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Edward Paice, *World War I: The African Front*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2008. Pp. xxxix, 488. ISBN 978-1-933648-90-3.

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Britain's entry into the Great War ended any chance that the conflict would be confined to Europe. In extending the war to Africa, the British were seeking not to add Germany's colonies to their own already vast Empire but to prevent it from using its territories as wireless installations and ports to assist its commerce raiders. Both sides assumed the war would be over by Christmas, to be followed by a process of political horse trading in which any lost colonies would be restored to the rightful owners. However, as the conflict dragged on and assumed greater intensity than originally anticipated, old imperial rivalries resurfaced and colonial objectives were reappraised. The British fired their first shots in the war when, together with the French, they invaded Togoland, which fell on 26 August 1914. South African troops gained control of German South West Africa in July 1915 and the British completed the conquest of the Cameroons in February 1916. But resistance in German East Africa (modern-day Tanganyika) did not end till the local commander, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, surrendered two weeks after the armistice in November 1918.

Operations in Africa bore no resemblance to the trench warfare of the western front, where men fell by the tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands in a single battle, and progress was literally measured in yards. There were few set battles in Africa as small armies marched and fought over thousands of square miles, facing dangers that went beyond those of the battlefield. Tropical diseases, killer bees and wild animals, inhospitable terrain, much of it unmapped and unexplored, and blistering heat made even the most hardened soldiers prefer the trenches of France to the trauma of East Africa.

The campaigns in Africa are replete with unusual incidents and larger-than-life characters that would ordinarily have aroused considerable interest, were it not for the copious blood-letting on the western front. Indeed, even today many general histories of the First World War ignore the conflict in Africa. Edward Paice's new book on the African front is therefore a most welcome addition to the literature of this neglected theater. Author of several excellent books on Africa¹ and fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, Paice has integrated an impressive array of printed and archival sources to produce a scholarly, detailed, superbly written, and balanced history of the political dynamics and operations in East Africa. He explains in his introduction that, even if the war in Africa was a side-show to the main struggle in France, it was exacted very high financial and human costs from the main antagonists.

The small German army conducted its African war on the cheap, but the British Treasury spent an immense sum, estimated at more than £70 million (£2.8 billion in today's money). Add the contributions of India and South Africa and the bill approaches or sur-

¹ See, e.g., *Lost Lion of Empire: The Life of Cape-to-Cairo Grogan* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), and *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

passes that of the Boer War. The 126,000 British troops in the East African campaign sustained over 22,000 casualties, including 11,189 dead. Additionally, fatalities among Britain's African combatants and carriers, as well as Indian and South African troops, exceeded 100,000, not to mention many thousands permanently disabled by disease or injury. The Germans made no attempt to keep records, but the death rate among African carriers and their families (who followed) alone was estimated to be no less than 350,000. Well might a historian refer to the campaign as "a war of attrition and extermination which [was] without parallel in modern times" (3).

Quite apart from the casualties suffered by combatants and their support units, this book emphasizes the tragic consequences of the war for the indigenous population of East Africa. Germany's brutal policy and its troops' wholesale thefts of food and cattle left the population to starve. And, too, the incessant drain on manpower made survival more difficult for those left behind. Further, in certain districts, the absence of rainfall forced the population to subsist on wild roots; in extreme cases, so it was reported, there was resort to cannibalism. Excluding the carriers conscripted for service, an estimated 300,000 civilians perished in German-occupied territories. But the greatest calamity of all occurred at the end of the war, when Spanish influenza spread across much of Africa, bringing untold suffering and nearly wiping out entire villages.

Both sides tried hard to harness the immense manpower pool of their African colonies for military purposes. Paice addresses the question why African soldiers fought and died for foreign imperialists whose motives for war were a mystery to them. For unskilled Africans, eager to escape the rigid confines of their tribe, the military offered a most lucrative and prestigious form of employment. Survivors returned comparatively wealthy, able to marry well and enjoy respect. Such troops were cheap, plentiful, courageous, accustomed to the oppressive climate, immune to fever, and able to endure incredible hardships on minimal rations. Most Africans enlisted, however, not as soldiers but as carriers. As neither vehicles nor beasts of burden were of use in the bush, the carriers became the bedrock of the transport system. The British alone employed a million carriers. Raising such numbers, given the inherent dangers involved and the unpleasant nature of the work, necessitated impressments, directly or indirectly. Carriers were seldom paid.

Paice's intricate narrative focuses on other non-military aspects of the campaign, for example, the attitude of the respective belligerents to the war in Africa. Britain, apart from wanting to neutralize the threat to its shipping lanes, regarded the conflict as a nuisance, a remote side-show which diverted funds, men, and material from the vital front in Europe. The other powers placed more significance on the campaign. South Africa was eager to expand its territory and the Belgian and Portuguese governments were fighting to retain their colonies. The Kaiser and his advisers believed that the presence of undefeated German troops on African soil when peace negotiations began would facilitate the immediate return of all former colonies to Germany. Since the British blockade had cut off German aid, they risked sending two supply ships, which succeeded in reaching the colony. Later they tried unsuccessfully to supply Lettow-Vorbeck by air. In a record-breaking flight of 4,340 miles in ninety-five hours, a Zeppelin meandered from Bulgaria to Egypt before it was forced to turn back without reaching its destination—Paice devotes a brief chapter to this amazing episode.

After Turkey joined the war and proclaimed a jihad against the Entente, the Germans, desperate to relieve pressure on their forces in German East Africa, dispatched agents to encourage the Muslim population to rise against the British.² A widespread Muslim holy war in East Africa would threaten Britain's security in Egypt and its control of the Suez Canal, not to mention the risk of mutiny among the many African and Indian soldiers in the British army. Rebellions in British Somaliland and among the Senussi in the Western Desert were contained, but the greatest threat came from Abyssinia where the new, seventeen-year-old emperor, Lij Iyasu, announced that he was converting to Islam. There was considerable anxiety in British governing circles that the emperor, who could raise an army of at least 100,000 men, might declare a jihad, sweep into the Sudan, and join hands with Lettow-Vorbeck. But a rebellion deposed Lij Iyasu and his successor, a Christian, adopted a neutralist policy. In the end Germany's efforts to unleash a far-reaching jihad in East Africa failed because its agents lacked an understanding of Islamic culture and religion which, like Christianity, was divided into sects with outlooks as different as those of disparate groups anywhere.

Internal politics are too often overlooked or given short shrift in studies of military campaigns. Paice, however, examines the subject thoroughly, particularly from the perspective of two of Britain's allies. The leaders of South Africa, Louis Botha and his austere deputy General Jan Smuts, once bitter enemies of Britain, had in time become its staunch adherents. Their decision to actively support Britain in August 1914 was made for what they believed to be the greater good of South Africa. It was a brave move in view of traditional anti-British sentiment among the Afrikaans-speaking population—and the fallout required Smuts to suppress a rebellion led by his former colleagues and friends. Intensely hated for having the blood of Afrikaner heroes on his hands, he was the object of almost daily death threats. He gladly left South Africa to assume command of field operations in East Africa early in 1916.

Portugal's keenness to participate in the war was bound up with party and political interests. The republic would have preferred to remain neutral but feared losing its African colonies, which somewhat palliated a deep-seated nostalgic yearning for past glories. In the pre-war years, acrimony and factionalism had marked Portuguese politics and led to frequent changes of government. The onset of war exacerbated the country's instability and parlous financial condition. Portugal's predicament hampered proactive campaigning by its forces in eastern and southern Africa.

Paice points out that propaganda played a role in the African conflict, just as it did in the European theater. Britain's position regarding Germany's colonies hardened after the first two years of the war. Prime Minister Lloyd George made it clear that his government had no intention of ever returning captured colonies to Germany. By firing the first shot across the bow, the British initiated the propaganda war. Seizing the initiative, they questioned Germany's fitness to rule and poured scorn on its vicious pre-war conduct, accusing it of using the natives as pools of slave labor and committing what amounted to genocide. As might be expected, the charges were exaggerated but there was undeniable proof that in

² The story here, which Paice relates in detail, is ignored by Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa, 1914–1918* (NY: Norton, 1986), and Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004), two of the better known general studies of the war.

suppressing revolts in German South West Africa between 1904 and 1906 and in German East Africa in 1907, scorched-earth tactics had caused the death of some 350,000 natives. Thrown on the defensive, the Germans insisted that since then they had made many beneficial reforms and that on the whole their rule was hard but fair. The British gained the upper hand in the war of words for, while their own record was far from spotless, they had not been nearly as repressive and cruel as the Germans.

The greater part of the book is devoted to a compelling and in many ways unique account of military operations in East Africa. Paice clearly explains the tactics used in engagements and the changing strategy of the campaign, examining the activities of all the belligerents, not only the British and Germans. He further describes how strained relations between British army leaders and their Belgian and Portuguese counterparts often severely impeded military cooperation. He relates tales of extraordinary courage and adventure which inspired a number of novels and movies.³

The British navy had no trouble gaining control of the waters along the eastern coast of Africa and within German East Africa, culminating in their destruction of the cruiser *Königsberg* in the Rufiji delta. It was a different matter on land, where the British and their allies faced huge challenges, some self-made, others inevitable in a torrid area twice the size of Germany. Distrust of Africans initially led the British to exclude them from combat in favor of Indian troops, who were, it turned out, under-equipped and ill-suited for the war being waged. Oddly enough, it was Smuts who first started to use black troops in field operations—with much improved results. British and South African commanders, slow to adapt to bush warfare tactics, had to cope with imperfect communications, tropical diseases which sometimes halved their available forces, and vegetation so dense that large opposing units often passed as little as half a mile apart, each unaware of the other's presence.

To make matters worse, coordination plans between the allies were rarely carried out successfully. Political wrangling marked every phase of Anglo-Belgian cooperation. The Belgians believed the British wanted to deprive them of conquered enemy territory, if not dispossess them of their colonies at the end of the war. The British, for their part, suspected the Belgians might use any captured German territory as a bargaining chip in secret negotiations with Berlin for a separate peace. Belgian involvement in the campaign ceased at the end of 1917, as the remnants of the German forces trudged closer to Portuguese East Africa.

To the Portuguese government, the war in Africa was more important than the one in Europe. But limited financial resources, unpopularity of the conflict at home, and fear that a defeat in the colonies would have serious political repercussions militated against its forces fighting the Germans more actively. The British held the Portuguese army in contempt, viewing it as more a liability than an asset. Had the Portuguese cooperated in British plans to encircle the German army instead of avoiding confrontations, the war might have ended in 1916.

What might have been does not detract from the heroics of Lettow-Vorbeck, who commanded the *Schutztruppe* (local militia comprising German officers and NCOs and Afri-

³ The best known being C.S. Forester's *The African Queen* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1935), later a film directed by John Huston (United Artists 1951).

can levies called askaris). The story of this genius of irregular warfare is well known. Waging a four-year war against overwhelming odds, he never lost a major engagement to the British. His early successes included a series of raids into British East Africa (now Kenya); he repelled an attack at Tanga though outnumbered eight to one, and won a victory over the British at Jassin. With the arrival of large South African forces, he was thrown on the defensive, relying mostly on guerrilla tactics but, under the right circumstances, willing to face his adversaries head on. South African commanders repeatedly attempted to surround Lettow-Vorbeck's main force or compel him to fight a decisive battle, but each time he eluded them. His objective in prolonging the campaign was to tie down large Allied forces which might otherwise be used against Germany on the western front. Though the British kept pouring in more troops and captured all the major ports and towns in German East Africa, the war dragged on as Lettow-Vorbeck marched his army the length and breadth of the country before invading Mozambique and Northern Rhodesia. To avoid delays, he left his wounded behind to be tended by the British and released his own prisoners if they gave their word not to rejoin the war. All the while, he kept his army intact and one step ahead of the Allies. His askaris endured unimaginable hardships but remained at his side, apparently less out of loyalty than fear—deserters were shot or hanged. In the end, his forces were reduced to a band of several thousand nomads, who remained in the field by seizing any supplies they could lay their hands on.

Paice has added significantly to our understanding of how a small German army (never exceeding 15,000 men) evaded the grasp of much larger British forces. Lettow-Vorbeck was more than tough, courageous, and resourceful. An expert in bush warfare, he had participated in and studied closely Germany's campaign to crush the native uprising in German South West Africa, becoming well versed in mobile warfare and its inherent logistical and medical challenges. He relied on his interior lines and knowledge of the country to move quickly, taking full advantage of the vast spaces in which to retreat, as well as the rainy season, which forced his pursuers to halt and allowed him to plan his next moves.

I have only two minor complaints about this book. First the maps could have been clearer and more detailed: the print is sometimes too small and some locations referred to in the text are absent from the maps. Second, the title is misleading: the author's entire focus is East Africa and he makes no pretense of covering the other fronts. It would, however, be ungracious to close on a critical note. This is a first-rate study by a scholar who has done justice to the nature of the war and suffering in East Africa. It is difficult to imagine anyone adding significantly to Paice's account in a book that will surely interest students of the Great War and Africa.