Prisoners of War (Africa)

By Daniel Steinbach

Summary

During the First World War Africans served as combatants, porters, and labourers in Africa and Europe where many became prisoners of war. POWs in Africa were generally swiftly incorporated into their captor's forces as soldiers or non-combatants. Those taken in Europe were interned in special camps where they became a subject of German war propaganda and were studied by anthropologists and other scholars. Research on African POWs in Africa is severely restricted by the lack of available sources from the colonial theatres of war.

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Introduction

During the First World War around 750,000 Africans served as soldiers and labourers in Europe and more than 2 million served in Africa itself.[1] Like most active war participants, a significant number became prisoners of war. It is generally difficult to establish accurate numbers of the men who became prisoners of war.[2] To undertake this task specifically for African POWs is nearly impossible. The reasons for this difficulty are threefold: Firstly, Africans interned in Europe were not necessarily registered as 'African', but according to their religion (especially Muslims) or their status as colonial soldiers. Secondly, only a minority of Africans – especially in Africa, but also in Europe – served as soldiers. The majority instead served as labourers, porters, or in other auxiliary positions.[3] These roles affected their legal and social status when they fell into the hands of the enemy. Thirdly, the breakdown of the German colonial administration in Africa, and the severe shortcomings of the French and British colonial bureaucracies during the war, combined with broad disinterest in the fate of

these men resulted in only scant official reports. As a result, colonial archival files in Europe contain only very incoherent statistics on African POWs which makes sound research on these men difficult.

Africans as Soldiers and POWs

In 1914, with the exception of Liberia and Abyssinia, all Africans lived under colonial rule by a European power. As these European powers went to war, their colonies turned into theatres of war and recruitment grounds for soldiers and labourers deployed in Europe.[4] As a result, millions of Africans were affected by the First World War, either as active participants, such as soldiers, porters, or labourers, or as civilians who lived in a warzone. Those African men who served as regular combat soldiers were regarded through, and subsequently deployed according to, contemporary European racial stereotypes, linked to the contemporary theory of martial races. These stereotypes were based on sharp distinctions between North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans and were underpinned by notions of racial, religious, and 'civilizational' differences between these categories. Similarly, few Africans at that time subscribed to the concept of a shared 'pan-African identity', and soldiers from different parts of Africa were themselves divided by linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences. In the context of this differentiation, the concept of an 'African war experience' is difficult and to some extent arbitrary. Yet, what all these men shared was their status as colonial subjects, deprived of most of the rights that European soldiers enjoyed, and in most cases coerced into a war that was not theirs.

The lack of reliable quantitative sources is mirrored by very few qualitative sources. Given the low rate of western literacy at the time, ego-documents by Africans serving in the war are extremely rare. Where these exist, they are mostly limited to accounts by men who were, or who went on to become, political or religious leaders who wrote about their experiences after the war.[5] Oral testimonies provide a more useful insight into Africans' war experience, but do not shed significant light on the topic of internment.[6] Reflecting the small number of Africans who became POWs, and echoing the general reluctance of most POWs (African or otherwise) to speak about their internment, only snippets of information exist. Contemporary sources by Europeans in the colonies mention African prisoners and prison camps, but mostly as side remarks. However, Africans interned in Germany were widely discussed in governmental, scientific, and public sources. Their experiences became – together with the experiences of other colonial POWs, like Indian sepoys – part of a German propaganda effort.[7]

This imbalance in the available sources is also reflected in the historiography. Since the 1970s a number of monographs have explored the First World War in Africa, setting the

perspective of Africans in the centre of the research. Based often on interviews with veterans, we now have a selection of case studies from all parts of the continent. However, the experience of internment does not feature prominently in these accounts and only a few articles discuss the issue in detail.[8] Mostly the focus of these is on exceptional prisoners, like those who were, or would go on to become, local leaders. So far no study has fully explored the internment of Africans in Africa during the First World War.

Works on Africans serving in Europe pay more attention to prisoners of war, but – unlike the Second World War – no study is solely dedicated to the African POW experience. This is particularly surprising as research on colonial POWs in Germany has developed into a diversified and active field.

Internment in Germany

Among the imperial powers, France was the only country that deployed Africans as combatants in Europe, and these served mainly on the Western Front, but also at the Macedonian Front and Gallipoli. Britain, for ideological reasons, refused to allow African soldiers to serve in combat roles outside of Africa itself. However, throughout the war both France and Britain recruited 200,000 Africans to serve as non-combatants who, after being shipped to Europe, worked as civilian labourers or – in often hazardous conditions – on the front itself.

Germany quickly realised the propaganda potential of the colonial troops deployed by its enemies in Europe. In 1915, it established two special POW camps near Berlin, dedicated solely to non-Europeans prisoners: the *Halbmondlager* at Wünsdorf, especially for Muslim prisoners, and the *Weinberglager* at Zossen. The treatment the POWs received in both camps varied for different prisoners at different times, but as these camps were planned and utilised for a propaganda effort towards domestic and international audiences, conditions and amenities were better than in average camps in Germany. Germany also hoped to entice colonial POWs to defect as part of ambitious, yet unrealistic, plans to deploy anti-imperial agitators in French, British and Russian territories, train propagandists to infiltrate the French and British armies on the Western Front and create units to fight alongside Ottoman troops.[9]

Not only religious, but also racial differences played an important part for Africans in the camp hierarchy. Following contemporary racist theories, North Africans were regarded as racially ‘higher’ and culturally more ‘civilised’ than sub-Saharan Africans, which affected the treatment these men received. It is especially noteworthy that these colonial soldiers from Africa were foremost perceived solely as Africans, secondly as enemies, and only thirdly as soldiers. This meant that African soldiers found themselves in a situation where it was not

their status or rank as soldiers that defined their treatment, but rather their ethnicity. Paradoxically this resulted in them being put into places where the conditions were significantly better than those provided to ordinary POWs in Germany. However, this 'special treatment' also went hand in hand with being reduced to 'trophies' displayed to the German public for propaganda purposes.[10]

The most important example of this was the exposure to academic research undertaken by anthropologists, linguists, and others.[11] Deprived of access to the former German colonies in Africa, and barred from travelling to French or British territories, these researchers took the opportunity to study, measure, and categorise the POWs from across the globe. Africans, it appears, did not receive different treatment than members of other groups like Indians or men from Central Asia.

Internment in the Ottoman Empire

African men serving with British and French troops were also involved in the campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. Here the most important was the Egyptian Front and, from 1917, the conquest of Palestine. Thousands of Egyptians were part of the defence of the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal and the subsequent attacks against the Ottomans. While not serving in combat roles, the 50,000 members of the Egyptian Labour Corps were involved in every stage of the campaign. To date – and unlike Indian POWs taken by the Ottomans – there is no research on the treatment these men received if they became POWs.[12] The same is true for the small number of soldiers from French West Africa who were part of the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign by the Entente powers in 1915.

Internment in Africa

The vast majority of Africans who experienced internment became prisoners in Africa itself. The authorities – both civilian and military – in all belligerent colonies did not develop a coherent and legally binding process for dealing with African prisoners, blurring the lines between civilian internees, forced labourers, exiles, and military prisoners of war.

The first Africans to be incarcerated during the First World War were those African leaders or groups suspected by the colonial administrators of harbouring anti-colonial sentiments. In August 1914 most colonials shared a fear that the outbreak of hostilities among the white colonisers would either lead to an African rebellion or to widespread African support of the respective enemies. For example, in the Cameroons, King Rudolf Manga Bell (1873-1914) was arrested and later executed by the German colonial administration.[13] In British East Africa (Kenya), the authorities deported individuals from the urban centres and entire villages on

the border with German East Africa (Tanzania) to remote internment camps in Somaliland. These measures can be regarded as examples of the nervous colonial state and a continuation of pre-war practices. A particular group singled out were African members of Christian mission societies who belonged to an ‘enemy nation’. German authorities in particular suspected that French and British missionaries and their staff were involved in espionage or sabotage. Being unable to deport any ‘enemy aliens’, both European nationals and also African mission members were arrested and interned.[14] The former generally received suitable accommodation, sufficient nutrition, and adequate medical support in their various places of internment. The latter, who were separated from the European civilian internees, were in several cases deliberately humiliated, exploited, or executed during their imprisonment.[15] While their numbers were small (and again no reliable statistics exist for their exact number), in the eyes of many colonials they represented a substitute target: They embodied both the military enemy by speaking English or French and also the ‘civilised African’ vilified by colonial settlers.

The various Allied campaigns against the German colonies (German East Africa, Cameroon, Togo, and German Southwest Africa) differed significantly in character, length, and impact. For example, while the South African-led conquest of German Southwest Africa relied almost exclusively on local white combatants, the other theatres of war saw soldiers from across the African continent, India, and Europe. Although this adds to the difficulties of capturing a specifically African war experience, some general patterns did occur across the continent and throughout the war. The backbone of the various Allied colonial forces – for example, Britain’s King’s African Rifles in East Africa or France’s *tirailleurs sénégalais*, as well as the German *Schutztruppen* – consisted of a regular professional colonial standing army. These men had served in their respective regiments for years, developed a strong *esprit de corps* and were for social, financial, and personal reasons dependent on and committed to their colonial rulers. Their pre-war experience, status, and motivations differed significantly from those African men who volunteered or were recruited for military service after the beginning of the war. Yet, even their combined numbers were dwarfed by the hundreds of thousands of labourers and porters who were pressed or lured into service by all colonial belligerents. Given the size of these armies, the difficulties in securing food rations and medical supplies led to enormous rates of sickness, injury, and death among combatants and auxiliaries.

Given these conditions, taking large numbers of prisoners of war and interning them for the duration of the conflict was not a policy adopted by the belligerents. Several accounts by both African and European soldiers stress the high rates of murder (and subsequent mutilation) after surrendering to the enemy. While contemporary witnesses and European war propaganda attributed this behaviour to specific ethnic groups or cultural practices, there

appears no recognisable pattern to verify this.[16] Linguistic differences, lack of proper training, and an absent threat of prosecution might have allowed for such behaviour to occur. However, given the nature of military encounters in African theatres of war, individual soldiers more likely died of their injuries or of a lack of medical care after a battle than of deliberate killings.[17] It is, however, easy to verify the difference of treatment when falling into the hands of the enemy by the skin colour of the soldier: most white officers and rank-and-file soldiers could rely on being treated significantly better than their African comrades. In addition, when becoming a prisoner, racial belonging was more important than military rank, with arrest reports differentiating only between ‘whites’ and ‘natives’. The former were generally interned in existing camps constructed for civilian ‘enemy aliens’ and treated according to military customs and legal regulations.

The fate of African soldiers after becoming prisoners differed depending on the place and time of their arrest as military authorities and colonial administrators regarded these men either as an expensive burden or a welcomed replenishment of military ranks and civilian labour. Given the shortage of experienced soldiers, officers for example regularly tried to persuade African soldiers to change sides. Some soldiers, especially N.C.O.s, rejected these offers while others were willing to ‘swap uniforms’ to avoid imprisonment and its consequences or were enticed by more pay or better conditions. Especially in the long, drawn-out campaign in German East Africa, it appears that several soldiers changed sides several times during the duration of the war. One veteran remembered the practice as follows:

> That was what happened to me. They [the British] usually sent you to their camps, made soldiers out of you and sent you to fight your old masters. If you had a rank in the German army, they would also give you a ranking position in their army.[18]

Those men who were sent to POW camps were swiftly integrated into the colonial war economy. All colonies suffered an acute shortage of labourers during the war which affected work on private plantations and public infrastructure, for example railways and the maintenance of roads. Colonial authorities appeared to have little hesitation about using African POWs en masse to fill any labour gaps. For example, in 1915 559 African prisoners taken by South African forces in German Southwest Africa were sent to Cape Town.[19] In 1917 the British military authorities transported 800 African prisoners of war from partially-occupied German East Africa across the border for road-building work in the north of British East Africa.[20]

For most camps there are no official reports on the treatment and the conditions of these

POWs carrying out labour assignments, as systematic inspections by the authorities appear not to have taken place. While in some cases, e.g. South Africa, prisoners received a small daily payment, in the increasingly chaotic campaign in German East Africa, prisoners were forced to work in chain gangs.[21] Despite correspondence between colonial and military officials on the status and welfare of these prisoners, comprehensive reports and statistics on employment and fatalities are rare. One exception is the internment camp in Nairobi, the capital of British East Africa. Between August 1916 and January 1919 about 2,800 Africans were held captive there. On average 600 prisoners were in the camp with 6 deaths per month.[22] However, there is no information on the fate and survival rate of those prisoners who left the camp.

Conclusion

The internment of colonial subjects during the First World War has been a dynamic field of research over the last two decades. However, the focus has nearly been entirely on the camps in Germany, leaving out Africa where most colonial soldiers served. The established work has convincingly shown the important cooperation between military, civilian, and scientific actors in the camps in Europe and the (mis-)use of these prisoners for purposes of research, propaganda, and politics. However, Africans – especially those from outside the Maghreb – received much less attention than Indian or North African prisoners. Exploring the practices and experiences of colonial internment outside Europe remains a challenging task. While important work has been carried out to include African soldiers and civilians in the narratives of the First World War in Africa, their voices get lost when they come from behind barbed wire. A systematic, comparative approach to interment and labour during the First World in Africa would fill an important gap in the history of colonial population control with its forced movement and mass incarceration of colonial subjects. However, given the limited availability and accessibility of sources, this is a difficult gap to fully fill.

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Notes

1. In this article the term ‘African’ is used to refer to colonised ‘black Africans’ and not white South Africans or white residents of other African colonies. ↑
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9. Höpp, Gerhard: Muslime in Der Mark. Als Kriegsgefangene und Internierte in Wünsdorf Und Zossen, 1914-1924, Berlin 1997; Evans, Andrew D.: Anthropology at War. World War I and the Science of Race in Germany, Chicago 2010; Roy, Franziska / Liebau, Heike / Ahuja, Ravi (eds.): When the War Began We Heard of Several Kings. South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany, New Delhi 2011; Riesz, János: Afrikanische Kriegsgefangene in Deutschen Lagern Während des Ersten Weltkriegs, in: Hofmann, M. And Morrien, R. (eds.): Deutsch Afrikanische Diskurse in Geschichte und Gegenwart, Amsterdam/New York 2012, pp. 71-106. ↑
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11. Evans, Andrew D.: Capturing Race. Anthropology and Photography in German and Austrian Prisoner-of-War Camps during World War I, in: Hight, Eleanor M. and Sampson, Gary D. (eds.): Colonialist Photography. Imag(in)Ing Race and Place, London/New York: Routledge 2002, pp. 226-256; Evans, Anthropology at War, 2010. ↑
12. Jones, Heather: Colonial Prisoners in Germany and the Ottoman Empire. In: Das, Santanu (ed.): Race, Empire and First World War Writing, Cambridge 2011, pp. 175-193. ↑
13. Austen, Ralph A.: Duala Versus Germans in Cameroon. Dimensions of a Political Conflict, in: Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer 64/4 (1977), pp. 477-497. Another unusual example: Gewald, Jan-Bart: Mbadamassi of Lagos. A Soldier for King and Kaiser, and a Deportee to German South West Africa, in: African Diaspora 2/1 (2009), pp. 103-124. ↑
14. British Civilian Prisoners in East Africa. A Report by the Government Committee on the Treatment by the Enemy of British Prisoners of War, London 1918, pp. 7-8; Die

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18. Thom Sukala, interview I-30, Zomba, Malawi, 14 September 1972, conducted by C. Y. Yuwayeyi & Melvin E. Page; courtesy of Prof. M. E. Page. ↑
19. South African National Archives, 1CT.15/9, Native Prisoners of War. Detention in Cape Town. ↑
20. Kenya National Archives, PC/Coast/1/9/5, Porters and Labours for P.W.D. ↑
21. Imperial War Museum London, K. 35303, H. Bayliss-Stokes, Report of Experiences of a Doctor, Prisoner of War in German East Africa. ↑
22. The National Archives [UK], WO95/5364, Part VII. East Africa, Cameroons, West Africa (Subseries: Lines of Communication), Report by Post Commandant Nairobi. ↑

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- Austen, Ralph A.: Duala Versus Germans in Cameroon. Economic Dimensions of a Political Conflict, in: Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire 237, 1977, pp. 477-497 (Portail Persée) (Article)

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Memory and historiography > Memoirs and testimonies
Society > Crime and discrimination > Discrimination
Society > Everyday life, civilian war experience > Rationing and shortages
Society > Religion and ethics > Mobilisation, religious
Society > Social groups > Colonial labourers
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Africa
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Balkan peninsula
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Near and Middle East
Warfare and the military > Battles, battlefields and campaigns > Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Western Front
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