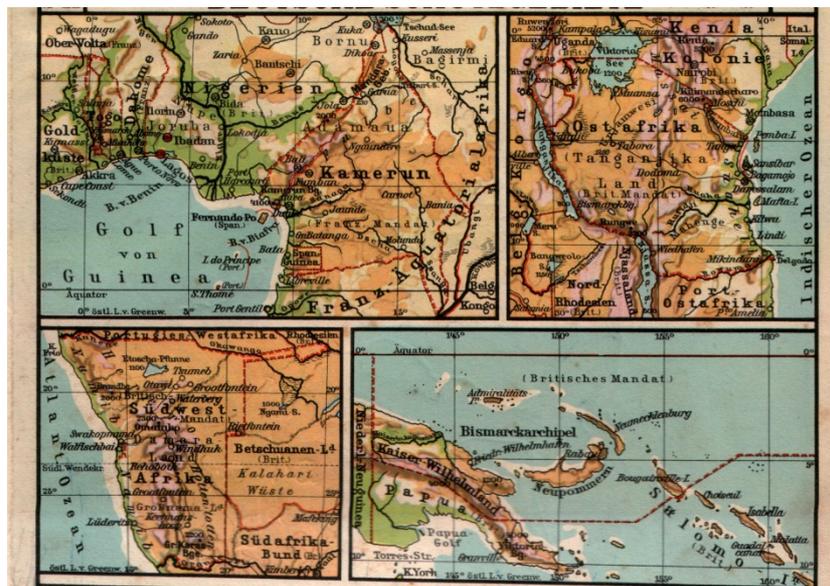


Activity 2 - Germany's African Colonies, 1914-1918

Germany was a relative newcomer to the 'scramble for Africa,' spreading into the few unclaimed parts of the continent via mercantile expansion and purchase of territory. By 1914, their colonial possessions were four: Togo, a thin sliver of land on the Gold Coast; Kamerun, a neglected if extensive territory south of Nigeria struggling with disease and lack of investment; German Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia), a largely desert land with a key deep-water port; and German East Africa, a large and important territory in the fertile African Great Lakes region covering present-day Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda.



German colonies, c. 1900. Clockwise from top left: Togo and Kamerun, German East Africa, Papua New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, and German Southwest Africa

As aforementioned, hostilities between Britain and Germany broke out with the British invasion of Togo, beginning on 12th August and continuing until the capitulation of the colony on the 27th. An act had been signed in 1885 between the imperial powers agreeing on the possibility of the neutrality of the Congo basin in the event of war in Europe, but this was repudiated by Britain, who rightly feared German interdiction of its vital shipping lanes passing Africa. Kamerun was invaded from French Equatorial Africa on 6th August 1914, and by the British on the 25th. Fighting lasted there until 1916, in Southwest Africa until 1915, and in German East Africa until after the Armistice in 1918 - the German forces were by then so isolated that they were not informed of the Armistice until 13th November, two days after the guns fell silent in Europe.

The War in German East Africa: the Kaiser's imperial holdout

The German strategy was one of mobile warfare and surprise attacks against the numerically-superior British and Belgian (that is to say, primarily east African and Congolese) forces. The German strategy was to withdraw into the interior to buy time, and tie up Entente troops which could otherwise be sent to Europe. The fighting in the interior bush was slow and gruelling, and food shortages and disease were constant menaces - this was no modern, industrial war.



The remoteness of the combat areas was illustrated to Admiralty planners when they received intelligence that the German cruiser *Konigsberg*, which was harassing British shipping off the east coast of Africa, was operating out of Salale and was vulnerable to attack. The only problem: nobody at the Admiralty knew where Salale was - it wasn't marked on any charts. The experience and local knowledge of frontiersmen and guides, therefore, was essential.¹ Nowhere was this more the case than German East Africa, where fighting dragged on for four years; unlike in Europe, it generally remained a war of movement, and did not degenerate into immobile trench warfare.

Question 1: How do the conditions of warfare in Africa and the Far East compare with what you know about the First World War in Europe?

In recent years, historians' attention has been diverted away from the agency of individual commanders like Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck and towards the native riflemen who, as the campaigns wore on, bore the brunt of the fighting in the African theatre.² It is still an open question, not only in the study of the First World War, but in the wider field of what has been called 'subaltern studies', as to what the motivations of colonised peoples were to act in support of the colonial power that ruled over them.

In order to understand the war in East Africa, it is important to think about the relationship between the *askari* soldiers and their European officers, and ask why they thought it was important to fight. The British and Germans expected their soldiers to adhere to European standards of military order and duty, but the rank and file observed local traditions of warfare. Prestige and reputation was more important than national honour to the *askari*: when their officers' reputations as hard leaders were undermined – by personal failure, defeats or reversals, degradation of uniforms or scarcity of food in the wilderness – they would lose their authority in the eyes of their native soldiers, and desertions would increase. In East Africa this war was closely associated with family honour – *askari* soldiers brought wives and children with them on campaign, and their prestige was measured by the maintenance of their mobile household of porters and boy servants. Experienced soldiers would 'apprentice' new recruits. Successful officers realised early on that they would have to allow for African martial customs if they were going to stand a chance at victory.

Question 2: Think about other potential reasons why people would volunteer for such a war. What about the complex cultural difficulties involved in organising such a force, especially in wilderness combat conditions?

Michelle Moyd contends that many *askaris* stayed with the German *Schutztruppe* because they saw the potential for increased standing and further patronage after the war. They continued to campaign as long as conditions in the German forces aligned with their own understanding of how warfare should correctly and honourably be executed: "Indeed, it was precisely their own sense of what it meant to be a professional that led them to desert in the hope of improving their conditions, returning to their communities and families wherever they might be, and recovering the elements of respectability that they had lost during the war. In the view of some *askari*, German officers had failed them as patrons. In a time of great privation and risk, some *askari* searched for new patrons, or turned to alternative social networks that could help them survive until new opportunities emerged."³ In this environment, the traditional state-based

¹John Keegan, *The First World War* (London, 1999), p. 12

²Bruce Vandervort, "New Light on the East African Theatre of the Great War: A review essay of English-language sources" in Miller, Stephen M., ed., *Soldiers and Settlers in Africa, 1850-1918* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 294-5

³Michelle Moyd, "We don't want to die for nothing!": *askari* at war in German East Africa, 1914-18" in Das,

explanations for the cause and continuance of the war seem to become subordinated quickly to local issues.

Question 3: What are some of the ways we can understand the First World War, besides a conflict between imperial states? Is there an argument to be made for looking at local factors, and the motivations of ordinary soldiers, and why?



Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-D 0A 0772
Foto: Dobbertin, Walther | 1906/1918

Schutztruppe heliograph operator, German East Africa

The experience of British *askaris*, considering the aforementioned attitudes of their German counterparts, reveals a similar mindset. British colonial troops in Africa, like those in India, were recruited based on martial races theory, and the assumptions employed by recruiters could affect entire communities. Two such groups in the King's African Rifles were the Kamba and the Yao. The reasons for the singling out of these groups were manifold and illustrative of British colonial rule, though none of them had anything especially to do with imagined martial qualities. According to Timothy Parsons, race stereotyping grew out of the administrative necessities of the British policy of indirect rule in Africa, which mobilised an imperfect understanding of tribe, class and caste to try and make sense of huge countries with few if any administrators on the ground.⁴

Question 4: If you would like to read more about the progress of the First World War in Africa, you can find extracts of Hew Strachan's *The First World War in Africa* at the following link. Consider the complexities outlined above as you read. What are the possible reasons that Africa does not feature prominently in the Western European narrative of the war?

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?isbn=0199257280>

Santanu, ed., *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 102-3

⁴Timothy H. Parsons, "Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen": The evolution of the Kamba as a martial race, 1890-1970", *Ethnohistory* 46:4 (1999), p. 672



Examples of martial race groups in East Africa

The Yao people of Nyasaland (Malawi) might have been characterised as a martial race partially because they happened to live near recruiting centres, though this was not the whole story.⁵ From the point of view of the soldiers themselves, there were costs and consequences about identifying with the imperial power: "In early days, soldiers were often despised as tools of an oppressive administration and even their own relatives might treat them as outcasts. On the other hand, as henchman of a conquering power, they also demanded fearful respect."⁶ Additionally, the experience of military service allowed for travel and cross-cultural encounters which would otherwise have been unavailable. For example, African regiments in their early days used Indian non-commissioned officers and trainers, and were deployed all over the vast African continent.

'Martial races' tended to be identified in areas where colonial expansion had destroyed the traditional economy; other 'warlike' people, such as the Maasai and Kikuyu, did not volunteer for service as they retained more lucrative alternatives. For the Kamba, there were simply few other options for making a living, and, over time, military service became part of their cultural identity. Cynthia Enloe calls this the 'Gurkha syndrome', and according to Timothy Parsons, it bears out for the Kamba: "Most Kamba *askaris*... believed that their status as a martial race enhanced their status in colonial society, and they expected specific considerations from the colonial government in return for their service."⁷ As the war dragged on, the ostensibly 'volunteer' army in East Africa was supplemented by the effective conscription of up to three quarters of eligible Kamba men. Thus, the entire community was deeply affected by the war.⁸

In the case of the Yao, their Muslim faith also drew administrators to recognise their 'martial' value: "There was a tendency among officers to regard Islam as a religion which taught 'discipline' and 'civilised manners' to pagans and thus produced better soldiers. Muslims were preferred even to Christians, who were often dismissed as 'insolent' and 'undisciplined'.⁹ Unlike in India, martial races theory in Africa largely survived into the interwar period, and was enunciated by the British - as well as in some cases being appropriated by African communities - until the 1950s and '60s.

Question 5: In what other possible ways could the First World War have had an effect in Africa? Even though the African campaigns were peripheral to the defeat of the German Empire, do you think that necessarily makes them unimportant in twentieth-century history?

The opinions of officers toward their men were largely voiced in the language and worldview of colonialism, and display a mixture of paternalism, disdain for their perceived backwardness, and respect for their fighting spirit. Captain Angus Buchanan, who joined a volunteer company of gentlemen from across the Empire bound for East Africa in 1914, characterised the African soldiers he encountered thus:

"Such fighting peoples as the Wahamba [sic], Diruma and Nandi, were most generally recruited from the coast areas; they were the most intelligent and adaptable natives in our service. Many of them made splendid Askaris, while as

⁵Risto Marjomaa, "The Martial Spirit: Yao soldiers in British service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939", *The Journal of African History* 44:3 (2003), p. 420

⁶Ibid., pp. 422-3

⁷Parsons, "Wakamba Warriors", pp.674-5

⁸Ibid., p. 677

⁹Marjomaa, "The Martial Spirit", p. 426



trained porters, for machine-guns, signalling sections, and stretcher-bearers, they were extremely useful, and many thousands were utilised for such work. Those natives were extraordinarily keen on their drills... They were simple, good-natured people, those blacks, and very easy to deal with if one took the trouble to understand them and their language, and ruled with a strong yet considerate hand. But they were unfortunate, and at a loss, when they came under the charge of strangers who had not had opportunity to understand them or their language-- which often occurred, owing to loss of experienced men through sickness or casualties... the Kikuyus from the Nairobi area, were used almost exclusively for carriers and camp cleaners, and were perhaps less intelligent than the average Swahili native, and of lower type. Nevertheless, some of them... come very close to the standard of the good Swahili. The warlike nomad Masai... held aloof from warfare.¹⁰

Here, once again, we see the uncritical way in which most European officers echoed martial race rhetoric, even in the face of contradictory experience. The motivations of the *askaris* largely remained a mystery to colonial officers, who merely accepted the ready availability of soldiers during the war. They did, however, take the increasing desertion of *askaris* from the German ranks toward the end of the campaign, not unreasonably, as a sign that the *Schutztruppe* was near defeat. Ultimately it was the capitulation of the government in Berlin, not the soldiers of German East Africa - who had spent most of 1918 in headlong retreat - which ended the war in the colonies. The German officers were permitted to march out of the wilderness carrying their swords, and the *askaris* were dismissed to their homes, soon to bear witness to life under a new, victorious imperial power - the British Empire.

As well as the colonial and European soldiery, the Indian Army served on active duty for the entirety of the campaign in German East Africa, as well as in many other places, including their aforementioned activity in the Middle Eastern theatre, at Tsingtao and at the Western Front. This serves once again to underline the monumental contribution of India to the imperial war effort - possibly the single most convincing argument for the importance of the First World War beyond the narrow confines of Western Europe.

Question 6: Reading the characterisations of the *askaris*' motivations given above by Michelle Moyd, Timothy Parsons and Captain Buchanan, do you consider that European officers take the loyalty of colonial soldiers for granted? Why might this be the case?

¹⁰Captain Angus Buchanan, MC, *Three Years of War in East Africa* (London, 1919), pp. 200-202