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Unemployment and Social Disorder during the British Colonial Period in Eritrea (1941–1951)

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Introduction

Eritrea was occupied by the British in April 1941 as part of military advancement of Allied powers in World War II. Largely British-led Commonwealth forces advanced towards Eritrea, the stronghold of Axis power in the region, and on to the western region from Sudan in their triumphant battle against Italy. The manner of British arrival in Eritrea cannot be regarded as part of its usual colonial adventure. Instead it was the consequence of the large global catastrophe of WWII. Thus, unlike Britain's customary colonial projects in which indirect rule would be imposed, Eritrea was exempted from such a system. In its stead, a temporary system was installed dubbed the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA) later to be altered and termed the British Military Administration (BMA).

Normally, the British colonial system was known for its indirect rule involving dual systems characterized by two separated but subordinated state structures for natives and whites. This was 'one for colonizers, the other for natives; one modern, the other customary.'¹ However, the nature of the state that Britain installed in Eritrea was distinctively different from the usual forms of colonial states it controlled in other parts of Africa. This was clearly explained in the report of the administration in 1949. In addition to the shortage of capital to run the territory '[t]he administration is staffed on a temporary short-term basis and has not the advantage of experienced and permanent staff as in a normal colonial Administration.'² In short, it was neither an ordinary colonial nor an independent state.

By all accounts, the decade-long British colonial system in Eritrea was characterized by serious economic crises and weak capitalist development. Prevalent social disorder, public insecurity, and ever-growing economic

¹ Mahmood Mamdani 1996, 70.

² *Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration*, 4.

deterioration descended Eritrea into state of virtual anarchy. As a colony it became very difficult to manage. Having experienced huge capitalist expansion and the resultant massive urbanization, modern capitalist accumulation, and huge capital investment during the Italian colonial period, British rule bore no comparison. In place of running capitalist investment, it gravely damaged its capitalist progress, replacing it with social disorder and public insecurity. This paper analyses this aspect of Eritrea's colonial history by investigating the economic realities. In so doing, the following questions are raised: what were the causes of social disorder and public insecurity during the British period? What characterized the economy of the British colonial period? What were the responses of the State and the indigenous people to this economic crisis?

Britain's arrival in Eritrea came with the promise that its indigenous people would be given autonomy, signalling the end of European colonialism. Soon, however, indigenous Eritreans were to realize this would be far from the truth. The promise had been a mere tactic deployed by the British to disintegrate the Italian colonial army largely composed of indigenous conscripts. British's lack of clear colonial objectives put the colony into an economically precarious situation, much earlier than anticipated, resulting in numerous socio-economic crises. Huge unemployment resulted from the collapse of an economy fundamentally dependent on Italian capital and the destruction of several economic institutions supporting a huge body of indigenous and white labour. The State quite naturally descended into all manner of instabilities due to the dissolution of the colonial military institutions, the destruction of the manufacturing industries, and the importation of labour from neighbouring British colonies.

The British Colonial State

When the British system was converted into the British Military Administration (BMA) from the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA), it faced serious administrative challenges in governing Eritrea due to a lack of appropriately skilled personnel. To remedy the problem the Italians, who had run the colonial state during Italian rule, were rehired. British military governors felt more comfortable working with fellow Europeans, albeit their enemy during WWII, than with indigenous people. In Sir Duncan Cumming's words, one of the colony's British governors, Italians were not there to 'supervise Italian rule', but to rule through the British system. Having the Italians run in the administration system was fundamentally meant to ease the burden the British incurred by occupying Eritrea. This decision had a few advantages, such as budget savings, maintaining the

status quo, and discouraging indigenous nationalist feelings, although it did little to disguise the carelessness of the British to the wellbeing of Eritrean indigenous population.

In practical terms, the purpose of the BMA was much more than ‘caretaker’. ‘The principal aim of BMA was therefore to make the former state structure of the “Occupied Enemy Territory” inoperative, to dissolve the traditional power structure, and to replace it with the British institutional and administrative state apparatus.’³ Britain’s lack of concern for the indigenous folk was not merely a matter of colonial attitude but further impacted by a severe lack of Britain’s own funds that had been severely depleted by WWII. One of the colonial administration reports reveals how Eritrea could not be run to the standards of its customary colonial system.

The Administration is staffed on a temporary short-term basis and has not the advantage of experienced and permanent staff as in a normal British Colonial Administration. Throughout the year, there has always been a shortage on establishment, especially of technical personnel—Finance, Legal, Educational, and Medical. In spite of this, and of the many changes in staff that have occurred at all levels, the officials of the Administration have applied themselves to the job in hand with the greatest energy and enthusiasm in the face of work that is continually increasing in complexity and volume.⁴

Managing Eritrea was a heavy financial burden. ‘The cost to the United Kingdom of the administration of the territories [...] and including all overhead expenses for headquarters and so forth, during the past eleven years was about £16,500,000 up to the end of the last financial year on 31 March 1952.’⁵

In a nutshell, Italy had ruled Eritrea for half a century (1890–1941). During this period, it had changed the country’s society enormously. Capital had flooded into the colony, flowing to construction, agriculture, and conscription. Determined to establish a settler colony, the colonial state had imposed different laws and legislation to expropriate land and labour from the indigenous people. Land dispossession was common in the early period—particularly between 1890 and 1894. Consequently, the divorce of peasant labour from the means of production took place. The break-up of the pre-capitalist economy took on a dramatic scale between 1935 and 1941 as the

³ Jordan Gebre-Medhin 1989, 74.

⁴ *Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration*, 4.

⁵ Cumming 1953, 20.

colony was turned into a war preparation base. In this period, peasants and pastoralists were expeditiously depeasantized via conscription and proletarianization.

When, in 1932, Eritrea was transformed from an ordinary colonial state to a launching pad for the expansion and formation of the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa), the colony's mobilization and organization was rapidly increased. This intensified the commodification of labour and the rate of surplus extraction from the indigenous people. This was the major force behind the proletarianization of the indigenous people. With massive capital being invested in the colonial economy, indigenous people became increasingly attracted by the seductive nature of capital. In the process, sentiments against Italian colonialism became diffused, disarming much of the growing resistance against colonial rule. The colonial economy flourished. In 1939, Eritrea had 25 postal offices and 67 telegraph lines in the communication sector.⁶ By the beginning of the 1940s, it boasted 846 transport and 383 construction enterprises.⁷ At the end of Italian colonial rule, Eritrea had 2,198 industrial firms, and 2,690 commercial firms estimated at a worth of 2,198 million lire and 486 million lire capital respectively.⁸

However, manufacturing came second as the source of employment and transformation of indigenous people. The main agent, or the core, was the institution of the colonial army. In economic terms, change in the pre-1932 period was very gradual and its impact on the indigenous people was very much controlled by the colonial state. In 1935, indigenous wage workers numbered between four and five thousand.⁹ Between 1900 and 1930 total capital investment of Italian currency came to one hundred million lire. This had largely been invested in the development and maintenance of the communication and transportation infrastructure.¹⁰

This was to change in 1935, when 40 per cent of the indigenous male workforce was deployed in the colonial army. In 1907, the colony provided only five thousand men for the army. This was what was deemed necessary for the colony to function normally. But, with the prolonging of the war in Libya and, even more importantly, the plan to invade Ethiopia to create an East African empire of Italy, demand increased to ten thousand. Governor Salvago Raggi expressed his concern that unending requests to send soldiers

⁶ Redie Bereketab 2000, 99–102.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

⁹ Tekeste Negash 1987, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

to Libya from Eritrea were building a colony by destroying another, for such demands uprooted not only the peasants but also the workforce from the country. Now the major source of this recruitment—the peasants—are ‘nowhere to be found’.¹¹ In 1935, almost all the indigenous peoples’ productive labour was in the colonial army and the State was forced to subsidize it by importing fifty thousand Italian labourers to the colony. Studies show that the Italian colonial state conscripted between 130 and 150 thousand indigenous people.¹²

Following the defeat of the Italians by the British in 1941, the colonial structure had been dismantled causing huge labour redundancies. The colonial economy in general and the colonial army institution, that had either directly or indirectly provided the livings for a large section of society, were now non-functional. The situation was economically dire for the indigenous people. Sir Duncan Cumming, one of the British governors of the colony, described the economic condition in a lecture delivered at Chatham House on 28 October 1952.¹³

In the occupied Italian colonies the soldiers of their large colonial army lost their employment. Their families lost the remittances they had previously received and the discharged men were suddenly thrown back on their tribal and village societies. The highly organized Italian schemes for agricultural and industrial development, together with the subsidies which supported them, were thrown abruptly out of gear.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Killion 1996, 92; and Healy 2007, 5–6.

¹³ Cumming 1953.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Table 1 The British Military Administration census on the labour by June 1944¹⁵

Sector	Size
Employed in agriculture, nomads with flocks, etc.	128,750
Employed by various services of the Administration	11,000
Employed by various private firms	9,000
Merchants	5,000
Unemployed	35,000
TOTAL	188,750

Sector	Size
General workers	30,000
Servants, office orderlies, etc.	2,000
Clerks, writers, etc.	1,000
Cooks, waiters, catering workers	1,000
Mechanics, carpenters, builders, drivers, etc.	1,000
TOTAL	35,000

Demolishing the old colonial system was not the only cause of unemployment. The lack of capital and any proper objective for the colony also contributed. Unlike other colonial projects, the British colonial state and the British capitalist were not motivated to invest in the colony. As stated earlier, the British did not arrive in Eritrea for the purpose of colonialism and did not want to stay long once they had seized Eritrea from Italy. Normally, the British colonial purpose had been driven by capitalist expansion. Not so in Eritrea. The British administration's objective was 'care and maintenance', and it was very cautious in terms of expenditure for the colony. The British Army Council sent instructions to its subordinates in Eritrea in October 1942 regarding the meaning of 'care and maintenance' and its required expenditures. Some of which reads as follows:

No capital expenditure could be incurred except with specific authority; maintenance work on essential roads was to aim at keeping them in reasonable condition and to avoid unduly heavy capital expenditure during the next ten years; productive expenditure on agriculture

¹⁵ *British Military Administration, Central Registration: Heading Labour Exchange; Subject-Unemployment Native Labor, 1.*

to meet war-time difficulties would be considered, and also proposals for the extension of educational facilities among the inhabitants if efficient teachers were available.¹⁶

The mission was purely temporary and political, and there was never any intention to invest capital or do anything whatsoever to change the lives of the indigenous people. Neither the colonial state nor individual capitalists had any interest in conducting business in Eritrea. The State's budget was insufficient for its 'care and maintenance' mission, let alone any economic investment. In the annual report of 1949, '[t]he very strictest economy in expenditure and the search for increased revenue has continued [...]. The Administration has not, perhaps, been given the credit to which it is due for its successful efforts in maintaining the relatively small gap between actual expenditure and revenue.'¹⁷ In Cumming's view, '[t]he United Kingdom Treasury could hardly have been expected to subsidize these territories on the scale that the Fascist Government had thought necessary for their own purposes.'¹⁸ Hence the British system had neither the intention nor the capacity to send capital to this territory.

Alongside the newly discharged soldiers, existing pensioners who had participated in Libya, Somalia, and Ethiopia and had received their pension from the Italian colonial state were also plunged into dire circumstances as the British revised their privileges. A modicum of relief was awarded at first, but later all pensions were stopped. In a meeting held on 26 June 1941, the Deputy Chief Political Officer (DCPO) wrote to the Deputy Chief Finance and Account (DCF & A) of the OETA.

I [DCPO] submit that the political importance of continuing the payment of certain classes of pensions that were paid by the Italians in Eritrea deserves careful consideration [...]. The amounts paid to individuals are very small but they concern a large number of Eritreans & it is their pensions that I am especially anxious to continue.¹⁹

The importance of this recommendation was not so much an economic concern as a political one. According to the DCPO, the failure to continue pensions to ex-soldiers would lead to serious security risks. It would be better to pay the small pension amounts than incur the huge expenses of the

¹⁶ Cumming 1953, 15.

¹⁷ *Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration*, 4.

¹⁸ Cumming 1953, 14–15.

¹⁹ *British Military Administration, Labour Pension* (Box 139, File no. 37/D/1, Acc. no. 11681), 2.

larger forces required to maintain security. Pensioners who ‘hold honoured positions on their return to their village’ can have a serious impact on society if their lives are not deteriorated by British rule.²⁰ Furthermore, helping the pensioners would enable the British to establish friendship with the indigenous folk.²¹ However such concerns were difficult to undertake with the critical shortage of budget. According to a letter from the DCPO to the secretary of OETA, based on their meeting with Col. Rodd on 30 June 1941, ‘[n]o pensions as such may be paid by O.E.T.A but the principal is recognized that some, if not all, the actual payments must continue. Therefore the only way to affect this is to regard them as relief payments.’²²

In addition to such a systemic problem, the importation of labour from other British colonies and the hiring of Italians further deteriorated the employment conditions of the indigenous. Italians filled the state bureaucracy while Yemeni, Sudanese, and Ethiopians were brought in to satisfy labour demands. It was said restoring Italians to the state bureaucracy was necessary as no native had the capacity to assume such responsibilities. When the Head Controller of Labour asked the Chief Secretary at the BMA headquarter to employ an indigenous Eritrean, he encountered this response: ‘there is not much work offering for natives but if you will send this man to my office I will see what can I do for him.’²³

Unemployment in the city of Asmāra, for instance, reached twenty thousand in May 1943 at a time when non-European residents numbered between 110 and 120 thousand.²⁴ The situation was made very clear in a notice posted to the people of Asmāra by the Senior Civil Affairs Office (SCAO) on 7 June 1943. The message addressed all Eritreans and Ethiopians living in the colony’s capital Asmāra, that did not have a regular job and were dependent on help from friends.

I [chief of SCAO] advise all such people [unemployed] that the chance of their hopes being realized is very small [...]. Construction on a large scale is finished. This is something which all of you know. So my advice to all those who are out of work is: do not stay here in the hope of finding something to do, but go back to your villages, be-

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid., 3.

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ *British Military Administration, Central Registry: Labour Exchange Applications for Employment General*, 1.

²⁴ Ibid.

fore the rains begin, where anyone who wants to work can be sure making a living.²⁵

The situation continued until the end of the year. A letter dated 3 November 1943 forwarded to the Chief Administrator by the SCAO begins with how serious the problem will become in the near future unless intensive propaganda is carried out ‘for the return’ of the unemployed ‘to the land [or] the absorption of unemployed natives on road works appeared as the only feasible one.’²⁶

Even though unemployment was not the only issue addressed, the OETA began to pay serious attention to it when, in October 1941, it set up an Executive Board that coordinated projects in Eritrea. The issue of employment had become an important part of the agenda. The board included the Chief Secretary of the Administration and a senior staff officer from the military headquarters in Eritrea.²⁷ When considering the scale of the colony’s problems, it became clear the board lacked the authority to handle the serious challenges of unemployment.

Nonetheless, some solutions were introduced. The first step was the introduction of relief. The lack of financing to pay the pensioners forced the OETA to authorize relief programmes. A letter sent by the Finance and Accounting Office to the head of the district finance and accounting department on 20 April 1942 assured that pensioners in districts Asmāra, °Addi Qäyyäh, °Addi Wägri were to receive relief to the amount of approximately 156.443 lire per month. The district heads of finance and accounting were instructed by him to reduce the amount of relief below the existing one. He urged them as follows to try their best: ‘I have to request that you will, as opportunity occurs, enquire into the circumstances of these pensioners and reduce or abolish the relief payments according to circumstance, subject to consideration of the political aspects.’²⁸

Although somewhat temporary, the arrival of the Americans in the region during WWII, and the mass construction project they initiated, gave some relief to the OETA. In fact, the United States Army, following recommendations from British military officers, established military bases in three different districts, Məşəwwa^c, Ginda^c, and Gura^c. Not only its strategic location, but also the presence of skilled Italian and Eritrean labour as

²⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁷ *Development of Eritrea, British Military Administration in Africa*, 128–129.

²⁸ *British Military Administration, Labour Pension* (Box 139, File no. 37/D/1, Acc. no. 11681), 1.

well as its advanced communication and transportation facilities made Eritrea an ideal place to host these military bases.²⁹ According to the report of the American consulate in Asmara of 21 August 1942, the American military bases across Eritrea provided 1,274 employment opportunities for local people.³⁰ However, this was not to last more than two years, as American staff withdrew in 1943, at the end of the war in Africa.

Furthermore, the arrival of American military staff brought serious pressure on the local economy, exacerbating the colony's economic crisis. Aside from labour, the plan was for all supplies—mainly food—to come from the United States, but this did not come about.³¹ The failure of this plan and the lavish expenditure of the military staff created severe price increases on food products, which were already in short supply. This sharp increase in demand, as well as the maladministration of the monetary system, deteriorated the living conditions of the unemployed even more. Prices increased with the increase of British and American military personnel and the lack of common currency in the market, as the British were still using Italian lire. The administration tried to stabilize the lire by valorizing what was in circulation, but this was destined for failure as the flow of lire increased from Ethiopia to be met with an inadequate supply of consumer goods. This damage made living standards go from bad to worse.

A third attempt to solve the unemployment problem by the BMA came in the form of deportation of non-Eritrean indigenous labourers. Indigenous unemployment grew so rapidly in 1943, the Chief Administrator of the colony, Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg issued a letter to all heads of the regions of the colony stating, 'In view of forthcoming unemployment, and to a certain extent to improve the security position, it may be advisable to export back to their countries of origin such non-Eritrean natives as we have. The chief of these are, of course, Sudanese and Yemenese.'³²

During this period, registered non-Eritrean natives in one division, called Akkälä Guzay, numbered 1,481 and were of Egyptian, Ethiopian, Somalian, Sudanese, and Yemeni nationalities.³³ Most were employed in the American military base in Gura^c. In 1943 there were approximately 110 thousand non-

²⁹ *Development of Eritrea, British Military Administration in Africa*, 125–127.

³⁰ *American Military Activity in Eritrea, September 26, 1942*, 5.

³¹ *Development of Eritrea, British Military Administration in Africa*, 127–128.

³² *British Military Administration, Central Registration: Heading Labour Exchange; Subject-Unemployment Native Labor*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Eritrean indigenous in the colony. Longrigg, governor of the colony, proposed the State round them up and deport them to their countries of origin.

I am of the opinion that the only way to solve the unemployment problem is to do what the police are doing at the present moment but on a very much larger scale, i.e. to round up native [non-Eritreans] who are walking the streets and to place those with exemption permits and those without any form of identity card at all into a camp, and to repatriate in groups.³⁴

Later, this was to become a serious programme. In a meeting held at the office of the Chief Secretary on 20 July 1943, attended by Deputy Chief Secretary, Commissioner of Police, Senior Civil Affairs Officer, and Controller of Labour, among others, the problem was discussed and elaborated on a great deal. Based on the minutes of the meeting:

Native unemployment is confined mainly to two centres of population—Asmara and Massawa. The number estimated is about 10,000 of which at least 7,000 are believed to be Sudanese, Ethiopians and Yemeni. The deportation of alien natives is taking place at the present time at the rate of 600 to 700 per month.³⁵

The police commissioner recommended the deportation of all, even including those with official documents that were in order. Such austerity was socially, economically, and politically unbearable.

The situation in rural regions was far worse than in the urban centres. After the collapse of the colonial economy and the military institution, a huge section of the labour force remained disoriented. Labour laid off from the army, which comprised the majority of the unemployed, could not enter capitalist employment due to a lack of employable technical skill. But even those few who may have possessed competences did not have sufficient employment opportunities. As a result, a huge number of conscripts moved back to rural regions despite encountering unexpectedly bad conditions. Once there, however, many were unwilling to remain in the villages under such conditions. Most conscripts had stayed in the army for more than four years; those who had joined the institution at too early an age had not even acquired basic ploughing skills, while the others' peasantry attitude had been supplanted by military culture. Most returnees living close to urban centres preferred living between the towns and the rural area. Two stark

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

realities made life very harsh for those that did become full time peasants: firstly, drought and locusts had rendered agriculture futile and most ex-conscripts found agriculture far harder work than the military; furthermore, the money they were used to earn in the military gave them different and varied buying prospects rather than crops and livestock and thus could be translated into other needs. The tantalizing nature of modernity, which most of them found too hard to resist, revealed other modes of living beyond agriculture that seemed to be easier.

Unemployment and Social Disorder

Despite the State's efforts at handling the socio-economic challenges, the unemployment driven crisis spiralled out of control, resulting in serious social disorder in the form of strikes and public insecurity. Two major incidents particularly affected the BMA badly: the 1949 strikes organized by the workers of a shipping line in Məşəwwa^c and by those of the railway department in Asmara. Both strikes demanded payment equivalent to the work accomplished and in line with the increasing cost of living in the colony. While the shipping line strike lasted for one week until the shipping agency agreed overall increments of their wages,³⁶ the railway department strike continued for six weeks stopping only after the State sanctioned pay increases for lower grades.³⁷

But the strikes were of little concern compared to the emergence of brigands, locally called *šafta*, which severely damaged public security in the colony. It was not the only new social group to emerge out of the crisis mass unemployment had caused; migrant workers and vagabonds became prevalent too. Hussey, a British officer, reported,

As regards Public Security there is a certain amount of larceny in Asmara, much of which may be put down to the fact that so many of the people have no other means of subsistence [*sic*]. Also in the streets of Asmara many beggars are to be found, especially from among the child population [...]. Of a more serious [*sic*] nature are cases of highway robbery by so-called 'Shifta'.³⁸

³⁶ *Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ Hussey 1954, 321.

In a letter sent to the Chief Secretary on 28 February 1945 from the Chief of Office of the Senior Civil Affairs, the above incidents appeared to be very common.

It is realized by all that the unemployment problem among the native urban population is bad and is likely to get worse: [...] owing to this unemployment, there has been a most noticeable increase of vagabonds [...] who have organized themselves into gambling gangs, preying on the public and contemptuous of the police.³⁹

While some had become vagabonds, others pursued seasonal jobs in neighbouring countries as migrant workers. While unemployed Eritreans migrated to Ethiopia and Sudan, a common destination throughout the twentieth century, the unemployed Italians moved to Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda and even as far as Saudi Arabia and India with the British forces.⁴⁰

The first migrant workers were a few unemployed labourers that chose to go to Sudan when cultivation in the western lowland deteriorated badly. Previously, Eritreans had been assigned work in Ethiopia after Italy occupied Eritrea. What was once forced migration now became voluntary, as Eritrean migrant workers flocked to Ethiopia during the British colonial period. From the colonial official's point of view the flow of unemployed Eritreans to Sudan was a relief. One of the reports sent by the Senior Division Officer of the western province of the colony to the Chief Secretary argued the importance of Eritreans working in Sudan: 'the temporary migration by those workers is of value to Eritrea as well as to the Sudan, for they bring money back to the territory [...] and this is spent in the local shops.'⁴¹

³⁹ *British Military Administration, Central Registration: Heading Labour Exchange; Subject-Unemployment Native Labor*, 7.

⁴⁰ *British Military Administration, Labour Pension* (Box 139, File no. 37/B/1, Vol. II Acc. no. 11570), 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Table 2 Statistics of migrant workers to Sudan between 1946 and 1951⁴²

Year	Workers
1946	150
1947	250
1948	550
1949	400
1950	328
1951	970

This growing unemployment resulted in Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia hosting more migrant workers than Sudan. Both Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia hosted professional Italian and Eritrean workers, whereas the migrant workers in Sudan were mainly plantation workers.⁴³ The biggest employer operating in Saudi Arabia was the private British company Aramco, which preferred hiring Italians to Eritreans. The Italians had more choice than the Eritreans for they could also choose to move to Uganda, India, Kenya, and Djibouti.⁴⁴ At the outset, most of these migrant workers did not stay longer than four months. But, as living conditions went from bad to worse in Eritrea, some decided to resettle there permanently. Reports from the regions demonstrate that Akkälä Guzay, one of the eight administration divisions of the colony, had a relatively large number of migrant workers because it had contributed more labour to the colonial army.⁴⁵

Internal migration also occurred in this period. After the collapse of the military institution, many servicemen returned to the land to live as peasants. There were two kinds of returnees: uninjured individuals rendered unemployed by the collapse of the military institution, and ex-military personnel discharged due to injury. A large number of ex-conscripts who managed to survive the war returned to their homes; however, the extreme agrarian crisis forced them to seek seasonal work elsewhere in Eritrea, such as in °Aligdär and Umḥaḡär, where plantations had remained active. The discharged, injured ex-conscripts lived between rural and urban spaces as the British pension was irregular and was sometimes given in kind rather than money.

⁴² Ibid., 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁵ *Development of Eritrea, British Military Administration in Africa*, 143.

The most serious disturbance of law and order during the Administration was armed, highway robbery. According to the 1949 annual report of the Administration, '[p]olitically the year 1949 has been uneasy and eventful [...] the Administration has continued to perform its difficult and thankless task in the face of continued political uncertainty, of increasing threats to public security, and of increasing pressure of work.'⁴⁶ The report states that, up to 1948, officials were able to travel without escort across the territory, but, in 1949, '[t]his is hardly the case'.⁴⁷ An account by regional police officers claims that most members of *šāfta* groups have previous experience of fighting. 'Given the [tactics] they used to take the ambushes and the escapes as well as the fight with policy at times indicate that these people are experienced fighters.'⁴⁸ In one of the monthly political reports of 1950, authorities had become extremely concerned as the *šāfta* began to replace the official authorities in their areas of activity.

The comparative immunity enjoyed by *shifta* in the past has so seriously weakened the authority of the Administration that an increasing number of persons are now prepared to defy the Administration, usurp its authority, and take the law into their own hands. In the past the weight of the Administration's authority and prestige proved sufficient to deter all but the most desperate from taking to a life of outlawry.⁴⁹

During the 1950s, in some parts of Sāra'e region, one of the most densely populated peasantry divisions of the colony, the state authority was replaced by the *šāfta*.⁵⁰ When the State came to realize the rural area was increasingly affected by *šāfta* incidents, it introduced a number of counter measures. On 7 August 1944, the Police Commissioner in Asmāra issued a notice stating that he would make rewards of between 100 to 200 pounds sterling for anyone providing information leading to the capture of known *šāfta*. In 1944, but in the absence of any clear indication of the reward system being effective, the Administration arrested fifty-one people for armed robbery in the Barka administration division—the region most affected.⁵¹ When in 1945 the reward method was perceived to have failed to deliver the

⁴⁶ *Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration*, 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *British Military Administration, Shifta Activities*, 3.

⁴⁹ *British Administration, Eritrea, No. 53 Monthly Political Report, May 1950*, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2; and *British Military Administration, Shifta, Crimes outlaws Agordat*, 2.

⁵¹ *British Military Administration, Shifta, Crimes outlaws Agordat*, 2–3.

expected results, a collective reward for capturing or a collective fine for harbouring *šafta* was upgraded.⁵² When the village ‘Addi Buḥnuna in the Sāra’e administration division was found guilty of not informing the authorities of the presence of *šafta* in its village, the Chief Administrator of the colony was compelled to issue this order:

In exercise of the powers vested in me as Chief Administrator and in pursuance of Article 186 [...] I order the payment of collective fine of East African Shilling 1200 (one thousands two hundred) by the village of Adi Buhnuna in the Serae Administrative Division, for failing to inform the authorities of the presence of part of Asserassai Embaie’s gang in their village during the engagement which took place at Adi Laghen on the 2nd November 1950.⁵³

In early 1950, the Administration increased its security measures by recruiting additional forces from the indigenous people and introducing a system called the ‘Village Guards Scheme’.⁵⁴ In the Village Guard Scheme, state armed village members were to guard their village from any outlaws but mainly *šafta*.⁵⁵ Although these counter measures enabled the State to increase contact with the people, they were less effective in stabilizing colony security. In one of the instruction letters sent ‘To all the heads of districts, tribes and villages’ by the Chief Administrator in October 1950, the concern of the Administration about the growing *šafta* activities is demonstrated clearly:

During the past month there has been peace in Eritrea to an extent that the country has not known for a long time [...]. Recently there have been signs that shifta may again become active [...] shifta cannot operate in Eritrea without the knowledge and help of the people [...] I again call on all law abiding people to prevent the shifta from causing further trouble. It is entirely to their advantage that they should do so because otherwise they may suffer more from the security measures of the Administration than from the shifta.⁵⁶

⁵² *British Military Administration, Shifta, Crimes & outlaws*, 3.

⁵³ *British Military Administration, Shifta, Crimes outlaws in Serae*, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁵ *British Military Administration, Home Guard Plan: Anti-Shifta Distribution of Arms, Issue of Rifles to District Chiefs*, 5.

⁵⁶ *British Military Administration, Rehabilitation of Ex-Shifta*, 2.

Nevertheless, not all *šäfta* were a product of the economic crisis. Some were engaged in family feuds and others, particularly those active from 1950, were, to a huge extent, politically motivated. In political terms, the last two years (1951–1952) of the BMA were a period when the Eritrean people was preparing a UN sponsored federal programme with Ethiopia. Ethiopia, under the crown of Ḥaylā Šəllase, used the *šäfta* system as an important political instrument to intimidate nationalists and show the victorious allied war forces that the colony could only be insecure and vulnerable, were it given any sort of independence. The real facts, however, greatly indicate that politics was much more the factor as most of the *šäfta* ring-leaders turned out to be either Ethiopians or Eritreans sponsored by the Ethiopian monarchy.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The arrival of the British in Eritrea altered the course of the colony's capitalist development. Owing to the lack of financial capital and a proper colonialist project, Britain disregarded any capitalist development. As Britain's arrival in the region can be termed accidental, political disinterest and the lack of any long-term projects for economic investment caused an economic crisis resulting in mass unemployment. By the end of Italian rule, the indigenous people of Eritrea had experienced quite different socio-economic conditions through the emergence of new semi-capitalist forces. The intensive penetration of Italian capital had destabilized the former patriarchal agrarian society, but by the end of British rule, Eritrean society was simply mired in political and economic crises.

Even though both periods were different forms of the manifestations of capitalism, each caused labour mobility, but in opposite directions. The Italian period resulted in mass depeasantization of labour shifting focus from the rural to the urban. The British period reversed this trend with a repeasantization of labour in the form of urban–rural migration. Consequently, in the mid-1940s, pressure on the rural area of the region increased. An unemployed workforce, particularly military servicemen, had no choice but to return to agriculture. Exposed to the harshness of agrarian living, some chose to return to urban areas. This left the workforce in a constant transition process, moving back and forth between the region's rural and urban areas.

⁵⁷ Alämsägäd Täsfay 2005, 44–51.

The long-term impact of this historical period saw the emergence of fragmented labour taking the form of migrant workers, vagabonds, and brigands. A significant amount of the unemployed workforce chose to seek their livelihood moving between the rural and urban, but others migrated to Sudan, Ethiopia, and other neighbouring countries to seek work. Some of those who chose neither option became vagabonds and brigands creating a serious threat to public safety. Clearly this scared off the very little capital investment that had remained after the defeat of the Italian colonial state. In the knowledge that the major Italian capitalists left the colony after Italy's defeat, the few remaining hoped the BMA would allow them to operate. But soon the activities of the British made their hope give way to scepticism and confusion. This eventually led to a cyclical economic crisis that severely damaged public safety in the colony.

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⁵⁸ The archival documents listed here are all held at the Research & Documentation Centre (RDC) in Asmara.

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Summary

This article investigates the connection between unemployment and social disorder that characterized British colonial rule in Eritrea between 1941 and 1951. Using the archives of labour of the British period, this article documents the causes of social disorder that galvanized the British period in Eritrea. Based on archival documents, the article argues that the public insecurity and social disorder of the British period were largely related to socio-economic conditions resulting in mass unemployment caused by (1) the dissolution of the colonial army institution; (2) the destruction of the manufacturing industries; (3) the importation of labour from neighbouring British colonies. Upon the defeat of Italy by the British in Eritrea during WWII, the British system had a clearly diminished appetite for colonialism and abandoned any agenda of capitalist expansion, inflicting massive redundancies on the labour force. This produced new social groups such as migrant workers, brigands, and vagabonds. Based on these archival documents, an alternative explanation is introduced pinpointing far more accurately the sources of public insecurity and social disorder during the British colonial period between 1941 and 1951.