

# THE SPECTATOR

## **Jeremy Corbyn is wrong about the evils of the British Empire**

By Sam Akaki



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Under a Corbyn government, we learn today, historical ‘injustice’, colonialism and the role of the British Empire will be taught in the national curriculum. It’s quite staggering: anti-Britishness will be taught in British schools. Make no mistake: this would not be the story of Africa. It would be political propaganda designed to do Britain down.

I loathe identity politics, but I have to say: a lot of the people making the Corbynite proposals are white. Perhaps as a proud African Brit, the descendant of people who received the British and then fought against them in Uganda, I might have ‘privilege’ – as the Corbynistas would doubtless say – to point to another side to the story.

Before the British and other western powers arrived, much of Africa was a borderless wilderness inhabited by warring tribes and clans who were collectively vulnerable to killer tropical diseases, blinded by ignorance and often enslaved by superstition. It was the British Church Missionary Society, followed by colonial demonstrators who risked their lives in deeply inhospitable territory seeking to liberate fellow human beings from the bondage of poverty. They pioneered education and modern health service and introduced cash crops, industrialisation and English as a unifying language.

The Corbyn agenda will doubtless focus heavily on slavery, making out that it was an evil that sprang from the blackness of British hearts. For the real story, don’t take it from me. Read the renowned African-American academic, Dr Thomas Sowell, himself a descendant of the transatlantic slave trade, who has intensively written about the history, magnitude and scope of slavery down the ages.

As Dr Sowell shows, slavery was never about race or creed. Rather, it was about the competition for power and accumulation of wealth. Larger, more

organised and better armed groups attacked, killed, robbed, enslaved and humiliated the weaker ones. Europeans once enslaved other Europeans, Asians enslaved other Asians, African enslaved other Africans, indigenous peoples of the western hemispheres enslaved other indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere. People were a commodity, in every culture in the world.

Sadiq Khan, Labour's Mayor of London, has supported proposals for a museum of slavery. If one is built, I hope it tells the full story. That Slavs were so widely used as slaves both in Europe and the Islamic world that the very word "slaves" comes from the word for "Slavs", not only in English, but also in other European languages – German, Italian – as well as in Arabic. Roman conquerors enslaved the proud but weak British tribes used them as slave labour to build roads, forts, baths and to work in the mines or as during their 400-year long occupation and exploitation in this island.

It's a fair bet that the Corbynite history books will start the history of slavery at the dawn of the British Empire. Children won't be told that at least a million Europeans were enslaved by North African pirates from the 15th to the 18th century and some Europeans were still being sold on the auction blocks in Egypt long after the emancipation to free African slaves in the United States.

I know as a fact that my chiefly ancestors in Uganda were owners of slaves captured in war, or received as reparation in exchange for our relatives (who had been killed by the opposing clans and tribes).

In his book *Empire*, Niall Ferguson has this to say:

*"Today, per capita GDP in Britain is roughly 28 times what it is in Zambia. But to blame this on the legacy of colonialism is not very persuasive when the differential between British and Zambian incomes was so much smaller at the end of the colonial period. In 1955, British per capita GDP was just seven times greater than Zambian. It has been since independence that the gap between the coloniser and ex-colony has become a gulf. The same is true of nearly all colonies in sub-Saharan Africa."*

It is a complicated picture. But one theme emerges: that the British Empire, while it lasted, made Africa a far better place for Africans.