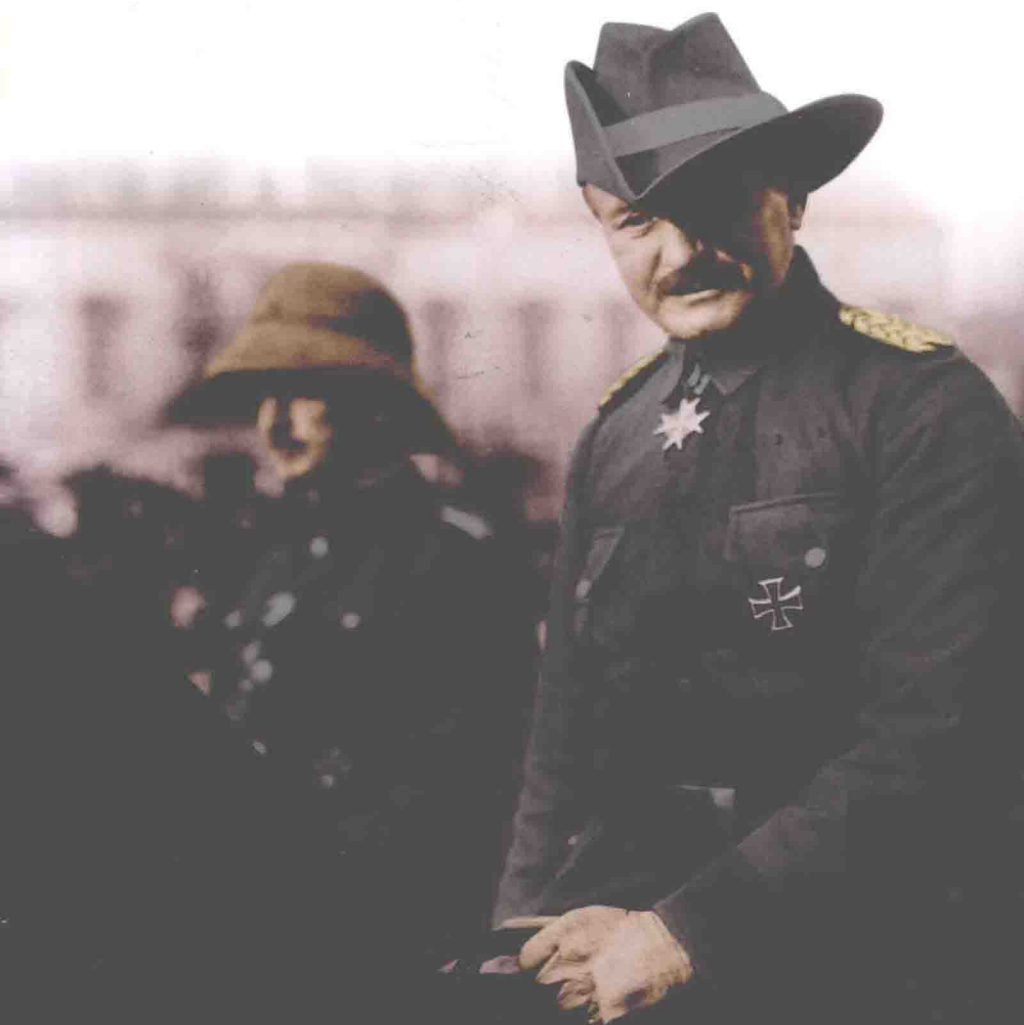


WORLD WAR I IN AFRICA

THE FORGOTTEN
CONFLICT AMONG THE
EUROPEAN POWERS



I.B. TAURIS

ANNE SAMSON

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*Dedicated to all those past and present affected
by the campaigns in East and southern Africa
and in loving memory of
'Pa' Gerry Stilwell*

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1. Position on the eve of war	25
2. To war, 1914	44
3. The outbreak of war: Southern Africa, 1914	68
4. German South West Africa, Angola and Southern Africa, 1915	79
5. War on the waters and in the air, 1915–1917	97
6. East Africa, 1915–1917	109
7. Personal, personnel and material	131
8. Last days, 1918	157
9. Behind the scenes, 1915–1918	166
10. The war in London, 1915–1917	186
11. All for what?	211
12. Conclusions	222
<i>Notes</i>	232
<i>Bibliography</i>	275
<i>Forces Index</i>	288
<i>Person Index</i>	290
<i>Place Index</i>	298
<i>General Index</i>	303

INTRODUCTION

'Whenever in these present momentous times I read some laconic paragraph indicating that the Navy has attacked and sunk some enemy ship, I wonder how much scheming and dare-devil courage have gone to achieve that three-line result.'¹ So wrote Piet Pretorius about tracking down and sinking the *Königsberg*. His statement is just as pertinent for the non-military historian reading a book or article on life or some campaign in any war. Realising, through discussion with military experts and travelling through the East African countryside, that bland acknowledgements of success or defeat cover a whole interplay of individuals and organisations inspired this book.

The book does not aim to tell the military story as that has been done elsewhere. However, it draws on these narratives and original documents to show the interrelatedness of policy and strategy with what was happening on the ground and in-between. It attempts to shed some light on the influence of the individual politician, official, commander, soldier and civilian, in determining the direction of war. As a British Staff College lecturer summed up in 1901, 'War is a contest between two human intelligences rather than between two bodies of men.'² In telling the story of the First World War in East and southern Africa, this book will hopefully show some of the 'humanness' of war and that not all military men were keen on fighting for fighting's sake.

One of the challenges in writing such a history is that the historian is reliant on what other people have remembered and chosen to record. 'Memories are pictures, and they form haphazardly on the mental

screen.³ Memories are personal and only those which are recorded and made public are available, if found, to create the mosaic. This means, that no story is ever complete. Even the official histories which aimed to give a complete picture do not. These official stories are based on the information available at the time as well as the dominant ideology at the time of writing. The result of these extraneous factors is that the second volume of the official history of the East African campaign was never completed while that of the German South West Africa campaign only contains one-third of the story.⁴ This is not surprising given the nature of war and that the nature of the terrain in East and southern Africa made the recording of events erratic.⁵ There are no records of the East African Mounted Rifles who were never disbanded, yet the unit consisting of 85 per cent of the population in the first days of the war, had only one major, one sergeant and two troopers at the end.⁶ Reading the Belgian official history of the war makes the reader wonder if it is the same war that is being spoken about. It is clearly written to the glory of 'little' Belgium fighting against the super powers and succeeding. Reference to its dependency on Britain is almost unmentioned.⁷ In addition, little if anything was recorded of the Indian, black and coloured involvement in the East and southern theatres despite these groups contributing the greatest proportion of manpower. This is not to say that the historians of the time were slack. They were writing for specific purposes and with the information they had, as noted by the Historical Department letter to General Wapshare's widow asking her not to destroy any papers now that he had died.⁸ This book, too, is written in a specific time and context with the information available and as a result will have its own flaws.

The campaign

The 1914–1918 war was between European powers about power. So why involve subordinate countries outside of Europe? This question has no doubt inspired a renewed interest in the East Africa campaign, as seen by the increased number of publications on the subject: Ross Anderson's *The Forgotten Front*, Hew Strachan's *The First World War in*

Africa, Edward Paice's *Tip and Run* and Giles Foden's *Mimi and Toutou Go Forth*, being the most popular.⁹ Interest in the East Africa campaign is fuelled by the number of first claims the campaign makes. It was the longest lasting of the war and according to *The Times* had the first naval engagement on 13 August 1914 on Lake Nyasa. The first naval Victoria Cross (VC) of the war was won during an attack on Dar-es-Salaam by Captain Henry Peel Ritchie.¹⁰ Hostilities started with a bombardment of Dar-es-Salaam on 8 August 1914 before those in Europe, and ended on 25 November 1918, fourteen days after the armistice in Europe was signed. Trench warfare was to all intents and purposes non-existent. Emil Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, German commander in East Africa, was the only German general to occupy British territory and was also the only undefeated German general of the war. He led a force of 260 Germans and up to 12,000 askaris against a total allied force of around 100,000 soldiers and one million porters.

The campaign in East Africa was, and still is, important for various reasons. As Francis Brett Young, in his foreword to Thornhill's *Taking Tanganyika*, notes: 'that campaign was unique of its kind: the first tropical warfare waged under modern conditions of transport and armament, and the first in which organized native troops on either side fought with white men and against them'.¹¹ Similarly, the campaign in South West Africa was of significance. Britain asked South Africa, a country which had fought against it fifteen years before, to undertake the task. This remarkable undertaking was reinforced by Prime Minister Louis Botha leading the South African forces into the German colony after putting down a rebellion in his own country which had been initiated by senior military men opposing the campaign. Following South Africa's involvement in German South West Africa, the country, under the command of General Jan Christian Smuts, took on the German forces in East Africa, linking the two campaigns and bringing cohesion to the First World War in southern, central and eastern Africa.

The advent of the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War seems an opportune moment for the campaigns in Africa to be reconsidered

and acknowledged in their own right, not as side-shows of the European War. Individually, each campaign might be regarded as a side-show, however, collectively they achieve a significance not usually associated with the African continent. In telling the story of the war in East and southern Africa, the contributions of Smuts and Lettow-Vorbeck, two men who were both politicians and military men, admired and despised by their fellow countrymen yet had a huge regard for each other and became friends, will be assessed. This can only be done by looking at their relationships with those around them and the context in which these took place.

This book expands on my thesis published by I.B.Tauris in 2005 under the title *Britain, South Africa and the East Africa Campaign, 1914–1918: The Union Comes of Age* whilst correcting the errors which managed to slip through. It does not aim to explore the military aspects of the campaign as that has been admirably done by others.¹² However, it does aim to explore why the war was taken to East Africa and why it progressed the way it did. In essence, it looks at the interplay of individuals at all levels and how they contributed to the outcome of the war. Strong personalities directed various aspects of the war. This was understandable as war requires strong individuals to make difficult decisions. Issues arise, and invariably will, when those personalities clash, each believing that their perception of the situation is the right one. It becomes more complex when politicians believe that ‘war is too serious to be left to the Generals’ and have to have their say.¹³ By exploring the interplay of the main individual players involved, southern Africa, as a whole, is drawn into the discussion, not least because from 1916 the Union of South Africa was to play a dominant role in the campaign and the country’s deputy Prime Minister, General Jan Christian Smuts, commanded the forces there for a year. In addition, Southern and Northern Rhodesia as well as Nyasaland, Portuguese East Africa and Congo were drawn in by virtue of being neighbouring countries. Through South Africa’s pre-1916 involvement in the wider war and the internal political situation, the campaigns in German South West Africa and Angola became involved in the story.

The politics of the campaigns in East and southern Africa played out at various levels, locally within each territory, at individual country level, within the various colonial empires (Strachan's 'sub-imperialism')¹⁴ and across powers in Europe. It was in effect a 'war between empires'.¹⁵ Twenty-eight countries were involved in the campaign, some subordinate to others, but each integrally linked and influencing the war on the ground.

In 1914 when war broke out in Europe, sub-Saharan Africa was divided under the control of five European powers – Britain, Germany, Portugal, Belgium and France. Of the territories, Britain controlled the majority in some form – either directly or through chartered companies. British influence dominated southern and eastern Africa except for German South West Africa and Portuguese Angola in the south-west and Portuguese and German East Africa on the eastern side. The centre of the continent was dominated by Belgium which controlled the Congo while West Africa was relatively evenly split between Britain and France with some German and Portuguese influence.

In Africa, there tended to be some co-operation between the European powers to protect the position of the white man who was outnumbered by black, Indian and Arab. The years prior to the outbreak of war had seen numerous wars to subjugate the recalcitrant masses and force subservience. In Europe, the powers worked together to support the position of their citizens in Africa but were also prepared to undermine each other for territorial and economic advantage wherever possible. Of the southern and eastern African territories, those of South Africa, German and British East Africa, Uganda and the Congo were seen as most valuable to the European countries with Britain desiring German East Africa and the Portuguese territories in particular so as to own a continuous strip of land from Cape Town to Cairo. Competing against British interests was the German desire for either British or Belgian and Portuguese territory to join its two sub-Saharan German colonies across the breadth of Africa. The most developed territory under discussion, South Africa, was interested in incorporating neighbouring German, Portuguese and British

territories into its fold, at least to the Zambezi River. This, no doubt, resulted in increased tensions in the area as well as between the associated European powers.

Lettow-Vorbeck and Smuts

Before looking at the background of each of the territories directly involved in the campaign to understand why they would consider taking up arms in the great conflict at the risk of undermining the position of the white man, it seems opportune to introduce the two lead protagonists: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his 1916 adversary, General Jan Smuts, Deputy Prime Minister of South Africa and Minister of Defence. Although they only got to meet in 1929 for the first time, their paths had overlapped since 1903 when Lettow-Vorbeck was posted to South West Africa and 'gained abundant personal experience [. . .] of Boers, both on the Staff of General von [sic] Botha and as an independent Company and Detachment Commander.'¹⁶

Lettow-Vorbeck was born on 20 March 1870 in Saarlouis, Germany, and having spent some years at Oxford University (his mother was Scottish) followed his father into the German War Academy in 1888. His adversary Smuts, two months his junior, was born on 24 May 1870 in Malmesbury, Cape Colony, studied law and became a Boer commander in 1900/1 during the Anglo-Boer or South African War. Lettow-Vorbeck was posted to Africa in 1903, although Dolbey claims that he was involved in southern Africa even earlier: 'Before the war in South Africa, rumour says, he was instructor to the "Staats Artillerie," which Kruger [President of the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek] raised to stay the storm that he knew inevitably would overwhelm him. Serving, with Smuts and Botha themselves in the early months of the Boer war, he joined the inglorious procession of foreigners that fled across the bridge at Komati Poort after Pretoria fell, and left the Boer to fight it out unaided for two long and weary years more.'¹⁷ Evidence and timeframes suggest, however, that he was on the German General Staff based in Berlin, updating the German government on what was

happening during the 1899–1901 war.¹⁸ A short sojourn in Germany saw Lettow-Vorbeck return to Africa, firstly for a brief period in the Cameroons in 1913 and then to East Africa in 1914. During this time, Smuts and his colleague and friend, Louis Botha worked to obtain independence for their defeated country, which they did in 1906, followed by the formation of Union in 1910. In 1910, Botha became Prime Minister and Smuts his deputy with responsibility for the Union's armed forces.

When war broke out in 1914, Lettow-Vorbeck gathered together the troops he had and set about attracting as many allied forces to East Africa as possible to assist Germany's struggle in Europe. The war in East Africa officially ended on 25 November 1918 when Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered in accordance with the armistice instructions from Germany. In March 1919, he returned to Germany, the only undefeated German general of the First World War and retired from the army in 1920, to enter politics as a parliamentary deputy for the right wing or conservative German National People's Party.

Smuts started the war in the political arena helping to guide South Africa to declare war on German South West Africa in 1914 and where he took up arms in 1915 before returning to the political scene and taking the field in German East Africa. He went to London in 1917 to attend the British Imperial War meetings and stayed there for the remainder of the war and peace discussions, returning to South Africa as premier in 1919 following Louis Botha's death from the influenza on 27 August 1919.

The campaign in East Africa started when the port of Dar-es-Salaam was shelled on 8 August 1914. Despite this attack and the German occupation of the British town of Taveta later in the month, a period of calm ensued whilst both colonies and their home governments took stock of the war on land. In November 1914, Britain attempted to re-launch the campaign with an attack on Tanga and Longido. But, for various reasons, mainly the lack of available manpower, the theatre quietened down again until February 1916 when Jan Smuts took command of the combined British forces and started

his chase after Lettow-Vorbeck. The chase lasted a year before Smuts left for South Africa and Europe. In London he continued to influence the campaign, bringing about a change in commander from his successor General Hoskins to the South African van Deventer. The latter, having been absent from the campaign for about five months, saw the campaign move into Portuguese East Africa and to its end in Northern Rhodesia.

There is no record of Smuts and Lettow-Vorbeck meeting apart from in 1929 in London. However, their paths continued to cross. In 1945 Smuts and others were sending Lettow-Vorbeck food parcels after the latter was put on the Nazi blacklist following the 20 July 1944 bomb plot against Hitler.¹⁹ In 1953, after Smuts' death, Lettow-Vorbeck visited the battlegrounds of South West Africa, then under South African rule, and East Africa renamed Tanganyika and under British mandate. Listowell maintains it was Smuts who invited Lettow-Vorbeck to visit Africa in 1953 after tracking him down in Hamburg in 1951.²⁰ This is unlikely as Smuts died on 11 September 1950 at the age of 87, although he did write to Lettow-Vorbeck on 15 May 1950.²¹ Lettow-Vorbeck died in Hamburg on 9 March 1964 at the age of 98. The lifetime of these two men, whose paths crossed at various times over the African continent, saw the dividing of Africa between the European powers, a redefining of these relationships and at the time of Lettow-Vorbeck's death, the first African colonies achieve independence.

Terminology

One of the difficulties many authors of African history face is that of terminology, especially when dealing with pre- and post-colonial periods. Over time various terms and descriptors have been used for different groups of people at different times. In an attempt to reduce confusion and to stay true to the period, the terms used at the time being written about have been maintained. Although these terms are not necessarily those in use today and in some cases are frowned upon, their use in no way has any political or other connotation. Therefore the

words black, white, native, Indian, South African (English, Afrikaans, British), Boer and non-white used in this text are purely descriptors to aid the understanding of the period.

In the text, reference has been made to the 1899–1901 war between Britain and the two southern African Boer Republics, although on occasion Southern African, Anglo-Boer and Boer War have been used. In current South African texts the war is referred to as the South African War, but, it does not appear that this practice has extended to the United Kingdom.

Composition of the forces

The composition below is based on what the British army worked to during World War One. However, the circumstances of the campaign in East Africa meant there were variations depending on what manpower could be raised. Nevertheless, the table in next page gives some idea of how the different military ranks linked together.²² The German forces or *Schutztruppe* were organised into fourteen Field Companies (*Feldkompagnien*). These were made up of mobile company columns, each column having 2 officers, 1 doctor, 2 German non-commissioned officers, 150 askari, 2 machine guns, 322 carriers, 100 askari 'boys' and 13 European 'boys'. European volunteers formed *Schutzkompagnie* of 40–120 men.²³

Section	Consisting of	Leader/commander
Platoon or Troop (Mounted Infantry & Cavalry, Engineers, Artillery)	6-8 privates, riflemen or guardsmen 4 Sections Total of 32 men	Corporal Lance Corporal (deputy) Subaltern (Lieutenant or 2 nd Lieutenant) Sergeant in support NCO - NonCommissioned Officer
Company or Squadron (Mounted Infantry & Cavalry, Engineers) or Battery (Artillery)	3 or 4 Platoons, troops or sections of machine guns Total of up to 150 men Transport for a Machine Gun Company in EA: 4 porters to carry gun parts and ammunition 15 porters per gun to carry ammunition 3 mules per gun to carry reserve ammunition	Major Captain = 2 nd in command Company Sergeant Major (Warrant Officer Class 2) Company Quartermaster Sergeant
Battalion or Regiment (Indian Army, Mounted Infantry & Cavalry, Engineers, Artillery)	4 Companies Machine Gun Section Head Quarters (signallers, cooks, drivers, regimental police, clerks, storemen, medical personnel) Total between 500 and 800 men	Lieutenant Colonel (Commanding Officer) Senior Major = 2 nd in command Adjutant (senior Captain) Regimental Sergeant Major (Warrant Officer Class 1) Quartermaster (Lieutenant or Captain) Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant (Warrant Officer Class 2) Orderly Room Staff Sergeant (Warrant Officer Class 2)