

# Primary Source: *John Chilembwe,* *“Letter to The Nyasaland Times,”* *November 1914\**

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## Introduction

In early 1915, the Reverend John Chilembwe led a brief but violent uprising in the British colony of Nyasaland (modern-day Malawi). Chilembwe had studied in the United States and returned to Nyasaland in 1900, where he had established the Providence Industrial Mission and a series of independent schools in the Shire Highlands - an area populated with white-owned plantations where African workers experienced discrimination and violence. An advocate of African advancement and social and racial equality, Chilembwe combined evangelicalism with a strong anti-colonial view.

In the months before the uprising, Chilembwe had expressed his frustration with the outbreak of World War I and the loss of African life in the East Africa Campaign. In November 1914, he wrote the following letter to The Nyasaland Times, which was suppressed by colonial officials. In it, he critiques African recruitment into the military and carriers for a war unrelated to African interests, by a government that denied their participation and rights.

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\* Source: “Chapter 21: The Voice of African Natives in the Present War - John Chilembwe,” *Christianity in Malawi: A Sourcebook*, Ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2020, 246-249.



## PRIMARY SOURCE

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN CHILEMBWE

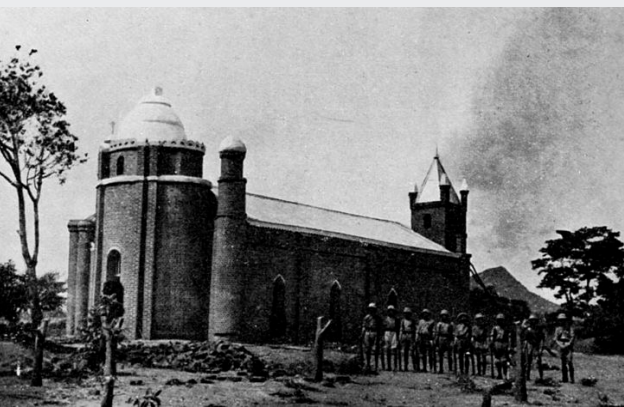


*Local residents of Nyasaland, 1911*

***John Chilembwe,  
“Letter to The  
Nyasaland Times,”  
November 1914***



***John Chilembwe, 1914 (above);  
and a view of the Providence  
Industrial Mission shortly after  
being captured by government  
troops and before its demolition,  
1915 (below)***



We understand that we have been invited to shed our innocent blood in this world's war which is now in progress throughout the wide world.

On the commencement of the war we understood that it was said indirectly that Africa had nothing to do with the civilised war. But now we find that the poor African has already been plunged into the great war.

A number of our people have already shed their blood, while some are crippled for life. And an open declaration has been issued. A number of Police are marching in various villages persuading well built natives to join the war. The masses of our people are ready to put on uniforms ignorant of what they have to face or why they have to face it.

We ask the Honourable government of our country which is known as Nyasaland, Will there be any good prospects for the natives after the end of the war? Shall we be recognised as anybody in the best interests of civilisation and Christianity after the great struggle is ended?

Because we are imposed upon more than any other nationality under the sun. Any true gentleman who will read this without the eye of prejudice will agree and recognise the fact that the natives have been loyal since the commencement of this Government, and that in all the departments of Nyasaland their welfare has been incomplete without us. And no time have we ever been known to betray any trust, national or otherwise, confided to us. Everybody knows that the natives have been loyal to all Nyasaland interests and Nyasaland institutions.



For our part we have never allowed the Nyasaland flag to touch the ground, while honour and credit have often gone to others. We have unreservedly stepped to the firing line in every conflict and played a patriot's part with the Spirit of true gallantry. But in time of peace the Government failed to help the underdog. In time of peace everything for Europeans only. And instead of honour we suffer humiliation with names contemptible. But in time of war it has been found that we are needed to share hardships and shed our blood in equality. It is true that we have no voice in this Government. It is even true that there is a spot of our blood in the cross of the Nyasaland Government.

But regarding this world-wide war, we understand that this was not a royal war, nor a government war, nor a war of gain for any description; it is a war of free nations against a devilish system of imperial domination and national spoliation.

If this were a war as above mentioned such as war for honour, Government, gain of riches, etc., we would have been boldly told: Let the rich men, bankers, titled men, storekeepers, farmers and landlords go to war and get shot. Instead the poor Africans who have nothing to own in this present world, who in death, leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire distress are invited to die for a cause which is not theirs. It is too late now to talk of what might or might not have been. Whatsoever be the reasons why we are invited to join in the war, the fact remains, we are invited to die for Nyasaland. We leave all for the consideration of the Government, we hope in the Mercy of Almighty God, that some day things will turn out well and that Government will recognise our indispensability, and that justice will prevail.

John Chilembwe

In behalf of his countrymen



**Postcard promoting Nyasaland plantations (above); Askari in combat during the East Africa Campaign (below)**



**View of Zomba Plateau, Malawi (formerly Nyasaland)**



# Image Citations:

## Page 1:

Nyasaland Protectorate, Revised and drawn in the Lands Office, Blantyre, 1935, British Library, OGL v1.0,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Nyasaland\\_Protectorate.\\_Revised\\_and\\_drawn\\_in\\_the\\_Lands\\_Office,\\_Blantyre.\\_Revision\\_of\\_1933\\_-\\_Additions\\_of\\_1935%27\\_\(WOMAT-ADD-76\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Nyasaland_Protectorate._Revised_and_drawn_in_the_Lands_Office,_Blantyre._Revision_of_1933_-_Additions_of_1935%27_(WOMAT-ADD-76).jpg)

## Page 2:

Native residents of Nyasaland, arriving to market, 1911, Wellcome Images, CC-BY-SA 4.0,  
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View of the church of the Providence Industrial Mission in Mbombwe, Nyasaland, shortly after its capture by government troops, 1915, Public Domain,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Providence\\_Industrial\\_Mission\\_before\\_demolition.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Providence_Industrial_Mission_before_demolition.jpg)

## Page 3:

'Tobacco Plantation in Nyasaland,' artwork by Frank C. Papé produced for the Empire Marketing Board, 1928, The National Archives, UK, CC-BY-SA 3.0,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_National\\_Archives\\_UK\\_-\\_Tobacco\\_Plantation\\_in\\_Nyasaland.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_National_Archives_UK_-_Tobacco_Plantation_in_Nyasaland.jpg)  
German East Africa, Askari in Combat, c. 1914-1918, photograph by Walther Dobbertin, German Federal Archives, Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA7225, CC-BY-SA 3.0,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_105-DOA7225,\\_Deutsch-Ostafrika,\\_Askari\\_im\\_Kampf.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_105-DOA7225,_Deutsch-Ostafrika,_Askari_im_Kampf.jpg)  
View of Zomba Plateau, northwest of Zomba, Malawi, 2008, Public Domain,  
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