

**„When two elephants fight it's the grass that suffers.“  
(African proverb)**

## **East Africa during the First World War**

By Oliver Schulten; translated from German by Oliver Seitz

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From 1885 to 1917 the present states Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania used to form the colony German East Africa (German: Deutsch-Ostafrika, hereinafter referred to as DOA), it's size as large as the German Empire and France together. Here used to live approximately 7.5 million people, half of it in Rwanda and Burundi. In the colony 120 languages were spoken. The foreign population was of merely 5.336 Europeans and 15.000 Asians. The colony was surrounded by other European influential areas: in the north there were the British protectorates Kenya and Uganda, in the west the Belgian Congo, in the southwest the English territories Malawi and Zambia. In the south DOA touched the Portuguese East Africa, present-day Mozambique. The islands off the coast were under British control.

### **Hut- and poll taxes**

Since Tanzania was conquered forcibly from 1885 from off the coast, the Germans appeared as confederates of the local elites in Rwanda and Burundi. The heavily centralized polity of the Tutsi in this region thwarted further advance. During the following years dubious protection letters were signed with local authorities: mostly the Africans assumed that they merely granted rights for settlement and exploitation. The Germans however interpreted these procedures clearly as surrender of all political power plus complete dispossession. In parallel to this the Germans proceeded by armed forces against anybody who refused to submit. This and the implementation of hut- and poll taxes provoked massive resistance. Up until 1917 the

Germans made over 80 military surrender campaigns, e.g. against Makonde and Hehe. On account of this over 300.000 people died until the First World War.

### **Expensive – and no peace**

The attempts of the colonial government to prod the African farmers to adjust their production for export failed. Hence the governorate started to directly settle the land with Europeans. Consequence: Protests and revolts against expropriations. The misery of the indigenous people was further aggravated by tax liability. Since there was barely cash the taxes had to be paid by natural produce or fatigue. By this mostly young men were forced to work on European plantations. The Germans had access to over 800.000 employable people. Nevertheless, the colony didn't pay off and it wasn't quite to be pacified. In total the German Empire had to pump 122 million Deutschmark into DOA – and until the outbreak of war there still were several districts under military administration.

### **Land as security**

On the 05<sup>th</sup> of August 1914 martial law was imposed over DOA. All Germans were called to stand against the Allies. Just the same month the British destroyed the Germans' communication channels. The German colonists were isolated. After conquering Togo, Namibia and Cameroon the Allies concentrated on DOA. For the British it was mostly a matter of territorial gains – according to the motto land as security.

Apart from European soldiers there came detachments and porters from 23 countries to East Africa – from Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Congo, South Africa, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Botswana, Swaziland, Somalia, Mozambique and the Sudan. Furthermore Jamaicans and divisions from Rajasthan, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Punjab. France sent mostly war materials and food. The British and South Africans denied further help through French troops: one wanted to restrict French influence in East Africa.

## **Terrain, rain and malaria**

In the beginning the British opted for heavy armament: arms technology, plated vehicles, planes and trucks were supposed to ensure victory. This plan was upset by unclear order authorities, lack of communication and planning, outdated cards and mostly the local conditions: the Allied were troubled by rough terrain, two rainy seasons per year and diseases. Above all the malaria and sleeping sickness claimed the lives of thousands of men and animals in shortest time. Furthermore a functioning infra-structure and adequately trained soldiers were missing. Therefore from 1914 to 1916 the German units were able to carry out successful attacks and to offer resistance. Primarily the means of reinforcement and communication were preferential targets, i.e. the British Uganda-train.

## **The end of DOA**

The turning point came with the offensive of 1916: the Allied attacked the German colony from Kenya, the Congo, from Zambia and from Malawi at the same time. In parallel to this the coastal towns at the Indian Ocean were taken over. Thereby the German resistance broke down. More than half of the colony came under allied control. Therefore the Germans changed from static to a kind of guerilla war. Since no reinforcements were to be expected open battles were meaningless. The Germans were kept alive only by captured foodstuff, ammunition and weapons. Everyday life of the *Schutztruppe* (protective force) was dominated by harassment, permanent eluding, sabotage and minor attacks. This tactic wasn't successful though. Up to 1917 the Allied could disable the Germans within the colony. All of the important cities and train connections were conquered. Yet again German officers surrendered with their troops due to missing supplies of medicine, weapons, water and food, as well as lack of help through the local population. The German protective force had been forced aside to the south; the colony had ceased to exist. At the end of 1917 the DOA became British protectorate. The German troops had slipped to Mozambique. At the end of 1918 the last Germans grounded their weapons in Zambia – together with 1.300 men, 1.500 porters and their respective families.

## **“Black” soldiers, “white” commanders**

One thing both war parties have in common: as well the armies of the Allied as the German consisted of African soldiers, the so called Askaris, which were commanded by European officers. A large part of the German colonial force was made of former slaves, “criminals”, professional soldiers and mercenaries. Their pay was cash and spoils after a victory. A third of this troops consisted of foreign mercenaries like Manyema, Baganda and Bemba. The rest were local Askari of the Ngoni, Sukuma and Nyamwezi. Until 1916 3.007 Europeans and 12.100 Askari had been concentrated. If necessary, German officers were able to recruit additional irregular units – enabled by local authorities. Normally these chiefs had to signing on after their subjection and to put men at the Germans disposal in case of an “emergency”. Until 1918 3.000 of the Askari had deserted from the army, 4.500 were listed as missing and 4.200 were held in war captivity. Approximately 1.000 Askari defected to the Allied – and were now fighting against the Germans. Apart from the Askari themselves their families made up a major part of the military columns. They went along with the troops and transported personal belongings, searched for food and water, collected firewood, cooked, sewed, mended uniforms, took care of the sick and the wounded. The children were used as alerters, transporters of the mail and as visual annunciators.

## **90 percent Africans**

The Allied have deployed approximately 240.000 soldiers: 80.000 Europeans and Boers, 35.000 Indians and 125.000 Africans. Kenya was the operation base until 1916. There the troops and porters were gathered. The allied armies were made up of the *King’s African Rifles* (KAR), the *Force Publique* and the *Nyasaland Native Force*, i.e. Around 1917 the King’s African Rifles reached a force of 35.000 Askari – mainly from Kenya and Malawi. Massai, Nandi and Baganda were recruited in Kenya. The Ngoni, Chewa, Yao, Lozi, Bemba, Ndebele, Ila and Tonga in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Portugal deployed approximately 20.000 soldiers. And in the Congo the Force Publique had been raised to 25.000 men until 1917. A lot of them came

from the province of Katanga or were Manyema. After the European soldiers were mostly bothered by diseases, the English head of military decided to let Africans fight more intensely. The units of the KAR were raised and more allotments were requested. From West Africa came approximately 10.000 soldiers – Hausa, Ibo, Ewe and Fulani. The result: from 1918 on 90 percent of all troops were Africans.

### **Without porters no movement**

The time between 1916 and 1918 is frequently referred to as “safari war”. The main weapon of the troops there were their legs: the Allied had to run after the Germans if they wanted to win. Therefore one thing is clear: without ten thousands of porters there wouldn't have been a war in East Africa. Roads barely existed, railway lines weren't developed sufficiently, and the withdrawing troops destroyed the rest of the infrastructure. Without porters a military operation wouldn't have been possible. The men had to march six to seven hours a day – with loads of up to 30kg on heads and shoulders. They had to surmount mountain passes and swamps. The sick or exhausted were beaten and left behind. At night the porters were guarded by armed personnel and they were tied up in order to prevent them from fleeing. The tax lists, which had been implemented in the colony before the war, listed all healthy men. On behalf of these lists the porters were recruited. Recruiters were moving through the villages and read names; the people were gathered and chained up. From the villages they then had to march to the depots. The British recruited approximately 550.000 men in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda. From the Congo came 260.000 porters, from West Africa 10.000, from Mozambique 90.000. In Tanzania the Allied and the Germans recruited approximately 670.000 porters. The number of porters deployed altogether amounts to 1.5 million people.

### **Building, cooking, tracking**

Most of the carriers were signed on for a certain time, only a few served through the complete war. The biggest part of the carriers worked behind the lines. They took care of supplies and the

maintenance of communication lines. If a carrier was sent to the front he repeatedly was at risk of attacks since the respective enemy tried this way to interrupt the resupply. The transport of goods and weapons wasn't the only task of the carriers, though. Furthermore they had to build roads and bridges, cook and track. And also always they were victim of the colonial bureaucracy. In Kenya the porters had to carry an identity card. On this their names and the duration of their service was stated. These cards often were lost during the battles or the officers took them away. Furthermore the entry lists vanished from the depots. If that was to happen the carriers weren't able to claim their pay. Additionally, the agreed upon wages often weren't paid at all or only partially. Even if a carrier could state how long he had worked there were cases where men had to wait for their pays until the end of 1920.

### **“Entrap like animals”**

In the beginning a good pay attracted many people into the service of carrier or army duty. Starting from 1916 this motivation wasn't enough anymore. The Europeans took to the means of crimping. That was handled normally by the local chiefs. Those were ordered by the respective colonial government to assign carriers and soldiers. Who refused was threatened with deposition, arrest or death. In addition there were mobile police units which mostly at night were recruiting weapons-grade men. They went from house to house and took along any men they could find. The people were chained up and carried away. A further means to recruit was the raise of duties and taxes. The pressure of payment was raised so that those affected could only fulfill the outstanding debts by profitable work. Tardy tax payers were arrested and obliged to the carrier duty. In this context there are also cases known where women were taken as hostages in order to force the men into the duty of carriers. An eye witness report verifies that the men in the villages were “entrapped like animals”. A Belgian commander described the recruitment of carriers and Askari as slave hunting. When the carriers fled they had to face being persecuted and shot.

## **Starvation, disease, mismanagement**

The depression set of crimping, tax raises and seizure of food stuff triggered a mass exodus. Whole districts became desolate. The fields lay derelict, the villages were deserted. Passing military units had confiscated all available food. And in order to complicate the moving up of the enemy the existing infrastructure had been destroyed. Roads, bridges and railway lines were blown up. The results of burnt fields and villages were famines. Just in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda died over 100.000 people. In total there were approximately 300.000 affected by hunger. The misery was so huge that there wasn't even time to bury the dead. Thousands of refugees were wandering across the country in search of food and water. These migrations as well as the military troop movements led to the spread of diseases like malaria, smallpox and typhus. In addition there was syphilis – mostly due to the surging prostitution. And that was not enough: at the end of the war East Africa was infested by the Spanish flu. Also the traditional agriculture changed dramatically: in the Congo the colonial administration forced the farmers to plant rice in order to feed the troops. In Malawi the issue was maize, in Mozambique cotton. Thus the existing agricultural structure was defeated, changed or it collapsed. This affected immediately the structure of the villages, their organization and social structure. Since the chiefs often were, or had been forced into this role, “middleman” between the colonial administration and the population their status within the community changed negatively. A lot of chiefs lost the trust which had been put into them traditionally. The result: according to European reports the “public safety” collapsed as from 1916. Cattle transports were only possibly at night since at day there was the danger of regular assaults. In order to avoid poverty the people often were left to theft and begging. Also the human trafficking revived again. The sale of a boy yielded a cow, a girl that of two.

## **Uprisings and resistance**

Due to the existing reality of crimping, forced labour, destructions, price increases, tax raises, mistreatments and hunger massive resistance rose in all East African colonies. Most of the people fled

from advancing troops to rough terrain, hid or went to other colonies. Certain groups also opted for armed resistance. For example the *Mumbo-Cult* in Kenya and the *Nyabingi-Movement* in Uganda-Rwanda were at war for years with the Europeans. At the same time in Malawi a lot of people joined the *Nyau-Movement*. In other cases whole ethnic groups upraised, like the Barue, Yao and Macua in Mozambique, the Gusii, Giriama and Turkana in Kenya. These uprisings could only be brought down by troops. In Tanzania the Hehe and Makonde leagued with the Allied against the Germans. That applies also for Massai, Wangeni and Surkuma. Also the Belgians in the Congo had to proceed against various uprisings: unrests in the region of Kivu as well as insurgencies of the Bashi-Lele and Luba were crushed brutally. In addition there were mutinies inside the Force Publique. In Uganda the Kiga and Tutsi rose. Chiefs of the Ganda protested against the crimping: they compared the work for the British with the former slavery.

### **Bad beer, cooked seed**

The carriers in the colonial armies also offered resistance. Already directly after the recruitment many fled on the way to the depots – mainly at night. Also during the battles many carriers escaped, others pretended to be ill or feigned mental illnesses. It is also reported that some took deliberately poisoned food or water in order to sideline themselves. The daily, so to speak passive, resistance of the carriers is in general imbued by intentionally “playing dumb”, feigning of insanity or extra slow working. The civilian population had to find other ways of resistance: one refused to provide workers, carriers or soldiers; withheld food, hid supplies or cooked the seed, which had been distributed by the Europeans, before it was planted. When the food was then claimed the farmers showed that nothing had been growing... In Tanzania the German recruitment patrols were poisoned by the villagers with bad beer, Belgian units were attacked by the population. In Malawi the government representatives were chased away and also basted during attempts of recruitment. The resistance reached the level of the chiefs as well: some of them denied to report to the authorities the names of the men fit for the military service – and they didn't let the refugees of recruitment being chased. There is



also an increase of raids of German supply depots to be observed: the starvation of the population was just getting to big. Especially the Hehe repeatedly attacked the German patrols and stole their cattle.

### **Unbelievably cruel**

During the war in DOA the Allied lost in total 10.000 soldiers and over 100.000 carriers. On the German side there are supposed to have died also 100.000 carriers. The outbreak of the Spanish flu cost the death of a further 500.000 people. In addition there came thousands of victims which succumbed to the consequences of malaria, small pox, typhus, malnutrition, diarrhea und hunger. The total amount of civilian victims of the war is stated at half a million. Financially the war had cost around 300 million British pounds. Territorially the largest part of the former colony DOA went as a mandate to the British. The Belgians took over Rwanda and Burundi. A small part, the Kionga-triangle, was given to Portugal. The carriers and Askaris reported after the war that few understood for what the battles were being fought for. A veteran described the war as “unbelievably cruel”: in pre-colonial times there wouldn't have existed struggles which would have cost such an amount of victims.

### **Wage labour instead of slavery**

Only a few Africans had been working outside of their communities before the war. This changed dramatically during the war: thousands of people were now dependent on cash in order to pay for food and taxes. Then did the work on reconstruction follow. Whole districts weren't habitable anymore, the fields had been destroyed and the wells filled up or poisoned. It was also necessary to care for wounded or invalids. Nevertheless the colonial administration still demanded fatigue and taxes from the African population. The prices for food had been raised, including massive tax raises. From 1921 international economic crises also affected Africa: the farmers became more impoverished and the necessity to work for the Europeans rose. The respective national currencies lost approximately half of their value in comparison to the pre-war period. With direct implications for the war veterans for example, who saved their pay in order to buy cattle or

land. Also the economy system of the carriers, which had been implemented during the war, continued to have an effect: it was continued smoothly while the registration and management of thousands of workers now benefitted the colonial industry. A consequence that is still effective to present day: in search for work a lot of people moved to the cities. Basically the Europeans have completely transformed the societies in East Africa. Within 40 years a host of waged workers had arisen: when in 1908 the authorities in Tanzania registered only 35.000 waged workers the amount in 1926 was of 276.000 already. At the same time the amount in the Congo is of 450.000, in Kenya 195.000. Actually the army of all these waged workers replaced the slaves of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The colonial powers had assured the African populations for their military actions in the European interest an improvement of the personal circumstances and more political influence. These promises weren't fulfilled. Under this impression various political organizations and trade unions were created in the years after World War I. The ideas of the Pan-Africanism had a lot of followers in the whole eastern and southern Africa. The main demands of these times reflect the actual reality: implementation of an international protection of the African population, abolition of forced labour, African participation in the political power of their own countries, development of an educational system and public health. Also the natural resources should be available to the Africans themselves. Many political organizations which demanded an improvement of the personal circumstances and political say developed after the war: the *Nyasaland Native Association* in Malawi and the *Industrial and Commercial Union* in South Africa which organized strikes. In Uganda the *Nyabingi-Movement* called on for boycotts of work and tax paying. In Kenya it's the *Kikuyu Association*: their concern was compensation for African families who lost their land to the Europeans. Moreover, the *Young Kavirondo Association* demanded the abolition of the hut taxes and the forced labour.

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