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Colonial Office Records

The Colonial Office was the government department responsible for Britain’s colonies at various points throughout the 18th to 20th centuries. It issued instructions to colonial governors, authorised expenditures, and determined the broad direction of policy for the Empire.

In this episode, we look at three documents that provide insight into the experiences of people living under British rule: a 1921 letter from black sailors in Wales to the Prime Minister; a 17th-century slave-trading ship's journal; and service records of African soldiers fighting in World War I.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [CO 323/885](#), [T 70/1211](#), [CO 1069/65](#)

If you’re interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode, take a look at our research guides to [Slavery and the British transatlantic slave trade](#), [Colonies and dependencies from 1782](#) and [Soldiers in African forces under British control](#). Our guides are presented in a very factual manner and do not address the horrors and violence of some of the topics covered. However, by sharing these resources we hope to support your further study.

For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcription

[Teaser clips, montage from episode interviews]

Jessamy: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Jessamy Carlson.

Roger: And I'm Roger Kershaw.

Jessamy and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Jessamy: In this episode, we're taking a closer look at the records of Britain's Colonial Office. At different points in the 18th to 20th centuries, this was the government department responsible for Britain's colonies. It issued instructions to colonial governors, authorised expenditures, and determined the broad direction of policy for the Empire. Though the Colonial Office only existed under that name between 1768 and 1966, our CO collection contains records from 1570 all the way up to 1990.

Roger: But this isn't an episode about the office's complicated timeline. In this podcast, we will be looking at the lives of everyday people living under British rule.

As part of the episode, we will address themes and information concerning discrimination, death, and enslavement, which you may find upsetting to hear. We acknowledge that it is distressing but we believe that it is important to look at all history and to learn from it going forward.

We'll start with a 1921 letter from Black sailors in Wales to the Prime Minister...a letter strongly influenced by the Black Nationalist movement called Garveyism.

Then we'll take a closer look at the journal of a 17th-century slave-trading ship and what it can tell us about the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

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After that, we'll learn about African soldiers fighting in the First World War.

And finally, you'll learn more about how to explore this collection on your own.

Jessamy: Now, let's get right into our first story, which starts with a letter from a group of Black sailors. It was written in 1921.

Iqbal: I'm Iqbal Singh. I'm the regional community partnerships manager at the National Archives.

Here we have a letter from a group of men from Cardiff who are part of what is an emerging Black working class. And they are writing to the Prime Minister of the day, basically setting out their grievances. Their concern is that they're not finding employment. But uniquely in this letter, what they're setting out is that if employment can't be found for them, they basically want their passage to be made to Africa.

The letter is signed by a group of men, and from exploring the 1921 census, which was recently opened, it is possible to find out a little more about most of them. So the author, his name is Bernard Mason, and he's the writer. He is the youngest of the group, aged 27, and appears to be the most qualified. He works as a motor mechanic and is from Nassau in the Bahamas. The others, who are co-signatories, are all seamen and variously aged 28, 31, and 37. The majority are married to women from Cardiff or Liverpool and say that they are from St. Vincent's in British West Indies, Demerara, British Guiana, and Barbados. They come from various parts of the British Empire and at the time the census was taken, at least three of the five signatories are unemployed.

Finally, it's interesting to note that the letter that is replied back to these men from the Colonial Office basically says that we cannot help the men and the best they can do is advise the men to seek repatriation.

Roger: So let's look at the letter itself. What specific issues does the group bring up and how do they make their case?

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Iqbal: This is a very unique piece of writing. I've studied a number of letters from the time that similarly address issues of unemployment and we have in the past used these in our projects and previous podcasts, but I've never read anything quite like this.

The letter opens with a straightforward address to the Prime Minister, and here I'm quoting from the actual document. "I am requested by the undersigned men of my race, whose signature will be noticed attached to this letter as a man of my people, to inform you of the existing circumstances here in Cardiff, among men."

So this really sets the tone immediately when the author refers to 'my people' and 'as a man of my people.' And the letter continues by emphasizing how bad the situation has become for Black seamen in port cities like Cardiff, and a demand that all British subjects should be treated the same. It's at pains to say in this letter, as other letters in our correspondence from colonial subjects do at the time, the sense of betrayal that, having served the Empire, men are being treated in this way.

And so here again, I'm quoting from the letter: "It leads us to think that after paying the great priceless gift of life on the various battlefronts, that we are no more required. If that be the case, which is proving itself daily, then the policy of the British Crown towards its Black subjects is entirely useless. Sir, we go to and fro in various places in search of work. Whether it be there or not, we cannot obtain same owing to being Black. And that does not prove British justice and freedom."

So here again, you're hearing these very stark words. And it's in the next passages that you're really alerted to how much influence the movement for Black pride and Garvey in this period are having. And it would be interesting to think how officials such as the prime minister himself would respond to such lines. So this is again from the letter: "Sir, I want to point out to the authority that we, the Black race of people, contained within our midst as fine political leaders, medical professors. In general, we have men and women capable in every sphere of life as those of the white race. Therefore, we want justice shown to us as British subjects, the same as other British subjects irrespective of colour."

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And this letter ends on a note that reinforces an uncompromising call for equality and a powerful reminder that it is on the back of the sweat of Black people and the injustices they have faced that Britain has been made great. So this final area where the focus of the letter goes to, "Sir, our conditions has got to be improved and must be improved. As I have aforesaid, we don't want hospitality, we want work. By the sweat of our fore parents, your country is what it is today. Gold from Africa, the Black man's land. Diamonds, the same. And various other nature's gifts to us. We have been robbed of ours by right. We are entitled to consideration."

And it's in this extraordinary last sentence that the author states that if Britain is unable to find employment for its Black subjects, it should do the right thing and make provision for her subjects to be returned to Africa. So here we have that last sentence. "We want employment. If it's impossible to give us employment here, then see that we are transferred to our own lands with our families, not to be molested by other people. And we shall better our condition."

This is a very important letter coming from a group of Black working-class men who are standing out and saying that not only are we British subjects, but we're also men who are very proud of our race and our history.

Roger: It's a bold letter, and I'd say it feels quite contemporary in some ways as well. Now, let's talk about the historical and ideological context of the letter.

In the aftermath of the First World War, street protests, riots and strikes broke out in countries worldwide as millions of workers faced unemployment and housing shortages– not the peacetime prosperity they had been promised. In 1919, a series of violent riots in Glasgow, South Shields, Salford, London, Hull, Newport, Barry, Liverpool and Cardiff saw street fights, vandalised properties and five people killed. Thousands-strong white working-class crowds in these port towns directed their anger at black and minority ethnic communities, blaming colonial workers – whose numbers had increased to meet wartime shipping needs – for post-war job shortages.

Now, you've alluded to the influence of the Black pride movement and Garvey. By Garvey, of course, we mean, Marcus Garvey, the political activist from Jamaica. Garveyism, the movement he inspired, is really being discussed all over the African Diaspora at this time. We'll get into the man

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himself shortly, but first, can you tell us a bit more about the message of Garveyism and what it meant for Black men like Bernard Mason?

Iqbal: I mean to understand what's going on about this movement and its influences, you can't ignore the long history of enslavement and racial violence that is the background to the movement that Garvey spearheads. And not just him, but others too. And at the heart of his message is Black pride. Generations and generations subject to horrific treatment injustice met this violence with resistance, and Garvey's movement is one more manifestation of this. And in a post-war world where colonised peoples and non-white nations were demanding racial equality and asserting pride in their own pasts and people, Garveyite's movement was a notable voice.

It's a message on how they could self-organize and demand change on their own terms. And we know from this research that scholars have been doing that the message has been spread across different locales through meetings and the distribution of print, notably The Negro World newspaper. And the paper has become quite an important source of information about how this organising activity is happening. And it's a message that was appealing to people across the African diaspora taking in Caribbean, the US and Britain.

Roger: Tell us more about Garvey's career and how he came to inspire this international movement of Black Nationalism.

Iqbal: He was born in 1887. He came from a humble background to become a notable public speaker and trade unionist, and then touring Europe before the war and coming to London, and studying law at Birkbeck, and getting involved in a Pan African newspaper and debating at Hyde Park Corner. But Garvey's real prominence happened at the end of the First World War as an important spokesman and figurehead for a global movement fighting for Black rights and equality.

Roger: In 1914, Marcus and his wife, Amy Ashwood Garvey, had founded an organisation called the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, commonly referred to as the UNIA.

Iqbal: The UNIA was founded by Garvey and had various strands including a newspaper which I've spoken about before, The Negro World. And his mixture of radicalism and Black Nationalism made

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imperial authorities very uncomfortable. His movement was at the forefront of arguing that Black people needed to be treated as equals and more radically, that they could do it themselves. His program included chartering a ship and preparing people of African heritage to return to Africa to set up their own state.

And I'm going to try and illustrate some of the influences that he has with something that happens here in Britain in 1925 when the Coloured Alien Seamen Order is issued. It's become now quite infamous. But in The Negro World paper, you have some of the first protests that are made in 1925 when the order is issued. We have a cutting of this paper in our collection.

So this is really quite typical of the Garveyites who are standing up for working people. And it's on the back of these protests led by Garveyites that the Colonial Office kind of really starts to think, "We need to single these particular people out as a real threat. "You know, banning The Negro World paper, imprisoning Garveyites, and in Garvey's own situation, restricting him from going to places like Bermuda and the Bahamas. And by 1925 he's actually imprisoned.

But this inspiration that he and his movement is giving means that despite him not being in operation anymore, these Garveyite voices are taking up the mantle and really picking up this issue of, for example, the treatment of these Black sailors.

Roger: So you've started to explain how Garveyism becomes something larger than Marcus Garvey the individual. Can you tell us more about that?

Iqbal: By the end of '21, Garvey's own position is changing. The movement itself is really at its zenith in 1921. But authorities in the US and elsewhere are starting to heavily clamp down on him and his organization and it in itself is starting to implode. There are issues of violence within the organization and there are changes in Marcus Garvey's own views. From his radical politics to a move towards racial purity and separatism, which ultimately leads him to even meet the Ku Klux Klan. And it's at this point that criticism of him is moving quite vociferously against what he stands for and a new phase of Garveyism starts to emerge as he kind of in some ways goes more into the shadow. And it's the work of scholars such as Adam Ewing recent whose book, The Age of Garvey, is setting out some of the arguments that the movement Garvey has spearheaded are moving into.

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What you have here is a working-class Black community learning to self-organize. While Garvey himself is in prison, it's Amy Garvey who takes his writings and edits them and publishes them. And she plays a very important role in really supporting this whole movement, which is much bigger now than Garvey himself. While he, after prison, returns to Jamaica and then comes to England and he makes links with a number of speakers and leaders within the African Diaspora, really his impact in that sense is gone. It's taken on by others and he, later on, inspires people like the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. He inspires Malcolm X. And it's very much when the Black Power movement restarts again in the 1960s in a big way, that you see Garvey sort of brought back as it were.

And yes, he was a controversial figure and some of his views were not very, from today's viewpoint, judged as very nice. But that, I think, limits the impact of the movement that Garvey was the figurehead for. It's important to recognise that Garvey inspired many, many generations. Many people have taken inspiration from this idea of Black Pride and the idea that Black is beautiful, and as developing a counter-narrative to a narrative that was often very demeaning of Black people. And I think that it's very well-argued that it's Garveyism as opposed to Garvey, per se, that we should really be looking at in terms of how we study this movement.

Roger: And that of course brings us full circle to the letter you shared from the Black sailors in Cardiff, whose demands are clearly inspired by Garveysim.

Iqbal: The letter when you read, it is extraordinarily inspiring in terms of how these men have come from quite working-class backgrounds to articulate quite powerful views about their sense of pride and who they are. Not just as British subjects which they're proud to be, but also as people of African heritage. And that how they're making that link that Africa, ultimately, is the font of their own sense of identity and they are really proud. This influence– from the 20s right the way through to our current '20s– is profound.

Roger: Thank you, Iqbal.

Jessamy: Our next story takes us back 250 years.

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Philippa: Hello, my name is Dr. Philippa Hellawell, and I'm an early modern record specialist at the National Archives.

Roger: Philippa has been researching a ship's log from 1675.

Jessamy: So, Philippa, the record you have for us today is the ship's log or journal for The James. Tell us about this ship and its log? Why have you chosen to talk about this one today?

Philippa: So we have lots of ship journals and ship logs at the National Archives, and they're mainly in our Admiralty series. However, this comes from a separate series and it is part of the records of the Royal African Company. And there is only a small number of ship journals in the Royal African Company collection, probably about 20. The James was a slave ship, it was one of the Royal African Company slave ships which was involved in trading enslaved Africans, dealing with local traders on the West Coast of Africa, and shipping enslaved persons to the Americas where they would often be sold to local plantation owners and merchants to work on the plantations.

Ship journals tend to document the course and navigation of slave ships, and it's not uncommon for ship journals to mention slave mortalities during the Middle Passage, they usually in the forms of numbers and tallies, however this one actually gives the detail of the causes of death of each individual enslaved person. And so this is why I think it's quite an interesting and difficult source to talk about because it gives an insight into the terrible conditions that enslaved Africans suffered during the Middle Passage.

Jessamy: Can you put The James and other slave-trading ships in historical context for us? What was going on at the time, in 1675, and how connected was the British economy to the slave trade?

Philippa: the Company, the Royal African Company, they trade in a variety of goods. But it was predominantly concerned with trading things like gold, ivory, and enslaved Africans. The Royal African Company is well known in the history of slavery as being the institution with the largest number of slave voyages. And the number of enslaved people kind of far outweighs any other institution in this period.

They were bought with manufactured goods from Britain and Europe, and the enslaved people were then sold to plantation owners in the American colonies and West Indies. That was in return for commodities such as sugar and tobacco, and this is what is well known as the Triangular Trade.

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And we see this kind of activity happening throughout Britain in this period, so parts such as Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow, especially as the 18th century went on, sent out many slaving ships every year and they'd bring a lot of prosperity to their owners and local individuals. Many cities did grow rich on the profits of these industries which depended on materials produced by slave plantations, so things like cotton, sugar, and tobacco.

And then if we want to kind of widen this out and think about the broader European picture, Britain was not the only slave-trading nation. Really as soon as Europeans began to settle in the Americas, they started to import enslaved Africans to work for them. And this began in the early 16th century with the Portuguese. They were the first to buy West African slaves and then transport them across the Atlantic. After the Portuguese, if we're to order the major Atlantic slave trading nation by trade volume, we're probably seeing the Portuguese and the British as the main slave traders, which are then followed by the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the Danish.

And really, there's a really high number, the estimates do vary about how many Africans were taken across the Atlantic over a span of around 400 years. They're roughly at about 12 million. But also when we think about these figures, and this is kind of one of the reasons why I've brought this record out today, is that the number purchased by the traders was also probably considerably higher because what happened during the Middle Passage—so this long voyage which could take between six weeks to ten weeks—unfortunately, many enslaved Africans died on that voyage. It was a very high death rate. So approximately about 1 million of those Africans are likely to have died during the voyage.

Jessamy: So, let's go back to the log from The James. What kind of detail does it give and what can it tell us about the experiences of the people who were imprisoned on that ship?

Philippa: Yes. This particular ship departed from London to West Africa in March 1675, getting there later in the year, and began trading on the Gold Coast in late August. The ship was commanded by Captain Peter Blake and he departed the following March with 430 enslaved Africans, there was about a crew of 40, and they arrived in Barbados two months later. And we know from the ship journal that of these 430 slaves, 58 of them died. And we have the details of 51 of those in the ship logs.

So what this journal tells us is it tells us about mortality rates, firstly. The 51 enslaved Africans who died was comprised of 28 men, 19 women and four young boys. This is a mortality rate of about

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13.5%, and that is consistent with average mortality rates of about 15% during the Middle Passage, but it's not unknown for rates to far exceed this with about 50% mortality rate on some voyages. And the reason why it was so high is that conditions on board the ship during the Middle Passage were appalling. Men were packed together below deck and were secured by leg irons, and the space was very very cramped and they were often forced to crouch or lay down. Women and children tended to be kept in separate quarters. Sometimes on the deck, they didn't have much freedom of movement but it also exposed them to some violence and abuse from the crew too. So we're talking about the physical conditions of the ship been very oppressive. It's also an environment in which disease can spread and disease can grow given the poor sanitation and these quite suffocating conditions, it meant that there's a constant threat of disease so things like fever or dysentery or smallpox. Also, they had a very limited diet on these voyages and that could also lead to ill health as well.

Jessamy: Now, Philippa, I'm going to ask you to go into a bit more detail about what happened to these 51 individuals on The James, but before you do, I just want to give our listeners a head's up that this is upsetting history to learn about.

Philippa: Yeah. So of the kind of things that they died from, the greatest proportion of deaths were attributed to the flux. This was followed by the thinness of the enslaved Africans who were said to have wasted away, but many of those who fell into the flux were noted as being very thin when they were purchased. And so this does show the links between malnutrition, poor diet, and ill health.

Roger: If I can jump in to clarify one thing here: "the flux" was a term used in this period to describe the symptoms of dysentery. Dysentery is a bacterial infection caused by contaminated drinking water, though in this period, they had no idea what caused it. The symptoms were diarrhea, stomach cramps, pain, nausea, vomiting, and fever.

Phillipa: But there are lots of other causes of death as well. It's a very difficult source to read and it really does bring to life the suffering that these captives experienced. And I'll go through some of these, but I'll also talk a bit about the nature of the source itself.

So essentially, the ship log is more or less a kind of a day's summary of the ship's navigation; where it is, information about longitude and latitude, any notable events that happened on that day's voyaging. And at the back of this journal is a table, and this is the table of mortality that I'm

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talking about, and this is why it differs from some of the other ship journals that we have in the Royal African Company collection.

In this table, it lists the location of the ship, it lists the day of the ship, and it then has a column about the cause of death and information on whether this was a “male African” or a “female African” or a “child.” And I'm just gonna go through some examples. So the first death that was recorded was on the sixth day of the journey and this was a male enslaved person who was just said to have departed this life suddenly. We don't really get much information about this particular individual but as we kind of go through the list, we have more who are... "departed this life" tends to be the stock phrase that's used. After that, we have a young boy who died of convulsion fits, another man who died of a fever... And these, like I said, the quite common ones are Africans who were noted to be very thin and to have wasted away and died as a consequence.

And like I said, it is very difficult to read. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish between different cases, but sometimes we get a little bit of detail which really bring to life some of the individual stories of the people who suffered. So we hear of an enslaved person who died of a great swelling of his face and his head. We have one who died of a fever after lying in the longboat in the rain in the night and no man knew that they'd gone into this boat. So we are seeing that this particular slave-- this is speculated-- maybe tried to escape but seemed to have perished in the longboat in the middle of the night. We hear a story of another male slave who died of “cramp in all his joints,” which again speaks to the difficult conditions in the ship, as well as some really difficult episodes of the experience of women on these voyages as well. They can be quite difficult to talk about.

And it also brings to light the experience of mothers on voyages as well. So we hear of one particular mother who, “being very fond of her child, carried her up and down, which wore her to nothing, by which means she fell into a fever and died.” So we're thinking about how this African woman was trying to take care of her child while on this voyage. And this is actually specified as the cause of this woman's death being tied out by carrying her child, but of course, we also got to remember that this is the perspective of the captain of the ship and how they attribute the loss of life, which might have been very different in reality. Another troubling episode is a woman who unfortunately miscarried and had to deliver a stillborn child, and then she died two days after delivery. So there are some very troubling accounts here, and although we don't know the names of these people, we do get a bit of an insight into their stories. And they're very sad stories as well.

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The last one that I want to finish with—well, there's two. There's one account of a young boy who was noted as being very sick and fell overboard in the night and was lost. It's just a heartbreaking story. And then also of a male enslaved person who leaped overboard and drowned themselves. It was not uncommon to see cases of suicide amongst enslaved groups. This has been interpreted by historians as being an extreme example of resistance, really, and the idea of death being preferable to hardships under slavery. It's been noted that it might have been a folk belief amongst African people that they thought they would return to their own country after death, and by taking one's life, that was a means to change their condition to move from being enslaved to being free. And so I hope I've demonstrated the sadness that comes out of this source, but I think it really brings to life the nature of the Middle Passage.

Jessamy: It's not an easy listen, but I appreciate that this source tells us something about the people on board this ship and what they went through. I think we often hear about enslaved Africans just in terms of numbers.

I wonder if it's possible to say anything about what happened to the survivors of this particular passage?

Philippa: It's very difficult to follow the stories of these individuals. And the reason why I think this source is interesting is that we get a sense of the individual, whereas as you said, often enslaved people are only referred to as numbers. And that's sometimes reflected in the nature of the source material that we have; so, a lot of the records in this record series, financial records, things like ledgers and account books and invoice books. And so we only really see enslaved Africans as a number. This is why it's also very difficult to follow their trajectories after they arrived in the Americas. Invoices of American slave sales do the same, they reduce these people to numbers. So even the sources that we've got on the American side, although they might describe the captive's age and gender and maybe whereabouts they came on and the date they were sold, there's nothing really to identify them. And bear in mind some of these people their names might have been changed by their new owners as well so it's very difficult to find consistent records of enslaved people.

What we can say about their experiences, perhaps more in general, but we do know that on reaching the Americas, the crew of the slave ships would prepare them for sale. This often involved washing them, maybe shaving them, and there are accounts of them actually being

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rubbed with palm oil to make them look healthier and disguise any sores and wounds that may have been caused by the conditions on board.

About this process, there's a great first-hand account by the abolition campaigner and former enslaved African, Olaudah Equiano who wrote his autobiography in 1789, and he talks about how merchants of planters came on board the ship when they arrived in the port, and how individuals were put in separate parcels and they were examined very attentively, and they pointed to the land signifying that that's where they had to go. He talks about there not being many days when they were in the merchants' custody before they were then sold, and the buyers were then rushing at once into the yard where they were sold and the enslaved people were confined, and the merchants would have to make a choice of what parcel they wanted to purchase. You can imagine what an overwhelming experience that must be, you know, adding to the difficult voyage that they've just been on having to deal with this noise and clamor and the eagerness of buyers to clamor for a particular parcel of Africans to work on their plantation.

And so if we're then trying to think what happens then after they've docked in port and they've been purchased by plantation holders and merchants, it's even harder to track their trajectory. And really, the best chance of finding a record of an individual who was enslaved is to find them on a slave register. And we have slave registers here at The National Archives but there are no registers of enslaved people before 1812. But really before that, the best place to find information about an enslaved African is in the private papers of the slave owner, or in the records about the owner of their property as well. We can also look to colonial papers as well because it was a very difficult life on the plantation as well, but there were signs of resistance amongst enslaved communities. And they might resist in quite small ways from day-to-day acts of resistance such as killing livestock or pretending to be ill, but they also engaged in full-scale revolts as well, confronting their enslavers. And we have records of these rebellions in our colonial records.

Jessamy: You've addressed this a bit already, but what are the challenges in researching the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and enslaved Africans. What records does The National Archives hold that can help us understand this history?

Philippa: As I've mentioned, the records that we have are made by captors or made by colonial officials. And we can try and extrapolate information from that about what the conditions were, you know, what the environment was like. And that's why the journal of The James slave ship is

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really interesting because it can reveal some of the experiences of these people. We might not be able to hear it from their mouths, it's not necessarily their words, but we do get an insight into their suffering. So sometimes it's about reading against the grain to find information about what their situations were like and what their experience entailed.

And if somebody was to go on to want to research the trans-Atlantic slave trade at The National Archives, we've got a massive amount of records that could be consulted more than I could even go through in today's podcast. They range from our Colonial Office to Board of Trade records and Admiralty records and Treasury records, but I would say that the most important area of our collection is the records of the Colonial Office. And there are separate series for each country so it would probably involve looking-- for instance if you're looking at plantations-- looking at the volumes for each country, different Caribbean countries. And these series are divided into sub-series, so we have original correspondence. These are official letters and reports from governors to the Colonial Office in London. That might include things like newspapers or petitions from slave owners, some kind of reports on slave rebellions or correspondence on laws that affected enslaved persons, as well as information and statistics on enslaved populations. We also might have sessional papers. These are reports of the local government on all matters affecting the country, and may also include grants of freedom and discussion on slave laws. There is also the series that I've talked about today, which is T70. This is the record series for the Royal African Company. So there really is many different directions that you can go in to try and explore the history of the slave trade.

Jessamy: Thank you for talking us through this, Philippa. As you said, there is so much material still to be researched in our collections when it comes to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Roger: Moving on to our next story, we're returning to the 20th century. Our colleague Martin Willis has pulled up some photographs and records from the Great War in Africa that tell us more about the Black soldiers and porters involved in Britain's African campaigns during the First World War.

Martin, let's start with the photographs you've been researching.

Martin: So we've got quite a few photographs, quite an extensive range but the first I thought I'd talk about is a black and white picture, the Nigerian regiment crossing a river during a Cameroons campaign somewhere between 1914 and 1916. It shows the troops actually crossing this river. It's

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quite shallow but it's 20 to 30 feet wide and flanked by heavy forest trees, undergrowth, and stuff. And it kind of gives you that imagery of what the conditions that they were actually operating in and what they were doing.

If you look at the imagery from the Western front when you see bomb craters and burnt-out buildings, with this you get that differential between what would be the imagery of the Western front and actually what the campaigns in Africa would have been like. Totally different conditions having to travel vast distances. And I think that picture really sums up the people that we're going to be talking about.

So the second, again, is a black and white photograph of African carriers or porters carrying their loads. And this one's actually in German East Africa. And in this shot, we can make out roughly about 30 individuals appear to be men but in different forms of dress. Some of them are in full dress, some have clothes or shorts on and they're carrying their loads. And with this, they're in really kind of low grass, there's a few trees around. And it shows again, it's a totally different environment to what the first photo I described shows. But with the carriers obviously, in the African campaigns, the main way of getting anything around is it had to be carried. On the Western Front, you'd have trains and lorries. And in the African campaigns, you had porters and carriers. Everything had to be moved. So if you had to go and fight 50 miles away, you had to carry your food, your ammunition, everything. I think there was a heavy price paid with those carriers, you know, with disease, tiredness, lack of food. They really paid a heavy price for all that they did.

Roger: Can you give a brief historical context for this story...why is Britain fighting in Africa during the First World War and who are they fighting?

Martin: A lot of it comes back to expansions of the different empires, European empires. You can really go back to the late 19th century. I think we can look at the scramble for Africa. From that you can look at the Berlin Conference 1884, where a lot of the spheres of influence were decided. And there were other events. .

So for instance, in 1911 you saw the French taking parts of Algeria, and the Germans didn't agree with that so the French ceded land which actually was tagged onto the side of Cameroons. So we can actually look at that as a reason for French involvement and interest in that campaign. So it was colonial interests that play that part.

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They actually wanted that ceded land back they saw this as an opportunity. So it was less about the fact that they'd been invaded and that was the Western Front was in France and Belgium, it was more about that colonial holdings, and could they actually get. That kind of sets the scene for why we find British, French, German troops actually fighting in those colonies. Initially, the Germans actually tried to have neutrality or such and actually keep the fighting from their areas, but eventually the British and French said, "No, we can actually try and get some land back while we're here as well." So again, it's kind of an extension to that scramble for Africa really.

Roger: So, it's not so much that the fighting in Europe has spilled into the African colonies, but rather that the war in Europe has created opportunities for European powers to win territory in Africa...

Martin: In essence, yeah. I mean, it's an opportunity. It was kind of not connected at all in some ways, even though obviously they wouldn't be at war if it wasn't.

Roger: Right. So, coming back to the historic photographs, we're talking about *African* soldiers fighting for the British. What was the motivation for Black soldiers to fight for the British in these inter-European conflicts?

Martin: I think sometimes they haven't got a choice, sometimes they have. For the soldiers, quite a lot of them were actually professional soldiers. So if you look at the King's Africa Rifles, the Gold Coast Regiment, which is part of the West African Frontier Force, a lot of those would have possibly been serving prior. We've seen Gallantry Awards back into the early 1900s, so they were definitely career soldiers.

But a lot of it would have been motivated by pay because obviously a lot of time if you're in rural villages, you're actually reliant on things like harvests and trade. But if you're in one of the regiments you're actually going to have a regular income. And when we look at going into some of the records, you'll actually see that there are rewards for if you receive gallantries of like three and five pounds. Which would have been a lot of money back in 1914 in Africa.

So I think there wasn't any direct conscription at all into infantry or anything like that, but when we look at the carrier supporters, a lot of those were more or less really quite often actually forced unwillingly to enlist. It might be a case at the local village where they say, "We need 10 or 15," and they were then taken off to actually carry these loads for the soldiers.

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Roger: So, Martin, I know you've been piecing together the stories of a few specific African soldiers from this period. Who are these men and what do we know about their lives?

Martin: There are some more slightly famous or well-known soldiers like Belo Akure who was a career soldier. He was with the gallantries back in 1907-1908, but then also through for the Cameroon's campaign, and then went through to East Africa. So we know there's career soldiers and we've got good pictures of those, and actually a lot of the detail of what they do. But also then you kind of rank and file Black African soldiers that most people don't know much about.

One of the examples I look at it is a chap called Adegbite Offa. And actually, there's no service records as such, so when you're trying to find out about them you kind of have to see what records we hold and what you can work with. And with him, we know through publications and other things as well that Soldiers weren't allowed to use their own surnames. We do find Adegbite was his first name, but Offa would have been his town or possibly the tribe that he came from. And that works across all the West Africa Frontier Force, Gold Coast, Ghana, Sierra Leone Regiment and Nigerian Regiment.

We find that all of those soldiers that are serving, their first names would be their own, their surnames would be either their area or tribe. So that means for Adegbite Offa, I found seven. And it's only his service number that actually identifies him. We can tie him roughly back to a specific part of Nigeria from where he's from, but we can't actually say precisely.

But then actually, there were some papers done at the end of the campaign by the commanders, and they actually had some details around gallantries and the campaign itself. And with that, there's draft bits of information that kind of give us a picture that leads us off into things like war diaries and other things to try and pick out some of the detail. And from that detail then, you know, the war diaries that gives you descriptions of where they were fighting, what they were doing. You see instances I've mentioned of burnt-out towns, which kind of gives you that idea of why the local people were displaced, but also then actually why they were reliant on their carriers and so forth for their food. Because obviously, the local areas they were going through had been quite often scorched-earth or affected.

But what we do see when we go through the records is, again, you can build part of their career up through things like the colonial gazettes. So roughly a year after, say, he was mentioned in dispatches or in another document, you actually then can quite often find the details in those local

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government gazettes. There's records of promotions and other things. So we can start building bits of pictures up of them; where they're from, the bit of their career or their promotions, but then also the conditions and experiences where they were serving throughout the campaigns through the different records.

Roger: And what were the conditions like for soldiers and porters involved in these campaigns?

Martin: I think pretty harsh. As I mentioned previously, the war diaries do give you very good descriptions of what the conditions were like. I mean, you actually can read about a patrol they went on a specific day, which might have meant that they traveled 20 to 30 kilometers. And it mentions that, you know, it was beautiful sunshine, by the time they'd done about five miles they were in torrential rain. The weather changes again, and it's changeable all day. Muddy paths, you know? I mean, there's descriptions of soldiers getting washed away in rivers and turning up a few days later back to where they were based. You get a real flavor for what the conditions were like. And again, some of these war diaries are quite graphic, especially around sometimes the carriers. There's descriptions about carriers being in really bad ways, you know, in dying condition as such through lack of food, malnutrition, or just pure exhaustion because they've traveled 20-30 miles and they haven't got sufficient food to feed them all.

Roger: What happened to these African soldiers and porters after the war? Would they have continued working for the British or returned to their previous occupations or something else?

Martin: Some of the soldiers were professionals or professional soldiers, they would have carried on. But a lot of it, I think again, would have probably gone back to their earlier lives. So you know, the carriers and porters would have gone back home, rebuilding.

Roger: Fascinating. Thanks, Martin. I know this is quite a large area of research—and we could probably do with another few episodes to really do it justice,—but for those listening who want to learn more or do their own research, where should they start? Any research tips?

Martin: So yeah, I think resource-wise there's lots of good information especially through things like the Great War in Africa Association website. The people that run that have really good ties into researchers in Africa and different archives across the world, and they produce a lot of very good resources and really good up-to-date research. Closer to home, obviously, here at the National Archives, we have some good blogs that have been written by staff members. But also then, we've

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got quite a few good research guides. So 'Colonies and Dependencies from 1782', that guide actually links into some of the key Colonial Office documents, but also links to a specific guide on 'Soldiers in African Forces under British Control', which gives you some of the record descriptions for some of the records that I've been talking about. But obviously then, there's some more broad ones about the war which we'll link you army and things to link into how to search for war diaries and other records.

Jessamy: There are countless other stories we could tell from this collection, but I believe we're nearing the end of our time for this episode.

Roger: To wrap things up, our colleague Dan Gilfoyle joins us to discuss the CO collection as a whole and give us some insights into what information it can provide for researchers interested in anything related to the history of the empire. Dan is a specialist in this collection and an expert in locating hard-to-find records within it.

Jessamy: Dan, we've given a brief overview of the Colonial Office at the start of the episode, but it would be great if you could give us a more in-depth introduction to what it was and what it did over the course of its existence.

Dan: The Colonial Office as a specific entity only existed for about 100 years between the mid-1850s and the 1960s when most colonies became independent. And so we tend to use the Colonial Office as a kind of generic term for various government departments which had responsibility for the colonies. So for example in the 18th century, offices of state had responsibility and, rather peculiarly, for the first part of the 19th century, it was the Home Office that had responsibility, which sounds rather strange. But nevertheless, we tend to talk about whoever had responsibility for administration as the Colonial Office.

And when we talk about overall responsibility, again we have to consider the relationship which the Colonial Office had with governments throughout the colonies. And in fact, there operated a very kind of flexible and pragmatic system. So in each of the former colonies, there was a governor who was the representative of the Queen, of the Monarch. And normally there were legislative assemblies or executive assemblies which assisted the governor in his duties.

We also need to keep in mind just the distance that many of the colonies had from Whitehall. So in the early 19th Century, it would have taken a good six weeks probably for dispatch to get from

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Jamaica to Whitehall, and a similar time for a letter to go back. In other words, the colonial governors had enormous flexibility and they weren't under such close control as all that, and a lot of decisions were really taken on the spot.

Nevertheless, some broad themes do emerge. Certainly, slavery was absolutely central to the empire from the very beginning through to abolition in the 1830s and there's lots of material on that. For example, registers of the enslaved, policy documents, material about resistance by the enslaved to the colonial authorities. Throughout the 19th century, there's lots of material on conflict, really. So for example, if you look at the Cape of Good Hope there's material on the expansion of the colony to the east, if you look at Jamaica again, there's, there's plenty of material on resistance, the colonial authorities, lots of material, for example, on Moran Bay in the 1860s. There's a bit of a change in the 20th century when the Colonial Office became much more actively engaged in managing the empire economically. So we find lots of material on natural resources, forestry, agriculture, mining, the environment, and lots of scientific papers as well. But then towards the end of empire, after the Second World War particularly, we find much material on nationalism, resistance to colonial rule at the end of empire, constitutional development, and independence. So, all in all the, the range of the British empire over time, together with the Colonial Office's overall role means that it's a very large collection, probably one of the biggest collections on empire in the world.

Jessamy: You've related the breadth of the collection of Colonial Office records, but I'm curious, in your opinion, what are some of the highlights?

Dan: Well, that's quite a difficult question, I suppose, because one is always turning up interesting things in the course of doing a bit of research.

But one recent acquisition which has been enormously fascinating and visual as well is the Colonial Office library photographic collection which is in CO 1069. Most of the photographs date from the 1870s and run through to the period of independence, but there's also a good deal of artwork. For example, I chanced upon a watercolor by a man called Joseph Lycett, which is a very beautiful picture of Sydney Harbour around about 1820. And I was interested in Lycett and decided to do a bit of research on him. He was born in Staffordshire around about 1780 and he traded as an engraver. And he became very expert in that trade. However, he was also a bit of a

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crook and used his engraving skills to forge banknotes, for which he was eventually arrested, tried, and transported to Australia.

Another highlight of that collection is an anthropological series by a man called Northcote Thomas. He was an Oxford anthropologist who was commissioned by the Colonial Office to do studies in West Africa; so in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. We've got a really large collection of photographs by him of just African people, of what they did, of buildings and the like. And that's a very important collection, I think.

Now, all of these photographs in the Colonial Office, or most of the photographs in the Colonial Office library collection have been put on Flickr, as "The World Through a Lens." And you can view those free of charge if you'd like.

From a personal perspective, I've been engaged in a few cataloging projects myself often done by volunteers, and recently we completed the cataloging of the series CO 733, which is the Colonial Office correspondence on Palestine. That produced some extremely interesting information on, you know, the birth of the Israeli state and Jewish immigration into Palestine, and relationships with the Arab people, and quite a lot on infrastructure as well, you know, the electrification of various cities in Palestine and the developments of Jaffa harbor. But those are just a few highlights from a personal perspective.

Jessamy: You've touched on this a bit, but I wonder if you could reflect on why you think it's important to tell stories from this collection and make those records available to the public?

Dan: I think the importance of the collections in some way derives from just the scope of the British Empire, really. If we considered over time, you know, to encompass the various times much of the Americas, much of North America, major parts of the West Indies through to South Africa, all the way up to Egypt, at times postwar mandates in the Middle East, Mauritius, India and then Malaya, and through to Australia and New Zealand, so I mean, the scope of the collection from that point of view is enormous. And used in conjunction with archives elsewhere particularly in the former colonies, it's a great picture of what happened in the past.

In some ways, it's a strong on imperial policy and what officials thought and the way policy developed, but nevertheless, it also captures the stories of many individuals throughout the

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empire, how they moved around, those people who were born in the colonies and the colonial officials themselves, of course, and just from the point of view of personal stories, you know?

I'm casting my mind for good examples. I'm thinking of something I read recently which was an episode that happened in South Africa in the late 1890s. This was an outbreak of a cattle disease called cattle plague or rinderpest, and because this was a very dangerous disease and because South Africa has a pastoral economy really, cattle are very important, it was kind of a national crisis and the Cape's veterinary department swung into action.

However, there's a very interesting character. He was the first African vet to qualify. He was a man called Jotello Soga. He was born in the Transkei version of the Eastern Cape, and he was educated in the veterinary college at Edinburgh and moved back to South Africa afterwards and he was employed by the Cape of Good Hope government. But Soga, as the first African vet and the only African vet employed at the Cape, he was very much involved in communicating information and gathering information from Africans. So he was sent out to look at African cures, to try and persuade Africans about vaccination and the like... It's a fascinating story of his. He appears kind of here and there in the records and you have to piece things together, but it's a good example of an individual story and how they can be pieced together through the records.

Another case would be the Baptist or the Christmas rebellion in Jamaica which happened over Christmas in 1831 just before abolition. You could say that the rebellion wasn't really effective and it was actually suppressed by the colonial government, although led I think directly to abolition just a couple of years later, but again because of trial documents, we have lots of individual voices as people gave evidence about what had happened and what they'd done in the course of rebellion. So I think the collection, if one looks hard enough, can tell us stories about individuals as well as about these obviously important matters of colonial policy and colonial administration.

Jessamy: Thank you Dan for the overview and for the little snippets of story. I will definitely be looking up that photo collection.

Roger: Hopefully, this episode has inspired some of our listeners to do their own investigations into the Colonial Office collection. The best place to start is with a catalogue search. From there, our research guides offer detailed advice on how to locate specific types of records. We have several related to the CO collection. They can be found by going to our home page and selecting "Help with your research" at the top of the page.

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Some guides which relate to this episode include one on how to find Colonial office records, one on how to trace the records of enslaved people, and one on finding records of people serving in African forces under British control. We will put links to these guides in the show notes to help you get started.

If you still can't find what you're looking for, our record specialists are available to help in-person in our reading rooms or online via our chat service.

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Roger: And don't forget to subscribe to On the Record at The National Archives so you don't miss new episodes, which are released throughout the year.

Roger: And Finally, Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.

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