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Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Africa)

By [Christian Koller](#)

All belligerent colonial powers enlisted Africans for fighting, and as carriers and war workers in African, European and Middle Eastern theatres of war. Despite the fact that universal compulsory military service did not apply to African subjects, a considerable share of the more than two million men recruited did not enlist voluntarily. Recruitment thus faced countless forms of opposition, including bribery, malingering and self-mutilation as well as hiding or flight to other territories. Many recruits deserted as soon as the opportunity arose. Last but not least, a considerable number of the many armed revolts in wartime Africa against colonial rule can be linked to forced recruitment.

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Introduction

European colonial powers recruited hundreds of thousands of Africans for war service as soldiers, [carriers](#) or war workers. They were deployed in all African [theatres of war](#) as well as in Europe and the [Middle East](#). This article considers the ways these young men were recruited, their attitudes

towards service for their colonial masters, and organised [resistance](#) against war service in several parts of Africa.

African Recruitment

It is difficult to establish the exact number of Africans mobilised for the war effort of the colonial powers, yet figures for individual theatres of war suggest that more than two million Africans saw deployment on African, European, and Middle Eastern battlefields. German troops in Africa (the so-called "[Schutztruppen](#)") overwhelmingly consisted of African soldiers. Their numbers were relatively low: 1,200 in Togo, 3,200 in Cameroon, 5,000 in Namibia, and 14,000 [Askari](#) as well as 2-3,000 irregulars in [East Africa](#). More impressive are the figures for African carriers serving in the German colonial armies: 11,000 in Cameroon and even 200,000 in East Africa.

In all African theatres of war, more African soldiers served in the Entente armies than in the German "[Schutztruppen](#)". In Togo, the overwhelming majority of the 25,000 French and British troops were Africans. The same is true for the 30,000 French and British troops deployed in Cameroon. [South African troops](#) attacking the German colony in Namibia were overwhelmingly composed of settlers of European extraction, but they included Africans in non-combatant roles as well. Entente forces in East Africa totalled 240,000 soldiers from Europe, India, and Africa. At the outbreak of the war, native units in the British East African colonies were as small as their German counterparts: the "[King's African Rifles](#)" in Kenya, Uganda and Nyasaland mustered only 2,300 [Askari](#), and in Northern Rhodesia 800 Africans served as militarized police. Until the end of the war, the strength of the "King's African Rifles" would increase to 33,000 soldiers; and the British also deployed about 25,000 soldiers of their "West African Frontier Force" in the East African theatre of war. Again, the number of carriers in this theatre, some 750,000, massively exceeded that of combatants. Altogether, the British recruited no fewer than 930,000 carriers for deployment in the different African theatres of war, with recruitment extending to fourteen different territories (East African Protectorate, Uganda, German East Africa, Portuguese East Africa, Zanzibar and Mafia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Seychelles, Gambia, Gold Coast, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa).^[1] In Nyasaland, for instance, approximately 30 percent of the adult male population was recruited for military labour.^[2] The Belgians deployed 15,000 African soldiers of their Congolese "[Force Publique](#)," as well as 260,000 carriers. Four thousand African soldiers from Mozambique saw deployment in the Portuguese forces, whilst the number of carriers used by the Portuguese is unknown.

As for deployment overseas, the overwhelming majority of Africans served in the French army. African units deployed in Europe included 135,000 West Africans, at least 134,000 Algerian Arabs, and contingents from Tunisia (60,000 men), Morocco (37,000 men), Madagascar (34,000 men), and the Somali coast (2,000 men).^[3] Furthermore, the French also recruited a considerable number of war workers for metropolitan deployment: 76,000 in Algeria, 35,000 in Morocco, 18,000 in Tunisia, and 6,000 in Madagascar.^[4] On the other hand, a suggestion made by Prime Minister [Georges Clemenceau](#) (1841-1929) in 1918 to hire up to 200,000 Ethiopian mercenaries was not

pursued.^[5] Italy tried to deploy African troops in Europe as well, which resulted in a disaster: in 1915, some 2,700 soldiers from Libya were shipped to Sicily. However, they did not enter the front lines because many died from pneumonia immediately after their arrival, and so the survivors were shipped home again.^[6] The Belgian government repeatedly discussed shipping in several thousand soldiers from the Congo, yet these ideas would never materialise due to both the need to keep a strong army force in Congo against attacks from German East Africa and fears that exposing Africans to warfare in Europe would weaken colonial control. Nevertheless, a small number of Congolese present in Europe managed to enlist in the metropolitan Belgian army and served on the Western Front.^[7]

The British were reluctant to deploy African troops in Europe. Although the British forces in the African theatres of war and the Middle Eastern campaigns included large numbers of African soldiers, a campaign for a “million-strong black army” following the French example, backed by several officers and politicians with colonial backgrounds, was unsuccessful. Logistical issues, coupled with racist prejudices and opposition from colonial authorities, resulted in the renunciation of the use of African troops on European battlefields. Non-white men were also banned from the “South African Overseas Expeditionary Force”. However, black and “coloured” men from the Union of South Africa served in Europe in the “South African Native Labour Contingent” (21,000 men), the “Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport” (2,800 men) and the “Cape Coloured Labour Corps” (1,200 men), all of them in unarmed ancillary roles.^[8] Furthermore, the British recruited 82,000 war workers in Egypt^[9] and 1,000 in Mauritius for service in Europe.

Passive Resistance

Wartime propaganda and memorial culture in both the Entente states and Germany was used to stress Africans’ alleged loyalty to and eagerness to fight and die for their colonial masters. Several issues related to recruitment, however, suggest completely different attitudes of Africans towards war service. Whilst it is sometimes difficult to decide between voluntary enlistment and forced conscription, it is clear that a considerable number of Africans, more than likely even the majority of them, were incorporated into wartime colonial armies against their will, even though universal compulsory service did not apply to them.

Upon the outbreak of the war, British colonial officials engaged in widespread propaganda, which managed to attract volunteers for the relatively well paid “King’s African Rifles”. Recruitment of carriers, however, proved to be much more difficult. African chiefs were called upon to turn out men, and missionaries were also expected to help.^[10] The chiefs’ forced collaboration with recruitment officers, however, would undermine their authority. Many men quarrelled with them and tried to hide. British recruiters captured men day and night for military service and sometimes even took women as hostages to be released only when their men went off to war.^[11] Chewa chief Malengachanzi in Malawi remembered such actions in 1973: “There was terror everywhere and people did not feel

safe.”^[12]

The French recruitment policy in North and [West Africa](#) was mixed, including the enlistment of volunteers as well as conscription. In 1912, the [French parliament](#) had passed several acts enabling conscription in West Africa and Algeria if the numbers of volunteers were too low. Conscription became more and more important the longer the war lasted.^[13] Whilst in 1915 only 2,500 out of a total of 14,500 new recruits in Algeria were conscripts, this ratio changed dramatically in the second half of the war. In 1917, the army enlisted 6,261 volunteers and 25,925 conscripts, in the following year there were 13,942 volunteers and 34,173 conscripts.^[14] During the 1915/16 recruiting campaign in West Africa, only 7,000 out of 53,000 recruits were volunteers.^[15]

A widespread practice in West Africa was to ask local chiefs to provide potential recruits and to threaten them with imprisonment if they failed to do so. Most often, young men from the lower social strata, especially domestic slaves, were presented to French recruitment officers.^[16] As a consequence, the lower strata were highly overrepresented amongst recruits, except for contingents from regions that had preserved aristocratic martial traditions. Sometimes, however, French recruitment agents did not trust local chiefs and directly collected recruits by having troops surround villages and arrest the young men. Another method was to arrest the parents of young men who had fled and only release them once their sons had given themselves up to the recruiting officers.

French colonial officials had first been in favour of recruitment, but, in view of African resistance, they soon changed their minds. In August 1914, [William Merlaud-Ponty \(1866-1915\)](#), Governor-General of French West Africa, wrote to Paris that “there would be extreme enthusiasm if people were informed that the natives were to be given the honour to fight in France”.^[17] His successor [François Clozel \(1860-1918\)](#), however, stated only a year later that “The brutal and badly prepared effort demanded by Ponty, aggravated by the officers’ incompetence, has completely disgusted everyone.”^[18] In September 1917, Governor-General [Joost van Vollenhoven \(1877-1918\)](#) obtained a temporary cessation of recruitment in French West Africa. Vollenhoven stressed that France should rather prioritise the economic exploitation of West Africa: “This country has been ruined just to recruit another few thousands of men!”^[19] Furthermore, Vollenhoven highlighted African resistance against recruitment:

Out of recruitment has resulted an unpopularity that has become universal from the very day when recruits were asked to serve in Europe and grim, determined, terrible revolts started against the white man, who had hitherto been tolerated, sometimes even loved, but who, transformed into a recruiting agent, had become a detested enemy, the image of the slave hunters he had defeated and replaced himself.^[20]

French recruitment practices in West Africa did indeed face countless forms of opposition, ranging from bribery, malingering, self-mutilation, hiding outside the villages or fleeing to Liberia, Gambia, Portuguese Guinea and the Gold Coast, to suicide and even armed rebellions against the colonial administration. Rumours likened the French recruitment missions to the pre-colonial slave trade.

From Senegal alone, an estimated 35,000 men fled from French recruiters. War veteran Kande Kamara (c. 1895-?), a Susu aristocrat from Guinea, in a 1976 interview recalled:

When I arrived in my home no one was to be found. [...] The only people you saw in the village were old people and women; all the young men my age were in the bush – in the mountains, in forests, and in valleys where it was safe. The only time they could come home into town was in the middle of the dark night; no one would come to town during the day time if the chief's town provided soldiers.^[21]

In winter 1917/18, when the French government decided to resume recruiting in West Africa, Vollenhoven desperately wrote: "The natives don't want to supply any more men and we won't get more by convincing them. If we really need new *tirailleurs*, we will have to recruit them forcibly, running the risk of a general revolt."^[22] After Vollenhoven's embittered resignation, the French government appointed Blaise Diagne (1872-1934) "Commissaire de la République dans l'Ouest Africain" with the powers of a Governor-General, to organise the new recruitment campaign. Diagne had been the first Black African to be elected as a deputy in the French parliament in 1914. Like some African American leaders, he considered and propagated war service as a means to obtain rights such as the franchise. By September 1918, he had recruited 63,000 soldiers: many more than expected. The end of the war spared these soldiers from having to fight at the front. However, as from 1919 many of them were stationed as [occupation soldiers](#) in the Rhineland, where many became sick or died.^[23]

French officials in [North Africa](#) were less hostile towards conscription than were their colleagues in West Africa. Charles Lutaud (1855-1921), Governor-General of Algeria, even explicitly announced an expansion of conscription of Algerian Arabs in 1916.^[24] In the following year, however, he opposed governmental plans for a premature enlistment of those who would come of age in 1918, arguing that, "even though we managed to suppress last November's uprising, the tribes' submission is far from absolute".^[25] Thereupon, the government renounced these plans. The government's ambition to recruit another 50,000 Algerian Arabs in 1918 by expanding conscription to the south of Algeria, where no working colonial administration was yet in existence, was criticised by colonial officials as unrealistic. When Paris persisted, colonial administrators put the new policy into practice. However, they managed to recruit far fewer soldiers than Paris had hoped.

An important type of passive resistance was desertion. Of those young men who had not managed to avoid conscription, many deserted at the earliest opportunity. For African soldiers who had been shipped to Europe, desertion was hardly an option any longer, given the difficulties of hiding among the civilian population. German attempts to encourage defection of Muslim soldiers and to try to convince them to fight for the Ottoman Empire were of limited success, as only about 500 out of 8,000 North African POWs and defectors agreed to such a transfer.^[26] On the other hand, desertion rates in Africa were very high. They amounted, for instance, to 25 percent of those recruited by the British in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Of the 14,000 *Askari* recruited and conscripted by the Germans in East Africa, no fewer than 3,000 deserted. Furthermore, the figures of 4,500 missing and

4,200 captured *Askari* are likely to include many more deserters.^[27] Most *Askari* recruited from the Gindo, Hehe and Ngoni, for instance, would desert when deployed near their home regions and wage a guerrilla war against all European armies. And the backbone of the big Tuareg rebellion in the central Sahara from 1916 to 1918 under Ag Muhammad Wau Teguidda Kaocen (1880-1919) was composed of several hundred deserters from the French and Italian colonial armies.^[28]

Active Resistance and Rebellion

The First World War witnessed dozens of minor revolts and a considerable number of major armed rebellions against colonial rule all over Africa, stretching from Algeria to the Cape of Good Hope and from French and British West Africa to German East Africa. Whilst the reasons behind these resistance movements are manifold, forced recruitment of soldiers and military labour accounted for many of them and in some cases recruitment can clearly be identified as the main trigger. In French West Africa, a revolt amongst the Bambara in Bélé Dougou (Mali) from February to November 1915 undoubtedly stemmed from opposition to recruitment. During the great revolt in West Volta from November 1915 to August 1916, which included tens of thousands of rebels of different ethnic groups, recruitment was at the very least a major trigger. The French had to deploy nearly 5,000 soldiers and policemen to quell this resistance, using brute force, destroying whole villages and killing many civilians. French recruitment practices were also partially responsible for the numerous rebellions in Benin during the war.^[29]

Of the many anti-colonial rebellions in North Africa during the war, which stretched from Morocco to Libya and Egypt, especially those in Algeria were linked to military recruitment. As in West Africa, French recruitment officers in Algeria faced all sorts of opposition. Back in the autumn of 1914, conscripts and their families had protested forced service in various locations. Resistance to recruitment culminated in the winter of 1916-17 in a major uprising in the South Constantinois. In Tunisia there were a few minor revolts in 1915 and 1916.

Other colonial powers' recruitment drives faced organised African resistance as well. In Southern Nyasaland, for instance, John Chilembwe (1871-1915) led a revolt against British carrier recruitment.^[30] Several rebellions in Nigeria expressed general discontent with British colonial rule, to which the recruitment of soldiers and carriers had considerably contributed.^[31] The same is true for wartime revolts against Belgian rule in the Congo.^[32] German East Africa between 1914 and 1917 witnessed twenty-six oppositional movements, nine cases of armed resistance, and nine rebellions or attempted rebellions, many of which were directly or indirectly linked to recruitment of soldiers and carriers.^[33]

Conclusion

On balance, recruitment of more than two million young men, most often against their will, for war

service was a major issue in large parts of wartime Africa. Whilst [colonial propaganda](#) and memorial culture stressed Africans' eagerness to fight for their colonial masters, the reality was considerably different, with many men trying to avoid war service by hiding from recruitment missions, by desertion or even by active resistance. Forced recruitment thus had serious consequences, ranging from the flight of tens of thousands of young men, to major armed rebellions against colonial rule. Conversely many men, mainly for financial reasons, voluntarily joined colonial armies, especially upon the outbreak of the war, and in response to Blaise Diagne's recruitment campaign in 1918 that presented war service as a means to gain political rights and managed to attract many more men than expected. Nonetheless, young men's attitudes were overwhelmingly negative towards service in a war that was so obviously not theirs.

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