Let me begin with an anecdote. In early 2003 I was invited to give a lecture on the Anglo-Ashanti War of 1873–74, by Dr. Ian Beckett—who was then teaching at the U.S. Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. I spoke to a roomful of young marine officers, who listened politely to my account of how the British army commander, Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley, with the aid of careful forward planning and close attention to logistics, managed to pull off one of the first reasonably successful European military campaigns in tropical Africa. When I had finished, however, I quickly learned that it was not Wolseley, the “very model of a modern major general” or no, that the young marines wanted to hear about, but another, later European campaigner in Africa, Col. Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, who had led German colonial army units (Schutztruppen) in the fighting in East Africa during the First World War.

Lettow-Vorbeck, I was told, had employed guerrilla tactics to out-maneuver and outfight Allied armies much larger than his own, thus accomplishing his objective of tying down Entente troops and resources that might have been used on the Western Front. Further, I learned, he had led his enemies on a merry chase across three East African colonies and had surrendered several days after the Armistice in Europe, his army still intact, to an enemy that had never defeated him.

The marine officers’ interest in the exploits of Colonel Lettow-Vorbeck reflects an earlier period, now superseded, at least as far as academic military history is concerned, in the historiography of the East African theater of the First World War. Its heyday came between the 1960s and 1980s when no less than five English-language popular histories of the East African war appeared, all narratives written in the ‘guns and drums’ style of the ‘old military history,’ largely operational in approach, heavily focused on leading personalities—especially Lettow-Vorbeck—and
resolutely Eurocentric. The best of them was Charles Miller’s *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa*, ‘bundu’ being an African word for ‘bush’ or ‘back of beyond,’ a reference to the difficult terrain over which much of the fighting in East Africa took place. Miller’s book is self-consciously ‘popular’: “[T]he very last thing I wanted to do (or could do),” he tells us, “was turn out a work of scholarly or military expertise.” Thus, the bibliography is skimpy and footnotes are absent. What readers do get, though, is a rousing story, stressing “the spirit rather than the letter” of the East African theater of World War I. Unfortunately, readers also come away from the book with some potent reinforcement for the then widespread but, as explained below, skewed notion that the German commander in East Africa, Col. Lettow-Vorbeck, was one of history’s great guerrilla leaders. Miller pulled no punches. His hero, although “an obscure Prussian officer . . . could have conducted post-graduate courses in irregular warfare tactics for Che Guevara, General Giap, and other more celebrated but far less skilled guerrilla fighters,” he wrote.

This early period also saw the publication of the first popular history of the First World War in Africa as a whole, Byron Farwell’s *The Great War in Africa, 1914–1918*. After a career as an auto company executive, Farwell turned his hand to writing histories of Britain’s colonial wars in Africa and India. His account of World War I in Africa is very much in the mold of the ‘old military history,’ but betrays an awareness of new trends in the field. He is much less celebratory about the exploits of the European officers who dominate his narrative than many of his contemporaries. His verdict on Lettow-Vorbeck is particularly interesting: “[W]hat he did in the end was worse than useless…He tore the social fabric of hundreds of communities and wrecked the economies

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2 Ibid., x.
4 Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, ix.