

The East Africa Campaign



Introduction

The longest battle of the First World War anywhere in the world was the East Africa Campaign. The German colony of German East Africa was located along the central East African coast in what is now Tanzania, reaching as far west as today's Rwanda and Burundi. The British, Portuguese, and Belgians controlled the territories surrounding German East Africa, but the majority of the people involved in the campaign were African soldiers and the carriers who transported supplies. They came from all over eastern, central, and southern Africa, and even included west Africans from Nigeria and the Gold Coast Colony. The campaign also drew in combatants from Germany, Great Britain, India, and South Africa.

German and British colonial rule was relatively new to the region, with their respective official east African colonies not in place until after the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885: German East Africa was declared in 1885, and British East Africa in 1895. Between 1895 and 1901 the British built a railroad

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from the coast inland to Uganda. The railroad stretched from Mombasa to Kisumu and had an enormous impact on labor and white settlement. Africans were forced to serve as laborers on the railroad, while white settlers began to come to the area north of present-day Nairobi. In their eagerness to establish ranches or cash crop plantations of coffee and tea, these settlers displaced many Africans.

The Germans in German East Africa also built a railroad into the interior, making use of forced labor. They established sisal plantations and also looked to grow coffee. Sisal is used to make rope, which is vital for shipbuilding. It was therefore important to the German empire's geopolitical aspirations for a navy strong enough and big enough to rival the British navy.

Subjects and Citizens in French Senegal

How did people in East Africa experience the outbreak of war? Let's look at a story that points to just one of many ways the First World War affected Africans swept up in the East Africa Campaign:

I made two trips in the interior, trading. On my second trip...I heard a rumour that there was war between the British and the Germans. Natives were talking about it. It was 2nd of August, 1914. On my arrival I hurried to [the] U.M.C.A. Station at Magila and reported the matter to my friend Mr. Russell. He did not believe me and said it was impossible for the British and Germans to fight because they were friends and relations. I replied that I thought there was something in the rumour.

—“The Story of Martin Kayamba Mdumi, M.B.E., of the Bondei Tribe,” written by Himself, in *Ten Africans*, ed. Margery Perham (Northwestern University Press, 1936), 185–89.

Key Terms:

East Africa Campaign

German and British East Africa

Askari

Schutztruppe

King's African Rifles

Battle of Tanga, 1914

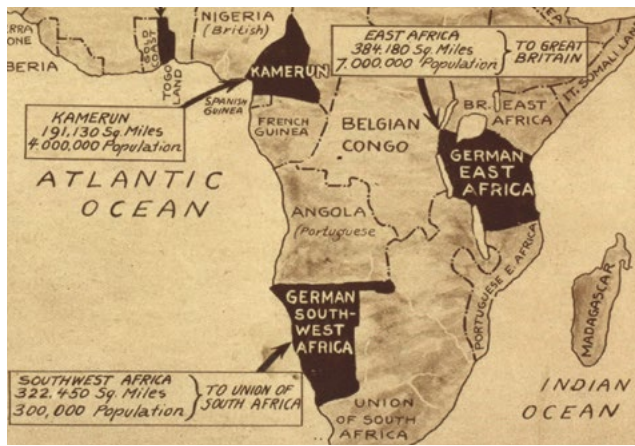
John Chilembwe and the Chilembwe Uprising

Nyasaland

Carriers
(*watengatenga*)

Article 22 of the Treaty of Versailles

Mandates



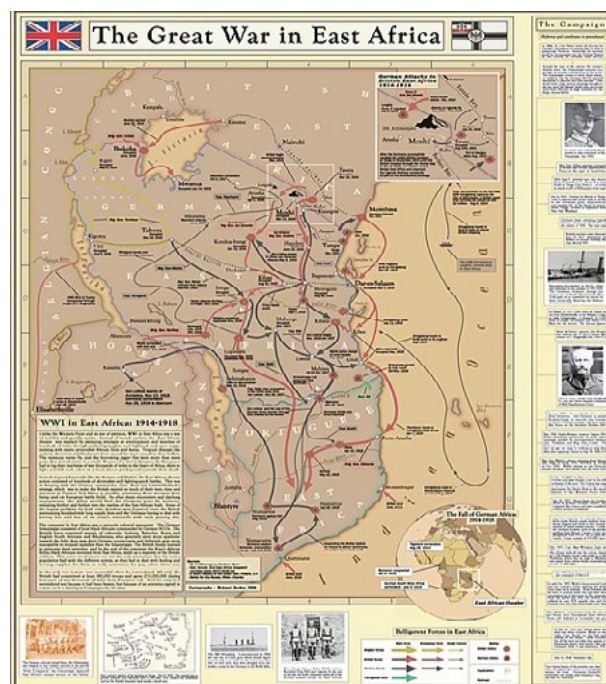
Map of Africa, showing colonial holdings

colonies were uncontroversial before the war. However, once the war had broken out, English missionaries and the Africans in their orbit located in a German-run colony were considered enemies.

Mdumi goes on to say that he attempted, just after the outbreak of war, to travel to see his father in Mombasa, a British-ruled city just to the north; it proved impossible. This was because German troops were already in control of Tanga, the German-controlled town at the border not far from Mombasa. His missionary friend Mr. Russell was wrong. The English and the Germans were indeed at war, even here in central Africa, far from the trenches of the Western Front in Belgium and France. The fact that there were British missionaries in German-controlled territory and vice versa was now a serious concern. And it affected more than just the white missionaries. As an African in the orbit of an English mission inside of a German colony, Mdumi and others like him were seen as enemies and potential British spies; many were interned as prisoners of war in brutal conditions. Mdumi himself ended up in German-run prison camps for British sympathizers. He survived, but witnessed many atrocities. There were also German missions in British East Africa, where the German missionaries and the African Christians affiliated with them also were interned in prison camps.

During the time of conquest and in the first years afterward, Africans resisted German and British attempts to take over land, levy taxes, and conscript labor for their railroads and other major development projects. To crush African resistance and enforce colonial tax and labor laws, the colonizing powers used white officers who recruited and trained African men to join the colonial police and armed forces. Such African police and soldiers were known as *askari*, a word meaning “soldier” in Kiswahili, Somali, Arabic, and other languages.

The author of this quote is Martin Kayamba Mdumi, an African Christian and teacher at a school on a mission station run by the Universities Mission of Central Africa (UMCA). Mdumi was based at Magila Mission, a UMCA mission in northeastern German East Africa. But the UMCA was a British Protestant missionary society. British missionaries living in German colonies, and German missionaries operating in British



Map of the East Africa Campaign in World War I



Members of the British King's African Rifles

The German military forces in East Africa were known as the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika*, or *Schutztruppe* (“Protection Force”) for short. During the First World War the *Schutztruppe* was led by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. The *askari* who fought with the *Schutztruppe* were recruited from all over eastern Africa. *Askari* of the *Schutztruppe* were relatively well paid; they were able to establish prosperous homesteads and become men of substance. The *Schutztruppe* had been used to enforce German power in East Africa since the 1880s. Most recently, they had helped to crush an anti-colonial rebellion in 1905–1908 known as the Maji-Maji war. On the eve of war in August 1914, the *Schutztruppe* had 2,542 African *askari* and 218 Europeans.

The *askari* in the service of the British in Central Africa were members of the King's African Rifles (KAR). The KAR was far less well-prepared and much fewer in number than the *Schutztruppe* at the outbreak of the First World War.

Early in 1914, before the war had even begun, German General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck reckoned that, *if* a world war should begin, “we East Africans should not remain idle spectators, but should take a hand if there should be even a trace of a prospect of relieving the pressure in Europe.” Note here how Lettow-Vorbeck identified himself as an “East African,” even though he had only arrived there in January of 1914. Lettow-Vorbeck wanted to divert soldiers and resources away from the European conflict, in the hope that by forcing the British to respond to war in East Africa, it would help the German war effort in Europe. Lettow-Vorbeck's view prevailed over that of the German colonial governor, Heinrich Schnee, who felt that the African colonies should stay neutral during the war in Europe. Schnee was also counting on the terms of the Berlin Agreement to hold: that in the case of a European war, the colonies in Africa would stay neutral.



Schutztruppe askari displaying the German flag in East Africa

The Germans and the British nonetheless prepared for battle in East Africa. In August and September of 1914, Germans, British, and Belgians made moves to attack enemy wireless stations or secure control of the great lakes in central Africa. The first major engagement began with the Battle of Tanga on November 4, 1914. The British initially thought that the conflict in East Africa should be taken on by the British imperial forces of India. This view was informed by how much the British valued the trade connection between East Africa and the British holdings in India, and the sea routes that bound them. The British War Office therefore sent the British Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) to battle the Germans in East Africa.

The IEF was 4,000 strong, led by a British general and officers with Indian rank-and-file soldiers. The plan was to attack at the port of Tanga, approaching by sea in boats that had launched in India. Given that the German forces, including fewer than 2,000 *askari*, were so much smaller in number, the British assumed that the German-led African troops would be easy to defeat. However, the attack on Tanga did not go as planned. The Indian soldiers had been kept onboard ships for several extra weeks and by the time they landed were exhausted, hungry, and many had become ill. The *Schutztruppe* made good use of their local knowledge of the setting as well as machine guns, and defeated the IEF quickly. Tanga was a humiliating failure for the British.

For the time being, the British withdrew, though the war would continue. Thereafter, fighters on this front would also include white British officers, African soldiers known as the King's African Rifles, white South African regiments, Belgian forces from the Congo, and regiments from Rhodesia, Nigeria, and the Gold Coast Colony. At times, Indian regiments too would return to the region. In July 1915, German Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) surrendered to the British-allied forces, which also freed up more military personnel from South Africa to be sent to the campaign in East Africa.

Responses to Empire and War: The Chilembwe Uprising

Even in the early months of the war, the costs of the conflict combined with existing frustrations with imperial rule spurred resistance movements in East Africa. Just five months after the outbreak of the war, in January 1915, a man named John Chilembwe led an armed uprising against the British colonial regime in Nyasaland (modern-day Malawi).



Depiction of the Battle of Tanga, 1914

As a young man, Chilembwe had traveled to the United States in 1897 to study at a missionary school in Virginia, where his experiences meeting and studying with African Americans sharpened his views about colonialism as well as racial and social injustice. With the help of the African-American National Baptist Convention, Chilembwe returned to Nyasaland in 1900, where he established the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) in a town in the Shire Highlands. After British rule began in 1891, settlers had established plantations in that region, and by the late 1890s, colonial taxes and a labor tax (called *thangata*) led many indigenous people, including refugees fleeing forced labor in Mozambique, to seek employment on the plantations, where they faced discrimination and violence.



Photograph of John Chilembwe, 1914



British King's African Rifles marching during the First World War

Chilembwe's PIM church combined evangelism with a strong commitment to social and economic justice, as well as African advancement and modernization. In 1910, the church had 800 members. Chilembwe had also established a network of independent Black African schools in the area. A symbol of hope to many, plantation owners saw the church as a threat to European hegemony, and in 1913 employees of a local estate burned down one of the PIM's churches.

Increasingly critical of British colonialism, Chilembwe was horrified by the outbreak of World War I and the loss of life inflicted on Africans. In September 1914, German-led askari forces attacked Nyasaland from Tanganyika in the Battle of Karonga. While British forces were able to repel the invasion, they lost 60 men, 49 of whom were African. In November, the month of the disastrous Battle of Tanga, Chilembwe penned a letter to the local paper, *The Nyasaland Times*, opposing African recruitment into a war unrelated to African interests. Government officials suppressed the issue of the paper the letter was printed in and prepared to take action against him.

In January 1915, Chilembwe revealed a plan for an insurrection to his followers. Members involved in the uprising attacked several sites, including the local Magomero estate, whose managers were well-known for their violent treatment of workers. During the attack, fighters killed several of the managers. They were also able to seize five rifles and ammunition from the African Lakes' Company, though four of the fighters were captured in the attack. Smaller attacks also occurred in Zomba (the colonial capital) and in Ncheu and Mlanje. However, as news of the uprising spread, plans for parallel insurgencies failed to materialize and KAR forces were mobilized to the region. Within a matter of days, the uprising was ended. Chilembwe and his brother Morris fled, but on February 3 they were spotted by an *askari* patrol and killed.



Captured Chilembwe fighters, sentenced to death, 1915

Though the uprising failed to gain sufficient local support, it did generate fear among colonial administrators, who held summary trials, imprisoned 300 fighters, and executed around 36 of the leading revolutionaries. Local officials also enacted reprisals against communities in the region, and placed restrictions on weapons, public gatherings, and literature deemed subversive.

A subsequent colonial Commission Inquiry held June–July 1915 concluded that the revolt had been caused by the mismanagement of local plantations. Still, many restrictions imposed on the region remained in place until at least 1919, and the commission's recommended reforms did not result in far reaching changes.

Local views on the Chilembwe uprising at the time were mixed. While some disillusioned villagers in the region agreed that the episode amounted to a quarrel with local estates, others saw hope in Chilembwe's actions, despite its immediate failure. The uprising had emerged in the context of war and in response to localized abuses of the colonial system. Chilembwe had preached equality for Africans and anti-colonialism. As the East Africa campaign dragged on and tens of thousands more men were recruited into the military and carriers, the grievances against empire and the war only continued to fester and deepen.

African Combatants and Carriers

He who accepts European [wage] employment pawns himself, just as he who joins the army plunges himself into trouble.

—A Yoruba-language (Nigeria) song about World War I-era military service, as cited in John Barrett, "The Rank and File of the Colonial Army in Nigeria, 1914–1918," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 15, no. 1 (1977), 110, fn 3.

After the defeat at Tanga in November 1914, described above, the East Africa campaign largely paused until a major new offensive began in 1916. Meanwhile, as British colonial officials dealt with the aftermath of the Chilembwe uprising, they also launched a massive effort to recruit soldiers and carriers for the East African Campaign. After British-allied South African forces conquered German Southwest Africa in 1915, South Africa could also be pulled into the East Africa campaign, and South African General Jan Smuts became the commander for the British side. By March 1916, there were a total of some 73,330 combatants under Smuts, comprised of:

- 27,575 South African and British troops
- 14,300 Indian troops
- 6,875 KAR
- Force Publique: 580 Europeans and 14,000 Africans



German askari playing cards, c. 1914-18

Some Africans were willing enough to join the King's African Rifles or the carrier corps, since the earnings they had as laborers on the large estates run by Europeans were so low. As recalled by a Malawian veteran of the King's African Rifles named Fulotiya Nsanama: "I was just willing to join the K. A. R. because on the estate they were paying us only 3s. When I heard that there was war in Nairobi,



German East African carriers rest at camp during the campaign

and the KAR was employing men for higher [1 pound, 1 schilling, and 1 penny] a month, I decided to enlist and did not care of death in the war." Others were less desperate for funds and not remotely interested in joining the war. In areas where volunteers were not to be had, the colonial officials pressured chiefs to produce men for the war effort.

For every man, Black or white, German or British, who held a gun, a number of carriers was needed. So, in addition to the roughly 73,000 fighters under Smuts' command, tens of thousands of men also served as carriers, also known as porters or as the *tenga-tenga*. There were few roads suitable for motor vehicles. There was only a limited number of miles of railroad. The roads that did exist were so muddy in the rainy season that it was impossible for animals to pull wagons. In certain regions livestock were vulnerable to tsetse flies and unsuitable for that reason as well. Thus, much of the war material had to be carried by people on foot. White officers might require as many as six carriers, while African fighters might require three.



Carriers in Nyasaland, watched by British soldiers about to trek through a swamp

While the British needed more carriers than the Germans, both sides relied on humans to carry the food, munitions, and other supplies of war. Lettow-Vorbeck and the *Schutztruppe* were a smaller force that used more of a guerrilla approach to the campaign, drawing heavily from the local people for food and supplies as much as they could. This approach was devastating to the local areas wherever they went, leaving depleted herds and famine in their wake. Areas where the British were especially coercive in recruitment for the carrier corps also had a negative impact on food supply, since laborers crucial for local care of herds and harvesting of crops were taken away as carriers or fighters with the KAR.

African porters had been central to the thriving of intricate trade networks crossing back and forth across Central Africa's Great Lakes and to the Pacific coast long before the First World War. In that sense, the use of carriers for the war was a familiar labor regime for the Africans who joined the Carrier Corps or who portered for the German forces. Hundreds of thousands of carriers supported this campaign, recruited (mostly forcibly recruited), from all over western, southern, central, and eastern Africa.

The carriers' testimonies called up pictures of reeking black mud, blinding red dust, and long columns of exhausted and hungry men, carrying loads that were heavier than the 60-pound limit. They dealt with illness from dysentery, malaria, and, later in the war, influenza. They were under pressure to cook their food quickly at the end of a long march, and were issued inferior quality grain. Their colonial commanders operated under false beliefs about Africans' immunity to disease or bad water. Sometimes men had to use water that had been kept in the same containers that cleared human waste. Between the undercooked and moldy grain and the impure water, it is no surprise that dysentery was the top killer of carriers on the East Africa campaign. In addition, the caloric allotment per day for carriers was 1,000 calories less than for soldiers. Unsurprisingly, replacing carriers who died presented a constant challenge for the commanders.

The Impacts of the East Africa Campaign and the End of the War in Africa

While the East Africa campaign started in August 1914 along with the start of the war in Europe, it only ended *after* the end of the war in Europe, on November 25, 1918. The warring armies had treated the African territories through which they moved as places from which to supply their columns. The labor shortages, loss of livestock and food crops, destroyed fields and famine which ensued and took the lives of thousands more were simply incidental.

In early 1916, the war in East Africa turned in the Allies favor as the British launched a major offensive. The German *Schutztruppe* chose to engage in continuous retreat, but to never surrender. By the time they were finally forced to accept that the war in Europe had ended with an Allied victory, they had covered some 3,000 miles, across German East Africa, Portuguese East Africa, and Northern Rhodesia, and were on the verge of re-entering German territory.

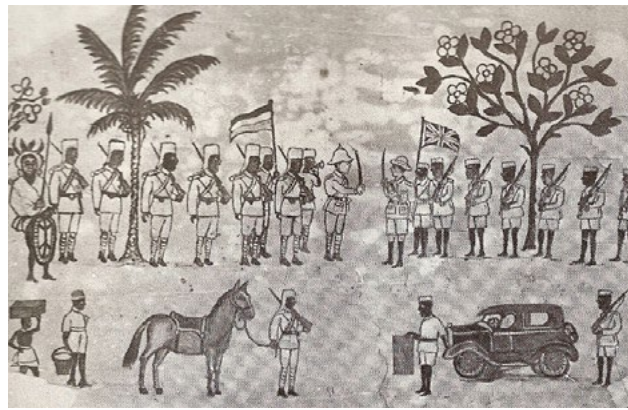
Along the way, many *askari* had died, or decided to leave and disappeared off the campaign trail. But at the end there were still over 1,000 *askari* with Lettow-Vorbeck and the German officers of the *Schutztruppe*. Many had come down with the influenza that was spreading throughout the world, and were marching sick. Carriers were also in the column, as well as family members—wives and children. A distinctive element of the *askari* way of war was that they traveled with family, unlike the KAR. At the war's end, the British immediately took the *askari* into custody as prisoners of war, as well as the German officers. The *askari* were held in camps for some time, waiting for transport back to where they had started. During this period too, many became ill or died from the spread of influenza and dysentery due to poor conditions in the camp.



Mounted Askari (above); Captured German Askari, late 1917 (below)



When the war finally did end, Europeans began to hash out post-war peace settlements. The Treaty of Versailles, which concluded the Allies' war against Germany, was issued in 1919. In addition to addressing concerns in Europe, the treaty also aimed to settle the matter of Germany's colonial holdings, and included this statement regarding the colonies formerly ruled by Germany:



African artist's drawing depicting Lettow- Vorbeck surrendering his forces to the British at Abercon (present-day Mbala) in Northern Rhodesia, November 1918

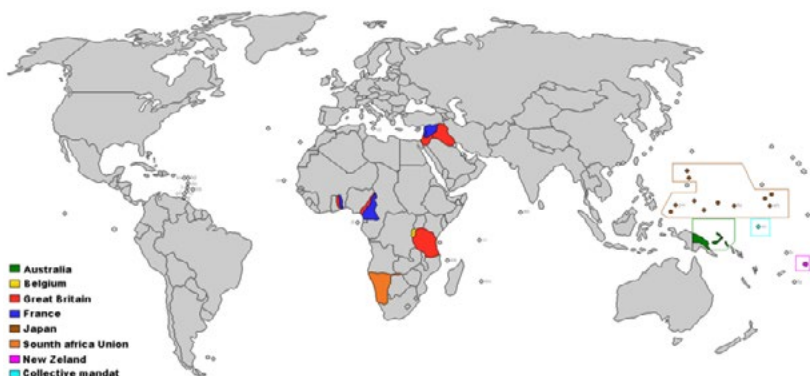
To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant. The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.

–Article 22, “The Covenant of the League of Nations,” *The Versailles Treaty*, June 28, 1919.

The writers of the peace terms viewed Africans as unable “to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world.” And yet, over one million Africans from the farthest corners of western, southern, and central Africa had been pulled into the war. And while many had died, many had endured the strenuous conditions of this most modern of wars.

Nevertheless, according to the terms of the peace settlement, German East Africa was transformed into three separate “Mandates” under the “tutelage” (guidance/control) of European powers. Tanganyika Territory came under British control, while Ruanda and Urundi (today’s Rwanda and Burundi) went to Belgium. In effect, the British and the Belgians would treat these territories as colonies in the

years between the first and second world wars.



Global map of “mandates,” created by the League of Nations, 1919

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Image Citations

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Map of Africa in 1919 (Image 495 of The War of the Nations: Portfolio in Rotogravue Etchings: Compiled from the Mid-week Pictorial, New York, 1919), Library of Congress, Public Domain, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/collgdc.gc000037/?sp=495&q=map+of+africa+191>
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The Original 3rd Battalion of the KAR, formed in 1902, Kenya, OGL v1.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_National_Archives_UK_-_CO_1069-144-3.jpg
Accomplices of Rev John Chilembwe in the uprising of 1915, sentenced to death, National Archives of Malawi, CC-BY-SA 4.0, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chilembwe_supporters_being_led_to_be_executed_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chilembwe_supporters_being_led_to_be_executed_(cropped).jpg)

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East Africa, Askari playing cards, c. 1914- 1918, photograph by Walther Dobbertin, German Federal Archives, Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA3104, CC-BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_105-DOA3104,_Deutsch-Ostafrika,_Askari_beim_Kartenspiel.jpg

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General Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck surrendering his forces to the British at Abercon, Northern Rhodesia, November 1918, by an anonymous African Artist, National Museum of Tanzania, Public Domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lettow%27s_surrender.jpg
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