



Black, White, and Khaki: Lettow-Vorbeck and the African *Askari*

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ABSTRACT

On battlefields that stretched for miles across the savanna in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro, to palm-shaded beachheads and dense tropical forests, the forces of the German East African Schutztruppe under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck engaged Allied forces in far-flung East Africa during the First World War. Few units in the Imperial German Army resembled the Schutztruppe, in that it was mostly made up of black African askari, led by a small white German/European officer corps. In addition to heading the transformation of the unit from a counter-insurgency force meant to quell native African uprisings, to one that could defeat European colonial forces, Lettow-Vorbeck's leadership allowed the Schutztruppe to survive against the hundreds of thousands of Allied troops sent against it, without regular assistance from the Germany. Ultimately, the Schutztruppe was never fully subdued during the war, and only surrendered when informed of the general armistice in late November 1918. This paper will use primary and secondary sources to examine the status of the Schutztruppe and the askari before, and then during the war, seeking to prove that the Schutztruppe was able to effectively fight and survive the campaign using guerilla warfare strategies and tactics learned before World War I, combined with highly rigorous "Prussian"- style training and loyalty to Lettow-Vorbeck himself that was introduced shortly before and during the conflict.

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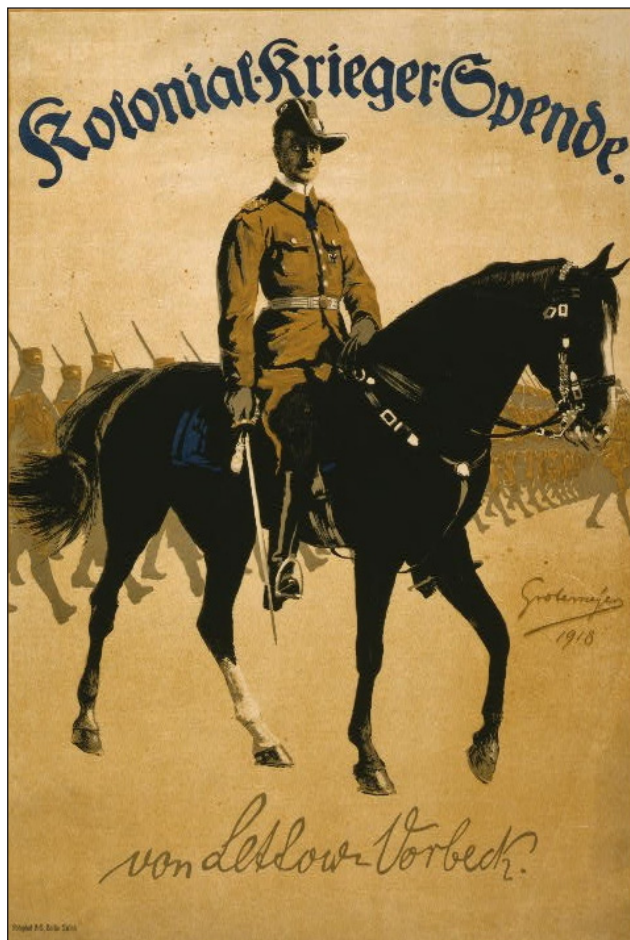
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A World War I German poster of General Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck on horseback leading African soldiers. Text at top reads “Colonial War Funds”; on bottom is facsimile of von Lettow-Vorbeck’s signature.¹

From battlefields stretching across the savanna in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro to palm-shaded beachheads and dense tropical forests, the forces of the German East African *Schutztruppe*, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, engaged Allied forces during the First World War (1914–1918).² Few units in the Imperial German Army resembled the *Schutztruppe*, being largely made up of Black African *askari*, led by a small white German/European officer corps.³ Lettow-Vorbeck grew the unit from a counter-insurgency force, meant to quell Native African uprisings, to one that could defeat European colonial forces. In the force’s greatest test, he led the *Schutztruppe* against hundreds of thousands of Allied troops, all without regular assistance from the German homeland. The entire saga of the East Africa campaign is physically and socially detached from the trenches of the Western Front. The East Africa campaign reinforces the reality that the First World War is a global war: nations that struggled for dominance in Europe sought to expand

their colonial possessions at the expense of their enemies. Sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, the complex web of alliances that balanced peace in Europe for over a century broke down in the face of increased militarization, industrialization, and nationalism. The armies and navies of the Allies, composed mainly of Britain, France, and Russia, engaged the forces of the Central Powers of Germany, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire around the world.

Ultimately, the *Schutztruppe* avoided complete destruction during World War I, and only surrendered at Abercorn, British Rhodesia when informed of the Armistice of Compiègne in late-November of 1918.⁴ What allowed the *Schutztruppe* to accomplish this military feat? “Black, White, and Khaki”, referring to the different skin color of the African and European German troops, but united by their khaki colored uniforms, is a story of colonial conquest, race relations, and martial culture. Grounded in imperialism and conquest, the creation of an innovative and hybridized style of African warfare came in response to the threat of the Allies, whose invasion of German East Africa disrupted the German colonial system in which Germans extracted resources and *askari* advanced in their sociocultural spaces. This paper will use primary source diaries and recollections during the period after the war, as well as and secondary source essays and monographs in the century following the conflict to examine the status of the *Schutztruppe* and the *askari* before, and then during the war. It asserts that the *Schutztruppe* effectively fought and survived the campaign using guerilla warfare strategies and tactics learned before World War I, combined with highly rigorous “Prussian”-style training and sociopolitical loyalty to Lettow-Vorbeck himself, introduced shortly before and during the conflict.⁵

POST-WAR HISTORIES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The German history of the war in East Africa, written shortly after the end of the conflict, relies on primary sources and officially sanctioned histories of the campaign. They significantly influenced the subsequent historiography of the mid-to-late-twentieth century. Lettow-Vorbeck’s autobiographical *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika* (1919), published in English in 1920 as *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, emerged as one of the foremost texts on the day-to-day strategic and tactical operations of the campaign. However, it only offers a perspective of the war from within Lettow-Vorbeck’s personal recollection and experiences, according to the introduction from Lettow-Vorbeck himself. In his own words, this work seeks to provide the reasoning behind his actions and specific details about them.⁶

Other veteran accounts followed, including *Vier Jahre Weltkrieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (*Four Years' World War in German East Africa*) by Dr. Wilhelm Arning, published in 1919, and a substantial semi-official account of the campaign from the *Schutztruppe* perspective. Major Ludwig Boell, a junior officer in the *Schutztruppe* who served under Lettow-Vorbeck completed *Die Operationen in Ostafrika* (*The Operations in East Africa*), published in 1951.⁷ Lettow-Vorbeck and *Schutztruppe* soldiers wrote these memoirs to inform the German population in Europe of their unique hardships and martial prowess as Germans, opposing the anti-war sentiments of other post-war German memoirs, like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*. This dichotomy defined German memorialization of the war and laid foundations for the use of *Schutztruppe* experiences by the Nazi state for propaganda.⁸

An important aspect of sources like *My Reminiscences* and *Four Years' World War in German East Africa* is that they preface with a defense of German colonial practices. These sources claim that German African policy treated Africans better than the French, British or Portuguese, built more effective transportation infrastructure, and "civilized" African tribes better than other European colonies.⁹ Following Germany's defeat in the First World War, German overseas colonies were acquired by the victorious allies; German East Africa became the League of Nations territory of Tanganyika, which placed the region under British dominion until it gained independence in 1961.¹⁰

Other personal accounts, published in the late 1910s and 1920s, added more German colonial viewpoints to the campaign. Civilian Governor of German East Africa Heinrich Schnee wrote *Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkrieg* (*German East Africa in the World War*) in 1919, his personal accounts of the campaign, which describes Schnee's disagreements over the aggressive military policy of Lettow-Vorbeck and his attempts at maintaining the colonial *status quo*, as well as laying the foundations for German colonial irredentism.¹¹ German medical doctor Ludwig Deppe, one of many physicians with *Schutztruppe*, wrote *Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika* (*With Lettow-Vorbeck by Africa*), also a personal account, in 1919, providing a medical account of the campaign and the various wounds, diseases, and other ailments that the *Schutztruppe* endured.¹² Both of these sources provide privileged "non-military" viewpoints; Governor Schnee and Dr. Deppe criticized the guerilla warfare tactics that the *Schutztruppe* used during the war, especially with regards to the forcible taking of supplies and foodstuffs from Native African peoples.¹³

The historiography of Lettow-Vorbeck, the *Schutztruppe*, and the *askari* developed substantially since the end of World War I. Historic trends evolved from military histories in the twentieth century to social and cultural histories in

the twenty-first century. The historians that covered the East African campaign write from a conservative, "military-history-only" standpoint that is indicative of the late-20th century reaction against the prevalence of social and economic histories, and barely cover the motivations of the *askari*, the destructive tactics of the *Schutztruppe*, or German colonial practices before and during the First World War. Some of the most influential of these are Leonard Mosley's *Duel for Kilimanjaro* (1963), Charles Miller's *Battle for the Bundu* (1974), and Edwin Hoyt's *Guerrilla* (1981).¹⁴

In the twenty-first century, greater emphasis on the history of German East Africa before the war and a broader understanding of the role of *askari* within the *Schutztruppe* emerged. *Mzee Ali*, an oral history collection published in 2006, comprises experiences from Mzee Ali, an African *askari* drafted by the *Schutztruppe* before the war and who fought throughout the campaign.¹⁵ While only recounting the experiences of one *askari* out of thousands who either could or did not publish their experiences in the *Schutztruppe* system, *Mzee Ali* allows readers to get a sense of *askari* life both before and during the East African campaign, a critically opposing viewpoint to the numerous German officer's sources that have dominated the historiography, especially as Ali describes being forced into the *Schutztruppe* and the brutal conditions of training and warfare. Michelle Moyd's *Violent Intermediaries* (2014) is one of the most authoritative texts on the development and status of the *askari* within the *Schutztruppe* because of her explorations into the motivations and experiences of *askari* in the *Schutztruppe* system, especially in covering the "symbiotic" relationship between *askari* and the German colonial system in German East Africa.¹⁶ Michael Pesek's chapter, "Ruga-ruga: The History of an African Profession, 1820-1918," in *German Colonialism Revisited: African, Asian, and Oceanic Experiences* (2014), explores the history, roles, and motivations of these Native African auxiliary warriors within the *Schutztruppe* system, and how they adapted their native martial practices to the hybridized Afro-European warfare of the *Schutztruppe*.¹⁷ *Mzee Ali*, *Violent Intermediaries*, and "Ruga-ruga" explore the first-hand experiences of *askari*; their inclusion into the German colonial system, and their motivations for fighting with the *Schutztruppe*. *Violent Intermediaries* and other works by Moyd explore *askari* motivations during the war, challenging earlier historiography about perceived loyalty to "German values" and the Kaiser.¹⁸ This paper will strike a balance between the usage of immediate post-war sources to explore tactics and strategy and the usage of modern sources to analyze the *askari* and social aspects of the *Schutztruppe*, especially moving from the development of the *Schutztruppe* in the late-nineteenth century to a modern African fighting force by 1914.

DEVELOPMENT OF *SCHUTZTRUPPE* BEFORE 1914

German East Africa was borne out of the “Scramble for Africa” movement of the late-nineteenth century, in which European powers sought colonial African holdings for both resources and national prestige.¹⁹ Dr. Carl Peters, an early proponent of German colonialism, successfully lobbied the Imperial German government for a colonial charter in 1885 and began settlement in the modern-day Tanga and Pwani regions of Tanzania that same year.²⁰ The establishment of German plantations and trading settlements directly challenged the authority of Arab traders and African tribes on the Tanzanian coast and the island of Zanzibar. Uniting Arab and Native African forces, Abushiri ibn Salim al-Harhi led combined forces to raid German outposts and settlements in late 1888. To oppose these attacks, the Imperial German government created a unit for the defense of colonial assets: the *Schutztruppe*. Thus, the German East African *Schutztruppe* began life in 1889 as a hastily organized force of about one thousand European settlers, German officers, African *askari*, and *ruga-ruga*.²¹

After the initial conflict of the late 1880s, the *Schutztruppe* expanded and contracted based on immediate need. The HeHe Rebellion (1891 to 1898) and the Maji-Maji Rebellion (1905 to 1907) both precipitated an increase in *Schutztruppe* forces. The *Schutztruppe*, reinforced by the Imperial German Navy, defeated both rebellions with brutal tactics – imprisoning or ransoming Native African leaders and destroying the homes and communities of the HeHe and Maji-Maji peoples.²² As the force developed between 1888 and 1914, the core purpose of the *Schutztruppe* endured: to act as a counter-insurgency force against these types of Native rebellions opposing German rule. Several *Schutztruppe* commanders in the intervening period maintained this anti-insurgent force. This is a direct contrast to Lettow-Vorbeck’s leadership in World War I, which shaped the force into an offensive force against other European colonies. Growing tensions in Europe and Lettow-Vorbeck’s strategy for colonial warfare primarily drove the transformation.

The lessons in guerilla warfare, learned in fighting Native insurgencies, formed the basis for *Schutztruppe* strategy and tactics during World War I. The *Schutztruppe* aimed to be well versed in cross-cultural fighting methods: they instructed German officers in African warfare and *askari* in European drill and tactics. The core of *Schutztruppe* operations during these insurgencies centered around the use of self-sufficient “columns.”²³ Using a variation of the strategies and tactics espoused in British Colonel C. E. Callwell’s *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1906), independent subdivisions of *Schutztruppe* troops, called *Feldkompagnie*, allowed forces to cover an area in which

insurgent Native forces occupied.²⁴ The use of “small war” strategies and tactics would allow units to seize Native resources and supplies, deny them escape, and continually pursue Native fighters through difficult terrain.²⁵

Independent command styles allowed the *Feldkompagnien* to tailor their tactics and strategies based on the terrain, enemy forces, and supplies available.²⁶ Frequently outnumbered, the *Schutztruppe* used, according to Moyd: “mobility, surprise, deception, and superior firepower” to defeat African Indigenous revolts.²⁷ The diaries of German *Schutztruppe* NCO (non-commissioned officer) Josef Weinberger describes an 1892 expedition that the *Schutztruppe* undertook during this period, demonstrating the aforementioned tactics. Weinberger explains how his unit came under attack with heavy rifle-fire on-and-off, both night and day, by Native forces. After learning that the insurgents poisoned wells in the area, causing several *askari* and German officers to fall ill, Weinberger led a small force to attack the enemy forces at night, resulting in the successful defeat of Native forces in several villages.²⁸

In East German accounts of African warfare, the complete destruction of Native spaces is a common tactic. These tactics sometimes completely devastated villages, crops, ecosystems, and places of cultural significance. In the mind of these German commanders and even for the most veteran *askari*, these tactics ultimately denied their enemies bases of attack and resupply.²⁹ *Schutztruppe* Captain Tom von Prince’s account in *Gegen Araber und Wahehe* (Fighting the Arabs and HeHe), published in 1914, praises the *askari* for their effectiveness in the siege and how they conducted themselves against considerable enemy forces.³⁰ Another account comes from *Schutztruppe* officer Friedrich Kallenberg, *Auf dem Kriegspfad gegen die Massai* (On the War-Path with the Massai) published in 1892. Kallenberg describes the enflaming gunfire by his unit of *askari* against large African rebel forces, under their leader Elmurani and armed in the “Zulu-style.”³¹ The *askari* drove back attacks using their European training and discipline, and then pursued these rebel forces in the guerilla-style common in their Native lands.³² These martial experiences reinforced the connection between German soldiers and the African *askari*, preparing them for the First World War against the largest forces they ever faced.

In developing an effective martial culture, the *Schutztruppe* leadership displayed an organizational respect toward guerilla warfare before World War I.³³ A portion of the field manual of the *Schutztruppe* exemplifies this attitude:

his [the Native soldier’s] mobility and incredible marching powers, coupled with accurate knowledge of the country, make him able to carry out

apparently impossible detours. He has no fixed line of retreat, for after a defeat his forces break up into small parties, which retire in all directions, and concentrate again at points previously agreed upon... By constantly harassing their enemy in this way, they hope, while avoiding serious losses on their own side, to tire him out, compel him to expend his ammunition and gradually reduce his power of resistance...³⁴

The *Schutztruppe* “cut its teeth” fighting against African rebellions at the cost of thousands of insurgent Native African lives and spaces, and these experiences make it one of the most experienced African colonial units in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁵ The European interest and high praise toward the type of Native African warfare shows that German military planners sought to extract Native warfare tactics for their own betterment in fighting Native uprisings and European colonial competitors. German leaders applied their learned advantage of Native terrain and tactical methods against an enemy, who would deploy and use its troops in a disadvantageous European fashion.³⁶

APPLYING PRUSSIAN DISCIPLINE

The rigorous and brutal recruitment and the training of the *askari* helped develop the *Schutztruppe* into a highly effective military unit, and by introducing Prussian martial values, training created a strong sociopolitical bond between African *askari* and their German officers.³⁷ During the 1890s and early-1900s, the *Schutztruppe* recruited almost exclusively from Sudanese Africans because many Sudanese previously served in British-Egyptian colonial forces during the Mahdist War of the mid-1880s. Bringing experiences of Afro-European warfare into German service, German officers noted that Sudanese *askari* would become the backbone of the unit due to their fighting abilities. Often appointed as non-commissioned officers, these *askari* trained their counterparts using their Afro-European martial experiences.³⁸ The *Schutztruppe* recruited Native people, who it had defeated in battle, including the HeHe people.³⁹ Moyd claims that Native recruitment provided an outlet for peace in German East Africa: former warriors integrated into a new “martial system” with the *Schutztruppe* instead of continuing to fight against them.⁴⁰ In doing so, German colonial leaders directed Native African martial energies toward enemies of their choosing, and by incorporating Native tactics and hierarchies into the rank-and-file of the *Schutztruppe*, created a symbiotic relationship in which *askari* depended on promotion and pay and the Germans on African bodies for their military force.

During military exercises, The *askari* are introduced to the methods of Prussian training: rigorous and repetitive drilling with weapons and learning battle formations, as well as the proper wearing and maintenance of uniforms.⁴¹ The extremely harsh training, as described in Mzee Ali’s oral history collection, transformed men into model German soldiers:

training lasted many months. We were taught how to march properly, how to handle a variety of weapons and most importantly, how to be fearless. The training was so intense that at times when I fell down to sleep I often wondered whether I’d made a wise choice. Our instructors were ruthless and cruel. It seemed they did not know how to speak. It intrigued me that it was necessary for all orders to be shouted. The smallest mistake was punished with hard labor, not only for the culprit but for all of us.⁴²

Furthermore, military training expanded beyond repetitive rifle drills and memorizing bugle or whistle commands. Tasked with other duties, *askari* repaired buildings and parts of their “station” or base.⁴³ *Askari* also carried out administrative and disciplinary duties, served as couriers between stations, escorted colonial officials, served in judicial proceedings, cleaning weapons, learning first aid, and even performing traditional German military music.⁴⁴ By training and making the *askari* carry out tasks together, German officers sought to increase unit cohesion, loyalty, and discipline. With these practical skills, units built and maintained bases while operating as an independent force.

As early as the 1880s, Europeans sought to protect their African colonies from the threat of a general European conflict. At the Berlin Conference of 1884, which formalized European colonial spheres in Africa, an article of neutrality for the Congo River basin emerged as a key piece of the final treaty.⁴⁵ By 1914 however, hopes for a war limited to Europe met with the harsh reality of global conflict. Appointed commander of the *Schutztruppe* in early 1914, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck understood that German East Africa presented a prime target for the Allies, as it threatened lines of communication and supply with their colonies in Asia and the Pacific. With this understanding he prepared the *Schutztruppe* for the Allied powers that most directly threatened German East African territory: the forces of the British Empire and the other Allied nations in Eastern Africa, Portugal and Belgium. These enemies, vastly different from the African tribes that the *Schutztruppe* previously fought, also trained their respective African forces with modern rifles and machine guns. Their industrialized supply routes maintained the flow of raw materials and European goods. Additionally, each engaged in Afro-European warfare of

their own in their respective colonies; all nations had a sense of the potentially destructive ramifications if war broke out in Africa, but the aims of denying Germany the ability to disrupt lines of communication to Asia and the particular British desire to link their northern and southern African colonies through overrode earlier limitations of European warfare in Africa.⁴⁶



Map of East Africa before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. German East Africa would primarily face invasions from British East Africa (Kenya), Uganda, British Rhodesia, and the Belgian Congo in 1914–1916. After a fighting retreat south, the *Schutztruppe* invaded Portuguese East Africa in early 1917, and returned to German East Africa later in 1918.⁴⁷

While German colonial leaders like Heinrich Schnee debated whether to surrender the colony in the spirit of the Berlin Agreement of 1884 and avoid the destruction of material and property, Lettow-Vorbeck, a product of strict Prussian discipline and complete loyalty to the Fatherland, set out his strategy. With comparatively fewer forces and surrounded on three sides, the *Schutztruppe* couldn't defend the whole of German East Africa. With this in mind, Lettow-Vorbeck devised a plan of attrition: German armies in Europe could bring the Allies to the negotiating table as their capitals, political elites, and industry came under threat. By constantly harassing Allied forces surrounding German East Africa, the *Schutztruppe* could divert more critical resources and manpower to Africa against his inconsequential campaign, hopefully granting the German forces in Europe a greater chance at victory and a positive

outcome for Germany and her colonial possessions.⁴⁸ To this end, he began a new training regimen that gave his troops the most effective chance against the European powers.

One of Lettow-Vorbeck's primary objectives involved equipping the *Schutztruppe* with reliable firearms, training them in their use, and training them in European-African guerilla-warfare. He notes in *My Reminiscences* that the *Schutztruppe*, for most of its operational history, used the Mauser Model 1871, but the cartridges produced smoke when firing.⁴⁹ In a campaign that would require stealth and deception, the smoke could give away *Schutztruppe* positions.⁵⁰ Instead, Lettow-Vorbeck sought to supply the unit with Mauser Gewehr 98 rifles before hostilities began in August 1914. These rifles, in addition to having smokeless cartridges, had a five-round magazine, allowing for easier and faster reloading. In comparison, the Model 1871 utilized a "single-shot" mechanism; the user loaded each round individually. However, Strachan and Abbot note that German army supply priority meant that the *Schutztruppe* only equipped a few *Feldkompanien* with the newer rifle.⁵¹



The Mauser Gewehr 98 rifle uses a "stripper" clip of five rounds loaded at once, and then fired individually.⁵²

The machine gun proved to be a crucial weapon in the *Schutztruppe* arsenal, and both German and African soldiers became proficient in its use. Using evidence from *Battle of the Bundu*, historian Hew Strachan claims that the use of the machine-gun allowed for greater mobility over the rougher terrain than field-artillery pieces.⁵³ Lettow-Vorbeck notes that many of the *askari* effectively used the machine gun at long ranges, speculating that this skill comes from their sharp eyesight and experience hunting in the savannah.⁵⁴ These new weapons, married with the tactics and strategies of the pre-war insurgencies, made the *Schutztruppe* adept at fighting in the varied geography of German East Africa.

During the East African campaign, Lettow-Vorbeck continued the usage of pre-First World War *Schutztruppe* manuals for training purposes and adapted their maxims

and directions for warfare against European forces. The *Felddienst Übungen für Farbige (Ostafrikanische) Truppen* ("Field Exercises for Colored [East African] Troops") compiled the experiences of the *Schutztruppe* during Native insurgencies. The field manual includes war game scenarios, in which *askari* trained to ambush groups of enemy insurgents at significant range, and when the insurgents brought their usually larger numbers to bear against the *Schutztruppe*, a tactical retreat ensued, to preserve manpower and resources against a disadvantageous situation. The *askari* used their mobility and superior firepower to constantly harass and wear down enemies.⁵⁵

ASKARI LOYALTY

Lettow-Vorbeck's cultivation of himself as the figure of personal loyalty with the *askari* is a crucial part of the survival of the *Schutztruppe* as a fighting force, and reinforces the fact that *askari* loyalty is dependent on sociopolitical advancement within the German colonial system. Modern research indicates that most of the *askari*, who served with Lettow-Vorbeck and the *Schutztruppe*, during World War I, did so with the expectation it would make them "big men." *Askari* desired social status that came along with serving the German colonial government: individuals who possessed respect, commanded loyalty, and accumulated wealth. *Askari* sought livestock, large households, and power over members of their Native social constructs.⁵⁶ *Askari* came from a myriad of ethnic groups across East Africa, including those that the *Schutztruppe* conquered. As mentioned earlier, the *Schutztruppe* recruited these peoples into the force, and as these *askari* began to benefit materially and socially within the system of German colonial domination over Native groups, they sought to distinguish themselves as superior to non-*askari*.⁵⁷ *Askari* routinely brought their wives and children with them on campaign, which increased their paternal loyalty to Lettow-Vorbeck, thus *Schutztruppe* victories in capturing food and supplies helped the *askari* family survive.⁵⁸ Loyalty for the *askari* is contingent on how effectively the *Schutztruppe* served their material and sociological goals within their Native communities.⁵⁹

Rather than being seen as a military leader only, many *askari* viewed him, and by extension Imperial Germany as the ultimate sponsor to their individual interests. They rationalized that if Lettow-Vorbeck brought them victory, and greater amounts of wealth and power, then he should lead them. This rationalization is not made lightly. Lettow-Vorbeck and other German officers demonstrated their worthiness as military leaders to the *askari*, through shared experiences of training and fighting throughout the four

years of the campaign.⁶⁰ While the most complete and predominately German sources indicate a level of legitimate martial brotherhood between white Germans officers and African *askari*, (and some senior *askari* perhaps legitimately felt this way), almost all *askari* joined the *Schutztruppe* with the expectation of greater material or financial reward for loyal service, and any kinship is circumstance of the often intense battles the unit precipitated in – not a complete loyalty to the person of Lettow-Vorbeck or the German Kaiser. *Schutztruppe* defeats and *askari* losses of property and status within their native lands tested the constructed loyalty of the *Schutztruppe*. When the unit retreated into Portuguese East Africa in 1917 and 1918, desertions and defections to the pursuing Allied forces increased. But for all intents and purposes, when the *Schutztruppe* surrendered in Abercorn in 1918, Lettow-Vorbeck still possessed a small, but loyal fighting force.⁶¹

TRAINING IN EFFECT: BATTLES OF THE SCHUTZTRUPPE

Having discussed the innovations in training by Lettow-Vorbeck and the nature of *askari* loyalties, this section discusses how the East African campaign tested these elements, resulting in a unit that survived as a fighting force far longer than can be expected.

The *Schutztruppe* combined Native African styles of guerilla warfare, German training, and loyalty to Lettow-Vorbeck in a prolonged campaign that stunned and annoyed Allied commanders. It eventually forced, as Lettow-Vorbeck predicted, greater manpower and material commitments to the generally unimportant East African theater. At the Battle of Tanga, one of the first major battles of the campaign, the *Schutztruppe* demonstrated their fighting proficiency. From November 3 through 5, 1914, British Indian Expeditionary Force "B" under Major General Aitken, landed nine thousand troops at the port town of Tanga, with the goal of overwhelming Lettow-Vorbeck and capturing Dar es-Salaam, the colonial capital of German East Africa.⁶² The battle, which took place in both the streets of Tanga and the nearby rubber and palm oil plantations, resulted in a decisive victory for the *Schutztruppe*, using machine gun fire and repeated bayonet charges to weaken Aitken's beachhead position – Force "B" withdrew in the early hours of November 5th.

The most important outcome of the battle for Lettow-Vorbeck is the wholesale capture of Force B's supplies and equipment. This included clothes, ammunition, rations, advanced rifles (to supplement the *Schutztruppe*'s older ones), and machine guns.⁶³ The seized supplies helped the *Schutztruppe* remain furnished throughout the entire

campaign. Dr. Wilhelm Arning wrote in *Four Years World-War in German East Africa (1919)* about the bravery and loyalty of the *askari* troops to their German officers, despite being under heavy rifle and naval gunfire offshore and how those qualities represent the success of German training.⁶⁴ Lettow-Vorbeck also writes in his memoir, *My Reminiscences*, that the capture of supplies and naval gunfire “had lost its terrors for our brave blacks,” because of German training and leadership.⁶⁵ The engagement at Tanga demonstrated to German and Allied military leaders the effectiveness of the Afro-German training and tactics.

Following Tanga, the *Schutztruppe* moved against the growing Allied troop formations massing in Kenya, specifically in the settlement of Moshi. To gain supplies and force more Allied commitment to East Africa and further distract from the main theater of war in the Western front of Europe, Lettow-Vorbeck embarked the *Schutztruppe* on a raiding campaign into southern British East Africa, specifically against supply trains on the Uganda Railway. This phase of the campaign lasted almost all of 1915, as Allied forces mustered and planned a large enough invasion to take the whole of German East Africa. Lettow-Vorbeck writes about the practice of guerilla warfare during this period of the war in *My Reminiscences* and narrates the capture and destruction of British supply trains.⁶⁶ He attributes this success to his training of *askari* to work as self-sufficient raid detachments.⁶⁷ The *askari* and their German counterparts also developed a greater sense of comradeship and loyalty during this period. Lettow-Vorbeck relays a particular story where underbrush cut a German officer’s face, and an *askari* used his sock to clean the wound, who apparently stated “that is a custom of war; one only does it to one’s friends.”⁶⁸ Through shared battlefield experiences, Germans and African *askari* marital relationships strengthened, though they are rooted in paternalistic and imperial agendas.

Despite holding out for most of 1915, *Schutztruppe* fortunes began to change as the British and Belgian colonial forces began incursions into German East Africa. Under the British South African General Jan Smuts, the Allied forces began a region-wide assault beginning in 1916 through 1917. Unable to contain Allied advances, Lettow-Vorbeck decided on a strategy of avoiding potentially decisive engagements through fighting and retreating.⁶⁹ This saved men and equipment, as well as forced more Allied effort to completely defeat the *Schutztruppe*. At the Battle of Mahiwa, from October 16 to 18, 1918, the *Schutztruppe* employed a fully developed hybrid German-African model of warfare. Relying on entrenched machine gun emplacements and rifle pits, *Schutztruppe* forces, led by Lettow-Vorbeck himself, repulsed the advance of British forces. Holding the British, specifically the King’s African Rifles, similar to the *Schutztruppe* with white officers and Black *askari*, in a fierce

firefight prevented an organized retreat with suppressive fire. Then *Schutztruppe* reinforcements deceptively flanked British forces and inflicted heavy losses firing from dense copse of rainforest. Overwhelmed, British forces retreated.⁷⁰ This style of strong defensive positions, accompanied by ferocious flanking maneuvers, and if overwhelmed, quick, organized retreat, represented the final development of German training combined with tactics learned from African warfare, allowing the *Schutztruppe* to survive as an organized force.

The *Schutztruppe*, forced out of German East Africa in 1917 and through 1918, moved into Portuguese East Africa in order to raid lightly defended outposts for supplies. At this point in the war, the Allies brought large numbers of artillery and continually shelled *askari* positions. In an oral history interview, *askari* Mzee Ali describes the ferocious British attacks on hastily made trenches. Mzee Ali notes that his *askari* comrades are shaken by the artillery, but still manages to repulse Allied assaults. Even after a bombardment killed their German commander, he and the other *askari* still retreated, led by *askari* non-commissioned officers to German positions and reassigned to other *Schutztruppe* units.⁷¹ As mentioned before, many of these *askari* began to see Lettow-Vorbeck as not serving their sociopolitical interests and resolved to leave *Schutztruppe* service, either to return to their Native spaces or join with the prevailing Belgian-British power structure emerging in the region.

An engagement that defined this final phase of the war occurred at Lioma in western Portuguese East Africa, August 30 to 31, 1918. Losing units of *askari* to desertion, starvation, and disease, Lettow-Vorbeck sought to capture as many supplies as possible and return north to German East Africa. Even further adapting to African styles of warfare, the German command decided only to use a partial amount of their force, as bringing the whole army exhausted supplies needed in the future. But while the *Schutztruppe* became masters of African warfare, so had the Allies, particularly the British “King’s African Rifles”. At Lioma, the *Schutztruppe* proved both their effectiveness as battle-hardened warriors, but also their limitations. The *Schutztruppe* withdrew without capturing vital supplies, unable to dislodge British units from their defensive positions around the village, despite flanking maneuvers and sharp-hit and run attacks. This further strained the marital relationship between Lettow-Vorbeck’s *askari* and his leadership status, as *askari* lost material gains and in some cases, loved ones.⁷²

As the campaign continued, *askari* desertions began to mount and dwindling supplies heralded defeat. Lettow-Vorbeck moved the *Schutztruppe* back into German East Africa in September and October 1918, but at this time, thousands of British, Belgian, and Portuguese forces pursued them. In late November 1918, Lettow-Vorbeck received confirmed reports of the armistice between the

Allies and Germany.⁷³ On November 23 of that year, Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered the remaining 1,500 troops, which he personally commanded at Abercorn. Lettow-Vorbeck notes that despite the surrender, he made all attempts to procure pay for the *askaris* and the transport carriers. He said “yet it was a matter of honour for us to see that these people, who had fought and worked for us with such devotion, should receive their rights.”⁷⁴ Lettow-Vorbeck, recognizing the sociopolitical and material needs of the *askari* sought to provide for them in the new British dominion over their new territory of Tanganyika, though this is grounded in a paternalistic and colonial worldview.

Here the interwoven paths of Lettow-Vorbeck and the *askari* separated, but the experience of the East African campaign lasted far beyond 1918. Lettow-Vorbeck and the surviving German officers received a celebratory return to Berlin in 1919. Despite their defeat, Germans looked to Lettow-Vorbeck and the *Schutztruppe* as an exemplar of fierce resistance and German martial prowess as the only German force to occupy British territory during the war.⁷⁵ Political instability and economic downturn gripped the Germany that Lettow-Vorbeck and the veterans of the *Schutztruppe* returned to, and in the late 1920s and early 1930s, German colonial irredentists sought a return of German rule in Africa. As part of their broader nationalist appeals, Nazi Party ideology co-opted the East African episode. Hitler sought to frame the now-lost German African colonies as potential for revenge against the British and to justify their Aryan racial right to rule over Africa for both the material and ethnic conquest of the German people.⁷⁶ Famously, a staunch supporter of the deposed German monarchy, Lettow-Vorbeck refused Nazi overtures to support the Hitler regime. In some accounts, Lettow Vorbeck even personally insulted Hitler, and his World War I fame saved him from Nazi imprisonment or worse.⁷⁷ With the failure of the North African campaign during the Second World War, the Allies dashed the dreams of a renewed African empire.

CONCLUSION

The East Africa campaign, while not as well known as Western Front of World War I, cemented itself as a fascinating episode of military history. Military historians wrote of its importance in developing guerilla warfare strategies and tactics. Social and colonial historians focused on it from the lens of European colonialism in Africa and subsequent decolonization movements, and the aspects of marital relationships. This essay expands on that latter point; Germans and Africans, once regular enemies, began to hybridize their warfare into a unique relationship, in the face of enemies that sought to upend that status

quo. While it is a relationship that is rooted in servility and patronage, aspects of loyalty, training, and guerilla fighting resulted in one of the most effective military forces in military history: the *Schutztruppe*.

While Germany lost the First World War, Lettow-Vorbeck undoubtedly impacted on the *askari* he commanded. A written account recalls that after Lettow-Vorbeck’s passing in 1964, the West German government sent an agent to German East Africa, now Tanzania, to issue large back pensions to *askari* still alive. Many men that came to the agent did not have official paperwork to prove their service, so the German agent asked each to perform the *Schutztruppe* manual of arms instead. As the story goes, each *askari* performed the manual of arms perfectly.⁷⁸ Through the crucible of war, *askari* on *safari ya Bwana Lettow* (Mr. Lettow’s journeys) experienced hardship and suffering as a result of their colonial overlords, but the indelible impact that their experiences had on their personal and communal lives is evident.⁷⁹

NOTES

- 1 Wikimedia Commons. “File:Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck WWI poster.jpg.” https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_von_Lettow-Vorbeck_WWI_poster.jpg.
- 2 *Schutztruppe*, literally “Protection Force.” From German. The name for the armed force that was tasked with protecting and maintaining public order in German East Africa. Specific terms in German and Swahili will be italicized in this essay.
- 3 *Askari*, “soldier”. From Swahili and Arabic. Term refers exclusively to African soldiers that fought for both German and Allied armies.
- 4 At the Armistice of Compiègne, November 11, 1918, German forces in Europe agreed to a ceasefire and subsequent peace talks. This news took several weeks to reach Lettow-Vorbeck and other German units around the world.
- 5 Guerilla-warfare refers to a type of fighting that uses small units to harass and distract large enemy forces, with the goal of making operations in an area too costly in both material and manpower for the enemy. “Prussian-style” training refers to the type of military training used by the Imperial German Army before and during the First World War. More so than other European armies, it emphasized rigorous discipline, exacting drill movements, expertise with one’s weapon, and camaraderie.
- 6 Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1920), Preface.
- 7 Wilhelm Arning, *Vier Jahre Weltkrieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Hanover: Gebrüder Jänecke, 1919); Ludwig Boell, *Die Operationen in Ostafrika* (Hamburg: Walter Dachert, 1951).
- 8 “Veterans of the Imperial German Overseas Forces,” German Colonial Uniforms, <http://www.germancolonialuniforms.co.uk/veterans%20DKKB.htm>.; “Reichskolonialbund Propaganda,” The Weiner Holocaust Library, <https://wienerholocaustlibrary.org/object/temp93/>.
- 9 Lettow-Vorbeck, *Reminiscences of East Africa*, Preface; Arning, *Vier Jahre Weltkrieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika*, 10
- 10 Elizabeth Heath. “Tanzania,” In *Encyclopedia of Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 11 Heinrich Schnee, *Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkrieg* (Leipzig: Quelle and Meyer, 1919). “Irredentism” refers to the sociopolitical belief in reclaiming lost territory that “rightfully” belongs to a nation. Schnee is of the foremost advocates of German colonial


- irredentism in the 1920s and 30s, and promoted renewed German colonialism as a member of the Nazi Party in the Reichstag in during the Nazi regime.
- 12 Ludwig Deppe, *Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika* (Berlin: Scherl, 1919).
 - 13 Ross Anderson, "World War One in East Africa 1916–1918" (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2001), 6.
 - 14 Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guerrilla: Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan, 1981); Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963); Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, (New York: Macmillan, 1974).
 - 15 Bror Urme MacDonell, *Mzee Ali: the Biography of an African Slave-Raider Turned Askari & Scout* (Johannesburg: 30° South Publishers, 2006). The collected stories from Mzee Ali about his life and his time as a German *askari* during the East African campaign. McDonnell subsequently published them. Other historians such as Moyd, Strachan, and Anderson use this source.
 - 16 Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014). ProQuest Ebook Central.
 - 17 Michael Pesek, "Ruga-Ruga: The History of an African Profession, 1820–1918," In *German Colonialism Revisited: African, Asian, and Oceanic Experiences*, edited by Nina Berman, Klaus Mühlhahn, and Patrice Nganang (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 85–100.
 - 18 Michelle R. Moyd, "We don't want to die for nothing': *askari* at war in German East Africa, 1914–1918," In *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, edited by Santanu Das (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90–108.
 - 19 Richard A. Webster and Harry Magdoff, "Western Colonialism," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2020.
 - 20 Arne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism 1856–1918: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64–6. ProQuest Ebook Central.
 - 21 Alejandro de Quesada, *Imperial German Colonial and Overseas Troops 1885–1918* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2013), 17; *ruga-ruga* are Native African auxiliaries that frequently fought with both German and Allied troops during the colonial period and the First World War. These forces, commonly in Native dress, would act as scouts and conduct flanking attacks on enemy forces.
 - 22 Quesada, 17–19.
 - 23 A "column" refers to a military unit where the individuals in the formation are organized longer than it is wide. This allows the unit to effectively move for long distances across roads or other pathways. It also leaves the unit vulnerable to attack. In this context, it is a synonym for the *Feldkompagnien*, operating as an independent unit on the battlefield or strategic setting.
 - 24 *Feldkompagnien*, literally "Field Company." From German. These units, about 60–100 men each, and able to operate independently for a short period of time. They consisted of infantry and support arms, sometimes artillery.
 - 25 Callwell defines the term "small war" as a conflict between regular forces (usually European: guns, artillery, clearly defined styles of warfare), and irregular forces (usually African or Asian, possibly guns, undefined styles of warfare e.g. guerilla warfare).
 - 26 Colonel C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1906). Ch. 11.
 - 27 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 119.
 - 28 Wolfgang Hubach, "Josef Weinberger aus Tölz: Ein bayerischer Unteroffizier als Sergeant bei der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppe in Deutsch-Ostafrika, 1891–1896," 8–9. As found in *Violent Intermediaries*, 119–120.
 - 29 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 120.
 - 30 Tom von Prince, *Gegen Araber und Wahehe: Erinnerungen aus meiner ostafrikanischen Leutnantszeit 1890 – 1895* (Berlin: Mittler, 1914). 298–299. Transl. by Lieutenant Commander Michael Kubat, USN ret.
 - 31 "Zulu-style" means that these enemy soldiers armed themselves with spears and cowhide shields, and dressed in elaborate "war-dress".
 - 32 Friedrich Kallenberg, *Auf dem Kriegspfad gegen die Massai: eine Frühlingfahrt nach Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Munich: Beck, 1892). 122–123.
 - 33 Major Thomas A. Crowson, "When Elephants Clash: A Critical Analysis of Major General Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck in the East African Theater of the Great War" (Masters thesis, U.S Army Command and General Staff College, 2003), 10–13.
 - 34 As cited in Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, 15; and Crowson, 13–14.
 - 35 Peter Abbot, *Armies in East Africa 1914–18* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 6.
 - 36 No one definition can encompass the whole of "European" styles of warfare, but generally refer to the use of large bodies of infantry, cavalry, and artillery moving together as a "corps"; a system that had changed little from the mid-19th century. With an environment hostile to horses, and the ground difficult for traditional heavy artillery, the fast moving infantry tactics of the *Schutztruppe* would cause immense casualties for a traditional European army.
 - 37 Prussian refers to the predecessor state of the German Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia. One of the most highly effective and trained militaries of the eighteenth century, German colonial officers sought to implement the perceived values that carried their ancestors to victory in the training regimen for the *askari*.
 - 38 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 39–41.
 - 39 Anleitung zum Felddienst in Deutsch-Ostafrika (Dar es Salaam: Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Rundschau, 1911), 4.
 - 40 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 44; "Martial system" refers to the social system of warfare for Africans in the East African region. In several German and other European accounts, *askari* and *ruga-ruga* treated military service as a lifestyle that determined social and economic status.
 - 41 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 93–94.
 - 42 MacDonell, *Mzee Ali*, Part II, VIII.
 - 43 Heinrich Fonck, *Deutsch-Ost-Afrika: eine Schilderung deutscher Tropen nach 10 Wanderjahren; die Schutztruppe; Reisen und Expeditionen im Innern; Land und Leute; Wild, Jagd und Fischerei; wirtschaftliche Verhältnisse* (Berlin: Voss, 1910), 74.
 - 44 Gustav Adolf, *Graf von Götzen, Durch Afrika von Ost nach West: Resultate und Begebenheiten einer Reise von der deutsch-ostafrikanischen Küste bis zur Kongomündung in den Jahren 1893/94*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1899).
 - 45 Berlin Conference, "General Act of the Berlin Conference on West Africa, 26 February 1885," 5–6. <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1885GeneralActBerlinConference.pdf>.
 - 46 Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–3.
 - 47 Wikimedia Commons, "File:German East Africa, 1914–1918.jpg," from *The Times History of the War* (London: *The Times*, 1914–1921). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:German_East_Africa,_1914-1918.jpg.
 - 48 Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, 95.
 - 49 Gregg Adams, *King's African Rifle Soldier versus Schutztruppe Solider* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 20.
 - 50 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 8.
 - 51 Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, 104–105; Abbot, *Armies in East Africa*, 6.
 - 52 Wikimedia Commons, "File:Gewehr 98 noBG.jpg," https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gewehr_98_noBG.jpg.
 - 53 Strachan, 104; Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, 15–19.
 - 54 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 9.
 - 55 Michelle R. Moyd, "Imagining African Warfare: War Games and Military Cultures in German East Africa," in *Warfare and Culture in World History*, ed. Wayne E. Lee, 212–240 (New York: New York University Press, 2020, 2nd edition) 226–228.
 - 56 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 4–5.
 - 57 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 106–109.
 - 58 Michelle R. Moyd, "Askari Identity and Honor in the Maji Maji War, 1905–1907," in *Maji Maji: Lifting the Fog of War* by James Giblin and Jamie Monson (Boston: Brill, 2010) ProQuest Ebook Central, 168–172; Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 124–126.

- 59 Adams, *King's African Rifles Soldier vs. Schutztruppe Soldier*, 72.
- 60 Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 92.
- 61 Moyd, "“We don't want to die for nothing,” 100.
- 62 Ross Anderson, *Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign 1914–1916* (Stroud, UK: Spellmount Press, 2014), 524.
- 63 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 45.
- 64 Arning, *Vier Jahre Weltkrieg*, 116.
- 65 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 45.
- 66 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 64–66.
- 67 Lettow-Vorbeck, Ch. 7.
- 68 Lettow-Vorbeck, 76.
- 69 Abbot, *Armies in East Africa*, 19.
- 70 Adams, *King's African Rifle Soldier versus Schutztruppe Solider*, 43–58; A “copse” is a small group of trees.
- 71 MacDonell, *Mzee Ali*, Part III, XXI.
- 72 Adams, *KAR Soldier vs. Schutztruppe Solider*, 62–70.
- 73 Adams, 75–76.
- 74 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 319.
- 75 Robert Gaudi, *African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa 1914–1918* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 410–411.
- 76 A. Edho Ekoko, “The British Attitude towards Germany's Colonial Irredentism in Africa in the Inter-War Years,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 2 (1979): 287–307. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260060>.
- 77 Gaudi, 414–415.
- 78 Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, 333; *Das Weltreich der Deutschen*, S1 E1, “Kopfjagd in Ostafrika,” directed by Sebastian Dehnhardt, Manfred Oldenburg, and Ricarda Schlosshan, aired April 6, 2010, on Phoenix, <https://youtu.be/sPRIwrZQQu0?t=2220>.
- 79 “safari ya Bwana Lettow,” Swahili. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 210–212.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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