

#GreatWarInAfrica: “Loyalty” does not explain why African soldiers fought in East Africa in World War I

Michelle Moyd of Indiana University seeks to dispel the myth of blindly loyal colonial troops during World War One.

One hundred years after World War I began in Europe, the question of why tens of thousands of African soldiers fought for European colonial powers in Africa intrigues us. European colonial military officers writing about their troops after 1918 proclaimed their soldiers’ loyalty and dedication to imperial goals and ideals. This is particularly true of the East Africa campaign, which captured the attention and imaginations of many post-war writers. Thousands of colonial troops from German East Africa, British East Africa, Belgian Congo, Portuguese East Africa, and elsewhere did indeed fight to the end of the protracted and grueling campaign, which had lasted slightly longer than the war on Europe’s western front. But does it make sense to describe these soldiers as “loyal?”



The askari troops pictured fought alongside the Germans in East Africa

In a limited sense, perhaps. When the campaign ended in late November 1918, some 1200 German colonial troops (*askari*) surrendered to Allied forces alongside their commander, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. At the end of the war, the British King’s African Rifles (KAR) still had some 30,000 men in arms, and the Belgian Force Publique about 15,000. Inasmuch as these soldiers remained with their armies until the armistice, they met a minimum standard of loyalty to their organisations and commanders.

But if we scratch the surface a bit, the flimsiness of “loyalty” as an explanation for why soldiers fought until November 1918 soon reveals itself. Not all soldiers recruited or conscripted to fight in the colonial armies made it to the end of the war. Desertions and deaths (whether combat-related or due to disease) affected all the armies at war in East Africa. In addition, soldiers in the colonial armies are often described as “volunteers,” but the truth is more complicated. Outright coercion and socio-economic constraints limited the ability of able-bodied men within a certain age range to avoid either becoming soldiers or labourers (especially porters). Those who opted out were subject to corporal punishment or execution if caught.

Perpetuating the myth of loyal colonial troops undermines our ability to grasp the levels of violence that characterised the campaign. Understanding what happened to the troops themselves reminds us that loyalty can only explain so much. In the campaign’s latter stages, supplies and ammunition

dwindled, and armies became **exhausted** from long marches across rugged terrain. Living off the land—a longstanding method of provisioning in the colonial way of war—became the solution for soldiers in all the colonial armies. In the process, they committed terrible abuses against those who inhabited the lands through which they marched.

They did so in order to survive, but there is more to it than that. Those who managed to survive and stayed on with their colonial military organisations did so because they expected their service to set them up for success after the war. The desire for futures with families, elevated social status, economic security, and professional pride motivated many African men to stay and fight even under the harshest conditions. Soldiers viewed war spoils -including food, livestock, arms and ammunition, and people – as a means to an end, since these were the markers that would potentially help them prove their manhood in the postwar socio-economic landscape.

Colonial officers’ memoirs are rife with observations indicating that their troops did in fact feel some sense of loyalty to the empires they served. German *askari*, for example, sang marching songs that celebrated the Kaiser and Germany’s military prowess and strength. These expressions should not be interpreted as demonstrating some sort of organic loyalty to the German Empire, however. Rather, it is more likely that soldiers used familiar praise modes to reinforce community and to communicate to their officers that they intended to stay as long as doing so served their needs. In some cases they also expressed a sense of **comradeship with officers** they respected as tough leaders and men who had shared the **hardships of the campaign** with them. None of this amounts to the simplistic “loyalty” that European memoirists extolled in their postwar writing. Rather, they had witnessed African troops’ attempts to make sense of the war on their terms. The loyal colonial troops who inhabit these memoirs and most popular understandings of the war are at best caricatures of the men who fought and died during World War I. Such caricatures, like so many well-meaning stereotypes involving Africa, are based on a **racist impulse** to render Africans as less than fully capable of assessing their interests and acting upon those assessments. The centenary of World War I’s outbreak provides an opportunity to reflect on what it cost people **around the world**. In trying to think through the specific meanings of the war for those living with colonialism and imperial encroachment, “loyalty” has quite limited utility. Even worse, it converts a history of terrible violence into one of heroic deeds and chivalric values. Given the ways that the war’s effects shape our present, we can ill afford to remain tied to such narratives, particularly when we have the means to **do otherwise**.

Michelle Moyd is an Associate Professor in the History Department at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is the author of the book, **Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa.**

September 16th, 2014 | [Conflict](#), [Featured](#), [International Affairs](#) | [2 Comments](#)
