

# Colonial Warfare and Occupation (Africa)

By [Brian Digre](#)

## Summary

In 1914, Allied leaders plunged Africans into a conflict that was not their own. In West Africa, British and French colonial troops quickly occupied Togo, while the conquest of Cameroon proved much more difficult. A relatively short campaign led by white South African cavalry resulted in the seizure of German Southwest Africa. The grueling fighting in German East Africa lasted four years as remarkable African soldiers, their able German commander, terrain and climate repeatedly frustrated Allied military efforts. Campaigns in Cameroon and especially East Africa took a terrible human toll. Ultimately, Allied victory led to a repartition of Africa and the persistence of colonial rule.

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## Introduction

On 12 November 1918, near the Zambian town of Kasama, German [Askaris](#) (African soldiers) skirmished with troops of the [King's African Rifles](#). In Europe, the Armistice had silenced the guns on the [Western Front](#) the day before this last clash in Africa.

[Germany](#) had four African colonies in 1914: Togo (today: Togo and territory in eastern Ghana), Cameroon (Cameroon and territory in northeastern Nigeria), German Southwest Africa (Namibia) and German East Africa (Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania except Zanzibar). When the war began, British decision-makers saw Germany's colonies as a threat to Allied shipping in the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic. Colonial shortwave stations and ports could be used to support German commerce raiders. Given the superiority of Allied naval and colonial forces, [Britain](#) and [France](#) were eager to end the threat and take advantage of their

adversary's vulnerable position.<sup>1</sup>

From an African perspective these territories were already under foreign [occupation](#) before World War One began. The war changed the nationalities of the occupiers, but colonial rule remained under the new guise of the [League of Nations](#) mandates. This essay focuses on how military campaigns during World War One and the [Paris peace conference](#) redrew the map of colonial Africa.

## West Africa

Surrounded by much larger British and French colonies, Togo was quickly overwhelmed. Recognizing his untenable military situation, Major Hans-Georg von Döring, the acting German governor, had appealed for [neutrality](#). Instead, the British gave him twenty-four hours to surrender. Abandoning the capital of Lomé, von Döring withdrew his heavily outnumbered forces to the interior. Pursued by British and French colonial troops, the Germans finally made a stand in front of the town of Kamina.<sup>2</sup> When he realized that his military position was hopeless, von Döring destroyed the shortwave station and surrendered on 26 August 1914. The fighting was over in less than three weeks.

In Cameroon, the Allies encountered a far more difficult campaign. The colony's size gave the Germans room to maneuver, while the tropical climate in the south and mountains in the north created natural obstacles which they could exploit against offensive operations. In response to British naval concerns, the Allies struck first at the colony's principal port, Duala. Here, a controversial and racist German policy of land expropriation along the Wouri River had angered the African population. The dispute reached a climax with the German execution of the traditional ruler [Rudolf Duala Manga Bell \(1873-1914\)](#). Convicted on dubious evidence of conspiring with other Cameroonian ethnic groups and the British against Germany, he was hanged for treason on 8 August.<sup>3</sup> An Anglo-French expeditionary force under the command of British Brigadier-General [Charles Macpherson Dobell \(1869-1954\)](#) seized Duala with little opposition in September 1914.

The Germans abandoned the port in accordance with their strategy of a protracted defense in the interior, anchored by bases in the northern highlands.<sup>4</sup> They shifted their administration to the interior town of Yaoundé, where the Beti led by [Karl Atangana \(1880-1943\)](#) remained loyal.<sup>5</sup> An Allied attempt to push in this direction by rail from Duala was repulsed in June 1915. French colonial forces assisted by troops from the Belgian Congo eventually advanced into the colony's eastern and southern areas. In the north, Allied forces gradually overcame all German resistance except at Mora. There the German commander established himself in

an almost impregnable mountain redoubt and held out against repeated attacks.

From July through September 1915, the rainy season led to a pause in hostilities. When the Allies resumed their advance, not only were the Germans outnumbered, but their severe shortage of ammunition meant they could neither counterattack nor mount a sustained defense. They abandoned Yaoundé in January 1916, and in a well-executed maneuver retreated into the Spanish colony of Rio Muni. They were shortly moved to the neighboring island of Fernando Po (today: the territories form Equatorial Guinea.) The Spanish promised the German forces would be interned, but they lacked the military strength and will to truly do so.<sup>6</sup> News of the German retreat finally led to the surrender of Mora in February 1916. The fighting in Cameroon was over although the Allies remained anxious about the intentions of the troops on Fernando Po. Casualties during the campaign occurred from tropical diseases, especially malaria, as well as combat. The hardships of war and military occupation fell not only on the troops. The Allied forces that advanced from Duala required over 30,000 African porters.<sup>7</sup>

Allied officials discussed administering occupied Cameroonian territory as an Anglo-French condominium, but rival [imperialist](#) ambitions led them to abandon the idea.<sup>8</sup> Instead an interim division of the colony favored French interests, frequently disregarding local ethnic loyalties in the process. Territories in the south and east of Cameroon (that the French had ceded to Germany in 1911) were rejoined with French Equatorial Africa. Neither of the Allied powers, however, had sufficient wartime colonial resources to adequately administer their new spheres of Cameroon.<sup>9</sup>

## German Southwest Africa

Fighting in German Southwest Africa differed from warfare elsewhere on the African continent for several reasons: the territory has an arid climate and much of the arable land lies on the central plateau, bordered by the Kalahari Desert to the east and the Namib Desert along the coast in the west. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Germans had carried out genocidal campaigns against the Herero and Nama peoples and imposed a settler economy based on cattle ranching and mining on the region's devastated and displaced African populations.

At the outset of the war, the Germans had about 2,000 soldiers in the colony, augmented by 3,000 local reservists. This was a European force without the support of African troops that Germany raised in its other colonies. The Germans feared African rebellions and so dispersed their units throughout the territory. Military mobilization diverted animals and men from

agriculture, contributing to famine by 1915. Finally, the Germans lacked a decisive and imaginative military leader who might have made optimal use of what strengths they had, such as a central railway line.<sup>10</sup>

The [Union of South Africa's](#) leaders, Prime Minister [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) and Defense Minister [Jan Christian Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), despite divisions within their own Afrikaner community, backed Britain in 1914 and complied with the British request to attack German Southwest Africa. Some Afrikaner nationalists favored neutrality while others, including military commanders, saw an opportunity to seize control in South Africa with German aid. The rebellion that resulted was uncoordinated and ineffectively supported by the Germans. By early 1915, Botha had quelled the insurrection with a combination of force and conciliation. Now with over 40,000 men he set about the conquest of the German colony.

South African forces pushed north across the Orange River and inland from the ports of Luderitz and Walvis Bay. Despite a sometimes sluggish and poorly conceived retreat, the Germans managed to withdraw to the northern part of the colony. Destroying railway tracks and poisoning water holes, they slowed the South African advance which depended heavily on mounted Afrikaner commandos. Botha assumed command of the northern force, built up his supplies and pushed inland from Walvis Bay. In early May, hard-riding South African commandos seized the key railway junction of Karibib and the capital of Windhoek. The Germans pulled back to Otavi in the far north, hoping distance would give them a chance to prepare a final stand but the South African pursuit was rapid and relentless. At the beginning of July, German governor [Theodor Seitz \(1863-1949\)](#) sought an armistice.<sup>11</sup>

Casualties were remarkably light on both sides. Outmaneuvered and outnumbered, the German forces surrendered territory rather than mount serious resistance and risk envelopment. They refused to embrace guerrilla warfare. The South Africans, while depending heavily on African laborers, turned aside offers of indigenous military assistance in Southwest Africa.<sup>12</sup> Both sides claimed that this campaign would be a "white man's war."

Africans who hoped that a South African victory would end German oppression and return their confiscated lands were ultimately disillusioned. During the war and immediate postwar years the South Africans imposed martial law. With the German settlers' authority undermined, many African pastoralists started to expand their herds. The South Africans, seeking to appear as liberators, introduced some reforms such as prohibiting whipping of workers (although they retained the punishment for their wartime African laborers).<sup>13</sup>

Once they had been awarded a League of Nations mandate for the territory (see below), the

South Africans moved to impose their own policies of racial segregation and exploitation. Approximately half the pre-war German population was deported and white South Africans took over German farms. African land ownership was restricted to reserves where the inadequate land was poor and arid. The results were poverty and a supply of cheap labor. New regulations and taxes led to an uprising of the Bondelswarts people in 1922 and its brutal military repression.<sup>14</sup> Africans found that colonial exploitation had only changed hands.

## German East Africa

In [East Africa](#), German ability to maintain an armed force in the field for four years against overwhelming odds was a considerable military achievement. A number of factors were responsible for this accomplishment. German East Africa was not faced with superior Allied military forces in neighboring territories at the outset of the war as was Togo. The topography of the colony also favored defensive operations. Mount Kilimanjaro, the Pare Range and the Usambara Mountains provided natural obstacles to attack from the north. The colony's tropical climate posed difficulties for an invading force, while its large size offered the Germans ample room for strategic retreat.

African soldiers and their German officers proved a redoubtable defensive force. They fought bravely with great stamina in the face of severe hardships. German officers and their commander, Major General [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#), were ingenious soldiers: adapting to their environment, taking advantage of their strengths and exploiting Allied errors. They also had significant success in capturing or improvising ammunition and other necessary supplies.

The British hoped to win a quick and decisive victory with an attack on the northern port of Tanga in November 1914. Instead the assault became a disaster. An overconfident and indecisive British commander, General [Arthur Aitken \(1861-1924\)](#), sent his [Indian expeditionary force](#) into battle without allowing the troops to recuperate from their long voyage. Aitken's tactical mistakes multiplied as von Lettow-Vorbeck rapidly reinforced his positions. Following several days of sharp clashes, including the unusual appearance of angry bees in the midst of [battle](#), the British were forced to withdraw and adopt defensive positions along the northern border of the German colony.<sup>15</sup> Throughout 1915 German raids were able to disrupt British railway traffic from Mombasa to Nairobi.

At sea, the British Navy was alarmed by the presence of the modern German cruiser [Königsberg](#) in the Indian Ocean. On a visit to Dar es Salaam at the outbreak of the war, the Königsberg had a brief career as a commerce raider. The ship's captain, [Max Looff \(1874-1954\)](#), sought refuge in the Rufiji River delta. Initially unable to penetrate the German

defenses, the British were compelled to deploy valuable warships to guard the delta's channels. Only in July 1915, with the arrival of shallow-draft vessels, were they able to fight their way into the delta and destroy the Königsberg in an extraordinary naval battle.<sup>16</sup>

In early 1916 South African troops arrived in British East Africa (Kenya) and Smuts was given command. He launched a new offensive against the Germans in March yet despite numerical superiority a quick victory eluded him. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's tactics, the terrain and especially the tropical climate conspired against the British forces. Although his forces were pushed back, the German commander consistently avoided encirclement. Firing from prepared positions in thick brush, his soldiers frequently inflicted heavy casualties before withdrawing. The tsetse fly devastated the horses of Smuts' mounted units, thwarting their mobility. His soldiers suffered severely from tropical illnesses, particularly malaria and dysentery. Still, by the time torrential rains halted operations in September, British forces had seized the German colony's most developed northern half.<sup>17</sup> Colonial troops from the Belgian Congo supported this advance and occupied Rwanda and Burundi.

In 1917 the composition of British forces increasingly resembled that of their adversary, as Indian and white South African soldiers were replaced with black troops from [West](#) and East Africa. This heightened the cruel irony of African combat. This change also challenged the paradoxical and racist attitudes of many white South Africans who had argued that blacks were incapable of fighting modern wars and simultaneously feared the consequences of African military training. Von Lettow-Vorbeck believed he was diverting Allied resources from their use in Europe while maintaining a German position in Africa.<sup>18</sup> Yet during the last year of the war, African soldiers under European officers killed each other in a campaign that would not affect the war's ultimate outcome.

Offering the inaccurate view that the East African campaign was all but over, Smuts left his command in January 1917. Widely respected by the British, he went to London to represent South Africa and remained as a member of the Imperial War Cabinet. Von Lettow-Vorbeck continued his stubborn resistance as he retreated further south. By November 1917, the Rovuma River, southern border of the colony, was at his back, his forces greatly depleted and his ammunition low. Governor [Heinrich Schnee \(1871-1949\)](#) favored surrender. Instead, von Lettow-Vorbeck chose the fittest of his force, divided them into mobile columns and invaded Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique).

Although Portugal had declared war on Germany and sent expeditionary forces to Africa, its colony was poorly defended. The Portuguese administration was unpopular. The widespread Makombe rebellion erupted in March 1917 and was brutally suppressed by the end of the

year. Many Portuguese troops fell ill. The swiftly moving German columns were able to capture new weapons and ammunition, while the British and Portuguese failed to anticipate the Germans' changing directions. This tortuous German occupation created onerous demands for African porters. In September 1918, the elusive von Lettow-Vorbeck reentered the German colony and turned west into Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). There he finally surrendered upon learning of the armistice in Europe.

The death and destruction resulting from the fighting and wartime occupation in East Africa far surpassed that of conflicts elsewhere on the continent. Wartime suffering had exacerbated colonial exploitation to such a degree that [John Chilembwe \(1871-1915\)](#), an African Baptist minister in Malawi, led a revolt against British colonial rule. By 1916 Lettow-Vorbeck's force of 15,000 troops faced Smuts' 55,000 soldiers.<sup>19</sup> The supply systems for von Lettow-Vorbeck's and Smuts' forces relied heavily upon porters who were usually forcibly recruited. The requisitioning of food supplies as well as manpower brought famine. It has been estimated that in German East Africa (including Rwanda and Burundi) German wartime policies led to the deaths of no less than 300,000 civilians.<sup>20</sup> Then, as elsewhere in the world, came a final calamity, the [influenza pandemic of 1918-1919](#). Soldiers and porters returning home helped to spread the disease. In British East Africa 10 percent of the population may have died while the wartime devastation in German East Africa led to even higher mortality rates in some places.<sup>21</sup>

## Mandates and the Repartition of Colonial Africa

Allied victory in 1918 offered opportunities to realize plans for colonial expansion. Opposition to returning any of Germany's colonies was almost universal among Allied leaders. Wartime losses, the potential future threats posed by German colonies and imperialist motives influenced British, French and Belgian decision-makers as they sought to retain their wartime occupation of Germany's African territories. Public justification for these acquisitions was made largely on the basis of African interests and preferences. This corresponded with American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) emphasis on self-determination. At the Paris peace conference in early 1919, the result was the creation of the League of Nations mandate system in which the Allied powers acquired German territories as mandates rather than colonies. Behind this altruistic cloak, a renewed scramble for African territory occurred.

In West and Central Africa, the French received the majority of Togo and Cameroon. These territories were seen as providing valuable access to French colonies in the interior and as compensation for British colonial gains elsewhere. Although African preferences were proclaimed as justification for Allied actions, they were often ignored in reality. For example,

the border between Togo and the British colony of the Gold Coast divided the Ewe people. British officials recognized that they could rectify this capricious imperialist frontier and there were genuine African statements of support for unifying the Ewe.

*The Gold Coast Leader*, an [African newspaper](#), argued that the Togolese would favor a unified mandate under British administration. A column in the paper appealed in vain to the self-determination rhetoric of the Allies: "The repartition of Africa is the topic of the hour... The choice of such a change does not lie with an alien Power but with the people themselves." The British decision to disregard this and similar appeals provoked an article titled "A Day of Sackcloth."<sup>22</sup> The Anglo-German partition of the Ewe was replaced by an Anglo-French one.<sup>23</sup>

German Southwest Africa went to the Union of South Africa as a mandate rather than an outright annexation as the South Africans preferred. German East Africa, which had suffered so much in the war, now proved a contentious prize. British interests dominated and most of the colony went to Britain as a mandate. South African and Belgian leaders envisioned using its southern part to compensate [Portugal](#) for territory they coveted elsewhere in Africa, but these imperialist visions foundered upon Portuguese refusal.<sup>24</sup> A Portuguese request for the same territory as a mandate was rejected by the British who were largely dismissive of both Portuguese and Belgian wartime contributions. Britain would agree to the outright cession to Portugal of only the small Kionga triangle.

In the northwest, the Belgians retained Rwanda and Burundi despite British misgivings concerning the character of their rule in the Congo. Grudgingly British Colonial Secretary Lord [Alfred Milner \(1854-1925\)](#) accepted the situation but insisted that Britain keep a corridor of territory along the western shore of Lake Victoria.<sup>25</sup> African interests could be sacrificed while the opportunity to achieve the old imperialist dream of a British Cape-to-Cairo railway was not negotiable.

## Conclusion

Histories of the First World War frequently overlook the African theatres. For Africans the campaigns in Cameroon and especially in East Africa brought widespread hardship and death. Allied victory and wartime occupation of Germany's colonies provided incentives and opportunities for fresh imperialist expansion. The results redrew the map of colonial Africa, establishing new boundaries and changing the nationalities of those in power. The long-term consequences of these changes still influence modern African states. While the League of Nations mandate system introduced the idealistic concept of international oversight for colonial rule, Allied rhetoric of self-determination remained illusory.



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## Notes

1. For a full discussion of war aims see encyclopedia entry: War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Africa). [↑](#)
2. Moberly, Frederick J.: Official History of the War: Military Operations Togoland and the Cameroons, 1914-1916, London 1931, p. 37. [↑](#)
3. Digre, Brian: Imperialism's New Clothes. The Repartition of Tropical Africa, 1914-1919, New York 1990, pp. 23-24. [↑](#)
4. Strachan, Hew: The First World War in Africa, Oxford 2004, pp. 20-21. [↑](#)
5. Quinn, Frederick: The impact of the First World War and its aftermath on the Beti of Cameroun. In: Page, Melvin (ed.): Africa and the First World War. New York 1987, pp. 174-177. [↑](#)
6. Osuntokun, Akinjide: Nigeria in the First World War, London 1979, pp. 193-194. [↑](#)
7. Moberly, Official History of the War 1931, p. 427. [↑](#)
8. Elango, Lovett: The Anglo-French 'Condominium' in Cameroon, 1914-1916. The Myth and Reality, in: International Journal of African Historical Studies 18/4 (1985), p. 673. [↑](#)
9. Quinn, The impact of the First World War in: Page (ed.), Africa and the First World War 1987, pp. 177-178. [↑](#)
10. Strachan, The First World War in Africa 2004, pp. 76-77. [↑](#)
11. Ibid, pp. 87-91. [↑](#)
12. Grundlingh, Albert: Fighting Their Own War. South African Blacks and the First World War, Johannesburg 1987, pp. 57-60. About 74,000 African laborers were recruited in South Africa, often unwillingly, to serve in Southwest Africa, East Africa and France. They formed nearly one third of the South African forces in the African campaigns. [↑](#)
13. Wallace, Marion: A History of Namibia. From the Beginning to 1990, London 2011, pp. 212-214 and Grundlingh, Fighting Their Own War 1987, pp. 90-92. [↑](#)
14. Wallace, A History of Namibia 2011, pp. 215-224. [↑](#)
15. Paice, Edward: World War I: The African Front. An Imperial War on the African Continent, New York 2008, pp. 40-58. [↑](#)
16. Ibid, pp. 113-124. [↑](#)
17. Hordern, Charles: Official History of the War: Military Operations East Africa. I, London 1941, pp. 391-393. [↑](#)
18. Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul von: My Reminiscences of East Africa, London 1920, pp. 3, 216 and 222. [↑](#)
19. Strachan, The First World War in Africa 2004, pp. 122 and 183. [↑](#)

20. Paice, *The African Front* 2008, p. 398. ↑
21. *Ibid.*, p. 397. For a detailed assessment of Malawi see Page, Melvin: *The Chiwaya War. Malawians and the First World War*, Boulder 2000, pp. 171-175. ↑
22. *The Proposed Repartition of Africa*, in: *Gold Coast Leader*, 22 February 1919, p. 4 and 30 August 1919, pp. 3-4. ↑
23. Amenumey, D.E.K.: *The Ewe Unification Movement. A Political History*, Accra 1989, pp. 3-20. ↑
24. Hyam, Ronald: *The Failure of South African Expansion 1908-1948*. London 1972, pp. 28-33 and Digre, *Imperialism's New Clothes* 1990, pp. 188-196. ↑
25. Digre, *Imperialism's New Clothes* 1990, pp. 188-196. ↑

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## External Links

- [Africa after World War One \(Educational Technology Clearinghouse\) \(Database\)](#)
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- [Das, Santanu: Experiences of Colonial Troops \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Fogarty, Richard: Race, Racism and Military Strategy, 29 January 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
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- [Special Issue on the First World War, The Journal of African History 19/1, 1978 \(Cambridge Journals\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The First World War and Africa, 1914–18 \(Africa Research Institute\) \(Map\)](#)

## Metadata

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