



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MALNUTRITION, POOR HOUSING AND DISEASE: THE WOES OF TANGANYIKA MIGRANT LABORERS DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE UASIN GISHU RAILWAY 1922-1923.

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ABSTRACT

As scholars get interested in human rights violations during colonial rule in Kenya especially during the Mau Mau struggle for independence, other colonial scandals of lesser magnitude remain unearthed as this article demonstrates. The manner in which the colonial governments constructed the public works and railways in particular has not received adequate scrutiny by historians. The construction of railways required mobilization of tens of thousands of labourers who more often than not worked under appalling conditions. This article examines how labor was procured and treated during the construction of the Uasin Gishu Railway in Kenya where hundreds of workers died due to poor housing, diet and disease. Specifically, the article examines why the Uasin Gishu railway was the only Kenyan project in 1920s to import labor, in this case from Tanganyika Territory and South Africa. Second, labor mismanagement led to a high death rate among the workers, and this necessitated a probe by both Tanganyikan and Kenyan authorities. Incidentally, the colonial Kenyan officials employed various means to cover up the problems experienced by both Tanganyikan and Kenyan laborers during the construction of the railway. Relying heavily on archival sources never used before, this article exposes the weaknesses embodied in trusteeship and mandated territories doctrine. Africans whether from Mandated or a colony were treated the same by British administration.

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INTRODUCTION

Background to labor problem in Kenya in 1920s

One major handicap in the development of public works, and railways in particular, was lack of skilled manpower in post first world war Kenya. While it was possible to get the ten engineers required for the construction of Uasin Gishu Railway from London, it proved quite a hassle to get enough surveyors, draughtsman, overseers and artisans from East African region. To address the problem, such classes of workers had to be imported at an extra cost on the part of the colony. Importation of skilled labor was often done by the government, but not at the scale demanded by the construction company. The first major importation of labor in Kenya occurred during the construction of the Uganda railway at the end of the 19th century.¹ It necessitated the importation of Indian coolies whose majority refused to be repatriated back to India after the expiry of their tenure leading to a significant population of Indians in Kenya. The Indian presence in East African has been a contested issue both in colonial and post colonial periods. The Indian crisis in the country climaxed in 1920s when they also wanted to be given equal treatment with the British settlers. Their numerical strength was a major challenge to the minority white settlers who dominated both the government and commercial sector. In an attempt to check

the Indian influx in the country the colonial state frustrated further importation of labor from that part of the world. As a result, Norton Griffiths, the company contracted to construct the line, contemplated employing Maltese artisans through the advice of Leo Amery, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for the Colonies and a friend of Sir John Norton Griffiths who was conversant with that part of the world.²

However, J. H. Gailey, the local director of Norton Griffiths, doubted the wisdom of “the policy of introducing low class English speaking Europeans into a black man’s country such as this and would rather have seen Arabs, Chinese or Italians here.”³ He went on to wonder if Maltese could really work in East Africa after the local governor, Sir Edward Northey informed him that he had allowed contracting of 30 Maltese for Public Works Department but after arriving in Mombasa, they were met by members of the local Indian Union who told them “they would be eaten by lions and killed by snakes if they stopped here, and all except one went back. This does not look as if they have guts.” Definitely, this might have been a ploy by the Indian community to prevent the government from employing foremen from any other part of the world while skilled local Indians needed such jobs. Accordingly, Norton Griffiths inquired from the Colonial Office (CO) on the suitability of employing artisans from Malta.⁴ A minute by Cosmo Parkinson, rejected importation of Maltese labor and suggested that Northey should facilitate the training of African artisans. Alternatively, the government should allow

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employment of Indians without attaching any conditions.⁵ Norton Griffiths was informed accordingly. The latter accepted the advice from the CO,⁶ but instead of employing Indians, the company opted for coloreds from the Union of South Africa.

Consequently, the company sent labor recruiters to Durban, South Africa, with the objective of getting 150 skilled artisans. Nonetheless, the South African government imposed stiff labor requirements that the company could not meet. First, the company was supposed to pay a bond of £100 per laborer. Two, laborers were to be repatriated at the company's expense after the expiry of the contract without any provision for renewal. Three, the company was to retain 50% of the laborer's wages, which the company was expected to send to South Africa upon the expiry of the contract.⁷ If the company agreed to these terms, it would have meant spending money that was not catered for in the construction contract. Thus, the company requested the Kenyan authorities to pay the bond, and guarantee repatriation of workers. However, the governor refused to carry the burden arguing that the country did not have such legislation to force workers to return to their country against their will.⁸ The governor also mistakenly told the company to shoulder the cost of repatriation and bond contrary to the terms of the construction contract. Thus, when the matter was referred to the Crown Agents for the Colonies (CA) for advice, they supported the position of the company. It was observed that under the contract the company was: Acting as our [government] agents, and not as contractors, the £100 per head, which they would be required to pay as a guarantee for the labourers they recruit, would eventually fall on the government of Kenya colony, and would have to be paid to Messrs Griffiths & Co for this purpose.⁹

The CA advised that the alternative was to request the South African government to waive the bond and other conditions. Thus, in January 1922 the governor was asked to get in touch with South African authorities to sort out the issue.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the South African authorities were not forthcoming, and the company, desperate to have skilled manpower, managed to employ only 30 artisans under the above-mentioned conditions. That is the company agreed to pay £100 bond per head, to repatriate workers after a three year contract, meet medical examination expenses before embarkation, and, when returning, pay wages from the date of leaving South Africa,¹¹ Thus, the company managed to get skilled labor by February 1922 while the shortfall was filled with local Indian artisans. The Kenyan people carried the burden of the extra charges (bond, fares and medical examination) due to faulty terms of the contract that prevented the company from any liability. However, the provision of unskilled labor from Kenya was not forthcoming due to great competition from settlers after the end of the war. This necessitated outsourcing of unskilled labour for the construction of the Uasin Gishu railway from Tanganyika as demonstrated below

Unskilled labor from Tanganyika Territory (TT)

One peculiar aspect of the construction of the Uasin Gishu railway was the importation of unskilled labor from Tanganyika Territory during the first year of its construction.

This was because, throughout the 1920s, Kenya experienced labor shortages, as most of able-bodied men were not willing to go out and work after their harsh experiences during the First World. During the war many Kenyans lost their lives or returned disabled following service in the carrier corps, and most of them would not have wished to risk their lives providing hard labor on railway construction. Furthermore, the use of forced labor after the war in 1919 and 1920 had caused a political storm in both Kenya and in London. As a result, the government was willing to allow the contractor to import labor from Tanganyika Territory. Consequently, the colony's director of labor, S. F. Deck, warned the resident engineer (RE), Col. Robertson: It is probable that only a fraction of labour required can be reasonably be supplied by the country. I recommend that labour be mainly recruited in Tanganyika Territory in accordance with the contract drawn up by the government for Captain Griffiths.¹²

It was possible to recruit labor from Tanganyika (part of present day Tanzania) because it had become a British mandated territory after the defeat of Germany in 1918.¹³ As a result of the defeat, most German settlers left the country, and it was assumed that the country had abundant "underutilized" labor while Kenya was facing an acute labor shortage. This was based, of course, on the European misconception that labor could only be effectively utilized in wage employment. Furthermore, there were claims that the Wanyamwezi, an African community in Central Tanganyika, were very enterprising and could willingly offer labor. This was not far from the truth. The Wanyamwezi were well known for their enterprising activities during the long distance trade in East Africa in the 19th century.¹⁴ Additionally, the Wanyamwezi and Wasukuma had effectively provided labor during the construction of the Central railway by the Germans, and therefore their experience would be an added advantage. Thus the director of Griffiths & Co sent labor recruiters to Tanganyika, and surprisingly the governor of TT allowed recruitment of 2,500 workers.¹⁵ But the recruitment had to wait the final signing of the construction agreement. When contract formalities were concluded, it would seem Governor Sir Horace Byatt had changed his mind and was not ready to release the previously number of laborers. Thus, Northey wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (S of S) to grant him special powers to ensure that labor was recruited from TT. He noted IN HIS TELEGRAM that Sir Horace Byatt was demanding a guarantee that laborers would be repatriated upon the expiry of contract.¹⁶ The request received support from W. C. Bottomley, the head of East African Department at the CO, who observed that the governor of Tanganyika Territory had indicated in July 1921 that there was surplus labor over and above what was required in the country. Bottomley proposed:

- (1) that the recruitment should be voluntary
- (2) The contract should be for six months in the first instance, but could be extended.
- (3) The contractor should provide transport, accommodation, and medical care
- (4) Those employed may be accompanied by their spouses if they desired
- (5) Repatriation should be agreed on.¹⁷

The S of S granted permission to recruit labor on condition that the government would ensure that workers were well fed,

paid their wages, and repatriated upon expiry of a six-month contract. More significant, the S of S instructed the governor to ensure that Africans: Wishing to be recruited will be able to work without detriment to their health at all levels, and under the conditions involved, and for this purpose, government medical officers in Kenya and Tanganyika must approve recruitment of each [African]. Repeat this telegram to Byatt who should acknowledge receipt to me.¹⁸

Even with this communication, Byatt continued to place obstacles in the way of recruitment. On 27 January 1922, acting governor, Bowring informed the S of S that Byatt still insisted that legislation should be passed to guarantee repatriation of workers. In addition, Byatt had imposed a new penalty of £10 per head for non-return of laborers. It was Bowring's views that Byatt was causing delay in releasing the workers and therefore Bowring sought direct intervention by the S of S.¹⁹ Consequently, the S of S told Byatt, "I would be glad to receive as soon as possible by telegram statement of conditions and reasons for conditions which you wish to stipulate."²⁰ On the other hand, John Norton Griffiths was equally getting impatient with what was happening in Tanganyika and thought that the CO should intervene. He wrote a private letter to Sir Herbert Read, the Assistant Undersecretary of State, to complain about the behavior of Sir Horace Byatt. He observed:

Large number of [Africans] with previous railway construction experience were waiting and anxious to work. One would think they are two foreign countries opposed to each other, and we know there is no new work going on in Tanganyika Territory. Why not employ them in the meantime."²¹ In the same mail, Norton Griffiths went further to draft a model telegram to be sent to Byatt: That the CO understands that natives [Africans] are willing to work on the government railway extension at Kenya colony, and will they facilitate the free movement of these natives under proper supervision. The Norton Griffiths attitudes reflects the mind set of the British view that the mandated territories were not different from other British dependencies. The direct intervention by the S of S worked in favour of the company. On 20 March 1922, Norton Griffiths wrote to E. H. Marsh, Winston Churchill's private secretary, to thank the office for the job well done. He noted: "Through the kind and prompt attention given to the matter by CO, the difficulties have been overcome. Please convey my grateful thanks to Mr. Churchill [S of S]."²² Norton Griffiths optimism was supported by a report by Col. J. K. Robertson for the month ending 31 March 1922, in which he indicated: "1,500 Wanyamwezi were at Mwanza, a port on Lake Victoria enroute to Kenya."²³ Eventually, the TT provided 1,947 workers by June 1922.²⁴ Unfortunately, quite a number of workers from TT were immediately repatriated for failing to meet health standards required for railway construction.

The Uasin Gishu Railway labor from Kenya

Although the government officials in Kenya feared that the company contracted to construct the railway might not be able to mobilize enough labor for railway construction, the fear was misplaced based on what transpired later. It would seem that the local director of the Griffiths & Co, J. H. Gailey, was an effective labor mobilizer. He personally participated in

procuring labor from Nyanza province, a region that had been dubbed a labor "reserve."²⁵ Gailey established network of labor recruiters (*nyapara*) throughout the country; thus by September 1922, the governor of Kenya informed the TT officials that the railway would not need more laborers from the territory once their contracts expired for those in employment.²⁶ Nevertheless, it took a few months before the labor situation could stabilize. When the construction started in December 1921, the contractor had 392 men while the sub-contractors had 525 workers.²⁷ But the pace of recruitment was not very fast in the initial few months so that by the end of January 1922, the RE was very pessimistic about the labor situation. He noted, "the recruitment of labour in Kenya was disappointing despite the contractors efforts to raise 2,172 labourers."²⁸ It was Robertson's contention that unless contractors maintained a monthly workforce of 10,000 men, it would be impossible to complete the railway within the stipulated time. It was this fear of lack of labor from Kenya that had necessitated the importation of labor from TT. Thus, in an effort to attract more workers from Kenya, Gailey decided to pay a good commission to labor recruiters, which motivated them to aggressively encourage more Africans to go for employment in the railway construction. The labor recruiters were paid between two and six shillings for every worker they presented in Kisumu, the railway head on Lake Victoria.²⁹ Some Indians and Europeans in Kisumu established labor bureaus to cash in on the high demand from both public works and settler farms. They sent African sub-recruiters to canvass the African villages to get workers. Consequently, there emerged a "class" of African labor recruiters who were reported, "to be getting rich" by local standards.³⁰ The major weakness of African labor sub-recruiters, like other wage earners in the country, was that they did recruitment as a part time activity to meet certain domestic needs, and once they were satisfied, they reverted to their normal life. As a result, a European labor agent lamented, "the best of them make a great deal of money in capitation fees in a very short time and then retire into private life."³¹ In addition, the railway contractor paid between 14 and 18 shillings per month, which was higher than the 12 shillings and 14 shillings paid by some estate owners.³² Consequently, by the end of May 1922, the work force on the Uasin Gishu railway had grown to about 12,000 men. The influx of many workers from different parts of the country overwhelmed the management of the company, resulting to various complaints related to poor medical attention, rationing of food, housing and sanitation. In addition, between May and July there was an outbreak of diseases that led to the death of many workers, and complicated labor relations on the construction of the railway. The health crisis brought the direct involvement of both governments of the TT and Kenya to contain the situation.

Death during the construction of the railway

The construction of the Uasin Gishu railway faced many severe challenges compared to other public works in Kenya at that time due to what seemed to be poor labor management. As will be demonstrated below, the death rate was rather high among TT laborers; which raised concern from the Tanganyika administration. The intervention by TT officials forced the government of Kenya to arbitrate to improve working conditions and save her reputation. Without the involvement of foreign workers, one would wonder whether the government would have bothered to improve the welfare

of workers on the project. It is apparent that the health crisis started immediately the TT workers arrived in Nakuru the headquarters of Rift Valley province. Thus, within the month of May, the death rate was estimated at 83 persons per thousand, which raised an outcry in both Kenya and Tanganyika. Unfortunately, the investigation reports composed by both governments are highly distorted and suspect. The TT authorities exaggerated the magnitude of the crisis while the Kenyan authorities attempted to cover up the mess by presenting a relatively rosy picture. Nonetheless, it is possible to detect from these two reports that some of the main causes of death during the month of May 1922 were due to neglect on the part of authorities.

H.C. STIEBEL'S INVESTIGATION

The TT authorities sent H. C. Stiebel, a Senior Commissioner, to investigate the cause of death of workers in June 1922. His report was quite damaging to the reputation of the Kenyan government and the construction company. Stiebel attributed the high death rate to poor rations, cold weather, inadequate medical facilities and hard labor.³³ While these were serious concerns that needed urgent attention, the way he conducted his investigation, and compiled the results, left it open to criticism by government officials in Kenya. His investigation, by any standard cannot be considered to have been thorough. He left Mwanza on 21 June 1922 and was back by 15 July. While the number of days might seem adequate, the poor transport system at the time consumed most of his days. The actual inspection was done in less than three days, for he left Nakuru on 26 June to inspect labor camps and returned on 28 June 1922. Since the camps were spread over 70 miles to the west of Nakuru, with poor transport conditions, it would seem that only one day was spent doing actual inspection. He claimed to have inspected workers and living conditions at 9 out of 13 sub contractors that employed Tanganyika workers.³⁴ Unfortunately, he did not specify the names of the sub contractors he inspected. He spent the remaining days compiling the report. Although it is easy to criticize the rapid inspection that Stiebel conducted his investigations, it is also important to note that the inspection took place after most of the problems were already under control and what he found on the ground could not effectively represent the true situation as in May 1922. Incidentally, the same time that Stiebel was conducting his inspection, the Kenyan Principal Labor Officer was conducting another independent investigation. One might consider this to have been a counter inspection to verify the truth on what was likely to emerge from Stiebel's inspection. A close examination of Principal of Labor, S. F. Deck's, report shows that some of the accusations were true. It was his view that most deaths resulted from pneumonia and influenza.³⁵ What can be discerned from the table below is that most of the workers died within one and half months after their arrival. The first group of TT laborers arrived in Nakuru on 11 April 1922.³⁶ Table 2 illustrates the death rate. From this table it is evident that 58 deaths occurred within a month of men's arrival at Nakuru. Deck noted that 64 deaths occurred in hospital, and 26 elsewhere.³⁷

Ultimately, there was either a serious problem in the selection of laborers or there was an outbreak of disease in the camps. One factor that needs to be noted is that the workers arrived during the rainy season in the Rift Valley and sometimes the

area becomes very cold, especially for people not used to cold weather in high altitude. The bulk of Tanganyika workers came from areas of warm weather conditions, and therefore it is foolhardy to deny that cold weather did not have an effect on the workers before their bodies got used to the changed environment. To make matters worse, the workers were provided with only a small blanket at Kisumu, which they used during the day and at night.³⁸ It boggles one's mind to understand how they survived at night once the blanket was rained on during the day. By the time the inspection was being conducted, the management had already addressed the situation by providing an extra blanket and a gunny bag to be used during the day.³⁹ By any standard, this does not constitute good clothing for the workers, although the Kenyan administration thought it was a better alternative.

Table 1: Number of laborers from TT and death rate, April to July 1922

Month	Number employed	Deaths	Repatriated	Remarks
April	1394	12	6	8 in camp physically unfit
May	-	43	14 deserted	
June	553	26	52 deserted	
July	-	14	164 repatriated	
Total	1947	95	236	

Source: J. K. Robertson to Colonial Secretary, 2 September 1922, CO 533/282.

Table 2: Time spent in Kenya before the deaths occurred

Days	Deaths
0	4
0-7	10
8-14	12
15-month	32
one month and over	25

Source: S. F. Deck to Chief Native Commissioner, 9 August 1922, CO 533/282.

An examination of some of the cases handled by the railway magistrate indicate that theft of blankets left in the huts as workers went to the construction site was a common offence.⁴⁰ There were also reports that once the workers were issued with an extra blanket they sent it home with the other workers who happened to complete their contract faster.⁴¹ What is rather curious is the level of exploitation of the workers by contractors when it came to the provision of a gunny bag or sack. It was decided in November 1922 that only workers on more than three months contract would get a free sack,⁴² while the rest were charged one shilling per sack. When one bears in mind that the salary was between 14 and 18 shillings, it is obvious that the contractors gained a lot from the project. Thus, the claim by Stiebel that cold weather caused death of some workers was valid to some extent based on the poor clothing provided by the company. The concern for providing adequate clothing for TT workers going to work on the railway was voiced very early, but both the Kenya and Tanganyika administration did not take it seriously. In November 1921, James G. Doyle wrote to the undersecretary of State to reject proposal to the recruit workers from TT for Uasin Gishu railway. Although his identity is not clear because he claimed to write as private concerned citizen, the content of his letter demonstrates that he was familiar with the weather conditions in both Central Tanganyika and the Rift

Valley of Kenya. It was his view that the Wanyamwezi and Wasukuma who came from the plains, 4,000 feet above sea level could not survive in the 7,000 feet highlands in Kenya. He argued that the Wanyamwezi in such conditions would become “a wretched shivering cheerless creature, a prey to all the chest troubles.” The geographical differences between their place of origin and their new place of work contributed to their illness. He wondered what sort of clothing would be provided and how they would ensure that the workers covered themselves at night since at 7000 feet there was severe night frost, morning and evening fog and a cold clammy mist.⁴³ Read, replied to his letter and assured him that every care would be taken to ensure the safety of the workers.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Doyle’s concern was overlooked, as noted above.

Furthermore, the medical attention provided to workers by government officials in both Kenya and TT was wanting. One of the instructions given by the S of S was that workers were to be medically examined before leaving Tanganyika and before repatriation. The Principal Medical Officer, Kenya, had wired his counterpart in Tanganyika to ensure that “only mature individuals of best physique are to be recruited as work is most arduous.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, this aspect was also overlooked by the Tanganyika administration. Stiebel, after observing some of the laborers awaiting repatriation at Londiani camp, admitted that some of the 168, which he referred to as the “sweeping of Tabora,” were not examined before they were dispatched to Kenya.⁴⁶ This line of evidence tallies with reports from medical officials in Kenya. A report prepared by A. B. Calde Cott, a camp superintendent, indicated that some 200 workers looked emaciated as if they came from a famine zone, and he wondered how they would perform the hard tasks expected of them.⁴⁷ The men might not have come from a famine stricken zone but were starved on their journey from TT to Kenya. They were also exposed to wind and rain as no accommodation arrangements had been made.

In addition, a report by Chumi Lal Khama, Hospital Assistant, Junction camp, indicated that most workers from TT were of inferior physique, and he blamed the administration for not examining workers before departure. After examining the workers upon arrival, 40 were rejected “chiefly for venereal disease and lung trouble.”⁴⁸ Consequently, between April and July 1922 almost 200 workers were repatriated due to poor physique, and medically related complications.⁴⁹ In an effort to exonerate the Kenyan administration, the Principal Medical Officer concluded that most deaths from TT laborers occurred before “local conditions could have taken time to take effect.” Incidentally, it was not only the TT workers who arrived in the work camps without prior medical examination. The chief medical officer noted: It was evident that medical arrangements were utterly inadequate. I was not at all satisfied with the physique with a large part of the labor, chiefly Meru, Chuka and Embu, which is recruited by contractors and written on at Nakuru without having been passed by government inspectors.⁵⁰ Additionally, there was congestion in the camps after the influx of so many workers from different regions, and it was not necessarily true that workers had diseases before they were recruited. More often than not, most deaths occurred in camps housing between 400 and 500 workers. A report by Dr. Scott Byrne observed, “the

pneumonia from which most of the men suffered from developed very rapidly. Thus a man may be only slightly ill one day and dangerously ill the next.”⁵¹ Accordingly, some of the men who died immediately on arrival in hospital might not have been seriously ill during the previous few days. Thus, the change of weather or lack of proper examination could not have been the only cause for the deaths. For instance, the weather in Central Tanganyika and Mwanza is similar to most of Nyanza province from where the bulk of Kenyan workers came. The weather in the two regions was equally similar to that of Taita in the Kenyan coast, which had contributed 217 workers, but none died as result of working at high altitude.⁵² It is worth noting that during the same month of May 1922, 111 Kenyan workers died out of the 12,000 work force and that remained the highest figure for a single month thereafter.⁵³ These observations suggest that there was negligence on the part of the contractor in providing good living conditions before the crisis occurred.

No wonder, as late as 1923, the Labor Inspector complained that the camps suffered from congestion and poor sanitation. Most men did not use pit latrines to answer the call of nature, claiming that it was a taboo to relieve themselves in the same place with strangers. They opted to go to the surrounding bushes to relieve themselves.⁵⁴ Definitely, this was a major cause of diseases during the rainy season. There were also reports to indicate that in the construction sites there were no latrines, and therefore people worked in non- sanitary conditions. The Labor Inspector excused this bad omission by arguing that the hot sun during the day acted as a strong disinfectant.⁵⁵ The poor accommodation in small huts of 15 feet in diameter also had great impact on the health of workers. Nakuru station, where workers were received before being distributed in other camps, lacked basic accommodation facilities. There were only 20 “*bandas*” (small huts) of about 45 by 15 feet, but they were not adequate to receive all the laborers. At one night when TT workers arrived, 200 men had no accommodation and it was extremely cold.⁵⁶

However, the intervention by the contractor and the government inspectors after the crisis ensured that working conditions were improved a bit, which reduced the death rate considerably. But it should not be construed to mean that the intervention was a humanitarian gesture; to the contrary, it was due to the political atmosphere that had been highly charged previously on the labor issues in 1919/20 in Kenya and the local administration did not wish to have negative publicity.

Table 3: The Health situation between September and December 1922

Moth/ 1922	Workers	In Hospital	Admitted	Discharged	Invalidated to houses	deaths
September	13,397	115	561	382	91	62
October	13,694	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
November		175	504	348	81	31
December	13,487	217	482	367	105	39

Source: Uasin Gishu Progress Reports for the months of September to December 1922, KNA: AWAS/25/175.

The government feared that the high death rate by “foreign” workers was likely to cause a more severe political storm than the former crisis. In relative terms, one can notice that the death rate declined considerably, bearing in mind that from

September 1922 the labor force was maintained at over 13,000 men per month. The table 4 illustrates that more than 200 people were always in hospital, an indication that medical facilities were inadequate by any standard. Eleven doctors to deal with a population of about 17,000 were inadequate. This appalling situation is demonstrated by table 4 below.

Table 4: Illustrates sickness and death rates in 1923

Month/1923	Workers	In Hospital	Admitted	Discharged	Invalidated to houses	deaths
January	13,750	185	580	449	42	32
February	15,452	244	398	297	48	42
March	16,322	253	550	341	77	36
April	16,515	347	552	333	157	63 +8 in camps+ 1 accident
May	17,426	344	676	439	222	56+5
June	15,809	328	508	456	127	50
July	14,625	206	443	371	57	29
August	15,850	198	508	560	40	6
September	14,789	163	380	315	31	38
October	12,040	159	361	284	41	22
November		173	318	268	55	19
December		149	195	199	50	9
January 1924		86	183	131	39	7

Source: Uasin Gishu Progress Reports for the months of January 1923 to January 1924. KNA: AWS/25/175

Table 5 on the other hand demonstrates that the majority of deaths took place in hospital rather than in the camps, which raises the question of the kind of medical attention accorded to the sick.

Table 5: Illustrates where deaths occurred

Month/1923	In hospital	In camp	By accident	Total	No. of deaths per thousand
January	33	6	6	45	3.20
February	45	2	2	49	3.10
March	38	9	2	49	2.82
April	72	7	1	80	4.85
May	55	4	1	60	3.68
June	47	4	1	52	3.19
July	25	4	0	29	1.94
August	37	3	4	44	2.80
September	39	1	0	40	2.55
October	36	2	0	38	2.82
November	19	1	0	20	1.79
December	9	0	0	9	1.05

Source: Kenya Colony: Native Affairs Department, Annual Report 1923.

To address the situation, the company increased medical doctors to 11 by August 1922, and constructed two Hospitals with bed capacity to accommodate 50 patients each.⁵⁷ There were also dispensaries in most of the camps, while some sub-contractors provided private medical attention to supplement what the contractor provided. Unfortunately, the medical officers at the time did not have an emergency vehicle to deal with urgent cases. Yet another cause of death cited by Stiebel was the poor rations (*posho*) provided by the contractors. In an attempt to safeguard the feeding of workers, the colonial administration came up with what they thought was a "standard meal" for African workers, but when examined critically, it was possibly inadequate for workers performing different tasks for it was fixed with farm workers in mind, and therefore might not have been adequate for heavy tasks like road and railway construction. The table: 6 below illustrates a daily standard meal provided to African workers.

Table 6: Standard rations for African workers in Kenya.

Type of food	Amount/per day
Mealie meal (corn flour)	2 lbs
meat	8 ozs
Maharagwe /choroko (type of beans)	2 ozs
cheese	2 ozs
Sugar (jaggery)	2 ozs
salt	¼ oz

Source: Principal Medical Officer to Colonial Secretary, 18 August 1922, CO 533/282.

In 21st century one would not imagine how those workers survived on 2 pounds of corn flour and a pinch of salt during the six months' contract. It would seem the contractors made their profits from starving the workers. If meat was not available, 2 ½ ozs corn flour, 6 ozs of beans and 2 ozs of ghee were served with the other ingredients. Half a lemon was to be served twice a week.⁵⁸ Incidentally, the use of Mealie meal to make "*ugali*" (baked corn dough) was popular with people from the Kenyan lake region, but it was not a stable diet for most of the Kenyan communities. It was even worse for the TT workers. A report by Sayidi, a headman of Tanganyika workers, noted that most of his men died of starvation. He complained that in Tanganyika they did not "usually eat *uji* [porridge] or *ugali* made of *mahindi* [corn], in our country we eat *muhogo* [cassava] and various other foods which we do not get here."⁵⁹ It is therefore possible to believe that the change of diet could have had an effect on the workers before they became accustomed to Kenyan food. A report by Captain Remington, a Labor Inspector who visited 13 camps of sub contractors employing TT workers, noted that workers complained of insufficient food. In particular, he cited the camp of Gulletti where sick workers were given a half ration as a punishment. Their employer claimed that most of them were returned from hospital as malingerers.⁶⁰ In the camp of Captain Douglas, the inspector noted that the workers were a poor lot, although there were no complaints, while in the camp of Messrs Rousi's and Mellono, the workers complained they were not getting "*posho* measure heaped up as in other camps near by."⁶¹ In spite of the evidence presented, Col. Robertson exonerated most of the sub contractors from blame claiming that they provided a standard meal. But some contractors realized the problem of inadequate rations, and decided to pay with food for any extra work performed.⁶² Consequently, such sub contractors had a larger amount of earthwork performed compared to others, an indication that most workers would work harder as long as they were given adequate food. Also it was noticeable that one sub-contractor who supplied meat in addition to normal ration had only one death among his large labor force.⁶³ Thus inadequate rations must have contributed to some deaths.

Ultimately, the measures introduced by the government to improve sanitation, diet, and clothing and provide clean huts reduced the death rate greatly thereafter. Anthony Clayton and Donald Savage have noted that the appointment of labor, medical inspectors and railway magistrates enhanced the monitoring and improving of the conditions of work so that the death rate went down from 51.32 per thousand in 1922 to 35.28 per thousand in 1923. In 1924, the death rate was reduced to 14.28 per thousand.⁶⁴ Definitely, the government was concerned, as even the S of S, the Duke of Devonshire, had demanded a probe in to the cause of death during the construction of the railway. The colonial state therefore

struggled to improve the situation to avoid a similar crisis. By June 1924, it was estimated that 1105 people had died during the construction of the railway, but more might have died as they returned home or their cases were not reported.⁶⁵ Thus, the initial death rate created conditions that caused more attention to be focused on what was happening on the railway and other public projects employing a significant number of workers.

Conclusion

The construction of the Uasin Gishu railway during colonial period has generated more controversy as noted above. The labor crisis in 1920s forced the colonial state to toy with the idea of importing labor not only from East African region, but also from Malta and South Africa. But stringent labor conditions labor imposed by the Union Government of South Africa made it impossible to procure it from the country. While it would have been possible to get skilled labor from India, the white settler community would not have accepted it for fear that the Indian population would be too high to pose a political competition. In Kenya, post world war one made it seemingly difficult to attract African servicemen after the harsh conditions during their military and carrier corps services. The alternative was to seek labour from Tanganyika Territory which had just reverted to Britain as a mandated territory after the defeat of Germany.

However, the recruitment of Wanyamwenzi and Wasukuma became a humanitarian disaster. The death rate was high due to poor working conditions, poor housing, inadequate food rations and unfavorable weather conditions. The death rate and high desertion rates forced the TT government to institute an investigation which was shoddy although it still highlighted the appalling condition. The Kenyan authorities used the TT sloppy report as an excuse to cover up the situation which demonstrates the unjust colonial system. Despite the evidence of negligence no officer was reprimanded or punished. No evidence of compensation was accorded to the families of the diseased. On a positive note, the government and the contractor instituted a policy that improved the working condition and which went a long way to reducing the death rate and attracted local workers. The measures put in place by the director of the construction company to attract more workers dispels the myth of labor shortage in Kenya. The positive response by Kenyans demonstrates that the poor working conditions worked as deterrence, while good wages, rations worked as pull factors, which shows that African workers were able to respond to market forces.

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- ⁴ Norton Griffiths to Read, 6 September 1920, CO 533/251.
- ⁵ Minute by Parkinson, 11 September 1920, CO 533/251.

- ⁶ Norton Griffiths to Grindle, 13 September 1920, CO 533/251.
- ⁷ Norton Griffiths to Crown Agents, 16 December 1921, CO 533/275 AND ALSO Norton Griffiths to Crown Agents, 2 January 1922, CO 533/286.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Crown Agents to Colonial Office, 4 January 1922, CO 533/286.
- ¹⁰ Churchill to Northey, 12 January 1922, CO 533/286.
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- ²³ Uasin Gishu Progress Report: Report for the month ending 31 March 1922, KNA: AWS/25/175.
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- ²⁶ Northey to Acting Governor of Tanganyika Territory, 28 September 1922, CO 533/282.
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- ²⁸ Ibid.
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- ³² Anthony Clayton and Donald Savage, *Government Labour in Kenya, 1895-1963* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), 134.
- ³³ H. C. Stiebel's report is not available in Kenya National Archives, which demonstrates the level of cover up by Kenyan authorities. However, various respondents extensively cover his report and therefore it is possible to reconstruct his line of arguments. The summary of the report is contained in a letter written by Edward Northey to Deputy Governor of TT, 28 September 1922, CO 533/282.
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- ³⁶ Shield to Deck, 22 May 1922, enclosure, Deck to Chief Native Commissioner, 9 August 1922, CO 533/282.
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⁴⁰ *Native Affairs Department, Annual Report 1923*, 47.

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⁴² Ibid., 43.

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