

# Africa versus Europe: how the two British theatres compared 1914-1918



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## Abstract

Although the African theatres of the First World War are receiving more attention than in the past, they are still relatively unknown. As in 1914-1918, the territories remain exotic side-shows for those interested in the main theatre of war, that in Europe, and for British researchers, it is the Western Front. This article aims to alert readers to the similarities and differences between the British forces which served on the Western Front with those who served in the African theatres of 1914-1918, proving that “War is always hell. Only the setting changes”.

**Keywords:** Africa, Western Front, Home front, Empire, Colonies

## África frente a Europa: comparación de los dos teatros británicos 1914-1918

### Resumen

Aunque los teatros africanos de la Primera Guerra Mundial están recibiendo más atención que en el pasado, continúan siendo relativamente desconocidos. Al igual que en 1914-1918, los territorios siguen siendo exóticos espectáculos secundarios para los interesados en el teatro principal de la guerra, el de Europa, y para los investigadores británicos, es el Frente Occidental. Este artículo pretende alertar a los lectores sobre las similitudes y diferencias entre las fuerzas británicas que sirvieron en el Frente Occidental y las que lo hicieron en los teatros africanos de 1914-1918, demostrando que “la guerra es siempre un infierno. Solo cambia el escenario”.

**Palabras clave:** África, Frente Occidental, Frente Interior, Imperio, Colonias

At the time, the African theatres of the First World War were seen as peripheral or side-shows to the war in Europe. Today, the African campaigns are still seen by many in Europe as peripheral, yet for those in and from Africa, the war was as real as for those in any other theatre. While the East African theatre was regarded as exotic, those serving from Europe being on “safari” and having an “easy time”, some in Africa preferred to be on the Western Front where they could be killed by a sniper bullet rather than face the constant ravages of jigger flea, lion and other wildlife, the rain and malaria (Morrow, 2003: 124; Eeles, 1916). Reading the memoirs and letters of men who served, one could be forgiven for thinking the war in Africa was quite different (Pocock, 2015). At first glance, it was, however, on closer inspection there were numerous similarities. What follows is an overview of the similarities and differences between the British Western Front and the African theatres, with most attention given to East Africa which was the longest running campaign of the war (8 August 1914 to 25 November 1918). To overcome space constraints, the author assumes that most readers have some understanding of the war on the Western Front and has therefore focused more on the less-known African theatres using secondary material which consolidates primary research. In doing so, this introductory paper aims to take further Taylor Harper’s 1995 summary:

My goal in writing this was to discover, if possible, how a large group of Englishmen, brought to Africa not by their own design, reacted to this new and very strange setting, culture and type of warfare. Fighting in Africa was nothing like life in the trenches. And yet few would say it was any easier. It was a different kind of hell. A mobile hell. It was not the psychological hell of sitting in bunkers being bombed to smithereens, but rather the psychological hell of marching for days with little food and bad water with the possibility at any moment of ambush in the dense bush by German troops, rhino, lion or leopard. There was no barbed wire, only thorn-studded bushes that could shred your clothes in a minute and that stretched out to the horizon. As in the trenches there were rats, but also snakes, vermin of a dozen different types, biting ants, stinging bees, jiggers, and a myriad of microscopic organisms that took a greater toll of these men from Britain than bullets or shells. War is always hell. Only the setting changes. The men who went to East Africa instead of France were not being given choice assignments by an [sic] means. (Harper, 1995)

On 4 August 1914, when the British government declared war, taking the empire into an unknown conflict, neither the masses in Britain nor those in Africa had any say in the decision. They were drawn in by virtue of being under control of the British parliament. The dominions could choose the extent to which they wanted to be involved – in Africa, that meant the Union of South Africa which had to receive parliament’s permission to invade neighbouring German South-West Africa (Namibia) (Samson, 2020a). The colonies and protectorates, especially those areas falling into the Congo basin, although technically at war, were to be protected by not being dragged into the conflagration. Stretching the comparison, Britain, under Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener’s leadership, would only use volunteers; conscription eventually being brought in by stages, the Derby scheme of 1916 probably being the most well-known. British East Africa (Kenya) was an exception when the settlers insisted on conscription which

was introduced in March 1916, mainly as a means to ensure farm labour by forcing black Africans to work on white-run farms (Samson, 2020a). Pragmatically, Herbert Kitchener did not want the non-European territories involved in the war as that would detract attention from the Western Front where all available manpower, in his opinion, would be required (Samson, 2020b). But he was overridden by the War Book which dictated that enemy wireless stations were to be put out of action on the outbreak of war, one being at Dar es Salaam in German East Africa, and when other local actions took place in an uncoordinated fashion. By the time the powers came to consider keeping the Congo Basin out of the war, too many military encounters had already happened (Samson, 2020a).

In all territories, as with all wars, men enlisted for the same reasons: adventure, economics, to get away from oppressive environments or girlfriends, to prove their worth, coercion (“chiefs had betrayed their people”), conscription (“People [in Mdyaka village] were forced to serve”; recruiting parties “were very cruel”), following in their father’s footsteps, and to protect their land (“We fought to protect our country and children from cruel Germans”) (Page, 2020a). As Erik-Jan Zürcher noted in *Fighting for a Living*,

[...] compliance does not necessarily have to equal acquiescence. People can see the army as an opportunity structure, offering them chances of social advancement or of improving their living standards, the chance to escape issues at home including getting women pregnant, feuds, or crimes (as Johnson notes), or simply the possibility to travel and see more of the world than their own village or valley. (Zürcher, 2013: 39).

Whether they realised it at the time or not, “healthy young males who had served their country in the army were seen as attractive workers, as they had been declared healthy (psychologically as well as physically) and had acquired discipline” (Zürcher, 2013). Malowa Mwali was one such, being employed as a *kapitao* (sergeant major) at the Field Star Mine at Que Que, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) at the time of the Second World War. He “was quite a boss there, just because [he] had joined the K.A.R. in the 1914-18 war”. Similarly, Chisosya wadi Mtulukoko did not serve in the 1939-45 war as he was a *kapitao* on a farm, having served in the KAR between 1914 and 1918 (Page, 2020a).

Likewise, those who did not want to serve, found their own way of avoiding or trying to avoid military service: self-harm, hiding, moving away for employment, or giving false names (Page, 2020a; Moyd, 2014; Grundlingh, 1987); although in Britain men, as conscientious objectors, could also refuse to serve (“Conscientious Objectors”, 1915-1918).

Labour was used extensively. The army required work behind the scenes to keep the fighting force operational. This included making munitions, food production, moving equipment and supplies and looking after the wounded and ill. In Britain, with men rushing to the colours, legislation was passed to keep essential workers in their jobs, women too were used to make munitions

and keep the home front and frontline fed and cared for. While there were similarities around labour and transport, these were also the areas that saw the greatest differences.

Despite the size of the African theatres, the European front saw greater use of railways than the war in Africa, the rail network being more developed in the former. Taylor Harper puts it succinctly: "One rarely realizes that [Africa] comprises 20% of all the world's land and is only a third smaller than Asia. German East Africa, now Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, could swallow Germany and France and still have some room for dessert, say Luxemburg or Belgium" (Harper, 1995). In West Africa there were no railways used in the war, in South-West Africa a fairly established rail system existed, while in East Africa there was one line in British East Africa (Kenya) and two in German East Africa (Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda), all running east to west. Once south of the Central Railway in German East Africa, there were trolley lines on some farms. In both South-West Africa and East Africa, the lines had to be repaired or even rebuilt following their destruction as the Germans evacuated an area (Haarhoff, 2021; Sneyd, 2014).

Motor vehicles were easier to use in Europe than in Africa too, due to the road infrastructure although the rains in both caused havoc, especially in Europe when combined with the churned ground, the result of bombing. In Africa, the type of soil and lack of tarred roads presented problems. The cost of upkeep in Africa was high as both the Administrator of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Edward Northey, commander of the Nyasaland (Malawi)-Northern Rhodesia Frontier experienced ("Private Papers of Major General Edward Northey", n.d.; Yorke, 2015) while black cotton soil caused vehicles to stick (Campbell, 2020). Horses could be used in Europe for transport to get close to the frontline while in East Africa, most horses succumbed to sleeping sickness or trypanosomiasis carried by the tsetse fly – mounted units jokingly being referred to as "dismounted" units. The result in Africa was that manpower, literally, was used to carry equipment and food across many miles of territory. The exact number of carriers to serve in the various African theatres is not known, however it is estimated that about one million served in the East African theatre (Paice, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

While trenches were the main feature in Europe, there were trenches in Africa; more so in West Africa, but also in East Africa. They were found at the base of Salaita in Tsavo, Kenya, or surrounding a fort or *boma*, and were more common in the German controlled southern part of the East African theatre. Often the trench was filled with sharpened spikes and disguised as a means of defence. Where camps were in place for some time, trenches were dug for defensive purposes; men also learnt to dig single holes for protection from bombardment at night, tents being few and far between (Page, 2020a).

<sup>1</sup> Calculations done by the author for the Commonwealth War Grave Commission report into *Inequalities in Commemoration* (2021) suggest this figure to be fairly accurate.

For most countries involved in the war, standing armies were used at the start, such as the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), West African Frontier Force (WAFF), King's African Rifles (KAR) and Union Defence Force (UDF); the territorials and rifle clubs being white volunteers who had kept in training whilst in civilian employ. Kitchener insisted on all armed forces being trained to ensure discipline, alignment of action and to instil a sense of automation by which means men could protect themselves. While the minimum length of training for volunteers in Britain was six months, in Africa it was nine, although the 25th Royal Fusiliers (Legion of Frontiersmen) Service Battalion was said to be the only unit from Britain to not be trained. The 25th was also the only unit which accepted men who did not meet the War Office's recruitment requirements, enlisting men such as Charles Fitcher Smith, who had a prosthetic leg, American Northrup Macmillan, who was hugely overweight with a 64-inch waist, and Frederick Selous, who was 64 when he was killed by a sniper in January 1917 (Tarpey, 2019; Aldrick, 2012). The East African Mounted Rifles (EAMR) raised in British East Africa (Kenya) had no training as a unit when war broke out, Timothy Parsons describing them as "a ramshackle collection of fractious horse-borne settler militias" (2015: 183). They were local settler farmers who set out to protect the border between the German and British colonies and the Uganda railway which the Germans regularly raided (Wilson, 2006).

Until the arrival of the Indian Expeditionary Forces to support them, the nearly 800 strong EAMR was effectively responsible for a front line (478 miles) (Confidus Solutions, n.d.; Klekowski and Klekowski, 2018) longer than the Western Front (450 miles North Sea to Switzerland) which saw 100,000 British men in six divisions serve in 1914. Initially, the EAMR was supported by the Indian Volunteer Force raised within British East Africa but they were disbanded within three months of the outbreak of war for political reasons (Steinbach, 2021; Morton Jack, 2018). The African units were also operational before those in Europe. On 8 August 1914, the port of Dar es Salaam in German East Africa was fired upon by the Royal Navy and on 12 August 1914, the day the British Expeditionary Force arrived in Europe, the first British rifle shot was fired in West Africa. Other encounters took place around East Africa on 15 August 1914, including at Taveta in Tsavo, Kenya, while the first recorded British shot in Europe was on 22 August in Casteau, Belgium (Samson, 2018; Willson, 2012). Taveta and its surrounds was the only British Empire territory occupied by German forces during the war, being held from 15 August 1914 through to the end of February 1916.

As the war progressed, so more men were required for both the Western Front and the last remaining theatre in Africa, East Africa. Various recruitment techniques, especially from 1916, were used to entice men to enlist. In Britain, women gave white feathers to men they believed to be shirkers. It caused such a stir that men were provided with badges to show they were "on war service", wounded or disabled, while the hospital wounded were supplied with special "Hospital Blues", a distinctive uniform, for when they

went out (Doyle, 2012). In Africa, while no feathers were issued, except to white men in South Africa (Thompson, 2011), men were enticed to join the colours by recruitment bands (Page, 2020a; Samson, 2021b). Black Africans taken prisoner on the battlefield were given the option of working as porters or soldiers. This was possible as black African loyalty was different to white: where whites tended to be patriotic to a country or flag, black Africans were loyal to the person who could best guarantee their security. This meant that men were generally quite comfortable changing sides, so we see previous German askari having served initially in 2 King's African Rifles (KAR), a British unit raised in Nyasaland, until 1911, then with the Germans and later, after capture again between 1916 and 1918 again with the British KAR, either as porters or armed askari (Hodges, 1999; Page, 2020b; Grundlingh, 1987; Pretorius, 2013). Bands, parades and rallies were features of recruitment in both Britain and Africa, and while conditions of service differed in terms of rates of pay, the length of service was similar: three years or length of the war.

Labour recruitment, however, differed, although in both theatres, a shortage of labour saw men brought in from other countries such as the South African Native Labour Corps which served in France, Chinese labour which served in both Europe and East Africa and the Seychelloise who served in East Africa (Samson, n.d.a; Grundlingh, 1987; Athanase and Bonnelame, 2016; "War Diaries Director of Railways", n.d.). In Britain, as previously mentioned, legislation had to be passed to keep men in specific or essential jobs. This also applied to civil servants and colonial office officials working in Africa to ensure civil society continued functioning. As a result, many resigned their position to enlist (Samson, 2021b). The movement of men into the armed services left gaps which were filled by women: the Land Army, WPSU, munitions work and medical care being the main fields in Europe. In Africa, female settlers took over the management of neighbouring farms whilst the menfolk were at the front (Dinesen, 1937 and 1981), while some served as nurses. All women were active on the home front, and on occasion this extended to feeding and watering men in the field as evidenced by photographs of the Lake Tanganyika Expedition. The extent to which women were used as labour in East Africa is still to be determined. Some veterans interviewed by Melvin Page deny women were ever used by the armed forces for labour, while other accounts imply they were. Women providing comfort for men was prevalent in both the European and African fronts, encounters crossing colour lines (White, 1990).

In Africa, the recruitment and experience of black labour differed according to where one originated, the conditions of employment, who employed the person and length of time employed. While labour was needed on white farms, labourers were also required to work on the docks, railways, ships and as cooks, servants and animal herders. On occasion, employers in BEA would threaten employees with being sent to the army if they did not obey an instruction (Dinesen, 1937). General labour to build bridges and camps was needed, some being employed on a contracted basis whilst others were employed casually as local demands dictated. The majority of black labour,

however, was reserved for carriers or porters, although gun porters and stretcher bearers were more specialised functions and carried higher status and pay. Carriers transported loads of food, ammunition and other supplies, packed in loads weighing approximately sixty pounds or thirty kilogrammes. More challenging to carry were items of awkward dimensions such as gun carriage wheels which required a number of men to coordinate movement. In Europe, trains or wagons would be used to move such loads. In East and West Africa, as previously mentioned, conditions mitigated against the use of mechanical and animal transport.

While most labour was paid for through the military system, including officer's servants, orderlies or batmen, in Africa, four rank and file soldiers could employ a "boy" between them who was paid out of the soldiers' salary (Samson, 2015). He would set up camp on arrival at night, source firewood, prepare hot water for baths and carry the soldier's surplus equipment when on the march. Camp followers appear to be a mix of official servants – as in the Indian Army which served in East Africa and which brought out its own followers – and unofficial followers such as the "boys" and other casual labour including women and children who provided various services as required. The use of child labour, despite being banned, was a feature in Africa, particularly as servants. A General Routine Order was issued reminding serving men that their use was unacceptable. Complaints had been received from "local chiefs that numbers of children have run away from their homes to the various camps, enticed by the troops to stay and work for them. [...] Native servants can be obtained through the Military Labour Bureau" ("General Routine Order 49", 1916). However, for the young person who sought and offered his services, it was a way to earn a living and to see beyond their village. It was also a potential way to stay near a serving parent.<sup>2</sup> This is another area requiring more research.

Officer's servants would generally travel with them from their country of origin while rank and file or replacement servants were locally recruited. Most serving forces travelled by sea at some stage of their time in military service. This was not surprising given the extent of the British Empire, George Morton Jack recording that by the outbreak of war "approximately 75,000 Indian servicemen [had] travelled overseas between 1900 and 1913" (2018). For service on the Western Front, most travelled across the channel between Britain and Europe while for those men from Britain serving in Africa or vice versa, there was travel through submarine-infested waters having to avoid enemy raiders, irrespective of whether the route was via Cape Town in South Africa or the Mediterranean and Suez Canal. Men from Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Egypt (British West India Regiment), who saw service in East Africa from the end of 1916, were transported by sea to the theatre and then between Kilindini in Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Lindi and

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to the panel discussion on *Africa History Club* (24 October 2021), Clubhouse, for additional insight.

other port bases, including on Lake Tanganyika, by boat to save time trudging the distance overland. The poorly developed ports, however, meant men invariably alighted onto lighters with all their kit before reaching land. One of the reasons the Indian Army (including a British unit) failed in its attack on Tanga in November 1914 was that the force had not been trained in landing attacks (Anderson, 2014).

But there was no avoiding the overland slog, marching between eight and twenty miles a day, depending on the speed with which one had to reach one's destination. Accounts tell of carrier columns stretching kilometres as the men wound their way through and over rivers, up and down rocky mountains and through thick grass and thorn trees to get their loads to the front. Accounts also vary as to how long men stayed in the African field constantly on the alert; it seems on average about six months (if you were white). There was no behind the trench line, communication trench or front as men on the Western Front had. It was all front depending on where one was. In contrast, the men in Europe circulated round the front every two weeks, with home or base leave on occasion (Corrigan, 2003). This was rare for those in Africa. Leave was scarce, as were letters from home. Some doctors, such as Geoffrey Carpenter who was based in the Belgian Congo, spent the war collecting insects, others like Francis Brett Young and Norman Parsons Jewell in German East Africa saw their fair share of action and suffered from attacks of malaria (Carpenter, 1920; Young, 1917; Jewell, 2016). The equivalent of trench foot was the jigger flea, an insect which burrowed under the toenail to lay its eggs. If the whole sac was not removed intact, it would lead to horrid painful sores. Leave, when it did occur in Africa, was in Nairobi, Durban, Cape Town or other African centre, as a trip back to Britain would take too long. Often extra convalescent time was added to a hospital stay for this reason, particularly at the end of the war irrespective of rank or background ("Medical Records of the First World War", n.d.). It saved on costs but also ensured men received decent food and rest.

While the texts often refer to the climate and lack of rations taking their toll on the carriers, all forces in East Africa were affected by these and generally to the same extent. The quality of rations and quantities recommended were way above what actually arrived, and varied considerably depending on the role a person fulfilled – rations differed for men in transit and those on the front, ordinary carriers and gun carriers. The main issue affecting all carriers, compared with the fighting men, was inadequate time to cook their food, in particular maize, which resulted in severe digestive issues and consequently malnutrition (Pike and Balfour, 1918). Supply lines were stretched, at times non-existent. It is unlikely this situation would have been tolerated on the Western Front. Food parcels were common supplements for whites in both theatres, however, there seemed to be more pilfering in East Africa; letters home and diaries suggesting items had not arrived. On occasion, a cake was recorded as mouldy when it arrived on the Western Front (Webb, 2014; Satchwell, 2014; Campbell, 2020). YMCA camps which were few and far between in Africa enabled men, who could afford it, to supplement their

rations. And on occasion, additional food could be bought from local villages before surpluses were destroyed by either army to prevent them falling into enemy hands. One reads of similar actions on the Western Front where local residents provided food for soldiers. YMCA camps were more also prevalent in Europe. Missionaries and the Red Cross did their bit where they could, the latter in particular concerning prisoners of war ("Green Book No 1A", n.d.; Anthony, 2006).

The men in Europe had to keep themselves occupied with the monotony of the trench, the men in Africa with the monotony of the march. To pass the time and to maintain morale, songs were sung. Many of those sung on the Western Front are still recognised and sung today, such as *Pack up your troubles* and *It's a long way to Tipperary*. Those sung in the African theatres have long been lost to time, unless a veteran could recall one for an interviewer (Mullen, n.d.; Page, 2020a). As Edmund Yorke (2015) noted, many were of the time, demonstrating an equality between officers and rank and file which was not socially permissible after the war. Away from the frontline, entertainment by touring groups to base camps was more frequent in Europe than in Africa. In Durban and Cape Town, the two main port cities where troops often stopped over, there were concerts and other entertainment opportunities as recorded in diaries. Little is recorded about such events in East Africa other than in YMCA camps.

Medical care was more limited in Africa, the mobile nature of the conflict and size of country playing a role, as did the British system of centralising supply compared with the German units being self-sufficient. It is, however, surprising to read how quickly new ideas of treatment spread to Africa such as the Serbian Barrel and how treatments evolved, while other improvements such as increases in basic ration requirements did not get notified (Pike and Balfour, 1918; Samson, n.d.b). The medical structure in Africa was similar to that in Europe although the Field Ambulance was far more basic in Africa. Women were employed as nurses in both theatres but there was greater reluctance to allow them to serve in Africa than in Europe because of the conditions and remoteness of the theatres. As in the United Kingdom, there were convalescent homes, one of the most well known in British East Africa being that of Lady Colville where the author Francis Brett Young spent some time (Leclaire, 2006).

The war came to most home fronts. In Britain through the bombs dropped by zeppelins, in Africa, as the mobile forces moved through an area, some experiencing the conflict more severely than others, and some areas remaining completely untouched. While it is generally accepted that in most African cultures, women tended the fields, they did rely on male muscle power to help prepare the soil. The absence of healthy men meant that less food could be grown (Samson and Page, 2020). This food shortage was exacerbated by some areas having to export foods to support the armed forces, and by droughts or floods; some of the worst of both being recorded during 1917. In all home

fronts, the wounded, disabled and aged had to be looked after. Fundraising, concerts, organising comforts (Pires and Nunes, 2021) and managing convalescent homes were other ways the home front was engaged in the war. In Africa, mission stations held bazars or fetes to sell products to raise funds for comforts, while chiefs raised money for specific purposes, to the extent that Africa donated 274 planes at a cost of £2,086 each to the British war effort (Samson, 2017). Some gave gifts of cattle, and many sent messages of loyalty. In both Britain and Africa, prayer meetings were held regularly during the conflict.

No doubt, the stress caused by not knowing was strong on all fronts, including the home. On the Western Front bombardment was the equivalent of not knowing what to expect as one marched through vegetation higher than men were tall. What has become known as shell-shock or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was prevalent in both theatres and as controversial. Dr Owen Berkeley Hill was believed to have suffered from PTSD which accounted for his being evacuated from East Africa to Britain, where his accusations against fellow doctors had a severe impact on their careers. After the war, he went on to set up the top psychiatric hospital in India (“Administration of Medical Services in German East Africa”, n.d.; Nizamie and Goyal, 2010).

The Christmas truce of 1914 featured disproportionately in the British centenary commemorations. What is little known is that in Africa there were regular truces for various reasons. Louis Botha, in German South-West Africa arranged a similar truce in July 1915, to what Kitchener had done in 1902, to facilitate surrender talks. In East Africa, one side or the other would request a break in fighting to bury the dead and remove wounded, or to exchange medical supplies. However, the latter was usually arranged as a drop-off through a messenger carrying a white flag. The forces were also known to write to each other objecting to unacceptable behaviour and on the occasion of German officers being sent awards from Germany, the British Commander-in-Chief, South African Jan Smuts, wrote to congratulate Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his men (von Lettow-Vorbeck, 1990).

Whilst in Europe a man could not easily flee the falling shells, in Africa the porters invariably scattered on a nearby gun being fired with the result that loads were dropped, damaged or lost. Before the march could continue, as many as possible had to be rounded up and reassured. Instances of possible suicide are found across the theatres in Africa, no formal verdict being issued to ensure wives and families remained entitled to pension payments (Samson, n.d.c; Willis, 2018). The subject of suicide during conflict is a much-neglected area of research yet based on the cases in the African theatres during the war suggests it was relatively common but not spoken about. More common, as on the Western Front where such injuries were called “Blighty Wounds”, were cases of self-harm to avoid further service (“Self-harm, Hand Wounding”, n.d.; Humphries, 2014).

Desertion generally received the same treatment in both theatres – deserters were shot and buried, depending on the commanding officer. Some, such as Dr Norman Parsons Jewell in Africa were more understanding and ordered whipping instead. An analysis of Jewell’s war diary entries suggests this only became a necessity as the war progressed when men were reluctantly brought into service (Page, 2020a; Jewell, 2016). There are instances where men were found enlisted in regiments who had deserted others. This was either because they had been allocated to a role they did not like, were being discharged for ill health or on occasion did not like the commanding officer. While the first two cases invariably involved soldiers, the last concerned carriers to the extent that the East African Commander-in-Chief on 2 January 1918 issued an order that all such men had to be returned to their original unit (“General Routine Order 2”, 1918). This was not much different to men enlisting under assumed names to avoid prosecution, such as H Bulweni of the South African Native Labour Corps who was wanted for a murder in the Engcobo district of the Transkei (Grundlingh, 1987).

There were a handful of mutinies in the British forces in both Europe and Africa. According to David Payne (2008), 1,800 British servicemen were court martialled for mutiny with only 42 being from the Western Front. The Western Front was to see three “fully recorded mutinies” and a fourth at a prison near Rouen and that by the Australians en masse in October 1918. In Africa, Ross’s Scouts and Wavell’s Arab Scouts were the two units most recognised for objecting to conditions. Both units were disbanded (Samson, 2021c). Otherwise in East Africa there was concern about employing Muslim soldiers from India who were from areas supporting the Khalifa’s call to *jihad* although there was no known repercussion in sub-Saharan Africa. There were executions for treasonable acts, assisting the enemy, but whether these were related to the Ottoman Sultan’s call for *jihad* is not clear. Hassan Bin Sudi was sentenced to death by hanging on 23 July 1915 by the then Commanding Officer at Mombasa, Brigadier General W Malleson, while on 20 October 1915, “intimation [was] received [in Nairobi regarding the] execution of a Kojan named Jaffer Thavur at Zanzibar for trafficking with the enemy” (“War Diary of Indian Expeditionary Force B”, n.d.). On 26 November 1915, another two Indians were executed, this time by firing squad. They were Hindu cousins Ganesh Dass and Yog Rash, at Voi. It seemed to be in response to Germans blowing up the Uganda Railway line nearby (Sharma and Sharma, 2020).

In addition to the mutinies, there were two rebellions or uprisings in Africa. They were the Chilembwe “nationalist” uprising in Nyasaland in February 1915 and the South African Afrikaner or Boer Rebellion of 1914 after parliament had voted to invade German South-West Africa (Samson, 2020a). A close inspection of the records shows that there was continual unrest in places throughout the war in Africa. Local communities took the opportunity of peace keepers being otherwise occupied to exact revenge against neighbours and other wrong doers. The Portuguese and Germans suffered similarly depending on who was perceived to be the local stronger force. On the home front

too, opportunities were taken to push for better recognition. In Britain, the Suffragettes put their disruptive campaign on hold to support the war effort in an attempt to gain the vote and a political voice, whilst in South Africa, in 1918 the Bantu Women's League which wore blue ribbons, led by Charlotte Maxeke, forced the Union government to abandon the requirement for black women to carry pass documents allowing them to move around (Global Non-violent Action Database, 2013).

Where individuals felt strongly about issues but not to the extent of mutiny or rebellion, they found other outlets to make their feelings known. While not as prolific as regards the Western Front, combatants and others turned to poetry and prose. Francis Brett Young, a doctor, wrote an "official" account of his experiences in East Africa under the title *Marching on Tanga* (1917), but gave vent to his frustrations in *Jim Redlake* (1930) and *The Crescent Moon* (1918). Gertrude Page (1915 and 1918) expressed the challenges and dilemmas colonial settlers felt having to decide where their priorities lay – their new developing farm, the war in Africa or in Europe. Poets and artists expressed their sentiments at the time and after the war, RT Caluza in South Africa commenting on social aspects as seen in his 1915 "Ixeghwana [Old Man] or Ricksha Song", compared with the white soldier experience (Lucia, 2005; Satchwell, 2020). There are at least three known poems concerning the sinking of SS *Mendi* which was transporting South African Native Labour Corps members to Britain when it was hit by the *Darro* on 21 February 1917 off the Isle of Wight. In comparison there are at least four songs commemorating the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* which was torpedoed on 7 May 1915, the impact of both sinkings having significant repercussions in Europe, South Africa, and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Novels and films recalling events and shedding light on social and cultural aspects continue for both theatres of conflict, most novels on the African theatre however being published in Britain, including those by African authors. Exceptions include Fred Khumalo, *Dancing the Death Drill*, about the sinking of the *Mendi* which was published in South Africa, and Kenyan born MG Vassanji's, *The Gunny Sack* and *The Book of Secrets*, both of which were published in Canada, his country of residence, while American historian Melvin Page's historical biography of Juma Chimewere, *Distinguished Conduct*, was published in Malawi.<sup>4</sup>

Death, too, had similarities – many who were killed on the Western Front lay where they fell with no known grave, not dissimilar to those, especially carriers, who died in Africa. The reasons for such differences are varied, as has been the means of remembrance. While superficially those serving on the Western Front were more homogenous, this was only really true in terms of religion; Christianity dominating. In Africa, the diversity of religion was as

3 Hebron Mandhlenkosi Ngubeni, "Amaqhawe eMendi" and F. J. Gaffin, "U Kuzika kuka Mendi", en Huskisson (1992) with the most well-known being by Sek Mqhayi, "Ukutshona Kukamendi" or "Sinking of the Mendi".

4 The two remaining black African authors who wrote about the East Africa campaign, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not Child*, and Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Afterlives*, are both published in Britain. For a full list of novels concerning the 1914-1918 war in Africa, see the GWAA Bibliography ([www.gweaa.com](http://www.gweaa.com)).

great as that of any other characteristic, such as language and ethnic grouping, with the result that men were treated differently in death – likely according to local traditions and perceived practices.

While families in Britain were notified within a short time when a person on the Western Front was wounded, missing or presumed dead, it was not the case in Africa. While messages took a while to filter back to family in Britain, it took longer within Africa, often the family only hearing when a member of the same unit arrived home at the end of the war. Few letters were sent amongst the black and Arab soldiers and their families. This was due to many being illiterate but also concern by those who could write of having their letters read and restricted by censors. One interviewee in *Chiwaya War Voices* noted that when people did write home, they used imagery to let family know how they were: being stung by a bee instead of saying he had been shot. Of the carrier forces, it seems that only Bishop Weston's Zanzibar Carrier Corps were supplied with cards to write home (Hodges, 1999). Similarly, few in Africa knew what was happening in the wider war, unlike those in Europe. Newspapers, if they did arrive, were at least six months old, and with few black Africans being able to read, they relied on someone literate being able to access the paper.

There did seem, however, to be more interaction between people of different backgrounds in Africa than on the Western Front, where it was mainly limited to people being taken prisoner. Black Africans talk of speaking to white German prisoners when they had a shower in the river (Page, 2020a). There was concern amongst white prisoners in Africa being guarded by black prison guards who oversaw them having to clean lavatories and so forth, occupations traditionally reserved for blacks (Belgian Ministry of Colonies, 1919). This related to class issues which played out in both theatres in different ways. In Europe, class was economic with social behaviour being the distinguishing factor. In Africa, it was colour which masked similar economic and social divisions. While white working class men might have had some issue with killing and challenging or commanding men of a more "superior" class, it was more stressful for the black and Arab African who had been conditioned, through threats, to consider the white man with awe. Now they were instructed to shoot and kill white men, an instruction which posed a psychological barrier to overcome. Ndezemari Phiri told Edmund York on 16 May 1980 that, "[...] after I killed him [a white Sergeant-Major by bayonet] I had to take his number [...] take that gun belt, take that bottle and leave the whole gun" (Yorke, 2015). It was a traumatic experience. A few on the Western Front had similar experiences, for example, Inuit sniper John Shiwak (Sikoak) who revealed that he overcame the issue by putting himself into hunting mode (Kennedy, 2003).

Languages and cultures in Africa were diverse compared with Europe. Similar to the Indian Army, but different to the majority of the British Army, in Africa there was no common language such as English used on the Western Front. In Europe, Kitchener had insisted on British commanders being appointed to bridge the gap between British Army ways and other cultures, such as Sam

Steele of Canada not being appointed to command a division and not wanting Welsh or Irish units using their native tongue (Samson, 2020b). British men sent out to Africa to serve with the King's African Rifles were encouraged to learn KiSwahili to facilitate communications, their being rewarded financially on passing examinations in the language (Samson, 2021a).

After the war, few spoke of their experiences. This is a common complaint from family members researching their past. The men interviewed by Melvin Page and his team in Nyasaland (Malawi) similarly revealed that "You don't talk about war, it's the same as an initiation ceremony". Some went onto explain that if they told people what they had really experienced, few would enlist. It was best they found out for themselves (Page, 2020a). On the whole, demobilisation and the post-war experience for soldiers carried further similarities, with there being objections by those who had to stay longer. While in Europe, German prisoners were provided with a means to get home, in Africa the black German askari who had surrendered had to find their own way home. However, they were released in smaller groups to ease pressure on the local communities they would have to pass through (Great War in Africa Association, 2018). Veterans, especially those with permanent war disabilities, visible or otherwise, struggled to get work (Delpont, 2016; Hanna, 2015). Therefore, to cope with the after-effects of the war, many veterans turned to support groups. In Britain there was the Royal British Legion, in South Africa, a linked South African Legion and from 1929, the MOTHS or Memorable Order of Tin Hats. In Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi), *mbeni* dance societies were formed. These had their origins on the march during the war. Other secret societies, often religious based, such as the *Butwa* in Northern Rhodesia and the Watchtower, also came into being, these latter being of greater concern to the colonial administrators than the dance groups. Officials were encouraged to start touring again and to quickly re-establish pre-war control (Yorke, 2015).

There is discrepancy over the extent to which pensions and disability allowances were paid to groups who served in Africa. This varied depending on which country a person was from, in which unit they served, where a person was resident, and who the local district administrator and chief was. Accounts range from not receiving anything, local chiefs and district administrative officers either being incompetent or dishonest, to being allowed to take their blanket home to being paid an amount determined by how long they had served and if they had been wounded (Page, 2020a; Grundlingh, 1987; Yorke, 2015; Hodges, 1999).

As on the Western Front, when a soldier performed a deed warranting recognition, awards were made in Africa. If the person was white and in a British Army unit, they were entitled to the equivalent award as the men in Europe for similar acts and ranks. However, for black and Indian soldiers, there were different awards. George Morton Jack refers to permission being granted for the Victoria Cross being awarded to Indian soldiers. Permission was never

granted for black soldiers. In the sub-Saharan African theatres of the 1914-1918 war, only five Victoria Crosses were awarded, four for action in East Africa.<sup>5</sup> Awards to black soldiers were dependent on which service paid them, there being a difference between the British War and Colonial Offices, and the age of a force. This led to the word Imperial being pre-fixed to the Distinguished Conduct Medal to differentiate it having been awarded to a black soldier. While on the Western Front and in the Indian Army, there were strict guidelines governing the issue of medals, requirements were less stringent in Africa, medals also being awarded for political or motivational reasons.<sup>6</sup> As with the Western Front, for an award to be recognised, it had to be published in the *Gazette*, or official government newspaper. Invariably in the United Kingdom, this was in the London and/or Edinburgh *Gazette* (Arnold, 1988; Fecitt, 2021). However, not all African awards were announced in these papers. One has to consult the local East and South African Gazettes as well as General Routine Orders to ascertain what awards were granted, including monetary awards, in particular to carriers and interpreters who went beyond the call of duty ("General Routine Orders", 1916; 1918). A financial reward was of greater value than a medal which could not be used to purchase food and other items. At the end of the war, medals recognising service were awarded on the same basis across the British Empire, the difference being that Indians and black Africans were awarded the Silver and Bronze War medal respectively instead of the medal issued to white troops. Death plaques too were issued across the board, although it is unlikely all African soldiers received theirs. That they were issued to black personnel is confirmed by the existence of at least one seen in 2019, that of Private M/1099 Mbaluka Mdala of the Rhodesia Native Regiment who died of flu or pneumonia on 15 December 1918.<sup>7</sup>

During 1918 and beyond, what was known as the Spanish flu, ravaged Africa as it did Europe and elsewhere. Those particularly affected were along the lines of communication, men returning home carrying the plague. It made no distinction, however with few in Africa having been exposed to western type illnesses, the flu took its toll, being referred to as the three-day illness (Page, 2020a.; Yorke, 2015; Phillips, 1990). Other diseases took their toll in Africa during the war years too, in particular, malaria, small pox and the plague (Jewell, 2016; Hodges, 1999). Full figures for Africa will never be known as there had been no complete count of the various populations by that time (Yorke, 2015; Phillips, 2014). One of the legacies of the war of 1914-1918 was that the European empires had a better understanding and grasp of the territories they controlled, having been forced to move inland away from the coastal regions to further their war aims (Browne-Davis, 2018). This meant

5 John Butler, Cameroons, West Africa 17 November 1914; Henry Ritchie, HMS Goliath 28 November 1914; Wilbur Dartnell, Maktou, East Africa 3 September 1915; William Bloomfield, Mlali, East Africa 24 August 1916; Frederick Booth, Johannesburg, East Africa 12 February 1917.

6 Dispatch from General Wapshare on operations on Mafia Island East Africa; recommendations for awards; other correspondence including CO 525/63 58513 on Military Operations, and CO 323/720, 49612 Military, Distinguished conduct and meritorious service medals. WO 32/5815, The National Archives. United Kingdom.

7 Private collection; not listed on the CWGC list of dead. Last View: 24 October 2021.

greater control over populations was possible, as systems were introduced to manage large scale production of goods and coordination of people. In Africa, this meant less opportunity to escape paying taxes in cash. To ease pressures in Britain caused by unemployment, soldier-settler schemes were introduced where veterans who met the requirements were allocated farms in East and Central Africa – even if they had no previous farming experience. Few succeeded (Duder, 1978).

Finally, as this article has shown, although the detail differed, there were more similarities between the British theatre on the Western Front and in Africa than differences. As Harper noted “War is always hell. Only the setting changes” – whether on the frontline or the home front; and its legacy is far-reaching too. As the peace discussions at Versailles humiliated Germany, so too did decisions regarding Africa. The mandate system resulted in less financial expenditure in previous German colonies than in longstanding British territories. The result was the growth of nationalism which played out in 1939 and beyond.

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