

#GreatWarInAfrica – Equatorial Guinea and the German Schutztruppe during the First World War

LSE's Mahon Murphy explores the loyalties of Cameroon soldiers who fought for Germany in World War 1.

The battle for control of Cameroon during the First World War involved five Empires (Britain, France and Belgium versus Germany, with neutral Spain looking on) and was not confined within the borders of the country itself. Cut off from supplies by Britain and France's control of the sea and virtually surrounded on land, German soldiers were faced with defeat and the threat of internment and forced labour in the prison camps of Dahomey (Benin). The only option left for the German troops was to retreat across the River Campo to the south and into Spanish-controlled Rio Muni. This retreating army comprised approximately 200 German officers, 6,000 Schutztruppe (troops recruited in Cameroon), 6,000 Cameroonian women and roughly 4,000 servants and carriers.



The German-trained Cameroonian troops were viewed as excellent fighters

The Governor of Spanish Guinea (Equatorial Guinea), Ángel Barrera y Luyando, like the majority of Spain's military elite, was pro-German and saw the possibility of earning the "Prussian" military decoration he had coveted before the war if his German charges were treated well. On reaching Rio Muni in mid-1916 and surrendering to the Spanish authorities, Barrera had the German Officers and 3,000 Schutztruppe brought to the capital on the island of Fernando Po, to be interned until the end of the conflict in Europe.

Barrera believed he was presented with an excellent opportunity for the development of agriculture in Spanish Guinea: plans were made for the Cameroonians to be put to work on farms and plantations in Fernando Po and Rio Muni. However, much to Barrera's dismay, as Cameroonian troops were highly trained soldiers who, according to the British Ambassador to Spain, Arthur Hardinge, "despise[d] agriculture and all manual labour as fit only for slaves" they were not keen on settling down to a life of farming on the island and absolutely refused to work.

To make matters worse, on Fernando Po the German troops far outnumbered the meagre Spanish garrison and the "prisoners", now having become the jailers, began to openly drill and plot to re-take Cameroon. This forced Britain and France to threaten to invade the Spanish colony if the King of Spain did not take matters under control. In response to this threat the German officers were shipped to Spain where they were kept in relative luxury in villas across the country.

The Beti (who made up the majority of Germany's Schutztruppe in the Cameroons) had banked on a German victory in Europe and were confident that after the war, Cameroon would be returned into German hands. The Beti leader, Karl Atangana, who was educated by the German

administration and had lived in Hamburg, was declared *Superior Chief* shortly before the outbreak of war. Atangana not only spoke German fluently; he wore German fashions and had a house built in a European colonial style. Furthermore, in August 1916, one of Atangana's daughters, Katerina, was sent to Limburg, Germany for education. Given these factors, Atangana's vested interest in Germany is apparent. He and other Beti chiefs formed part of the colony's middle-class elite and had a lot to lose with a German defeat. Contrary to the British Foreign Office's assumption that once all the Germans were deported from Fernando Po, the Cameroonian troops would all seek to return home, Atangana along with six other Beti chiefs followed the German Officers to Spain.

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, there were faint hopes that the victorious Allies would allow Germany to retain its African possessions. The Beti chiefs lobbied King Alfonso XIII of Spain to support the return of Cameroon to Germany. However, and despite the King's delusions of grandeur, Alfonso was not a decision maker in Paris and none of the victorious powers were keen to give up possessions they had won through bloodshed. Cameroon became a League of Nations Mandate controlled by the French. However, the Beti, especially Karl Atangana, adapted to the new French administration very well, with the chiefs returning to Cameroon from Spain in 1920.

While the story of German retreat into Spanish Guinea is really only a footnote to the First World War in Africa, it does tell us something important about African soldiers' loyalties during the conflict. Despite prominent inter-war propaganda that projected the image of the eternally loyal African soldier, the reality was that these men saw themselves as professional soldiers and clearly understood what they had to lose or gain through the outcome of the war in Europe and acted accordingly. On his return to Cameroon, Karl (now re-christened Charles) re-established his status as Superior Chief of the Beti, even conducting a failed experiment in Spanish-style "democracy". Although he was never fully trusted by the French authorities because of his German connections, Atangana remained an important part of the French administration until his death in 1943.

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