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# Ordeal and Opportunity: Ending the First World War in Africa<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Studying the history of World War I in Africa reveals dimensions of the global conflict and its aftermath that deserve our attention. The war was an ordeal for hundreds of thousands of Africans whom Europeans conscripted as soldiers and laborers, as well as for those who suffered the war's devastating outcomes, including widespread famine, the influenza pandemic, and destruction of livelihoods. The post-war period also presented Africans with opportunities, however limited, to pursue new socio-political roles, new economic prospects, and in some cases, to challenge colonial authority. African wartime and post-war experiences help us to see how empires mobilized colonized subjects to serve their interests. At the same time, they highlight African strategies for living with colonialism in its myriad forms.*

A disturbing image appeared in *The New York Times* on January 27, 1918.<sup>2</sup> It showed an *askari*—an African soldier in the German colonial army (*Schutztruppe*) in East Africa—guarding a group of eight African men chained together around the neck.<sup>3</sup> A bundled load—perhaps the soldier's kit—occupies the center of the image. Below the picture's lengthy descriptive caption, readers learned that it had been produced “from a photograph found in the possession of a captured German officer.”<sup>4</sup> The image was

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positioned at the bottom of the newspaper page below a variety of different scenes of the Great War in Europe. It is the only image on the page that depicts Africans. Beyond the information about the image's supposed provenance, the page offers no explanation of what the African prisoners had to do with the war, why an African soldier was guarding them, who took the photograph, or where it was taken.<sup>5</sup>

The image seems out of place amidst the other images on the page. These included a portrait of a sixteen-year-old Australian private, members of the Lafayette Escadrille attending a memorial service for a fallen fighter ace, and the German and Austro-Hungarian emperors engaged in discussion with their military commanders on the Italian front. *The New York Times'* readership likely knew only bits and pieces about the African campaigns of World War I. Coverage of the war in Africa was sparse in *The New York Times* and other U.S. media outlets. The image suggests a level of callousness and brutality that echoes throughout other images of Africa in circulation around this time, especially those of atrocities committed in the Congo Free State under King Leopold. In those images, the individuals who represented the primary agents of colonial violence were African soldiers or police.<sup>6</sup> The picture of brutal treatment of African prisoners in *The New York Times* may have simply confirmed white perspectives of Africa in the early twentieth century, through representations of African peoples in decontextualized and racist tropes.<sup>7</sup> Although the photo stood out from the others on the newspaper page, as a part of the visual culture of empire, it was in many ways standard fare.

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African soldier hints at the significant level of violence involved in mobilizing African populations for war. These mobilizations occurred both alongside and beyond the battlefields of the four African campaigns of World War I, which were fought in the German colonies of Togo, Cameroon, German Southwest Africa, and German East

Africa. The conscription of African laborers and troops was embedded in the wider violence of military campaigns occurring in these places. The German colonies became targets of Entente colonial forces at the war's outset, as Entente powers anticipated, correctly, that conquest and occupation of

these lands would accrue more land to their empires. Togo fell to British forces in August 1914, Southwest Africa to South African forces in 1915, and Cameroon to combined French, British, and Belgian forces in 1916. The campaign in German East Africa lasted until November 1918, when German *Schutztruppe* commander General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck finally surrendered to the British in Northern Rhodesia, or what is today Zambia.

The image of African prisoners directs our attention to colonial reliance on forced labor, the violence inherent in using such labor regimes, and the punitive practices that accompanied this violence. The date of the photograph is unspecified—it may have been taken between 1914 and 1918. It might also have come from an earlier time in German colonial history. We only know what the caption tells us. In many ways though, these details are irrelevant. The mechanisms by which colonial powers pressed African men, women, and children into various forms of unfree labor were largely the same before, during, and after the war. What changed during the war was the scale. European mobilization of African troops and workers during World War I in Africa reflected longstanding colonial practices of labor conscription, resource extraction, and land grabs. The war exacerbated the harshest conditions of colonial occupation. This is the lens through which we should seek to understand the effects of World War I on Africans and Africa.

The mobilization of people and resources to fight, whether on the side of the German Empire or the Entente, was unprecedented and often accomplished through military violence.

African peoples resisted by fleeing from recruiters, sometimes crossing borders into adjacent colonial territories where they hoped to evade recruitment drives. Others chose to directly oppose colonial conscription. In Nyasaland (Malawi) in 1915, Reverend John Chilembwe inspired an armed resistance to colonial

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labor demands and incited his congregation to take up arms against colonial agents and settlers. Although the labor conditions that provoked this resistance grew out of the war's insatiable demand for people, they had precursors in colonial labor practices that had shaped African societies, economies, cultures, and politics for several decades prior to 1914.

*The New York Times* image was quite a departure from the best-known representations of the *askari* which, especially after 1918, showed them as loyal, heroic, and dedicated soldiers to the German colonial cause. This

tension between the two representations hints at the complexity of their history and legacy. Lettow-Vorbeck and the *askari* who fought alongside him during the East African campaign committed many abuses against African communities. They seized provisions and livestock, disrupted planting and harvest cycles, and pressed people into work for which they rarely received adequate compensation. Women were forced into performing domestic labor for soldiers on the march and were frequently the targets of sexual violence.<sup>8</sup>

Like his German counterparts fighting in Europe, Lettow-Vorbeck prioritized military necessity in prosecuting the East African campaign. While on the march, columns of his troops ruthlessly exploited African communities, requisitioning food stores, crops, and livestock. In the latter stages of the campaign, they also seized people, especially to fill the ranks of porters and laborers. In prioritizing military objectives over all others, Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign ensured that significant portions of eastern and southeastern Africa would suffer from wartime devastation well into the post-war period. German East Africa's last colonial governor, Heinrich Schnee, was appalled at Lettow-Vorbeck's refusal to entertain any notion of preserving the colony for future development under continued German rule. But military necessity won the day, as it did in so many other places between 1914 and 1918.<sup>9</sup>

To make things worse, the columns of Entente soldiers did the same things as they pursued the *Schutztruppe* throughout eastern and southeastern Africa until Lettow-Vorbeck's surrender in November 1918. The devastating effects of these depredations on East African populations also caused significant hardships due to famine and the spread of the influenza pandemic to the region through globalized military shipping and soldiers' and laborers' travel around the world.

Lettow-Vorbeck's surrender to the British in Northern Rhodesia, a territory administered by British colonial authorities, in November 1918, marked the end of a campaign that had lasted more than four years. The Entente's numbers far exceeded those of the *Schutztruppe*, as did their ability to resupply their forces. Despite the Entente's numerical superiority, Allied armies had great difficulty in stopping the *Schutztruppe* in part because of Lettow-Vorbeck's highly mobile style of warfare, which forced Entente troops to pursue his columns across vast distances. In the campaign's final year, much of the fighting took place not in German East Africa, but in Portuguese East Africa.

Other parts of the continent formerly colonized by Germany also experienced such transitions in colonial authority, which usually accompanied military occupation. Campaigns in Togo, German Southwest Africa,

and Cameroon ended earlier in the war and resulted in implementation of new governance as victorious British, French, Belgian, and South African colonial authorities considered how to integrate these new territories into their administrative structures.<sup>10</sup>

In all of these cases, British, French, Belgian, or South African occupation of territories formerly colonized by Germany resulted in changes in African peoples' everyday lives as they navigated survival under new colonial regimes. All of Germany's former colonies became League of Nations Mandate territories after the Versailles settlement. German East Africa became known as Tanganyika Territory, administered as a British mandate beginning in 1920. Belgium gained authority over Rwanda and Burundi, formerly part of German East Africa. In West Africa, Togo and Cameroon were divided between British and French mandatory control, and Southwest Africa was administered by South Africa. In North Africa too, new chains of authority and exchanges of power emerged as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated and as British and French imperial influence expanded in the region. What might we learn if we shift the vantage point away from international diplomatic efforts to create a new world order through the League of Nations, and rather toward those most affected by the war and its aftermath?

Africans were forced to navigate new colonial regimes, recovery from wartime devastation and military occupation, and different social and economic prospects and risks in all of the territories mentioned above. Survival required individuals to consider the implications of living under differently configured colonial governance structures and cultures, and to strategize in order to live within those systems. These regimes were "at once autocratic and paternalistic," and, at their core, racist.<sup>11</sup> While European colonizers' administrative practices shared many commonalities, post-war changes in administrative languages, district organization, and economic priorities required adjustments in everyday lives. In Africa's interwar period, there is no triumphal narrative of a straight line of colonial rule leading to independence, though certainly African soldiers, veterans, workers, and others expressed discontent with the imposed governance during and after the war in different parts of the continent.<sup>12</sup> One exception was Egypt and the 1919 Revolution, where politicians' assertions of anti-imperialism and self-determination resulted in real challenges to British regional designs.<sup>13</sup> By 1922, Egypt had achieved nominal, if not actual, independence.<sup>14</sup>

In most other parts of the continent, however, the end of the war brought additional hardships for most Africans. In the former German colonies, British, French, Belgian, or South African colonial authorities

occupied the territories militarily before eventually taking over day-to-day administration of these new colonial territories. The post-war military occupation and transfer of administrative control occurred alongside, and often contributed to, the compounded effects of the global influenza pandemic, devastating famine, and displacement of populations.<sup>15</sup>

In British Tanganyika, for example, up to 80,000 people may have died as a result of influenza between 1918 and 1920.<sup>16</sup> The war's violent disruptions of day-to-day life, labor recruitment drives, and abusive mili-

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tary provisioning practices ensured that thousands of Africans would experience tremendous hardship after 1918.<sup>17</sup> These abuses laid the groundwork for an expansion in the range of tsetse fly infestation, so that by 1924, two-thirds of Tanganyika may have been affected.<sup>18</sup> Sleeping sickness infections then followed throughout the 1920s and into the 1940s, with nearly 24,000 people being diagnosed with the disease in that time. Labor policies instituted to help combat the spread

of tsetse zones "mobilised millions of man-days of compulsory labour" but generally failed to stem the spread of tsetse.<sup>19</sup> The combined effects of disease, famine, and new colonial regimes harmed many Tanganyikan communities and resulted in fundamental changes in Tanganyikan society, including shifts in marriage practices, new labor migration patterns, and new socio-economic relationships between colonial governments and the governed.

In some cases, these circumstances created new opportunities for socio-economic improvement. Many Chagga, a farming people who live and work on the fertile slopes of Kilimanjaro, began growing larger amounts of coffee in the 1920s in response to higher prices on the world market. They converted their economic strength into political strength later in the 1920s and 1930s, leading to challenges to colonial policy and marking "an important advance in political consciousness" for a new class of Tanganyikans.<sup>20</sup> On the other side of the continent, in Togoland, a former British trading company clerk named J.T. Mensah sent a number of petitions to the League of Nations, asserting that he and other Togolese should be able to weigh in on the country's future, especially regarding the division of Togo into British and French spheres.<sup>21</sup> His efforts had

little effect on the Permanent Mandates Commission, but they provide some insight into post-war Togolese political aspirations and imaginaries. And following South Africa's victory over, and occupation of, German Southwest Africa, young Herero men seized the opportunity to assert and redefine their masculinity vis-à-vis the new colonizers and Herero elders by organizing themselves into military-style troops, or *Otruppa*, complete with German uniforms. The *Otruppa* "appropriated German military aesthetics and blended them with precolonial Herero ideals of masculinity."<sup>22</sup> Having experienced humiliating defeat in Germany's genocidal war against the Herero and Nama of 1904 to 1907, the opportunity to belong to *Otruppa* units allowed young Herero men to reclaim a martial masculinity during and after World War I. In this way, they too challenged the post-war order.

Yet, the case of Southwest Africa also reminds us that post-Versailles politics endangered Africans in new ways. South Africa secured a Mandate over Southwest Africa in the Versailles settlement in 1919. As South Africa implemented increasingly inflexible, racist, and segregationist policies, culminating in the National Party's electoral victory in 1946 and the implementation of apartheid, Southwest Africans were subjected to the same mistreatment as black people living in South Africa. A 1967 study by the International Commission of Jurists noted that "With each day that passes, the South African Government is tightening its strangle-hold on South-West Africa, depriving its people of their wealth and their right and ability to develop into a free and self-supporting nation."<sup>23</sup> Namibians fought a long liberation struggle against South Africa that finally won them independence in 1990, but this history cannot be understood without understanding the roots of South African regional political hegemony in World War I.

World War I affected African people across the continent in numerous ways. Historians and other scholars of the war should continue to think through the full range of African experiences of the war, which were indisputably framed by the new colonialisms of the post-war years. Yet it is paramount also to acknowledge the many creative approaches African peoples took in navigating, negotiating, and overcoming the interlocking racist and gendered oppressions of colonial rule. The centenary of the war's end reminds us that the ordeal of the war for Africans should not obscure the opportunities—intellectual, social, economic, and cultural—that emerged from it and the efforts taken to mobilize toward improved livelihoods and eventual independence.

It is important to use this moment to think in terms of the colonial continuities that persist in affecting Africans—the disruptions that caused

them harm and the opportunities created for those able and willing to take advantage of them. Only by considering these threads alongside each other and intertwined with one another can we grasp the complexities of African lives in the interwar period. Otherwise, we risk simplifying the story to

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are experiencing opportunity in a given historical moment serves as a guide for discerning patterns in political, social, and economic hierarchies that shape today's ostensibly postcolonial world.<sup>f</sup>

the diplomatic history of Versailles and the implementation of the mandate system with little sense of how people experienced the resulting new political realities. African experiences of navigating authoritarian colonial regimes' demands during and after World War I reveal to us, one hundred years later, a multidimensional spectrum through which to view and understand the war.<sup>24</sup> Discerning those who are living through difficult ordeals and those who

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 The phrase "ordeal and opportunity" comes from John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 240.
- 2 *The New York Times*, January 27, 1918, 8.
- 3 The official name of the German East African colonial army was the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Imperial Protectorate Force for German East Africa). German East Africa comprised what is today mainland Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi.
- 4 *The New York Times*, January 27, 1918, 8.
- 5 But see the same photo with a different caption posted at <<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-world-war-1-in-africa-german-askari-native-soldiers-with-a-chain-gang-170543014.html>> (accessed November 7, 2018). This version reads "World War 1 in Africa. German Askari (native) soldiers with a chain gang of re-captured German Askari deserters in East Africa. Over half of the German African soldiers were Askaris." The accompanying information also suggests that the photo was taken between 1916-17. I have been unable to ascertain further detail on the photograph's history.
- 6 For an analysis of some of these images, see Christina Twomey, "Severed Hands: Authenticating Atrocity in the Congo, 1904-13," in Geoffrey Batchen and Mick Gidley, eds., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).
- 7 See Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1) (1985): 166-203.
- 8 Michelle Moyd, "Gender and Violence," in Susan Grayzel and Tammy Proctor, eds.,

- Gender and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 9 Isabel Hull, "Military Necessity and the Laws of War in Imperial Germany," in Stathis Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud, eds., *Order, Conflict and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
  - 10 Caroline Authaler and Stefanie Michels, "Post-war Colonial Administration (Africa)," *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, <[https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war\\_colonial\\_administration\\_africa](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_colonial_administration_africa)> (accessed 18 November 2018).
  - 11 Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 137.
  - 12 Moyd, *Resistance and Rebellion (Africa)*.
  - 13 Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63-75, 141-157.
  - 14 Cyrus Schayegh, "Post-war Societies (Middle East)," *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, <[https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war\\_societies](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_societies)> (accessed 18 November 2018).
  - 15 See John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 269-270; and Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London: Phoenix, 2007), 395-398.
  - 16 See Iliffe, 270; and Paice, 395-398.
  - 17 James L. Giblin with Blandina Kaduma Giblin, *A History of the Excluded: Making Family a Refuge from State in Twentieth-Century Tanzania* (Oxford, Dar es Salaam: James Currey, 2005), 42-44.
  - 18 Iliffe, 271.
  - 19 Iliffe, 272.
  - 20 Iliffe, 273-280.
  - 21 Michael D. Callahan, *Mandates and Empire: The League of Nations and Africa, 1914-1931* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 32, 117-119. For further analysis of the culture of petitioning in British Mandate Togoland and the making of indirect rule there after World War I, see Benjamin Lawrance, "Bankoe v. Dome: Traditions and Petitions in the Ho-Asogli Amalgamation, British Mandated Togoland, 1919-39," *Journal of African History* 46 (2) (2005): 243-267; and Benjamin N. Lawrance, *Locality, Mobility, and 'Nation': Periurban Colonialism in Togo's Eweland, 1900-1960* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 121-147.
  - 22 See Molly McCullers, "'We do it so that we will be men': Masculinity Politics in Colonial Namibia, 1915-49," *Journal of African History* 52 (1) (March 2011): 44; and Wolfgang Werner, "'Playing Soldiers': The Truppenspieler Movement among the Herero of Namibia, 1915 to ca. 1945," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16 (3) (September 1990): 476-502.
  - 23 *For the Rule of Law: A Study by the International Commission of Jurists on Apartheid in South Africa and South West Africa*, International Commission of Jurists, June 6, 1967, 28.
  - 24 Iliffe, 272.

