German East Africa: Territory and People in World War I

Aude Chanson

German East Africa was the largest colony of the German colonial Empire. With a surface area of about 995,000 km² (384,172 sq mi), it represented twice the area of the German Reich (German Empire in Europe) at the end of the 19th century. This colony was also called the “German India in Africa”¹ because of its economic growth and its importance in the German colonial Empire. It was surrounded by the Allies’ colonies (British East Africa, North Rhodesia, and Zanzibar, the Belgian Congo and Portuguese Mozambique). Since German East Africa had a low population density (0.125 hab/km²) and few Europeans lived in the territory, the conquest of this colony by the Allied troops appeared easily achievable.² However, the new commander of the military forces of German East Africa, Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, surrendered just 14 days after the Armistice, which was signed in Rethondes between Germany and the Allies. His strategy was to mobilise as many Allied troops as possible in Africa employing guerilla tactics, in order to maintain Allied forces far from Europe, and thus, far from Germany. Consequently, his plan was a tremendous success.

This chapter proposes to analyze the forces involved in East Africa and the consequences of this non-standard campaign for the African population and its territory, in a four-year war that did not concern them. This colony was a mosaic of cultures with more than 120 population groups. As a result of the blockade of Great Britain and the geographic location of German East Africa, the conflict between the Allies and Germany in German East Africa entailed a significant contribution from the local populations. The entire economy and agricultural system were reshaped. The daily life of soldiers, porters, and the

² In 1913, in German East Africa, there were 4,830 Europeans, of whom 1,292 were Germans, while there were 78,810 Africans, according to German statistics. The ratio of Europeans to Africans was higher than that in other German colonies, where it lay at 19%. Martin Eberhardt, Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid: die deutsche Bevölkerungsgruppe Südwestafrika 1915–1965 (Münster, 2007), 35. Gann Lewis H., Duignan Peter, The Rulers of German Africa, 1884–1914 (Stanford, 1977), 267.
local population was deeply disrupted. Some of the aspects of the ‘colonial agreement’ disappeared, whereas some Africans assumed new responsibilities in order to fill the void left by the expulsion of European peoples (Germans as well as British) in specific places in East Africa, India or Germany.

**German East Africa at the Outset of the First World War**

The war was declared in Europe between 28 July and 4 August 1914, but it initially did not have a significant effect on the East African colonies. Indeed, the railway between Dar es Salaam and Lake Tanganyika was just completed and an international fair was organized on 15 August in the capital city. In this context, the colony was not at all preparing for the war but rather for festivities. Thus, the German Governor Dr. Heinrich Schnee (1912–1919) requested the status of neutral country by referring to the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) Article 113, which provided for the neutrality of the colonies (in the Basin of the Congo River) in the event of war in Europe. In spite of Belgium’s support concerning this approach, this tactical move failed when two British cruisers, H.M.S. *Pegasus* and H.M.S. *Astraea*, bombed the radio station of Dar es Salaam on 8 August 1914. Thus, the war was declared but the colony could not benefit from the sending of special military troops, contrary to what the French press stated:

> Germany was actually organizing an army in German East Africa not only capable of defending its country, but also capable of taking on a strong onslaught against the Belgian Congo, the Mozambique, and the Uganda; but it hid to its potential opponents its military power in the process of being created.

This newspaper article adopts a certain vision of Germany at the beginning of the war, when it considered its combined territorial expansion, in Europe in the conquered areas of Belgium, Luxembourg and France for the West, in Russia for the East, and in Africa. Indeed, the German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1909–1917) alluded to the creation of a German

---