

Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War

Forgotten Colonial Crisis

Edmund James Yorke



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BRITAIN, NORTHERN RHODESIA AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR
Forgotten Colonial Crisis

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Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War

Forgotten Colonial Crisis

Edmund James Yorke

Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, UK

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*Dedicated to all those people, civilian and military, who
perished on the German East Africa Front during the Great War
and, on the Western Front, to my grandfather, Percy Albert
Yorke, of the 13th London ('Kensington') Regiment who lost his
leg to shellfire in the Ypres salient and to my step-grandfather,
John Walter Collins of the Machine Gun Corps, who was
severely gassed and wounded during the battle of the Somme.*

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Foreword

Until very recently the history of the First World War in Africa, if it was told at all, focused on Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his selective account of the German campaign in East Africa which he commanded. He described how he had led British forces in a merry dance from Kenya and Uganda to Mozambique and Rhodesia. Africa was there to provide colour to a war which it so conspicuously lacked in Europe. The fates of Africans themselves were scarcely addressed and the use of Africa as a European battleground was rendered as a military strategy rather than a human catastrophe. Edmund Yorke's *Forgotten Colonial Crisis* exposes the reality, showing just how narrowly focused, self-serving and misleading are Lettow-Vorbeck's memoirs, and all the books shaped by them.

The ideas of 'total war' may have been developed on the back of the First World War in Europe, but this book shows how relevant many were to the war outside Europe. Fragile rural economies were made to sustain a four-year campaign. Their most important input, labour, was conscripted for the purposes of the war, as porters carried food and munitions hundreds of miles in order to sustain the troops in the field. In Europe stalemate became synonymous with the war's terrors; in Africa mobility multiplied the demand for manpower and spread the devastation. And because the carriers were on the line of march, they were not in their homes and engaged in the more productive business of cultivation. Any economic benefits which had accrued to East Africa and its adjacent territories before 1914 were wiped out by 1919.

In 1916 Northern Rhodesia provided the base for the British invasion of German East Africa (then Tanganyika and today's Tanzania) from the south-west – just as Kenya did from the north. Under the command of Brigadier General Edward Northey, troops of the King's African Rifles crossed into southern Tanzania, territory that had been barely touched by German rule. War therefore became the motor of imperialism, opening up hitherto unpenetrated areas of equatorial Africa to the realities of British and German colonisation. But it also undermined empire, as farmers and settlers, as well as police and colonial administrators, were sucked out of Africa's more developed areas. Northern Rhodesia was one of these. By 1918 the indirect consequences of war confronted it with crisis. At the end of the year Lettow-Vorbeck himself burst into this

volatile mix. He finally surrendered on 25 November, two weeks after the German armistice in Europe.

Edmund Yorke weaves together economic, imperial and military history to show the impact of war in ways that each in isolation cannot begin to convey. He provides context and illumination from one to the others. Here in microcosm is a case study of the effects of 'total' and protracted warfare. It gives pause for thought – in relation not just to our understanding of the First World War but also to conflict more generally in sub-Saharan Africa.

Hew Strachan
Chichele Professor of War Studies, University of Oxford

Acknowledgements

As primarily a study of colonial policy and local response with an emphasis on official policy, the bulk of research for this book was originally conducted within the government archives of Great Britain and Zambia, notably the National Archives, Kew (formerly the Public Record Office) and the National Archives of Zambia, housed in Lusaka. In addition, extensive use was made of private papers and mission archives located mainly in Britain and Italy. Oral history research, focused on a few of the last surviving African veterans of the Great War, was also carried out in a selected number of villages located in a primary First World War recruiting area, the Ngoni and Chewa villages of the Eastern Province of Zambia.

Over the past three decades many individuals and institutions have contributed to the evolution of this book. The Department of Education and Science, the Cambridge University 'Smuts Memorial Fund' and my old college, Pembroke College, provided essential and generous financial assistance for research conducted both in Britain and overseas. I also wish to thank the ever-hospitable staff of the Rhodes House Library, Oxford University, the National Archives, Kew, the Wiltshire County Record Office and the National Archives of Zambia for valuable assistance afforded during the search for source materials. The custodians of both the High Commissioner Lord Buxton and BSAC Director Philip Lyttelton Gell Papers kindly granted me access to their vast private collections. Dr Robin Palmer and Professors L. H. Gann and Andrew Roberts provided great academic advice during the early stages of this research and I will never forget my several memorable, academically stimulating and highly productive meetings conducted in a snow-covered Balliol College (interspersed with teas and room cricket!) with the late Beit Professor of Imperial History, Ronald Robinson during the bitter winter months of early 1979.

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Preface

As Professor Bill Nasson recently observed in the *Cambridge History of the First World War*, 'the volume of writing about Africa and 1914–18 remains comparatively modest'. This book will hopefully fill one substantial gap by analysing the impact of a total war, the First World War, upon one colonial African political economy, that of Northern Rhodesia. It will demonstrate how escalating imperial war demands overwhelmed the political, social and economic fabric of this immensely fragile and embryonic colonial state. The war ended in a full-scale crisis of colonial control.

Northern Rhodesia, at the outbreak of war, represented a uniquely grossly underdeveloped British colonial state, a social and economic backwater, undercapitalised and insecure within its own political boundaries and, until as late as 1912, severely neglected by the ruling administrative authority, the British South Africa Company (BSAC). By 1914, even the process of colonial conquest, of political subjugation, was by no means complete; substantial areas of the Territory remained deeply hostile to Company hegemony. Company investment policies, almost totally concentrated upon her rapidly expanding sister-state, Southern Rhodesia, combined with potent environmental barriers to ensure limited European settlement; white mining and agricultural sectors remained embryonic. This lack of white enterprise facilitated (again in stark contrast to Southern Rhodesia) the survival, even expansion, of large cohesive bodies of African peasantry, successfully producing for and competing in the domestic market. Such powerful political and economic constraints also meant that even Northern Rhodesia's main economic purpose, to serve as a labour reservoir for the agricultural and mining industries south of the Zambesi River, was severely compromised; by 1914 her labour resources were significantly underexploited and large groups of Africans remained resistant to sustained participation in the Central African labour economy.

The advent of the First World War dramatically changed all this. It called for unprecedented exploitation of African food and labour resources and it exercised an ultimately unacceptable strain upon the political institutions of such a fragile colonial state. This process is the principal concern of this book. It can be summed up in one crucial question: How did such an avowedly enervated colonial state, despite such

heavy politico-economic stress, survive for over three years before crisis and, eventually, partial collapse overtook it?

By way of answer this book adopts two intrinsically related modes of analysis. Firstly, the growing political strain is examined in terms of the changing perspectives of political officers at all levels of the colonial state. These range from the highest level, the Colonial Office in London, down to the basic ground-level agencies of colonial control, the district *boma* and its African allies. The latter is a particular area of focus as it was the political survival of traditional authorities, chiefs and headmen, as colonial mediators or communicators, which ultimately determined the success of wartime food and labour requisitions, and upon whom the system of colonial control ultimately rested. Secondly, in relation to this perceived strain on Northern Rhodesia's political system, changes of policy designed to prop it up in face of growing indigenous resistance to wartime food and labour demands are clearly distinguished.

These two interrelated themes are pursued within a broad time frame. In order to explain the continued survival of the state it is essential to divide the war period into two distinct phases. These imposed markedly different levels of strain, which, to a large extent, explain how the colonial state not only survived but maintained African food and labour supplies for so long before succumbing to crisis. The first phase was one of limited strain. Before General Northey's offensive of early 1916, it will be shown how demands were haphazard and tolerable and indigenous resistance accordingly low. Thereafter, there was a period of intense strain, of truly 'total war', when maximum exploitation of African food and labour resources occurred and when the reciprocal scale of passive resistance reached uncontrollable levels, culminating in a full-blown crisis of colonial control.

During the primary phase, in almost two years of war before Northey's great offensive from Northern Rhodesia into German East Africa, the colonial authorities were able, if with great difficulty, both to maintain internal order and to successfully exploit existing African food and manpower resources. This is explained in terms of three important variables. First and foremost, this initial resilience is accounted for by the widespread African willingness to volunteer food and labour as a means of private profit and, because such demands remained geographically and quantitatively limited, it will be shown that severe pressure was largely confined to the three districts closest to the north-east border, while carrier pay and conditions remained attractive and akin to peacetime. Secondly, the institutional strengths and greater degree of market participation of those martial tribal groups most favoured by the colonial authorities for war labour recruitment, notably the Bemba

and Ngoni group, are identified as further factors to explain this initial resilience. Finally, the enormous expansion of colonial, political and coercive support accorded to traditional authority as a whole as the main pillar of the colonial state in wartime is stressed.

Northey's offensive into German East Africa in 1916 marked the decisive watershed in the political fortunes of this colonial state. It will be shown how, as Northey's communication and logistical lines inevitably extended and his supply needs massively multiplied, and as carrier conditions severely deteriorated, the scale of African resistance concomitantly magnified, particularly as the BSAC authorities in Livingstone were compelled to open up new and often less reliable food and labour regions. The ruthlessness of these policies is illustrated by the forced deployment, by the always profit-orientated BSAC, of large quantities of raw Lozi labour recruits from Barotseland to the Katanga Mines, in order to compensate for the loss of north-eastern recruits to the war effort, a policy which resulted in the deaths of hundreds if not thousands of Lozi males. These policies, in turn, caused fresh, often impossible strains upon the political position of traditional African elites, particularly within acephalous societies. Their growing political dilemma is a primary focus of this book.

During this second phase of intense strain, it will be shown how the 'politics of survival' began to dominate the colonial state's response to the deteriorating conditions of control at ground level. Largely futile attempts to buttress the legal position of traditional elites are highlighted, notably the widespread deployment of newer supportive agencies, notably divisional headmen. They soon proved inadequate in preventing the vilification and isolation of many chiefs and headmen as oppressors and exploiters. This internal political stress is graphically illustrated by the increasingly bitter conflicts erupting between the civil and military authorities over the latter's abuse of carrier service conditions. The acute vacuum of colonial power created by Northey's advance, which effectively deprived the Territory of the bulk of its existing police forces, is also illustrated both by the prevailing Company paranoia and its weak defensive response to the anti-colonial Makombe Rising in neighbouring Portuguese Mozambique and by its increasing loss of labour control on the north-east Plateau and parts of the north-west.

By October 1917 it is observed how official recognition of the internal crisis caused urgent BSAC appeals for imperial support for a relief scheme, designed to redress the growing war-inspired social unrest. During the ensuing twelve months the 'politics of crisis' at the highest political levels is analysed, as both the BSAC and the Colonial Office

united to force a recalcitrant War Office to underwrite the scheme. During these critical months, it is contended that internal collapse was only narrowly averted by the continued and disproportionate reliance upon the more politically cohesive, reliable and malleable tribal groups, namely the Lozi, Bemba and Ngoni, and secondly, by a temporary respite from labour and food demands as Northey's columns disappeared deep into strategically remote Portuguese East Africa. With the renewal of intense food and labour demands by mid-1918, it is shown how a major, official 'emergency' tour of the north-east and north-west districts exposed the imminent breakdown of the chain of war labour recruitment, even within the authority structure of the most reliable Bemba tribal group. This incipient collapse is matched by the government's inability to prevent widespread political decentralisation as many famine-stricken African villages scattered to remote illegal *mitanda* or garden settlements so as to increase local food supply or evade military labour levies. In September 1918, after the High Commissioner's stark warning of imminent disaster and continued War Office obduracy, a desperate Colonial Office was forced to intervene directly in a bid to de-escalate the crisis by implementing a virtually unprecedented ban on compulsory African war labour recruitment within Northern Rhodesia. The gravity of this colonial crisis is thus strikingly revealed by this de facto suspension of Northern Rhodesia's support for the imperial war effort. No other British Colonial Territory had experienced such a level of crisis.

It will be pointed out, however, that such drastic action by no means cured this underlying crisis of white authority. The totally unexpected German invasion of Northern Rhodesia a few weeks later revealed just how rotten the structures of British authority had become. Colonial control completely collapsed across much of the north-east Plateau in a maelstrom of chaos and lawlessness. The rapid emergence of an active and intrinsically anti-war Watchtower movement in the closing months of the conflict represented the apotheosis of this wartime political crisis. This conclusion is substantiated by the movement's close relationship to wartime repression, its attraction for ex-military *tenga-tenga* (carriers/porters) and *askari* (troops), its total rejection of the repressive authoritarianism of both the *boma* and its wartime allies, the traditional elites, and the establishment of a power-base in those border districts which had suffered most from excessive military demands and social unrest. British authority, it will be demonstrated, was saved only by the fortuitous arrival of the Armistice.