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Research Project

Dissertation Ngwenya: Blurring the Blue Line: African Police, Emergency and the Struggle for Independence in Colonial Northern Matabeleland, 1955-1980

Project funded by own resources

Project title Dissertation Ngwenya: Blurring the Blue Line: African Police, Emergency and the Struggle for Independence in Colonial Northern Matabeleland, 1955-1980

Principal Investigator(s) Tischler, Julia ;

Project Members Ngwenya, Brian ;

Organisation / Research unit

Departement Geschichte / Geschichte Afrikas (Tischler)

Project Website <https://dg.philhist.unibas.ch/de/personen/brian-ngwenya/dissertationsprojek t/>

Project start 01.02.2016

Probable end 31.07.2023

Status Completed

This historical study examines the different ways through which African police forces mediated the process of decolonization and the expansion of the nation-state in Zimbabwe between 1960-1990. Using Alltagsgeschichte as a methodological lens, I investigate African police “self-understandings” and their “situated subjectivities” as bureaucrats of the colonial and post-colonial states they served. By exploring the quotidian interactions of the supposed collaborators; between the structures and hierarchies of colonial and post-colonial states on one hand, and the broad sections of the colonial African society, on the other, I seek to understand how African police navigated and negotiated their lives and work vis-a-vis the particular ambiguities of decolonisation in a settler context. Consequently, I conceptualise African police as political actors whose personal motivations as well as their outlook on law and authority and visions of the nation-state have contributed to the formation of the nation-state in Zimbabwe. By placing African police at the centre of analysis, this study seeks to argue that this group of subjects shaped the process of decolonisation and the post-independence recasting of the nation-state in more complex and multifarious ways than existing research acknowledges.

Broadly, examining Zimbabwe’s violent and drawn-out decolonisation process through the lens of African police intermediaries contributes to historiography on colonial policing and everyday life in former settler colonial states. Trapped in the polarised binaries of collaboration and resistance, existing historical studies on the matter, whether written from the stand-point of empire or as institutional histories, have been preoccupied with the coercive nature of policing as central to controlling colonial societies and maintain the authority of alien rule. Neither of these perspectives left much room for systematically studying the socio-political histories of agents like police during the crises of decolonisation in Africa beyond common-place stereotypes. Secondly, by extending into the post-independence era, it not only makes critical empirical contributions to literature on intermediaries in the late colonial years but also stretches the category to new frontiers.

The study will use material from various archival collections in UK, South Africa and Harare. In addition, oral interviews with retired African police and their immediate families will be used extensively in order to corroborate archival material. I shall also consult various such as newspapers, crime and court records, autobiographies, novels and memoirs.

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Financed by

University funds
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