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# Organization of War Economies (Africa)

By Karin Pallaver

This article provides a brief overview of the contribution of African economies to the war and of the ways in which colonial economies were re-organized to respond to the demands of the war period. Its main aim is to provide an understanding of the ways in which African economies integrated into the European war economies and how economic relationships between Africa and metropolitan powers changed in a world dominated by the war.

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## Introduction

At the time of the outbreak of the Great War, the African continent, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, was entirely colonized by Europeans. As a consequence, virtually the entire continent was involved in the conflict. The more direct effects were felt in the colonies where the war was actually fought, for example the German colonies and the neighboring territories, and in those areas where soldiers were recruited for the European fronts. However, all African colonies and their economies were involved in the war, either directly, through the production of strategic materials to sustain the European war effort, or indirectly, because of disruptions to international trade, as well as the exclusion of German companies from African markets. Therefore, to Africans who fought as soldiers in Europe or carried munitions and food on African battlefields, and to Africans who contributed to the war off the battlefield with their labor and their produce, the war seemed to centre on Africa itself.<sup>[1]</sup>

General surveys of the First World War in Africa always discuss the importance of the economic participation of the colonies to the war effort. [2] There are no specific studies, however, on African economies during the war on the continental level, although single case studies have been carefully investigated. [3] This article is an attempt to provide, on the basis of the available literature, a brief overview of the contribution of African economies to the war, and of the ways in which colonial economies were organized to respond to the demands of the war period. It is clearly difficult to generalize, without simplifying situations characterized by huge differences in the productive capacities and available resources of individual colonies, as well as varying degrees of involvement on the part of the relevant colonial state in the pre-war economy. Some countries were actually only marginally touched by the war, like Ethiopia or the recently conquered Libya, while others, like those neighbouring with German East Africa, contributed significantly both with manpower and the production of food for the troops. Nonetheless, the outbreak of the war changed the international trade patterns and the degree of control of European governments over African economies, and this caused a general reorganization of colonial economies. An analysis of the African economies from 1914 to 1918 helps

to illustrate how they integrated into the European war economies and how economic relationships between Africa and the metropolitan powers changed in a world dominated by the war. More generally, understanding colonial economies during the period helps make clear the real extent of participation from Africa in the First World War.

## Disruption of International Trade and Tighter Control by the Colonial State

Whether or not directly involved in the fighting, nearly every African territory was affected by the wartime shortages of imports caused by scarcity of shipping, the sudden booms in demands for strategic resources, and the exclusion of German companies from African trade.<sup>[4]</sup>

The outbreak of the war created problems in shipping that caused a reorganization of the international trade on which the economies of some colonies had depended. During the war, shipping remained vital to maintain the economic links between the colonies and European countries, but pre-war shipping patterns were disrupted by higher freights and increased scarcity of tonnage, as well as by the German U-boat campaign. Shipping shortages caused bottlenecks that disrupted external trade. The shipping shortage was particularly devastating for those colonies that produced commodities which were not essential for the war effort, such as coffee, tea or cocoa. In the Gold Coast, the export of cocoa was dramatically reduced to favour the export of oleaginous products, and this affected local producers, middlemen, merchants and shippers. In the Sudan, shipping problems led to the cancellation of regular calls at Port Sudan, leading to new arrangements for the shipment of goods overland to Egypt.

Before the beginning of the war, German commercial houses had dominated the import and export trade of many West African colonies. In Sierra Leone, for example, they enjoyed an 80 percent share of the total trade. From the outbreak of the war, however, the Allied colonies were forbidden to trade with German companies and commercial houses. Before the war, German companies had been very powerful in the Nigerian market, dominating Lagos' export trade, and maintaining a good share of the imports. The ban on trade with the enemy cut off commercial links between Nigeria and Germany. With no more German competition, British merchants could increase their share of the colony's trade. However, exports were reduced overall. Before the war, West African oleaginous products had been mainly exported to Germany, where local industries transformed them into finished products. After the beginning of hostilities, this export came to a sudden halt. French West Africa's main export products, including peanuts, palm oil and palm kernels, that had previously been transported to Germany, had to be diverted to Great Britain. The sharp decline in the trade of palm products for German industries caused revolts in the Niger Delta and in mid-west Nigeria. In the Sudan, the export of gum to the Hamburg market was brought to a standstill.

Some colonies had been also largely dependent on German imports. In the Gold Coast, the import of axes, hoes and matches was stopped after the outbreak of the war.<sup>[14]</sup> Another important consequence of the ban on German companies was the withdrawal of German shipping companies, for example the Woermann Linie in West Africa. The elimination of German competition changed pre-war patterns of sea trade and created new opportunities for British shipping companies, especially Elder Dempster.<sup>[15]</sup> In general terms, war conditions favoured large European shipping and commercial companies at the expense of smaller African producers.<sup>[16]</sup>

The disruption of pre-war commercialization networks and problems in shipping reduced the amounts of goods that could be imported to the African colonies. At the same time, the wartime demands for foodstuffs and <u>labor</u> increased internal price levels and caused a rise in import prices and the cost of living. [17] In Kenya, inflation caused a decline in real incomes by 38 percent between 1912 and 1916. In South Africa, prices rose more rapidly than wages and this caused a sharp increase in the cost of living and contributed to heightening social conflict. In the Gold Coast, price of foodstuffs had increased by 50 percent by 1918, and that of basic commodities by 100 percent. This increase was also related to the rise of custom tariffs to finance the war effort. In Ethiopia, the war had isolated the country from its traditional buyers and sellers and the Addis Ababa workers had difficulties in finding employment in transport construction and daily labor. [21]

If the decrease in imported goods created distress in some areas, elsewhere it favoured the development of import substitution \$Organization of War Economies (Africa) - 1914-1918-Online

production. In Nigeria, economic growth was stimulated by the local production of certain items. In 1917, a new colliery was opened in Udi that made possible the production of coal locally instead of importation. The government also opened new sawmills to produce good timber, and roofing tiles were produced locally to replace imported iron sheets.<sup>[22]</sup> In the Gold Coast, thanks to African producers' initiative, soap started to be produced locally.<sup>[23]</sup> Owing to shipping problems, as well as rise in freight, insurance costs and import charges, competition for African markets was reduced and this favoured the rapid development of secondary industrialization. In South Africa this increased by 72 percent between 1915 and 1920.<sup>[24]</sup>

German colonies were entirely cut off from Germany by British naval blockades. In German East Africa, these were enforced beginning in 1914. Only two ships reached the colony during the war, one in April 1915, and another in March 1916. Many German factories closed down, because they had no more access to international markets, and also because German settlers enlisted in the military. As a consequence of the blockade, the domestic and civilian economy became largely self-sufficient: quinine, cotton cloth, blankets, khaki shirts, candles, soap, cigarettes, spirits and shoes, among other goods, started to be produced locally. Of the 1,000 kilograms of quinine used during the war, half were produced locally. [25]

The need to better exploit the colonial economies to support the war effort caused major state interventions in many of the colonial economies. *Laissez-faire* economic policies that had dominated the British approach were abandoned during the war in favour of a stronger imperial direction and control. The Colonial Office asked the British colonial governments to apply policies of strict economy that led, among other things, to the curtailment of public works projects.<sup>[26]</sup> Government requisitions of produce for the army, especially grains, foodstuffs and hides, became common in French West Africa. Prices were fixed by the government and, despite some negative effects, this shielded African producers from currency fluctuations that occurred during the war period.<sup>[27]</sup>

In the German territories, colonial governments strictly controlled local economies in order to respond to the problem of disrupted communications with Berlin. In Cameroon, soon after the outbreak of the war, Governor Karl Ebermaier (1862-1943) took control over all supplies and properties in the colony and imposed a centralized and interventionist control over the economy through the mobilization of manpower, the local manufacture of munitions, a policy of price control and the requisitioning and rationing of foodstuffs. [28] In German East Africa, commerce was restricted and foreign trade stopped. The government fixed the price of foodstuffs and basic commodities: tinned food and cloth were fixed at 25 percent above pricing that prevailed before the war. [29]

African economies were reorganized to favor the production of those commodities that, owing to the war, had become scarce in Europe, or that were strategically important to the war effort. Consequently, those products that had dominated some African economies before the war, like cocoa or coffee, were neglected and exports decreased or stagnated.

## African Products for the European War

In a discussion on the organization of African economies during the war, two main aspects have to be taken into consideration. On the one hand, colonial governments tended to expand the production of already existing exports that could be useful for the war effort, and tended to neglect those products whose commercialization was made difficult by the outbreak of the war. On the other hand, new resources were developed both to sustain the war effort in Europe and to be used as replacements for goods whose trade had been limited by the war. The capacity to find and exploit new resources depended on the degree of control achieved by the colonial state at the time of the outbreak of the war.

A common trend was the development of food production both for the armies and for the European population. The French colonies in North Africa, especially Algeria and Tunisia, were fundamental to resupplying France. Grains, especially wheat, barley and oats, were exported to France to feed the civilian population after the 1917 food supply crisis. Mutton was exported from North Africa to supply the French and British armies. [30] In order to compensate for the delays in the transport and commercialization of foodstuffs caused by the war, food was often processed in the colonies before being exported. In Madagascar, for instance, manioc was processed locally to produce flour. [31] In Eritrea, the production of tinned meat, already initiated in 1913, was increased tremendously in order to feed the Italian army. A total of 12 million tins were shipped to Italy from Eritrea during the war. [32] In Sudan, food production increased by 100 percent between 1915 and 1917. Meat was exported to Egypt and in 1917 the Sudanese government signed an agreement that all exportable food had to be sent to Egypt. A \$Organization of War Economies (Africa) - 1914-1918-Online

resource board was established to control food supplies.[33]

In the colonies directly involved in the fighting, the production of foodstuffs had to be increased in order to feed local troops and porters. In German East Africa, the internal food supply was reorganized through the creation of collecting points along the central railway, where <u>food</u> was assembled and then redistributed to the troops. German settlers, who did not enlist in the military, turned their production of export crops into maize, potatoes and wheat to sustain the troops. However, from 1916 to 1917, when the campaign moved to the south of the colony, the troops had to rely on the local production of food, since there were no European plantations in the area.<sup>[34]</sup>

The war was a true watershed in the economic history of Kenya, as it created a favourable situation for the white settlers, and at the same time caused a closer incorporation of African peasants into the colonial economy. The value of settlers' exports, especially coffee, sisal and flax, recovered in 1915 and 1916 compared to the declines experienced throughout 1913 and 1914. The settlers' success was based on pre-war investments, but also on the maximization of opportunities arising out of the war, especially the production of vegetables and meat to sustain the Allied forces. [35] African local production of foodstuff came under the control of the state, owing to the enormous demand for foodstuff for troops and porters engaged in the East African campaign. Thanks to this, the Maasai increased their wealth significantly during the war, since they sold cattle to the army, and, since mainly male and low grade cattle were sold, stock reserves could be maintained. [36]

From West Africa, the most important export products for the war were oleaginous products, needed to produce, among other things, glycerine essential in making munitions. [37] Great Britain discovered the importance of controlling the trade and commercialization of Nigerian oils, and during the period of German submarine attacks, the British government intervened to move Nigerian oils to Great Britain. This significantly increased exports that in 1917 exceeded those of previous records. The money obtained went into the pockets of large European export companies, English producers and the Nigerian government, but low prices continued to be paid to Nigerian producers. [38] French West Africa also contributed to the war effort with palm oil, palm kernels and peanuts that were bought by the colonial state and transferred to Great Britain or France for transformation. Between 1917 and 1919, the only oleaginous products that reached France were peanuts from Senegal, and this, according to Marc Michel, created a period of "reciprocal dependence" that, however, did not last after the war. [39] In West Africa, all four British colonies suffered from the reduction of shipping, loss of markets, high price of imports, loss of manpower diverted to the war and a decrease in public works construction. [40]

In the mining sector, some productions were developed, whereas others were interrupted after the outbreak of the war. In Southern Rhodesia, the mining sector remained the most important export sector of the economy, whereas agricultural production was negatively affected by the congestion of the British Empire's transport network and the uncertainty of deliveries. [41] The search for new resources to support the war effort led to the opening of new mines, such as the Udi coalmines in Nigeria and the bauxite reserves in the Gold Coast. [42] The extraction of Katanga in the Congo was developed during the war. Elsewhere, however, production was interrupted. De Beers, for instance, suspended the production of diamonds, owing to the probable detrimental effects of the war on the international demand for luxury products. This had consequences on the labor market: in South Africa, 5,000 whites and 45,000 black workers were dismissed and mining activities were only partially resumed in 1916. [43] Another South African product whose export was ruined by the war, were ostrich feathers. Their trade had boomed before the war, but after the beginning of hostilities, the European market for luxury products almost entirely closed up. The Karoo ostrich farming industry was ruined and thousands of local workers, mostly poor rural Coloured laborers, became unemployed. [44]

Overall, during the war Africans had to pay more for their non-subsistence requirements, pay more taxes, and supply more labor and produce to the colonial government. At the same time, however, Africans received the same wages and were confronted with dramatically different market conditions.

## The Mobilization of African Manpower: Old Tensions and New Opportunities

The employment of soldiers and carriers for the war effort was an unprecedented mobilization of the African labor force, with important social and economic consequences. The most significant mobilization was that of soldiers and porters for the East

African campaign. The British employed 1 million people, among them 200,000 porters from Nyasaland, which constituted two thirds of the total male population. The Belgians employed about 250,000 porters from the Belgian Congo. [45] The demand for laborers for the war in German East Africa induced people to flee to avoid conscription. This increased the number of squatters on European plantations and therefore the availability of laborers for settlers' enterprises. [46] Military laborers also reached East Africa through inter-colonial migrations. British West African military carriers and transport laborers were in fact employed in the East African campaign, including nearly 1,350 motor drivers from the Gold Coast. [47]

France recruited the most substantial number of African soldiers for the Western front.<sup>[48]</sup> In French West Africa, tensions developed between the large recruitment of men and the need to increase food production in the colonies, especially sorghum, maize and beans, to feed the troops and the civilian population in Europe. Recruitment policies in French West Africa led people to migrate to neighbouring colonies to avoid conscription. This reduced problems of labor shortages in some areas, for instance, in the Gold Coast mines.<sup>[49]</sup> This broad recruitment created many problems in the organization of agricultural work and the division of labor, leading to a decline in food production as well as disruptions to some industries.<sup>[50]</sup> Owing to the recruitment of soldiers, crops were neglected in the Niger Valley and this, together with unfavourable weather conditions, led to a widespread famine.<sup>[51]</sup> In Nigeria, the recruitment of carriers and soldiers caused a curtailment in public work projects.<sup>[52]</sup> In some instances, forced labor was employed to replace conscripted soldiers and carriers. In the Belgian Congo forced labor was employed in the Katanga mines in order to replace porters recruited for the war effort in Northern Rhodesia.<sup>[53]</sup>

In the Portuguese colonies, mobilization of human and material resources initially intended to affect the outcome of the fighting in Europe, demanded a material control of the territory that Portugal simply did not have. The mobilization that took place was therefore restricted to aiding the war effort in Africa. Labor could be efficiently mobilized, especially porters, because Angola and Mozambique were already labor reservoirs for neighboring colonies, specifically for the mining sector in South Africa. However, in contrast to Great Britain and France, who employed resources of their colonies to boost the war effort and to reinforce their armies fighting on the Western and other fronts in Europe, Portugal was confined to using colonial resources to support the war effort in Africa itself.<sup>[54]</sup>

The war also created opportunities for African workers, who could replace European workers and settlers who left for the front. The mobilization of Europeans forced the government of French West Africa to review its policy towards the training of Africans for positions previously filled by Europeans, like agricultural supervisors, postal officials, custom officers and mechanics, among other professions. Medical schools were established to train assistant doctors.<sup>[55]</sup> In the Gold Coast, African workers replaced Europeans as engine drivers on the railways and as mechanics in the mines.<sup>[56]</sup> During the war, African laborers also migrated to Europe, to replace European workers who had been sent to the front. Workers from Algeria, Tunisia and Madagascar were employed in France, and from Libya in Italian ammunition factories.<sup>[57]</sup>

Finally, labor shortages during the war made African workers more aware of their bargaining power, and this sometimes led to unrest and strikes. In 1917, there was a strike in the Obuasi gold mines in Ghana, during which workers asked for better work conditions and pay.<sup>[58]</sup>

### Conclusion

The First World War presented African economies with opportunities and constraints. In general, African economies were brought under tighter control by European colonial powers, by way of price controls, the requisition of food crops, the compulsory cultivation of certain crops, and the recruitment of labor, both for the army and for economic production. <sup>[59]</sup> In many colonies the war caused the intensification of the cultivation of cash crops and foodstuffs, the development of an industry for the local transformation of food, and new investments in the mining sector. <sup>[60]</sup> During the war, the resources of the colonies were surveyed in an unprecedented way, through mineralogical and agricultural studies and research. This led to an increased knowledge of the economic potential of the colonies, as well as to the creation of new instruments to exploit colonial resources.

The outbreak of the war caused a great dislocation in the internal and external flows of trade, but war demands and import substitution encouraged and increased domestic economic activity in the colonies. The war caused a halt in public works construction, but also stimulated the introduction of the internal combustion engine and the building of navigable roads to many \$Organization of War Economies (Africa) - 1914-1918-Online

parts of the continent. In East Africa, for example, the protracted campaign against the Germans led to the construction of roads to facilitate the transport of supplies. In the areas where there were sustained military activities, infrastructure was developed, as was the case in the ports of Dakar and Mombasa.<sup>[61]</sup>

African economies contributed to the war effort, but the war also stimulated post-war investments. The war made evident the limited capabilities European powers had to exploit their own colonies, a point highlighted in the writings of colonial officers from the period. In an interview given in 1918, Gaspare Colosimo (1859-1944), the Italian Minister for the Colonies, underlined that the only way to exploit the African economies in the post-war period was to develop railways and ports. Similarly, Albert Sarraut (1872-1862), in his *La mise en valeur des Colonies Françaises*, noted that the absence of railways to bring African produce to the ports, had placed serious limits on colonial contributions to the French war effort, and was detrimental to the development of the colonies. The economic expansion between the two world wars was also due to measures introduced during and immediately after World War I, such as the intensification of the production of certain products, the search for new materials and a general increase in the control over African economies. Undoubtedly, the First World War changed the relationship between African and European economies, and served as the basis for post-war colonial economic policies.

Karin Pallaver, University of Bologna

Section Editors: Melvin E. Page; Richard Fogarty

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