to take this possibility too seriously they nevertheless feel that they cannot ignore it' and he 'hope[d] that whatever is appropriate and could be quickly effective on the lines suggested can be arranged'. However, he also believed that 'Something of the kind has certainly been considered by Odinga, his Kenyan supporters, and probably their allies outside'.²¹ MacDonald did thus believe that Odinga potentially was, or had been, planning a coup, and the idea of his external allies undoubtedly refers to potential Soviet involvement. MacDonald's views held weight in London as the person who had rightly foreseen—in a way that previous colonial officials had been unable to—that Kenyatta was someone British governments could work well with, and that they should seek to cultivate that relationship.

In London, there was relatively little detailed discussion or analysis of this, although what there was tended to see a coup as unlikely. John Chadwick of the Commonwealth Relations Office wrote an analysis and argued that 'At first sight it would seem unlikely'. However, given the conflict between Kenyan factions, he thought:

it is possible that the extremists might, perhaps as a policy of desperation, make so ill-considered and possibly violent attempt to protect or restore their position, if not to overthrow the government ... I suggest that we should work on the assumption that we would wish to intervene if necessary to prevent the overthrow of the present regime in favour of a minority government of the extremists; that such a risk does exist; and that a contingency plan should be made as soon as possible against such an eventuality ... we must assume for the moment that there is a real danger.²²

London planners recognized that the potential coup was unproven and probably unlikely, but were prepared to act anyway. MacDonald reported a few days later that 'the chances of their being sufficiently ready and capable of mounting a successful coup are

not (repeat not) great; but they may in desperation try something. Or they may be better prepared than we know'.²³ His view evidenced the wider British uncertainty about a coup's likelihood, but because they did consider it a possibility, even if remote, British officials planned to intervene. This explains why such detailed plans were made on the basis of such little evidence, as discussions of how likely a coup attempt actually was were fairly quickly subsumed by planning the military action which would be used if it occurred.

British military interventionism

The Operation Binnacle plans made in 1965 are particularly significant because they serve to challenge the conventional view that the British government had already by 1965 moved away from the idea of military intervention in Africa. After the disasters of Britain's most prominent example of post-war military intervention in Suez in 1956, British planners were more cautious, seeking to ensure the support, or at least acquiescence, of allies, especially America.²⁴ Studies of post-colonial intervention in Africa have pointed to the limited role of Britain compared to other external actors, including France, the USA, USSR and Cuba.²⁵ The exception was British intervention during the East African mutinies in January 1964, with British forces acting in Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya.²⁶ The British 24 Infantry Brigade was already stationed in Kenya, and additional troops and aircraft were sent from Britain. The initial mutinies were expected to be only a precursor, and forces in Malta were to be put on 24-hour alert.²⁷ But British action to stop the mutinies was quickly 'completely successful ... with a minimum of fighting'.²⁸ British support successfully maintained the governments of Presidents Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere and Milton Obote.

This was Britain's only significant post-colonial military intervention in Africa. Indeed, Rouvez has argued that it 'did not herald a new era for British military activism in Africa; it was a final colonial enterprise in which Britain assisted the young East African republics at their own request. It marked the end of British military rule in Africa'.²⁹ It is certainly possible to view this as a final fling of empire, especially in Kenya, which had gained independence only weeks before, and where British troops were still stationed. Other external powers, particularly France, intervened militarily in the continent more frequently. France became 'the most regular and consistent foreign military intervener in Africa' and the most involved of the former European colonial powers.³⁰ Between 1960 and 1991, France 'conducted more than three dozen military interventions in sixteen African countries'.³¹ By comparison, the British seemed to disengage. A clear indication of this came later in 1965 when the British did not use any military action against Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) on 11 November 1965. Prime Minister Harold Wilson had publicly ruled out the use of British force in October 1965, a move which the Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, later described as a 'classic strategic blunder' giving 'the green light' for UDI.³² This lack of involvement seems symptomatic of a reduced priority for Africa in British foreign policy, and a move away from military interventions.

However, there was a brief time in 1964–1965 when British military intervention in Africa was still considered a realistic prospect to plan for. Immediately after the East African mutinies, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) considered future British military action in Africa: 'there may be a requirement for the introduction of British forces into an independent country, normally at the request of the government concerned, with the possible objects of either restoring the authority of a recognised government or protecting British

nationals or both'.³³ The British government was still seriously contemplating future, possibly multiple, African interventions, with no planned policy of disengagement. After the coup in Zanzibar in 1964, the British made plans for military intervention, going through 'nine months of contingency planning and changing readiness states', although never actually intervening.³⁴ Speller argues that British interests in Zanzibar, unlike in mainland East Africa, were not extensive enough to merit the intervention actually being carried out, while the lack of a request made this more difficult and liable to criticism.³⁵ Nonetheless, it was seriously contemplated. Plans also existed for military action in Rhodesia. Watts has rejected the contention that the British military would have been unable to intervene in response to UDI, arguing that this was a choice dominated by economic difficulties, political and electoral concerns; 'even though the circumstances were not particularly favourable to military intervention ... [it] was practicable and likely to have succeeded'.³⁶ As late as January 1966, the Defence Planning Staff on the Chiefs of Staff Committee argued that 'Our existing plans form a realistic basis for the rapid unopposed introduction of a battalion group for internal security purposes into either Zambia or Rhodesia'.³⁷ Plans did still exist for military intervention in Africa.

British politicians and the military continued to view military action as part of Britain's 'world role', particularly in the region east of Suez. In February 1964, with British forces in Cyprus, Malaysia and East Africa, Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home publicly declared his hope 'that the Commonwealth countries understand that when the chips are down, the Commonwealth can rely on Britain'.³⁸ Wilson, who came to office later in 1964, told the House of Commons: 'I want to make it quite clear that whatever we may do in the field of cost effectiveness, value for money and a stringent review of expenditure, we cannot afford to relinquish our world rôle', part of which was the ability for military intervention.³⁹ Financial restraints were increasingly apparent, and Wilson was looking for savings, initiating a Defence Review with the aim of restricting the defence budget to £2 billion (in 1964 prices) by 1970.⁴⁰ Yet, even in this Defence Review, the Defence Planning Staff continued to stress the importance they placed on Britain being able to intervene militarily overseas, arguing that:

Our influence in the world at large depends generally upon foreign assessments of our strength ... we need a military capability not only in order to protect our national interests, eg Persian Gulf, and to fulfil our commitments, eg BAOR [British Army of the Rhine], but also to demonstrate that our friendship is worth having and that our opposition could be formidable.⁴¹

For defence planners, the ability to intervene overseas was essential to the projection of British power and they argued that Britain should continue to have a military force capable of this. This was, of course, prior to the most radical re-think of British defence capabilities, with the 'landmark' decision made public in 1967 to withdraw from east of Suez.⁴² In the mid-1960s, there was still the prospect of a more substantial British commitment to post-colonial Africa.

It is also worth noting that the Operation Binnacle plans were not the only British military intervention plans to exist in mid-1965: there were also plans for Kuwait. The British military had already intervened in Kuwait in 1961 in 'the largest scale mobilization of British forces in the Middle East in the post-Suez era'.⁴³ The Exchange of Notes between Britain and Kuwait at independence included a British commitment to protect Kuwait

militarily if requested. Only months later, this occurred in fear of and to pre-empt a possible Iraqi invasion, and despite what has since been seen as a 'lack of evidence of a tangible military threat from Iraq'.⁴⁴ The British government continued to maintain plans for intervention in Kuwait, based on their obligation under the Exchange of Notes. These plans were initially laid in October 1961 and revised in April 1964 with the aim being 'to preserve the existing regime and to deter external aggression'.⁴⁵ By then, this was not in response to any specific imminent threat, but rather a general plan in case of an attempted coup and possible Iraqi intervention.⁴⁶ These appear to be the only two occasions in April 1965 where this kind of intervention was being seriously planned for. These were also interlinked: intervening in Kenya would mean troops were not available to go to Kuwait simultaneously, but MOD viewed this as an 'acceptable' risk.⁴⁷

British reactions

The idea of a Kenyan coup activated many contemporary British fears. The leadership of Kenya was at stake and, at its simplest level, the rationale for military intervention was the same as that which Ashton argues led to intervention in Jordan in 1958 and Kuwait in 1961: 'to maintain in power a regime friendly to British interests'.⁴⁸ The British had found this in Kenyatta's regime and Odinga threatened this. Despite colonial fears about Kenyatta, typified by Governor Patrick Renison's description of him in 1960 as 'the African leader to darkness and death',⁴⁹ by 1965 British assessments of Kenyatta were positive and diplomats viewed him as the guarantor of British interests and stability. Kenyatta himself made the request for support in a coup attempt, and any refusal by Britain to act could have appeared as a lack of commitment to him personally. British suspicion of Odinga had also begun during the colonial period, but had not been re-evaluated as he became the epitome of the 'radical' Kenyan politician. Odinga cultivated Soviet and Chinese connections for their financial benefits, despite not being an ideological convert,⁵⁰ and it seemed probable that Odinga would turn Kenya away from Britain were he to gain the leadership. He thus appeared through British eyes to pose a direct threat to their interests. British planners were acting both to preserve the existing situation and to protect it from potential encroachment and change.

Predominant among British concerns was the cold war. Schmitz has argued that 1964–1965 was a time of particular concern about Soviet and Chinese 'efforts to foment revolutions throughout sub-Saharan Africa'.⁵¹ Fear of Soviet support for a coup was a key British concern. Soviet and Chinese influence in Africa was growing, and both countries had made financial offers to Kenya in 1964.⁵² It was the 'Russian offer of an arms gift' in 1965 which made rumours of a coup appear feasible.⁵³ Although Kenya's nominal and public Cold War position was 'non-alignment',⁵⁴ Kenyatta's policies signalled his Western, and especially British, alignment. Kenyan political divisions meant that Kenyatta was aligned with the western bloc, Odinga with the eastern. If the USSR was intending to sponsor a coup in Kenya, this could reshape the country's political allegiances and have potentially wider regional repercussions. Rumours of a coup had significant cold war overtones, and this explains the British reaction.

These cold war fears had already been triggered in the 1964 Kenyan army mutiny. Then, the immediate British reaction was to suspect communist involvement and question 'whether we are faced with a widespread communist plot'.⁵⁵ Although they fairly quickly

recognized that this was not the case, and that 'Odinga [is] not repeat not [a] Communist puppet', he remained partially implicated in their eyes.⁵⁶ Diplomats were also concerned by Paul Ngei, a leading Kamba politician who had been detained with Kenyatta during Mau Mau. He was particularly significant here because the largest ethnic group in the Kenyan Army was Kamba, due to colonial ideas of the Kamba as a 'martial race'.⁵⁷ Thus, as Branch has argued, in 1964–1965, 'if the soldiers owed personal loyalty to any individual ... it was to Paul Ngei'.⁵⁸ After the mutiny, British diplomats speculated that Odinga and Ngei 'have been engaged recently in sowing discontent among Kenya Rifles as part of plot to take over Government'.⁵⁹ Given this prior view, it should be less surprising that British officials did not simply rule out a coup: they had previously believed Odinga and Ngei capable of plotting to overthrow the government, backed by communists, and so saw the possibility of this again. The British government believed, influenced by the cold war and Kenya's 1964 army mutiny, that Odinga might desire a coup.

They were also concerned that Odinga might have the support for a coup. Of particular concern was that Odinga had led a programme of eastern bloc scholarships from the early 1960s, so that by the start of 1965 there were 'thought to be 1,500 Kenya students in Communist countries',⁶⁰ with fears among other Kenyans and the British that at least some of them received military training.⁶¹ Although Kenyatta was suspicious of them on their return and they were not integrated into the army, these were potential supporters and actors in a coup. MacDonald later argued that, 'Odinga probably expected that such students would be accepted into the Kenya armed forces, that they would constitute a fifth column for him there, and that they would be in a position to use the Communist arms in his cause'.⁶² British diplomats were suspicious of Odinga's motives; believing him to be capable of planning a coup and potentially having the resources to carry this out.

To contemporaries, a coup therefore appeared more likely than it has subsequently. The lesson of Zanzibar and the East African mutinies was that in the febrile political circumstances of newly independent states, coups and mutinies could happen suddenly, with minimal planning, and success or failure could be contingent to some degree on chance. As Kposowa and Jenkins have argued, 'coups are a process that begins with plots, then turns into open attempts, and, finally, culminates in successful seizures'.⁶³ Coups were not always foreseen or predicted, and by their nature were secretive until they occurred; this meant rumours could acquire a significance out of proportion to realities. Nugent has argued of Africa at this time that 'mounting a coup was actually not that difficult'.⁶⁴ Although lacking much in the way of evidence, British policy-makers were unwilling to simply ignore the possibility; by the time there was conclusive evidence, it might have been too late to intervene. Discussing British intervention in Kuwait in 1961, Ashton argues that the British viewed it as 'best to act in haste rather than repent at leisure', and this same logic can be applied to Kenya.⁶⁵

A further reason a coup attempt in Kenya would be particularly destabilizing to British interests was the presence of a sizable European population in Kenya. Colonial policy had often focused on the Europeans, and in the years leading to independence colonial officials and ministers had been concerned to ensure their protection. The British government implemented and funded 'willing-buyer, willing-seller' land transfer programmes, meaning Europeans would be paid for selling their land and these were continued by Kenyatta after independence.⁶⁶ Land settlement, incidentally, was the main issue being discussed in the British Parliament regarding Kenya in April 1965.⁶⁷ More significantly, a coup could

endanger European lives. Wingen and Tillema have argued more generally that Britain 'tended to intervene where she had more citizens', and Kenya fits this pattern.⁶⁸ In January 1964, the Commonwealth Relations Office had argued that the Europeans' 'continued safety and welfare largely depends on the ability of the Kenya Government to maintain law and order'.⁶⁹ The 'UK Eyes Only' supplementary to a December 1964 Directive to the British Training Team in Kenya stated that 'circumstances might arise under which the Team might be called upon by the British High Commissioner to assist, in so far as they are able, in the protection of British lives and property in Kenya'.⁷⁰ Protecting British citizens was a key feature of planning for military action, and plans existed for both civil and military evacuations from across East and Southern Africa.⁷¹ A coup and change of leadership had the potential to endanger the lives of Europeans in Kenya, or the stability on which their continued presence and prosperity seemed to rely.

A successful coup would also jeopardize, and possibly terminate, the substantial military relationship Britain continued to have with Kenya. In the aftermath of the 1964 mutiny, the two governments signed a Memorandum of Intention and Understanding which secured key strategic benefits for Britain, including overflying and air-staging rights, while offering Kenya British training and finance.⁷² The British military did not have a continuous presence in Kenya, as they had until December 1964, but were given permission to train twice yearly in Kenya.⁷³ For MOD, this was a key priority. There were also British military personnel serving within the Kenyan military, including as Commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force. The British military additionally supplied a training team to Kenya and this gave significant influence, as a military trained and equipped by the British would be likely to continue working with British troops and equipment. This would be challenged if Soviet arms and training personnel were accepted. There was also some British support for Kenya's military in fighting the *shifita* conflict.⁷⁴ Military ties were key to the 1965 planning for a coup response: they were a benefit the British government hoped to maintain, but they also made intervention more achievable than elsewhere. Although there was no British military presence in Kenya as there had been during the 1964 mutiny, there was an extensive military relationship on which to base plans.

The British government had also already signalled a sense of commitment to supporting Kenya's government. The British were under no formal obligation to assist Kenya in an attempted coup. The Nigerian defence agreement had been the most significant British attempt at a formal military agreement, but this had failed under pressure from Nigerians,⁷⁵ and thereafter the government was 'careful to avoid formal written agreements with newly independent Commonwealth territories in Africa'.⁷⁶ Although colonial officials had hoped to maintain access to the Kahawa base in Kenya, this had not succeeded in the face of Kenyan opposition.⁷⁷ However, the 1964 Memorandum of Understanding stipulated that Britain would 'make available British troops stationed in Kenya to assist the Kenya Government in dealing with internal disturbances'.⁷⁸ This was clearly a reaction to the mutiny and suggests that neither government was entirely certain of stability. This did not promise troops from Britain in the circumstances of a coup, but did indicate something of a continuing British commitment to Kenya's internal security. The mutiny and Memorandum also evidenced to Kenyatta that in such a crisis he could call on the British military for support.

Intervention plans

After receiving Kenyatta's request, the British government immediately began to consider their response and make plans. The Defence Operations Executive met on 8 April and divided Kenyatta's request into two separate requests: the first for ships, the second for troops on the ground. This meeting considered that sending ships could act 'as a demonstration and possible deterrent to any attempt by extremists to over-throw the Kenya Government, although the possibility could not be ruled out that the provision of these ships might provoke the action it was designed to deter'.⁷⁹ They decided, however, that the benefits of sending ships were greater than the possible risks. This open display of British military power and support was clearly requested by Kenyatta to provide a very visual 'reminder to Odinga that the President has friends handy'.⁸⁰ Whether this did have an impact on any potential plotting is unknown, but it was certainly intended as a disincentive. American and Russian ships also arrived in Mombasa, and the possibility of external military action must thus have been obvious. Sending ships was also an easier and less controversial action for the British military to take than putting boots on the ground. *HMS Anzio* was already scheduled to visit Mombasa between 10 and 21 April, but MOD additionally reviewed the positions of other ships, and diverted *HMS Albion* for a few days en route to Singapore.⁸¹ MacDonald discussed this with Njonjo, who 'tells me that Kenyatta will be very grateful'.⁸² MacDonald was also informed that 'three further ships could reach Kenya waters in the near future at short notice if a real emergency arose', although interestingly this information was not to be shared with Kenyatta.⁸³ Even Britain's closest Kenyan allies were not kept fully informed, highlighting the secrecy with which British plans were made.

A ground intervention force was the more complex decision, but MOD barely hesitated in making plans. In the initial meeting of the Defence Operations Executive on 8 April, three days after Njonjo's request, 'the Chief of the Defence Staff has instructed the Defence Planning Staff to prepare an outline plan to provide British Military assistance to Kenya, should a formal request be received'.⁸⁴ Njonjo had stressed that what he was asking was 'not a formal request', which it 'would be politically inexpedient' to make preemptively; though should 'a critical situation' occur, Kenyatta would make a request as he had during the mutinies.⁸⁵ For the British government, receiving a formal request was a prerequisite for action.⁸⁶ This was one of the main issues highlighted by Wingen and Tillema's study of British interventionism. They examined Britain's military interventions from 1945 to 1970, with 34 military interventions of varying size, including within the empire, and noted four characteristics which made British military intervention more likely: intervention within the empire or in former colonial territories; receiving a request for intervention; political violence occurring in the country where intervention would occur; and the presence of British military forces already in position.⁸⁷ In Kenya in 1965, these preconditions would be met if a coup occurred, but Kenyatta would need to make a formal request before British troops would be engaged.

British plans for intervention were detailed and considered, laid by MOD and agreed by ministers. By 9 April, MOD had created a plan, Operation Binnacle, for the deployment of troops, should these be required.⁸⁸ One battalion could arrive from Aden after 36 hours with no prior warning, or after 15–18 hours if they had 48 hours' notice. If necessary, another battalion could be sent from the UK.⁸⁹ However, immediately from this first

meeting, the limitations and restrictions of any possible intervention were being considered. The 'Planning Assumptions' were that: 'we would wish to intervene to prevent overthrow of Government by extremists, provided we could achieve this within our means and without getting involved in protracted operations against rebels ... Our intervention should take a precisely-defined form for a precisely-defined object'.⁹⁰ Military planners were looking to limit the scope of any intervention, and to ensure this remained within the boundaries they wanted. The guidelines for intervention were rigidly defined:

The role of our battalion would have to be restricted to:

- (a) releasing Kenya forces and police for action against the rebels;
- (b) guarding Kenyatta and friendly Ministers as well as public buildings and other key points in Nairobi;
- (c) maintaining control over the airport.

Our troops could not operate outside Nairobi or be drawn into a long guerrilla-type campaign. Nor could they be used to arrest or fight the dissidents except in self-defence.⁹¹

Despite their willingness to intervene, MOD was cautious about the scale of any involvement—a caution probably encouraged by their prior experience during Mau Mau of a 'long guerrilla-type campaign'.⁹² Early information about a coup would be essential, as MOD argued that British forces 'cannot "reconquer" Kenya for President Kenyatta'.⁹³ As the British military was prepared only to prevent a coup, not to reverse one, they needed to be in position quickly or they would be too late.

The logistics were in place to make intervention feasible, thanks to continued military connections and access to facilities. In April 1965, around '150 British officers and NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] are on secondment to the Kenya Army as a Training Team'.⁹⁴ However, the British military presence had declined since the mutinies so that 'intervention will only succeed if everything possible is done by the Kenyan Government, to limit and simplify the task of the troops'.⁹⁵ MOD was clear that the Kenyan military must play a significant part, with British forces cast in a supporting role. Although not always planning in tandem with the Kenyan military, its assistance was essential if British forces were to intervene successfully. The troops would 'come under the operational command of the British Commander of the Kenya Army thereby clearly demonstrating our role in assisting the Kenya Government'.⁹⁶ Partly, this was because British planners were cautious about the scale of their involvement and thus wanted to highlight their 'assisting' role. However, the Commander of the Kenya Army was British, and, as was later stipulated, 'these arrangements of course apply only for so long as a British officer retains command of the Kenya Army'.⁹⁷ While keen to look as though they were acting with the Kenyan government and military, and indeed to be doing so, MOD strategists were also sure that British troops would remain under British command.

The attitude of the Kenyan military to any coup attempt would be crucial.⁹⁸ British policy-makers anticipated Kenyan military personnel remaining largely in favour of Kenyatta. Since the mutiny, Kenyatta and the British had focused on ensuring an apolitical military,⁹⁹ and the British presence and leadership in the Kenyan military meant they could probably count on much of the military supporting the government rather than a coup. The British officers serving in the Kenyan military made the loyalty of the military leadership beyond question: this would be to Britain and, by extension, to Kenyatta and so would oppose a

coup. Decalo has argued that 'the fact that there were usually resident/visiting British forces in the country deterred casual coupmanship attempts'.¹⁰⁰ British military leadership would certainly have made planning a coup more difficult as it would have been hard to secure support at a high level. Parsons has agreed that 'British military ties reassured Kenyatta that his political rivals would not be able to turn the army against him'.¹⁰¹ This was particularly important because there may well have been criticism of British involvement. Accusations of neo-colonialism were increasing, including Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, published in 1965.¹⁰² The presence of British military troops had been one of the complaints of the mutineers in January 1964.¹⁰³ Parsons has suggested what a 'difficult step' it was for the three East African leaders to request British assistance during the mutinies; a sign of their own military weakness and reliance.¹⁰⁴ After the British intervention then, 'both Kenyatta and Mboya are frightened of the criticisms they are receiving ... about the decision to ask for British military help'.¹⁰⁵ Calling upon British assistance would not be popular and would be likely to lead to criticism.

There were additionally British Special Air Service (SAS) troops in Kenya in April 1965 training Kenya's General Service Unit (GSU). The GSU was intended 'to provide a body-guard for the President and to act as a counter revolutionary force'.¹⁰⁶ That the British SAS was providing their training hints again at the strength of Anglo-Kenyan military connections. The British Defence Advisor in Nairobi quickly asked whether the SAS in Kenya 'would be free to act in support of counter-sabotage forces they are training if a coup d'état threatened'.¹⁰⁷ Here was the potential for British troops already in Kenya to become involved in resisting any potential coup. The Memorandum of Understanding had explicitly stated that British troops on the ground would assist in such circumstances. MacDonald gave the order that if SAS troops were asked, 'acting on President's instructions, to take some immediate action to protect President or his Ministers against attempted assassination or to maintain stability of Government they should if satisfied this [is] absolutely necessary act on those orders immediately and inform me as soon as possible thereafter'.¹⁰⁸ British SAS troops were thus given permission to act without prior consultation or approval from the British government if they viewed this as essential. It seems from this that MacDonald must have believed there was the potential for a coup or assassination attempt to occur, and also shows how quickly such a situation could have spiralled away from London's control. In London, however, briefing noted that the SAS must be bound by the same rules of engagement as other troops; namely that 'nor could they be used to arrest or fight the dissidents except in self-defence'.¹⁰⁹

On 9 April, MacDonald spoke again to Njonjo and asked for the 'latest appreciation of the time when trouble (if any) might start'. Njonjo responded that a coup could occur 'any time from "mid-April" onwards', potentially in the next week, although 'the situation this morning seemed rather more relaxed than it appeared a day or two earlier'.¹¹⁰ As this suggests, even after a few days Njonjo seemed more confident in the government's stability and was not urgently pushing the British to action. In the British High Commission in Nairobi, too, there was no immediate expectation of a coup. By 12 April, there was 'open and active ... confrontation between the Odinga faction and the moderates'.¹¹¹ But Stanley reported on the same day that 'Matters have so far gone remarkably well. Kenyatta is decisively on top'.¹¹² MacDonald and Njonjo met again on 14 April when MacDonald informed Njonjo categorically that 'a battalion of British troops is ready at 48 hours notice in Aden to

fly to Nairobi if and when a formal request is made'.¹¹³ The Kenyan government's intelligence suggested the following day, 15 April, as 'one possible date for the action', although Njonjo now thought this unlikely.¹¹⁴ It seems that, in response, the British government suggested changing the readiness of British troops to eight hours in case of an attempt the following day. Kenyatta, however, did not see this as necessary: 'in Kenyatta's view the Opposition have become rather "frightened" and it is very unlikely that they will act tomorrow'.¹¹⁵ They did not. But on 15 April, the Director of Operations in Aden decided that 'all binnacle forces within the command should meanwhile remain at 24 hours notice until BHC [British High Commission] Nairobi indicates that the situation warrants forces being at the reduced notice'.¹¹⁶ These were reduced to 48 hours' notice on 24 April and thus spent nine further days on alert for a Kenyan coup.¹¹⁷ On 29 April, Kenyatta asked if British troops 'can remain at 48 hours' notice', clearly unwilling to yet relinquish the prospect of British support, should this become necessary.¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, Kenyatta and his elite—with support from the British—took action against Soviet influence. The exact reason for the arrival of the *Fizik Lebedev* into Mombasa is unclear: according to MacDonald, Njonjo and other moderates were 'taken completely by surprise' by the arrival of a Soviet training team.¹¹⁹ Hornsby states that Odinga had organized the arms shipment without the knowledge of other ministers, but Branch argues that it was actually part of an arms deal made in 1964.¹²⁰ The timing, however, made this appear suspicious. The British High Commission investigated the Russians who arrived, and informed Njonjo that three were 'suspected of being intelligence officers'. According to MacDonald, 'President Kenyatta and his most confidential Ministerial colleagues were very grateful for that information'.¹²¹ The British were also involved in the rejection of the Soviet arms shipment. However, their involvement was not as simple or unidirectional as Branch suggests in his comment that 'officials at the [British] High Commission pressured the president to publicly reject the weapons'.¹²² In addition, the British had a more subtle, behind-the-scenes role. Before the arms were rejected, they were inspected by some leading Kenyan politicians and the Commander of the Kenyan Army, who was to recommend whether to accept or reject the arms.¹²³ The Commander of the Kenyan Army, Brigadier Hardy, was British. That a Briton was to assess the equipment was perhaps already a sign that it was unlikely to be accepted. More significantly, MacDonald was again approached by Njonjo, this time also with Bruce McKenzie, Kenya's white Minister for Agriculture, with a close relationship with Britain and key member of Kenyatta's elite. Again, they requested British action, with MacDonald asked: 'to convey privately and unofficially to Brigadier Hardy that he should give an honest opinion about the utility of the various items of equipment, but with a prejudice in favour of rejecting each and every item as not sufficiently useful'.¹²⁴ MacDonald passed on the message, and the weapons were publicly rejected by Kenyatta for being old and not useful. If this had been a plan by the Soviet Union for a revolution, or even to disrupt the British position as leading military ally in Kenya, it had failed absolutely.

Soon, any threat of a coup dissipated. By 5 May, exactly one month after Njonjo's initial approach, MacDonald judged that 'whatever is the truth about the plan for a "coup d'état", the preparations for it have now gone hopelessly awry'.¹²⁵ It was long after the rumour of a coup had passed that MacDonald conducted an extensive analysis of this. In his despatch on 'Plans for a coup d'état in Kenya?', sent on 28 June, MacDonald highlighted that the key 'evidence' which sparked Njonjo's approach was 'a letter from a

conspiratorial colleague' to Pinto, which 'suggests that some sinister action – which the Kenyan authorities interpreted as perhaps a "coup d'état" – might have been planned'.¹²⁶ It is unclear who sent this letter beyond 'one of Mr. Odinga's friends', exactly what it contained, or even if MacDonald himself saw it.¹²⁷ This had not been pointed to in April, and, as one of the officials in London minuted, 'there is quite a lot in the introductory paragraphs which now seems to have come to light for the first time'.¹²⁸ MacDonald 'doubt[ed] whether April was a fixed date', but did still believe that Odinga had hoped for 'a political overthrow of President Kenyatta's Government. I believe that the plotters expected the overthrow to be possible by more or less constitutional means, and that the arms and trainees were merely to give them extra assurance and backing if required'.¹²⁹ MacDonald viewed Pinto's 'despicable but timely' assassination as one reason a coup had not been attempted.¹³⁰ However, MacDonald saw the episode as beneficial for Britain and argued that 'Kenyatta and his principal colleagues' confidence in our wise and effective friendship has been further increased'.¹³¹ The British government had given evidence of Kenya's significance to them and their willingness to support Kenyatta. Soviet influence had been largely expelled from Kenya, and the British had cemented their position as Kenyatta's leading ally.

On 10 May, MOD decided that although they no longer expected an immediate coup, 'the plan should still be issued since a potential threat continues and similar alarms could arise in the future'.¹³² Binnacle plans thus remained in place. The possibility of a coup was reviewed in January 1966 and considered 'unlikely', but the idea did not completely dissipate.¹³³ In 1970, it 'remains practicable to deploy forces of this size to Kenya'.¹³⁴ A British plan for intervention in response to Kenyan internal unrest existed until 1971, when it was 'cancelled because present day political and military considerations made it no longer realistic to plan for this contingency'.¹³⁵ Notably, this was a few months after rumours of another coup plot surfaced, one which had taken the British government by surprise.¹³⁶ This was also when they cancelled the ongoing plans for Kuwait and when the British withdrew from the east of Suez, meaning intervention would have been harder to implement thereafter. Until then, the possibility remained of British military intervention to maintain the Kenyatta state.

Conclusion

With hindsight, it is possible to see the coup as a rumour blown out of proportion. In 1965, however, this was not so apparent. The rumours did prove of some use to Kenyatta, Njonjo and the Kenyan elite who opposed Odinga as they moved to limit his power and influence. Odinga challenged Kenyatta in the following year, but in a political rather than military form, when he resigned from the vice presidency and formed an opposition party, the Kenya People's Union. But in 1969, Kenyatta banned the party and Odinga was arrested. Odinga's influence was at its height in 1965, and a coup thus seemed a realistic possibility. This speaks to the importance of recognizing and taking seriously the concerns of contemporaries. Although the coup was most likely largely fictional, it was treated seriously in London, and the concerns of contemporary policy-makers are worth engaging with. For British officials, a coup seemed a possibility, and if it occurred, it would threaten their substantial interests and significant relationships in Kenya. Although Kenya has tended to be seen as a country of stability within Africa, in 1965, this trajectory was much

less apparent. Rather, the factional rivalries and involvement of external powers suggested a situation of uncertainty and instability.

Although the Operation Binnacle plans were never implemented, they also reveal that the British government in early 1965 had not yet disengaged completely from the idea of military intervention in Africa. This would occur only in situations where the benefits of intervention would outweigh the negative side of the balance sheet, with a calculation that the costs—financial, military, political and international—would be worthwhile, so that non-intervention would prove a greater threat to perceived British interests than action. As Wingen and Tillema have argued, ‘British military action was highly selective as to time and place’, and at this moment in Kenya, British interests seemed to be best served by planning to intervene.¹³⁷ The extent of British interests in Kenya encouraged the British government to react to the Kenyan request for assistance in 1965, and the extent of British planning reveals the lengths to which they were prepared to go to protect these. For the British government, getting involved could be criticized and potentially difficult, but could also limit Soviet influence, secure their own interests, and cement relationships with Kenyatta, who was already becoming the leading British ally in the region. This article thus highlights the importance of plans, even those not carried out. Behind the scenes and without being made public, the British military was readying itself for action, and the plans being made involved the British cabinet and highest levels of the military. Although there was no British military intervention in Kenya in 1965, this was contingent on events in Kenya rather than a lack of will in the British government.

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Notes

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Justin Willis and Øystein H. Rolandsen and the anonymous reviewers at *The International History Review* for comments on earlier versions of this article, and John Darwin and Rachel Johnson.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AHU/AHRC2011/000180788].