Establishing Empathy: Education, Emotions and Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
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Abstract

The Consequences of Imperial Empathy during the British end of Empire

On 3 May 1961 the UK Colonial Office wrote to the British Colonial Governments of Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Zanzibar, and to the East Africa High Commission regarding the destruction and removal of classified documents before Africanization expelled colonial administrators from office.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Colonial Office instructed authorized officers to remove records which might *embarrass Her Majesty’s Government* (HMG)*.* The instructions therefore assumed that certain individuals within the colonial service would be able to understand and interpret *embarrassment* on behalf of the UK government, personified by Queen Elizabeth II. Officers’ eligibility to purge records was determined by their rank within the colonial service, their race, and their Britishness, i.e., higher ranked White British officers. As one such administrator remarked, “when it comes to the point [of determining embarrassment], one is driven back upon subjective judgement and some degree of instinct based on experience.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In this case, the categories of colonial difference that had been fundamental in establishing Britain’s empire were summoned and reinscribed through the documentary curation of decolonization.

The process of mass record destruction and removal at the end of Britain’s colonial empire can be examined as a collective action empathy exercise, wherein the UK Colonial Office asked its servants to take the perspective of HMG in order to prevent political embarrassment for the UK and reaffirm allegiance to the metropole as the empire failed. In doing so, the consequences of this empathy come into clearer view. The record purge resulted in the removal of thousands of files from the former colonies to London. In the Kenyan case, these files consisted of evidence related to the small war leading up to independence, including records of detention camps, extrajudicial killings, and the sanctified use of torture. Jordanna Bailkin describes the period during which this record removal exercise took place as the convergence of decolonization, welfare, humanitarianism and human rights.[[3]](#footnote-3) By instructing late colonial officers to empathize with and protect HMG, the UK government created a moral ground for the suppression of legal evidence with the effect of delaying and/or preventing human rights interventions related to colonial rule. This paper will examine an imperial notion of empathy by examining the interplay between colonial officers facing the end of their careers and the UK government facing the end of its empire in an international context increasingly hostile towards both.

1. Shohei Sato (2017) ‘Operation Legacy’: Britain’s Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide, The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 45:4, 697-719, DOI: [10.1080/03086534.2017.1294256](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2017.1294256) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Britain’s National Archives, FCO 141 6970, File note, Gavaghan, 9 November 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jordanna Bailkin. *The Afterlife of Empire.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)