COLONIAL RECORDS AND IMPERIAL CONSCIOUSNESS (FRANCE, 18TH CENTURY)

Marie Houllemare
Université de Picardie Jules Verne
Amiens, France
marie.houllemare@u-picardie.fr

Abstract
How did the French crown perceive its colonies during the 18th century? This paper considers the role official papers of the French colonies played in the emergence of an imperial consciousness at the end of the century.

In 1699, a Record Office was created within the Minister of Navy, but it operated from Paris, whereas the others offices were in Versailles, near the king. At first, only letters (incoming and outcoming of the minister) and reports were kept. During the Regence (1715-1723), much more attention was paid to the registration of the official correspondence and royal orders: they were understood to be a useful tool for an efficient government of the colonies and were quickly filed. Afterwards, the Record Office was given a new aim, more historical than political: to write the History of the glorious French expansion overseas. At this time, the most recent records concerning the colonies ceased to be given to the Record Office and stayed at the Colonial Office (created in 1711). From the middle of the century onwards, a new attention was given to personal files of military and civil servants in the central administration of the ministers as well as in the colonies, when staff-management started to appear in the French ministers.

Only with the loss of Canada and several others colonies at the Treatise of Paris in 1763 did the administration came to realise that other kinds of papers could be of some use. As the refugees were arriving from North America since the fall of Louisbourg in 1759, the intendant of the port of Rochefort asked for the creation of an Office for Public Papers of the Colonies (Dépôt des papiers publics des Colonies). By keeping copies of civil registers, it could help finding missing people and verifying identities. At first, it was only dedicated to the former Nouvelle-France (Canada), but by 1765, its scope was enlarged to the whole empire. The administrators of all the colonies were then asked to send copies of civil registers every year. A large part of the papers this office was gathering were sent to Versailles in 1776 when an Office for Colonies’ Charters (Dépôt des chartes des colonies) was created, but the records of the lost colonies stayed in Rochefort until 1789. Only in 1791, every paper concerning either the colonial administration or the colonists were reunited in an Colonial Papers Office, independent from the records of the Navy: for the first time, therefore, an imperial consciousness drove the organization of the official colonial records.

Keywords: Archives, representation of the colonies, «French empire, 18th century