

The Forgotten Front: The First World War in German East Africa

The German appetite for Africa came late, and came hungrily. Bismarck, for years, had dismissed colonial ventures as a luxury the new Reich could ill afford. He preferred the European chessboard, the Concert of Powers, the careful balancing of Vienna and Petersburg and London. But by the early 1880s the pressure from Hamburg merchants and Hanseatic shippers, from the nascent colonial lobbies of Frankfurt and Berlin, had grown too insistent to ignore. The Scramble for Africa was on. The British were everywhere. The French were extending their reach across the Sahel. The Belgians, with King Leopold's private genocidal ambition, were carving out the Congo. To stand apart was, in the language of the day, to forfeit one's place among the great powers.

Carl Peters provided the instrument. A young, ambitious philologist of indifferent reputation and considerable nerve, he founded the Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation in 1884 and, that same autumn, slipped across the Indian Ocean to the East African coast. With a handful of companions and a satchel of pre-printed treaties, he marched inland from the mainland opposite Zanzibar, presenting his documents to chiefs who could not read them and securing, by signature and by thumbprint, a vast tract of country stretching from the coast to the foothills of Kilimanjaro. Bismarck, presented with a fait accompli and the prospect of a colonial irritant for Britain, granted his reluctant blessing in February 1885. The Schutzbrief was issued. Deutsch-Ostafrika, on paper, was born.

In substance it was a different matter. The territory, when finally negotiated with London and with the Sultan of Zanzibar over the years that followed, comprised some 995,000 square kilometres of country, taking in the whole of present-day Tanzania together with Rwanda and Burundi and a slice of northern Mozambique. It was an empire the size of Imperial Germany itself, populated by perhaps seven million people belonging to more than a hundred language groups, with almost no infrastructure beyond the slave-caravan routes of the Arab dhow trade. Germany had acquired it almost without intending to. Now she had to govern it.

The first attempts were calamitous. The German East Africa Company, made over the territory in 1885, fell almost at once into a confrontation with the coastal Swahili and their Omani patrons. By 1885 the Abushiri Revolt was in full cry along the littoral, the company's agents besieged in their factories at Bagamoyo and Pangani and Tanga, the German tricolour pulled down and trampled in the dust. Berlin sent Hermann von Wissmann, an officer of considerable experience in equatorial Africa, with a force of Sudanese and Zulu mercenaries and a small German cadre. By the spring of 1890 the rising was broken; Abushiri ibn Salim al-Harhi was captured and hanged at Pangani; the company's charter was rescinded and direct imperial rule was imposed. The territory, henceforth, would be governed from Dar es Salaam by a Reichskommissar, with a small standing army called the Schutztruppe to maintain order.

The first generation of German rule was harsh but, by the colonial standards of the day, not exceptionally so. The country was opened, after a fashion. Railways crept inland from the coast: the Tanganyikabahn pushing from Dar es Salaam towards Lake Tanganyika, the Usambarabahn climbing from Tanga to the foothills of the Pare and Usambara highlands. German planters established sisal and coffee estates in the cooler uplands. Missionaries, Catholic and Lutheran in roughly equal measure, established stations across the interior. Hermann von Wissmann, on his return as governor in the mid-1890s, promulgated some of the first game ordinances and game reserves anywhere in colonial Africa. The Selous country, soon to be the largest game reserve on the continent and named, in time, for the British hunter Frederick Selous, was first set aside under German rule in 1905. The German authorities, for all their faults, took a serious interest in the preservation of the great fauna of the country; the world's earliest formal wildlife reserves owe a not inconsiderable debt to the bureaucratic mind of pre-war Berlin.

What the planters and the bureaucrats did not foresee was the depth of resentment building in the southern half of the territory. Forced labour on the cotton schemes, the depredations of corrupt akidas and jumbes, the casual brutalities of district officers operating beyond serious supervision: these things accumulated. In July 1905, in the country south of the Rufiji, a spirit-medium named Kinjikitile Ngwale began distributing a sacred water which, he taught, would turn the bullets of the Germans to water. The Maji Maji Rebellion that followed was the most serious indigenous rising of the high colonial period anywhere in Africa. By the time the Germans had broken it, in 1907, perhaps 250,000 Africans were dead, the great majority from the deliberate famine the Schutztruppe induced by burning crops and villages across an enormous swathe of the south. The country never quite recovered from it. When war came seven years later, the southern districts were still half-empty.

Such was the colony into which Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, newly promoted Oberstleutnant, stepped ashore at Dar es Salaam in the spring of 1914.

He found a Schutztruppe of perhaps two hundred and sixty German officers and non-commissioned officers and some two thousand five hundred Sudanese and African askaris, organised in fourteen field companies scattered across the territory. He found a governor, Heinrich Schnee, who detested militarism and intended, should war come in Europe, to invoke the Congo Act of 1885 and have East Africa declared a neutral zone. He found a colony connected to the outside world by two railways, a few hundred miles of dirt track, and the wireless station at Dar es Salaam. He found, in short, almost everything against him. He determined, almost at once, that the only sensible course in the event of war was offensive action. Not to win the colony, which would be plainly impossible. Not even to hold it. But to tie down the largest possible Allied force in East Africa for the longest possible period, that the burden on the Western Front be lightened by however small a margin. It was a strategy of attrition pursued by a force that had nothing to attrit with, and it would prove one of the most remarkable feats of arms of the twentieth century.

War came in August 1914. Schnee, briefly, attempted to declare neutrality; Lettow-Vorbeck, ignoring him with the practised insolence of the Prussian field officer, began assembling his companies at Moshi in the shadow of Kilimanjaro and at Tanga on the coast. The first shots were fired in the second week of the month, when a German lake steamer raided the British wireless station at Kisumu on Lake Victoria. By September, German patrols were across the Anglo-German border into the Uganda Protectorate and British East Africa, harassing the Mombasa-Uganda railway and tying down the small British garrisons. The pattern of the war, in its early form, was set.

In November the British made their first serious move. Indian Expeditionary Force B, eight thousand strong under Major-General Arthur Aitken, was landed at Tanga on the third of November 1914 with orders to seize the coastal terminus of the Usambara railway line and open the way to the interior. They walked into one of the most extraordinary defeats of the early war. Lettow-Vorbeck, racing his men south by rail from Moshi, met them with perhaps a thousand askaris and a few field guns. Over three days of confused fighting in the coconut groves and through the streets of the town the Indians and the British were comprehensively routed; one celebrated phase of the action, in which angry swarms of bees descended on attackers and defenders alike, has passed into the folklore of the campaign as the Battle of the Bees. Aitken withdrew with the loss of eight hundred men killed and wounded and the abandonment of sixteen machine guns and six hundred thousand rounds of small-arms ammunition, the greater part of which Lettow-Vorbeck cheerfully appropriated to his own use. He would fight the next four years largely with British rifles.

The naval war, such as it was, took on a character all of its own. The light cruiser SMS Königsberg, caught at sea by the outbreak of war, raided into the Indian Ocean and sank the obsolete British cruiser HMS Pegasus at Zanzibar in September 1914. Pursued by superior British forces, she retreated into the labyrinthine channels of the Rufiji delta, where she lay concealed for months while the Royal Navy hunted her with monitors and aircraft. In July 1915 she was at last destroyed by shellfire. Her crew, however, escaped into the interior, taking with them her ten 10.5cm guns; these were converted to land carriages and would, for the rest of the war, constitute the heaviest artillery of the Schutztruppe.

The lake war was stranger still. Lake Tanganyika, 675 kilometres long and held at its outbreak by three German steamers including the powerful Graf von Goetzen, dominated the western approaches to the colony. In 1915 the Royal Navy contrived to drag two motor gunboats, christened HMS Mimi and HMS Toutou, by rail and ox-cart and brute labour across two thousand miles of southern Africa and over the Mitumba mountains, that they might be launched onto the lake. The expedition was commanded by one Geoffrey Spicer-Simson, a sometime hydrographer of disgraceful record and theatrical disposition, who took to wearing a kilt of his own design in the equatorial heat and was worshipped, briefly, as a god by the Holo-holo

people of the western shore. The little gunboats engaged the Germans in December 1915 and February 1916, sinking the Kingani and the Hedwig von Wissmann; the Graf von Goetzen was scuttled by her crew in 1917. Lake Victoria, Lake Nyasa and the smaller waters saw similar small actions, fought between converted steamers crewed by half-trained sailors and half-naked stokers, in temperatures that ruined the engines and prostrated the men.

The land campaign, from 1916 onwards, was a war of movement on a scale and over a country that European generals had never before contemplated. South African General and politician, Jan Smuts, assumed command of Allied forces in February of that year and committed perhaps fifty thousand troops, predominantly South African, Indian, Rhodesian, and King's African Rifles, to a vast pincer movement intended to roll Lettow-Vorbeck up against the southern frontier. The Germans gave ground, slowly and methodically, fighting rearguard actions at every river crossing and along every defensible ridge, drawing the Allies ever further from their railheads into country where horses died of trypanosomiasis within weeks and white men of malaria and dysentery scarcely more slowly. By the end of 1916 Smuts had taken Dar es Salaam and most of the populated north; by the end of 1917 Lettow-Vorbeck had been driven across the Rovuma into Portuguese East Africa. Yet he was not beaten. He continued to march, continued to forage, continued to fight whenever the Allies cornered him and slip away whenever they did not. Smuts handed off the command. The Belgians invaded from the Congo and took Ruanda and Urundi and the lake ports. The Portuguese were thrashed at Ngomano in November 1917 and lost a great quantity of arms and ammunition to the Germans, which was no small windfall.

The numbers of the Allied effort, by the war's end, defy comprehension when set against what they were attempting to accomplish. Up to 250,000 allied combatants in all served in the East African campaign across its four years; with perhaps a million Africans, conscripted as porters and bearers in the British Carrier Corps and its Belgian and Portuguese equivalents, marched the supplies forward on their heads through the bush. Lettow-Vorbeck's force may have peaked at about 18,000, but was more typically at 11,000-14,000 men or less, of which only a few hundred were ever German Europeans. The disproportion was, on paper, ridiculous. In the field, in the country, it was nothing of the kind.

The cost of the war was paid, overwhelmingly, by the African dead. The European combatants suffered grievously enough; the British Indian and South African and Rhodesian forces lost perhaps ten thousand men killed and many more incapacitated by disease. But the askaris on both sides died in their thousands, and the carriers in their tens of thousands. Estimates of porter mortality in the British Carrier Corps alone run from one hundred thousand to more than double that figure, dead of overwork and undernourishment and the standing trinity of African campaigning, which was malaria and dysentery and respiratory infection. The Belgian and Portuguese carrier corps probably did no better. The civilian population

of the territory, already battered by Maji Maji, suffered famines and reprisals and displacement on a colossal scale. Some estimates of overall African mortality, military and civilian, place the figure as high as three hundred thousand for the four years of the war.

The askaris themselves, both German and Allied, fought with a discipline and a tenacity which European observers found astonishing. Lettow-Vorbeck's askaris in particular followed him to the end, deserting in only insignificant numbers despite repeated reversals and the eventual loss of any prospect of victory. He paid them, when he could, in promissory notes scrawled on whatever paper came to hand; the Federal Republic of Germany, to its credit, honoured them in 1964.

The end came not in Africa but in France. On the 11th November 1918, in a railway carriage at Compiègne, the war the East African campaign was meant to sustain came at last to its close. The news reached Lettow-Vorbeck, then in Northern Rhodesia having marched his column up from the Zambezi country, on the 13th, by way of a captured British dispatch rider. He had taken the small mining town of Kasama three days earlier. He continued his advance towards the Belgian frontier for several days before consenting to negotiations, that he might extract the most generous possible terms; on the 25th of November 1918, at Abercorn on the southern shore of Lake Tanganyika, he formally surrendered his force. It consisted, by then, of one hundred and fifty-five Germans, eleven hundred and sixty-eight askaris, and perhaps fifteen hundred carriers and women and children of his fighting tail. The arms he handed in included some captured British rifles, some German Mausers of the 1871 pattern, four field guns including one taken at Tanga in 1914, and a quantity of small-arms ammunition manufactured at the Tanga workshops from melted-down telegraph wire. He had not been defeated in the field.

The peace which followed dismembered the colony with the brisk indifference of victors who knew nothing of the country they were dividing. The Treaty of Versailles stripped Germany of her colonies in their entirety. The League of Nations Mandate system, an emollient device intended to dignify what was in plain fact a confiscation, allotted the bulk of Deutsch-Ostafrika to Great Britain as the territory of Tanganyika; the small north-western kingdoms of Ruanda and Urundi went to Belgium and were administered, in time, from Léopoldville; the Kionga Triangle, a sliver of country south of the Rovuma, went to Portugal. Most of the German settlers, perhaps five thousand in number, were repatriated through Dar es Salaam in 1919-1920. Their farms were sequestered; their churches passed to British and Belgian mission societies; the railway from the coast to Kigoma, painstakingly completed in the year before the war, became part of the British East African network. The colony, after thirty-five years, ceased to exist.

What it had been, what it had cost, and what manner of war had been fought across it, were forgotten in Europe with extraordinary rapidity. The Western Front consumed all remembrance. Of the East African campaign there survived in Germany only the

legend of Lettow-Vorbeck, who returned to Berlin in March 1919 to a hero's welcome and a parade through the Brandenburg Gate, and the photographs of his lean, browned men filing past the Reichstag, the colony's last and finest emissaries. In Africa what survived was harder, and harder to count. A million carriers had walked a long way for a war they had not declared and could not name. Most of them never walked back.