

HANNA RUBINKOWSKA

British Sources on Ethiopia (formerly Abyssinia)¹ in the National Archives, Kew

Abstract

The National Archives in Kew holds a vast volume of information related to the history of Ethiopia. The aim of this paper is to show how many sources on the subject are hidden in the Archives, and to indicate the wide array of topics related to Ethiopian history that can be researched using the records kept there.

This paper is also intended to serve as a guide for those who would like to search the collections of documents related to Ethiopia. It describes the arrangement of and the periods covered by individual collections, additionally showing some examples of documents on the subject held outside the main Ethiopian collections.

History seems to be a game that brings unlimited possibilities. On the one hand, historians will always search for new sources which may reveal facts still not discovered by them. On the other, it will always be possible to develop new interpretations of well-known facts. Interpretations will support new historical ideas growing in particular circumstances. For the past few decades, historians have realized the amount of global research they had missed. It took the last half of the century to make us understand that when we try to piece the past together, we still need a broader perspective; this is even

¹ There is no specific date when the term “Ethiopia” instead of “Abyssinia” has started to be used in the British documents collected in the National Archive. The general collections are marked “Abyssinia (Ethiopia)” or: “Ethiopia (formerly Abyssinia)”. The most documents can be found under the name “Abyssinia” and all the data included in this article relates to research under this name. The term “Abyssinia” was used as a name of the country by the British till around the 30s of the 20th century, when it was accepted that Ethiopians would expect foreigners to use term “Ethiopia”. The Foreign Office files include correspondence which documents the process of changing the country’s name in the official British use.

the case when dealing with local, European history. To fill this gap, historians dealing with the areas beyond Europe concentrate more on searching for unknown sources than for providing new interpretations. However, there are still many undiscovered in non-European history.

The aim of this article is to show how many sources on African history, particularly Ethiopian, are hidden in European archives, an example being in The National Archives in Kew;² scholars can find an almost unlimited source of British material in the files stored in the archives. Most of the documents relating to Ethiopia have never been published in any form and I believe the majority have never been researched.³ In the case of Ethiopia, with only few historians dealing with this “peripheral” country, there is a vast amount of material which has never been used by them. In this archive alone, the readily available material is big enough for some generations of historians to come who would like to spend their lives delving into the history of the Ethiopian Empire.

The problem a scholar faces while searching for documents relating to Ethiopia in the National Archives is the sheer quantity of information. It applies not only to separate documents, but also to the number of collections within the archives, of which approximately thirty hold documents related to the Ethiopian history. The biggest and the most interesting array of information relating to the political history of Ethiopia seems to be in the files of the Foreign Office. The earliest documents related to Ethiopia are dated back to 1808. They are collected in a section of General Correspondence from Political and Other Departments (covering dates: 1756–1966) and they are part of a Foreign Office collection. There are fifty-six volumes in the section referring to the period 1808–1905 (series details: FO 1). Before 1906 the general correspondence of all the departments within the Foreign Office, apart from the Chief Clerk’s Department, the Library, and until 1892, the Slave Trade and African Departments is arranged in country series. After 1906 they are arranged chronologically. So for each year there are separate country files. Within each year, files are arranged thematically. In the case of Ethiopia, the number of files varies; for example, there are three files containing documents dated 1906 (FO 371/1; FO 371/2; FO 371/3), thirteen files from 1920 (FO 371/4388 – FO 371/4400) and fifteen for 1928 (FO 371/13099 – FO 371/13113).

The Foreign Office collection includes maps. Some of them are located within the main files, but others – mostly because of their size, were extracted and form a special collection (symbols: MPK; and MPKK for those which need extra large flat storage). There are forty-four references for the MPK collection with the earliest two maps dated 1837 (“Map of Arabia, Egypt, Nubia (now Sudan) and Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), showing

² The National Archive was formed in April 2003 bringing together the Public Records Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission. The definitive history of the Public Records Office is: John D. Cantwell, *The Public Records Office 1838–1958*, London: HMSO, 1991 and *idem*, *The Public Records Office 1959–1969*, Richmond, Surrey: Public Record Office, 2000.

³ There has been a choice of Foreign Office documents recently published by Frederic A. Sharf (ed.), *Letters from Abyssinia 1916 and 1917: with supplemental Foreign Office Documents*, by Major Hugh Drummond Pearson, commentary and annotations by Richard Pankhurst, Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2004.

the River Nile, high land, bays, capes, islands, the Yemen, provinces, tribes, and towns of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. [Printed by] Harrison and Sons"; MPK 1/190/2, and: "Map of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf of Aden, showing the conquest of Mohammed Ali, Pasha of Egypt, on the shores of the Red Sea, 1837; marked are districts, garrisons, dispositions of troops, tribes and towns. Reference table. Compiled with notes by James Mckenzie, Bengal Cavalry; [printed by] Harrison and Sons" MPK 1/190/3). The latest maps of the MPK collection are dated 1938. The MPKK collection holds three maps: two from 1901 and one from 1908. There are also maps and plans extracted to flat storage (eleven references, covering dates: 1867–1905; MFQ) or to rolled storage (ten references, covering dates: 1868–1932; MR) from records of various other departments. Another group is created of maps and plans extracted to flat storage from records of the Colonial Office ("5 items extracted from CO 533/490/18. (4)-(5) Map, in 2 sheets, of the frontier between British East Africa (now Kenya) and Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). Reference table to communications and relief and boundaries. Surveyed by Captain P Maud CMG, Royal Engineers, 1902–1933"; MPG 1/1190/1-5).

Within the Foreign Office collection, the archives also provides extracted copies of confidential documents (Confidential Print). As the official National Archives web page states, this division consists of complete or extracted copies of selected correspondence and other papers issued or received by the Foreign Office. Individual prints contain varying numbers of documents, ranging from single items to substantial compilations, which deal with the affairs of particular countries or subjects. They include dispatches from British diplomatic missions, Foreign Office instructions as well as memoranda, political, economic and other reports generated by diplomatic missions abroad, by the Foreign Office's own departments or by other departments of the British Government, proceedings of foreign legislative bodies and memoranda transmitted by foreign embassies in Britain, proceedings and resolutions of ambassadorial and other diplomatic conferences, protocols and ratified treaties, proceedings and reports of international bodies and reports from home and foreign news media relating to political affairs. Individual volumes are also divided into chapters on occasions, each chapter dealing with a specified topic or event.⁴ The earliest confidential print related to Ethiopia comes from 1846 and is included in a general collection of confidential prints covering dates 1711–1960. Within the collection, the files from 1846–1956 contain forty-eight volumes relating to Ethiopia (series details: FO 401). There are also documents related to Ethiopia within the collection of confidential prints on Africa: These cover the periods 1911 to 1913, 1919 to 1923 and 1942 to 1946 (FO 403).

The documents referring to Ethiopia are part of files belonging to other country divisions and are mentioned in the catalogue as separate documents. However, they can be ordered together with the whole file by cross-referencing. This makes it possible to trace documents through the catalogue which consist of an integrated part of a different division (i.e. maps related to Ethiopia are a part of files related to Egypt (FO 925/7823:

⁴ www.catalogue.nationalarchives.gov.uk

“Routes in south-west Abyssinia, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, by Arnold W. Hodson, CMG, 1923–1926. 1:2,000,000. Royal Geographical Society.” [Covering dates: 1929] or: FO 141/501/14: “Frontier affairs relating to Ileembe Triangle (Abyssinia, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda border areas): Suggested demarcation of area inhabited by the Kuku tribe, two maps [Scale 1:1,000,000; 1.014 inches – 16 miles] showing road building plans.” [Covering dates: 1930]]

Apart from the Foreign Office collection, there are over thirty other divisions in which lesser amounts of documents are stored. They are divided according to their origin and their physical features i.e. size. The Ethiopia-related documents are grouped in collections created by the governmental bodies as well as other institutions. Some of the collections contain very few documents regarding Ethiopia. For instance, in the 1800–1900 collection of the records of the Copyright Office, Stationers’ Company (COPY), only one item is related to Ethiopia. It is dated 11 September 1884, and is described as a “photograph of the elephant sent as a present to the Queen by King John of Abyssinia in the Zoological Gardens with the two native keepers who came over in charge of it.” (COPY 1/369/209). Another example is the records within the 1800–1900 collection created and acquired by the Natural History Museum in London (DF105/2/9), in which one item relates to Ethiopia; It is entitled “Specimens from Abyssinia from William Thomas Blanford, 1869”. In the case of collections held offsite, such as the DF collection, the nine sets of documents are available to view in a reading room in Kew three working days after a request is submitted. Another collection, in which only two items relate to Ethiopia, is one from the Admiralty, Naval Forces, Royal Marines, Coastguard, and related bodies (ADM); one of them from 1883 is entitled “Mission of Sir W. Hewett to Abyssinia” (ADM 116/43), while another one, dated 1893 April 3–1894 February 28, has simply been named “Abyssinia”.

The collections containing the documents of the earliest years belong to the Board of Trade and of successor and related bodies (BT), as well as the Cabinet Office (CAB). The BT collection has twenty-three references, the earliest from 1847 (“Correspondence from E.J. Stanley relating to a draft treaty with Abyssinia”; BT 1/467/32). The CAB collection consists of forty-two references with the earliest document dated 1868 (“Opposition attempt to limit supplies; Royal Commission on Ritual Observances; Abyssinia”; CAB 41/1/11). Other early collections which contain documents on Ethiopia are: records created and inherited by HM Treasury (T); records of the Privy Council and other records collected by the Privy Council Office (PC); records of the Ministry of Munitions and successors, including papers of David Lloyd George (MUN); records created or inherited by the Home Office, Ministry of Home Security, and related bodies (HO); records created or inherited by the Transport Departments and of related bodies, and of the London Passenger Transport Board (MT); records created or inherited by the Registry of Friendly Societies (FS); Domestic Records of the Public Record Office, Gifts, Deposits, Notes and Transcripts (PRO). Within the PRO collection, some documents are preserved on microfilms, e.g. “Sir R. Wingate to G.F. Archer. Somaliland: sending correspondence about the Mullah [QQ 9-10]. Abyssinia. 13 January 1915.” (PRO 30/57/47).

As time has passed and the number of documents has increased, there are more collections holding documents referring to Ethiopia. Since 1920, documents have been preserved in a collection of the Royal Mint (one set of documents: “Abyssinia: enquiry for coinage blanks”, 1925–1934; MINT 20/995), records created or inherited by the Air Ministry, the Royal Air Force, and related bodies (nine references, covering dates: 1928–1945; AIR), records created and inherited by Government Communications Headquarters GCHQ (sixty references, covering dates: 1923–1945; HW). Documents issued after 1930 are collected with the records having been created or inherited by the Medical Research Council (one record: “Health of the Italian forces in Abyssinia”, covering dates: 1936–1938; FD 1/3652), records of the General Register Office, Government Social Survey Department, and Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (one record: “Refugee married in Abyssinia’ later granted divorce by Russian Orthodox Church”, 1936; RG 48/1006), records of the Prime Minister’s Office (five records, covering dates: 1935–1948; PREM), records created or inherited by the Dominions Office and of the Commonwealth Relations and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices (seven records, covering dates: 1935–1942; DO). Due to World War II the British seized possession of documents from the German, Italian and Japanese governments. These documents are now available in the National Archives and some of them focus on Ethiopia (fourteen references, covering dates: 1924–1936; GFM). Since 1940 there have been documents stored in a collection at the Security Service (one document dated 1945; KV 2/969), records created or inherited by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Departments, and of related bodies (one document, covering dates: 1948–1954; MAF 163/26) and records of Special Operations Executive (four documents, covering dates: 1940–1945; HS).

As my main interest lies in the history of the first three decades of Ethiopian Empire of the 20th century, my experience with the National Archives’ holdings applies mainly to this period. It quickly transpires that the archive documents reveal information which can fill gaps of knowledge not only regarding Ethiopian history but also of many other unresearched aspects of Colonial and British Imperial history. Throughout the 20th century, one of the most important questions in the British policy towards Ethiopia and Africa was an attempt to control the area of the Blue Nile and the Tana Lake. According to Frederic Sharf, the first document showing British interest in the subject is the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 15 May 1902.⁵ According to the National Archives files, the Lake Tana situation was the most important issue in British policy towards Ethiopia from 1902 until the Italian aggression towards Ethiopia in 1936. There are a few publications focusing on this,⁶ including one which contains some of the National Archives sources on

⁵ *Letters from Abyssinia 1916 and 1917...*, p. 19; the text of the “Proposed Anglo-Ethiopian Subsidy Agreement (1904)” (FO 371/1880, 119–123) published *ibid.*, pp. 170–175.

⁶ See: James M c C a n n, ‘Ethio-British Negotiations for the Lake Tana Dam 1922–1935’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14 (1981), pp. 667–99; Haggai E r l i c h, *The Cross and the River: Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Nile*, Boulder, Colorado: L. Rienner, 2002; *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, ed. H. E r l i c h & Israel G e r s h o n i, Boulder, Colo.: L. R i e n n e r, 2000.

Tana Lake.⁷ In spite of the number of documents related to this subject in the National Archives' collections, it seems that there are still plenty of unresearched areas within this topic. Relations between Great Britain and Italy concerning the area can serve as an example. The Tana Lake district played an important role in liaisons between these two countries as both of them were interested in the neighboring territories.⁸ One of the hundreds of reports describing the situation states: "With reference to the question of Italian influence in the north of Abyssinia, and more especially with regard to Gondar and the districts around Lake Tsana, I have the honour to report that I had an opportunity recently of asking Signor Cora in a private conversation what he considered would be the pretensions of Italy in the event of the break up of Abyssinia at some future date, mentioning that our claim in connection with the waters of Lake Tsana might possibly lead to some dispute as to the ultimate possession of Gondar. Signor Cora said at once that Italy would certainly consider Gondar should fall to them with the rich cotton lands on the shores of the lake, which, with perhaps the exception of Wolkait, would be about the only really fertile land that a possible division would give them. On being pressed further as to what he considered would be their southern limit, he said that Gojjam, in his opinion, must be theirs, basing his claim on article 9 of the tripartite agreement and the recognition of the Italian right to construct a railway west of Adis Ababa, linking up Erythrea and Benadir, which would be impossible if the province in question were in other hands. [...] Now that the question of combating Italian commercial influence in the lake district is under discussion the expression of Signor Cora's views may be of interest, although I am quite unable to say to what extent they may be shared by his Government".⁹

From the documents related to the Lake Tana issue, one can also conduct research into the situation in the Ethiopian court, albeit the situation according to British diplomats' perceptions. One of the reports can be used as an example to illustrate the problem: "I opened the question with Ras Taffari on the 19th instant, and told him that I was now in a position to make a definite request in the name of His Majesty's Government, and to submit proposals. I asked him whether he intended to deal with the subject himself, or whether he would wish me to speak in the first place to the Empress. His Highness replied at once that he had no competence in the matter, and that he must ask me to take the latter course. He said that he had already been accused in some quarters of selling Lake Tsana to the English, and that if he were known to be negotiating with me on that subject, it would expose him to further suspicion. He added that it was an old question, and that the Abyssinian Government regarded it as a very serious one. [... Sahle Sadalou] asked me if I realized what the Empress and her entourage are made of, and he tapped the wooden table with his finger. [...] The Empress and the priests and elders

⁷ *Letters from Abyssinia 1916 and 1917...*

⁸ In 1890 Italy colonised the lands to the north and east to Ethiopia. Over the centuries those lands were on and off under the rules of the Ethiopian emperors. The colony was named Eritrea by the Italians and it forms an independent country nowadays.

⁹ Thesiger to Grey, July 6th, 1912; FO 371/1294.

who surrounded her will be hard to move. I thought the Fitaurari's silence a favourable symptom, for what it is worth. He is a plain, blunt man, who stands for conservatism and the Menelik tradition. I am on friendly terms with him, but I should have expected from him outspoken opposition. He has lately, I believe, drawn closer to Ras Taffari, and his silence on this occasion may indicate a wish to preserve his liberty of action".¹⁰

While the Tana Lake question has been partially researched based on the National Archives documents, other topics, quite surprisingly, never attracted historians' attention, like the arms embargo during and after World War I imposed on Ethiopia by the European powers and Ethiopians' reaction to the situation. The problem which was mentioned by Harold Marcus in his study of Haile Sellasie I's early years, seems to have determined British and Ethiopian relations for many years.¹¹ Ras Tafari (later Haile Sellasie I, 1930–1974) put much effort into acquiring arms for his troops. He tried, without much success, to persuade the European Powers into allowing him to import arms legally as well as smuggle arms to Ethiopia. In 1922, a British diplomat writes in his report: "[Tafari] opened his heart to me, and explained that he had ordered the arms from America in secret. He had intended to bring them to Addis Ababa unknown to anyone. Then, in the event of trouble, he would have been in possession of unexpected reserves. His scheme has been defeated by the action of His Majesty's Government in detaining the Arms at Aden. He had been forced to ask the French and Italian Legations to help him. The Italian Minister lost no time in telling the Empress that he [ras Tafari] had been forsaken by his friends the British. The presence of the arms at Aden became common knowledge. His enemies among Abyssinians taunted him with his misplaced confidence in the British Government. The sacrifice of the arms at the loss of their value were nothing to the disappointment he had experienced".¹²

An interesting extract from one of the reports discussing arms' delivery for Tafari illustrates British attitude towards Ethiopians. It is a part of a discussion in which the British Government is considering a presenting a gift to Tafari. The discussion took several months and at some stage it was agreed to give him an old tank, a motor car and some second-hand guns. Eventually, after a suggestion by Major Dodds, a British diplomat residing in Addis Ababa, the idea of a tank was dropped in favour of a better option. Major Dodds wrote in his telegram: "I am no longer in favour of giving tank. I propose that machine gun which is here should be given at once and I suggest in addition giving twelve silver trumpets instead of motor car or anything else".¹³

Another major problem for British dealings with the Ethiopian Empire was the situation regarding Ethiopia's borders. One aspect of this was the subject of British Somaliland's border. Strong Muslim movements aiming for independence from the British rule constituted a major problem before and during the World War I. The Somali leader,

¹⁰ Russel to Curzon, May 26th, 1923; FO 371/8403.

¹¹ Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Sellasie I: The Formative Years, 1892-1936*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

¹² Dodds to Curzon, Oct 17th, 1922; FO 371/7146.

¹³ Dodds, May 20th, 1920; FO: 371/4393.

who was called Mad Mullah by the British, presented a serious threat for many years. He was granted financial and arms support from the German and Turkish governments. Ethiopian ruler Lij Iyasu (1910–1916) who led pro-Muslim policy, helped by transferring arms and money to the Somali leader. The documents revealing details of British policy towards Somali movements, their connection with the Ethiopian ruler and towards problems that they faced on Ethiopian borders, can also be found within the National Archives collections. Most are a part of the Foreign Office collection, but they are also included in other collections, such as the one of records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies (WO 106/21: Political situation, Relations with the Mullah, Abyssinia, Italy and France (92/2). [Covering dates: 1905–1910]).

All the documents, which are in the National Archives, provide a very interesting source for research into British attitude towards Ethiopia and Ethiopians. Huge files in the collection of the Foreign Office as well as in other collections, not only reveal political thoughts of the British, their reaction to the threats and advantages for their country but they also present very personal feelings about the country and the people the British diplomats dealt with on a daily basis. Even though they describe British perception and the social psychological basis for British colonial system, Ethiopia sets a very special case. As an independent African country, the Ethiopian Empire's position was different to British African colonies. The fact that Ethiopia is an old Christian civilisation also influenced the British officers' attitude towards the country and the people. However, it was not enough to perceive Ethiopians as equals in politics and diplomacy. In many reports, Ethiopian ceremonies were described as "barbaric"¹⁴ and Ethiopians as being "like children".¹⁵ The discussion over the arms delivery, mentioned in the article before, throws up more questions regarding British attitude. Major Dodds who suggested giving trumpets to Tafari instead a motor car, talks about the guns delivered to the Empress Zawditu (1916–1930): "Empress called at this Legation last week when at Ras Doltas in order to clinch Magi question. I gave machine gun to her personally. Gun unfortunately was much worn and only with difficulty I got it to function".¹⁶

There are also many minor questions discussed in the documents, which could provide material for a number of extensive articles and publications. An example of this could be the different plans and proposals for the Ethiopian railways, which were supposed to be built by the British, French and Italians in different parts of the country. Among many other documents dealing with this issue, there is an example of some included in the collection of records of the Cabinet Office. There are four items dated between 1900 and 1910: "Proposed railways in Somaliland and Abyssinia (signed in 1903 November 12)" (CAB 37/67/73).

¹⁴ Archer's report, March 27th, 1917; FO: 371/2854.

¹⁵ Campbell to Curzon, July 3rd, 1919; FO: 371/3497; Campbell to Sperling, December 2nd, 1918; FO: 371/3494.

¹⁶ Dodds, July 8th, 1920; FO 371/4393.

All the extracts and information mentioned in this article show only a very small part of what can be found in the British National Archives. The key is to focus on the many unrevealed stories from both British and Ethiopian history. All these and many more fascinating topics are waiting for those who are ready to come and indulge the life well preserved in the old documents.