

Embattled in the Last Theatre of the War: The Involvement of Abercorn (Mbala) District of Northern Rhodesia in the First World War

by

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Abstract

A conflict which started between Austria and Serbia, on 28 June 1914, turned into the First World War on 28 July 1914 as aggressors started summoning their allies. Later in 1914, warring states called upon their colonies to service the fighting. By December 1914, Africa had joined the war on the side of respective colonial masters. It was in this context that Abercorn (now Mbala) district, a northerly district of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) that bordered German Tanganyika (Tanzania) got involved in the First World War on behalf of Britain, its colonial master. The war situation faced by the British in Abercorn required collective effort of not only the imperial force but also the local people to fight the Germans. As a result, the British used various ways in the district to enlist the local people into the war. The geographical location of Abercorn made it inevitable for the district to be involved in the fighting. To a large extent, the British used local chiefs, propaganda, coercion and incentives to recruit the local people for war services. This work demonstrates that Africans did not join the colonial army purely due to government propaganda, but that they also had their own reasons for doing so such as desire to earn money and learn how to operate a gun. In this manner, the article brings to the fore the aspect of African agency in the enlistment process. It is also argued that not all Africans buttressed the British war aims as groups such as the Watch Tower Society were subversive towards the recruitment of the local people for war service in the district.

Key Words: Abercorn, German-Tanganyika, chiefs, propaganda, coercion, incentives, African agency, Watch Tower Society

Introduction

Scholars who have studied the First World War in Africa have paid much attention on the experiences of Africans, and the role of imperial army commanders in the three theatres of war: the West African, South-West African, and East African. ¹Few studies have explored how the local people in different regions on the continent were recruited for war services. Studies that have attempted to investigate how Africans on the continent got involved in the First World

¹S. Hew, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and R. Anderson, 'Norforce: Major General Edward Northey and the Nyasaland and North Eastern Rhodesia Frontier Force', *Scientia Militaria*, 44, 1 (2016).

War have overlooked other crucial factors such as geographical locations of fighting zones, the role of incentives and desire by the local people to join the military for their own reasons.

In Africa, the local people were recruited to offer various war services on the three major theatres of the First World War. The campaign of the Allied powers against the Germans in Tanganyika, East Africa, was the longest episode of the war. B. Nasson's work focussed on the undefeated German General of World War One, Paul Littow von Vorbeck. Nasson noted that Vorbeck pillaged British colonies in East Africa by waging guerrilla warfare in Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland due to their geographical locations. However, his study overlooks how the German General recruited his local fighters on the border regions during the war. How did the belligerent forces convince Africans especially on the border of Northern Rhodesia and Tanganyika to join their armies? This is a packed historical question which this article unbundles. There is little doubt that, the owners of the land which became the battlefield on this border were drafted into the fighting by the belligerent nations in various ways.

W.T. Hodges investigated the aspect of African porters during the war. He contented that, Uganda contributed a total of about 190 000 porters, arguably the largest number of porters to the Allies during the East African campaign. This argument resonates with M. Crowder's observation that compulsory recruitment for troops and carriers was enforced in Uganda from 1915 onwards.² Hodges acknowledged that some carriers came from different parts of colonial Zambia though without demonstrating how they were recruited.³

In Nyasaland, Africans were recruited either as carriers or soldiers during the war. M. Page observed that the local people in Nyasaland started rebelling against being recruited as porters. To prove his assertion, Page cited the Chilembwe Uprising as an example of African dissent in the provision of war services. Despite this rebellion, colonial authorities started using excessive force to conscript Africans for war services, an aspect which this article explores in depth for Africans in Abercorn.

The study by J. Gewald is among the most recent works on the First World War on Northern Rhodesia.⁴ He argued that the British consolidated their control of Northern Rhodesia during and after the war. This was done partly by recruiting Africans as porters and soldiers.⁵ Although Gewald hinted that Africans were recruited for war services, he did not demonstrate how the enlistment was done like this work does.

² M. Crowder, 'First World War and its Consequences in Africa' in A.A. Boahem (ed.), *General History of Africa VII*, Paris: UNESCO, 1985), 295.

³ G.W.T. Hodges, 'African Manpower Statistics for the British Forces in East Africa, 1914-1918', *Journal of African History*, 19, 1 (1978), 109.

⁴ J. Gewald, *Forged in the Great War: People, Transport, Labour the Establishment of Colonial Rule in Northern Rhodesia, 1890-1920*, (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2015), 76.

⁵ Gewald, *Forged in the Great War*, 117.

It evident from the above studies that the various ways used by the British to enlist the local people in Africa for war services during the the Fisrt World War have not been extensively investigated. This article addresses this oversight first by illustrating how the northerly district of Abercorn got involved in the First World War. Secondly, the article demonstrates ways used by the British in Abercorn to enlist the local people for war services. In doing so, this work partly responds to Gewalt's appeal for research on various ways used by the British to convince Africans to join its military for war efforts during the first Geat War.⁶ This work was crafted using mostly primary sources from the Catholic's Faith and Encounter Centre Zambia (FENZA), the Livingstone Museum (LM) and the National Archives of Zambia (NAZ). Oral sources related to the war were also consulted in Abercorn. Because people who witnessed the war first hand are not available, interviewees were children, and grandchildren of those experienced the First World War first hand in Abercorn. The data collected from different sources was analysed, and corroborated in order to come up with a balanced narrative.

The section below discusses various reasons that made Abercorn to be involved in the First World War in detail. It demonstrates that proximity to the German territory, and the local chiefs were crucial for the district's involvement in the conflict. It also argues that the war tactics employed by the German General, Littow von Vorbeck, inevitably grafted Abercorn in the fighting. However, some Africans particularly members of the Watch Tower sect, were subversive towards enlistment for war.

Reasons for Abercorn's Incorporation in the First World War

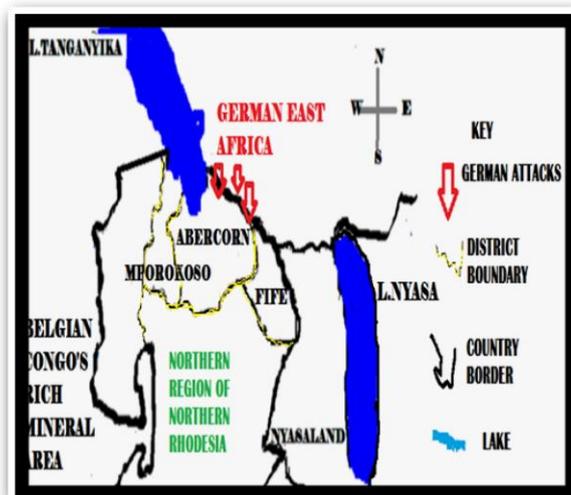
Among the reasons that made Abercorn district to be involved in the First World War was its geographical location and proximity to Germany's East African territory. In the north, the district adjoined the German territory known as Tanganyika which was part of the large German empire called German East Africa.⁷When the fighting ensued on 5 September 1914, between the two neighbouring territories, it was inevitable that the district would be actively involved because of its proximity to the German territory.⁸ Besides this proximity was the possibility that Britain would use Abercorn to launch an attack on the adjoining German territory of Tanganyika. Thus, the location and proximity made it easy for the Germans to attack the district without covering long distances. See map I.

⁶Gewald, *Forget in the Great War*, 90.

⁷ Abercorn District Notebook, vol I, 208; H. Gamwell and M. Gamwell, 'History of Abercorn', *Northern Rhodesia Journal*, 4, 6 (1961), 524; and 29 October 2018, *Times of Zambia*, 8.

⁸ The Livingstone Museum (LM) 2/4/58/1 G69/1, Report of the work done by the Northern Rhodesia Police in the 1914-18 war; and Interview, G. Simusokwe, temporal palace of chief Tafuna, Mpulungu district, 29 March 2019.

Map I: The Geographical Location and Proximity of Abercorn to German East Africa



Source: Adapted from Edmund James Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War: the forgotten colonial crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 69.

The driving force behind the German attack on Abercorn was their dream of creating an empire in Central Africa. The Germans desired to achieve this by joining their two coastal colonies of German South West Africa (Namibia) with their vast East African territory (German East Africa). This idea, known as *Mittelafrika*, had been conceived in Germany long before the advent of war.⁹ This geostrategic idea articulated Germany's foreign policy aim prior to the First World War to bring Central Africa under German domination. During the war, the concept of *Mittelafrika* was popularised by German academics, politicians, and military officials both at home and overseas in order to revive the morale of their fighting troops.¹⁰ In this regard, the German General, Paul Lettow von Voebek who operated in East Africa, worked on the concept of *Mittelafrika*. This was to be done by first annexing Abercorn which bordered German East Africa with Northern Rhodesia. Northern Rhodesia, a British protectorate, was regarded as the only stumbling block to connecting with German South West Africa.

At the same time, *Mittelafrika* threatened the British desire of planting the Union Jack from Cape Town to Cairo.¹¹ Furthermore, the idea of *Mittelafrika* threatened the British with a loss of about £10,000 of tax in Abercorn to the Germans.¹² Therefore, the British desired to

⁹ R. M. Mambo, 'Mittelafrika: The German Dream of an Empire Across Africa in the late 19th and 20th Centuries', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 20 (1991), 163; and 4 September 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 8.

¹⁰ Mambo, 'Mittelafrika', 171.

¹¹ Mambo, 'Mittelafrika', 161; and J.E. Helmreich, 'End of Congo Neutrality', *The Historian*, 28, 4 (1966), 610.

¹² National Archives of Zambia (hereafter NAZ), A2/3/1. Loc 791/ 197, Telegram from Northern Rhodesia Administrator to Commandant General, 20 November 1914.

defend Abercorn from being annexed by the Germans. As a result, the district found itself at the centre of a war in East Africa. During the war, the Germans attacked Abercorn from the northern part while the British defended it from the B.O.M.A. garrison, in the south.

Abercorn also actively became involved in the Great War as a result of General von Voeberk's war tactic of distracting the Allied forces in Africa from the main theatre of the war in Europe. The German General wanted to distract the Allied countries in Africa as much as possible from supplying their forces in Europe with colonial soldiers and resources.¹³ This was aimed at giving chance to German forces fighting in Europe to defeat the Allied powers as the latter could be cut off from colonial supplies and reinforcement. Von Voeberk wanted the Allied nations' resources on the continent to be used to prosecute the war in East Africa and not in Europe.¹⁴ In order to achieve this, the German *Schutztruppen* planned to display a guerrilla warfare in the Allied nations' colonies and harass them.¹⁵ In the south of German Tanganyika, General von Voeberk considered Abercorn as a point of attracting the British forces in Northern Rhodesia to a war. This was done by launching episodic attacks on the district. The British responded by fortifying the district with combatants. Thus, Abercorn became embattled in the East African campaign of the First World War.

Furthermore, in an effort to distract African resources from the European theatre of war, the Germans planned to sabotage supply regions of the Allied nations in Central Africa. The Katanga region in the Belgian Congo was one such an area. The region was rich in minerals such as copper which was essential in manufacturing ammunition for the Allied nations.¹⁶ Therefore, the capture of the Katanga by Germany implied a stifled supply of important war raw materials to the Allied forces, thereby giving advantage to the Germans to win the war. However, the seizure of the Katanga meant the violation of Article 11 of the Neutrality Act of 1884, of the Berlin-Congo Act.¹⁷ By that Act, the Congo Basin was classified a neutral power in wartime based on the neutrality of its colonial master, Belgium.¹⁸ In spite of the Neutrality Act, the Germans were determined to incapacitate the Katanga.

In addition, it was advantageous for the Germans to access the Katanga by land as they could move large numbers of soldiers at once, and loot Africans for food on the way.

¹³ J. McCracken, *A History of Malawi, 1859-1966*, (Rochester: James Murrey, 2012), 148.

¹⁴ J. Illife, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1979), 241.

¹⁵ *Schutztruppen* was the official term for German colonial troops; Illife, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 241; and Helmreich, 'End of Congo Neutrality', 620.

¹⁶ E. J. Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War: the forgotten Colonial Crisis*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 49; and Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Zambia Colonial Rule', <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zambia/Colonial-rule>, accessed on 15 September 2019.

¹⁷ F. Fischer, 'German War aims in the First World War', *World Politics*, 15,1 (1962), 167; and W. O. Henderson, 'The Conquest of German Colonies, 1914-18', *History*, 27,106 (1942), 125.

¹⁸ Henderson, 'The Conquest of German Colonies, 1914-18', 125.

However, accessing the Katanga by land meant overriding Abercorn as it provided an arid landmass to the region. The British in Northern Rhodesia were aware of this possibility by the Germans. When the war began, Lawrence Wallace, the colony's Administrator, emphasised that "quick steps should be taken to defend the northern border which offered several well defined lines of access to the rich...Katanga".¹⁹ When the war broke out, as Edmund James Yorke observed, von Voerberk embarked on an aggressive and proactive campaign which was aimed at:

distraction of the neighbouring principal Allied colonies of the Belgian Congo, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and British East Africa. He told Berlin that war in the colony should not be treated as a self-sufficient episode. It and the Great War can react off each other.²⁰

By taking this warfare approach, it meant that Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo could not be attacked without an assault on Abercorn. This was so because the district lay on the forefront passage into Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo mainland, either by land or Lake Tanganyika. This policy of distracting the Allies meant that it was impossible not to involve Abercorn in the war.

The Incorporation of Belgium Congo into the War at Abercorn

Following the defeat of Belgium by Germany in Europe, the Belgians in the Congo became willing to join the war against the Germans in East Africa. On 22 August 1914, the Germans using their gunboat, the *Hedwig von Wissmann*, destroyed the Belgian steamer, *Alexandre del Commune* on Lake Tanganyika.²¹ By then, this was the only ship that posed a threat to German presence on the lake. This attack increased Belgium's impetus to abandon the policy of neutrality and ally itself with the British in Abercorn.²² Like the British, the Belgians considered Abercorn to have been in a good geographical position for attacking German Tanganyika.

On the other hand, for the Belgians, the reward of joining the war in Abercorn outweighed its cost. Firstly, they wanted to use the war against the Germans in Abercorn to restore their image in the Congo which had degenerated as a result of their defeat in Europe.²³

¹⁹ NAZ A2/3/4 Loc 794/198, Correspondence from Administrator Wallace to the Secretary of BSACo, London, 15 March 1915.

²⁰ York, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 38.

²¹ Gewald, *Forged in the Great War: People, Transport, Labour the Establishment of Colonial Rule in Northern Rhodesia, 1890-1920*, 108.

²² Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, 100.

²³ B. Digre, '1914-1918, Online International Encyclopaedia of the First World War', https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/contributors/Brian_Digre, accessed on 20 August 2019.

Most importantly, they wanted to have bargaining power for land in the aftermath of the war.²⁴ In Central Africa, the Belgians wanted increased access to the Atlantic Ocean but were hindered by Portuguese colonies there. Therefore, the Belgians reasoned that after a successful campaign against the Germans in Abercorn, the Portuguese would surrender Angola and other areas including the Cabinda enclave to them so that they could have a direct route to the Atlantic coast.²⁵ The Belgians hoped to exchange these territories with German colonies especially German South-West Africa.

When the British defence force in Abercorn was pressed hard by German warfare in September 1914, they asked for military aid from the Belgians.²⁶ The Belgians responded favourably by sending their troops known as the *Force Republique*. The first troops of the Belgians arrived in Abercorn on 22 September 1914.²⁷ They consisted of five Europeans, and 153 (Congolese) Africans. These joined three thousand local Africans from within Abercorn who were recruited for defensive works.²⁸

Through their African spies, the Germans noticed the build-up of Belgian troops in Abercorn. As a result, the Germans attacked the district on several occasions.²⁹ To do this, the Germans utilised the *Ruga-ruga* who were skilled fighters and knew Abercorn very well because of their involvement in the slave trade for a long time. As such, the *Ruga-ruga* were responsible for much of the atrocities committed against civilians during the First World War in Abercorn district.³⁰ Germany's major assaults on the district were at Kasakalawe (1914-1915), Saisi (1915), and the B.O.M.A garrison and prison (1914-1916).³¹ Through these battles, and others, Abercorn directly encountered the First World War more than any other district in Northern Rhodesia.

African Reaction to War News

There were many factors that contributed to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Among the factors that led to the Great War was the desire for colonial expansion, and the alliance system that divided Europe into two hostile camps (Triple Alliance and Triple Entente)

²⁴ Digre, '1914-1918, Online International Encyclopaedia of the First World War', 3.

²⁵ Helmreich, 'End of Congo Neutrality', 622.

²⁶ Helmreich, 'End of Congo Neutrality', 622.

²⁷ NAZ A2/3/2 Loc 791/197, Report on the Affairs of Abercorn and Tanganyika province, 31 December 1914.

²⁸ NAZ A2/3/2 Loc 791/197, Report on the Affairs of Abercorn and Tanganyika province.

²⁹ 10 October 2018, *Times of Zambia*, 13.

³⁰ The Ruga-ruga were an indigenous war-like ethnic group found in German East Africa who were ready to be hired for warfare, for more, see, M. Pesek, '*Ruga-ruga: The History of an African Profession, 1820-1918*', in Nina Berman and Nganang Nganang (eds.), *German Colonialism Revisited: African, Asian and Oceanic Experiences*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

³¹ For detailed description of these battles, see, Daniel Phiri, 'The role played by Africans in the British war effort in Abercorn District', *Southern Journal for Contemporary History*, 45, 2 (2020).

by 1914. However, the murder of the Austrian heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sofie, by a Serb youth, Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on 28 July 1914, sparked out the fighting between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, exactly one month after the assassination.³² This fighting turned into the First World War by early August 1914. By then, Northern Rhodesia was a British South African Company (B.S.A.Co) administered territory. In terms of administrative command, the territory's Administrator reported to the B.S.A.Co Secretary in London through the British High Commissioner in South Africa. It was through this channel that Northern Rhodesia received news of the outbreak of war in Europe in August 1914. The war news relayed to Lawrence Wallace, the Administrator of Northern Rhodesia, stated that 'His Majesty, King George V... is at war with Germany and the dual-monarchy of Austria-Hungary'.³³ In response, Wallace passed on this war news to all District Commissioners in the territory through telegram. By 8 August 1914, Abercorn District Commissioner, P.C. Chesnaye had already received the war news.³⁴

When the war news reached Abercorn, it was first disseminated to Europeans, and a month later (September 1914) to local traditional leaders. Traditional leaders in Abercorn were informed of the outbreak of the war only after Germans had already begun to traverse the district for war acts. Local chiefs were called to a meeting by the District Commissioner in early September 1914 where the outbreak of war was explained to them.³⁵ Traditional leaders such as Chiefs Zombe, Tafuna, Chitimba, Nsokolo and Chinakila welcomed the war news transmitted to them.³⁶ The actual causes of the conflict, however, were not recounted to the traditional leaders. All what they came to understand was the reality that there was a war between two European nations: Germany and Britain.³⁷ At the *indaba*, local chiefs were told not to be terrified as it was a 'white man's war', and were promised protection over their land and property.³⁸ Chiefs were advised to remain calm in spite of the hostilities. The District Commissioner, however made it clear that if things became hard, African support would be

³²B. Walsh, *Modern World History*, (London: John Murry, 1996), 3.

³³ NAZ A1/1/15 Loc 697/161, Royal Proclamations, 7 September 1914; and Foreign office, 'A state of war', Supplement to the London Gazette, no. 28861 (1914).

³⁴ NAZ A1/1/15 Loc 697/161, Royal Proclamations, 07 September 1914.

³⁵ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197, Correspondence of District Commission of Abercorn with Fife Native Commissioner, 24 November 1914; and Gewald, *Forget in a Great War*, 82.

³⁶ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197, Report on Abercorn by the native Commissioner Hugh Jones to the Magistrate of Abercorn, 19 December 1914; and Interview, Z. M. Mutembo, Heavy Industrial Area, Mbala District, 27 March 2019.

³⁷ Interview, Simusokwe.

³⁸ NAZ Box 13, Bound, Administrator BSA, Co., Annual Report for 1911-1923, Correspondence of Wallace to the Secretary of the BSA Co, London, 18 October 1914.

sought.³⁹ On their party, traditional leaders expressed willingness to support the British who were their colonial masters.

Traditional leaders disseminated the war news to their people through their headmen. Their subjects in turn also received the news with willingness to support the British, their colonial masters. This stance was taken because their leaders had already taken that view. Traditionally, African subjects could not disobey their leaders, thus, the local people were loyal to their traditional leaders.⁴⁰ As one government official observed even before the actual fighting began, “natives in the northern border of Abercorn seem to wish to invade German East Africa on their own at once. For them, there is unnecessary delay to attack on our border side”.⁴¹

Despite expressing willingness to support the British, some of the local people whose villages were along the border such as Chizombwe were not for the idea of a war due to security concerns. After the war news spread, such villagers were told by the government to shift into the interior.⁴² However, most of them did not heed the directive. As a result, these became the first victims of German and *Ruga-ruga* raids in the district. In this regard, not all Africans accepted every decision of colonial officials with regard to the prosecution of the war.

The use of Local Chiefs, Propaganda and Coercion in the Mobilisation and Recruitment of Africans for War Services by the British

With the insignificant number of Europeans in the district numbering 48 in 1914, it was clear that the successful defence of Abercorn demanded the incorporation of the indigenous people into the army. Therefore, the mobilisation of Africans for war services was soon embarked on by colonial authorities. This was done by first seeking permission from the local chiefs to enlist their subjects for war services.⁴³ To do this, chiefs were given different articles in form of money, and textiles as well as being promised B.O.M.A support in dealing with their disloyal subjects.⁴⁴ Similarly, M. Crowder argued that a great deal of recruitment in Northern Rhodesia was undertaken through local chiefs.⁴⁵ At times, chiefs rounded up strangers to avoid enlisting their immediate dependents or kinsmen.

³⁹ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197, Report on Abercorn by the native Commissioner Hugh Jones to the Magistrate of Abercorn, 19 December 1914.

⁴⁰ NAZ Box 13, Bound, Administrator B.S.A. Co Annual Report for 1911-1923, Correspondence of Wallace to the Secretary of the BSA Co, London, 18 December 1914; and A. Tembo, ‘The Impact of the Second World War on Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), 1939-1953’, PhD Thesis, University of the Free State, 2015, 29-34.

⁴¹ NAZ Loc 791/197, Correspondence from country Administrator Wallace to the secretary of the British South African Company (hereafter B.S.A. Co) London Wall, 14 September 1914.

⁴² NAZ A2/3/2 Loc 792/ 197, Report on the Affairs of Abercorn of Tanganyika District, 31 December 1914.

⁴³ Interviews: Mutembo; and J. Siame, Luselwanfumu village, Mbala District, 27 March 2018.

⁴⁴ Interviews: Chief Zombe; and Mutembo.

⁴⁵ Crowder, ‘First World War and its Consequences in Africa’, 293.

Chiefs' representatives such as messengers and headmen also participated in the recruitment of military personnel. After being given permission by chiefs, messengers and headmen carried on the mobilisation of personnel in the villages where the local people were mustered for enlistment.⁴⁶ It was during such gatherings that the actual enlistment by the military authorities took place.⁴⁷ Through this system, the British for instance, organised and enlisted more than 4,000 local people of Abercorn for war services by December 1914.

Propaganda was also used to convince those who did not show willingness to enlist for war services in the district. For example, the British claimed that the Germans were 'brutal people who wanted to kill all Africans, and that the British on the other hand were protecting them, thus Africans should join hands with the British'.⁴⁸ This propaganda was used to make the local people appreciate that the British were good people who were protecting them from being exterminated by the Germans. At best, the propaganda aimed at cultivating an attitude of colossal detest for the Germans in the minds of Africans. For instance, Africans were told that if the Germans became victorious in the war, both them and the British would be wiped out because the enemy did not want either of them.⁴⁹ Africans were thus made to believe that if they did not join forces with the British, their lives would be at the mercy of the enemy.⁵⁰

Similarly, Christian missionaries also participated in spreading propaganda against what they called German evil. They particularly used this in countering activities of the Watch Tower sect which was discouraging Africans from enlisting for war service. One such message stated that:

Germans were a badly ambitious race, they plot to subdue all races including the natives. For this, they prepared guns for shooting people and myriad soldiers so that they can enslave the world... who checked their oppression? The Watch Tower or the British? It's the British who protected the world. The natives must too help in protecting the world knowing that Germans acted like wild beasts... so all of you go and enlist. The wild beasts do not have such mercy. Truly, the BOMA is a friend of all decent people.⁵¹

It was reasoned by the British that if the Germans were portrayed to the Africans as murderers who were thirsty for their lives, and land, it would compel them to join the war on the side of the Allies. Thus, it became imperative for the local people to enlist for war services in

⁴⁶ Interviews: Simusokwe; and Siame.

⁴⁷ Interviews: Mutembo; and E. Siame, Kasunga village, Mbala District, 02 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Illife, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 246; and interview, Siame.

⁴⁹ Interviews: Mutembo; and Siame.

⁵⁰ Interview, Siame.

⁵¹ NAZ ZA 1/10 Box 63, Bishop's letter to the mission of North Eastern Rhodesia, 24 October 1917; and Interview: Sinyangwe.

Abercorn.⁵² This propaganda convinced Africans to enlist for war in order to prevent the district from being annexed by the voracious German imperialists who wanted to subdue Abercorn district.⁵³ Despite the prevalence of such propaganda, the British always depicted themselves as more powerful than the Germans. To do this, colonial authorities relied on Christian missionaries who had close interactions with local villagers. Wallace, the colony's Administrator instructed the White Fathers at Kayambi mission in Abercorn to 'instil in the natives the superior power of the British in winning the war'.⁵⁴ The local people thus came forth for war duties having been convinced that they were on the winning side of the conflict. Other than the missionaries and the District Commissioner, African elites who had received mission education were also used to communicate such propaganda to headmen and villagers.⁵⁵ These became important functionaries in war time.

To counter British propaganda, the Germans also devised their own scheme which targeted Africans who lived along the border. Jonas Sinyangwe, an African spy engaged by British military authorities stated that, the Germans 'are telling the natives that they are winning the war and they believe it'.⁵⁶ In fact, the British told the indigenous people of Abercorn to be loyal to them so that their land and lives could be protected.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the local people of Abercorn were incorporated into the war for their labour, land, food and knowledge of the local terrain.

Furthermore, the British used the law to compel some Africans into enlisting in the military. As working conditions in the army began to deteriorate in 1916, authorities started having challenges to find men for military service. Potential recruits eluded village headmen and recruiters. Due to this state of affairs, authorities passed the Administration of Native Proclamation in 1916.⁵⁸ Clause seven of the proclamation provided punishment on Africans who disobeyed their chiefs and headmen when called for military work. ⁵⁹ This meant that

⁵² NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197 Telegram of Commandant General to the Administrator, Livingstone, 17 November 1914; Interviews: Sinyangwe; and Siame.

⁵³ Interviews: Sinyangwe; and Siame.

⁵⁴ FENZA I-M-Hi 53, Development of the White Fathers Mission among the Bemba Speaking people, 1891-1964, 26.

⁵⁵ NAZ ZA/7/1/3/9 Box 86, Abercorn sub-District Annual Report, 1 April 1915, 4; and Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 169.

⁵⁶ NAZ A2/3/2 Loc 792/197, Report by Jonas Sinyangwe to Colonel F.A Hodson, 23 October 1915, 2

⁵⁷ NAZ A2/3/1 791/197, report by the Native Commissioner to the District Commissioner Abercorn, 24 November 1914.

⁵⁸ NAZ A2/1/16 BS 353/75, List of Enactments promulgated during the year 1916 in respect of the armed forces of Northern Rhodesia, 1916; J. S. W. Cross, 'The Watch Tower Movement in South Central Africa, 1908-1948', PhD Thesis, University of Oxford, 1973, 192; and J.E. Yorke, 'War, Mobilisation and Colonial Crisis', *The British Journal of Military history*, 2, 2 (2016), 158.

⁵⁹ Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 129.

people who evaded being recruited for military service could be punished by whipping.⁶⁰ Chiefs and village headmen also intensified their recruitment drive for personnel in the district as they benefited in form of different articles given to them by government as presents.⁶¹ Furthermore, village headmen did not want to let down the British authorities in fear of losing the government support when dealing with their recalcitrant subjects.

Additionally, coercion was at times used to draft Africans into the Great War. This started happening from 1916 onwards when the Allied forces began an offensive in German East Africa; yet there were also men who hid in the bush and *mitanda* in fear of being recruited in the military.⁶² To force such men to come forth for enlistment, their wives were arrested by recruiters and subjected to false detention and maltreatment.⁶³ In such situations, men were forced to come out of various hideouts so that their wives could be released. Recruiters were helped in this process by village headmen and messengers who knew the local terrain very well. This state of affairs caused bitter relationships between traditional leaders and their subjects.⁶⁴ In certain chiefdoms such as that of Chinakila, recruiters could force a family to supply human resources for war service.⁶⁵ In such circumstances, the family decided and agreed on the people to be released for war duties depending on their population and health.⁶⁶ If some of the healthy and tax paying age remained, they were to inter-change roles once their kin returned.

African Agency in Enlisting for War Service

Apart from the factors discussed above, some people in Abercorn had their own reasons for enlisting in the military. There were those who enlisted in order to earn money to pay poll tax which was pegged at five shillings per adult throughout the war period.⁶⁷ Others sought to raise money for buying personal necessities and luxuries. These included cattle, and bicycle.⁶⁸

The desire to buy clothing was another incentive which enticed the local people to enlist for war service. By 1915, *calico* was used as a form of payment for labour and bartering of foodstuffs in the district.⁶⁹ Therefore, getting free *calico*, in addition to the contract payment

⁶⁰ NAZ A2/1/16 BS 353/75, List of enactments promulgated during the year 1916 in respect of the armed forces of Northern Rhodesia, 1916.

⁶¹ Interviews: Mutembo; and Siame.

⁶² Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 40.

⁶³ 30 October 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 11; and Nation Museums Board, *The First World War in Northern Rhodesia*.

⁶⁴ Interview, Mutembo.

⁶⁵ Interview: Mutembo.

⁶⁶ 19 December 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 10; Interviews: Mutembo; and Siame.

⁶⁷ NAZ, 2/3/2 Loc 792/197, Annual Report for Abercorn sub-district, 31 March 1915.

⁶⁸ Interviews: Chief Zombe; and Siame.

⁶⁹ NAZ ZA 7/1/3/9 Box 88, Abercorn sub-District Annual Report, 1 April 1916.

as well as a military uniform became very lucrative for the local people to join the army. This lured some of them to enlist for military services.⁷⁰

The British additionally used incentives to entice Africans to come forth for military work when they realised that some of them were evading being recruited. In the early days of the war when the operations of the Germans and *Ruga-ruga* became ruthless on the border, some of the local people abandoned work. Moreover, African servicemen were not being equipped with guns because the British feared that they could be training a future enemy. This discouraged locals from joining the military. For instance, after the Germans killed two local border guards and wounded another in September 1914, most villagers started refusing to get employed as guards in Abercorn.⁷¹ In order to compel them to go for such deployment, inducement was used. Most often, this inducement was in the form of guns, blankets, and money.⁷² Other than material gain, guns attracted the local people to join the military because merely learning how to operate one was an achievement on its own. The commander of operations in Abercorn during the war, Colonel F. A. Hodson, observed that 'the indigenous people were excited to come and use European rifles'.⁷³ This enthusiasm for handling guns by Africans was noticed among those who came to be recruited in the military. Africans found the use of European guns an exciting thing.

Furthermore, an increase in payment was also used as an inducement to entice the indigenous people to get employment in the army. When the numbers of Africans who were coming forth for enlistment in the army started declining in 1915, an increment in wages was used to entice them. For instance, six shillings which was paid to the *askari* for a month in July 1915 was increased to twelve shillings in August 1915.⁷⁴ In addition, there was an introduction of extra payment if one's contract expired while his or her services were still needed. Authorities paid two shillings and six pence for such an extension of contracts.⁷⁵ As such, some young people responded to this pay rise, and it encouraged them to serve in the military till the end of war.⁷⁶ Crowder also observed that Africans who knew exactly the wages for the enlisted voluntarily joined the army without external pressure.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Interview, Siame.

⁷¹ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197, Report by the Native Commissioner to the District Commissioner Abercorn, 24 November 1914.

⁷² NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 971/197, Correspondence from Colonel Hodson to Chief Staff Officer Salisbury, 30 April 1915.

⁷³ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 971/197, Correspondence from Colonel Hodson to Chief Staff Officer Salisbury.

⁷⁴ NAZ A2/3/1 Loc 791/197, Report by Colonel Hodson to Chief Staff Officer Salisbury, 22 July 1915.

⁷⁵ NAZ A2/3/4 Loc 794/198, Telegram from Abercorn district Commissioner to the Secretary of Administration Livingstone, 8 October 1916.

⁷⁶ NAZ KTN 1/1, 64, Abercorn District Notebook vol I, on H; and Interviews: Simusokwe

⁷⁷ Crowder, 'First World War and its Consequences in Africa', 293.

On the other hand, others voluntarily offered their labour services in order to prove that they were man-enough and thus could make their families proud. Like those who went on labour migration before the advent of war, military work brought pride to workers' families. Local men who finished their military contract and went back home with money and other articles like *calico*, became the pride of the family.⁷⁸ These were perceived by their kin and peers to be heroes and 'real men'.⁷⁹ Similarly, those that fought along, and against Europeans without being killed were regarded by society as heroes.⁸⁰ This perception influenced some of the local men in Abercorn to try their masculinity by enlisting for war services. This demonstrates that the local people in Abercorn were also self-driven to enlist in the military during the First World War, and not entirely due to government propaganda or coercion.

The Final Recruitment Phase

During the final enlistment (1914-18), military recruiters gave priority to those who met the standards below to be drafted for various services although in times of difficulties to recruit, some of these requirements were not adhered to.

- i. Able-bodied; tall, huge and muscular in appearance.
- ii. Young men starting from 16 years onwards.
- iii. Physically fit and not the sick.
- iv. Passing eye test; being able to close one eye while keeping the other open at the same time.
- v. Those who had received Christian mission education, and were able to read and write.
- vi. Those who had vocation skills such as carpentry from Christian mission centres.
- vii. Those without eyesight problems.⁸¹

Engagement in the military involved signing a contract between the recruitee and the army for a period of at least six months. By signing such a contract, the recruitee agreed to keeping the terms of the contract signed, receiving food rations, blanket and getting 25 percent of their pay as field allowance upon commencing work, while the remainder of the payment was to be paid at the end.⁸² Details of the next of kin were also given to the recruiting authorities. In the event of death, these were supposed to be notified and in turn received the worker's payment.⁸³

⁷⁸ Interviews: Mutembo; Simusokwe; and Siame.

⁷⁹ Interviews: Chief Zombe; and Donald Kaite, Kasunga village, Mbala District, 2 April 2019.

⁸⁰ Interviews: Mutembo; and Siame.

⁸¹ 2 March 1940, *Cape Times*, 4; Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 46; and Interview: Mutembo.

⁸² NAZ A2/3/2, Loc 792/197, Correspondence of Wallace to the BSACo secretary, London, 13 March 1915.

⁸³ NAZ A2/3/4 Loc 198, Correspondence of Acting District Commissioner of Tanganyika to Colonel Murray on military porters, 18 October 1916.

Due to personal reasons and other mobilisation strategies as discussed above, people of Abercorn enlisted for various works in the military. Those who were enlisted as combatants were locally known as *askari*. This was the plural form for the Swahili term *mskari* to mean a soldier.⁸⁴ African soldiers wore a khaki long sleeved shirt, a khaki pair of shorts and a black Fez hat but without footwear.⁸⁵

Most of the combatants recruited in Abercorn fought in the Northern Rhodesia Rifles which was part of the King's African Rifles in the East Africa campaign.⁸⁶ The *askari* recruited in the district were trained at Abercorn garrison.

During the Great War, the *askari* were also referred to as foot soldiers because they engaged in ground combat (infantry). Throughout the war period, Africans worked bare-foot because European commanders believed military boots were unsuitable for Africans as they had previously not worn any footwear.⁸⁷ They believed that military boots could slow down or burden African fighters.⁸⁸

A few of those Africans who had received formal education worked in auxiliary positions. Some were trained how to operate a gun, but were designated as clerks at the depot or as *capitao*s to supervise porters.⁸⁹ Those with vocational skills such as carpentry were also trained on how to operate a gun but were mostly assigned to works related to their vocations. For instance, carpenters and bricklayers made camping tools and constructed forts, respectively.⁹⁰

Those who did not fall into any of the above categories of skills, were recruited into portage. These were popularly called as *Tenga-tenga*, a corruption of the Chewa *Mtenga-tenga* (porters). Among the Mambwe people of Abercorn, porters were known as *bamusenda mpamba*.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the two local terms implied carrying loads of different nature for the military.⁹² In their duties as porters, Africans carried war cargo either on their heads, or back up to the final destination, while some used their own initiative to make wooden stretchers.⁹³ Those recruited as first line carriers were engaged for a period of six months just like the

⁸⁴Interview: Mutembo.

⁸⁵ Nation Museums Board, *The First World War in Northern Rhodesia; and 12 November 2018, Zambia Daily Mail*, 6

⁸⁶ NAZ A2/3/4 loc 794/198, Correspondence of the Administrator to the Secretary of BSA Co, London, 15 March 1915.

⁸⁷15 October 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 11.

⁸⁸ The National Museums Board, *The First World War in Northern Rhodesia*.

⁸⁹ Interviews: Mutembo; and Simusokwe.

⁹⁰ Interviews: Mutembo; and Simusokwe.

⁹¹ Interview, Simusokwe.

⁹²15 October 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 11; and Interview, Simusokwe.

⁹³15 October 2018, *Zambia Daily Mail*, 11.

askari.⁹⁴ Africans also worked as ‘ambulance’ carriers or cooks in the army. Upon being discharged from work, a certificate of release was issued by the responsible military officer.

By the time the hostilities came to an end, almost every healthy person in Abercorn had contributed to the Allied war effort in at least one way or the other at the battle or home front. E. Yorke observed that a significant number of the Mambwe, the Lungu, and the Iwa people of Abercorn provided regular, and sustained employment during the war time.⁹⁵ Since labour from far off districts in Northern Rhodesia took a lot of time to reach Abercorn due to long distance, authorities relied much on the locally available people of the district. Moreover, colonial authorities later discovered that it was more expensive to move people from elsewhere than employing the indigenous people in Abercorn due to feeding costs and medication which they incurred en route to the war front.⁹⁶

Opposition by Africans towards the War Effort

In Abercorn, the most potent group that posed resistance to war enlistment from 1917 onwards, was the Watch Tower Movement (Society). The society was founded by Pastor C. T. Russell in New York, United States of America.⁹⁷ Among its aims, was to emancipate Africans from the oppression of secular government.⁹⁸ It established branches in Nyasaland at the beginning of the 20th century.⁹⁹ Through labour migration, the society spread to Southern Rhodesia. It was in Southern Rhodesia where the local people of Abercorn who went as labour migrants came into contact with the preachers of Watch Tower Movement and became influenced by its ideology.¹⁰⁰ Among the earliest adherents of this movement in Abercorn in 1917 was Hanoc Simpungwe Sindano.¹⁰¹ After his expulsion from Southern Rhodesia in early October 1917, the ardent convert went home to Tanganyika province of Northern Rhodesia. However, before reaching the province, he established branches in Serenje and Mkushi districts. Later Sindano went to Abercorn. And by October 1917, he had established this millennial society in the district where he preached against all civil authorities in his local language.¹⁰² The society soon had youth followers who were the target age group of the

⁹⁴ NAZ A2/3/4 Loc 794/198, Telegram from Abercorn district Commissioner to the Secretary of Administration Livingstone, 8 October 1916.

⁹⁵ Yorke, *Britain, Northern Rhodesia and the First World War*, 53.

⁹⁶ NAZ A2/3/4 Loc 794/198, Report by Administrator Wallace to the secretary of B S A Co London, 17 April 1917.

⁹⁷ NAZ ZA 1/10 vol II, Watch Tower Movement, 19 February 1920.

⁹⁸ FENZA I-M-Hi 51, The Diocese of Mbala Visitors’ Notes 1892-1984, 156.

⁹⁹ J.R. Hooker, ‘Witnesses and Watchtower in Rhodesia and Nyasaland’, *Journal of African History*, 1 (1965), 91.

¹⁰⁰ NAZ ZA 1/10 Vol. I, Watch Tower Movement in Tanganyika District, (no date).

¹⁰¹ NAZ ZA 1/10 vol I, Watch Tower Movement in Tanganyika District.

¹⁰² FENZA I-H-Hi 138; and T. Hodges, *Jehovah’s Witness in Africa: the Minority Rights Group*, (London: Watch Tower Bible and Track Society, 1985), 5.

colonial administration for military duties in the campaign against General Voerberk. The Watch Tower Society spread fast in Abercorn because it quickly promoted people to high positions within its structure and offered free quality literature lessons to its members.¹⁰³

Sindano proclaimed that the attacks by the Germans, and other ills that were associated with the war, were signs of the end of the world. In their insolence towards civil authority in the district, Watch Tower members preached that:

The end of the world and the present government is quite near, therefore, no need to obey chiefs, headmen or government representatives. No need to cultivate or give attention to livestock. Be baptised and ready for the new government; Chiefs and non-converts are devils connected with Satan.¹⁰⁴

Such teachings were regarded as seditious by the missionaries and the colonial administration. The Watch Tower sect preached that the Great War was initiated by God against the British who connived with the local chiefs to oppress the villagers in the district.¹⁰⁵ They further added that the colonial administration, local chiefs, and missionaries, were all agents of Satan whose downfall was to come at the end of the war. They preached that *ba shamfumu batufyengafye* translated as ‘the chiefs were being unfair as they have cheated us by joining in this war’.¹⁰⁶ This sort of preaching made some of the ardent members of the society to resist and refuse to be drafted into the war.

Furthermore, most of the indigenous people in Abercorn had begun to refuse to work for Europeans by the end of 1917. This was more serious with regard to military works.¹⁰⁷ They further refused anything to do with Europeans and their technology.¹⁰⁸ This jeopardised the mustering of Africans for the war effort, and brought the district at the verge of rebellion. In addition, the Watch Tower intensified their activities because of the chaos and upheaval brought by the war as people complained of diseases, starvation and death in the district.¹⁰⁹ These complaints provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of the society’s ideology on the aggrieved locals. Thus, S. Cross aptly observed that the millennial’s ideology was universally acclaimed among the Mambwe people of Abercorn.¹¹⁰ For this reason, the Watch Tower

¹⁰³ FENZA I-M-Hi 51, The Diocese of Mbala Visitors’ Notes 1892-1984, 156; and Hodges, *Jehovah’s Witness in Africa*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ NAZ ZA 1/10 vol I Report on Watch Tower Movement in northern Rhodesia by visiting commissioner, 19 January 1919.

¹⁰⁵ FENZA I-M-Hi50, 57, Historical notes on the Watch Tower.

¹⁰⁶ FENZA I-M-Hi50, 58, Historical notes on the Watch Tower.

¹⁰⁷ Cross, ‘The Watch Tower Movement’, 197.

¹⁰⁸ Cross, ‘The Watch Tower Movement’, 206.

¹⁰⁹ Cross, ‘The Watch Tower Movement’, 206.

¹¹⁰ Cross, ‘The Watch Tower Movement’, 198.

Society was labelled by colonial authorities as a political movement which hid in religion. Therefore, the society was banned in 1920 and its leaders imprisoned. Despite this measure by the colonial authorities, the Watch Tower Society did not completely die out in Abercorn as it continued to operate underground. This shows that although traditional chiefs and the majority of their subjects had welcomed the war news, others did not.

Conclusion

This work has established that Africans in Abercorn did not join the First World War purely due to government propaganda or force, but that themselves became agents of recruitment. Some of them were influenced by push and pull factors such as the desire to seek employment and earn income, prestige of learning how to operate a gun, wearing military uniform and to prove their masculinity. This demonstrates that Africans had their own perspectives for enlisting for war service. Thus, this argument dispels the public view which holds that Africans were coerced to join the fighting during the First World War. On the other hand, the work has demonstrated that not all Africans buttressed enlistment for war services in the district. Particularly, the Watch Tower Society opposed Africans' involvement in the conflict. The incorporation of Abercorn in the Great War made the local economy to be severely pressed, and accounted for the innumerable deaths in the district. This helped the local people to be politically radicalised. Lastly, the engagement of Africans in the fighting opened up room for some indigenous people to get educated and be enlightened. After the hostilities, members of the Watch Tower and the educated Africans became the first potent political force to have manifested a spirit of nationalistic struggle in the Northern Rhodesian district of Abercorn.

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