

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 169

### *“Tipperary mbali sana sana”*

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The British war in East Africa had begun slowly, and with many setbacks and frustrations. But by 1916, with control of the Great Lakes and the sea secured, South African and Indian troops began the invasion of German East Africa. By the end of 1916, Dar es Salaam had fallen, and two-thirds of the German territory was under British or Belgian control. The British press mocked the German commander, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, calling him “Lettow-Fallback.”

But Jan Smuts, veteran of the Anglo-Boer war and commander of the British ground forces, knew better. The Boers had experienced similar losses of territory, and yet kept the fight going for another two years. And his German-led opponents in East Africa seemed capable of doing exactly the same thing.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 169. *Tipperary mbali sana sana*.

We’ve covered the war in East Africa in episodes 105, 113, and 128 already. And to those unfamiliar with guerilla warfare, it might appear that the British had the Germans on the run by the beginning of 1917. But the thing about guerilla warfare is, you can’t tell how the war is going by looking at the map. So let’s begin today’s episode by taking a look at the facts that actually *do* tell you how the war is going.

The German commander, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, still has over 10,000 soldiers, mostly black Africans, at his command, and they still roam freely over a sprawling region of tropical savanna about the same size as Imperial Germany. Allied forces are a mix of Indian and South African Army units, plus a few Portuguese soldiers, Belgian *Force Publique* fighters from the Congo, and white British settler volunteers from British East Africa and Rhodesia. They number about 40,000 altogether, which sounds pretty good, but when you strike off the list the soldiers who are poorly trained, unreliable, or ill, the actual number of well-trained soldiers ready to fight is about the same as what the Germans have. And there’s just no way that 10,000 soldiers can go into the

field and round up a comparable number of skilled and motivated enemy soldiers over an expanse of territory this big.

The British command does not want to see Portuguese- or Belgian-led troops in German territory. The British are already jockeying for position with their allies over the post-war settlement, and the British are very much keen on expanding their own colonial empire, already the largest in the world. Among the additional worries facing Jan Smuts, the overall commander of the British forces in East Africa, is the weakness of the Portuguese frontier to the south. The Portuguese have sent soldiers from Europe to bolster their defenses, but these soldiers are few and not well trained or motivated. Lettow-Vorbeck's army is perfectly capable of forcing its way across the southern border into Portuguese East Africa whenever he decides to. And he is going to do exactly that.

Smuts also has to keep an eye on his deteriorating political situation. As the war in Africa drags on, it is becoming increasingly divisive in South Africa. White South Africans of British ancestry support the war effort, as do mixed race and Indian South Africans, including friend-of-the-podcast Mohandas Gandhi. Some Afrikaners do, too, but a lot of other Afrikaners resist the war. The minority government in South Africa can't afford to alienate too many of them.

Over the course of the Great War, Afrikaners would feel increasingly alienated from their British rulers. By the end of the war, Afrikaner banks and insurance companies began appearing, financial institutions created to insure that Afrikaner money stays in Afrikaner hands, to be lent to and invested in strictly Afrikaner projects.

Black South Africans, especially the city dwellers, support the war effort and hope it will lead to greater civil rights at home. New laws had been passed in 1913, restricting black South African ownership of land. Protests against the law were voluntarily suspended when the war began, in the same way that Irish Home Rule advocates and suffragists in Britain suspended their respective campaigns for the duration of the war. But these black South African civil rights activists also expect their patriotism will be rewarded after the war is concluded. They will be disappointed.

Despite their support for the war, black South Africans were not permitted to fight in it. During the Anglo-Boer War, most black South Africans were bystanders, and most who were involved filled support roles, on both sides. Few were actual fighters. Now, during the Great War, British and Afrikaner South Africans alike opposed involving black South Africans in the conflict. West Africans and East Africans would become part of the conflict, but South Africans? No way. Go figure.

Tens of thousands of black South Africans were recruited for support roles, and many were even shipped to France to work on the docks, unloading cargo. Which, when you think about it, is really a lot like being a porter, isn't it? But white South Africans had a hard time envisioning black South Africans in any kind of military role other than the simplest manual labor.

But white soldiers of the British Empire found conditions in East Africa to be harsh. Officers who had served in France and were then reassigned to East Africa wrote letters home expressing nostalgia for the good old days of living in the trenches, if you can believe that. At least in the trenches, you got three square meals a day and there was no malaria.

White South African soldiers discovered that even having been born and raised in South Africa was no preparation for the tropics, another reason why the war was becoming unpopular there. In early 1917, Smuts declared the Germans beaten, and he was summoned to London to advise the Cabinet and be a part of the Imperial War Conference. This was a face-saving device meant to protect Smuts' popularity. To be transferred out of East Africa before the war was finished could have been seen as a rebuke, but this way it looked like a promotion.

Smuts's replacement was a British Army officer, Major-General Arthur Hoskins. But as soon as Smuts was gone and Hoskins took command, the South African government called their troops home. The war was growing too unpopular in South Africa. In addition to the political dimension, South African casualties, mostly from disease, were becoming an issue in their own right. Prime Minister Botha's official reason was that the units had been too weakened by disease to continue fighting. There was even some truth in that. And anyway, Smuts had declared the Germans beaten, so what was the problem?

Hoskins knew better. There was still more fighting to come, and the sudden loss of the South Africans amounted to a crisis. Hoskins had previously held a command in the King's African Rifles, so to him, the obvious solution was to recruit more East African *askari*, and send them into the fight.

I talked before about the British reluctance to use soldiers from their own East African colonial holdings against the Germans. For the first two years of the war, the British preferred to keep these soldiers at home in British East Africa to maintain control and security there. There was a danger in sending African soldiers to oust German colonial authorities, namely, that once Africans learned they could do that, they might apply the lesson to British colonial authorities. White settlers in British East Africa had been particularly vocal in their concerns about arming and training black African soldiers. And there was another concern. A substantial number of East Africans are Muslims, especially along the Swahili Coast, and with the Ottoman Empire not that far away and the Ottoman Sultan having called for jihad against the British, some questioned the reliability of these Africans.

But the call to jihad was two years old now, and nothing had come of it anywhere, including Africa, and the situation was getting urgent, and Whitehall was getting more concerned about the spiraling costs of the war. Something had to give.

Another consideration is that new units of black soldiers were arriving from other parts of the British Empire—soldiers from Nigeria and the Gold Coast, and even a couple of units from the West Indies. With the arrival of these units, and the departure of most of the white soldiers, the

resistance to putting East Africans on the front lines was starting to look pretty silly. And here marks a turning point in the war in East Africa, as the British soldiers become predominantly African themselves.

The British colonial force in East Africa had first been organized in 1902 and was called the King's African Rifles. They numbered only about 2,500 when the war began. By the end of the war, there would be over 30,000, a twelve-fold increase. Most of that increase would come now, in 1917, as recruitment of Africans began in earnest.

The recruitment of Africans into British armed forces would indeed have a tremendous impact on the British and the Africans both, and it couldn't help but change the relationship between them. As far as the British go, it's striking to read some of the diary entries composed by British Army officers serving alongside African soldiers in this war, as they relate, in language that ranges from surprise to utter astonishment, that African soldiers are capable of organizing, taking training, following orders, marching, and shooting just as well as any European. To us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this seems unremarkable, but to white Europeans of the day, it was a revolutionary discovery.

The war changed African perspectives, too, in many ways, some obvious, others less so. For many of these soldiers, it was their first time in uniform, first time marching and drilling, not to mention first time holding a rifle and learning how to use it. They even had their own marching song: "*Tipperary mbali sana sana*," or, "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary" in Swahili.

That Africans were inferior to Europeans was an idea embraced not only by most Europeans but also by many Africans. In the colonial era, Africans had witnessed many examples of things Europeans could do that they themselves could not. That an African with a rifle could be every bit as dangerous as a European with a rifle was something of a revelation to them as well.

And speaking of revelations, a lot of these African soldiers had never traveled more than a few hours' walk from their birthplaces. Now they were seeing the world. And seeing railroads, telegraphs, steamships, tall buildings, airplanes, and all the wonders of the twentieth century.

But the most significant effect of enlisting may have been the most typical one. Military service can be an uplifting and empowering experience for a young person. These soldiers met new people, learned new skills, and accumulated some savings. Their home towns were proud of them. Their neighbors looked up to them. Their marriage prospects improved. They would return home with some capital to improve their lives and brighten their futures. In short, poor Africans were enlisting in the King's Army for pretty much the same reasons that poor Englishmen were.

And there was one other benefit, one unique to Africans. Military service exempted you from getting drafted as a porter. We talked about this before. Because of the lack of roads and railroads and a climate lethal to horses, human porters were the main way food, supplies, and

equipment were shipped to soldiers in the field. African soldiers numbered in the tens of thousands, but African porters numbered in the millions.

Virtually every able-bodied male African in East Africa served as a porter at some point in the war. It was endless backbreaking labor in the tropical heat, with few of the benefits soldiers enjoyed. The pay was decent, at first, but as the war dragged on and Whitehall became cost conscious and the British supply lines got longer, demanding that many more porters, the pay rates plummeted until at last they were hardly being paid at all. Young men hid in the hills or enlisted in the army to avoid conscription as porters. By 1917, porters were getting paid just five rupees per month, plus their food, which was often not adequate, since like everything else, it too had to be carried in by more porters, so there was always a temptation to cut corners on meals.

The possibility of conscripting Africans to work as porters for *no* pay, at least for short terms, was considered but rejected. Europeans had a history of enslaving Africans, which had ended less than a hundred years ago and was still a cause for shame. Europeans also had a history of castigating the Arabs for enslaving Africans, a moral crusade that Europe took up in earnest beginning about the day after they ended their own slave trading. So after eighty years of strenuously denouncing Arab enslavement of Africans, suddenly compelling Africans to do heavy manual labor for no pay might be viewed as a teensy bit hypocritical.

So, five rupees a month. That was as low as the British's consciences would allow them to go. To put that figure in perspective, consider this. If you started working as a porter, you were required to get an ID to wear around your neck, and you were required to get it at your own expense. That was two rupees. Do you like sleeping on the ground? No? Need a blanket? That will set you back three rupees fifty, meaning that now you've got to haul supplies on your back for a month just to make back your out-of-pocket costs before you actually start turning a profit. Or to put it in a different perspective, white settlers who volunteered to serve as soldiers got paid five rupees per day. And you might think, well, those were soldiers, but the dangers of war, plus disease, hard labor, and poor food kept the casualty rate for African porters comparable to the casualty rate for soldiers in the trenches in France.

[music: MacLeod, *Infados*]

The early part of the year is the rainy season in East Africa, which makes any offensive action impossible. Last year, the British had made efforts to improve the roads and bring in trucks to help move supplies, but the heavy rains washed away those roads and left the British more reliant than ever upon human porters. The downside of having advanced so deeply into enemy territory was that the supply lines kept getting longer and logistics, always a thorny problem in Africa, were getting more complicated all the time.

The lesson that had been learned last year was that advancing light infantry units deeper and deeper into enemy territory was far easier than keeping those units supplied as they made their advance. You'll recall from episode 128 that British units moved forward, took enemy positions,

then sat for weeks, enduring enemy counterattacks and starvation rations as they waited for their supplies to catch up.

Smuts had tried to fight a mobile campaign last year, to encircle Lettow-Vorbeck's units. But it hadn't worked because of the logistics. The faster the British moved, the sooner they were out of supplies. And no matter how fast they did move, the Germans, who knew the country better, could always move a little faster.

The Germans, as we have seen, were more resourceful, more able to live off the land and manufacture their own needs, as opposed to importing them. Of course, the Germans drafted porters in large numbers also, and "living off the land" sometimes meant raiding local farms. Africans are subsistence farmers, which is a fancy way of saying that if you steal a farmer's crop, his kids don't eat. And as it turns out, the 1917 harvest was going to be a bad one here in East Africa, and starvation is going to claim as many lives as the war.

Which brings us back to Arthur Hoskins. As a soldier with much experience in Africa, Hoskins well understood these logistical problems. And he understood, even if no one wanted to say it out loud, that Jan Smuts' attempt to fight a mobile war in 1916 had ended badly. The German commander and his units had proved over and over again that they could escape from an encirclement faster than the British forces could create one. And then, after the German forces escaped, the British found themselves sitting in an advanced and exposed position for weeks or months waiting to see if their supplies could catch up to them before they starved to death.

Hoskins's solution was careful planning and preparation before beginning another advance. First of all, now that the British controlled the entire coastline of German East Africa, overseas supply could be brought through ports farther south, including Dar es Salaam itself. This would shorten the supply lines and reduce the demand for porters.

And speaking of porters, they were falling sick and dying at an alarming rate. Remember that the nature of using human beings as your supply chain is that most of the food they're carrying is meant to be consumed by other porters farther up the line. When the supply system fails and the soldiers at the front line aren't getting their supplies, you can bet that much larger numbers of porters are also not getting their supplies.

And then there's the unique problem of Britain's multinational army. The German force is mostly African, with a small—and dwindling—number of German officers. They all eat local foods, even the Germans. On the British side, you now have a mixed force with a lot of Indians, a growing number of *askari* fighters, and significant numbers of white soldiers. These three groups are accustomed to eating very different diets, and each has to be supplied with their native cuisine. This may sound silly, but forcing people to eat strange foods for a long period of time can be demoralizing at the least, and can often be unhealthy. In East Africa with its many endemic diseases, anything you can do to keep your troops healthy and happy is worth doing.

But Hoskins was soon to learn that the Cabinet in London wasn't prepared to be as patient as his approach demanded. They wanted to know what was taking so long. And worse, why was Hoskins requesting so many supplies? Remember that early 1917 is the peak of the U-Boat war against Britain. The British are feeling the loss of ships and trade, and so this is the worst possible time to be asking London to divert food and ammunition to Africa. Besides, didn't Jan Smuts declare the Germans in Africa already beaten? That would be the same Jan Smuts who is now advising the Cabinet.

In April, Hoskins reported to his superiors that he expected his troops to be ready to move in July. That wasn't good enough to appease the Cabinet, so Hoskins was reassigned to Mesopotamia. This news angered many of the soldiers. Hoskins was popular, and it was felt he hadn't been given a fair chance. The soldiers also understood the need for thorough preparation before beginning an advance into East Africa, rather better than the Cabinet did.

The Cabinet still saw East Africa as a sideshow, a distraction. The Germans certainly didn't. Berlin saw the value in draining British resources away from Europe. Unfortunately for Lettow-Vorbeck, it had been more than a year since the supply ship *Marie* had sneaked through, and supplies and equipment were becoming a problem. His troops were all living off of local foods, even the Germans, but quinine, for treating malaria, was running low. So was ammunition. It's a sign of how much value the Germans ascribed to the fight in East Africa that in November 1917, Germany sent a zeppelin southward in a dramatic and secret effort to send Lettow-Vorbeck supplies by air. Despite encountering bad weather in the Mediterranean, the airship got as far south as Khartoum, but then was recalled when the news came that British forces had overrun the location where the zeppelin crew had hoped to land. Lettow-Vorbeck had been forced to retreat into the mountains. So the airship returned to Germany, its mission unfulfilled, and there would be no further such attempt. Still, it was a remarkable effort.

Meanwhile, the British had selected their new commander, Jan Smuts's old pal Jacob van Deventer. Van Deventer took command, and immediately discovered the supply problems and the large number of soldiers stricken by disease. In the end, van Deventer wouldn't be able to get his offensive going any sooner than July, either. What he could get, though, were a couple of South African units that Prime Minister Botha decided could be spared after all, now that a South African was back in command.

Over the next three months, the British forces advanced southward, pushing the Germans back another hundred miles, still looking for that opportunity for an encirclement that would force the Germans into a decisive battle.

They almost got what they were looking for at Mahiwa in October. Van Deventer had hoped to encircle and destroy one of the German columns, but his Nigerian forces were almost destroyed instead when their South African comrades were unable to complete the maneuver. In all, a British force numbering almost 5,000 South Africans and Nigerians was forced into a retreat by a

German force less than one-third its size. The British suffered 2,700 casualties to the Germans' 500. Now, that sounds like a convincing win for the Germans, and it was in some ways, but in Africa things are not always as they appear. Four days of fighting had consumed close to a million rounds of irreplaceable German ammunition, and in particular, it had all but used up the German supply of smokeless cartridges. Longtime listeners may remember the early days of the podcast, when smokeless cartridges were the latest technology. Now the German troops would have to rely on their older weapons, the ones that give off a puff of smoke when you fire them, which tends to give away your position, which is fatal to Lettow-Vorbeck's hit-and-run tactics.

The Germans had retreated almost all the way to the Rovuma River, the border between German and Portuguese East Africa. Food and ammunition were scarce. Morale was low. It might make sense for Lettow-Vorbeck to try to slip behind the enemy and head back north into the interior of German East Africa for another round of liberating harvests from the farmers who grew them. But by this time, the German commander had to face a new problem: a rising tide of defections. His soldiers, the African *askari* who are over 90% of his fighting force, had been fighting a guerilla war under harsh conditions for years now, and getting paid only in vouchers that he promises them the German government will make good on someday. What do you suppose will happen if he takes his soldiers too close to their homes?

Come to mention it, it's pretty amazing they've stuck with him this long. By all accounts he was an inspiring figure who treated his soldiers well, and that helped. It likely also helped that he allowed his men to bring their wives and girlfriends along on the campaigns. And by the way, the German government will indeed make good on those vouchers, although it will take until 1926.

Since turning north was out of the question, in November 1917, Lettow-Vorbeck decided to cross into Portuguese East Africa and hunt for food and supplies there. Now, the British had recognized this possibility and had requested permission from the Portuguese government to send their troops into their colony months ago, but the Portuguese had refused. It wasn't that the Portuguese were so confident they had the situation in hand; it was a matter of national honor. Portugal had gone to war as much to assert her right to her African colonies as any other reason. To accept British help was tantamount to admitting that Portugal was too weak to maintain her colonial territories alone.

On November 25, the Germans began shelling the Portuguese garrison at Ngomano, just on the Portuguese side of the Rovuma River. As the shells rained down on the Portuguese troops, about 2,000 German-commanded soldiers crossed the river some distance upstream and quickly surrounded the Portuguese position. The Portuguese force, which consisted of about 700 *askari* and 200 Portuguese officers, were not only outnumbered, but their commander was killed early in the battle, leaving the troops disorganized and demoralized. The Portuguese force soon surrendered. They lost about 200 killed. Lettow-Vorbeck had lost only a handful.



Lettow-Vorbeck's force plundered the Portuguese position for badly needed supplies. They abandoned their own German weapons, which by now they had little ammunition for, and armed themselves with Portuguese rifles and machine guns and 250,000 rounds of ammunition. They also had about 700 prisoners. They released the Europeans but they forced the Africans—about 500 of them—into service as porters to carry the supplies they had just captured.

Over the next several months, Lettow-Vorbeck and his troops traveled virtually at will back and forth across the northern half of Portuguese East Africa, repeatedly raiding Portuguese garrisons for provisions, virtually turning the colony into a German supply dump. The native Africans living in the region had little love for the Portuguese and often proved willing to assist the German force, or at least look the other way when they passed through. Lettow-Vorbeck managed to recruit about 200 new African fighters during this period, a figure that disappointed him. He had been hoping for more.

By early 1918, the last of the British Indian troops had left East Africa. The British were pretty much fighting with an all-African force now, albeit with European officers. There were West African units from Nigeria and the Gold Coast, but most of the soldiers now were East African *askari*. In January, the Portuguese relented and gave the British leave to send troops into Portuguese territory. As Lettow-Vorbeck moved south through the interior of the country, the British used the Royal Navy to transport their troops to ports successively farther south, and from there marching them into the interior. By July, Lettow-Vorbeck got as far south as the town of Nhamacurra, in the central part of the country. To give you a sense of perspective, in the past two years, the German East African soldiers had traveled a distance equivalent to marching from Paris to Petrograd.

It was at Nhamacurra that he hit the jackpot, capturing a huge amount of supplies. Ten machine guns, 400 modern rifles with 300,000 rounds of ammunition, as well as half a million pounds of food and an ample stockpile of wine, champagne, and distilled spirits. It wasn't long, as one German officer later wrote, before there was not a single sober man, black or white, in Lettow-Vorbeck's entire army.

The British were furious. By this point, the alliance with Portugal seemed to be doing the Germans more good than it was doing the British.

But Lettow-Vorbeck was reluctant to move any farther south. Ahead of him lay the wide Zambezi River, which he wasn't sure he could cross before his British pursuers could catch up and pin him against it. So he reversed direction and sent his force back to the north. They re-entered German East Africa in September. The next destination: Northern Rhodesia, a territory untouched by the war so far, where he hoped to garner additional supplies. The British wouldn't be expecting that, and—who knew?—from there they might continue west into Portuguese West Africa.

But time was running out for the Germans, in more ways than one. Lettow-Vorbeck's force had been further reduced by casualties and desertions, down to about 1,500 German and African fighters, and about 3,000 porters.

And then there was the disturbing news coming over the wireless. The German force was down to one wireless set, which could receive only. The last time they had gotten news of the war in Europe had been in late 1917, when there was reason to think things were looking up for Germany. Now, in Northern Rhodesia, they were able to pick up wireless signals again for the first time in a year, and also examine captured British documents. What they learned was not encouraging. Damascus had fallen to the British? Bulgaria agrees to an armistice?

Lettow-Vorbeck's initial reaction was that this news sounded "very improbable." But as October gave way to November, the news only got worse. Rumors were flying. Hindenburg was dead. The Kaiser had fled the country. An armistice had been imposed upon Germany.

On November 12, the Germans captured a British messenger, who told them the news. An armistice had been agreed to on the Western Front. Lettow-Vorbeck and his fellow officers needed some time to digest what they had just been told, but they agreed to surrender on November 25, two weeks after the European armistice and one year to the day after they had crossed into Portuguese East Africa.

They were interned as POWs and eventually repatriated. Lettow-Vorbeck himself arrived in Germany in March 1919 to a hero's welcome. He married and had four children, two sons and two daughters, went into business, and served two years in the Reichstag, where he was staunchly anti-Nazi. Then in 1935, Adolf Hitler offered Lettow-Vorbeck the position of German ambassador to Britain. The story goes that he refused the position and told the Führer to—how shall I put this?—"engage in an extremely improbable sex act?"

In 1953, Lettow-Vorbeck returned to what was by then British Tanganyika, where he received full military honors from the British and was warmly welcomed by some of his former soldiers. He died in 1964, just a few days shy of his 94<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Lettow-Vorbeck and the German government never expected to win the East African campaign. Their goal was to drain British resources away from the war in Europe, and preserve a German post-war claim to East Africa. By that measure you would have to judge him a success, at least on the first count, if not on the second. The war in East Africa cost the British government an estimated £72,000,000 pounds, or five times what the campaign against German Southwest Africa had cost. To put that figure into perspective, it is about equal to the entire annual budget of the Ministry of War in 1913. Over 400,000 British and allied soldiers and support personnel from many countries fought in this campaign over four years, against an enemy force that was never larger than 15,000. And that doesn't include the porters.

Speaking of British Tanganyika, that is what most of German East Africa will become, after the peace treaty is signed. The small provinces of Ruanda and Urundi in the west will be ceded to Belgium, and a tiny triangle of German territory in the far south will be ceded to Portugal. This represents Portugal's only territorial gain from the war.

With British control of Tanganyika, the old colonialist dream will be realized at last. It is now possible to travel from Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, to Cape Town in South Africa without the bother of leaving British-controlled territory. For those who care about that sort of thing.

If the war in East Africa had happened in isolation, it would have commanded the attention of the world, much as the Anglo-Boer War had. It was only in comparison to the Great European War that this war looked like a "sideshow," as it was often called.

The official death tolls are about 12,000 British, 6,000 Portuguese, and 3,000 Belgian soldiers killed, against 6,000 German soldiers. A majority of these casualties are among Africans. But that doesn't begin to tell the story. The porters went into the field just like the soldiers did, they suffered all the hardships the soldiers did, and they died at comparable rates, so there is no good reason not to include them as combatants. The British recruited over a million porters in the course of the campaign, and at minimum, about 100,000 of them died. The actual figure may be much higher. The Germans, Belgians, and Portuguese didn't even try to count the number of porters they used, let alone how many of them died.

To put these figures in perspective, even if we accept the lower end estimates, the number of East Africans who died fighting in the Great War is about double the number of Americans. Or Australians. Or Canadians. Or Indians.

But British colonial officials had little interest in highlighting the casualty figures. The British government was pointing to the atrocities the Germans had committed in Southwest Africa and in East Africa before the war as an argument against allowing Germany to retain any of its African colonial interests afterward. The Germans had proved themselves incapable of ruling Africa without bloodshed, went the argument, and the British casualty figures in the Great War, well, they would tend to undermine that argument.

I haven't even gotten to civilian deaths yet. Aside from the soldiers and the porters of East Africa, an estimated 300,000 civilians died of starvation, brought on by a combination of poor harvests, tax increases, and the requisitioning of foodstuffs during the war.

But worse was still to come. In October 1918, the influenza epidemic struck. It moved quickly through East Africa, owing to the porters and the military supply lines, reaching places that had never experienced influenza before. In a matter of months, two million people died across all of sub-Saharan Africa. Nearly 200,000 flu deaths were recorded in British East Africa alone. No one knows the number in German East Africa; the skeleton administration the British had set up

as they took control of the colony was too small and too shaky to keep good records, but it's entirely possible that in East Africa as a whole, the influenza epidemic claimed as many lives as the war had. In just a few weeks.

These death tolls would be easier to bear if they had been in a good cause. But much of this fighting had to do with Germans, British, Belgians, and Portuguese spending African lives jockeying to protect their respective post-war colonial claims. It's hard to argue this is worth so many African lives. This conflict will put an end once and for all to talk of colonialism as a benevolent force for civilization and uplift in Africa. Or it should have.

Africans had fought bravely, often astonishing Europeans who had casually assumed no African could perform military service to a European standard. Many Africans hoped through wartime service, they had proved their loyalty and earned the right to be treated as equals. But neither Africans nor Indians were rewarded for their contributions to the war effort the way, say, the white British Dominions were.

At the Pan-African Congress of 1921, W.E.B. DuBois would declare that “twenty centuries after Christ, black Africa, prostrate, raped, and shamed, lies at the feet of the conquering Philistines of Europe.” Later still, he would write:

*England, with all her Pax Britannic, her courts of justice, established commerce, and a certain apparent recognition of Native laws and customs, has nevertheless systematically fostered ignorance among the Natives, has enslaved them, and is still enslaving them, has usually declined even to try to train black and brown men in real self-government, to recognise civilised black folk as civilised, or to grant to coloured colonies those rights of self government which it freely gives to white men.*

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank C.J. for making a donation, and thank you Gabriel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons help keep the words flowing and the bits going, for themselves and for everyone, and if you'd like to help out, I cordially invite you to our website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), where you can click on the attractive amber PayPal button, or on the perky orange Patreon button. And for myself and on behalf of all of our listeners, I thank you for your support.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we finish—yes, I said finish—the war on the Western Front, the last front of the Great War. This is it, the end, the finale, the armistice. *Très Bien*, in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Over the four years that I've been producing this podcast, I've heard from a number of listeners who perceive a Western bias or even an Anglophone bias. I did promise you a world perspective, and I admit I don't always deliver on that promise.

I try. I don't always meet the standard I set for myself. Maybe I set too high a standard, but I have no regrets about that. It's better to set the bar high and not make it than it is not even to try. Part of the problem is that English is the only language I can read well enough to do research in, and so that creates an Anglophone bias right there.

Another is that source materials are often hard to come by for certain topics. I've tried to do justice to the Great War in Africa. I've taken the opportunity to give more historical background on parts of Africa we hadn't already talked about, and I've tried to examine what these events mean for the African people.

But, as you may have noticed, even when I try to give an African perspective in the early part of the century, I'm still usually looking at them through European eyes, because this reflects the sources I use. But here's the thing. In 1914, Africa had a much smaller population than it does today. Most Africans did not speak a European language. Among the minority who did, few of them could write in a European language, and how many of those few do you imagine took the time to write a journal or memoir of their experiences during the Great War? Precious few, I suspect. And even if anyone had done that, their memoir would be unlikely to become available to me unless some European had taken enough of an interest in it to bring it to Europe and publish it. How often did that happen? Never, as far as I can tell.

If I'm wrong about that, please drop me a line at the podcast website and point me toward some African memoirs.

But I doubt many exist, and I invite you to take a moment to contemplate that fact. The Great War had a huge impact on Africa, and although it was just a hundred years ago, it's hard to find first-person African accounts of the events of the war. It's not as if we're talking about ancient history here. We have motion pictures and sound recordings of Europeans and Americans of this era. African experiences aren't recorded because no European (or American) of the time thought they were worth the trouble to preserve. And I think that vast African silence is as powerful an indictment of colonialism as anything that can be drawn from the preserved writings of Europeans and Americans.

[music: Closing Theme]