

Feet of Endurance: World War 1 in Africa

Breaking the Myths

Anne Samson, 20 January 2017

Apart from possibly France, which had a different relationship with its African territories to the other imperial powers, it does not appear that when war broke out in Europe that Africa was meant to be drawn in. Both the British and German governments sent messages to their African territories announcing that war appeared imminent in Europe but that no action was to be taken in the colonies. However, when war was declared, no messages were sent to the outlying territories instructing them on what action to undertake, if any. Each local territory therefore responded according to its own circumstances influenced by the attitude of the civil and military administrators.

The war in Africa was subsidiary to what was happening in Europe. For years, the campaigns in Africa were regarded as side-shows, insignificant to warrant detailed research or study. However as those of us with African roots and interests know, the reality was very different and the impact of World War 1 on the continent is still reverberating today. These days we tend to be very judgemental in looking at the past but I don't think that's very helpful. Life was different then. Following a set of values which in many ways don't accord with our views today. We can't change them but by understanding why things happened in the context in which they did we as Africans and others can focus on the positives and strengths that came out of the conflict of 1914-1918 and hopefully use that to create a better world order – one that many of our ancestors fought or hoped to achieve.

Today, I want to explore through case studies, how primary source research – getting into the archives in Africa and elsewhere is rapidly changing the way we need to think about the war.

My published work has focused mainly on white imperial or colonial involvement in the war in East, Central and Southern Africa – not surprising given my heritage and the fact that my historical interest is the interplay between individuals and bureaucracy. Understanding the big picture allows for the details to be put into the wider context. I have also, until recently – that is about three years ago, firmly held that each cultural group should write its own account of the war. I don't have intimate understanding of nine official language groups in South Africa, let alone elsewhere so cannot access their materials – written or other. My position, however, has changed as I've become aware how few African historians (as opposed to Africanists) are working on the topic of World War 1 in Africa – the greatest number are in West Africa. This in itself is an interesting area of study – not one for today though – but it does indicate/reflect the political developments and relationships with the Western/colonial powers. My approach now is to bring the hidden histories to light in the hope that it will encourage African scholars across the continent to take up the challenge of investigating their culture's involvement in World War 1 Africa. This will result in at least 177 versions of what happened in East Africa alone during the Great War as that is the number of micro-nations I have identified as being involved. Alas, we won't get 177 different accounts to pull together as many of the micro-nations only maintained an oral archive and those who served in the war are now dead, but that should not stop us from striving to tell their stories. What this means for me is that I only use the term African when it refers to all or a majority of the micro-nations which are settled in Africa – black tribes, Indian, Arab and white settlers who were born in Africa or who regarded the continent as home.

Now that I've set out where I'm coming from, let's get down to business. First, an overview of the war in Africa to provide the context for two broad case studies: supplies and race relations.

Overview:

Britain entered the war on 4 August 1914, the first shot was fired in West Africa on 7 August, the second on 8 August in East Africa. On 15 August 1914, German forces entered and occupied the only British territory of the war – that of Taveta in today's Kenya. They were to hold it until mid-February 1916.

The first German territory to fall during the war was Togoland on 25 August 1914, the next German South West Africa or Namibia on 9 July 1915 and Cameroon on 18 February 1916. Men who served in West Africa were also to serve in East Africa from mid-1916 onwards, when most (not all) the white troops were withdrawn ostensibly for reasons of health although politics played an important role too. The German forces in German East Africa or what is today Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, fought their last battle on 13 November 1918 two days after the Armistice in Europe was signed and officially surrendered on 25 November 1918.

The forces used were diverse and although we can get fairly accurate numbers of fighting men, the total number directly involved in the war is still unconfirmed – we have estimations. Each imperial power had its own approach to record keeping, different departments and territories were involved in the process, men served on both sides leading to double counting and records have been destroyed for various reasons including archives burning down in Kenya in 1925 and being bombed in London during World War 2.

The terrain and conditions the men and women served in were harsh. Africa is unforgiving and undiscerning – it either floods or it's sweltering with heat. Seldom is there an 'in-between'. The years of the First World War saw some of the heaviest rains on record as well as some of the most severe droughts – not helped by the scorched earth policy which was implemented late in 1917 in East Africa. It is estimated that 75% were lost due to malaria, dysentery and malnutrition. Gunshot and other war wounds accounted for less than 10%.

In addition to the weather, roads were scarce and the railways only in the northern part of German East Africa and from Mombasa to Uganda in Kenya. At that time, wild animals still roamed much of the area and tales are told of lions and others taking soldiers out of tents, crocodiles feasting as people crossed rivers and hippos turning over boats. In addition to the big animals, snakes and other crawly creatures abounded – one of the most feared being the jigger flea in East Africa.

Long distances and poor infrastructure meant that most transport had to literally be manpower. In places horses and oxen could be used but these often fell foul of tsetse fly or sleeping sickness. Despite attempts to keep men of the same faiths and cultures together to ease dietary provisions, this did not work due to the nature of the campaign and there are records of men being on as little as quarter rations for a few days at a time. Weather and the circumstances of war meant that where food was available it couldn't be prepared properly – maizemeal (pap, putu, fufu, ugali – all the same depending on what part of Africa you're from) requires thorough cooking over a fire with water. Water wasn't always available and often fires could not be lit to prevent discovery by the enemy. Men therefore ate raw or partially cooked maizemeal with the resultant consequences. Although there are some accounts of animals being shot for the pot, this was often banned because the sound of the gunshot would travel and alert the enemy.

Days would pass by monotonously – in the South West Campaign which in its intensity lasted about 6 months, only 19 days of actual fighting were recorded. The rest was moving men and equipment into place. Similarly in East Africa, marches were long, with short sharp skirmishes taking place – the suspense

of not knowing what was around the next rock or mountain or hiding behind the long grass was more stressful than the thought of being shot. Few (of any colour) had had training for their roles, so it is not surprising that often when a shot was heard, loads would be dropped and men disappear.

Onto **supplies**: This is the cause of me being here today and the inspiration for the title of this talk. Christine and I met each other over a discussion at The National Archives about shoes for carriers [[AHEC event on WAFF](#)]. The common perception is that Britain didn't care for its African (black in this instance) carriers as they did not supply them with shoes. Perhaps, but here are some other factors to consider. White soldiers – both British and African – in rags. One account by a doctor, Jewell,¹ tells of his colleague being too fearful of washing his uniform following an instruction by a superior officer. It was eventually decided that the doctor should wash his shirt first to see how that survived. It didn't, but at least he maintained his dignity in his tattered dirty shorts. He later had a make-shift shirt constructed from bandages and other available scraps of material until his contingent was sent back to Dar es Salaam for reequipping. This incident happened in 1917 when the chaos and rush of going to war was no longer an issue.

Seen alongside the carriers not being supplied with shoes, a different scenario emerges. Africa was not an important theatre compared to those which would have a direct impact on the status and survival of the European colonial powers. When shipping and the availability of supplies allowed, these were sent to Africa.

That Britain had a hierarchy of who received preferential treatment in terms of supplies can be found in correspondence both in South Africa and West Africa in 1914. In 1914, the four-year young Union of South Africa was needing military equipment in order to participate in the war. The equipment it had on the outbreak of war was mostly returned to England when the Imperial Garrison was released by the Union Government. Jan Smuts, the Minister for War scrounged the Empire for arms eventually sourcing two canons from Malta, the men to man them from St Helena, leaving that outpost without defence, and rifles from the Portuguese who were then neutral.² No-one else had any to spare. Similarly, a note in correspondence concerning materials for West Africa (CO 445/34/48111) refers to getting equipment to Canada which was sending men to the Western Front. If Canadians couldn't get equipment how could Africa expect to be supplied? The pecking order was defined. Britain, dominions sending troops to Europe, African dominions then colonies. East Africa was supplied by India – a longstanding military arrangement. However, India too was reliant on Britain for sourcing much of its military equipment. The sudden increase in demand for material meant hard decisions to safeguard the core had to be made. Africa being on the periphery had to wait. Further evidence of this can be found in the Admiralty correspondence where the Cape Squadron leader set out all he had to juggle when asked to convey troops from Cape Town to South West Africa.

This is not to say there was no discrimination in dealing with local groups. There was, but rather than broad-brush this as 'racist', it requires further unpicking. Discrimination is discrimination, however, it is important to look at the underlying reason for the discrimination. At the time of the First World War there was a general acceptance of racial hierarchy based on knowledge to date. Black Africans were generally

¹ Norman Parsons Jewell, On call in Africa in war and peace, 1910-1932 (Gillyflower, 2016 [oncallinafrica.com](#)); for photos from the NP Jewell collection - <http://www.maryevans.com/lb.php?ref=36057>

² Anne Samson, forthcoming paper on South Africa mobilises for war based on papers in SANDF Doc Centre and National Archives Pretoria.

seen as less intelligent, slow to learn and 'backward'. However, ideas were being challenged by men such as Lord Bryce and Gertrude Bell and locally men and women who had been educated in mission station schools were seen as more acceptable as they were 'educated' at least in Western ways. There were big political debates going on around this topic, but at a practical, more local level, Colonial Office officials generally tried to do what they thought was best for the people they were responsible for when they felt the more indigenous peoples were being unfairly treated. They replaced officials, including governors such as [Sir Percy Girouard](#) in Kenya in 1912 for giving Masai restricted land to settlers including to Lord Kitchener.³ Their actions had to be balanced with doing what was best for Britain, the country concerned, within budgets which had to be kept as low as possible.

Returning to our topic of shoes, local military officers were also concerned about their men as noted by the Officer in Charge of the Gambia Contingent for a sergeant to be paid for the cobbling duties he'd undertaken in addition to his soldier duties. This correspondence (CO 445/36/35338) shows how local conditions were adapted to ensure imperial budgets were kept low but also that men received recognition for what they did. Another point to consider regarding shoes is that their provision could have caused more trouble than what they were worth. This is particularly the case for people who were not used to wearing shoes. I remember as a little girl spending most of my time barefoot even in town. In the villages I frequent now in Africa, children and teenagers often are barefoot and if people are wearing shoes they tend to be flipflops. In the late 1800s it was still a matter of pride for the Zulu army to go barefoot, showing their toughness – it was easier to sneak up on the enemy. All of a sudden to go into shoes, blisters, chaffing and other pains would have to be dealt with. Photos of labour recruited locally show women and men going about barefoot – it was the norm for many.

Shoes or no shoes, jiggers, rain and long marches took their toll on all. By the time they got to leave Lolkisale in 1917 Dr Douglas of the South African Medical Services noted that he had 200 foot patients left behind to attend.⁴

Race relations. Colour played a role but it was not the main determinant. As demonstrated with supplies, it was more complex. Aspects such as class, social standing – wealth and education, as well as religion all played a part. Officers were a world apart from their men in the traditional army structure. When General Horace Smith Dorrien was appointed Commander in Chief of East Africa he asked for an increased entertainment allowance in late 1915 as he understood Nairobi was more expensive than Europe. This partly explains why South African General Jan Smuts was liked by many of the men, not officers, who served under him. He went into the field and suffered the same way they did (more or less). Similarly when Commander Geoffrey Spicer-Simson took the Lake Tanganyika Expedition through Cape Town, they were housed in different locations. Spicer was at Mount Nelson, his officers at The Grand Hotel in Adderley Street and the men at the Seaman's Mission at the docks.

South Africa is often criticised for not arming black soldiers during the war because of Apartheid policies. Apartheid started in 1948, but that is not to say aspects of it weren't present before. There was a huge concern or fear of black uprisings known as the 'black fear' or 'swart gevaar' and this led to white farmers who had revolted against the government being allowed to retain some arms. However, South Africa's

³ Anne Samson, Britain, South Africa and the East African campaign, 1914-1918: The Union comes of Age (2006, IB Tauris)

⁴ RDA Douglas, Experiences in the East Africa campaign: The 4th Field Ambulance, *South African Medical Record*, 1920 June 12.

military policies were in keeping with those of the British empire. Research into Jamaican involvement in the war by Robert Smith of Goldsmith's University provides the evidence for Britain's reluctance to arm troops who were not white and how circumstances forced the military to change its position. Lord Kitchener often found himself in the minority and on the receiving end of attack as he valued and encouraged the use of local forces. He had also been against the war being fought in Africa but was out-maneuvred on this front.

Most of the colonial powers avoided arming black men if they could. It is estimated that on the outbreak of war 60% of the German askari in East Africa were Muslim suggesting the majority were of Arab and Somali descent; the coastal areas being the main source of recruits. The Portuguese police forces were predominantly Indian again suggesting a preference for men who were not black. It's also worth noting that at this time Goans were recorded separately to Indians on returns showing racial breakdowns. Indians at this time were from today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where micro-nations were found to be trustworthy and fulfilled the requirements of the 'martial race' theory which was dominant at the time, they were recruited and armed to help fight against other black micro-nations, the idea being that black lives were more expendable in the development of colonialism. As mentioned earlier, there was a political undercurrent to this move – politicians in Europe and South Africa would not retain their positions if they had to account for large numbers of white casualties.

During the East Africa campaign and also to some extent in South West Africa, men were coerced into service. This has become the dominant perception of how the Carrier Corps came to be. I do not dispute that there was coercion, the evidence is there but it is not the full story. Many young men, particularly in the early days chose to serve for the same reasons many young white men in Europe joined the colours: adventure, a change and easy money. Interviews by Gerald Rilling⁵ and Myles Osborne⁶ as well as research by Michelle Moyd⁷ support this. Chiefs in South Africa, loyal to the sovereign – not the Union, purposefully sent their sons to serve so they, the chiefs could get first hand trustworthy feedback before agreeing to send other men. Recent archival discoveries by myself and separately by another South African historian include the attestation, death and discharge records for the South African and East African Native Labour Corps. From these it is clear that some personal servants, generally called 'boys', served with the same officer in four theatres of war – this could only be by choice. The discovery of these records in the SA Military archives provide a rich source of new information on those who served as labourers – the details recording next of kin, illnesses, ships sailed on, special duties undertaken and reason for leaving service as well as outstanding pay and pension. They add to the work already undertaken by Albert Grundlingh.⁸ So far, no comparable records have been found for white forces, other than medical records and attestation papers where still accessible, which begs the question – why?

Black labour in South Africa was undertaken by the Department of Native Affairs rather than the military so kept their own records. Also, the Prime Minister, Louis Botha, who was head of this department too, had a very paternalistic attitude towards the majority of South Africa's inhabitants. Knowing that

⁵ Gerald Rilling: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0257hvf>

⁶ Myles Osborne, *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba* (2014, Cambridge)

⁷ Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday colonialism in German East Africa* (2014, Ohio)

⁸ Albert Grundlingh, *Black Men in a White Man's War: The Impact of the First World War on South African Blacks* (1982 Witwatersrand); *Fighting their own war* (1987, Johannesburg), *War and Society: Participation and Remembrance: South African Black and Coloured troops in the First World War 1914-1918* (2014, Sun Media)

questions would be asked by family members and being aware of the need to keep black unhappiness out of the public arena to prevent the Nationalist Party from gaining political ground, having detailed information about each labourer would help manage any questions or challenges which arose.

Included in this recent discovery were desertion records. If men were not happy they deserted from all forces. Despite the German commander, Paul von Lettow Vorbeck's claims that his men remained loyal, Michelle Moyd estimates that around a third deserted, including Lettow-Vorbeck's cook. Other evidence to support desertion includes the propaganda pictures of men hanging from trees for deserting and the recorded threats of death to those who were caught. Norman Jewell, a doctor who served with the British forces for most of the East Africa campaign in charge of the 3rd East African Field Ambulance specifically responsible for black soldiers and carriers noted in his official diaries kept at The National Archives, that men who went AWOL (absent without leave) received lashes. It is worth noting that it is only from 1917 that accounts of AWOL and lashings appear in his records. This accords with the introduction of conscription of both black and white in East Africa and the resultant change in fighting tactics.

The publication of Jewell's memoirs including the discovery of his official diary accounts has been an eye-opener. The general perception had been that black carriers were left by the side of the road to die. Jewell's memoir indicates otherwise although there were by no means enough field ambulances or medical services in general as noted by the hard-hitting Pike report. Research being undertaken by a senior academic at Queen Mary's University of London into Commonwealth War Graves practices in Africa suggests that carriers were generally buried in unmarked mass graves unless it could be proven or verified that the individual was a Christian or one of the other major recognised faiths. Only 'religious' men were buried in Commonwealth War Graves. Similarly, where men died on the march, they were buried – if for no other reason than health. Identifying where these burials were, for men of all colour, would be difficult to locate after time – wooden markers disintegrate, stones get moved, locations are mis-recorded in the heat of the moment. Supporting evidence that where possible the dead were dealt with comes from Jewell's comment that they would burn animal carcasses (horses and cattle killed by sleeping sickness) to stop the spread of diseases. This would be done a mile from camp. If you've ever driven past an abattoir, you'll recognise the stench – that of death and decay – often reported in diaries of the campaign.

The East Africa campaign was one of endurance for all – irrespective of race, creed, role, age or gender. I haven't touched on the role of women in the theatre. There is little mention of them found in the literature. However, we know some served as nurses in the base hospitals. The German women, black and white were often camp followers and many undertook farming activities – accounts of white women overseeing or managing up to seven farms. Photos of the East African campaign in particular, show that women were engaged in supplying the forces – such as in the Lake Tanganyika expedition and Norman Jewell writes of Nandi women training as nurses. Children were born on the march and those old enough did their part in helping carry and undertaking whatever tasks needed doing as Michelle Moyd has explained.

The years of war took their toll. Uniforms were scrounged from wherever they could be, men died whilst others survived. Lettow-Vorbeck fought for his men to be paid for their war-time services – something which happened when he died. A white woman, Jane Thame, in Dar es Salaam administered the payments until the last veteran died. The remnants of war – documents, photos, cemeteries and landscape – hold clues to what happened then. We just need to let them 'speak'.

Thank you.