

## **WORLD WAR I AND POSTAL TRAFFIC IN BRITISH COLONIES**

### **The 2008 Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium**

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The world war of 1914-18 changed the lives of millions of people in all parts of the world. Some of these changes created the need for increased communication by mail while other changes limited existing correspondence. The net product of these increases and decreases determined the impact of the war on postal traffic. For countries directly involved in the war the impact was great, for less involved countries the impact was less. This presentation will examine the impact of the war on the volume of mail in the 'British Colonial Postal System'. It will answer four general questions.

1. How large was the impact of the first world war on postal traffic during the war years?
2. What long term effects did the war have on the volume of mail handled during the post-war period?
3. How did the impact of the war compare with the impact of the depression of the early 1930's?
4. How did these impacts of the war on the volume of mail vary by colony?

The presentation will be divided into four parts. It begins with a description of the data that was used in the analysis. This is followed by some background information on the British Colonial Postal System. After this is a case study that illustrates the procedures that will be used to measure the impact of the war. Following the case study the results of the analysis will be presented.

#### *Data*

From 1863 to 1947 the British Board of Trade issued a series of annual reports containing statistical information on British Possessions. A copy of the Title Page of the 48<sup>th</sup> Report is given in Figure 1. This page shows they were official documents generated for Parliament and published by His Majesty's Stationery Office. Most of the information in these Abstracts concerned commercial matters but from 1900 through 1937 they included information on postal activity. An example of this postal data, taken from the 48th Report, is given in the Table in Figure 2. The third column of these Tables provide annual estimates of the number of letters and cards handled by a colonies postal system including; (1) domestic mail, (2) foreign mail dispatched from the colony, and (3) foreign mail received by the colony. These estimates were used to measure the impact of the war. They will be referred to as 'the mail' or 'mail handled'.

Figure 1. Title page of Empire Abstracts, Number 48

STATISTICAL ABSTRACT  
FOR THE SEVERAL  
BRITISH  
SELF-GOVERNING DOMINIONS,  
CROWN COLONIES, POSSESSIONS,  
AND PROTECTORATES  
IN EACH YEAR  
FROM 1896 TO 1910.

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FORTY-EIGHTH NUMBER.

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*Presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty.*

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*Price 1s. 10d.*

Figure 2: Postal Statistics from the Empire Abstracts #48 for the Bahamas.\*

274  
No. 31—Continued.

**POSTAL STATISTICS.**  
POSTAL STATISTICS of the various SELF-GOVERNING DOMINIONS,  
Years 1900 to 1910, so far

YEARS.	Number of Post Offices.	CORRESPONDENCE DEALT WITH (i.e., Received and Despatched).				REVENUE.		EXPENDITURE.	
		Letters and Cards.	Newspapers, Book Packets and Circulars.	Parcels.	Telegrams.	Post Office.	Telegraphs.	Post Office.	Telegraphs.
<b>BAHAMAS.</b>									
1900	30	216,620	113,453	4,151	2,997	£ 2,829	£ 1,204	£ 7,068	£ 478
1901 (a)	30	385,787	169,342	5,593	4,784	4,128	1,929	10,219	718
1902 (b)	31	276,762	112,326	4,321	3,168	4,306	1,225	7,699	577
1903 (b)	35	303,394	119,510	4,411	3,389	3,253	1,336	6,945	564
1904 (b)	32	343,161	124,505	4,782	3,315	3,367	1,220	7,412	579
1905 (b)	34	360,213	124,242	5,848	4,419	3,694	1,220	7,531	558
1906 (b)	53	417,838	121,900	5,807	3,538	3,831	1,285	6,796	552
1907 (b)	36	510,103	134,705	6,347	3,848	3,820	1,248	7,266	545
1908 (b)	38	510,770	145,560	6,394	4,251	3,485	1,968	7,242	518
1909 (b)	41	508,515	143,548	7,514	3,787	3,433	1,453	6,389	509
1910 (b)	42	615,155	148,218	8,169	3,326	3,782	1,532	9,589	615

(a) For the 15 months ended 31st March 1901.  
(b) For the 12 months ended 31st March of the years following those stated.

\* *Statistical Abstracts for the Several British Self-Governing Dominions, Colonies, Possessions and Protectorates in each Year From 1896 to 1910*. Forty-Eighth Number, p. 274. Statistical Department of the British Board of Trade. London: His Majesty's-Stationery Office, 1911.

### The Colonial System

During the first half of the twentieth century the British Empire held sway over about one quarter of the world's land area and population. Postal service was provided for this enormous domain by a number of independent postal systems including a loosely organized system administered by the Colonial Office in London. This system, provided service for most Crown Colonies, their dependencies, some Protectorates and Mandated Territories. The number of possessions that participated in the Colonial System was roughly about forty for much of the period between 1900 and 1937 but the exact number and composition of the system varied over time, because some possessions merged, some changed their political status and others were added to the Empire. Figure 3 lists the possessions in the Colonial Postal System for which estimates of mail handled were available in or about both the years 1901 and 1937. It also shows the population of these colonies and the growth rate (1937/1901) for both population and the mail.

Figure 3: Population and Mail, 1901 and 1937, Colonial Postal Systems\*

Small colonies	Population (000)			Mail (000)		
	1901	1937	Growth	1901	1937	Growth
Falkland Is.	2	3	150	34	80 <sup>1</sup>	235
St. Helena	4	4	100	87	37 <sup>1</sup>	43
Turks & Caicos Is.	5	5	100	29	60	207
Bermuda	17	87	512	923	5,448	590
Seychelles	19	30	158	125	126 <sup>1</sup>	101
Gibraltar	20	19	95	2,112	2,433	115
Br. Honduras	37	56	151	215	601	280
St. Vincent	47	57	121	184	357	194
St. Lucia	49	67	137	31	37	119
Bahamas	55	66	120	292	1,762	603
Grenada	63	87	138	288	565	196
Swaziland	85	156	184	189 <sup>2</sup>	950	503
Leeward Islands	88	139	158	888	1,323 <sup>1</sup>	149
Gambia	90	192	213	59	187	317
Fiji	120	205	171	445	1,516	341
Somaliland	153	347	227	76 <sup>3</sup>	260	342
Malta	184	264	143	3,793	6,655 <sup>1</sup>	175
Barbados	195	190	97	1,379	2,240	162
<b>Large colonies</b>						
Trinidad & Tobago	218	455	209	1,740	5,558	319
Cyprus	237	372	157	634	3,215	507
British Guiana	293	337	115	1,964	4,009	204
Mauritius	375	413	110	2,066	1,715	83
Strait Settlements	600	1,310	218	7,739	42,043	543
Federated Malay States	678	2,052	303	5,194 <sup>2</sup>	34,273	660
Nyasaland	706	1,639	232	234	2,303	984
Jamaica	755	1,152	153	5,390	20,503	380
Sierra Leone	1,027	1,768 <sup>4</sup>	172	399	1,894	475
Gold Coast	1,486	3,746	252	3,194 <sup>3</sup>	6,657	208
Kenya	2,402 <sup>5</sup>	3,334	139	2,051 <sup>5</sup>	9,897	483
Uganda	2,843 <sup>5</sup>	3,711	131	608 <sup>5</sup>	2,234	367
Ceylon	3,565	5,780	162	16,535	70,579	427
Nigeria	13,604 <sup>6</sup>	20,467	150	687 <sup>6</sup>	1,715	250

\* Data for 1901 from *Statistical Abstracts for the Several British Self-Governing Dominions, Colonies, Possessions and Protectorates in each Year From 1896 to 1910*. Number 48. Statistical Department of the British Board of Trade. London: His Majesty's-Stationery Office, 1911. Data for 1937 from Number 67.

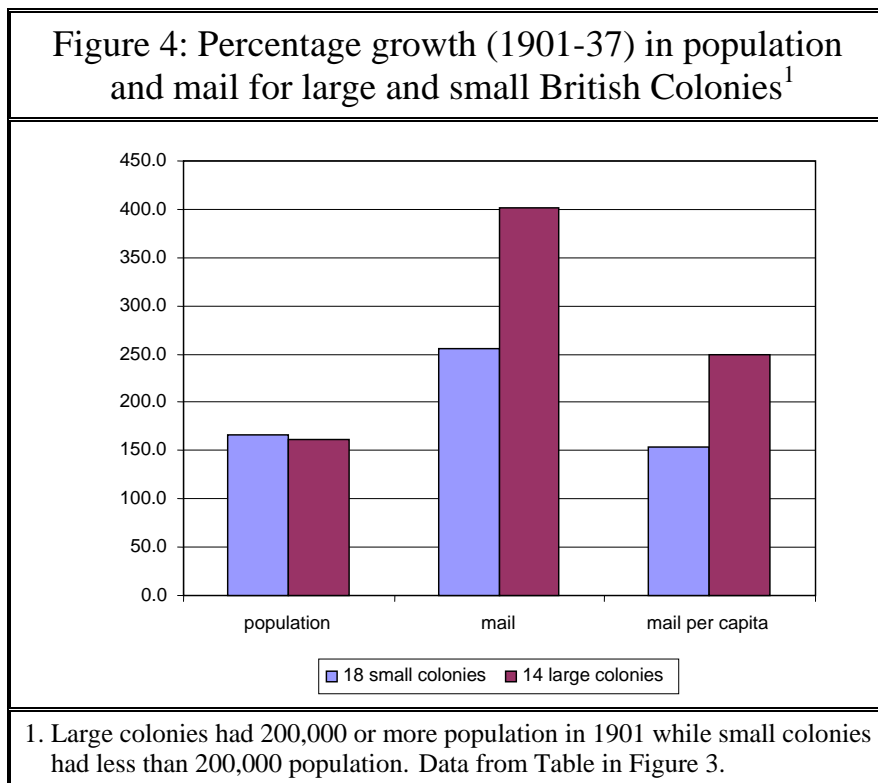
1. Data for 1936. 2. Data for 1905. 3. Data for 1903. 4. Data for 1931 5. Data for 1911

6. Total for Northern and Southern Nigeria.

An examination of the Table in Figure 3 shows these 32 colonies had a total population of about 30,000,000 in 1901 and handled about 60,000,000 pieces of mail in that year. The Table also shows an almost universal pattern of growth in both population and the mail in the period between 1901 and 1937. Only four colonies did not increase their population and only two did

not have an increase in the amount of mail handled. The total population of the 32 colonies increased 162% between 1901 and 1937 while the mail grew by 388%. Since the growth in the mail handled was much larger than the increase in population there must have been a great increase in the use of the mail by the residents of these colonies during this period of time. The number of letters and cards handled on a per capita basis increased from two in 1901 to about five in 1937.

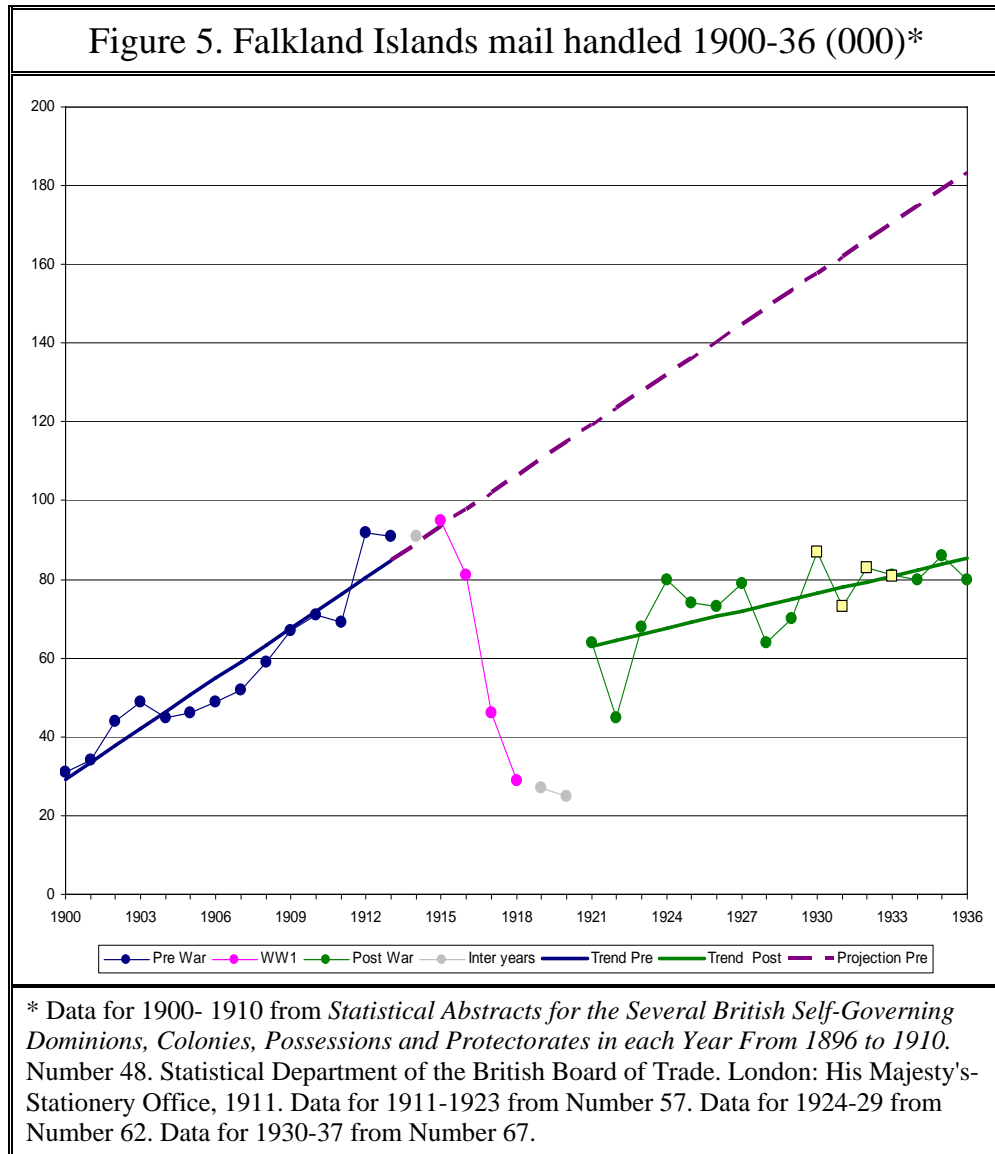
The Table also shows there was considerable variation in the size of these colonies, which went from a 1901 population of about 2,000 in the Falkland Islands to over 13,000,000 in Nigeria. This difference in population size is related to the growth in the mail and the increase in the per capita rate at which the colonies used the mail (Figure 4). Both large colonies, those with a 1901 population of 200,000 or more, and small colonies, those with a 1901 population below 200,000, had comparable population growth rates but the larger colonies had an increase of about 400% in the mail they handled while the smaller colonies had a increase of about 250% (Figure 4). This difference in the growth of postal traffic from 1901 to 1937, between the larger and smaller colonies, can be traced directly to the impact of the First World War and its aftermath and the difference would have been greater had it not been for the Depression of the early 1930's.



*A case study of the Falkland Islands*

Figure 5 charts the time series for the mail handled in the Falkland Islands for the period 1900-1936 and it illustrates the procedure used for analyzing the data. The blue dots on left side of the chart show the level of mail handled in this small colony in the pre-war years 1900-1913. The upward trend in these dots is measured by the solid blue trend line which was obtained by a statistical procedure known as regression analysis. The dotted purple line is the extension of the Pre-War Trend line into war and Post-War periods. It will be assumed that the purple line

measures the amount of mail that would have been handled in these years had the pre-war trend continued, that is had the trend not been interrupted by the war or a similar event.



The red dots on the chart are for the war years 1915-18, Note how red dots drop below the purple trend line on the chart. The degree to which they drop provides a measure of the immediate impact of the war. The sum of the mail actually handled (red dots on the chart) for the war years was 394,000 and the sum of the mail expected for those years (purple trend line) was 714,000, this gives an impact measure of  $[(394,000-714,000)/714,000]$  or  $-.45$ . That is, the actual mail handled in the colony dropped by 45% from that expected given the pre-war trend.

The green dots on the right side of the chart are for the years after the war (1920-36) but they include four yellowish dots for the 1930-1933 depression years. The green dots for the years 1921-29 can be compared to the purple trend line to measure the post war impact of the war. The total mail actually handled in these years was 617,000 and the expected mail, given the purple trend line, was 1,226,000. Using the formula described above gives an impact of about  $-.50\%$ .

A trend line was calculated for the post-war years (1921-29) using the same statistical procedure as that used for the pre-war years. The green line displayed on the chart is the post-war trend line. By comparing the yellowish dots for the depression years (1930-33) with the green trend line for the post-war years we can estimate the immediate impact of the depression on postal traffic. The results show the mail actually handled by the Falkland System was 570,000 during the four depression years of 1930-33 while that expected given the post-war trend was 566,000. Thus the actual and the expected volume of mail were almost the same indicating the depression had little if any effect on the colonies postal traffic.

#### *The immediate impact of the war (1915-18)*

There were 23 colonies for which the Empire Abstracts provided sufficient data to conduct the analysis described above for the Falkland Islands. Figure 6 shows the immediate impact of the war on the mail handled in these 23 colonies using the procedure described in the previous section. The Table in the Figure shows the war had a negative impact on the mail handled in all but four colonies. Malta and Cyprus both had an increase in the mail they handled during the war which may be attributed to their location on the vital Mediterranean Sea route. Surprisingly the war had a -14% impact on the mail handled in Gibraltar which was on the same route. The total impact of the war on the 23 colonies as a whole was a modest -10% reduction in the mail.

An examination of the Table in Figure 5 also shows the impact of the war was far greater on the smaller colonies. Most of the small colonies (10 of 13) had impacts of -20% or more while only one of the ten larger colonies, Jamaica, had such a large negative impact. The total impact for the 13 smaller colonies was -29% while the total impact for the larger colonies was only -7%. The greater impact of the war on the smaller colonies may be explained by the character of their mail. The proportion of domestic mail is directly related to the size of a colony, the larger a colony the greater its domestic mail relative to its foreign mail. Since none of the 23 colonies were in the direct war zone, the war probably effected the foreign mail more than domestic mail, hence it would have had a greater impact on the smaller colonies.

#### *The post-war Impact (1920-29)*

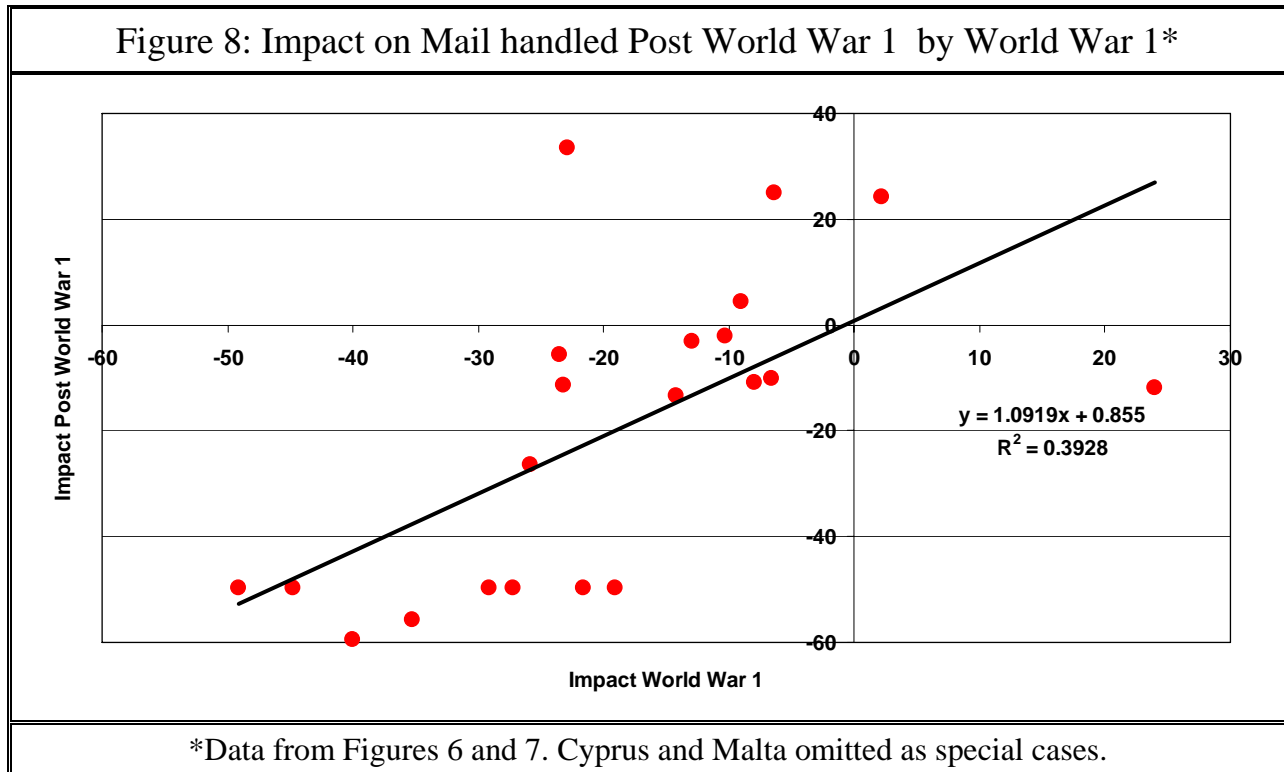
Figure 7 shows the Post World War 1 impact (1920-29) on the mail handled in the 23 colonies using the procedure described above. The pattern of the post-war impacts is similar to those obtained for the immediate impact of the war. The mail actually handled in most of these colonies in the post World War years (1920-29) was less than expected given the pre-war trends, and most of the negative impact occurred in the smaller colonies. However, the total impact was slightly positive, 2%, because there were great increases in the mail handled in two of the largest colonies, Ceylon and the Gold Coast.

It is interesting to note that neither Malta nor Cyprus maintained the positive effects of the war in the post-war period. If we drop these two colonies, which are special cases, then the Chart in Figure 8 shows the more negative the impact of the war on the remaining 21 colonies the more negative the impact they experienced in the post-war period. The disturbance in the postal traffic caused by war therefore tended to be carried over into the post-war period.

Figure 6: World War 1 (1915-18) Impact on mail handled in 23 British Colonies (red shading indicates drop of 20% or more).*			
Smaller Colonies (1901 population under 200,000)	WW1 % impact on mail	Larger Colonies (1901 population 200,000 or more)	WW1 % impact on mail
Falkland Is.	-45	Malta	29
St. Helena	-27	Cyprus	10
Bermuda	-49	Mauritius	-18
Gibraltar	-14	Strait Settlements	-09
Seychelles	-40	Jamaica	-23
Br. Honduras	-13	Fed. Malay States	-17
St. Vincent	-29	Sierra Leone	-19
St. Lucia	-10	Gold Coast	02
Bahamas	-23	Uganda	24
Grenada	-24	Ceylon	-06
Fiji	-35		
Gambia	-22		
Barbados	-26		
*For source of data see footnote Figure.			

Figure 7: Post World War 1 (1920-29) impact on mail handled in 23 British Colonies (red shading indicates drop of 20% or more).*			
Smaller Colonies (1901 population under 200,000)	WW1 % impact on mail	Larger Colonies (1901 population 200,000 or more)	WW1 % impact on mail
Falkland Is.	-50	Malta	-22
St. Helena	-57	Cyprus	-7
Bermuda	-33	Mauritius	-11
Gibraltar	-13	Strait Settlements	4
Seychelles	-60	Jamaica	-11
Br. Honduras	-3	Fed. Malay States	-10
St. Vincent	-8	Sierra Leone	-32
St. Lucia	-2	Gold Coast	24
Bahamas	33	Uganda	-12
Grenada	-6	Ceylon	25
Fiji	-54		
Gambia	20		
Barbados	-26		
* For source of data see Footnote to Figure 5.			





*The impact of the depression*

Figure 9 contains the estimated impact of the great depression of 1930-33 on the mail handled in the 23 colonies. An examination of the Table shows that the impact was negative in 20 of the 23 colonies and its total effect was -26% which was far greater than the war. The reason for this is the depression greatly reduced the mail in both the large and the small colonies, particularly the former, while the war had only a limited effect on the larger colonies.

Figure 10 shows that the impact of the Depression on the mail handled in the 23 colonies is negatively related to the impact on the mail handled in the post-war period. Colonies whose mail was far less than expected during the post-war period were those whose mail suffered least during the depression, while colonies whose mail was greater than expected during the post-war period were those that suffered the most during the depression.

*Conclusion*

The first world war decreased the mail in most of the colonies included in this analysis with the major exceptions of Malta and Cyprus which were located on the strategic Mediterranean sea lane. The total impact was a modest 10% reduction over the pre-war because the impact was limited in the larger colonies which generated most of the mail. The same general pattern was found in the post-war period (1920-29) but the impact was less in the larger colonies. The depression also decreased the mail handled in most of these colonies but its impact was greater in the larger colonies. As a result the total impact of the depression on the mail handled in these colonies, a 26% reduction, was much greater than the impact of the war.

The analysis also indicated that the greater the impact of the first world war during the war years the greater its impact during the post-war period. The opposite was true for the depression.

**Figure 9: Impact of the Depression (1930-33) on mail handled in 23 British Colonies (red shading indicates drop of 20% or more).\***

Smaller Colonies (1901 population under 200,000)	Depression impact on mail	Larger Colonies (1901 population 200,000 or more)	Depression impact on mail
Falkland Is.	3	Malta	-16
St. Helena	-15	Cyprus	-18
Bermuda	4	Mauritius	-28
Gibraltar	-23	Strait Settlements	-26
Seychelles	-13	Jamaica	-10
Br. Honduras	-49	Fed. Malay States	-30
St. Vincent	-26	Sierra Leone	-7
St. Lucia	-8	Gold Coast	-64
Bahamas	-29	Uganda	-18
Grenada	-26	Ceylon	-27
Fiji	3		
Gambia	-35		
Barbados	-21		

\* For source of data see Footnote of Figure 5.

