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The British Council's Development After the Second World War

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Abstract

The aftermath of the Second World War marked a profound geopolitical realignment that significantly altered Great Britain's global standing. Facing a transitional phase in its colonial and foreign policies, the British government recognized the strategic necessity of projecting "soft power" to navigate its diminishing imperial dominance. Central to this new diplomatic approach was the British Council, which emerged as a pivotal instrument for overseas cultural diplomacy. This paper examines the institutional expansion of the British Council during the post-war era, analyzing how state-backed cultural enterprises were actively encouraged and funded. Ultimately, the study highlights how the Council was deployed to rehabilitate Britain's war-damaged international image, foster transnational educational exchanges, and sustain British global influence through intellectual and cultural channels rather than traditional military or economic coercion.

Keywords: The British Council, Post-World War II, Development, Cultural Enterprise, Government Support.

Introduction

After the Second World War, developed countries' cultural organisations started to manifest an increasingly very important dynamism overseas to help gaining support for national policies respectively. Consequently, the British Council was encouraged by its government to expand particularly in British colonies. This Council's backed development was in tune with the harsh realities of post World War in which Britain's glorious imperial image was seriously damaged.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the major factors that contributed to the development of the Council's activities in the British colonies after the Second World War.

The British Critical Situation After the Second World War:

The British traditional values of pragmatism and progressive politics were no longer attractive. Britain was perceived to be an old-fashioned, outmoded power. Therefore, she had to promote a new image of herself as a dynamic, progressive democracy at the centre of a world-wide association of peoples, providing alternatives to communism and free-market capitalism. Her political and economic relative decline was coupled to a growing ideological gap between her and her colonies, which it was hoped would be closed. Indeed, after the Second World War, Britain had to reconstruct her destroyed economy and she needed support. So, she looked to her colonies for primary resources. Britain's damaged prevailing image there could no longer convince the colonial people to tolerate being exploited as they had previously been. This rejection of exploitation was encouraged by the pan-African movement which activated to spread awareness among the colonised people. The Manchester Pan-Africanism Congress of 1945 called colonial and particularly African peoples to oppose fervently imperial exploitation of their own resources. They also demanded equal and accelerated economic, cultural and social development of Africa ; a larger participation of Africans in the administration of their countries at different levels to prepare self government, a systematic planning and evolution especially in the interests of the Africans.[1]

This hard colonial situation led Britain to look for suitable machinery that would improve her image and secure her prestige from a total decline in the world in general and in Africa in particular. After debate with the different departments, the British Government was convinced that a corporation body would better assist in cultural propaganda than a government department, and because of its 'independent status' from its government and its wide range experience in dealing with different overseas peoples, the British Council was thought to be the qualified machinery.[2] It was hoped the British Council might close the ideological gap that was threatening British imperial interests. For instance, in Africa, the Council's focus was mainly on adult education, led by discussion group and assisted by spreading library services. The aim behind such an approach was to induce in African 'a state of mind favourable to Britain',[3] and secure economic advantages for her as well as

[1] For further details, see E. Geiss, The Pan-African Movement, (London, Methuen & Coltd, 1974), p. 391.
[2] "Both at home and abroad persons and organisations in the cultural sphere who willingly collaborate[d] with the British Council as a non-official body but who would not be equally prepared to co-operate with any organisation directly controlled in all its activities by [the British] Government". T 219/85, Confidential, Review of the Future of the British Council 1950-1951, p. 27.
[3] T 219/84, Second Meeting of Working Party, 2 January 1951.

her world prestige. Therefore, the Council was required to sophisticate its organisation and develop its work.

The British Council's Development After the Second World War :

In fact, the consequences of the Second World War on Britain and her colonies favoured the acceleration of the British Council's timid growth experienced before the war.

The British Council's Structural Growth and General Functionning :

The post-war preoccupations required more professionalism from the British Council to lead a pertinent expansion of a long-term work in view of the sizeable turbulences Britain had to face. Consequently, the Council's organisation and policy were designed in general terms by a Cabinet decision of March 1946[1] which ordered the Council initially to confine its field of action to educational and cultural matters and to avoid overlapping with the Government's Information Service whose work mainly covered among other patterns lectures (except a small portion), visual propaganda, press and broadcasting.[2] Later changes occurring on the structure of the post-war British Council led to developments of the Council's organisation, Finance and Staff.

Before the end of the Second World War, the British Council was organised into a number of divisions which increased from 3 (in April 1939) to 6 (in February 1943). After, the war in order to meet post-war British requirements and fulfil its wide-range activities, within an accelerated growth of international cultural enterprise, the British Council had to reorganise itself into 9 divisions each one including several departments which undertook a variety of tasks. The heads of those divisions proposed projects to the executive and Finance and Agenda Committee. The latter were assisted by a number of advisory ones. Moreover, the Council co-operated with various international institutions such as the United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organisation.

In fact, this doubling of the Council's number of divisions during the Second World War reflected the manifested need for the Council's assistance to spread influence and protect British imperial interests from the propaganda other countries were leading against Britain and other allies. Such Council's backing was further requested once the war ended. Consequently, the Council's structural organisation which comprised 38 departments in 1939, had 37 in 1943 and 47 departments in 1950. This increased number of departments in the British Council's structure to

[1] G. S. 29/05, Mr Bevin's letter 20th March, 1946.
[2] F. Donaldson, The British Council's : The First Fifty Years 1934-1984, London, Jonathan Cape, 1984, p. 72.

cover new tasks, reflected the significant expansion this machinery's work witnessed after the Second World War.[1]

This Council's continual development of its organisation and important relationships at an extended scale was made possible by devoted qualified staff. The latter was divided into separate Home and Overseas Services. The appointment of staff to different posts had to be recommended by the Council's Personnel Board in London, confirmed by the Director-General or, by the Executive Committee for Senior Posts.

To open offices at home and overseas, be able to fulfil its mission to achieve its objective, the Council had to obtain financial support. Its funds derided from two main sources : the first one, money voted by Parliament. The grant in aid was provided in a separate vote accounted for by the Foreign Office and was spent on the Council's work in foreign countries only. The cost of the work in the colonies and Commonwealth countries was furnished from funds born on the votes for colonial services and Commonwealth services, respectively. The Council's welfare operations for colonial students in the United Kingdom were covered by a grant from the Colonial Office which derived from the funds furnished under the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts. The grant-in-aid was officially for a net amount after deducting the miscellaneous receipts and the repayments by the Colonial Office and Commonwealth Relations Office. The Council's expenditure which amounted to £353,233,000 in 1939-40 knew continual increases ; was £480,673,000 in 1940-41 ; £688,773,000 in 1941-42 ; £1,011,109,000 in 1942-43 ; £2,814,625,000 in 1945-46 and 3,140,956,000 in 1946-47.[2] The second source, miscellaneous receipts, included fees charged in the Council's institutes and schools, income gathered from courses and the 'service and material' operations of the Council, financial assistance from the Colonial Governments and contributions from private corporations and individuals in accordance with the terms of the Charter.[3]

Under the British Council's Charter, the responsibility for controlling the Council's expenditure rested with the Council's Executive Committee.[4] The Foreign Office was responsible for general surveillance of the manner in which that control was exercised, and was accountable to Parliament for the proper expenditure of the grant-in-aid voted to the Council for work in foreign countries. The Colonial Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office were answerable to Parliament for the proper expenditure of the money voted to them for the Council's work in the colonies and the Commonwealth respectively. Moreover, the Foreign Office and the Treasury needed to be sure that the Council's own standards of financial correctness

[1] For details concerning the Council's affairs management see : CAB 113/17, Confidential, Report on the British Council by Sir Findlater Stewart, 8 February 1945, p. 3.
[2] F. Donaldson, op. cit, p. 382.
[3] T 165/84, op. cit, 1954, p. 7.
[4] T 219/420, Charter, clause 6, British Council Financial Handbook, Chapter II.

and of control were not below those of government departments. For instance, to facilitate the Council's expansion in the colonies, annual estimated expenditure by the Council operations there was increased from £369,000 in 1942-49 to £450,000 in 1950-51.[1]

Once the Council's needed money was secured, it was divided between United Kingdom and Overseas Services. For instance, in 1947-48, the British Council's total expenditure was £3,161,000, of which £1,607,000, rather more than a half was incurred in the centres overseas. Of the expenditure in London, educational services and material accounted for £577,000, Arts, for £167,000, Common Services for £341,000 and Headquarters administrative staff for £170,000.[2]

Post-war British Council's expenditure faced imposed cuts. Like all government machineries, the British Council suffered from the austerity policy Britain adopted immediately after the Second World War in order to face her economic problems and to meet the emergency imposed by the Cold War. Yet, the British Council did not mince efforts to spread British influence through the maintained work which helped the understanding of British policies overseas.

The Council's Policy Development:

The British Council machinery was entrusted with the task of supervising cultural relations as a formal activity of government[3], but the British Government did not consider the Council's 'cultural' work as 'part of the normal functions of a diplomatic mission'.[4] The Council's area of activity was restricted by the Foreign Office so as to cover the educated groups, leaving the other categories or the general public to the Information Service.[5] In spite of the fact that it wanted to enlarge its audience and to deal also with non-academic audience, the Council was expected to influence, in the long-term, particularly educated, often already receptive groups in foreign countries through the English language, British Drama, Fine Arts, Literature and Music and focused much more on Higher Studies and the training of teachers.[6] Thus, it was normal to see its staff involved with the training of teachers and the very filling of English-teaching posts in universities and other institutions overseas.

The new educational dealing proposed by the Council's new Education Director, Dr A. E. Morgan (1946-1951), was a serious problem in the Council's relations with the Foreign Office. Backed by Sir R. Adam (British Council's Chairman and Director-General 1946-1955 and President of the Council 1950-1954), Morgan claimed that

[1] T 219/85, op. cit, 1951, p. 36.
[2] For more details, see BW 151/10, Report of the British Council 1948-49 (London, June MCMXLVII).
[3] FO 924/253 LC 4940/113/45, Foreign Office Circular N° 144, 28 December 1946.
[4] BW 69/1, Minutes of a policy Committee Meeting, 11 February 1947.
[5] BW 2/342, Minute by A. Dudley, 3 March 1946.
[6] BW 2/343, Annex to Evidence presented to Sub-Committee D of the Select Committee on Estimates, 16 October 1946, p. 469, Memorandum by the British Council.

direct teaching of elementary English and the support of British schools should not occupy the Council's first priority but these tasks had to be transferred to the countries concerned instead the Council should reach beyond political and intellectual elite through the use of discussion group techniques.

Such Council's advanced type of education was resisted by the Foreign Office. For instance, in 1949 the Foreign Office Secretary, Sir Ernest Bevin asked the Council to revise its new dealing of education policy. He emphasised elementary teaching, and the expansion of British-type schools.[1] The Foreign Office argued that discussion groups could not be a substitute for English teaching and British schools could be suspected by foreign governments. The Foreign Office precisely referred to educationally underdeveloped areas and warned that, Morgan's proposed policies were big mistake since they could provoke suspicion.[2] Convinced with these arguments, the British Council's educational policy came back to traditional lines at the end of the decade.

The Colonial Office welcomed and encouraged the British Council to work to its full financial capacity. In August 1947, Mr Green-Jones (UK delegate to UN 1946, 1947-8) expressed his strong feeling about the obligation to maintain the British Council's work in the British Colonies for the following reason : [3]

As the Colonies themselves progress towards greater self-consciousness and self-sufficiency, their culture and institutions may retain a British flavour and cultural ties may supplement or take the place of political ties on which less reliance can be placed than in the past.[18]

The Colonial Office instrumentalised the British Council to develop an understanding of British colonial policy through British publicity.[4] The Council was also used in the Colonies 'not only as a means of 'putting across' Britain, but also as a powerful instrument in the improvement of race relations'.[5] Such an enterprise was particularly necessary in African colonies where large unofficial European populations were established. In 1948, the Colonial Under Secretary, Charles Jeffries, himself stated :[6]

I feel that the Council can play a vital part in the development of closer links between the people of the Colonies and the people of Britain, …, the services of the Council should be used to an even greater extent than they have in the past. [21]

[1] A. J. S. White, op. cit, p. 68.
[2] FO 924/771 LC 2291/71/452, Minute by J. P. Finch, 6 July 1949.
[3] BW 26/4. J. Thomas to Adam, 9 August 1947.
[4] PREM 8/648, Report of the Empire Publicity Sub-Committee, 20 February 1947.
[5] CO 878/48/1, Minute by K. W. Blackburn, 17 January 1949.
[6] A. J. S. White, op. cit, p. 85.

This Colonial Office positive attitude towards the Council facilitated the establishment of Council representations in all but the smallest colonial territories. Moreover, the Council's policy there became clearly defined particularly, in 1948. The opportunity of the Council work was briefed as 'the carrying of any activity in the cultural and educational sphere whose chief purpose is the "projection" of British way of life and the promotion of closer relations in cultural matters between the people of Britain and the people of the colonies'.[1] It was possible for the Council in the colonies to take part in cultural and educational operations which were to improve the promoted appreciation of the British way of life. In this respect, the British Council Annual Report for 1950-1951 pointed out :[2]

At present there are strong links between Britain and the Colonies which for the most part have not been forged by the Colonial peoples themselves. In many ways the strength of these links is threatened. It is to be hoped that as the peoples of the Colonies obtain greater control over their own affairs, they will realise the value of the connection with Britain and will themselves seek to strengthen the links between their countries and the Commonwealth clearly the Council can play … in achieving this purpose.[23]

Thus, the Council's work in the Colonies was perceived as a very important help to the Colonial Governments and was warmly encouraged and backed by the Colonial Office. Besides, the Foreign Office wished to see the work of the Drama, Fine Art and Music Departments severely reduced.[3] It was proposed to make these activities self-supporting and in 1948, the Council was instructed to focus as much as possible on activities such as visits, courses, lectures and English lessons rather than on longer-term projects like exhibitions of modern paintings.[4] This direct selection for the Council's post-war priority was expected to ensure rapid political return to which Britain was in most need particularly in relation to her colonies' young generation with whom Britain would have to treat in the future.

Conclusion

Thus, the British Council was allowed to know a significant change and development after the Second World War. In fact, the granting of self-government which was launched and the spread of communism which became a reality threatening British imperial interests in particular at that time, helped the Council to secure more support from the British government in order to strengthen its establishment and extend its work in British spheres of influence and later on, in different parts of the World to improve Britain's damaged image and further British influence.

[1] Ibid, p. 86.
[2] BW 151/12, Report of the British Council 1950-1951, (London, MCMXLVII, 1951), p. 2.
[3] BW 1/4, W. H. Montagu-Pollack to White, 17 January 1946.
[4] CAB 124/1029, Bevin to Greech-Jones, 22 September 1948.

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[16] T 219/84, Second Meeting of Working Party, 2 January 1951.

[17] T 219/85, Confidential, Review of the Future of the British Council 1950-1951.

[18] T 219/420, Charter, clause 6, British Council Financial Handbook, Chapter II.