

Historiography 1918-Today (Africa)

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Summary

This article outlines the historiographical development from Africa's treatment as a sideshow of World War I to attention to the conflict's global dimensions starting in the age of decolonisation and attempts to integrate Africa's role into this new narrative. Historiography on Africa in World War I has massively developed over the last thirty years, yet it is argued that there remain blind spots and desiderata, that stronger emphasis be put on African scholarship, and despite an increased awareness of Africa's role there remains a lot to be done for its full integration into the global narrative of the War.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Africa as a 'Sideshow'](#)
- [3 Increasing Attention to the Global Aspects of the War](#)
- [4 A New Narrative of a Global War?](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

Africa's role in World War I has traditionally been an issue (although for a long time a relatively minor one) in the [historiography](#) on both the First World War and the modern history of Africa (or more generally European colonialism). Recently it has also attracted the attention of scholars working in the fields of global history and transcultural studies. Topics focused on include [warfare in Africa](#) and its social, economic and ecological impact, recruitment of African soldiers and war workers and their deployment overseas, the role of African colonies in the [imperialist](#) powers' war economies, and more generally the impact of World War I on colonialism in Africa and possible links to [decolonisation](#) four to five decades later. This article will outline the development from a general neglect of Africa in early historiography on World War I and treatment of the continent as a mere sideshow, to increasing attention to the war's global dimensions beginning in the age of decolonisation, to recent attempts to integrate Africa's role into a new narrative of a global war.

Africa as a 'Sideshow'

Several 'African' aspects of the war had already been intensely discussed in Europe between 1914 and 1918, most prominently the use of hundreds of thousands of African troops on European battlefields by the French, the extension of warfare to Africa and the possible repartition of Africa by those European powers who would eventually win the war. The first post-1918 publications have to be seen in the same context, namely French attempts to justify their use of African troops in Europe (which continued with the [occupation of the German Rhineland](#) until 1930), and German agitation against the loss of their colonies, the "*Kolonialraub*" of [Versailles](#). Early publications in the immediate post-war years included memoirs covering both fighting in [East Africa](#)¹ and African [participation on European battlefields](#)², in addition to plenty of mostly official and semi-official French books and articles about the colonies' economic and military contributions.³ Popular German histories of the fighting in Africa⁴ were countered by British and French accounts mainly authored by senior military officials.⁵

During the 1930s and early 1940s publications would again discuss the deployment of African troops in Europe. Whereas heroization still dominated in France,⁶ a critical article by the colonial officer and geographer [Emmanuel de Martonne \(1873-1955\)](#) questioned official casualty figures as far too low.⁷ After the outbreak of World War II, some Nazi propaganda publications again reminded the German and international audience of the use of African troops and their alleged atrocities in the previous World War.⁸ The later half of the 1930s also saw some more German publications on the fighting in Africa.⁹

Scholarly historiography in the interwar period paid little attention to Africa's role in the First World War. In 1920, Scottish novelist, historian and politician [John Buchan \(1875-1940\)](#), who before the war had lived in [South Africa](#) and between 1914 and 1918 contributed to British [propaganda](#) working as correspondent in France for *The Times*, published a history of the (exclusively white) South African forces in France.¹⁰ [George Louis Beer \(1872-1920\)](#), American historian, colonial advisor to the Wilson administration during World War I, participant at the [Paris Peace Conference](#) and afterwards a member of [League of Nations](#) Mandate Commission, dealt with the African questions at the peace negotiations in a 1923 publication.¹¹ [Wolfgang Foerster \(1875-1963\)](#), a senior staff member of the German *Reichsarchiv*, published numerous documents related to the African theatres of war in his 1931 source collection *Kämpfer an vergessenen Fronten*.¹² And in 1934, American political

scientist [Shelby Cullom Davis \(1909-1994\)](#) completed a PhD thesis on the history of French West African troops at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva.¹³

On balance, Africa's role in World War I until 1945 was much more a political than a historiographical topic. The 'general' historiography of the war – scholarly, military and popular – was very strongly euro-centric. Africa in these narratives was a sideshow, at best. In numerous writings on World War I the continent was neglected altogether.

Increasing Attention to the Global Aspects of the War

While the overall notion of Africa as a sideshow to World War I persisted in the first decades after 1945, increasingly more attention was paid to its role due to the ongoing process of decolonisation, which for many contemporaries, including historians, was traced back to the experience of the two World Wars. Swiss historian [Rudolf von Albertini \(1923-2004\)](#), who already in 1966 had published a voluminous study of decolonisation,¹⁴ in a seminal 1969 article entitled *The Impact of two World Wars on the Decline of Colonialism* adopted a perspective of global history, arguing that decolonisation could not be seen as a mere by-product of the wars in Europe, but as an integral part of a structural change in world politics, characterised both by a transfer of power from Europe to the non-European world and a Europeanization or Westernization of this latter world.¹⁵

Africa's role in World War I now attracted increasing attention from military and colonial historians as well as those in the fields of international history and the history of Africa. Contributions from military history (in a wider sense) first included many publications on the operations in the African theatres and on the history of individual colonial units.¹⁶ The increasing influence of social history and the emergence of the "War and society" paradigm from the late 1960s on widened perspectives on social, political and economic aspects, including such topics as recruitment, war-related [migration](#) and the social and ethnic composition of African units.¹⁷ International history contributed several studies of imperialist powers' [war aims](#) in Africa and on the colonial repartition in 1919.¹⁸ 'General' histories of World War I, however, largely neglected the conflict's African aspects.

Colonial and African history, increasingly overlapping with military history and widening its perspectives, concentrated on topics such as the impact of World War I on individual societies and communities¹⁹ as well as on Africans' politicisation²⁰, anti-colonial resistance during the war,²¹ and the role of returned veterans in post-war societies²². Senegalese historian and politician Abdoulaye Ly and Guinean historian Ibrahima Baba Kaké emphasized

the use of Africans in European colonial units as a special type of imperialist exploitation.²³ The space dedicated to World War I in general histories of Africa or individual regions varied considerably. The French Germanist and historian Pierre Bertaux in his 384-page volume on Africa in Fischer's German-language world history series in 1966 addressed World War I in a mere three pages,²⁴ whereas Kenneth Ingham's 1962 *History of East Africa* had twenty-five pages on the years 1914 to 1918 and John Iliffe in his 1979 *Modern History of Tanganyika* dedicated a thirty-three-page chapter to the conflict.²⁵ Two classics of the early 70s nearly disregarded World War I: The 1972 bestseller *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by the Guyanese Marxist historian and politician Walter Rodney dedicated only a few lines to the African theatres of war and mentioned the far too low figure of 25,000 'French' Africans who lost their lives on European battlefields.²⁶ In the same year Burkinabé socialist politician and historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo in his *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire* covered African involvement in World War I in one single line and claimed that World War II brought many more Africans in contact with the wider world than its predecessor.²⁷ The seventh volume of the UNESCO *General History of Africa* (1985), on the other hand, contained a solid twenty-nine-page chapter on World War I by Michael Crowder. It summarized the war on African soil, the European exodus caused by the war, African involvement in the war, African challenges to European authority as well as the war's economic and socio-political consequences, and elevated World War I to a "turning-point in African history".²⁸

The late 1960s, 70s and 80s also saw the publication of more comprehensive works on several aspects of Africa during World War I. Several scholars provided studies abundantly based on primary material that synthesized the war experience of French colonies and protectorates: Charles-Robert Ageron in 1968 for Algeria,²⁹ Maurice Gontard in 1969 for Madagascar,³⁰ Daniel Goldstein in 1978 for Tunisia,³¹ Gilbert Meynier in 1981 again for Algeria³² and Marc Michel in 1982 for French [West Africa](#).³³ Combining political, social and military history, these books quickly became standard works for the regions covered. In 1981, Christopher M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner published a synthesis of World War I, focusing in particular on events in the [Middle East](#), as the climax of [France's](#) colonial expansion.³⁴ In addition some parts of Africa under British control were covered by monographs, including Nigeria by Akinjide Osuntokun in 1979,³⁵ and South Africa by Albert Grundlingh in 1987.³⁶ Furthermore, the history of military units composed of Black Africans, including their deployment during World War I, was the subject of several publications.³⁷ Two seminal article collections, a special issue of the *Journal of African History* in 1978 (based on

a 1977 conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London)³⁸ and a 1987 volume, edited by [Melvin E. Page](#)³⁹, provided outlines of the manifold topics and issues linked to Africa in World War I. Furthermore, a number of articles tried to summarize the war years either for the whole of Africa or for individual parts of it.⁴⁰

A New Narrative of a Global War?

From the late 1980s onwards, historiography on Africa in the First World War was affected by several overlapping 'turns' and historiographical developments. The 'cultural turn' brought the study of history closer to disciplines such as cultural anthropology, linguistics, cultural and gender studies, rather than, as with previous social history, to social sciences and economics. The trend towards transnational and global history focused attention on transcultural exchange and intercontinental entanglements. And the 'new military history' took an open approach to the study of war and collective violence in the past, expanding the purview of military history to include social and cultural factors that help shape wars.

The cultural turn in the study of 'African' aspects of World War I resulted in an increased interest in war experiences 'from below', mutual perceptions of Africans and Europeans, the role of gender, and memorial cultures emerging from the war experience. A good example for both the interest in war experiences from below and memorialisation of the war is [Joe Harris Lunn's](#) *Memoirs of the Maelstrom* (1999), an oral history based on interviews with eighty-five Senegalese World War I veterans conducted in 1982-83, which represented about half of the veterans still living at that time.⁴¹ Other studies covered different African communities' varying war experiences both in Africa and overseas.⁴²

The study of European perceptions of African soldiers, which had hitherto concentrated on the "[Black Horror](#)" campaign against the use of French colonial troops in the post-war occupation of the Rhineland,⁴³ was boosted by the seminal interdisciplinary volume *Tirailleurs sénégalais*, edited by the two German scholars of French literature, János Riesz and Joachim Schultz in 1989.⁴⁴ The 2001 monograph "*Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt*" by Swiss historian [Christian Koller](#) for the first time analysed European and North American perceptions of African and Asian colonial soldiers deployed in Europe from a strictly comparative perspective, arguing that under the surface of propagandistic antagonism common racist preconceptions can be observed on both sides of the Western front.⁴⁵ Several more studies concentrated on German perceptions of African soldiers individually and in the French colonial armies and French racial preconceptions about their own African soldiers as

well as public representations.⁴⁶

The study of gender aspects also largely focussed on the use of African soldiers in Europe and their perceptions by Europeans.⁴⁷ Whereas World War I's impact on gender in African societies has only partly been discussed in more comprehensive works, it has not been systematically analysed as an overall research focus.⁴⁸ The study of memorial cultures includes work on the collective memory of the war and [Spanish influenza](#) in different African societies,⁴⁹ on African and European autobiographical writing,⁵⁰ on official commemorations and the use of monuments in colonial and postcolonial West Africa,⁵¹ and on representations of African soldiers in both [French literature](#) and popular culture.⁵²

Imperial and colonial warfare as a topic at the intersection of "new military history", global history and imperial and colonial history has attracted increased attention in recent years and resulted in a range of new studies on the African theatres of war. This is especially true for the East African campaigns, emphasizing, for instance, the peculiarities of transcultural warfare (most notably in Tanja Bühner's 2011 book).⁵³ Several studies analysed the personality and the myth of General [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#), commander of the German troops in East Africa.⁵⁴ At the same time, a number of French books continued to celebrate the heroism of African troops in both World Wars,⁵⁵ several studies recounted the overseas experience of South African troops,⁵⁶ and Mohammed Bekraoui's 2009 book provided an overview on Moroccan participation in World War I.⁵⁷ The most comprehensive syntheses in this field of research are [Hew Strachan's](#) *First World War in Africa* (2004) that covers all African theatres of war,⁵⁸ and Jacques Frémaux's *Les colonies dans la Grande Guerre* (2006) that covers all French colonies.⁵⁹

In a programmatic article in the very first issue of the new journal *First World War Studies* in 2010, Hew Strachan has characterised World War I as a "global war".⁶⁰ But how strongly has this view materialised in a new narrative that no longer sees World War I as a European conflict with some overseas dimensions, but as an event to be studied from the perspective and through the methods of global history? And how has this new view affected the historiographical coverage of Africa's role? Several recent volumes have emphasized the war's global character and the manifold transcultural processes it triggered, prominently involving Africa.⁶¹ Contributions to these volumes, however, overwhelmingly stem from a small (though expanding) group of specialists in the field, mostly historians of Africa and Asia.

Yet, what of 'general' histories of World War I? While many of them still strongly focus on Europe, a number of edited volumes published during the last two decades at least include individual contributions on African and other extra-European aspects.⁶² The seminal encyclopaedia of the First World War edited by [Gerhard Hirschfeld](#), [Gerd Krumeich](#) and Irina Renz, published in German in 2003 and in English in 2012, includes entries on 'African' topics such as colonial warfare, colonial troops in Europe, South Africa, German South West Africa, German East Africa, [North Africa](#), and Lettow-Vorbeck as well as an introductory article on the war's global aspects. Yet the latter is located amongst articles on the course of the war, whilst the articles on systematic aspects (such as economy, women, etc.) and individual countries solely concentrate on Europe.⁶³ Also monographs and textbooks, as a few examples show, display an ambivalent picture. Niall Ferguson in his 1998 bestseller *The Pity of War* discussed [imperialism](#) and colonial expansion in his pre-1914 chapter, but completely left out Africa's and Asia's role in the war itself and the war's impact on colonial societies and European dominance in Africa and Asia.⁶⁴ On the other hand, [Leonard V. Smith](#), [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#) in their 2003 book *France and the Great War 1914-1918* (which exclusively deals with events in metropolitan France) cover the presence and perceptions of African troops relatively well.⁶⁵ [Lawrence Sondhaus](#) in his 2011 textbook *World War One. The Global Revolution* dedicates at least eleven of total 544 pages to 'African' aspects.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the last ten years saw the publication of several syntheses attempting to reconsider World War I from the perspective of global history.⁶⁷

On balance, research on Africa's role in the First World War has rapidly expanded during the last three to four decades both quantitatively and methodologically. Building on this research and profiting from the recent boom in global history, steps towards a new narrative of the War have been undertaken. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go.

Conclusion

Historiography on Africa in the First World War, having emerged from political debates during the war and immediately afterwards, has massively developed in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, following the methodological tendencies and innovations that shaped the study of history in general during these five or six decades. While much has been achieved, there are still some blind spots and desiderata. Furthermore, it is striking that most syntheses and many detailed studies are still done by European and North American historians, whereas the perspective of African scholars is still underrepresented – a fact that seems to reflect persisting general asymmetries regarding the

possibilities of historical research in Europe, North America and large parts of Africa. Stronger emphasis on African scholarship as well as the currently increasing, but still insufficient integration of Africa into a general narrative of World War I as a global conflict will be important tasks for the years to come.

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Notes

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