

CARROLL COLLEGE

“THEIR LOT WAS A DESOLATE VILLAGE AND STARVATION”: THE COLONIAL
CONQUEST, THE FIRST WORLD WAR, AND THE AFRICAN POPULATION OF THE
EAST AFRICAN COLONIES

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Abstract

This paper “‘Their lot was a desolate village and starvation’: The Colonial Conquest, The First World War, and the African Population” examines the effect of military action in British and German East African colonies during the conquest period and during the First World War.¹ German colonial efforts inflicted suffering on the African population during the conquest period that the British conquest of their colony in East Africa did not. However in order to be victorious in the fighting that broke out in East Africa in 1914 both the British and the Germans caused immense suffering to the populations under their control. That suffering is a reflection of colonial military policy.

The paper consists of an introduction and historiography, which examines how the history of the First World War in East Africa has been written about. The first chapter is an examination of the pre-World War 1 history in the area, their relation to the African population through military recruitment, and the officers of the respective nation’s relation to service in Africa. The second chapter is a history of the First World War in East Africa investigating the Africans relation to the fighting. This work attempts to fill flaws in the scholarship by looking at the suffering caused by the First World War broadly, rather than presenting a more narrow view focused on just one of the sides or a single group.

¹ Edward Paice, *Tip and Run* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2007), 288.

Introduction

In the scholarship on the First World War, the African Theatre has not received the same examination as other dimensions of the conflict such as the Western or the Mesopotamian Fronts. What examinations the war in Africa did receive have been narrow in focus, and therefore lack the proper context. Therefore, in this paper I argue that the military reality of the First World War and the nature of the colonies caused immense suffering for the African population that was subjected to the repercussions of the war. This subject that should be a part of the understanding of the First World War, and has been submerged unjustly under the western front, allowing an incorrect perception of the war to propagate, that civilians did not suffer because of the First World War.

Until the late 1960's the focus of what scholarship existed on the subject of the East African theatre was on the skill of the German commander in the theatre, Colonel, later General Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck, in prolonging the fighting to four years.² These narratives were also focused on the events surrounding the fate of the German cruiser *Koingsberg* which was trapped and destroyed relatively soon after the start of the war.³ The *Koingsberg* was sunk without having much success at the task that had been set out for it. This focus is understandable as it examined the fighting in East Africa in its relation to the fighting in Europe. The prolongation of the fighting is important because it occupied troops in East Africa that could have made a difference on the front in Europe.

² Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro; an Account of the East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1963); Brian Gardner, *German East* (London: Cassell, 1963); Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa, 1914-1918* (New York: Norton, 1989).

³ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 118–122.

The destruction of the commerce raider is important in that the ship can no longer affect the shipping carrying supplies and men to Europe. But it does not consider how events might have been affected the other way.

More recently the fighting in the African theatre has been examined more in terms of affect on the people in Africa. These scholarly works examine topics such as the manpower statistics for British forces in East Africa, or the impact of military service on one of the tribal groups.⁴ This examination has refocused the examination on the suffering of the African population that had previously been obscured by the earlier examination. This way of looking at the effects of the war has its roots in the study of colonialism. This gives it a focus on individual ethnic groups or area rather than presenting it in a greater context.

Historiography

The historiography can be grouped in to a variety of different methods. The first wave of this is the official history, such as *Military Operations East Africa Volume 1* or *The Fourth Battalion Duke of Connaught's Own Tenth Baluch Regiment in the Great War*. Official histories such as these tend to present a focused discussion of the events, concentrating on only the units that they are following, giving no back ground context. These are less useful for looking at the recruitment of the soldiers because of the narrow focus on the fighting, rather than looking at whole experience of the unit.

⁴ G. W. T. Hodges, "African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918," *The Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 101-116; Lewis J. Greenstein, "The Impact of Military Service in World War I on Africans: The Nandi of Kenya," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 1978): 495-507; David Killingray and James Matthews, "Beasts of Burden: British West African Carriers in the First World War," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 13, no. 1/2 (January 1, 1979): 5-23.

There are a large number of books focused on the campaign, mostly written before the 1970's. These books, with titles such as *German East* and *Duel for Kilimanjaro: An Account of the East African Campaign 1914–1918*, are very focused on the skill of the German commander in the theater, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, obscuring the wider scope by focusing on the exploits of one man.⁵ As such they do not offer a divergent view of the conflict, and suffer from much the same narrow focus as the official histories.

In the 1970's historians began to look at the campaign in a new way. This was not centered on the fighting but on the affect the First World War had on the individual ethnic groups. These were mostly journal articles, good examples include “Malawians and the Great War: Oral History in Reconstructing Africa's Recent Past” and “Wakamba Warrior are Soldier of the Queen”.⁶ This thesis intends to add to the scholarship by looking at the wars effect on the African population in relation to its colonial past and the contemporary military context.

East Africa before World War 1: The Africans and the Europeans

Pre-Conquest History

The beginning of European involvement with East Africa dates back to the arrival of Vasco Da Gama in 1498. These initial interactions would set the trend for East

⁵ Gardner, *German East*; Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro; an Account of the East African Campaign, 1914-1918*.

⁶ Melvin Page, “Malawians and the Great War: Oral History in Reconstructing Africa's Recent Past,” *The Oral History Review* 8 (January 1, 1980): 49–61; Timothy H. Parsons, “‘Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen’: The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970,” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 4 (October 1, 1999): 671–701.

Africa's relation to the Europeans. The Portuguese quickly gained control of the East African coast with force. Several cities of the area were sacked and burned to make Portuguese rule a reality.⁷ However, the Portuguese were never able to get to make much profit from the control of the coast or provide much stability.⁸ By the end of the 16th century much of Portuguese control of the area had been done away with, leaving only a few forts left of Portuguese effort.⁹ For a period after that Europeans rarely came to area with anything other than trade planned. The coastal area was ruled by a number of Sultans, the most influential being the Sultan of Zanzibar. These Sultanates were Arab states, with little interest in the interior of East Africa besides trading. Most of the Sultan's income came from the customs duties and taxes on the slave trade, as it lay on the intersection of East Africa Europe, Arabia, India and the Americas.¹⁰

In the interior there were a number of different tribes. Information about them before the arrival of the Europeans is scarce. While the Arab traders from the coast went into the interior, they left few written records about who they traded with in the interior.¹¹ There is still much that can be determined, however. Much of the area produced exports to be traded to Arabs on the coast for things they could not produce themselves such as cloth, muskets, and surplus gold in case of scarcity in the future.¹² These tribes also fought with each other, raiding each other for slaves and cattle. These tensions would be exploited by the Europeans to bring themselves into the area.

⁷ Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew, eds., *History of East Africa*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:134–135.

⁹ Charles Hordern and H. Fitz M. Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1941), 1.

¹⁰ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:222–224.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:169.

¹² Thaddeus Sunseri, "Reinterpreting a Colonial Rebellion: Forestry and Social Control in German East Africa, 1874-1915," *Environmental History* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 435.

Europeans began to arrive in the area to exploit its commercial opportunities in the 1840's in part at the behest of the Sultan of Zanzibar at the time, Sayyid Said. They would come to trade in its vast quantity of ivory.¹³ More importantly political influence would come because of the slave trade. The British government had decided to suppress the slave trade in 1807 and had begun to create treaties with other trading nations to outlaw the slave trade. Wherever possible these treaties were enforced by the Royal Navy, but the Royal Navy required permission to operate just outside of ports in order to intercept the slave ships.¹⁴ British warships would assist the Sultan Majid ibn Said in putting down a rebellion, shelling coastal cities controlled by the rebels. At this time the British were trying to influence the Majid into actual trying to close the slave trade, but that had little success.¹⁵ The inability of the local authorities to put a stop to the slave trade would serve as a justification for the European powers to move in and set up protectorates and colonies.¹⁶

A Brief Military History of German East Africa

The establishment of direct European control in East Africa would begin in the late 1870's. The initial movement towards European control was caused by events in Egypt. The occupation of Egypt in 1882 by British troops would induce the Germans to further action in the area of colonization. Germany had supported the British control over

¹³ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:225–226.

¹⁴ Leslie Bethell, "The Mixed Commissions for the Suppression of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of African History* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1966): 79–80.

¹⁵ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:232–234.

¹⁶ John Hatch, *The History of Britain in Africa: From the Fifteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 129–131.

Egypt, and the German Chancellor Bismarck expected the British to repay that favor by protecting German interests in Africa, especially in South-West Africa. When the British did not do that, the Germans declared a protectorate over what would become German South-West Africa in April 1884.¹⁷ Pressure for colonies had been building for some time, to have protected markets for German goods as well as the cheap materials extracted from the colonies.¹⁸ This brought forward a new age of colonial competition. Carl Peters founded the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation (GfdK)* the Society for German Colonization in March 1884. “Its initial object was to help fan a growing public enthusiasm for the establishment of German Colonies and to convert that enthusiasm into solid financial support.”¹⁹ By November, Peters and some of his compatriots had arrived in Zanzibar and had set out for the interior of East Africa. “Peters’ party spent barely over a month in the east African interior, and the twelve treaties with which they returned to Zanzibar in mid-December had all been obtained in little more than three weeks’ time.”²⁰ These treaties would form the legal justification for the Imperial Charter signed by Kaiser Wilhelm the First on the 27th of February 1885. This act brought 60,000 square miles of African territory under the “protection” of the German Empire.²¹

Control over German East Africa began with the German East Africa Company, but the colony would not remain under company control for long. The East Africa Company ran the colony very poorly. There was no administration for the vast area that the company had taken control off, and there was no incentive for economic

¹⁷ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:365.

¹⁸ Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 418.

¹⁹ H. P. Meritt, “Bismarck and the German Interest in East Africa, 1884-1885,” *The Historical Journal* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 1978): 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

development. The German government would compensate the company for any losses, company goods were exempted from taxation, and the company was paid to collect customs duties.²² To accompany this ineffective fiscal policy the company also advanced a disastrous policy towards the African population that lived in the territory. Company agents would destroy villages that refused to trade, forced the Africans to supply food and labor, and shoot porters.²³ In the town of Tanga some dogs owned by the Germans entered a mosque on a Friday during Ramadan, a particularly offensive act.²⁴ Until 1888 German policy did not have a drastic effect on the relations between the Germans and the Africans as they lacked the apparatus to make their policies felt. What was felt was the confiscation of all land whose owners could not supply a written title deed.²⁵

It was not only the economic effect of the German presence, but also the way the Germans treated the local rulers and sensibilities. The Sultan of Zanzibar had ceded the administration of most of the territories on the coast by an agreement on April 28th 1888 on several conditions, that the Germans would control it in his name, under his flag. In August the Germans began taking down the flag of the Sultan in towns across the territory they administered.²⁶ This act would cause a widescale revolt against the Sultan and the Germans. By September 1888 all of the stations set up by German East Africa Company except two were overrun.²⁷

²² Erick J. Mann, *Mikono Ya Damu: African Mercenaries and the Politics of Conflict in German East Africa, 1888-1904 = "Hands of Blood"* (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 2002), 27–28.

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:439.

²⁵ Mann, *Mikono Ya Damu*, 29.

²⁶ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:438–439.

²⁷ Mann, *Mikono Ya Damu*, 61.

The Africans that had revolted were initially from many different tribes, but they would coalesce into two groups. The first group centered on Bushiri bin Salim, an Arab land owner. That group was the first target of Captain Herman von Wissmann who formed the *Schutztruppe* or protection force in 1889.²⁸ The rank and file of the *Schutztruppe* were hired Africans. They came from all over Africa, anywhere the Germans could get permission to recruit. Sudanese soldiers recently released from Egyptian service, Shangaan warriors recruited from Portuguese East Africa, Zaramo caravan guards formally employed by the company, and even Turks formed the force that the Germans dispatched to put down what would be called the Arab revolt.²⁹

Putting down that revolt required both military force and manipulation. The forces lead by Bushiri bin Salim were defeated in battle, their fortifications stormed and burned, the enemy dead and wounded mutilated and paraded before the villagers in the area as a warning of the results of rebellion.³⁰ The Germans would build fortifications of their own on top of the remains of the old. These formed the administrative centers of German rule, and over the period of German rule around sixty of these stations were constructed.³¹ These shows of strength were accompanied by a propaganda effort that targeted the Arabs of the coast. The anti- Arab propaganda was successful, and by December 1889 Bushiri Bin Salim was captured and executed, destroying one of the groups resisting the Europeans.

²⁸ Ibid., 61–66.

²⁹ Ibid., 34–35, 47–50.

³⁰ Ibid., 66–70.

³¹ Michelle Moyd, "Making the Household, Making the State: Colonial Military Communities and Labor in German East Africa," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80, no. 01 (October 31, 2011): 59.

The *Schutztruppe* then advanced on the other rebel group, led by Bwana Heri, a popular political figure. Heri could rely on a broad basis of support from a population that was loyal to him and willing to support him against the invaders.³² These factors meant that he could effectively fight a guerrilla war against a German force that could not be stopped by a direct confrontation. To fight this

the *Schutztruppe* gradually adopted extremely brutal and destructive counter-insurgency tactics that came to be referred to as the *Verwustungsstrategie*, literally, ‘desertification strategy.’ This essentially amounted to a scorched earth policy, in which village and field over a large area were systematically destroyed to deprive guerrillas of their source of supply.... When African armed resistance was mobile, enjoyed a broad base of popular support, and conducted guerrilla tactics, the *Schutztruppe* was unable to defeat it. Then the *Schutztruppe’s* field operation shifted from conventional military tactics to total war, in which they made no distinction between armed fighters and civilians and destroyed private property, subsistence, and shelter. The ensuing famine and disease, that disable and/or killed large segments of the population, ensured the ‘pacification’ of a region.³³

These tactics forced Heri to surrender to Wissmann on April 8th 1890. He was made the Sultan of Zigua, and a member of the colonial administration.³⁴ These heavy handed tactics would serve well in suppressing revolts brought about by misgovernment. The Maji Maji revolt broke out in 1905. The revolt was caused, in part, by the establishment of colonial control over the forests that restricted the Africans economic opportunities. Named for a water medicine that was supposed to give fighter immunity to bullets, the revolt would last until 1907.³⁵ The revolt caught the Germans by surprise.

³² Mann, *Mikono Ya Damu*, 78–80.

³³ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁵ Sunseri, “Reinterpreting a Colonial Rebellion,” 430,439–441.

However, this surprise was not enough to stop the Germans from suppressing the revolt using the same scorched-earth tactics that had served to effect German control in the 1880's against Bwana Heri. From 1905 to 1907 more than 200,000 Africans in the revolting area died, killed by the German desertification tactics.³⁶

Africans in German Service

The Germans had a system of recruitment that reflected the circumstances in which they entered the Scramble for Africa.³⁷ The Germans used the status and prestige that came with military service to recruit individuals for the Schutztruppe. The askari of the Schutztruppe were charged with guarding and overseeing chain gangs, giving them a rather elevated position within the colonial labor system.³⁸ Service with the colonial powers could gain a man great wealth. "A number" of askari settled by one of their German officers became cattle dealers and "well-to-do."³⁹ For many this wealth served as the primary motivation, as exemplified by their actions before and during the East Africa campaign. In 1911, the Germans recruited many askari that had been recently serving in the King's African Rifles, and were now willing to serve in the Schutztruppe.⁴⁰ During the war Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck, their commander, notes in his memoirs, "Only a very few individuals deserted, and they were almost without exception men whose cattle was

³⁶ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 165.

³⁷ The Scramble for Africa is a name given to the partition of Africa between the great powers of the time. It began in 1876, and by 1891 the European powers had divided between themselves nine-tenths of the African continent. Hatch, *The History of Britain in Africa: From the Fifteenth Century to the Present*, 184–187.

³⁸ "Making the Household, Making the State: Colonial Military Communities and Labor in German East Africa" pg 54

³⁹ Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*; (London, Hurst, [n.d.]), 10, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://archive.org/details/myreminiscenceso00lettuoft>.

⁴⁰ H. (Hubert) Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945* (Aldershot [England]: Gale & Polden, 1956), 265.

in the territory now occupied by the enemy, and who were therefore afraid of losing their property.”⁴¹ Many German askari taken prisoner during the war would serve in the King’s African Rifles to get out of British prison camps.⁴²

Men serving in the Schutztruppe could be expected to have families and dependents accompanying them on campaign, doing camp work for them. A type of these, the askariboys, were paid for by the Schutztruppe. These children did many domestic jobs for the soldier that they assisted, serving as an apprentice to the soldier, gaining skills for possibly joining the Schutztruppe at a later date.⁴³

The colony’s police were also predominately Africans, the full complement being 2145 Africans and 45 Europeans at the beginning of the war, rivaling the size of the Schutztruppe with its 2540 askari and 216 Europeans.⁴⁴ The police forces were created partially by taking the African N.C.O.’s of the protective force, something General Lettow-Vorbeck complains bitterly about in his memoirs saying “The latter (the Schutztruppe) were deprived of its best elements, who, after joining the police, lost their good military qualities.”⁴⁵ At the start of the war the police would be put under Von Lettow-Vorbeck’s command, and would serve as soldiers, where he would restore their quality.

Germans In Africa

⁴¹ My Reminiscences of East Africa pg 124

⁴² Moyses-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles*, 335; Melvin E. Page, “The War of Thangata: Nyasaland and The East African Campaign, 1914-1918,” *The Journal of African History* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 92.

⁴³ Making the household making the state pg 65

⁴⁴ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

The Germans learned to fight in Africa by suppressing revolts. Tom Von Prince had fought in Africa with Wissmann in the 1890's and would later retire to East Africa. In 1914 he would return the Schutztruppe when the First World War broke out, and died leading African askari into battle at Tanga in November 1914.⁴⁶ Von Lettow-Vorbeck was himself a veteran of the suppression of revolts in German colonies and overseas possessions. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had been a part of the German force sent to join a multinational force in suppressing the Boxer Revolution in China in 1900-1901. He had been wounded in the left eye during the Hottentot rebellion in the German South-West African colony where he had served on the staff of General Trotha, and as a company commander.⁴⁷

A Brief Military History of British East Africa

The British experience in East Africa had significant continuity with the German experience. The division of the responsibility for the Sultan of Zanzibar's territory had left the British in control of large sections the Sultan's territory, and the explorer Harry Johnston, who would later become Consul-General for British Central Africa, had entered the area to make treaties with various tribes in much the same way that Karl Peters had in 1884. Also in the same way that German East Africa had developed, British East Africa was formed by the Imperial British East Africa Company in 1888, which ruled the East African protectorates as a crown colony.⁴⁸ British East Africa would prove

⁴⁶ Ada Schnee, *Bibi Mkuba: My Experiences in German East Africa during World War I*, Borgo bioviews no. 8 (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1995), 20; Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 4.

⁴⁷ J.R. Sibley, *Tanganyikan Gurrilla: East African Campaign 1914-1918* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books Inc., 1971), 16.

⁴⁸ H Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945* (Uckfield, England: Naval & Military Press, 2004), 5.

to be easier for the British to subdue than German East Africa was for the Germans to the south. Part of that may be because of British experience in dealing with colonized populations. The British would send many expeditions towards the lakes that held much attraction for the economic interests at play in the colony. These were small and presented by the British as antislavery expeditions. Lieut.-Colonel H. Moyse-Bartlett, in his history of the King's African Rifles, refers to them collectively as Slavers' War, even though as he himself says the expeditions of the Slavers' war were not connected.⁴⁹

In addition to fighting slavery, the British also aided their allies in combat with their rivals, such as when Captains Lugard and Williams and a force of about 600 men and two maxim guns aided the Christian faction in the Kingdom of Baganda in 1890.⁵⁰ The British gained control by aiding their supporters and not changing to much about the status quo. It was said that "the British coastline remained relatively tranquil simply because no changes were made by the company."⁵¹ Some resisted more fiercely to European encroachment and suffered for it. The Yao were successful slave traders and raiders before being subdued by the British in 1895. With those avenues closed off the Yao soon fell into poverty, unable to compete with European run plantation farms. The one way out was military service with the British who recruited them in large numbers.⁵² Many tribes such as the Yao and the Kamba would come to serve in the British units recruited from Africans such as the King's African Rifles. They often had little choice. The advent of the British had destroyed their way of life with its new restrictions and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12–23.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 49–50.

⁵¹ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:409.

⁵² Risto Marjomaa, "The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939," *The Journal of African History* 44, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 417–421.

structure. Therefore they had fought the British and ironically made the British interested in recruiting them rather than neighboring tribes. These tribes had not felt the need to fight the British as their way of life was not being destroyed, and so had not proven their fighting mettle.⁵³

Africans in British Service

The British in this period followed the idea of the martial race. According to Timothy H. Parsons, British officers conceived martial races as “masculine, tough, and above all, obedient.”⁵⁴ Once they had labeled a group a martial race, recruitment would be focused on that group, in order to take advantage of these traits. This recruitment was not a form of conscription, but was still capable of enlisting large numbers of people because of the benefits that were seen to come from military service.⁵⁵ The Martial races concept was developed after the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857.⁵⁶ According to Jeffrey Greenhut, the policy was intended to restrict service in the army to “Minorities whose then privileged position would depend on the continuation of British rule.”⁵⁷ Recruitment in India was therefore switched from areas in the south of the continent such as Bombay to the northern parts of India, and groups such as the Sikhs, the Gurkhas, and the

⁵³ Parsons, “Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen,” 674–675.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 675.

⁵⁵ Inspector General's report on 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19371, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

⁵⁶ Great Indian Mutiny began in May 1857 and lasted until the June 1858. There were many contributing causes to the mutiny, including general incompetence, but the most immediate cause was cartridges being issued that had to be bitten open, greased with either pig or cow fat, which both the Hindi and Muslim soldier saw as an attempt to subvert their faith. Many whole military units joined in the mutiny, and they were strong enough to take many cities, before being put down after a year and a half of hard fighting, despite receiving little support from the majority of Indians. Byron Farwell, *Armies of the Raj: From the Mutiny to Independence, 1858-1947* (New York: Norton, 1991),

⁵⁷ Byron Farwell, *Armies of the Raj: From the Mutiny to Independence, 1858-1947* (New York: Norton, 1991), 15.

Rahjputs.⁵⁸ The majority of these groups were from the hard mountain areas, an impoverished and rural environment where there would be more of an incentive for unskilled laborers to join up, serving for the pay, the uniforms and the prestige. These men would have been both accustomed to hardship and uneducated. This made both discipline and the justification of British leadership easier.⁵⁹ Indian units did have officers of their own, brought in to “improve the discipline” amongst the soldiers.⁶⁰ When the British began to colonize Africa in the late 19th century this idea traveled from India to Africa, and would affect recruitment there as well. The transfer of this idea was helped by the movement of Indian troops to the African colonies for internal security. Indian troops helped suppress rebellions in 1896, 1897, 1898 and 1900 before the creation of the King’s African Rifles in 1902. Even when the King’s African Rifles was formed it included a battalion of Indians.⁶¹ Indians were still needed, or seen to be needed despite the presence of indigenous troops.

The King’s African Rifles had diverse origins, being an amalgamation of military units formed by the Imperial British East Africa Company and the African Lakes Corporation that had become British units when these areas were collected into British protectorates. These units were not recruited specifically from a single tribal group, but were drawn from tribes “of proved fighting ability.”⁶² In 1902 these were collected into the King’s African Rifles in order to reinforce one of the protectorates in an emergency

⁵⁸ Ibid., 180–187. Depot Companies, 23 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/3, No. 19257, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Greenhut, “Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army,” *Military Affairs* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 1984): 16.

⁶⁰ Inspector General's report on 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19371, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

⁶¹ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 8.

⁶² Ibid., 561.

without having to be reinforced from India.⁶³ In the early years this was generally Sudanese and Swahilis, but the pool would expand to include tribes that had most fiercely resisted British encroachment such as the Nandi of Kenya.⁶⁴ The British had preferences for certain tribes, as evidenced by the Inspection Report of March 1906. The report gives, amongst other things, the numbers of men from specific tribes enrolled including the Yao. According to the report, “There seems to be some difficulty in obtaining Yaos at the present moment, and since the Yao makes an admirable soldier this is regretted. I have recommended more systematic methods of recruitment,”⁶⁵ These methods involved parades by the soldiers through Yao recruiting districts with everything being done to “make the service appear as attractive as possible.”⁶⁶

During the period of conquest in the 1880’s, many African’s had served with the colonial forces, either due to their nation’s alliance to the colonial powers or to promises of wealth for service. These alliances would be formed generally in the context of wars between Africans. For example in the Slaver’s War that started in 1887 in Central Africa, around Lake Nyasa would be the first time that British would train the Africans in European methods. This was done to repel Arab and slaver attempts to push back British influence by attacking the Ankonde and the Mambwe, people aligned with the British. The Europeans organized these people into battalions and companies in order to more effectively defeat the Arabs.⁶⁷ These were initially commanded by the chiefs and head

⁶³ Ibid., 548–552.

⁶⁴ Greenstein, “The Impact of Military Service in World War I on Africans,” 497.

⁶⁵ Inspector General's report on 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19371, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

⁶⁶ Inspector General's report on 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19371, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

⁶⁷ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles*, 13–14.

men of these people, but by 1889 the British would begin to put Indian officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of these units.⁶⁸

After the wars of conquest many of these units would be disarmed to assuage the fears of European settlers of an uprising or rebellion from armed Africans. There would still be armed Africans in areas of low white populations for the purposes of internal security.⁶⁹ These forces were small, but they would form the nucleus of the larger formations that would be created throughout the course of the war in Africa. They provided a framework out of which to create these larger units and would also establish the precedent for how African askari would relate to their European masters.⁷⁰

The Rhodesia Native Regiment is an example of this. The initial plan for the formation of the regiment was to raise 500 men from the Ndebele tribe, a tribe they considered warlike and one the British had fought twice, once during the initial conquest, and once when the tribe had risen in revolt in 1896.⁷¹ The unit would be formed around a nucleus of Africans from the British South Africa Police, and would be supplied with European officers from the Native Affairs Department and policemen from the British South Africa police.⁷² This desire to recruit from the Ndebele can be traced to the British impression that these were a warrior people that they had earned during the conquest, and their good standing with the British for support lent by some of the chiefs during the rebellions of 1896. The fact that these people only formed about 20% of the African

⁶⁸ Ibid., 14,16.

⁶⁹ Timothy Joseph Stapleton, *No Insignificant Part [electronic Resource]: The Rhodesia Native Regiment and the East Africa Campaign of the First World War* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 14.

⁷⁰ Askari is a catch all term used to refer to African soldier, no matter what country they serve.

⁷¹ Stapleton, *No Insignificant Part [electronic Resource]*, 22.

⁷² Ibid., 20.

population of the Rhodesian colony would have made the more attractive for recruitment. Their smaller population would make them more likely to support British rule in the case of a rebellion by other groups in light of their already deep involvement with the colonial masters.⁷³ The martial races system worked by trading prestige and wealth to a group in exchange for military service, focusing on that in the recruitment drives.

British in Africa

For the British, a posting to Africa was not well regarded by its officers or worth much effort meaning that it would be hard to find driven or able officers in command of the units there. A March 1906 memorandum indicates that they had no intention of becoming proficient in local languages as only a few sat for the examinations.⁷⁴ As service in the colonial civil government required the passing of a language examination that “could not be made more elementary without making the test a formality and useless for all practical purposes.” this also suggests that they had no intention of making Africa their home after discharge, unlike many German officers.⁷⁵ Another indication of the quality of British officers is a report on one Captain Elwell. The report states that he lacked “that capacity for hard work which would be necessary before he could be considered professionally fitted for a responsible command,” and “a sufficient knowledge of the training of an infantry soldier,” but according to the commander of 2nd Battalion King’s African Rifle “I do not at present see sufficient reason for removing him from the

⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁴ “Language Examinations, April 1906, Ref. CO 534/3, No. 17858, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).”, n.d.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

King's African Rifles."⁷⁶ Why would they want a posting to Africa? Inspection Reports from 1906 state that the ammunition for the artillery pieces were anywhere from 10 to 20 years old, and the guns in such a poor state that they were "useless for all service purposes,"⁷⁷ The equipment of the King's African Rifles was defective and old, a common element across all units with African soldiers. The Schutztruppe went to war in 1914 with rifles of the 1871 pattern, firing "smoky powder" which gave away the position of the man firing the weapon, as opposed to the newer smokeless powder from more modern weapons.⁷⁸

African Military Service before World War I

What can be seen from both the German and the British practices before the war is that the imperial military system traded on prestige and wealth. The British in India gave that prestige to select ethnic groups such as the Sikhs. In Africa the British tried to set up the same system, but they seem to be less successful in that attempt, as evidenced by the below desired levels of recruitment from groups such as the Yao. But the need to play on the twin aspects of prestige and wealth is a part of that system is evidenced by the way they tried to recruit for the regiments, with the bands. There are accounts of people joining the army specifically because they wanted to be able to wear the impressive uniforms of that the bands would march in.⁷⁹ Not only the prestige of the uniform, but joining the army was a way to support a wife and family.⁸⁰ The askariboys represent a

⁷⁶ "Capt. P. Elwell, 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19370, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).", n.d.

⁷⁷ "Inspector General's Report on 2nd Batt., 24 April 1906, Ref. CO 534/5, No. 19371, Despatches: Africa, Brit.Cent.Prot., Africa, East, Prot., and Uganda, The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).", n.d.

⁷⁸ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 8.

⁷⁹ Page, "Malawians and the Great War," 55.

⁸⁰ Marjomaa, "The Martial Spirit," 422.

good example of this, where the younger man apprentices for the job that he would grow into, to replace the askari whom he was supporting. In that way the units would train its own recruits. This same practiced can be noted in British units. Moysee-Bartlett reports, “Some of the Sudanese companies, such as No. 6, had so many civilian followers that they were able to provide their own recruits.”⁸¹ This was a strictly business arrangement, at least in Africa. The desertion of German askari with property in Allied command speaks to this, as well as the actions of British askari who, anxious to resume military service after the King’s African Rifles no longer needed their services crossed into German territory to enlist under the Germans, apparently in large numbers.⁸² They would put their skills to use wherever they could, so that they could get the wealth and prestige that was being offered.

Both the Germans and the British had not prepared their African soldiers for fighting against modern armies. That was not the purpose of askari. It was better to train and equip them for subjugating African tribes rather than risking the possibility that they might revolt after being trained and equipped with weapons suitable for resisting any force that could be dispatched to crush the resistance. For British officers at the start of the war this was good enough. Troops from India could, and would be dispatched to see to any offensive action if that was needed, and the African askari would be deployed in small post in order to keep a hold of the colony and also intercept German raiders.⁸³ The Germans could not rely on support or men from Germany when the European war came.

⁸¹ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles*, 135.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 153,265; Marjomaa, “The Martial Spirit,” 425.

⁸³ R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 84.

The First World War in East Africa: no thought of the repercussions

At the beginning of the First World War the colonial powers were very concerned with the effect that having Africans armed and trained could have on their rule of Africa. Dr. Heinrich Schnee, the governor of German East Africa during the First World War said in a book after the war, “All responsible men in Germany as well as in the colonies, whether in public or private positions, had no doubt about the fact that the provocation of wars in Africa, in which black men under European leadership would be forced to fight against white men, would deal a deadly blow to the prestige of the white race among the blacks.”⁸⁴ However, once war began that sentiment was quickly disregarded.

Carriers

There was a reason that Africans would find service in this war appealing. It was an alternative to service as a carrier. Carriers were a response to the needs of the theater. Animals could not be used to transport the food, ammunition, artillery and any and all other heavy loads and neither could vehicles.⁸⁵ Animals could not be used because bites from the tsetse fly would give the animal the sleeping sickness, making the animal unfit to work as early as several days after the bite, and it would die within three months.⁸⁶ Vehicles could not make it through the vast road less stretches of East Africa. So in order to supply their armies the British and the Germans required the services of thousands of

⁸⁴ Heinrich Schnee, *German Colonization Past and Future: The Truth about German Colonies* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1926), 85.

⁸⁵ Donald C. Savage and J. Forbes Munro, “Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East Africa Protectorate 1914-1918,” *The Journal of African History* 7, no. 2 (January 1, 1966): 314.

⁸⁶ Harvey G. Soff, “Sleeping Sickness in the Lake Victoria Region of British East Africa, 1900-1915,” *African Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 1969): 256.

men to carry all of these supplies to the front. For the entire war the British would recruit almost 700,000 men to serve as carriers from all over Africa, including German East Africa.⁸⁷ The Germans also employed a number of carriers to supply and support their troops. Von Lettow-Vorbeck estimates that each of the companies of the Schutztruppe, of which there was at maximum 60, was supported by 250 carriers, which is slightly more than the number of askari they were supporting as well as the men that would carry the supplies to the troops, the total number of carriers used by the Germans was in the hundreds of thousands.⁸⁸ As carriers were needed in greater and greater numbers, the need for noncombatants was more urgent than the need for combatants.⁸⁹ The desperate need for carriers drove the European powers to conscription in order to keep the fighting going. Africans avoided carrier service whenever possible, unlike service as an askari. The carriers were not paid well, and they were irregularly paid even then. In addition there were no pensions or disability allowance.⁹⁰

The Opening Stages

The First World War in East Africa would take several years to build to the intensity that would have such a great affect on the African population. On August 8th 1914, two English light cruisers arrived off of the city of Dar-es-Salaam, the capital of German East Africa, firing on the telegraph station, and disabling two German merchant ships, the *Konig* and the *Feldmarshall*.⁹¹ The naval gunfire did not damage the telegraph station, rather the Germans blew it up “from a rather excessive fear of its falling into the

⁸⁷ Hodges, “African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918,” 116.

⁸⁸ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 22,24,71.

⁸⁹ Killingray and Matthews, “Beasts of Burden,” 12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹¹ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 20.

enemy's hands."⁹² The British Navy would disable several other merchant vessels while looking for the real prize, the German cruiser *Konigsberg*. In contrast, the British land forces took a defensive stance. The British did not have large numbers of troops in the areas around German East Africa, only several companies of the King's African Rifles. Six companies of the King's African Rifles were recalled from Jubaland, where they had been trying to subdue local tribes.⁹³

The Germans were not as passive as their British enemies. Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the de facto commander of German military in the colonies, had determined a course of action that required a lot more action from the Germans. As he says in his memoirs,

I considered it to be our military object to detain enemy . . . forces if it could be by any means accomplished. This however was impossible if we remained neutral. In that case the situation would be that we who did not command the sea, would have to remain inactive, . . . England, on the other hand would have no need to employ a single man in East Africa on our account; it would be able to take away the very last fit Askari . . . for employment in other theatres more important than East Africa.⁹⁴

There were some that disagreed with him, looking to the Neutrality Clauses in the Berlin Act of 1885. The clause, Chapter III article X gives neutrality to any territories, provided the power that controls that territory decides to exercise that option, and the territory, "shall fulfil the duties which neutrality requires."⁹⁵

Von Lettow-Vorbeck acted quickly to force the issue and to bring war to East Africa. The first attack by the Germans into British territory was to seize the town of

⁹² Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 27.

⁹³ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 21.

⁹⁴ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 18–19.

⁹⁵ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 526.

Taveta, which fell on the 15th of August 1914, the first piece of British territory to fall into German hands.⁹⁶ Skirmishes between British, Belgian and German forces would occur throughout the hundreds of miles of mutual border that these colonies shared with each other. These operations were not on a large scale, rarely reaching more than 500 men.⁹⁷ The most important engagement of this early stage of the war would not be fought until November of 1914, at a place named Tanga.

Tanga is a coastal city in the northern part of German East Africa. It was not very important before the establishment of the colony, but would become more important because of their presence. The first actions of the Europeans that would make the town more important was the presence of European settlers. The majority of the 3515 square miles of land that had been given to European settlers had been in the area around Tanga and Mount Kilimanjaro.⁹⁸ Construction on the first railway in the colony was started at Tanga in 1905, and would reach to New Moshi, which made it important for the movement of supplies in the northern areas given the difficulties of transport because of sleeping sickness and the small number of good roads.

The British attack force was composed of several regiments of Indian Army infantry, and the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, a unit of professional soldiers. All Indians were on paper, volunteers, although there were allegations that recruitment was aggressive almost to the point of compulsion, especially in the Punjab areas of Northern India. Recruits from the Punjab would supply most of the manpower for the Indian army, around 400,000 men out of the 1,096,013 men that would serve overseas. Indian peasants

⁹⁶ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 29.

⁹⁷ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 266–274.

⁹⁸ Oliver and Mathew, *History of East Africa*, 1:449.

and villagers were the most eager to serve, which reflects that the motivations for prewar service carried into the war. This is also reflected by the lower rates to which university students enlisted.⁹⁹ R. Meinertzhagen, a British Intelligence officer attached to the Force had low hopes for the force. According to his diary, “They (the Indian infantry) constitute the worst in India, and I tremble to think what may happen if we meet with serious opposition . . . Two battalions have no machine guns and the senior officers are nearer to fossils.”¹⁰⁰ It had just fourteen machine guns, and the six guns of the 28th Mountain Battery to support the 8000 men of Expeditionary Force ‘B’.¹⁰¹ The force was originally going to be supported by the battleship *Goliath* and the cruiser *Fox* but the *Goliath* suffered mechanical failures, and so when the Force arrived at Tanga only the *Fox* remained to support the landing which was begun at 6 p.m. on November 2nd.¹⁰²

When the Force ‘B’ arrived the Germans were not occupying the town in significant forces to repel the invaders, but before the British had even begun the unloading process Von Lettow-Vorbeck was moving to “collect all available troops as rapidly as possible, to meet the obviously impending landing at Tanga,” moving troops down the Northern railway as fast as possible given the fact that there were only eight locomotives.¹⁰³ According to Von Lettow-Vorbeck morale amongst the troops was high due “not so much to the fact that the Askari clearly understood the gravity of the situation, as that for him a trip in a railway train is at all times a great delight.”¹⁰⁴ By the time of the British attack in the morning the Germans numbered 1200 to 2100 men

⁹⁹ Farwell, *Armies of the Raj*, 268–269.

¹⁰⁰ Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, 82.

¹⁰¹ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 40.

¹⁰² Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 75, 79.

¹⁰³ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

(sources differ), five artillery pieces, and also had 13 to 21 machine guns (again sources differ).¹⁰⁵ Two of those pieces were designed in 1873, and the other three were extremely light.¹⁰⁶ The German commander was confident of success. He wrote in his memoirs

from personal experience in East Asia, I knew the clumsiness with which English troops were moved and led in battle, and it was certain that in the very close and completely unknown country in which the enemy would find himself directly he landed, these difficulties would grow to infinity. The slightest disorder was bound to have far-reaching consequences. With my troops, of whom the Europeans were well acquainted with the country round Tanga, while the Askari were at home in the brush, I had a reasonable prospect of taking advantage of the enemy's weak points by skilful and rapid manoeuvre.¹⁰⁷

On the morning of November 3rd 1914 the British advanced a weak force in the direction of Tanga. The German 17th Field Company met this attack in good defensive positions and opening fire with machine guns prevented the advance and wounded the commander of the 13th Rajputs as well as killing several other officers of the regiment. Further reinforcements were committed by both sides. The German reinforcements advanced in an enveloping movement, which drove into the British flank. Indian troops “already exhausted after a night's hard work, bewildered in the dense vegetation and startled by their first experience of machine gun fire, were in no condition to withstand the onset of the African askari who, with cheering and the sound of horns and bugles could be heard approaching through the bush against their flank and rear.”¹⁰⁸

That action ended the days fighting, and the British would not attack again until just before noon on the 4th, advancing slowly towards the German positions. They would

¹⁰⁵ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 105.

¹⁰⁶ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 38; Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 40–41.

¹⁰⁸ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 82.

not have contact with the Germans until 2 in the evening. The fighting there would prove to be a chaotic affair. A swarm of angry bees ranged over the battlefield, stinging all that they came across, at one time driving the gunners away from the machine guns in one of Lettow-Vorbecks companies.¹⁰⁹ Some British units managed to penetrate into the town itself mainly the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and some of the steadier Indian soldiers, who had not run at the sound of hostile gunfire. A German counterattack drove them out by 5:13, just a few hours after the attack had made contact with the defenders. The Germans were victorious, the invasion force was being driven back into the sea, and then one askari blew the recall order on his bugle, and German forces retreated out of the town and to their staging areas.¹¹⁰ The British commander, Major General Arthur Aitken ordered a retreat in such haste as to abandon all of the heavy equipment on the beach including the machine guns. This withdrawal was accomplished without Lettow-Vorbeck even knowing it was underway. At the cost of 159 dead, including several European officers the Germans had inflicted 817 casualties as well as taking eight machine guns, 455 rifles, and half a million rounds of ammunition.¹¹¹ It was a stunning victory for the Germans.

Preparations for the Great Offensive

After Tanga, both sides prepared for the invasion of German territory that was expected. The Germans had begun to create the basis of the carrier system that would supply the army. Food would have to be brought in from the countryside then sent to the front by carriers, employed in large numbers, with 8000 carriers being used for a single

¹⁰⁹ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 44.

¹¹⁰ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 52–56.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

route. The route could take anywhere from nine to twelve days to go from one railway to another.¹¹² Feeding even the carriers was a problem. According to Lettow-Vorbeck, each carrier needed two pounds of food a day, and the maximum load was 55 pounds per man.¹¹³ Therefore there was inefficiency, given that in addition to food, this system transported all of the medicine, cloth, tobacco, chocolate, whiskey, soap, toothpowder, and ammunition to the front while the colony was still in German hands.¹¹⁴

The British were in a better supply situation, as they still had access to supplies from the homeland. However, confidence of the ability to go back on the offensive was low. The units that had been at Tanga were landed in the East African protectorate and were used to strengthen the defenses of the East African Protectorate along the Kilimanjaro front, protecting the Uganda railway. No further reinforcements would be sent to East Africa for some time as men were needed at more important areas, and without reinforcements the offensive could not be resumed.¹¹⁵ As 1914 turned to 1915, the British deployed defensively, expecting that the Germans would not be content to rest on their laurels and would act.

The Germans acted. On January 16th 1915, a British fortification at a place called either Jasin or Jassini was attacked by soldiers lead by Lettow-Vorbeck himself. The goal was to bring further British troops out to assist the fort, and in that way ambush them as they advanced to the aid of their fellows. But instead of a small fort the place was garrisoned by three companies who drove off attacking German askari with well-aimed

¹¹² W. O. Henderson, "The War Economy of German East Africa, 1914-1917," *The Economic History Review* 13, no. 1/2 (January 1, 1943): 106–107.

¹¹³ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 50–51.

¹¹⁴ Henderson, "The War Economy of German East Africa, 1914-1917," 107–108.

¹¹⁵ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 109–118.

fire at close range.¹¹⁶ But German attacks were only temporarily turned back and relief efforts failed to reach the defenders of the Fort. When the defenders had fired off their last rounds of ammunition and had been brought under rifle and machine gun fire by the Germans they surrendered on January 19th.¹¹⁷ While this attack did not have great affect on how the British would operate for the near future, it had a great effect on how the Germans would conduct themselves. The cost of taking that fort was high in several ways. In the words of Lettow-Vorbeck,

Although the attack carried out at Jassini with nine companies had been completely successful, it showed that such heavy losses as we also had suffered could only be borne in exceptional cases. We had to economize our forces in order to last out a long war. Of the regular officers, Major Kepler, Lieuts. Spalding and Gerlich, Second-Lieuts. Kaufmann and Erdmann were killed; Captain von Hammerstein had died of his wounds. The loss of these professional soldiers- about one seventh of the regular officers present- could not be replaced. The expenditure of 200000 rounds also proved that with the means at my disposal I could at the most fight three more actions of this nature. The need to strike great blows only quite exceptionally, and to restrict myself principally to guerilla warfare, was evidently imperative.¹¹⁸

The Germans then began raiding into the East African protectorate. These raids were very small, only a few men. The raids would first have to cross a large expanse of desert to reach objectives such as the Uganda railway. British patrols from the King's African Rifles and other units would operate in the area, playing "a perpetual game of hide-and-seek with Germans and rhinoceros alike," trying to intercept these raids.¹¹⁹ The raids were a great success, penetrating deep into British territory, ambushing patrols, and

¹¹⁶ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 58; Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 124.

¹¹⁷ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 127.

¹¹⁸ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 63.

¹¹⁹ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 280.

capturing supplies. One raid captured some 60 horses then slipped past British patrols with their catch.¹²⁰ The greatest effect was on the Uganda railroad. When the British military assumed management responsibility in November 1915 they found that “thirty-five locomotives – double the number that serviced German East Africa’s Northern Railway – were awaiting repairs to damage wrought by von Lettow-Vorbeck’s saboteurs.”¹²¹ One act of sabotage almost managed to kill a British General. The explosives wrecked the engine of the train, and gunfire riddled the carriage the General was riding in. This group of German raiders slipped back to German East Africa.¹²² Evidently British command was ineffectual during this period, not being confident enough to push forward offensive operations that might have put the Germans on the defensive, or being effective enough at defending British territory to prevent the serious damage that German raiding parties were able to effect on the potential logistical capabilities of the British. German raiders appear to have operated with very little difficulties faced from the British, but the environment took more of a toll. Injured and wounded men sometimes had to be abandoned in the desert, which was dangerous enough for the strong and able as “fatigue and thirst in the burning sun were so great that several men died of thirst, and even Europeans drank urine.”¹²³

The raiding parties could not continue forever, as the British War Office had decided to dispatch South African troops in large numbers to East Africa under General J.C. Smuts. The Union of South Africa was the union of former British South African territories and the Boer republic. Initially this was a cause for concern amongst the

¹²⁰ Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, 117.

¹²¹ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 170.

¹²² Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, 123.

¹²³ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 66.

British, given that the Boer War between Afrikaner's and the British had been only around a decade previous, and the Premier of South Africa Louis Botha, and his deputy J.C. Smuts had been Boer generals in that war. That concern was unfounded, as the South African now came to the aid of the British, conquering the German South-West Africa colony by July 1915.¹²⁴ With that done, and the pro-British party returned to power by a recent election, orders came in from the War Cabinet to raise at least 10,000 men for the conquest of German East Africa.¹²⁵ By November 13th, South Africa had raised enough troops to create five mounted regiments, six infantry battalions and five batteries of artillery, and the transport necessary for them in battle.¹²⁶

By February 1916, 27,000 men were prepared for the push into German East Africa. They mostly consisted of the South Africans, which began to arrive in December of 1915, but in addition to that there were the forces that had arrived as part of the Tanga invasion force, as well as Indian troops withdrawn from the western front.¹²⁷ Railroads were built into German East Africa next to the sea in order to shorten the supply lines as much as possible before the attack began. The plan was to advance on two fronts east and west of Kilimanjaro with the main effort being in the east, where they could be supplied by the railroad.¹²⁸

The Germans had been preparing for the British offensive while they were conducting the raiding operations. The *Schutztruppe* had now reached just about the maximum number of units, and had undergone reorganization. Before 1915, the German

¹²⁴ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 125.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 134–135.

¹²⁶ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 215.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹²⁸ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 296.

companies were segregated in to European and African companies, but that had come to an end due to the losses of Europeans. Von Lettow-Vorbeck relied on Europeans to provide the backbone of his companies. They were the majority of the officers and noncommissioned officers as “reliable Askari N.C.O’s” while they existed, were not abundant enough to justify to form the command structure for more than 60 companies.¹²⁹ These companies by the end of 1915 according to Von Lettow-Vorbeck included almost three thousand Europeans, which included the remaining crew of the commerce raider *Konigsburg* who manned the guns taken off the cruiser, and around 11,300 askari.¹³⁰ That number might have been higher than that given by the German commander, and may possibly have numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 trained fighting men to meet the 27,000 that the British mustered.¹³¹

The British Offensive Begins

The first movement of the new offensive was an attack on the German positions at Oldorobo on the 12th of February. This was the first exposure of the South Africans to fighting in the environment of East Africa. They did not expect that the askari would fight so hard and so well, and they retreated when, already weakened by thirst, German forces arrived on their flanks. After that defeat, the British delayed further offensive movements until March 4th 1916.¹³² The advance to the west of Kilimanjaro proceeded quickly at first, making better time than had been anticipated, but it soon slowed due to the suffering of the men from the heat and lack of water, raids on the supply lines, and the

¹²⁹ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 71.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³¹ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 170–171.

¹³² Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 236–238.

very terrain. In the east, where the main thrust was advancing on Tavanta there was little fighting, and the advance continued without much delay until they reached Reata hill, not far from Tavanta.¹³³ The British flanking movements in this stage were able to force the Germans to abandon a few strong positions, but these movements were detected in time to allow the Germans to slip away from their forward defensive positions and retreat to more defensible positions in the mountains.¹³⁴ General Smuts was trying to avoid direct engagements and frontal attacks in order to avoid heavy casualties amongst the South African troops; as a prominent South African politician, “he could not afford to go back to South Africa with the nickname ‘Butcher Smuts’.”¹³⁵

But maneuver would not be enough, however much Smuts would have wanted it. The German defensive line around Reata would to be attacked directly, the terrain would delay a flanking operation. The attack went forward with a regiment of the King’s African Rifles and of Indian infantry moved forward, but they were met by German fire and counter attack and their attacks stalled. A Rhodesian regiment, made up of Europeans that had settled in what is now Zimbabwe, moved forward to reinforce, and made good progress, managing to take part of the ridge before most of the regiment retreated. At 8 p.m. two South African regiments launched a bayonet charge but they were thrown back. In the meantime Smuts had sent a flanking force down a more open flank.¹³⁶ This put the

¹³³ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 188–189.

¹³⁴ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 110–111.

¹³⁵ Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, 166.

¹³⁶ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 243–246.

Germans at the risk of being cut off, and so Von Lettow-Vorbeck ordered a retreat from these positions, and the Germans slipped away in the night.¹³⁷

This battle would set the trend for actions in this stage of the war. The Germans would attempt to fight the British when the situations favored them, by holding strong defensive positions that would need to be attacked, or by counter attacking at more isolated British units. When the inevitable British flanking movement threatened, German forces would retreat back deeper into German East Africa. This would prolong the fighting in this theater, the only real goal of German resistance.

As one German official in Washington remarked at the time: ‘nothing more to our liking could have been done if we had had the ordering of the Allies’ military movements ourselves. They – and especially Britain – are expending men and money and shipping ... to conquer regions which can give them nothing they do not already have in abundance, and which we will take from them – in Paris, or wherever the Peace Treaty chances to be signed – by a stroke of a pen.’¹³⁸

The Realities of War in Africa

As the British advanced further into German East Africa they began to run into more problems. Supply was always an important problem. The initial offensive had been undertaken just before the coming of the spring rains, and when the rains came “the roads, or tracks became absolute quagmires, not inches but feet deep in mud as the result of heavy rain.”¹³⁹ The British were laying railroad track into the territory they were moving into, but in order to meet transportation demands the British called on the local populations. By December 1916, the British had recruited around 150,000 men from all

¹³⁷ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 114–116.

¹³⁸ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 171–172.

¹³⁹ John Henry Verinder Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa* (London J. Murray, 1918), 106, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://archive.org/details/generalsmutscamp00crow>.

over Africa to carry heavy loads.¹⁴⁰ These men would have been compelled into service through any number of ways such as threats to African tribal chiefs, intimidation and extortion, or large scale kidnappings, so it is not surprising that many took the chance to escape the poor working conditions as soon as possible.¹⁴¹ By this point the methods that Europeans used had an intensity that rivaled the methods of slaver raiding parties. “Led by the local police, recruiters would enter villages at night, make their way from house to house, rouse the inhabitants, and capture any adult males they might find. The men were frequently bound with ropes or even wooden yokes and marched off,”¹⁴² This frequently drove men to avoid the recruiters any way they could, such as self-disablement, hiding or joining secret religious groups such as *nyau* societies, which would hide fugitives in sacred places such as graveyards so they could escape the drafts.¹⁴³

1916 was the year in which the British realized that they needed to begin to rely on African troops because of sickness. The climate began to take a large toll on British European and Indian units, as their troops were not used to the climate, and suffered disproportionality from disease at a rate that seriously affected combat operations. According to Colonel Meinertzhagen, “every man killed in action means ten invalidated with disease,”¹⁴⁴ By June 15, the British first division had around 15% of its strength unable to fight due to fever.¹⁴⁵ In March and early April two regiments had to be withdrawn to more health climates to recover their strength. One, the 2/Loyal North Lancashire Regiment which had arrived with 832 men in 1914, illustrates the ravages of

¹⁴⁰ Hodges, “African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918,” 108.

¹⁴¹ Killingray and Matthews, “Beasts of Burden,” 13.

¹⁴² Page, “The War of Thangata,” 93.

¹⁴³ Page, “Malawians and the Great War,” 58.

¹⁴⁴ Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, 166.

¹⁴⁵ Hordern and Stacke, *Military Operations, East Africa*, 301.

disease. “On the 8th March 1915, out of a total strength of 901, 150 men were in hospital; by the 10th June the unit could muster less than 350; nine days later the available strength was 12 officers, 253 o.r. (enlisted ranks). Battle casualties up to the end of 1915 amounted only to 150.”¹⁴⁶ The British suffered from an average monthly casualty rate of 10 percent due to disease.¹⁴⁷ The British would have to rely more and more on the African troops, as the European and Indian troops suffered from disease that in a way that African troops from the climate did not. When it became obvious that the fighting in German East Africa would not be as quick as the fighting in German West Africa had been, the British had begun to raise troops for fighting specifically in the theater. According to Brig. General J. H. V. Crowe, “The general policy of the home authorities was that as far as possible no troops which could be employed in the theatres of operations in Europe should be made available for East Africa.”¹⁴⁸ On paper, the Africans were also all volunteers, but the British would demand men to be sent to serve in the King’s African Rifles. King’s African Rifles dispatches from October 1918 the Purko people refused to send the demanded men.

In consequence of this the King’s African Rifles were asked to send troops to the Reserve to enable the Government to deliver an ultimatum and to enforce the production of the ringleaders to whom this open defiance of Government was attributed.... The answer was a flat refusal to consider enlistment in the King’s African Rifles or to undertake any work whatever outside their own area.¹⁴⁹

The arrival of the King’s African Rifles secured the submission of other potentially likeminded peoples to the British demands. Incidents such as this demonstrate the

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 520.

¹⁴⁷ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 154.

¹⁴⁸ Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Report of Intelligence Section, 9 September 1918, Ref. CO 534/26, No. 54845, Despatches: East Africa; Despatches: Uganda., The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

coercive potential of the colonial powers, especially when manpower was in high demand.

About 56,000 men were recruited for the whole war from all of Africa. The colonies that contributed the most troops were Nyasaland, Uganda, and the East Africa Protectorate, all contributing around 10,000 men for military service.¹⁵⁰ Recruitment of Africans for the First World War was initially very popular. The depots of the King's African Rifles in Nyasaland were confronted with more African's looking to serve than they had needed for in 1914. The major thrust of this recruitment drive was the fear of another conquest, but something that cannot be underestimated is desire for money.¹⁵¹ Wages for askari were about three times higher than average local wages, a tempting sum.¹⁵² In Nyasaland, service in the King's African Rifles would also grant exemption from the hut-tax, a further financial incentive.¹⁵³ That was combined with the recruitment practices that had been successful before the war, the parading bands and attractive uniforms as well as adding the treat of another conquest.

The British Advance Resumes

After the initial fighting of Smuts' offensive, the British decided to hold their ground in the territory gained during the heavy rains that came with spring. In one area, twenty seven inches of rain fell during the month of April, and it did not let up till the middle of May. On May 21st, the British advance began. It consisted of three columns, one to follow the river Pangani, one to follow the rail line, and the last to advance

¹⁵⁰ Hodges, "African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918," 116.

¹⁵¹ Page, "The War of Thangata," 89.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵³ Exemption from Hut tax for Nys. natives serving in K.A.R., 30 July 1918, Ref. CO 534/26, No. 45097, Despatches: East Africa; Despatches: Uganda., The National Archives, Kew (United Kingdom).

directly, with the goal of forcing the Germans out of their strong positions in the mountains.¹⁵⁴ This action forced the Germans away from the northern part of the country, and its railroads, and deeper into the interior. By this time, the British had advanced all along the northern part of the colony, forcing the Germans back from the lakes along the northern border, the Germans still not risking being encircled and trapped.¹⁵⁵ The Germans could not delay the advancing British forces. By the 31st of July the British forces were in Dodoma, a town roughly in the center of British East Africa.¹⁵⁶ Von Lettow-Vorbeck slipped away again. By September, the forces were exhausted when the rains came, swamping the land, and making it incredibly difficult for enough supplies to make it to the forward troops. Both sides had taken to shooting hippopotami in order to get the meat. The German supply system had already striped most of the colony of food in order to find enough food to field an army not much smaller than the one backed by the whole of the British Empire, and had pressed 350,000 men into service to carry the food to the front.

The districts still under German control were denuded of all available foodstuffs as well as carriers; and only in quite exceptional cases was payment offered for either. Such ‘total disregard for the barest needs of the native population’ ... and the ‘wholesale seizure of every vestige of foodstuff throughout the country’ was to have dire consequences. ‘What of those unfortunates who were of no military value – the old men, the old women, and the young children.... ‘their lot was a desolate village and starvation’.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Crowe, *General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa*, 122–130.

¹⁵⁵ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 140–141.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁵⁷ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 288.

Before the end of 1917, 300,000 Africans would die in German East Africa from famine, one out of every twenty of the total population.¹⁵⁸ The number of carriers that had died in German service is unknown, any records that the Germans might have had no longer exist.¹⁵⁹ Because of the supply problems, and rampant disease Smuts had to pull back and prepare to resume the offensive when the rains stopped.¹⁶⁰

“The greater part of the German colony, including the most important areas, was now in British hands. But von Lettow was still undefeated; the cost of the operations in men, animals and material had been greater than expected, and the South African troops were at the end of their endurance. A new stage had begun in which the future prosecution of the war passed wholly to the African battalions.”¹⁶¹

The South Africans had truly reached the end of their ability to fight by the end of 1916. 12,000 of them were sent back to South Africa to recover, and the other non-African soldiers were not much better. The Indian regiments had 20% of their strength in sick wards almost constantly.¹⁶² The powerful British push resumed with the new year.¹⁶³ But it would resume without General Smuts. He had been ordered to London to represent South Africa at the Imperial War Conference in 1917 and would leave German East Africa on January 20th 1917.¹⁶⁴ Another South African was sent to replace him, General Jakobus van Deventer. By this stage, both his and von Lettow-Vorbeck’s troops were starving, and were barely able to continue operations. The Germans reduced the number of carriers to the barest minimum, and drove the women that followed the soldiers on campaign away to the south in order to limit the number of mouths to feed. This was not

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Hodges, “African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918,” 114.

¹⁶⁰ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles*, 318–319; Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 160.

¹⁶¹ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King’s African Rifles*, 320.

¹⁶² Ibid., 332.

¹⁶³ Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, 252.

¹⁶⁴ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 293; Crowe, *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, 264.

enough to stop food problems, and only the use of unripe maize allowed the rations to be increased to “nearly the normal allowance.”¹⁶⁵ Still the Germans continued to resist, being driven further and further to the south. At this point the Germans could no longer resist with the same numbers. There was only 400,000 rounds of ammunition, which had to be enough for 25000 rifles and the 50 machine guns that they had left.¹⁶⁶

The Final Stage

On November 17th, von Lettow-Vorbeck had decided on a desperate course. He would reduce his forces to around 2,000 fighting men and abandon the colony. On November 25th 1917, he, Governor Schnee and those 2,000 men marched into Portuguese East Africa.¹⁶⁷ When it became clear to the British what von Lettow-Vorbeck had done the British paused to reorganize their forces. Van Deventer disposed of his Indian troops, and moved to contain Von Lettow-Vorbeck with just African troops; troops that could deal with a campaign he thought would be as arduous as the one just finished.¹⁶⁸ This part of the campaign would last until November of 1918. The Germans ranged all over the Portuguese colony, attacking supply depots and evading Allied pursuit, before slipping back into German East Africa in September of 1918 where the column stayed until invading the British colony of Rhodesia in November of 1918. On Armistice Day 1918, Von Lettow-Vorbeck and around 160 Europeans, 1200 askari, and 1,500 carriers was on British soil. He finally surrendered on November 25 1918.¹⁶⁹ In the final year of the war, the Germans had suffered from an outbreak of a bronchial virus, followed by an outbreak

¹⁶⁵ Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*;, 176–178.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 217–229.

¹⁶⁸ Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles*, 389.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 412; Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*;, 303, 309–314.

of small pox. Malaria was a constant problem and both sides were exhausted by the marching, and starving, having picked the area clean of any food.¹⁷⁰ The fighting in East Africa ended when one starving, exhausted, disease ridden force surrendered to another.

Conclusion

When fighting came to East Africa in 1914 the African populations could not have expected what would come. The first year gave very little indication of coming suffering, but that soon changed. Through 1915, the British recruited 24,000 men for carrier service from the East African Protectorate, another 45,000 men were drawn up the next year and another 45,000 the year after that.¹⁷¹ The Germans also employed hundreds of thousands of men to serve the same purpose, each carrying up to 55 pounds on many day journeys.¹⁷² A significant number of men were seized by force; the colonial governments sending out night raids in order to reach the quotas. Many of these men never made it back, and even if they could return there might not be family there.

Those that went to war suffered heavily. Disease was rampant amongst the soldiers and the carriers, and the British invasion of German East Africa caused widespread starvation. The first to starve were the civilians in German East Africa. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's troops demanded vast amounts of food, and they received it. The efficiency of the Schutztruppe in levying that food rivaled the deliberate starvation campaigns that the Schutztruppe had used to subdue the colony multiple times. From

¹⁷⁰ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 382–383.

¹⁷¹ Hodges, "African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918," 108.

¹⁷² Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 50–51.

1905 to 1907 the Schutztruppe had killed 200,000 by desertification tactics, from 1914 to 1917 the armies in East Africa caused the starvation of 300,000.¹⁷³

Despite these deaths, the First World War in East Africa continued. Eventually the Germans had to surrender, but it was not because von Lettow-Vorbeck had finally realized what effect the war was having on the population, or because he believed that further resistance was impossible. Von Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered because of events that happened thousands of miles away, with the armistice in August of 1918. Fitting for fighting that began because of events that happened thousands of miles away. The fighting had not had a decisive effect on the events of the war in Europe.

In comparison to the numbers of dead from that battle in Europe, the actual number of men that died fighting in East Africa is very small. However, in East Africa the majority of the dying was done by African civilians either starved or worked to death to feed the colonial armies. The total number of Africans that died because of the fighting is not known, but the political result of the fighting is known. German East Africa became British Tanganyika, and colonial rule continued in much the same way it had done before the war.¹⁷⁴

The East African campaign was a result of the nature of the colonial government as well as the realities of the fighting. To form the colony the German efforts were not dissimilar to the way that they fought when the war came to Africa, with a disregard for the lives of the Africans, as well as their wellbeing, focused on victory above all else. The British initially attempted to deal with the First World War in Africa in much the same

¹⁷³ Paice, *Tip and Run*, 165,288.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 400.

way that they had tried to deal with other difficulties in Africa, by sending for reinforcements from India, which were expected to arrive and solve the problem.

However, when the reinforcements could not solve the problem the British displayed a willingness to exploit its African subjects to an extent that rivaled the Germans. Military operations could only be conducted in East Africa on such a large scale through a disregard for the human lives that were needed to keep the armies at the margins of starvation, and both the British and the Germans demonstrated that disregard for African life that evolved out of the conquest of these territories, and their transformation into colonial possessions. Therefore, the experience of the East Africa campaign effectively demonstrates the exploitative nature of colonialism and the affect of that exploitation on those trapped within that system. “Their lot was a desolate village and starvation.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

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