African Soldiers in World War One: Uprising within a Global Conflict

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“We should remember the world as well as the war: all those involved, all the contributions, all the experiences, all the trauma, and the lasting legacy’.

- Taken from the 2013 British Council report on WW1.

In 2013 when the British Council carried out a UK survey about the First World War, only 21% of people thought that there was any African involvement in the war. Yet one million people died in East Africa alone during WW1.

When reflecting on a war, the focus is often on those who were involved in combat and yet because of the situation in East Africa at the time, many more people were directly affected by the war than the soldiers. This was mainly due to the logistics of the war. There were no roads and the railway was still in its infancy meaning that supplies had to be transported long distances across British East Africa. For this reason, porters became just as critical as soldiers. The Carrier Corps carried the necessary supplies on their backs and heads across what is now Kenya. Although there is not much by the way of living memory of these porters, their mark is still noted by the market in the eastern part of Nairobi that is named after them: Kariokor.

As the war went on, women and children were also forcibly put to work. They received little or no pay and were trapped in a situation where they were looked down on by the British troops and despised by the villages' people whose harvests were plundered to literally feed the war.

There is a trail of names across the country which offer clues as to the events that took place during the Great War, including in Taveta which was then the border between the two colonial powers: Germany and Britain. For example, Salaita (derived from slaughter where 253 soldiers were killed) is one such hill. It was here in Taita, Taveta that the war was truly international. People who came from what would now be 21 nationalities lived, worked and fought alongside each other forming the Carrier Corps, Kings African Rifles and British Allied Forces. One South African labourer reported that the most remarkable part of his war time experience was 'to see the different kinds of human races from all parts of the world'.[1]

Aside from the war, what many of the people in Taveta at the time had in common was the colonial oppression that they were facing. WW1 gave them a different lens through which to view colonialism. This was a fact not lost on the British. 'If a 'coloured' man was trained to raise arms against another European, what guarantee was there, so the racial thinking went, that he would not one day attack his own white master?' [2]
Indeed, there are at least two African uprisings that took place during WW1. The East African Campaign started in what is now Tanzania and Kenya but then went on to spread as far as what is now Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In different places across this area, some African people began to see the war as a chance to fight for their own liberation. These uprisings were not coordinated across the continent but took place in disparate contexts with the First World War as the background trigger. The Chilembe Uprising took place in January 1915 and although unsuccessful is celebrated annually on the 15th of January in Malawi as the beginning of the Malawi Independence struggle.

In Kenya, Mekatilili wa Menza was a Giriama woman who has in recent times been commemorated with a statue and gardens as a national heroine. What is clear is that between 1913-1915, she led the Giriama people in a sustained uprising against British colonial forces. Her reasons were complex. The Giriama had a sophisticated socio-economic structure and she like many Giriama leaders was keen that it along with their culture should not be undermined. She was particularly concerned with the issue of labour. Mekatilili was completely opposed to the exploitation of young Giriama men by the British and it can be argued that the Giriama's sustained resistance is part of the reason porters had to be brought in from different ethnic groups much further inland. The British colonial push on African labour is likely not have escalated in the same way if it were not for the First World War.

Following the war, many leaders from around the world such as Gandhi were deeply disappointed that the efforts of their countrymen were not internationally recognised. If anything, colonial brutality increased around the world. The legacy of the war, however, remained and the connections between previously disparate people lingered. It may not have been until after the Second World War that the struggle for independence finally bore fruits for many Africans. That said, it was the First World War that unexpectedly brought people in the same place and may have planted the seeds allowing different groups of people to see each other as potential countrymen.

[1] - See more at: https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/colonial-troops#sthash.1491Aq9A.dpuf


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