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Mobilising Britain’s African Empire for War: Pragmatism vs Trusteeship

While the Anglo-German antagonism that led to the First World War was mounting in 1909, anyone attending the Royal African Society’s dinner on the evening of 5 November at the Trocadero Restaurant in London’s West End would never have guessed that Britain and Germany would wage war in Africa in five years time. Hosting the German Colonial Secretary Bernhard Dernberg and the German Ambassador Paul Wolff Metternich, the President, Sir George Tubman Goldie, and the senior members of the society were effusive in their praise of German colonial administration. After toasts to «The Kaiser» and «The King», the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies J. E. B. Seely lauded Dernberg’s declaration that the European imperial powers were trustees for the «black races of Africa», and he assured the German guests that the same sentiments shaped British colonial policy. «One white race can help the other – not to overcome their dark neighbours, but to save them from starvation. [...] We cannot rule them rightly unless we rule fairly and agree among ourselves. It would be a disaster not only to Europe but to the world, and above all to Africa, if strife and bitterness between the white nations of Europe should undo the work of generations for the prosperity of those regions.»

Agreeing wholeheartedly, Ambassador Metternich warmly declared: «Germany and England are bound together in Africa by common interests, by common-sense, and by common ideas. The wave of our civilisation is destined to break down the walls of primitive and barbarian conditions and to raise in their stead a better standard of life for the native population».

Given these sentiments, it would have seemed equally unlikely that the British colonial establishment would mobilise over one million Africans as combat troops and military labourers to fight a war against a fellow imperial power. While Indian sepoys made Great Britain a major land power, British military and colonial offi-

2 Ibid., 203.
cials deemed Africans too primitive and backward to serve in modern combat formations. In 1859, the Indian Army Reorganisation Committee considered and rejected proposals to use «alien» African troops as a counter-balance to the post-mutiny Indian Army, and in 1901 a secret War Office memorandum ruled that the «white subjects of the King» were solely responsible for imperial defence.\(^3\) This directive was doubtless inspired in part by the unofficial use of Africans as auxiliary forces in the South African War. Fearing that allowing «natives» to fight Europeans would set a dangerous precedent, critics like J. A. Hobson cautioned that the practice would lead to the «degradation of Western States and a possible debacle of Western civilisation».\(^4\) But it was entirely acceptable to employ Africans against other Africans on the grounds that these «savage wars» were in the service of civilisation. Indeed, the poorly paid «native troops» serving in the European-officered constabularies, corps, and irregular formations that became the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) and the King’s African Rifles (KAR) in the first decade of the twentieth century played the central role in the conquest of British Africa.\(^5\)

However, using these colonial forces against another European power was a different matter entirely. Acknowledging the difficulty of defending Britain’s far-flung global empire, the Committee of Imperial Defence calculated that metropolitan Britain only had the resources to garrison the Royal Navy’s strategic ports and wireless stations. Beyond that, each individual dominion, colony and protectorate had to raise local forces for its own defence. This was an expensive proposition, and a number of former colonial officers suggested African units as inexpensive replacements for regular British troops. Citing the effectiveness of Zulu levies in putting down native revolts in southern Africa, P. A. Silburn urged imperial defence planners to follow the Natal Defence Commission’s recommendation to raise Zulu naval garrison units.\(^6\) But when it received a similar question from the KAR’s Inspector General about using native levies as an inexpensive prop for the defence of the East African (Kenya) and Uganda Protectorates, the Committee of Imperial Defence ruled emphatically against deploying irregular African troops in a war that might involve Europeans. Declaring that the practice damaged the «prestige of the white race» and that it was «undesirable to drag natives into our quarrels unless it was absolutely necessary», the Colonial Secretary Lord Crewe directed colonial military advisors not to include native levies in their defence plans.\(^7\) This sounded


grand, but the colonial authorities also believed that allowing Africans to kill Europeans would expose the bluff that made British rule in Africa possible. As a colonial army officer acknowledged: «The inviolability of the white man must be maintained if a few hundred whites were to continue to impose their authority, in governing many thousands of blacks, in safety.»

Yet the committee’s ruling included a number of loopholes that opened the door for African recruiting during the First World War. First, Lord Crewe observed that Britain would probably have to put aside its principles if a hostile imperial power made extensive use of native levies, and he correctly predicted that «it is almost inevitable as the campaign progresses that both sides would find themselves assisted by natives, whether officially recognized or not». Moreover, the committee also sanctioned the unlimited and unsupervised use of African guides, scouts, messengers, and most importantly, porters. Silburn grumbled that the empire could not afford «such magnanimity» in refusing to employ natives in combatant roles, but he need not have worried. Although the 1885 Berlin Treaty explicitly declared that the Congo Basin, which encompassed most of the African battlefields of the Great War, would be «non-belligerent» territory in the event of a European war, Britain and its allies summarily dismissed attempts by German colonial governors, who knew that their local defence forces were inadequate, to invoke its neutrality clause. Britain had valid strategic reasons to capture Germany’s African ports and wireless stations because they threatened imperial shipping routes, but the opportunity to go further in seizing the entire German African empire was too great to pass up. This is how the Great War came to Africa.

1. Mobilisation and its Consequences

At its simplest, mobilisation entails the redirection of an entire society to the prosecution of a war. In this sense, the First World War affected nearly every aspect of life in British Africa, but the meaning and impact of this redirection was substantially and inherently different from what occurred in wartime Europe. African experiences during the Great War thus qualify and challenge accepted paradigms of mobilisation and total war. Most governments, particularly those sharing a border with a German colony, declared some form of martial law. While wartime inflation and food shortages made life extremely difficult for ordinary people to the point where the population of Nyasaland (Malawi) recalled WWI as «the hungry war», the global demand for raw materials, particularly in the United States, provided new and lucrative opportunities for successful commodity producers. This boom allowed the West African colonies to contribute millions of pounds to the imperial war effort in

9 TNA, CAB38/15, Committee of Imperial Defence, «Employment of Armed Native Levies».  
10 Silburn, Colonies, 174–175.  
the form of loans, cash transfers and gifts of raw materials. These mixed consequences of mobilisation were not unusual, but, in contrast to metropolitan Britain, the rulers of British Africa did not, apart from some promises to reward loyal service in South Africa, seek to mobilise popular support for the war effort.

African military service in particular was distinctly different from the western European model. Tammy Proctor has argued that the First World War was the first major conflict where the adversaries made a formal distinction between belligerent soldiers and non-belligerent civilians. Theoretically, a civilian was an innocent bystander whose non-combatant status brought protection from military attack, but Proctor noted that the realities of full mobilisation drew civilians into virtually every aspect of the conflict. Such fine distinctions were even more problematical in British Africa where the rhetoric of imperial trusteeship and African backwardness created a more potent binary: subjects of the Crown (British citizens) and «protected persons» (subordinate Africans). By the outbreak of the First World War, rank-and-file European soldiers served and sacrificed to defend nation states that in turn afforded them the rights of citizenship: the franchise, protection under the law and recognition of their rights as individuals. Indeed, John Horne has shown that mobilisation helped legitimise the western European regimes by forcing them to secure popular support for the war effort.

The total mobilisation that filled the ranks of the vast western armies through mass conscription in the final years of the war was a logical extension of this social contract. Conversely, the German and British colonial experts who toasted each other at the Trocadero claimed the right to rule in Africa by labelling their subjects primitive tribesmen who lacked the capacity to govern themselves. As the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain grandly declared in 1897: «[O]ur rule over these [African] territories can only be justified if we can show that it adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people.» The all-European South African formations that fought as imperial troops during the war were not a problem, but by this reasoning the imperial powers could no more subject «simple natives» to the horrors of modern warfare than they could underage children.

In reality, the doctrine of native trusteeship was a smoke-screen that shielded high-minded westerners from the aggressive realities of the new imperialism. Pious statements about moral uplift did little to mitigate the trauma and chaos of the «savage bush wars» and pacification campaigns that were central to European empire-building in Africa. Therefore it should come as no surprise that all of the imperial powers cast their ideals aside so easily when wartime necessity dictated
that they raise large African armies. Yet they went about it differently. Faced with the enormous manpower demands of waging a continental war with a numerically larger Germany, the French unapologetically conscripted 134,310 of their African subjects for service with combat units in France. This was easier to justify for the French because their assimilationist policies opened the way for a small number of westernised Africans to become citizens.\textsuperscript{17} Trusteeship, by comparison, made it much harder for British colonial administrations to use similar tactics, particularly when the metropolitan British forces did not resort to conscription until 1916. Following the doctrine of «indirect rule», and in contrast to the French, they declared their aim was not to produce African Englishmen but to help primitive peoples «evolve» along their own lines by governing them through «traditional native authorities».\textsuperscript{18} This meant that it was much harder to justify turning tribesmen into useful soldiers.

While the French openly acknowledged that their African troops were conscripts, British civil and military officials insisted that the infantrymen in the KAR, WAFF and other wartime African combat formations were volunteers who made the willing and informed choice to defend the British Empire. Writing after the war, Sir Charles Lucas, a senior Colonial Office expert on Africa, declared that in West Africa «no compulsion was used; to the very end it was a matter of free will».\textsuperscript{19} Lucas was correct that there were no formal conscription laws for combat troops in any African colony, and in 1917 the Colonial Office dismissed proposals from the War Office and various colonial governors to relieve the severe imperial manpower shortage by conscripting Africans. But this was only half the story. Leaning heavily on romanticised notions that «native law and custom» gave chiefs absolute authority over their tribes, British field administrators simply ordered their African clients (who were usually colonial appointees) to round up set numbers of men. One of these chiefly conscripts from southern Nigeria recalled:

We came back one night from our yam farm. The chief called us and handed us over to a Government messenger. I did not know where we were going to, but the chief and the messenger said that the white man had sent for us and so we must go. [...] [The white man] told us that we were going to the great war to help the King's soldiers, who were preventing the Germans coming to our country and burning it. We left and marched far into the bush. The Government police led the way, and allowed no man to stop behind.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} C. Lucas, \textit{The Empire at War: Volume IV}, London 1924, 136–137.
Chiefs usually received «head money», decorations and honours, and other kinds of bounties for meeting their quotas. Those who fell short most often lost their positions, thereby demonstrating that most colonial chiefs were little more than British proxies. This explains why the chiefs often used a heavy hand in recruiting. They seized the wives and cattle of resisters and generally preyed upon the most vulnerable members of their communities in meeting their obligations to the government. In the East African Protectorate tax defaulters and men who left the employ of a European without permission were the first to go. While senior officials like Lucas could comfortably deny that conscription took place, field officers were much more frank. As a district commissioner in Sierra Leone acknowledged: «[A]s long as the chiefs are called upon by the Government to assist in recruiting, the carriers are not strictly volunteers.»

When British officials did admit to mass conscription in the African colonies they justified it on the grounds that the impressed men were only non-combatant labourers. This was in keeping with pre-war practices where colonial administrators, merchants and company employees, and settler farmers employed a wide variety of coercive tactics to compel Africans to work for little or no money. Claiming that forced labour was necessary for the moral and economic development of the colonies, they reconciled the practice with trusteeship by claiming that primitive tribesmen needed to learn the value of regular work. Consequently, labour conscription was equally legitimate in wartime.

But what the colonial authorities failed to acknowledge was that distinctions between combat troops and non-combatant labourers that legitimised conscription were meaningless because it was impossible to conduct large-scale military operations in Africa without relying on thousands of African porters (carriers) to move ammunition and supplies. Motorised transport was still in its infancy, and there were few serviceable roads in the African combat theatres. Furthermore, trypanosomiasis and other infectious diseases limited the use of pack animals. In peacetime, small lightly armed companies could usually live off the land, and the WAFF and German Schutztruppe (Protection Force) raised special carrier units, which received some military training, to provide support for larger operations. During the First World War, however, larger and more complex formations required huge


amounts of conscripted African labour to move and fight. For example, offensive operations in the south western corner of German East Africa (GEA) depended on a precarious supply line stretching 450 miles from the Northern Rhodesian railhead. It took 16,500 labourers to move one ton of supplies per day along the route, which meant that it required 100,000 people to keep a 6000–man combat brigade in full supply.23

These realities made nonsense of combatant and non-combatant distinctions. Large-scale offensive military operations required tens of thousands of labourers, but British civil and military authorities gave virtually no thought as to how they would care for these people, who were almost entirely conscripts, in the unhealthy regions where the fighting took place. While their inability to provide for the carriers’ basic human wants was partially a legacy of the peacetime practice of running the African colonies on a shoestring, colonial military officers also believed that native tribesmen needed less food and could endure greater hardship than European troops. This official indifference, which often disguised base incompetence, produced staggeringly high mortality rates. In 1922, the War Office acknowledged that 42,318 East African non-combatants died during the war, but according to Geoffrey Hodges’s more plausible estimates 100,000 of the approximately one million men who provided labour for the East African campaign (half on short term contracts, half as carriers) lost their lives in the service of the empire.24 In essence, the raw material that fuelled large-scale colonial military operations was human life.

This reality explains why wartime manpower dragnets generated far more hostility and resistance than the colonial authorities were willing to admit. Nigeria experienced a wave of recruiting riots in the southern half of the colony in the early years of the war that police and military forces put down with considerable loss of civilian life. In East Africa, the Kenyan authorities gave up on trying to enlist the Maasai after a botched recruiting sweep turned into a pitched battle. Conversely, the coastal Giriama suffered mass conscription as collective punishment for a failed revolt in late 1914.25 Even the colonial regime’s chiefly allies sometimes balked when pushed too hard for manpower. Chimtunga, a senior Ngoni chief in Nyasaland, refused to cooperate with the recruiting campaign and, according to a government report, when his British supervisor ordered him to report «he returned a defiant answer that the Resident might come and fetch him if he could».26 It took

23 Lucas, Empire, 291.
26 Lucas, Empire, 260.
an entire KAR platoon to chase down Chimtunga and send him into exile. Much more seriously, widespread anger over these heavy-handed recruiting tactics was a contributing factor to John Chilembwe’s armed uprising against the Nyasaland government in early 1915. In an unpublished letter to the *Nyasaland Times* written several months earlier, Chilembwe rightly protested that «the poor Africans who have nothing to own in this present world […] are invited to die for a cause that […] is not theirs».27

2. The First Stage of Mobilisation, 1914–1916

Initially, this «invitation» was modest, for the British colonial demand for African manpower was relatively light. Following the pre-war template laid out by Committee of Imperial Defence, governors and their military advisors looked first to the security of their own colonies and then to seizing Germany’s African ports and wireless stations in Togoland (Togo), Kamerun (Cameroon), German South West Africa (Namibia), and German East Africa (Tanzania). The much smaller German *Schutztruppe*, which consisted also primarily of African units, were in no position to mount offensive operations. However, German commerce raiders operating out of Lome, Douala, Windhoek, and Dar es Salaam posed a tangible threat to British shipping. In the opening months of the war, the cruiser *Königsberg*, which was based in GEA, managed to sink a British merchant ship and cruiser before the Royal Navy blockaded and destroyed it in Rufiji River. Knowing full well that British sea power would leave them precariously isolated once war broke out, German commanders hoped to hold out long enough to force Britain to divert military resources from Europe to Africa.

Consequently, the initial focus of British colonial mobilisation was to raise sufficient local forces to seize the coastal regions of German Africa as rapidly as possible. This appeared to be a relatively easy proposition in southern Africa where Louis Botha, the first Prime Minister of the new Union of South Africa, gladly accepted the British government’s invitation to seize strategic points in German South West Africa in September 1914. Aspiring to expand South African influence in the region, Botha and his Defence Minister J. C. Smuts had already laid the groundwork for an attack on their German neighbours by stockpiling stores and expanding the rail network towards the border.28 While Botha manoeuvred the Union Parliament into endorsing the operation, he underestimated the deep resentment that many Afrikaners still felt towards the British Empire. Declaring that they had «forgiven but not forgotten the [British] barbarities perpetrated in this, our own

country during the South Africa War», a number of senior Afrikaner generals in the Union Defence Force (UDF) refused to lead the invasion and instead launched an 11,000–man revolt against Botha and the Union.\(^29\) It took several months to put down the rebellion, and the UDF did not complete the occupation of German South West Africa until July 1915.

Officially, the campaign in South West Africa was an all-European affair. Ever mindful of the political and security risks of giving Africans military training, Smuts wrote the 1912 Defence Act to exclude non-Europeans from the combat arms of the Union Defence Force. So while the South African government was happy to include the all-white 1st Rhodesia Regiment in the invasion force, it firmly rejected offers from the South African Native National Congress and the African Political Organisation to recruit troops for the campaign. Nevertheless, the Union forces would not have been able to take the field without the approximately 35,000 African and Coloured men who provided essential transport and logistical services.\(^30\) The non-European political and community leaders who asked the government to include their young men in the invasion certainly had no love for the Afrikaner-dominated regime. They knew full well that service to the Union and the Empire would legitimise their claim to full citizenship when the war was over. The South African authorities therefore remained adamantly opposed to arming Africans throughout the conflict.

These fine racial distinctions were not possible in the rest of British Africa. With British regular and imperial troops committed to the battlefields of Western Europe and defending the larger empire, mobilising African manpower was a top priority. In both West and East Africa, pre-war economic retrenchment had led the British colonies to drastically reduce the WAFF and the KAR. Referring to the security of the East African Protectorate (which became Kenya in 1920), the KAR’s Inspector General alluded to the role of African soldiers in imperial defence: «Our position at the present time is […] not only unsatisfactory but dangerous. Putting aside altogether the question of a native rising on a large scale which, however improbable, is too serious a factor to be altogether ignored, there are many situations which might […] become very dangerous if not promptly dealt with.»\(^31\) Consequently, when war came in 1914 it took a crash mobilisation programme to mount offensive operations against the remaining German colonies.

In West Africa, the Gold Coast battalions of the WAFF and Tirailleurs from French Dahomey overran Togoland within the first month of the war. Seizing Kamerun, however, was much more difficult. In September 1914, 1000 seaborne

\(^{29}\) The quote is by General Christian Frederick Beyers. Rayner / O’Shaunghnessy, Botha and Smuts, 277–278.


\(^{31}\) TNA, WO106/254, Memorandum by Colonel G. Thesiger, 17 April 1912.
African troops from the WAFF and Sierra Leone’s West Africa Regiment captured the capital of Douala relatively easily, but it took sixteen additional months of hard fighting for the Allies to force the German surrender in early 1916. Having lost control of the coast, the Germans successfully defended the colony’s underdeveloped and inhospitable hinterlands. Seizing Douala eliminated the threat to British shipping, but imperial strategists decided that the German forces in the interior remained a threat. This may or may not have been true, but France’s declaration that it intended to retain captured German territory was also a factor in the British decision to continue offensive operations.32

African labourers paid the heaviest price for these imperial ambitions. Bad weather, disease and the tenacious German defence virtually wiped out the original 3300 carriers, who were mostly from Sierra Leone and Nigeria that supported the capture of Douala. Lacking the means to continue offensive operations, the British commander Major-General Charles Dobell halted the advance in the summer of 1915 to allow his force to recover and await reinforcements. These took the form of another Nigerian infantry battalion and a battalion from the Indian Army.33 The civil authorities in West Africa also obligingly swept up 7500 more men to carry their supplies, but this time conscription had become much more difficult because able-bodied men had learned to avoid the chiefly press gangs. British officers scathingly referred to the new carriers as a «herd of cripples», and not surprisingly half the force became too sick from malnutrition, ulcerated feet, malaria, and other «wasting diseases» to carry on. The War Office later calculated that almost 9000 of the roughly 14,000 carriers who served in the Kamerun campaign were either missing or invalid cases. The official casualty figure of 515 deaths was unquestionably too low.34

In East Africa, it first appeared that the local settlers, who dominated the political life of the East African Protectorate (EAP), might spare subject Africans from suffering a similar fate. Sharing South African concerns about the need to protect their racial prestige, they pressed the colonial authorities to keep Africans out of combat. With the much reduced KAR’s 21 companies scattered from Nyasaland to northern Uganda at the outbreak of the war, imperial strategists initially planned to defend British East Africa with settler militias while seizing the strategic port of Dar es Salaam with an 8000–man expeditionary force from the Indian Army. But the amphibious assault in November 1914 by this Force B, which a British military observer deemed «the worst [troops] in India», was a dismal failure.35 The result

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33 The Indian 5th Light Infantry drew the assignment as punishment for mutinying at Singapore several months earlier.
was a stalemate that lasted well into 1915. The only significant combat during this period consisted of near weekly German cross-border raids on the Ugandan Railway. GEA’s southern border with Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia was also relatively quiet.

The East African Protectorate was fortunate that the GEA’s Schutztruppe was too small to mount offensive operations because the settlers would have been hard pressed to defend themselves without African assistance. The East African Mounted Rifles (EAMR), a ramshackle collection of fractious horse-borne settler militias, was particularly incompetent. Its self-appointed historian may have deemed it «one of the most important units of the East African campaign», but it suffered heavy casualties in its only serious engagement with Germany’s African troops. This was hardly surprising given that one of its squadrons was originally equipped with lances and several others used mules to compensate for the shortage of horses.\textsuperscript{36} By the end of 1914, the EAMR had lost so many men to «restlessness» and «boredom» (fine terms for what amounted to desertion) that the unit’s commander, adjutant, and medical officer had to stand guard duty. Nonetheless, at a mass meeting in Nairobi in September 1915 the settlers firmly committed themselves to the imperial war effort by unanimously agreeing to create a War Council and subject themselves to universal conscription. While they proudly declared that the EAP was the «first of the overseas dependencies to adopt the principle of compulsory military service», this pseudo-mobilisation was little more than bellicose posturing, for their War Council quietly ruled that only 99 men could be spared without damaging the Protectorate’s economy.\textsuperscript{37} Not surprisingly, the defence of British East Africa rested on the KAR in the EAP and Nyasaland and 3000 «Baganda spearmen» in Uganda.\textsuperscript{38}

As the Committee of Imperial Defence had predicted in 1909, the ban on native levies would not stand up in wartime, particularly after offensive operations in East Africa resumed later in the war.

3. The Second Stage of Mobilisation, 1916–1918

Native trusteeship became more irrelevant in 1916 as mobilising imperial manpower became a much greater strategic necessity. Faced with horrific casualties in Europe and imperial commitments stretching from India to Mesopotamia to the Dardanelles, in March 1916 the coalition government in London broke with the revered English tradition of voluntary military service and introduced universal conscription in Britain. The British government’s attempt to convince Ireland and the self-governing white dominions to follow suit sparked intensive political controversy and met with limited success. Under these circumstances raising more
troops became paramount, which led imperial strategists to reconsider their views on the military value of subject Africans. Thus, the pragmatic and exploitive realities of imperial rule trumped the paternalistic commitment to native uplift that legitimised British conquests in Africa.

Many of the European veterans of these «savage wars», who had rarely paid much attention to the niceties of trusteeship in the first place, now lobbied the British government to raise a «Million Black Army» for service in France. Writing in the *English Review*, Major Charles Darnley-Stuart-Stephens claimed that it was possible to raise four divisions of «superb savages» in a matter of months, and he promised that the Germans on the Western front would waver when they found «themselves outnumbered, say five to one, by Zulu and Basuto warriors, who charge home, regardless of all musketry and artillery fire».\(^{39}\) The major, who had commanded Nigerian troops in the 1880s, was clearly delusional, but the parliamentarian Josiah Wedgwood, who also had African military experience, laid bare the true motives of the Million Black Army movement when he explained that African troops were needed «because we do not want all the whites killed – to put it bluntly».\(^{40}\) Fortunately, the Colonial Office, which took trusteeship more seriously, blocked efforts to put these martial fantasies into practice in late 1916 by allowing a War Office recruiting mission to see for itself that there were no vast untapped manpower reserves in the African colonies.\(^{41}\)

Nonetheless, the urgency and desperation that characterised the last two years of the Great War dictated much greater mobilisation in British Africa. With the Indian Army stretched thin, imperial strategists were anxious to find ways to raise new fighting units and mobilise labour for the global war effort. In southern Africa, the swift capture of German South West Africa opened the way for the Union of South Africa to address both concerns. While a considerable number of individual European and Coloured South Africans had already enlisted in the regular British forces, in July 1915 the Union government agreed to raise an all-European infantry brigade for service in the Middle East and Europe and two more (one infantry and another mounted) for a renewed push in German East Africa. Having already won a civil war to keep South Africa as a dominion in the British Empire, it stood to reason that Botha would allow European volunteers, who would be paid as regular British troops, to defend it in France. As for East Africa, Bill Nasson argues that Botha and Smuts hoped to cash in on their imperial contributions after the war by exchanging the southern half of GEA for the strategic Portuguese East African ports of Delago Bay and Beira.\(^{42}\)


\(^{42}\) Nasson, *Springboks*, 94–95.
These were grand plans, but the Union’s insistence on maintaining racial segregation in its combat formations strained its European manpower reserves to the limit. The 76,184 South Africans who served abroad in these units during the war consisted of roughly eleven percent of the dominion’s able-bodied European males.\(^{43}\) Raising more all-European units would have required an economically and socially unsustainable level of mobilisation, and so Botha’s government had no choice but to relax its segregationist policies by raising two Coloured infantry battalions for service in East Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, it also created the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Corps and the Coloured Labour Corps to support imperial forces in France. All told, 25,000 men passed through these formations during the conflict.\(^{44}\) Writing after the war, the Cape Corps’s semi-official historian acknowledged that the pragmatic demands of mobilisation overrode the «local prejudice» against Coloured combat units: «[There was] no valid reason […] why the Coloured man should not be given an opportunity to serve his King and Country. […] The Empire was calling for men, more men.»\(^{45}\)

While this was certainly true, the Union’s fear of armed Africans was still stronger than the Empire’s desperate need for more combatants in the last two years of the war. Therefore when imperial strategists first opened discussions about using native troops in France in 1916 Botha would only agree to an unarmed support unit. And even then the President escaped what surely would have been ferocious resistance in the South African Parliament only because imperial funds paid for the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC). Concerned more with maintaining «white prestige» than upholding trusteeship, the Union government tried to stipulate that the unit be kept strictly segregated from other imperial troops and French civilians. The South African authorities also insisted that it be officered by South African policemen, administrators, compound managers, and other local Europeans with experience in «handling natives». Although African politicians and community leaders embraced the SANLC in the hope that it would further their appeals for full citizenship, their campaign to convince their people to volunteer for overseas service fell well short of its initial 10,000–man target by mid-1917. Union recruiters therefore followed the standard imperial template by simply ordering the chiefs to supply the necessary men. Similarly, the native authorities in the neighbouring High Commission Territories of Basutoland (Lesotho), Swaziland and Bechuanaland (Botswana) used varying degrees of compulsion to fill their quotas.\(^{46}\)

All told, approximately 21,000 southern Africans served with the SANLC in France where, despite the Union’s restrictions, they worked alongside military and

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44 Lucas, Empire, 501.
civil labourers from the wider empire. They suffered over 300 casualties (mostly from disease) while overseas, and over 600 of them drowned when their troopship, the SS Mendi, sank in the English Channel after a collision with another vessel. These were significant casualties, but greater metropolitan oversight and respect for their non-combatant status meant that the SANLC’s de facto conscripts were much better off than the African soldiers and carriers who were swept into the resumption of the East African campaign in late 1915.\textsuperscript{47} As in Kamerun, imperial military incompetence regarding the welfare of conscripted labourers and the underdeveloped state of transportation in GEA meant that offensive operations consumed the lives of a staggering number of non-combatant labourers.

From the comfort of post-war hindsight, a corpus of British official military histories and officers’ personal memoirs played down or ignored the scandal of over 100,000 carrier casualties. Instead, British commentators paid grudging respect to the Schutztruppe commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck’s success in tying down tens of thousands of imperial troops. At most, von Lettow-Vorbeck had approximately 3000 European and 11,000 African combat soldiers in 1916, a force which shrank to just 155 Europeans and 1168 Africans by the time he finally surrendered in November 1918. Conversely, the East Africa Force, initially commanded by J. C. Smuts, consisted of two South African brigades, the 1st Cape Corps, the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment, two British infantry battalions, the Indian remnants of Force B, and the African battalions of the KAR, the WAFF, and the Rhodesian Native Regiment. Belgian colonial forces also played a role in western GEA. Manpower levels fluctuated, but in 1916 the imperial forces amounted to 27,000 British and South African troops, 14,000 Indian sepoys, and 7000 African soldiers.\textsuperscript{48}

Relying on their strength in numbers, the British strategy was to envelop the Germans with a three-pronged invasion from the East African Protectorate in the east, Nyasaland in the south and the Belgian Congo in the west. Assuming that these offensive operations required at least three carriers per infantryman, the campaign’s architects calculated that they needed an initial draft of 160,000 plus an additional 1600 men per month as replacements for wastage. The actual numbers of Africans who served in the Carrier Corps, a loose term covering the wide range of support units the East African governments raised over the course of the war, was much higher.\textsuperscript{49}

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Von Lettow-Vorbeck’s ability to remain in the field throughout the war was an impressive military achievement, but the *Schutztruppe’s* African porters, who were much better trained and disciplined than the British carriers, explain his greater mobility. Moreover, his success, which contributed relatively little to the German war effort, had an enormous human cost. In addition to the 100,000 carrier fatalities, the 18,000 men from the SANLC and 9,000 Nigerian and Sierra Leonean carriers who also served in East Africa suffered similarly crushing casualty rates.  

With GEA’s ports securely in British hands, the rest of the East African Campaign was tragically unnecessary. Nonetheless, Smuts and the other imperial commanders persisted in pursuing von Lettow-Vorbeck throughout the colony, briefly into Portuguese East Africa, and finally into Northern Rhodesia where he eventually surrendered. There were several noteworthy clashes during the chase, but disease and poor sanitation were often more deadly than combat. Over the course of 1916, a battalion of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment shrank from 900 to 345 men, while a similarly sized battalion of the 25th Royal Fusiliers lost 85 percent of its initial strength. By early 1917, the 500-man all-European 2nd Rhodesia Regiment was so «saturated» with fever and dysentery that it had only 91 soldiers fit for active duty. The South African casualty rates were equally shocking, and neither the Union nor Southern Rhodesia had the European manpower to provide sufficient replacements. Disease and malnutrition took an even greater toll on the African carriers. But apart from the missions, which raised their own voluntary carrier units to ensure that their converts received better treatment, no one paid much attention to the African loss of life.  

Mindful that the high casualties suffered by the European South African forces on imperial service threatened to become a political embarrassment in the Union, in mid-1916 imperial planners decided to rely much more heavily on African troops. This involved expanding the KAR from 3 to 22 battalions, raising the Rhodesian Native Regiment and importing two WAFF brigades from West Africa. The settlers in Kenya and Rhodesia protested, but their inability to produce sufficient all-European units as alternatives undercut their political influence substantially. Precise figures are not available, but the combined strength of these forces stood at approximately 36,000 African infantrymen by the end of 1917. Claiming native troops were naturally disease resistant, British commanders insisted that this shift was based on sound military tactics. In reality, their primary concern was to end the

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politically indefensible «wasteful» use of European manpower. While colonial military officers boasted that tribesmen were effective infantrymen if led by the «right kind of white man», at least one regular army officer who saw extensive combat in France before joining the KAR considered these proper white men to be «trench dodgers of the most flagrant kind, conscripts, and men who had seen little or no service in the field». 53

As in the first two years of the war, senior colonial officials still insisted that deploying African combat units was compatible with the obligations of native trusteeship because all the infantrymen were volunteers and the conscripted carriers who supported them in the field were non-combatants. This was patently false. A great many of the men who served in the wartime KAR were volunteered by their chiefs. Some were even German soldiers who recruiters plucked from POW camps. Carriers also often became infantrymen when commanders ran short of troops or when they volunteered for combat to escape the horrors of life on the supply lines. In West Africa, entire WAFF companies are on record as offering collectively and unanimously to serve in East Africa. This is unlikely, but even if true it suggests that the men did not fully understand what they were volunteering for. 54

In the cases of the carriers, there was no way to meet the East African Force's needs without conscription and coercion. This was particularly true in 1917 when the quixotic pursuit of von Lettow-Vorbeck led commanders to push their porters beyond the standards of reasonable human decency. While one officer marvelled at the ability of native troops to «carry on without food and apparently exist on air», in reality they suffered staggering losses from physical exhaustion and malnutrition brought on by entirely inadequate rations, poisoning from foraged roots and berries, and out-right starvation. The head of the Military Labour Service, the officer responsible for carrier welfare, tried to enforce regulations regarding rations and working conditions, but as a mere lieutenant colonel he had no authority to issue directives to field commanders. 55

As word of these conditions spread it was hardly surprising that it became much more difficult to find men to serve in this theoretically non-combatant capacity. In early 1917, the labour shortage became so pronounced that it stalled most offensive operations. Under intense pressure to find new sources of manpower, the East African civil authorities pushed mobilisation to the limit by sweeping approximately 120,000 new conscripts into the Carrier Corps. The Ugandan government did so reluctantly due to the unacceptably high casualties suffered by Ugandan carriers.

53 Cuddeford, And All for What?, 195; Hordern, Military Operations, 513, 518; Downes, With the Nigerians, 44.
54 Haywood / Clarke, Royal West African Frontier Force, 189.
and concerns that the manpower drain was hurting the protectorate’s economy. In contrast, the field administration in the East African Protectorate, which was pro-settler and much less concerned with native trusteeship, was ruthlessly efficient and combed the colony for able-bodied men. By the end of the year more than 75 percent of unmarried males in the central Ukamba Province were either in the KAR or the Carrier Corps. Faced with popular resistance so broad that entire communities fled to the bush to escape the press gangs, the protectorate authorities gave African policemen a free hand in rounding up deserters until reports of rape and theft became a political embarrassment.56 In August 1917, fears of a mass uprising and a dearth of available men forced the government to halt the dragnet.

4. Legacies of Mobilisation

On 25 November 1918, 24 days after Germany signed the armistice ending the Great War, von Lettow-Vorbeck marched the remaining *Schutztruppe* into the Northern Rhodesian town of Abercorn to formally surrender. Lieutenant-General J. L. van Deventer, the imperial commander-in-chief, allowed the German officers to retain their swords and firearms on the march back to Dar es Salaam in recognition of the «gallant and prolonged resistance maintained by the German force in East Africa». Paying tribute to his European adversaries in his final report to the War Office, van Deventer blamed the Germans’ African soldiers and camp followers for abuse committed by the *Schutztruppe* during the war and claimed that: «it must in justice be said that the actual fighting of the East African campaign was, on the whole, clean – and sometimes even chivalrous.»57

Remarkably, it appeared that the imperial solidarity embodied in the warm toasts at the Trocadero nine years earlier had survived the war. But this was not the case. The victorious powers had no intention of returning the German colonies after having gone to such great lengths to seize them. While senior colonial officials lauded Germany’s commitment to native trusteeship at the Royal African Society dinner, once war broke out their adversaries became sadistic tyrants unfit to govern primitive peoples. Speaking to the House of Commons in May 1917, Lord Robert Cecil claimed German outrages, particularly in regard to labour abuses and porterage, made it impossible for Britain to return German East Africa after the war: «[The Germans] chain the [carriers] together and just work them until they died of starvation and exhaustion.»58 These charges were unquestionably true for von Lettow-Vorbeck’s forces also travelled on the backs of press-ganged African carriers.

Predictably, the Germans reaffirmed their commitment to native trusteeship in the hopes of retaining their colonies. Sounding the warning that «we are in danger of being robbed of our beloved German East Africa», the GEA’s last German governor Heinrich Schnee claimed that his African subjects loved their rulers so much that they cried out «wadeutschi rudini» («come back to us Germans!»).\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, German colonial experts were quick to level counter-charges against British imperial forces. «The English neglected the obvious duty of caring for the safe and orderly return of [their] tremendous armies of carriers in a most criminal manner. [...] Little attention was paid to the age, strength or health of these poor wretches. They were used and used up in the most ruthless way until they broke down or perished in their tracks. Countless numbers of them returned home sick and broken in health for the rest of their lives.»\textsuperscript{60} But at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference it mattered little that these accusations of British imperial misrule were valid. Branding the Germans unfit colonial rulers, the victors shared out German Africa as League of Nations mandates. This including assigning the Great Lakes kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi to the Belgians, a colonial power that had a truly horrific record of misrule in the Congo Free State.

In truth, few Africans who survived imperial service during the First World War would have cried for the return of any of their foreign rulers. Initially, native trusteeship usefully papered over the self-interest and blatant exploitation that characterised the first decades of European imperialism in Africa. The pragmatic demands of wartime mobilisation laid these realities bare for all to see. Having suffered nearly half a million casualties at the battle of the Somme in 1916, British strategists paid little attention to the doctrine of trusteeship and took the empire’s African subjects for what they really were: an exploitable resource.

It is impossible to tell precisely how many Africans served the British war effort in this capacity because colonial record keeping was so bad. A conservative estimate for combatants would be 30,000 West Africans and 35,000 East Africans. Approximately 74,000 southern Africans served in the SANLC, which should be counted as a formal military unit despite its non-combatant status.\textsuperscript{61} Most of the fighting in sub-Saharan Africa rarely reached the level of a pitched battle, so casualties among these fighting formations, which are even more difficult to document, were quite small in comparison to the wholesale slaughter on the French battlefields. Conversely, conscripted military labour, which the colonial authorities excused on the grounds that it was non-combatant service, constituted a different kind of wartime horror that had no European parallel. Sir Charles Lucas tried to pass off the mortality rates for Nyasaland carriers as not much higher than South African mine labour,

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\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{61} Lucas, \textit{Empire}, 45, 130, 214; Moyse-Bartlett, \textit{King’s African Rifles}, 413, 701; Stapleton, \textit{No Insignificant Part}, 32; Grundlingh, \textit{Fighting Their Own War}, 57.
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but it was impossible to deny that British neglect killed more African non-combatants than German bullets. Moreover, his figure of four percent falls far short of the more recent historical estimates of 10 to 15 percent death rates for men conscripted to support the East African campaign, which suggests that well over 100,000 African labourers died of mistreatment and abuse in the service of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{62} Bluntly put, there is no escaping the reality that the British and German colonial armies both ran on human life. To be sure, neither side intended for this happen, but while it was relatively easy to mobilise tens of thousands of men through mass conscription it was much harder to take proper care of them.

While the victorious powers at the Paris Peace Conference cited the wholesale mistreatment of African labourers as a justification for seizing Germany’s African territories, the British military and civil officials who oversaw mobilisation in wartime Africa never paid a price for their incompetence, which should be considered mass negligent homicide. Neither the official histories of the war nor the memoirs of colonial army officers make more than a passing reference to the realities of military portage. Many colonial officials were privately ashamed of their retreat from the principles of trusteeship, but they only admitted to the scope of tragedy in private inter-departmental correspondence: «Of course before the end of the East African campaign [...] the rate of mortality in East Africa only stopped short of a scandal because the people who suffered most were the carriers – and after all, who cares about native carriers?»\textsuperscript{63} In Kenya, where the government kept tens of thousands of pounds in unpaid carrier wages, the only official acknowledgement of the carriers’ sacrifice was a pair of monuments to the \textit{watu papagazi} (literally «men of the feet») in Nairobi and Mombasa. But the people of East Africa did not forget the horrors of carrier service. In September 1939, entire villages in Central Kenya, expecting the revival of the Carrier Corps, fled into the bush upon hearing of the outbreak of another war in Europe.\textsuperscript{64}

This collective panic at the prospect of another global imperial conflict illustrates the profound differences in the nature of mobilisation between colonial Africa and the metropolitan hearts of empire during the First World War. Horne, Proctor, and other noted historians of the Great War have rightly treated the conflagration as a watershed experience that shifted civilians from non-combatants to legitimate targets, as de facto auxiliaries of mass citizen armies. In comparison, subject Africans, whether they were in uniform or not, never qualified for protected status in the first place. Emphasising the poor living conditions that much of the


\textsuperscript{63} CO Minute by A. J. Fiddian, May 1934, in: Killingray / Matthews, «Beasts», 17.

\textsuperscript{64} «Black Knights of the Empire: Britain’s Tribute to her Soldier Savages and the Great Valour of The Men-with-Feet-and-Hands», in: \textit{The Sphere} (6 August 1927); KNA, AG/5/1356/57, Secretariat Circular no. 54, «Unclaimed Wages due to Members of the Native Carrier Corps», 5 November 1930; KNA, MAA/2/3/16/I/6, Central Province Intelligence Report, September 1939.
population of metropolitan Britain had to endure in the pre-war era, Adrian Gregory has persuasively argued that «[t]he overall effect of the war […] is that the poorest of the British people became less poor».

This certainly did not hold true for British Africa where the First World War can be seen as a continuation of what John Lonsdale has termed the «dreadful mortality» of the new imperial era. After enduring the prolonged warfare, famines and epidemics resulting from the European conquest, the people of much of British Africa could have understandably perceived the Great War as a larger, lengthier and ultimately more savage bush war. Moreover, John Chilembwe’s suggestion that the people of Nyasaland deserved citizenship, if not independence, for their sacrifices meant that the colonial authorities rarely considered using mass politics or civil society tactics described by Horne and Proctor to build popular African support for the war effort. On this score, their propagandistic mobilisation efforts were aimed at convincing the metropolitan British population that it was necessary and morally acceptable to mobilise «primitive peoples» for total war.


ABSTRACT

Mobilising Britain’s African Empire for War: Pragmatism vs Trusteeship

Britain’s African territories provided a reservoir of manpower that was heavily exploited during the First World War to aid the imperial war effort. Africans were recruited for service as labourers on the Western Front and, more importantly, staffed the vast logistics organisation that sustained multiple campaigns in Africa. Mobilising African subject populations raised difficult questions about the nature of British rule, particularly the racial hierarchies that sustained it. Voluntary recruiting was the model espoused by the colonial state, but in reality local systems of governance were exploited to impress men into service. Once on campaign African labourers suffered from high casualty rates as disease ravaged the lines of communication. This brutal wartime experience was not confined to those living under British rule, with German forces also sustained by poorly-treated African labourers. Mobilisation for the imperial war effort and the negligence of commanders during campaigns reveals the extent to which African colonial subjects were viewed as an exploitable resource during the First World War; an attitude that would leave a complex post-war legacy for the colonial powers in Africa.

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