

Book Review: World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict Among the European Powers

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World War I in Africa looks afresh at the strategies of the German and Allied campaigns, and at the great rivalry between General Jan Christian Smuts, who took on the German forces in East Africa, and General Lettow-Vorbeck, celebrated as the only German general to occupy British territory and whose troops finished the war undefeated. Although this book is presented as a multi-national study of the war in Africa, its key strength lies in the author's intimate knowledge of internal politics in South Africa, writes **Mahon Murphy**.



World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict Among the European Powers. Anne Samson. IB Tauris. July 2012.

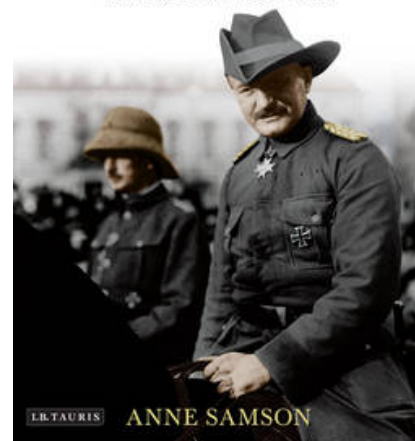
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"Ah, I wish to hell I were in France! There one lives like a gentleman and dies like a man, here one lives like a pig and dies like a dog," Lord Cranworth, settler in British East Africa once stated (p. 154).

Apart from [Hew Strachan's book](#) on Africa during the First World War, there have not been many recent publications that have dealt with the conflict in Europe's African colonies. That trend has been shifting, and with the centenary of the war and the historiographical shift to colonial history, gender studies, transnational and colonial history, there is an expected glut of publications that will look in depth at what was previously considered a side show. With this in mind one may be forgiven for thinking that it is actually the conflict on the Western Front rather than in Africa which is in danger of being forgotten.

Anne Samson's new book on the First World War in Africa builds on her [previous publication](#) on the conflict and South Africa. This new book offers a more comparative look at the war and focuses in on the actual places of conflict in German East Africa and German South West Africa. Strachan's standard work takes an in-depth look at the military campaigns. Samson seeks, however, to draw out the "humanness" of the war through a study of the influences of individuals rather than a military machine. This is certainly not a new approach to the conflict in German East Africa. The conflict there was awash with well-studied characters from the undefeated in the field: General Paul Lettow-Vorbeck and the eccentric British Naval Officer Spicer-Simson. However, what Samson delivers is a fascinating insight into the interplay between these various characters and how decisions taken on the ground, affected the outcome of the war. The Great War in Africa is presented here as a battle of wits between the various war, colonial, and foreign offices and those in the immediate line of fire (p. 43).

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A range of interesting characters are introduced throughout the book, but the two main protagonists are the above mentioned Lettow-Vorbeck and Jan Christian Smuts. Both these men were politicians and military men and both were instrumental in setting up the military systems in their countries; Smuts in South Africa, and Lettow-Vorbeck in German East Africa. Samson argues that it was their personalities and the management of the conflict that tipped the evenly held technical balance between the two opposing forces. While Smuts may have only first faced off against Lettow-Vorbeck in 1915, he had been busy putting down internal rebellion in South Africa and launched the campaign against German South West Africa. Of the two men, we get a more complex picture of Smuts and whatever his abilities as a commander of men, he was politically very influential right through the war and in the establishment of the mandate system that was put in place to govern the German colonies after the war. Lettow-Vorbeck remains the same old hardened fighter that we are familiar with from other studies.

Although this book is presented as a multi-national study of the war in Africa, its key strength lies in Samson's intimate knowledge of internal politics in South Africa. The Cape Colony provides the fulcrum through which the narrative of this book and its arguments operate. The other major English language text on South Africa in the Great War, Bill Nasson's [Springboks on the Somme](#), which focuses on the conflict purely on the terms of South Africa's relationship with the British Empire. Samson considers in more depth South Africa's relationship with its neighbours, bringing in new research on Portugal, Belgium, and the two German colonies of East and South-West Africa.

For lack of any English study on Portugal and Belgium in the African conflict, Samson's work makes an important contribution. It should be noted, as often happens with studies of such a vast area, that the sources are rather one sided. What we get in this account is a full of picture of Portuguese and British strategy in the war, albeit through British eyes. This in itself brings up some interesting questions. The war forced a rethinking of the relationship with Portuga, Britain's oldest ally, and had it not been for the conflict being dragged into Africa, Portugal might have seen its African possessions being carved up between – unthinkable as it sounds in retrospect – Germany and Britain. On the Belgian side, things were a little more complex. Britain had entered the war to aid “plucky” Belgium after its invasion by the German army. The territorial integrity of the Belgian Congo was another matter, however. Belgian colonial practices in the Congo were unpopular in Britain and it was not in the mood to offer Belgium the chance to expand its reach through conquest of German East Africa. There were even discussions on whether to force a handover of the Congo to the USA. These debates on the British side are well drawn out and the book would have benefited from a closer look at the internal goings on the reverse (Portuguese and Belgian) side.

One criticism that could be pointed at this book is that while the indigenous populations and the various black and Indian regiments and carriers that played a major part in the fighting are mentioned, they are not given the same attention as their “European” counterparts. However, one must keep in mind that this is a book dealing with the European political actors in Africa.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to research on the First World War in Africa. It moves away from the ‘ripping yarn’ style of histories that we are used to reading on the conflict. It presents new students of the area with a well-researched account of the war in South and East Africa that – through the use of indices and the author's clear style – signposts us through the major events and fleshes out the major characters in the war. This book will prove a useful starting point for those wishing to learn more about the First World War's African dimension.

Mahon Murphy is a PhD candidate in the History department at the LSE where he also received his MA. His research is on German prisoners of war and civilian internees in the extra-European theatre of the First World War. His thesis looks at the treatment of European prisoners in a colonial context with a focus on the fall of the German colonies and protectorates in Africa, China and the Pacific. [Read more reviews by Mahon.](#)