

East and Central Africa

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Summary

The war in East and Central Africa was one of the longest running of the Great War. It started on 8 August 1914 when the wireless station at Dar es Salaam was bombed and ended on 25 November 1918 when the Germans officially surrendered at Abercorn. Although the African campaign was regarded as a sideshow by the European powers, for Africa the war was one in a long list of almost on-going conflicts. At least 177 micro-nations participated in the conflict, which was fought over, and in, seven African territories. It involved the lakes, islands in the Indian Ocean and the air.

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Introduction

Since 2013, the number and range of publications on the war in East and Central Africa has grown substantially – to the extent that in 2016 an overview of the conflict need no longer be Anglo-centric or dominated by the military perspective. Taking a regional approach, this article will look at the military involvement of each of the seven territories as well as at crosscutting themes. This approach reflects the progress of the war, where disparate actions

merged in late 1917 as the Germans crossed into Portuguese East Africa. The territories concerned are: German East Africa (Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi), British East Africa (Kenya), Uganda, Belgian Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo), Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), Nyasaland (Malawi) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia).¹

As the likelihood of war became obvious, the German cruiser SMS [Königsberg](#), which was in Dar es Salaam, made its escape so as not to fall into British hands. A few days later war was declared and in accordance with the British Admiralty War Book, the German [wireless](#) station was bombed. A week later the same happened at the German port of Tanga. Almost simultaneously, and in an uncoordinated fashion, the German forces launched various attacks on neighbouring territories. Mid-August 1914 saw German attacks on Taveta in British East Africa and across into Belgian Congo. A week later, attacks occurred in [Portuguese East Africa](#) and at Abercorn in Northern Rhodesia. The outcome of these attacks was the German [occupation](#) of Taveta, the only British territory to be occupied by [Germany](#) during the war, while the Nyasaland Volunteer Force was able to hold the German attack back. On Lake Tanganyika, Belgian Congo dismantled the *Baron Dhanis* to keep it safe, allowing the Germans to take control of the lake. When Germany requested in September 1914 that the Congo basin remain [neutral](#), the other 1885 Berlin Convention signatories refused because of the actions that had already taken place. [Belgium](#), its neutrality violated in both Europe and Africa, continued an offensive-defensive in Africa without declaring war against Germany. The situation with Portuguese East Africa, however, was more sensitive as the country was neutral both in Europe and Africa. Between the German governor and the powers in Europe, [Portugal](#) maintained its neutrality until March 1916, although it did recruit internally and send out an [expeditionary force](#) to protect the colony.²

Overview of the Campaign

Southern German East Africa Border 1914-1916

The Nyasaland government took the initiative to gain control of Lake Nyasa, as it was recognised that whoever did so would have the upper hand. As early as 31 July 1914, [Charles Walter Barton \(1870\)](#) started defence preparations in case of a German attack.³ On 13 August 1914 the German *Hermann von Wissmann* was put out of action and its commander taken prisoner by the captain of the *Guendolen*. The Germans in the area had no idea war had broken out; it was only when the local administrator asked his British counterpart for information that the situation was confirmed.

In neighbouring Northern Rhodesia, the Belgians came to the territory's assistance at the request of the local district commissioner, who feared a German attack. This annoyed the

Colonial Office in London, which had hoped to keep the Belgians out of the war for as long as possible. The Belgian presence, however, freed the British colonial forces to repulse the German attack at Abercorn on 5 September 1914, and later at Karonga on 9 September 1914.

In January 1915, the Nyasaland government was faced with the Chilembwe uprising.⁴ The uprising, led by missionary [John Chilembwe \(1871-1915\)](#), took the [British government](#) by complete surprise, as it was believed that the territory was the most peaceful and loyal of all.⁵ Influenced by, although not directly related to the war, the unrest was significant enough to divert troops from defending the country against the Germans to deal with the internal unrest.⁶ 200 South Africans were sent to supplement the meagre Nyasaland forces.

The consolidation of the Nyasaland, Northern and Southern Rhodesian forces under one commander, General [Edward Northey \(1868-1953\)](#), in November 1915 represented a significant development in the region. Northey's appointment on 12 November 1915, initiated by South African Governor General and High Commissioner [Sydney Buxton \(1853-1934\)](#), streamlined command and led to more coordinated action against the German forces in the south and west of the German colony.

Until this time, Buxton had to liaise with commanders in each of the six territories in which South Africans were serving; five of which were in Africa. In addition to his High Commission territories of Bechuanaland, Southern and Northern Rhodesia, Buxton was responsible for 600 South Africans helping protect the Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland border, 200 South Africans reinforcing the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment already in East Africa and another 200 South Africans in Nyasaland.

March 1916 saw Portugal officially enter the war, providing it with the opportunity to occupy the Kionga Triangle on the border of German and Portuguese East Africa. The Portuguese were desperate for this territory, which they believed the Germans had "stolen" from them in 1885. To support the capture of Kionga, Portugal sent out its second expeditionary force to East Africa under Major [José Luís de Moura Mendes \(1861-1918\)](#). The first had been dispatched in August 1914 to provide additional military support to the forces already there. However, it arrived after the first German incursions into the colony. This second expeditionary force managed to occupy Kionga on 10 April 1916 but within the year had lost it again. In May 1916 the Portuguese suffered a major defeat at Namanga, where the Germans were able to replenish their stocks. In June 1916, a third expeditionary force arrived to further Portugal's territorial claims in the area.⁷

The forces under Northey's command pressured the Germans from the south, but were hampered by having too few men to patrol an ever-extending front, particularly since their Portuguese allies were unable to hold their own. In contrast, the Belgians held their captured territory but refused to do anything more.

On 7 November 1916, General [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#) asked that Northey officially be placed under his command to ensure coordinated action. This was merely a formality as the two commanders had been working in tandem from the time of Smuts' appointment on 5 February 1916. Following Northey's recall to London in preparation for his replacing [Henry Conway Belfield \(1855-1923\)](#) as governor of British East Africa, the forces in mid-1917 were united directly under the command of the new General Officer Commanding East Africa [Jaap van Deventer \(1874-1922\)](#).

By the time Smuts left in January 1917, the Germans had been pushed south, although Max Wintgens and Heinrich Naumann were still operating in the west.

Western German East Africa Border 1914-1916

Soon after the declaration of war, the Germans took complete control of Lake Tanganyika. After an attack on Lake Kivu the Belgians declared war on Germany in Africa on 13 October 1914. However, they could do little whilst Germany retained control of the lake. Discussions took place locally and in London concerning cooperation. As a result, the African or Lake Tanganyika Naval Expedition began the African leg of its journey on 16 July 1915 when two boats, HMS *Mimi* and *Toutou*, commanded by [Geoffrey Basil Spicer-Simson \(1876-1947\)](#) were sent overland from Cape Town to Albertville (Kalemie) on the Lukugu River mouth into Lake Tanganyika.⁸

The force arrived at its destination in October 1915 and was ready for action by Christmas 1915. On 26 December 1915, the expedition claimed its first prize; the gunboat *Kingani* was repaired and re-named HMS *Fifi*. The *Hedwig von Wissmann*, sister ship to the *Hermann von Wissmann* on Lake Nyasa, was sunk on 9 February 1916. With both boats having disappeared, the Germans scuttled their newest arrival, the *Graf von Goetzen* (*Gotzen*), on 26 July 1916 to prevent it falling into British or Belgian hands. It was raised and refurbished after the war and still ploughs the waters of Lake Tanganyika in 2016 as the MV *Liemba*.

The removal of the *Kingani* and the *Hedwig von Wissmann* from German control gave the Allies control of Lake Tanganyika. This enabled the Belgians to attack Kigoma from the air, capture [Ruanda and Urundi](#) in May and June 1915 respectively and, on 19 September 1916, capture Tabora.⁹ The capture of Tabora allowed the liberation of numerous [prisoners](#) and

interned civilians. In turn, the German governor's wife, [Ada Schnee \(1873-1969\)](#), as well as other German women and the wounded were interned in Belgian prison camps.¹⁰

Belgian distrust of South African motives had led the Belgian commander [Charles Tombeur \(1867-1947\)](#) to instruct his forces to take Tabora before the force led by [Charles Crewe \(1858-1936\)](#) arrived. Once the Belgians occupied Tabora, they did all they could to prevent the British commander-in-chief East Africa, Jan Smuts, from taking control of the administration or communication lines; Tabora would be a valuable bargaining chip at the peace table for the Belgians.

Northern and Eastern German East Africa Border 1914-1916

Having occupied Taveta in August 1914, the Germans proceeded to attack the Uganda Railway line, which ran from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, under their commander [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#) in an attempt to disrupt British plans. Until the [Indian Expeditionary Force C](#) arrived to help protect British East Africa, responsibility fell to the most senior military commander in the area, Lieutenant-Colonel [L.E.S. Ward \(1875-1929\)](#), who had recently retired and was en route to [England](#) when news of war arrived. He returned to his post and oversaw the formation of the East African Mounted Rifles, Magadi Defence Force and the Uganda Reserve, which sought to protect the 450-mile railway against German incursions.¹¹ In addition to the white forces, [Arthur Wavell \(1882-1916\)](#) raised 150 Arab Rifles to protect the coastline between German East Africa and Mombasa, while [Berkeley Cole \(1882-1925\)](#) led a group of Somali Scouts. These forces supplemented the two battalions of [King's African Rifles](#), which were based in Uganda and British East Africa, and an Indian company of the East African Regiment.¹² The German forces consisted of 2,166 Europeans, 6,895 [Askari](#) and "about 150 Arabs" spread across the colony.¹³

On the coast, SMS *Königsberg*, the German cruiser that had left the port of Dar es Salaam on 31 July 1914 in anticipation of war, sank the HMS *Pegasus* in the Zanzibar harbour on 20 September 1914. A month later, on 31 October 1914, the *Königsberg* was traced, anchored in the Rufiji (Rufigi) Delta undergoing repairs. The *Königsberg* was seen to be a major threat at the time as it had sunk the first merchant ship of the war, SS *City of Winchester*, and was of a better class than most British ships in the area.

In November 1914, the British initiated an attack on Tanga.¹⁴ The force, consisting of the Indian Expeditionary Force B and the British 2nd Royal North Lancashire Regiment, was repulsed by the Germans. Accounts of the [battle for Tanga](#) on 2-4 November 1914 indicate that confusion was rife on both sides and a truce was finally arranged for the British to

withdraw their wounded. At the same time, on 3 November 1914, Indian Expeditionary Force C attacked the Germans at Longido, some 250 miles inland. This, too, failed in its objective.

In response to the chaos in East Africa, the British War Office assumed control of military decisions in the area, relieving the India and Colonial Offices of this task, although [India](#) remained responsible for the supply of equipment and [food](#). The result was that the War Office refused to sanction any further action in East Africa unless victory could be guaranteed. The commander, Major-General [Arthur Aitken \(1861-1924\)](#), was removed from his post and replaced by General [Richard Wapshare \(1860-1932\)](#), who commanded from 22 November 1914 to 3 April 1915. On the German side, the victory at Tanga ensured the dominance of the German commander Lettow-Vorbeck over that of the official head of the colonial military, Governor [Heinrich Albert Schnee \(1871-1949\)](#).

In April 1915 Wapshare was replaced by Brigadier-General [Michael Tighe \(1864-1925\)](#) as commander-in-chief. Tighe remained in command until December 1915 when General Sir [Horace Smith-Dorrien \(1858-1930\)](#) was appointed in his place. Smith-Dorrien's appointment followed prolonged discussions on the future use of South African troops who had served in the [German South West Africa campaign](#). The indecision over what to do about East and Central Africa took place in London where Lord [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#), secretary of state for war, was reluctant to sanction any action in the theatre, believing that it would be a waste of resources and manpower and that the future of the territories would be determined at the peace table. On 12 November 1915, whilst Kitchener was in the Dardanelles, Prime Minister [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#) took control of the War Office, enabling the Committee for Imperial Defence to agree to an attack on German East Africa using South African forces.

On 23 December 1915, Smith-Dorrien sailed from Britain to take command in East Africa. However, he fell ill and on 5 February 1916 was replaced by the South African Deputy Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Smuts, on the face of it, was an appropriate choice as the main force that would be fighting in East Africa in 1916 was South African. The South Africans fought their first battle before he arrived, on 12 February 1916 at Salaita Hill, near Taveta, where they were repulsed. Smuts arrived on 19 February 1915, rearranged the forces and started pressuring the Germans using the encircling movement which had proved successful in earlier South African wars. However, the East African terrain proved a hindrance to quick movement and the prevalence of tsetse flies meant that animals could not be used effectively. In addition, the Germans had realised that to remain a distraction, they should not fight fixed or set battles, with the result that as the net closed around them, they moved southwards across the colony.

In addition to the South African forces, consisting of white and coloured (mixed race) troops, the Cape Corps, the white 2nd Loyal North Lancashires and the 25th Royal Fusiliers (Legion of Frontiersmen), the latter having been sent out in 1915, Smuts had use of the Gold Coast Regiment and the 2nd West Indian Regiment, which arrived in July 1916 as well as Nigerians from December 1916.

The year 1916 was characterised by a dash across the length of the German colony. A few battles were fought but on the whole, the Germans spent their time avoiding being encircled by the Allied forces.

1917

In early 1917, Smuts was relieved of his command in East Africa to attend the Imperial War meetings that the new British Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) had organised. [Reginald Hoskins \(1871-1942\)](#), previously inspector general of the King's African Rifles, would be his replacement. On the last day of the battle for control of the Rufiji River crossing, 19 January 1917, Hoskins became commander-in-chief of the British forces in East Africa. Earlier in the month, he had flown from Kilwa to Nairobi to confer with Smuts about the handover, as there was no time to make the journey overland. As Hoskins was otherwise occupied, it was agreed that Smuts would meet the Portuguese East African governor and army officials to arrange future joint actions against the German forces operating in the south of the German colony.

Hoskins's stint as commander-in-chief lasted a total of four months, from 19 January 1917 to 1 May 1917, before he was replaced by another South African, Jaap van Deventer. Hoskins's tenure as commander had been marked by the rainy season, during which no military operations could be undertaken; even if it had been possible, the supply and communication lines needed repairing. His request for additional troops following Smuts' announcement that only "mopping up" operations were needed was too much for the War Office and van Deventer became the tenth British commander-in-chief of the East African forces.¹⁵

Van Deventer's appointment was political. In London, Smuts had been in discussion with Chief of Imperial General Staff, General [William Robertson \(1860-1933\)](#), over Hoskins' removal and van Deventer's appointment. Van Deventer had left East Africa late in 1916 and only returned on 29 May 1917 to take over from Hoskins. In addition, [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) had refused to send reinforcements from South African whilst Hoskins was in command, yet did so following van Deventer's appointment.

Van Deventer benefited from the preparations and repairs Hoskins had made. Although the

majority of South Africans had left the theatre, van Deventer still had regiments from Gold Coast, West Indies, Nigeria, and remnants of the Lancashires and Indian contingents. He also had an enlarged King's African Rifles Force comprised of twenty-six regiments and the Cape Corps – all believed to be more acclimatised to the conditions they were fighting in than the white man but who, in reality, suffered the same.

Before the change in British command took place, however, Lettow-Vorbeck entered Nyasaland on 9 May 1917, where he was held in check by Northey's forces. He returned to German East Africa before turning to Portuguese East Africa, believing it to be an easier target for replenishing food and equipment. In anticipation of this move, Hoskins met with the Portuguese East African governor in April 1917.

On 12 September 1917, the fourth expeditionary force arrived in the Portuguese colony, but this did not ease the tense relations between Portugal and its allies. The Portuguese forces were demoralised on arrival due to poor management and planning. In addition, the political issues dominating the homeland impacted the appointment of commanders and the instructions they were given. The situation was exacerbated by two rebellions. The first took place from March to September 1917 and was instigated by the Barué, who objected to additional taxes being imposed and increasing labour recruitment for the war. The second was led by the Makonde in the spring of 1917 as a result of taxation. To safeguard their own territories, Portugal's allies refused to come to the colony's assistance as they feared rebellion spreading into their areas.¹⁶

On the Lake Tanganyika side of the colony, the Belgians, realising that the fight was moving into Portuguese East Africa, declined to send any forces, preferring to protect their borders against raids by Wintgens and Naumann. This was a wise move, as on 4 May 1917 Wintgens occupied the Kitunda Mission and the following month Naumann defeated the Belgians at Ikoma. However, their success was short-lived as Wintgens had to surrender due to illness soon after entering the mission. Naumann, realising that he had misunderstood intelligence that he had received about an uprising in the north of the colony, surrendered to the Cape Corps at Wanyoki on 2 October 1917.

Whilst an agreement had been reached with the Belgians over maintaining separate spheres of action, the British-Portuguese relationship remained strained. A month after the fourth expeditionary force arrived, on 18 October 1917, the final attack in German East Africa took place at Mahiwa. A week later, Lettow-Vorbeck started what [Max Looff \(1874-1954\)](#), the captain of the *Königsberg*, called "the battle of the wolves",¹⁷ where those who were no longer fit to continue fighting were to surrender. On 17 November 1917, Lettow-Vorbeck submitted his whole force to a medical examination and those deemed sufficiently fit

marched into Portuguese East Africa on 25 November 1917. Three days later, on 28 November 1917, [Theodor Tafel \(1878-1963\)](#), not realising how close he was to Lettow-Vorbeck, surrendered. This was a major blow to Lettow-Vorbeck.

With Lettow-Vorbeck out of German East Africa, [Horace Byatt \(1875-1933\)](#) was appointed British administrator of the German colony on 11 December 1917. He felt this was a premature move and was proved right when the Germans returned to the colony en route to Northern Rhodesia. With Wintgens, Naumann and Tafel out of the picture, the British War Office ordered a reduction in the forces in East Africa and the Nigerians, West Indians, Indians and Lancashires were sent home.

1918

Lettow-Vorbeck continued through Portuguese East Africa leading the Allied troops as far as Nhamacurra and Quelimane before moving back to German East Africa. On 11 April 1918 he fought his first set battle against the Portuguese at Churimba Hill (Medo or Chirimba). Other battles in Portuguese territory took place at the end of August 1918 at Lioma and on 8 September 1918 at Mahua.

The last two battles were fought without the Portuguese, van Deventer having met the Portuguese governor on 22 July 1918 to allocate separate roles for the various forces, which in effect side-lined the Portuguese. The Battle of Nhamacurra earlier in July 1918 had proved the final straw for van Deventer, as Lettow-Vorbeck had been able to replenish his stocks completely to the extent that his forces no longer had to use the 1871 Mausers they had used in 1914. This was made possible by the poor performance of the Portuguese troops and the decimation of the British forces that had been sent in support.

Lettow-Vorbeck returned to German East Africa on 29 September 1918 and on 17 October 1918 left behind those who were too ill to continue. This time he left them, including General [Kurt Wahle \(1855-1928\)](#), at Ubená near Mbeya and Iringa. He had resisted pressure from Governor Schnee to leave them behind in Portuguese East Africa, preferring them to become British prisoners, certain they would receive appropriate medical assistance.

On 1 November 1918, the Germans attacked Fife (Northern Rhodesia) and moved onto Kasama, where they fought their last battle on 13 November 1918. News of the armistice in Europe arrived in Livingstone on 11 November 1918, but due to communication difficulties took two days to reach Kasama. Lettow-Vorbeck and his German force of 115 Germans, 1,168 *Askari* and 2,000 porters, formally laid down their arms on 25 November 1918 in Abercorn. This was in contrast to a total of 111,731 British troops, including porters, at the end of the war.¹⁸ After the conclusion of hostilities, 15,470 Belgian Congolese (officers, [Force Publique](#)

and [carriers](#)) received a medal in recognition of their war service,¹⁹ while an estimated 24,500 Portuguese (European and indigenous²⁰) survived the war.²¹

Themes

Personnel

Traditional accounts of the campaign focus on the generic, mainly white, forces, alongside significant publications on the King's African Rifles²² and carrier corps or porters who formed the backbone of the supply chain.²³ Although current studies are generic in nature, it appears that researchers are starting to explore the experiences of specific micro-nationalities such as black, Indian and coloured South African,²⁴ Faridkot,²⁵ Sikh,²⁶ Jammu and Kashmir Rifles²⁷ and Muslim;²⁸ as well as the roles they fulfilled.

It is estimated that over 1 million porters, including 45,000 German East Africans, served the British forces, of whom 95,000 died. The Belgians used 260,000 porters. Of these, 20,000 accompanied the troops for the duration of the war; 6,600 lost their lives. An estimated 60,000 porters supported the Portuguese with an additional 30,000 recruited to support the British forces. An estimated 191,719 porters worked for the Germans. All forces used local labour, commandeered or otherwise, to carry [food](#), [equipment](#) and ammunition. The German forces were the most lean, with an average of two carriers per soldier, whereas the Allied forces had up to six per soldier. Loads of up to sixty pounds were carried by an individual who also had to carry his own blankets and other equipment. As with the military hierarchy, there was a carrier hierarchy, with gun carriers enjoying greater status than food carriers. In addition to carriers, each officer had his own personal servants or batmen, also known colloquially as "boys", and a cook. Soldiers often shared the cost of employing a "boy" and/or cook. The importance of these support workers was evidenced by a nearly riotous outcry when Lettow-Vorbeck reduced the number of personal servants his officers had from fifteen to six.²⁹

All forces made use of casual labour as they moved through different areas and had specific needs such as road and bridge building. Women were also used as required, the most well known case being those who carried water eight miles to fill the traction engines of the Lake Tanganyika Expedition. Camp followers, including women and children, fulfilled various social and personal functions as well as [labour](#); although the British tended to discourage camp following.³⁰ In addition to the labour recruited, and commandeered, locally, specialised labour was brought in from the Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, [China](#) and [South](#)

[Africa.](#)

Combatants and labour joined the forces for a variety of reasons. Some volunteered for reasons of adventure or financial necessity. This was particularly the case in the first months of the war. However, as early as August 1915, the settlers in British East Africa approved the Native Followers Recruitment Ordinance, which permitted conscription using quotas. This was extended in March 1917 to the “Grand Levy” conscripting the largest number of men possible. In September 1915 the British colonists called for the conscription of white settlers. Yet in 1916, as a result of the environmental impact on the troops, it was felt whites were unsuited for fighting in East Africa. The outcome was the decision to increase the number of King’s African Rifle battalions. By the end of the war there were twenty-six battalions, including one battalion, 6KAR, which comprised *Askari* who had served in the German [Schutztruppe](#). They, together with the German *Askari* and Belgian *Force Publique*, proved that black soldiers could hold their own in this “white man’s war” and that they suffered from the environmental conditions as much as their white and Indian counterparts. [Michelle Moyd](#)³¹ has provided insight into the formation and life of the *Askari* in German East Africa whilst Myles Osborne³² looked at the Kikamba in British East Africa. Belgian insight is provided by the conference papers edited by Isidore Ndaywel e Nziem and Pampile Mabilia Mantuba-Ngoma³³ and Portuguese insight by Marco Fortunato Arrifes³⁴ and Ricardo Marques.³⁵

African micro-nation³⁶ loyalty was not to the colonising country but rather to individual officers. As a result, desertion was not uncommon when it was perceived that officers were no longer in positions of strength. Hodges notes that 2,847 *Askari* deserted over the course of the war,³⁷ some joining the British forces as combatants in 6KAR, stretcher-bearers or porters. The British also recorded desertions but do not appear to have kept totals.³⁸ War diaries record occasions of men being absent without leave for diverse reasons, including to buy cigarettes. Punishments ranged from floggings to soldiers being demoted to porters to execution in all forces.

Feeding the Forces

As part of his strategy, especially moving into less developed areas of the colony, Lettow-Vorbeck arranged for maize and other foods to be planted in the south of the colony. By utilising these sources and raiding the local harvests, he was able to keep his men sufficiently well fed. This contrasted with the British forces, who could not live off the land because of the German scorched earth policy. Supply lines became stretched the further away the forces moved from the railways, leading to men regularly commenting on the paucity of rations,

often linked with the challenges of movement.

As the campaign progressed, the ravages of war that left the countryside barren and resulted in the worst floods and droughts on record in 1916 and 1917, respectively. An estimated 30,000 people in one region died as a result of the drought.³⁹ These communities, especially those situated along the supply lines, were then ravaged by the [Spanish flu](#) that spread like wildfire in 1918.⁴⁰ In some areas, such as British East Africa, farming returned to some sort of normality after 1916 as the armed forces moved south. By 1918, there was virtually no evidence that the area had been involved in the war.⁴¹

Everyone was caught up, if not in the actual conduct of the fighting and support of the troops, then behind the lines producing food and other goods required for the purposes of war. In the territories not directly affected by the fighting, farming and food production demanded manpower that led to some clashes with the military command. Edmund Yorke⁴² examined the impact of the campaign on the local communities and missionaries in Northern Rhodesia as well as the tension between the military and the colonial leaders. His work builds on that undertaken by Melvin Page⁴³ in Nyasaland. Complimenting both is the work of Jan-Bart Gewald.⁴⁴

Organisation

The Allies under Smuts and subsequent commanders tended to adhere to traditional military structures which, in the East Africa context, hampered movement. In contrast, General Northey, operating in the south, although still adhering to the more traditional methods, had taken time to ensure he had adequate supply lines and roads in place before he started any offensive actions. However, it was Lettow-Vorbeck's almost complete breakaway from the traditional approach to [warfare](#) that enabled him and his forces to last as long as they did.

The German troops operated as independent units for most of the war. Wintgens and Naumann operated in the west, Tafel and General Kurt Wahle in the east, and Loeff in the south after Dar es Salaam had fallen. Health measures were given a high regard. A doctor was, as far as possible, assigned to each mobile column, meaning that the wounded could be seen to almost immediately. Quinine or Lettow-Schnapps was to be taken daily and anyone who failed to do so faced disciplinary measures. The Germans also wore long trousers and sleeves, which protected them from cuts and scrapes as well as being bitten by mosquitoes.

On the contrary, the British forces wore shorts, did not have quinine as regularly and had fewer doctors available, which meant that on occasion men had to walk for days through the

bush before they were able to access medical assistance. Until 1916 the Belgian *Force Publique* had no support services, as they were meant to be an internal policing force. Following the appointment of Tombour as commander, the forces became more independent and self-sufficient.⁴⁵ From the start, the [Portuguese Expeditionary Forces](#) were meant to be independent with their own medical, engineering and administrative personnel. However, none of the expeditionary forces were as effective as they could have been. The reasons for this were complex, related to political issues in Lisbon and poor morale.⁴⁶

Technology

During the war, all forces made use to varying degrees of motorcars (including armoured ones), lorries, bicycles (including motorised ones), boats and railways depending on the terrain encountered and vehicles available. Where possible, trucks were used to transport goods and the ill or wounded,⁴⁷ however roads were scarce and almost non-existent in the rainy season. Horses and oxen, although used, suffered as a result of tsetse flies. Camel and mules, slightly more resilient, were also used where available. The speed with which animals succumbed to the fly made them unreliable, with the result that there was literally a reliance on manpower to ensure food and equipment made it to the front lines. Both mechanical power and manpower had to contend with the poor roads, especially in the rainy season when the roads turned to mud and in the extreme dry period when the roads were dust pools.

Where Lettow-Vorbeck created independent mobile columns, abandoning and destroying equipment no longer usable, Smuts relied on the traditional base and supply line system. His reluctance to move his supply depots to coastal bases south of Dar es Salaam after the capture of the Central Railway exacerbated the supply situation. Only after Smuts left in January 1917 were the lines moved to Kilwa and Lindi. Although this shortened the distances men had to carry equipment and food, it was still a torturous activity. The longest supply line of the campaign was that supplying Nyasaland, which ran from Durban on the South African coast and consisted of ocean [transport](#), railway, river transport and porter.

As with all the Allied theatres, shipping was essential to keeping the forces supplied and for defence purposes. In addition, shipping was required to transport raw materials to processing areas and to remove the wounded in specially adapted hospital ships. In the blockade of the *Königsberg* alone, thirty-five vessels of various kinds were used. The need for shipping to support the European war effort resulted in pressure on van Deventer to conclude the campaign and release shipping for the [Western Front](#). The Germans, despite realising that they would have to be self-sufficient, were able to resupply to some extent when two

blockade runners, the *Marie* and *Rubens* (renamed *Kronberg*), successfully broke through. However, Zeppelin L79, which was sent in 1917, turned back when given misinformation.

[Aircraft](#), too, featured in the East African campaign. The one German plane succumbed to an accident early in the war, while the Belgians obtained two planes from the British in 1916. They were flown by Belgian pilots and used against the Germans at Kigoma. The British used spotter planes in the struggle against the *Königsberg* and as early as October 1915, the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) set up an air base at Maktau near Taveta,⁴⁸ although later the main base would be on Zanzibar. They were later joined by the 26th Air Squadron. From here, planes were used for observation purposes and to drop bombs and propaganda leaflets on the German forces in the hopes of persuading the *Askari* to desert.

Conclusion

The diversity of troops and countries involved in East and Central Africa was unrivalled in any other single theatre. The campaign proved the endurance of man and challenged the stereotypical racial views of martial and non-martial races. The black, Arab and Indian African micro-nations had little option but to get involved in the war. The only choice they had was whether to do so willingly or not. The African micro-nations came into their own as the campaign progressed, both as combatants and support. Those who could used the opportunity to develop themselves, some achieving higher levels of status and wealth in the post-war world whilst others were to eventually lead their countries to independence after World War Two.

European intentions in August 1914 had been not to involve East Africa in the conflagration. However, local actions dictated otherwise. Reactions were mixed. White settlers and residents were torn between rushing to Europe to defend the motherland and staying behind to protect their investments. As with previous European wars, it was believed this one would be over by Christmas 1914, which added to the rush to enlist, both overseas and locally. However, in British East Africa, the farmers slowly drifted back to their farms to oversee harvests. Reinforcements that were sent to East Africa were felt not to be needed on the Western Front for reasons of perceived ability, poor discipline or wanting to keep the war “white”.

The German military in East Africa realised that the only way it could support the motherland in its struggle was to attract as much manpower from Europe as possible. Although this did not materialise, they succeeded in detracting shipping and departmental time that could have been more usefully spent on organising supplies for Europe. Although the Belgians relied on the forces they had in their colony, the Portuguese supplemented their meagre

forces with four expeditionary forces in order to protect their African interests. By all accounts, all would have preferred to be in Europe where the main struggle was fought rather than in the “backwater”.

The dominance in the media of the conditions in Europe led to limited understanding of what the forces in Africa experienced. There was very little trench warfare, although trenches are visible around or on hills. These were used as a first line of defence, mainly by the Germans, who would evacuate when it looked like they would be surrounded. The war was mobile, with men walking many kilometres through all weather and terrains. Leave and rotation as experienced on the Western Front was scarce. Mail often took six months to reach the men on the front and receipt of news in Europe was difficult to obtain.

Around 75 percent of those serving [died](#) from malnutrition, malaria, dysentery and blackwater fever; this was before the Spanish flu took its toll of approximately 25 percent of the communities it reached. Apart from having to worry about the human enemy, wild animals had to be considered: lions were recorded as having carried some sentries from their posts and men from their tents. Crocodiles and hippos had to be considered when crossing rivers. Although the prevalence of wild animals technically meant meat was available when rations had not arrived, little could be shot due to the carry of the sound and the visibility of the smoke from fires in giving away positions.

At the end of the day, Kitchener was proved right: the campaign would be drawn out, drain the European war effort of much needed equipment and shipping and have no major impact on the outcome of the war. Decisions about the future of the continent would be decided by the victor in Europe, which it was – none of the countries were completely happy with the outcome of the territorial division and much of the continuing trouble on the continent today can be linked back to agreements made in the 1920s.

The campaign and its consequences provide opportunity for exploring aspects of the wider war, which are less obvious when looking at the European context. In particular, the campaign provides insights into the relationship between the Allies and their various civil and military departments. The role of the ambassadors and liaison officers deserves serious study, as these men were responsible for ensuring smooth relations between the different players.

Issues of identity, nation and memory are starting to be explored more in depth as anomalies and differences are encountered. The recent work by Moyd, Osborne, Yorke and Gewald has opened up the role of micro-nations for further investigation. Other anomalies concern allegiance and memory. For example, the German governor’s wife was a New Zealander, yet she supported the German war effort whole-heartedly. German commander [Tom von Prince](#)

(1866-1914) was British, but took on German nationality before the war. Austrians fought for the Germans whilst Scandinavians fought on both the Belgian and German sides. The South African forces too were anomalous, with Boers fighting for both sides. Australians, Americans, Italians and Greeks also feature in accounts. Memories of the campaign seem to be more prevalent in Europe than in Africa and vary between different micro-nations. With no outright victor of the campaign, the study of memory, identity and nation and the links between them should in time provide valuable new contributions to academia.

What was regarded as a sideshow, insignificant then but now not so insignificant, enables an understanding of the European conflict hitherto unsuspected and unrealised. For those involved in the theatre, it was anything but a sideshow – it was a struggle for survival against nature and man, with long-lasting consequences for those whose land became the battlefield.

Anne Samson, Great War in Africa Association

Notes

1. There were twenty-three territories and European, Indian and Arab micro-nations; the 154 black micro-nations were comprised of two in Nyasaland, 108 in Tanzania, twenty-six in Kenya, three in Zambia, four in Congo, two in Rwanda, three in Burundi and six in Uganda. ↑
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