Version 1.0 | **Last updated 26 November 2019**

Colonial State Power and Politics (Africa)

By Michael Pesek

When the First World War came to Africa, European colonial rule was scarcely established in many parts of the continent. Some twenty years after the initial conquest, large parts of Africa remained beyond colonial control. An uneasy and fragile ceasefire between the colonial rulers and Africans prevailed, frequently disturbed by rebellions, mutinies, and the more hidden forms of resistance against the humble beginnings of the colonial state.

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Introduction: The Outbreak of War

Colonial administrations and missionaries reacted to news of the war in Europe with some concern.[1] Many administrators saw the war as a danger to the shaky European rule in Africa, exactly because it was a conflict among Europeans. Despite all the nationalist bravado that went along with the Scramble for Africa some thirty years earlier, everyday colonial politics across the borders were shaped by at least some sort of mutual respect and even solidarity. Colonial rule in Africa had always been thought by its supporters and practitioners to be based on white supremacy.

Many colonial societies had a cosmopolitan touch: Settlers from all parts of Europe, missionary societies and even the administration often included people from other nations. A clear example was the Congo, where for a long time Scandinavians played an important role in the colonial military and administration.[2] In pre-war times, the colonial states had reacted to any attacks by Africans on Europeans, regardless of their nationality, with harsh punishments. The sacrosanctity of Europeans was a central pillar of colonial ideology.

Such concerns were not shared by some officers of the colonial military keen to win merits during the war in Africa. Colonial rule was not a monolith: it was held together by an uneasy alliance between bureaucrats, settlers, missionaries and the military, each with differing agendas. Perhaps the most important conflict before 1914 was between bureaucrats and the military. The military handled colonial rule as a security problem, the administration increasingly looked for development. The colonial military's influence on politics dominated the first ten or fifteen years of colonial rule, but by 1914 civilian administrations had taken the helm in most parts of Europe's African colonies. The clearest example of how this conflict came back during the First World War was in German East Africa, where Governor Heinrich Schnee (1871-1949) clashed with his military commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (1870-1964) over how to conduct the war. Schnee, who was officially the commander-in chief, ordered Lettow-Vorbeck to remain on the defensive, but the latter ignored this directive, attacking British positions on the colony's borders. Later on, Lettow-Vorbeck increasingly sidelined Schnee's authority. In Kenya, acting Governor Henry Conway Belfield (1855-1923) initially leaned more towards the position of his German colleague in Dar es Salaam, but the British War Office supported an aggressive stance in East Africa. The British navy bombarded German harbors in the first week of August 1914, leaving little room for the governor to preserve peace in the region. In German South West Africa, however, the civil administration quickly found a common understanding with the colony's military commanders for an aggressive posture in the unfolding events.

By the first weeks of the war, it became quite obvious that those who were eager to turn colonial Africa into a battlefield had little regard for the political consequences a major war might have for colonial rule on the continent. African soldiers soon killed Europeans if they were on the enemy's side; they pillaged missionary stations and robbed farmers. In German and British prisoner-of-war camps in East Africa, African soldiers guarded European inmates and oversaw their work.[3] It was a reversal of the colonial order as it had been in pre-war years. Both sides supported African rebellions against their adversaries, but in some cases the Germans pushed the limits very hard. German officers trained and armed Senussi fighters in Libya, who waged jihad against the Italians. After they had fought Ndochibiri rebels in the northwestern part of their colony in East Africa for some years, they cooperated with them when this anti-colonial movement turned against the British.[4] In Northern Rhodesia, Germans backed some followers of the Watchtower Movement, who had risen against British rule.[5]

The conflict between Schnee and Lettow-Vorbeck was the result of unclear orders from Berlin. Like

other colonial powers, the German Empire had hardly made any contingency plans for the colony's role in a European war. To fight a war against a European power for colonial aggrandizement was hardly conceivable to most politicians and colonial bureaucrats at that time. The euphoria that had driven European nations into the scramble in the 1880s was long gone by 1914. Instead the everyday mess of colonial politics with its exhausting battles against the resistance of Africans, its disappointed hopes over some sort of Eldorado hidden in the heart of Africa, and its never-ending scandals of overstrained and inept bureaucracies tarnished the earlier enthusiasm. The attitude towards the colonies' role in the war was shaped by the importance of colonial politics for the metropole. Africa was not a priority for any of the belligerents in August 1914. Initially, the Belgians opted for neutrality and were in this supported by the Germans. For the Belgian government in exile, the Congo was the least of its worries.[6] After twenty years of failed colonial politics, Germany's "place in the sun" had lost its brightness for many Germans. Military experts regarded the Germany colonies as undefendable.[7] The French, mostly preoccupied with the German menace at the gates of Paris, were undecided for the first weeks. Only after intense pressure from the notorious Marseille colonial lobby did Paris develop a more active vision of the role of its African colonies in the war.[8] A major influence in the shift of Brussels' and Paris' position came from the British. The Foreign Office at first shared the reservations of its allies, but an alliance between the Indian Office and the War Office set aside all concerns in regard to an extension of the war to the colonies. The initial reasoning, however, had little to do with colonial schemes. The War Office was mainly worried about the German navy in the Indian Ocean, which threatened the shipping lines to India. Already in early August 1914, the British Imperial Defense Committee worked on plans for extensive campaigns in Africa. Their aim was to destroy German radio stations and harbors to block naval communication with Berlin and operational bases.

War Aims

Given the initial disinterest in Africa by the governments in Paris, Berlin and Brussels, their African colonies initially had a certain amount of room to define their role in the war for themselves. Here, on the spot, events unfolded quickly and developed their own momentum to which the metropoles often could only react. Even before the British Empire entered the war in Europe, Governor Hugh Charles Clifford (1866-1941) of the Gold Coast mobilized the colony's troops and prepared for war. His French colleague in Dahomey proposed a joint operation against Togo in the first week of August 1914, to which Bryant agreed. Both governors acted without consulting their superiors in Europe.[9] Local actions in the colonies, therefore, provided much of the initiative to turn the First World War into a second Scramble for Africa. Territorial gains only became an issue for official politics at home as late as spring 1915. In March 1915, the British secretary of state for the colonies, Lewis Harcourt (1863-1922) wrote a memorandum that sought to revive the old Cape-to-Cairo scheme. When David Lloyd George (1863-1945) became prime minister in 1916, his cabinet was filled with imperialists, who regularly discussed what to add to Britain's vast empire. France formulated its war aims in the same year. Then, the return of those parts of Cameroon lost after the Second Moroccan Crisis

(1911) to the French Empire was seen as an important issue. Belgium followed with claims on some parts of German East Africa and, more urgently, the estuary of the Congo. Some German politicians, also in 1916, came up with a plan for a German *Mittelafrika* (Middle Africa), but it is unclear how much this was supported by the government.[10]

In the later years of the First World War the events in Africa became closely connected to Allied visions of a global post-war order. Allied propaganda excluded the Germans from the family of civilized nations because of their alleged aggressive militarism and war crimes committed in Belgium and France. From an Allied point of view, the war in Africa morphed into a colonial Reconquista, where the Belgians and the French hoped to regain territories they had failed to obtain during the scramble or lost during the Moroccan Crisis. The First World War not only initiated a new Scramble for Africa, but also led to a new drive to establish colonial rule more firmly. But this was an uneven and inconsistent process. The first impact of the war in the British colonies was a mass exodus of whites to Europe to protect the metropole. In Northern Rhodesia nearly 40 percent of male whites left the colony.[11] Those who stayed abandoned their posts as civil administrators to join the war effort in the colony. The result of this exodus was that many parts of the colony were laid bare of any presence of the colonial state. Some Africans interpreted this vacuum as the end of colonial rule. When German troops invaded the colony in the last weeks of the war, most of the administration was evacuated. This seemed to fulfill those prophecies.[12] There was, however, a different process of extending colonial rule to regions hitherto not much affected by it. A case in point was the Kingdom of Rwanda in German East Africa: Germany had established shaky control only ten years before the war, mainly by an alliance with the king's court. The region was isolated from the rest of the colony and when the war started most of the occupying troops were sent to more important parts of the front. The German local commander, however, began to establish a war economy that engulfed much of Rwandan society. For the first time, Germans even collected taxes in 1915.[13]

Recruitment and Resistance

What little was left of colonial administration in abandoned regions was reoriented towards the war effort. Now, the colonial officials came to the villages not to settle political quarrels or to promote agricultural development, but in search of men to serve as porters and soldiers. For the French in Senegal, the maintenance of a fragile peace with local societies became a minor concern compared to the need to recruit soldiers and porters. In their ever-increasing hunger for new recruits, French officials increasingly resorted to violence: nightly raids and hostage taking became a common occurrence. This undermined previous efforts to enfold African societies into the colonial project.[14] In German East Africa, colonial authorities used similar tactics, perhaps the only difference was that the Germans did not distinguish between males and females, or adults and children.[15] In Kenya, the British resorted to other methods. Civil administrators ordered young males to the boma, or administrative center, for tax work. When they arrived, they were chain-ganged and sent to the front. Unsurprisingly, Africans increasingly avoided contact with the Europeans.[16]

Africans sometimes reacted to these violent intrusions of the colonial state with resistance or exodus. Most people fled either to inaccessible regions or across the border. In French West Africa, some people were "protest migrants," who stayed away only as long the recruitment patrols were near. Africans in East Africa also took refuge in neighboring colonies to escape forced recruitment and the rising insecurity as the war morphed into a complex conflict between German, British and Belgian troops and their local allies. Some Africans, as a British administrator found out in the mid-1920s, hadn't returned to their home villages years after the war.[17] One of the major rebellions of the war, the Chilembwe uprising in British Nyasaland, was closely connected to forced labor conscription in 1914.[18] The followers of John Chilembwe (ca. 1871-1915) channeled the anger and frustration of the local population with the assertive colonial state into a movement that attacked the colonial order in general. Although the British quickly suppressed the movement and killed its leader, the movement spread to other parts of British Central Africa.[19] In Southern Nigeria, the Egba revolted in 1918 against the incursion of the colonial state during the war and the loss of the semi-independent status they had vigorously defended since the arrival of British rule. Other rebellions were more limited in scope and ambition. In some parts of Kenya, the conflict between recruiting patrols, often men from other parts of the colony or Greek traders, and the local population turned into violent skirmishes. Chiefs on the eastern shores of Lake Tanganyika disarmed small Belgian patrols, who kidnapped and mishandled the local population.[20]

Local Power

The loss of trust in colonial rule affected, perhaps more importantly, the main allies of colonial administrations, too: African rulers. Before the war, Europeans had often tried to preserve the fragile ceasefire with African societies by abstaining from deeper intrusions into local politics. The colonial state lacked the resources to establish itself into the everyday life of its subjects and was desperate for the cooperation of African rulers. In exchange for willingness to cooperate in the sluggish establishment of colonial rule, such rulers were supported by the colonial state against internal and external threats. During the war, the colonial administration became more assertive. Chiefs increasingly felt pressure to obey the demands of the war machinery regardless of what impact that might have on their societies. In Cameroon, the chiefs' experiences with German colonial rule often determined their reactions to the demands of the war economy. If Germans had supported their claim to power, they would have been much more eager to satisfy the Germans. But the establishment of German rule in Cameroon had been extraordinarily brutal and therefore many chiefs saw the war as a new phase in their resistance.[21] This led to a cycle of violent intrusion from the colonial state and subsequent deterioration of the security situation, leading some chiefs to seek to enhance their status or to settle old scores. Often chiefs manipulated established mechanisms and duties of communal labor or tributary labor to meet the required quotas.[22] In Rwanda, the Tutsi elites tried to fulfill the demands of the Germans, and later the Belgians, by sending mostly men from the lower strata of the Hutu, thus manipulating established patron-client relationships. Their

Congolese counterparts, in order to fulfill the ever-increasing quotas of military recruitment without harming agricultural production, often sent underage teens or older and disabled men. Sometimes they were supported in this scheme by colonial administrators, who equally feared that the mass exodus of able men would led to unrest and famine.[23] In the Ashanti region of the Gold Coast, chiefs eager to show their worthiness to the colonial administration were thwarted by their councils, which had always acted as a democratic control even before colonial rule. Not so in the more acephalous societies further in the south, where colonial rule had helped to build a new class of chiefs. Acting without any legitimation by their subjects and given free hand by the administration, these chiefs morphed into little dictators in the service of the war economy.[24]

African chiefs were between a rock and a hard place. By fulfilling the demands for new recruits or porters they eroded their standing among their subjects, which, from the viewpoint of colonial rule, was their most important political capital. If they refused to cooperate with recruitment, they undermined their standing with the colonial state. Notwithstanding the erosion of the power of African chiefs, the war cemented and enhanced the alliance between Europeans and African rulers. After the war indirect rule became the official mantra not only in British colonies across Africa, but in Belgian and to some extent in French colonies, too. For the colonial state, the erosion of the chiefs' legitimacy was in the end only a minor nuisance. It even had the advantage of bringing them closer to the colonial state. It was no coincidence that what Terence Ranger (1929-2015) calls the "invention of tradition" had its peak in the interwar period, when African rulers wrapped themselves in the trappings of imperial monarchy that had become their main pillar of legitimacy.[25]

War Economy

Colonial war economies greatly extended their reach during the war. In Kenya, around 120,000 Africans worked in the colonial economy before 1914, while during the war 200,000 Africans served as porters or workers in the war economy alone. The colonial administration in Nyasaland estimated after the war that every male African worked at least one month for the war economy.[26] Initially, money was used as a main incentive. Force, however, was, as Africans had learned, an indispensable part of colonial politics and it increasingly played a part in the colonial war economy. The war, therefore, led to an enormous expansion of the participation of Africans in the money economy. This development, however, collided with the military's aim to wage the war in Africa on the cheap. In French West Africa and in the British colonies of East and Central Africa, colonial authorities used the war to militarize the labor market by drafting laws that intensified obligatory labor for males. Wages were determined by the state. The system of recruitment was based on military structures that developed during the war and continued afterwards, like the notorious *kipande* system in Kenya. Those Africans who tried to escape forced labor were hunted by military patrols.[27] Such measures were taken in other parts of Africa as well. In Freetown (Sierra Leone) and in Elisabethville (Congo), police patrols chased urban dwellers and unemployed youth to press gang them into military service.[28]

Conclusion

During the war, the colonial state emerged as a Janus-faced leviathan. On one side, the war economy heavily depended on the politics of raids, which took what was needed for the war without considering the long-term impact on colonial policies, the economy or demographic development. The British administrator of occupied German East Africa, Horace Byatt (1875-1933), bitterly complained in 1917 that all his efforts to establish some sort of administration and contact with the local population were hampered by marauding recruitment patrols. His colleagues in Northern Rhodesia warned the same year that the population was on the verge of uprising if recruitment continued. In 1917, therefore, the government began to reduce the quotas.[29] During the war, the colonial state refined and strengthened its bureaucratic institutions and procedures to enhance its grip on African societies and labor. Africans were surveyed, registered and forced into the colonial labor markets like never before. The war, therefore, was a major step towards the transformation of colonial politics in the inter-war period.

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Notes

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13. ↑ Pesek, Michael: Das Ende eines Kolonialreiches. Ostafrika im Ersten Weltkrieg, Frankfurt a. M. 2010.

14. ↑ Lunn, Joe: Memoirs of the Maelstrom. A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War, Portsmouth 1999, p. 33. For similar efforts in British colonies in Africa, see: Page, Melvin: The Great War and Chewa Society in Malawi, in: Journal of Southern African Studies 6 (1980), p. 176; Fields, K. E.: Charismatic Religion as Popular Protest, in: Theory and Society 11 (1982), p. 334; Matthews, James K.: Reluctant Allies. Nigerian Responses to Military Recruitment 1914- 18, in: Page, Melvin (ed.): Africa and the First World War, New York 1987, pp. 95-114, 96; Savage, Donald C. / Munro, J. Forbes: Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East Africa Protectorate 1914-1918, in: The Journal of African History 7 (1966), p. 328.

15. ↑ Page, Melvin E.: Black Man in a White Man's War, in: Page, Africa 1987, p. 6; Pesek, Das Ende 2010.

16. ↑ Savage / Munro, Carrier Corps 1966, p. 331.

17. ↑ Reid, Richard: A History of Modern Africa. 1800 to the Present, Hoboken 2012, p. 97.

18. ↑ Page, Melvin E.: The War of Thangata. Nyasaland and the East African Campaign, 1914- 1918, in: Journal of African History 19 (1978), pp. 87-100, 90.

19. ↑ Yorke, Britain 2015, p. 42.

20. ↑ Pesek, Das Ende 2010, p. 250.

21. ↑ Njung, George Ndakwena: Soldiers of Their Own. Honor, Violence, Resistance and Conscription in Colonial Cameroon During the First World War, Thesis, University of Michigan 2016, p. 271.

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29. ↑ Yorke, Britain 2015, p. 195.

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