

WW1's untold story: The forgotten African battlefields

By Kathleen Bomani,
World War I in Africa,
Special to CNN
August 8, 2014



Kathleen Bomani



Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – Locally recruited troops under German command in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania (then part of German East Africa), circa 1914.

Hide Caption

1 of 6

Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – Togolese men are recruited into the army in German-controlled Togoland, circa 1914.

Hide Caption

2 of 6

Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – Senegalese soldiers at a Sudanese camp during World War One, circa 1914-1918.

Hide Caption

3 of 6

Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – German colonial troops in Africa under commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, possibly during World War I, circa 1916.

Hide Caption
4 of 6

Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – Allied troops in pursuit of von Lettow-Vorbeck in November 1918 when he was down to his last 1,300 men in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in his attack on the Allied support lines.

Hide Caption
5 of 6

Photos: World War I in Africa

World War I in Africa – Dr. Heinrich Albert Schnee (left) with von Lettow-Vorbeck in Berlin 1919. The pair were responsible for the political and military administration of German East Africa (modern Tanzania, Burundi und Rwanda) until the colony was lost after World War I.

6 of 6



Story highlights

- As world commemorates the WW1 Centenary, the African story remains a footnote
- WW1 resulted in huge losses of African lives, had consequences for continent's future
- Two million African soldiers, workers and porters were directly involved in World War I

A hundred years ago on this day, on August 8th, 1914, the British HMS Asteria and Pegasus protected cruisers bombed Dar-es-Salaam, then the capital of German East Africa, bringing the European so-called "war to end all wars" to the eastern African shores. The day before, Anglo-French forces constituted of Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, Gambian and Beninese troops had [invaded German Togoland](#) in West Africa.

Among World War I campaigns, the East African one was the longest of all: as the armistice was being signed in Europe on November, 11th 1918, the last of the German forces were still fighting their British counterparts. Indeed the general who led them only surrendered two weeks later, on November, 25th 1918.

But who knows any of this, whether in America, in Europe or indeed in Africa?

As the world commemorates the Centenary of the Great War, [the African side of this story](#) remains a footnote, despite huge losses of human lives and [major consequences](#) for the future of the African continent.

The [East Africa campaign](#) was the opposite of the European war of trenches: it was about mobility, short raids and long treks on foot. The German Schutztruppe, white German commanders and black African soldiers called askaris, never

exceeded 25,000 men. The British however assembled 150,000 troops: South Africans and Indians at first, joined by Kenyans and Nigerians later on.

But none of these soldiers would ever have survived, let alone be able to fight, without the unmentioned exploitation of porters. For every one soldier, German and British troops used four "native carriers," including women and children, who hauled food supplies, arms and even artillery; cooked, scrubbed and tended to their needs; and died of exhaustion, malnutrition and disease.

[Of the 105,000 deaths](#) among British forces during the East Africa campaign, 90% were porters. 45,000 among the dead were from British East Africa (Kenya) alone.

General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, the German commander, is often lauded for his military genius, outwitting the British during four years with barely a fifth of their numbers. Some of the tales written are nothing short of David vs. Goliath. But von Lettow-Vorbeck had been ordered not to engage by Berlin.

As far as I am concerned, his actions would be better described as a war-mongering megalomaniac effort by a military commander responsible for the callous deaths of 300,000 porters, the looting of hundreds of villages and the devastation of years of crops. If the death toll had been of German lives, would he have been as celebrated in the scrolls of History?

It is unclear that askaris actually volunteered to be part of the Schutztruppe, considering just a decade earlier, in 1905, the Germans had violently suppressed one of the largest uprisings against colonial rule on the African continent, the Maji Maji rebellion.

That same year, Germans carried out the first genocide of the century against the Herero in German South West Africa (Namibia). Terror, subjugation and inhumane practice ruled in the German colonies, and this is how it should be remembered.

All told, two million African soldiers, workers and porters were directly involved in World War I. Though never fully acknowledged, Europe's Great war was a war of colonials and a colonial theater of war.

As I reflect on this day, a public holiday (Nane Nane) for farmers in Tanzania, I remember a hundred years ago 750,000 square miles of land was inundated and destroyed, I remember the farmers who were forcefully dragged into this as porters. I remember Africans who fought other Africans for reasons unknown to them.

The erasure of Africa's involvement in World War I, including the ongoing centenary commemorations, painstakingly reminds us that, once again, it is for us to make sure history is told in full.

My commitment to [The World War I in Africa Project](#) finds its roots in this necessity: history should be unearthed and a critical lens applied, especially by us Africans.

What happened in Africa should not stay in Africa.

http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/africa/world-war-in-africa/index.html?hpt=iaf_mid