

# Historiography 1918-Today (Union of South Africa)

By [David Brock Katz](#)

## Summary

The First World War in Africa has been considered a sideshow compared to the catastrophe that took place in European theatre of war. As a result, the historiography of South Africa's participation in the First World War has reflected this relative lack of interest. South Africa's contribution to the First World War is dominated by Jan Smuts who played a leading role during the campaign in Africa and later in the British War Cabinet and at the Paris peace conference. Smuts has been harshly criticised by British historians, a situation that has persisted for decades. However, there are positive signs that South Africa's role in the First World War is finally being reassessed.

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## Introduction

The South African historiography of the First World War encompasses the [country's participation in the European theatre](#) (most famously, the battles of Delville Wood, Arras and Passchendaele), and the campaigns in German South West Africa (GSWA, 1915) and German East Africa (GEA, 1916-1918). The [campaigns in Africa were considered](#), up until recently, to be a mere "sideshow" to the main European theatre and the comparatively sparse historiography represents this diminution in importance.

# Historiography

## Personal Reminiscences

One of the first to publish an account of the campaign was Brigadier-General [John Henry Crowe \(1862-1948\)](#) who commanded the [artillery](#) in German [East Africa](#) under General [Jan Christiaan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#). By the author's own admission, it constitutes little more than a diary of the events of the campaign.<sup>1</sup> Brigadier-General [Charles Pears Fendall \(1860\)](#), a member of the Imperial staff under Smuts, and Lieutenant-General [Jacob van Deventer \(1874-1922\)](#) produced a solid campaign history from Crowe's personal reminiscences.<sup>2</sup> Fendall provides rare insight into the administrative and logistical challenges faced by the British force and the effects these challenges had on combat and movement.

[Deneys Reitz \(1882-1944\)](#) took part in nearly every major event of the Boer War and managed to repeat his omnipresence in the [Afrikaner rebellion](#), the GSWA campaign, the GEA campaign and finally, the [Western Front](#).<sup>3</sup> Major [Pieter Voltelyn Graham van der Byl \(1889-1975\)](#) wrote an autobiography in a similar vein.<sup>4</sup> He too served in both the GSWA and GEA campaigns and his memories of Smuts and General [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#), Prime Minister of South Africa, are valuable. Yet another personal account from an intelligence officer, revealing intriguing aspects of the GEA campaign under Smuts, is that of Major [Philip Jacobus Pretorius \(1877-1945\)](#).<sup>5</sup> Colonel [Richard Meinertzhagen \(1878-1967\)](#) also served as an intelligence officer in GEA and offered harsh criticism of the conduct of the war in general and specifically Smuts' ability as a military strategist.<sup>6</sup> The fraudulence of Meinertzhagen's work was exposed by Brian Garfield in 2007.<sup>7</sup> This revelation came too late for some heavyweight researchers who had relied greatly on Meinertzhagen's work.

## Official and Semi-Official Histories

The first official history was authored by [John Buchan \(1875-1940\)](#).<sup>8</sup> The first official history which dealt specifically with aspects of the war in Africa was published in 1923 and was compiled by Major [Johann Gottlieb Wilhelm Leipoldt \(1877-1945\)](#), a land surveyor who served as an intelligence officer during the war.<sup>9</sup> This general history remained the only single volume book dealing with [South Africa's](#) entire First World War effort until [Bill Nasson's](#) book in 2007.<sup>10</sup> It would take nineteen years after the publication of Leipoldt's history before South Africans produced two further official works, authored by [John Johnston Collyer \(1870-1941\)](#) the South African Chief of Staff during the First World War. Significantly he had served in both

the GEA and GWSA campaigns and had an intimate knowledge of the day-to-day operations from a South African point of view.<sup>11</sup> These official histories, following the trends of the times, have been described as little more than narrow military chronicles.<sup>12</sup>

The most comprehensive work on GEA appeared in 1941 as part of the British official histories.<sup>13</sup> The author relied on the work of the South Africans Leipoldt and Collyer, making good use of both publications. The work, originally meant to consist of two volumes, was reduced to one, covering GEA from August 1914 to September 1916. The non-publication of the second volume leaves a lacuna for the period after September 1916 to the end of the war.

Further semi-official histories made a rather belated appearance in the early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> The first two books deal with the South African campaign in GSWA and GEA and are heavily reliant on the official histories in general and that of Collyer specifically.<sup>15</sup> The next two works in the series possess somewhat more merit. The first deals with the 1<sup>st</sup> South African [Infantry Brigade](#) in Libya and Europe and the second with the largely overlooked subject of blacks and their contribution to the war.<sup>16</sup> Albert Grundlingh and B.P. Willan have also significantly contributed to the neglected area of black participation.<sup>17</sup>

## The Other Side of the Hill

The fourteen volume official history of the Imperial German army in the First World War ignored the war in Africa.<sup>18</sup> These events would be left for some of the participants to explore in the absence of any official German narrative on the subject. The most famous of these accounts, if not the most informative, are the reminiscences of General [Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#).<sup>19</sup> The role of the Governor of GEA, [Heinrich Albert Schnee \(1871-1949\)](#), overshadowed by Lettow-Vorbeck, has been overlooked by historians.<sup>20</sup> Dr. [Ludwig Boell \(1889\)](#), a staff officer in GEA, produced the closest product to a German official history on GEA in the wake of the destruction of the Colonial Office records in World War II.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, [Ludwig Deppe \(1873\)](#) covered interesting medical aspects of the campaign from the German side.<sup>22</sup>

## Biography

There is a gaping lacuna in the historiography when it comes to biography of South African generals serving in the First World War. The biographies that do exist are restricted to Smuts

and Botha. One of the first books offering an adverse opinion on Smuts' lack of generalship was authored by Captain [Harold Courtenay Armstrong \(1892-1943\)](#).<sup>23</sup> The subtitle of the book, *A Study in Arrogance*, reveals much about the position that the author adopts in building his general biography of Smuts and, specifically, in assessing his conduct of the GEA campaign. Sir [William Keith Hancock \(1898-1988\)](#) has also produced a monumental biography of Smuts.<sup>24</sup> This book is one of the few based on an in-depth utilisation and analysis of Smuts' personal papers, housed at the National Archives in South Africa and, as such, it has not yet been superseded by more modern research on the war in Africa. There are a number of biographies that make passing reference to Botha's First World War record.<sup>25</sup>

### Popular and Campaign Histories

Typically Eurocentric, drum and trumpet style operational histories began to emerge in the 1960s. The first of these books was by Brian Gardner, followed a year later by that of [Leonard Mosley \(1913-1992\)](#).<sup>26</sup> Published next in a similar vein, short on bibliography and footnotes but long on sensationalism, was that of J.R. Sibley, stirringly if inappropriately named *Tanganyikan guerrilla*.<sup>27</sup> The book is peppered with Meinertzhagen's influence especially with regard to assessing Smuts' performance. The most readable of all these works, if perhaps not the most scholarly, is a book by Charles Miller.<sup>28</sup> [Edwin Hoyt \(1923-2005\)](#) continued to propagate the popular guerrilla theme.<sup>29</sup> [Byron Farwell \(1921-1999\)](#) authored the first book covering the entire war in Africa, complete with refreshing departures from those of his predecessors.<sup>30</sup> Farwell is able to place Lettow-Vorbeck's ability to survive the campaign in a more meaningful context in a style reminiscent of "new" history decades before its advent.

Setting the tone for the emergence of "new" history, was a conference held at the University of London on the Great War in Africa.<sup>31</sup> The conference highlighted the devastating impact and the significant changes for the inhabitants of Africa brought about by the war. The issue of Africa as a "sideshow" was put into perspective and the enormous human and economic cost, although a fraction of that in Europe, was brought into focus.

### Modern and "New" History

With few exceptions, new academic scholarship has failed to redress and reassess the myths created by the above historical works. The new histories have largely sidestepped the issues of the cult figure of Lettow-Vorbeck, his mythical guerrilla doctrine and the incompetence of the Allied generals in the face of a wily adversary. The new history has largely focused on the social issues brought about by the war in Africa. Thus, to a large extent, some of these myths

persist unabated and unattended to, due to the unpopularity of military history among the more academic researchers. The personality of Smuts has consequently suffered from what amounts to a rehash of secondary sources, where authors have repeated each other's prejudices and errors, resulting in an accelerated downward spiral.

British historians were at the forefront of reintroducing the history of the First World War in Africa during the early 2000s. Ross Anderson was among the first offering new insights into the campaign.<sup>32</sup> [Hew Strachan](#) has produced a book on the entire First World War in Africa and, as such, this rather thin volume describes the military operations in their broader context, rarely delving into the details of individual battles.<sup>33</sup> Refreshingly, Strachan manages to debunk some of the mythology surrounding Lettow-Vorbeck. Furthermore, Strachan attacks Smuts' approach to mobile [warfare](#). He accuses Smuts of adopting enveloping manoeuvres rather than direct attacks, thereby seeking to avoid the carnage of the [Western Front](#) battlefields.<sup>34</sup>

Nasson lays siege, with equal vigour, to Smuts' overall strategic and operational plan for the conduct of the campaign in GEA. He finds little merit in Smuts' idea to conduct a mobile campaign by using flanking and encircling maneuvers and utilizing numerical superiority to dislodge the enemy rather than conduct frontal offences similar to those contributing to the carnage of the Western front.<sup>35</sup> Edward Paice presents a more balanced and considered approach in assessing Smuts' military performance on campaign in GEA.<sup>36</sup> His battlefield analysis is more in depth and less overtly critical, acknowledging the difficult conditions beyond the control of the warring parties.<sup>37</sup> The latest work signifying a reassessment of Smuts and a more balanced approach to his conduct of the GEA campaign is that of Stuart Mitchell.<sup>38</sup>

[Anne Samson](#) has analysed the political manoeuvring and the motivation behind South Africa's entry into the First World War.<sup>39</sup> Samson picks up the expansionist thread as one of the more important motivations for South Africa's entry into the conflict. Research in this area has been neglected or only referred to in passing by some of the more modern authors since the work of Simon Katzenellenbogen, Noel George Garson and Ronald Hyam in the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Samson places South Africa's campaign in GEA in the proper context of an exercise in nation-building and as part of an expansionist agenda set by [Great Britain](#) and a sub-[imperialist](#) program set by Smuts. Nasson has also tackled the political aspects of South Africa's entry into the First World War but has concentrated more on the home front and the effects of the war on society rather than international relations.<sup>41</sup>

The sinking of the SS *Mendi* in 1917 and the role played by the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) during the First World War is an episode that has seen something of a revival in the new democratic South Africa. Norman Clothier maintained that the “death dance” performed on the sinking Mendi by doomed members of the SANLC was more than mere legend, while the likelihood of this is disputed by Albert Grundlingh.<sup>42</sup>

There are two works that cover huge swathes of South Africa’s military history which include references to the First World War. [Tim Stapleton](#) deals with the First World War in a concise manner and draws heavily from Nasson and Anderson.<sup>43</sup> Ian van der Waag has relied more heavily on archival sources in producing *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (2015) and thus provides new insights and original thought about South Africa’s contribution to the First World War.<sup>44</sup> Among a plethora of original material in van der Waag’s book is South Africa’s almost forgotten intervention against the Senussi in the Middle East campaign and an article on the Battle of Sandfontein in response to the work of Rodney Warwick.<sup>45</sup> Van der Waag dominates the academic scene with extensive publications dealing with South African preparations and involvement before and during the First World War.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

The historiography of South Africa’s participation in the First World War has suffered due to the conflict’s status as a “sideshow” when compared the European theatre of operations. Scholarship on South Africa’s participation in the First World War is dominated by works produced by British historians. The reminiscences of Richard Meinertzhagen and the biography of H.C. Armstrong have had an especially strong influence on British historians and their perception of Jan Smuts’ role in the war. The changing political landscape in South Africa has consigned South Africa’s participation in the First Word War to the national periphery. This “national amnesia” has contributed to a dearth of research on the subject. There are, however, promising signs emanating from South African academic circles of a revival in interest in and a more balanced approach to assessing South Africa’s participation.

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## Notes

1. Crowe, J.H.V.: General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa, London 1918. ↑
2. Van Deventer commanded a Union Defence Force formation in GSWA and later a mounted brigade in GEA. He then took over command of all the British imperial forces in the region from Smuts. Fendall, C.P.: The East African Force 1915-1919: The First



- World War in Colonial Africa, Uckfield 2014. ↑
3. Reitz, Deneys: Trekking On, Edinburgh 1933. ↑
4. van der Byl, Pieter Voltelyn Graham: From Playgrounds to Battlefields, Cape Town 1971. ↑
5. Pretorius, Philip Jacobus: Jungle Man, New York 2001. ↑
6. Meinertzhagen, Richard: Army Diary 1899-1926, London 1960. The viewpoint among some historians is that these diaries of Meinertzhagen may have been a reconstruction some years after the event rather than a diary of the actual event. ↑
7. Garfield, Brian: The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud, Washington 2007. ↑
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9. Anonymous, The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1918, Nashville 1924. ↑
10. Leipoldt, Johann Gottlieb Wilhelm: The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918, Pretoria 1924; Nasson, Bill: Springboks on the Somme, Johannesburg 2007. ↑
11. Collyer, John Johnston: Campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915, Nashville 1937 and Collyer, John Johnston: The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa, Nashville 1939. ↑
12. Grey, Jeffrey: Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clio: the rise and fall of Union War Histories, in: Scientia Militaria 30 (2000), p. 255. ↑
13. Hordern, Charles: Military Operations East Africa volume 1 August 1914-September 1916, London 1941. ↑
14. van der Waag, Ian: Contested Histories: Official History and the South African Military in the Twentieth Century, in: Grey, Jeffrey: The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth, Westport 2003, p. 42. The Ashanti Series is described by van der Waag as a "concealed" or "secret history" where most of the authors were unaware of their government sponsorship. The series was commissioned by the government during the negotiations for a democratic South Africa in the early 1990s to elicit support from Western powers. ↑
15. L'Ange, Gerald: Urgent Imperial Service: South African Forces in German South West Africa 1914-1915, Rivonia 1991 and Brown, James Ambrose: They Fought for King and Kaiser: South Africans in German East Africa 1916, Rivonia 1991. ↑
16. Digby, Peter: Pyramids and Poppies: The 1st SA Infantry Brigade in Libya, France and Flanders 1915 -1919, Johannesburg 1993 and Gleeson, Ian: The Unknown Force: Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars, Johannesburg 1994. ↑
17. Grundlingh, Albert: Black Men in a White Man's War: The Impact of the First World War on South African Blacks, in: African Studies Seminar Paper 125 (1982); Grundlingh, Albert: Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War,

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18. Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918: Bearbeitet im Reichsarchiv published between 1925 and 1930. ↑
  19. Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul von: Heia Safari! Deutschlands Kampf in Ostafrika, Leipzig 1920. See also Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul von: Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika, Leipzig 1920; Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul von: Mein Leben, Biberach an der Riss 1957. ↑
  20. Schnee, Heinrich: Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkriege. Wie wir lebten und kämpften, Leipzig 1919. ↑
  21. Boell, Ludwig: Die Operationen in Ostafrika, Weltkrieg 1914-1918, Hamburg 1951. ↑
  22. Deppe, Ludwig: Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika, Berlin 1919. ↑
  23. Armstrong, Harold Courtenay: Grey Steel: A study in arrogance, London 1941. ↑
  24. Hancock, William Keith: Smuts: The Sanguine Years 1870-1919, London 1962 and Hancock, William Keith: Smuts: The Fields of Force 1919-1950, London 1968, vol. II. ↑
  25. Meintjies, Johannes: General Louis Botha, London 1970; Engelenburg, F.V.: General Louis Botha, Pretoria 1928. ↑
  26. Gardner, Brain: German East: The story of the First World War in East Africa, London 1963 and Mosley, Leonard: Duel for Kilimanjaro: An Account of the East African Campaign, New York 1964. ↑
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  30. Farwell, Byron: The Great War in Africa, 1914-1918, New York 1986. ↑
  31. Rathbone, Richard: World War I and Africa: Introduction, in: The Journal of African History, 19/1 (1978), pp. 1-9; Willan, The South African Native Labour Contingent 1978. ↑
  32. Anderson, Ross: The Battle of Tanga, 2-5 November 1914, Stroud 2001. ↑
  33. Strachan, Hew: The First World War in Africa, Oxford 2004. ↑
  34. Ibid., pp. 131-138. ↑
  35. Nasson, Springboks on the Somme 2007. ↑
  36. Paice, Edward: Tip & Run, London 2008. ↑
  37. Ibid., p. 398. Paice contends that the war in East Africa was ultimately a war against nature. ↑
  38. Mitchell, Stuart: Jan Smuts, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in German East



- Africa, in: Krause, Jonathan (ed.): *The Greater War: Other Combatants and Other Fronts 1914-1918*, New York 2014. ↑
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41. Nasson, Bill: *WWI and the People of South Africa*, Capetown 2014. ↑
42. Clothier, Norman: *Black Valour – The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918 and the Sinking of the Mendi*, Pietermaritzburg 1987; Grundlingh, Albert: *Mutating memories and the making of a myth: remembering the SS Mendi disaster, 1917-2007*, in: *South African Historical Journal* 63/1 (2011), pp. 20-37. ↑
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## External Links

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- [Crowe, John Henry Verinder: General Smuts' Campaign in East Africa, London 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Hordern, Charles: Military operations East Africa, Vol. 1: August 1914-September 1916, London 1941 \(HathiTrust\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul Emil von: My Reminiscences of East Africa, London, c. 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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