

*'We don't want to die for nothing': askari at war
in German East Africa, 1914–1918*

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The First World War initially came to East Africa as a rumour. Mzee Ali, a senior *askari*,¹ recalled how he first heard in late 1914 of the 'great and terrible war' that would soon engulf German East Africa:

From the talk around the campfires we knew this was to be no ordinary war. The sheer scale of it set it apart from any war we had known or been involved in . . . We knew from the gravity of the discussions that this war would come to our land and that only then would we fully comprehend its nature.²

German officers of the Schutztruppe commenced an 'intense' military training programme to whip the veteran soldiers back into shape after years of garrison life, and to train a new generation of recruits.³ A seasoned veteran of East African warfare, Ali nevertheless felt great anxiety about this war's potential 'scale and horror' which 'had magnified out of all proportion in [the *askaris*'] minds'. Waiting to go into battle against Allied forces in East Africa in April 1915 and struggling to overcome his fear that he would mishandle his weapon in battle, he experienced agitation and sleeplessness. Finally, he pulled himself together: 'Breathing deeply to control my nervousness, I determined to put my faith and indeed my life in my training and in our officers.'⁴ Relying on his officers and comrades renewed his resolve, and he found that he could sleep again, even while waiting for battle to commence.⁵

The tough training Ali underwent, first as a young slave-raider under his father's tutelage and later as an *askari* under German leadership, helped produce Ali's masculinity. Ali's father taught him the virtues of a successful caravan leader, namely the ability to project calmness, decisiveness and practical mastery of the basic skills of caravan life. When the Schutztruppe arrived in his homeland, Ali recalled German officers' 'harshness' and arrogance in asserting themselves as the new rulers, but he was also impressed with their intensity, technological mastery and discipline.⁶ Ali experienced fear

many times during his service as an *askari*, but his years of experience in subordinating fear to faith in professional training, emotional toughness, and comradeship gave him the wherewithal to keep fighting.

Ali was one among the 14,000 *askari* recruited and conscripted by the German colonial administration for its East African campaign. But what were Ali and his fellow *askari* willing to fight and die for? Academic and popular authors have explained the *askari* willingness to fight in the East African campaign in terms of an organic ‘loyalty’ to their German officers, and especially to the Schutztruppe commander, General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck.⁷ *Askari* ‘loyalty’, detached from any sense of their particular histories, has sufficed to explain how they fought to the end of the bitter campaign. But as an explanation for the range of behaviours they exhibited in the First World War, ‘loyalty’ falls short. Each individual soldier’s ‘loyalty’ depended on his ability to manage the difficulties of life at war, and it was not an inherent characteristic of the men who fought. It was a choice undertaken by some, but abandoned by many others under the stresses of war.⁸ Past historical treatments of the war, in their uncritical repetition of German discourses on the loyal *askari*, have tended to obscure more substantive analysis of *askari* motivations to continue fighting, especially after the tide turned decisively against the Germans in East Africa in 1916.

Getting beyond the ‘loyal *askari*’ discourse requires temporarily directing our attention away from 1,200 *askari* who witnessed General Lettow-Vorbeck’s surrender to the Allies at Abercorn, Northern Rhodesia, in November 1918.⁹ What happened to the other estimated 11,000–12,000 soldiers not present at Abercorn? How do we explain the nearly 3,000 *askari* officially reported as ‘deserters’? Or the 4,500 ‘missing’ and 4,200 ‘captured’?¹⁰ How did the relatively small number of soldiers at the surrender survive the war? Given the tremendous hardships of the campaign, and the very real potential of not surviving it, why did they stay with the force? What made it possible for them to continue fighting without compensation or even basic provisions? Between desertion at one end of the spectrum and remaining with the Schutztruppe until the surrender at the other, *askari* evaluated how best to survive the war, in part according to how they understood the East African campaign as a test of their officer-patrons’ mettle as ‘hard’ men, leaders, patrons and professionals.

This essay examines the complex, shifting world of the *askari* at war in East Africa and recovers the particular economic, social and temporal contexts in which their war service in the Schutztruppe created meaning for them. It argues that the *askari* were willing to risk their lives in the First World War not out of some abstract loyalty to Germany, but because they

understood themselves as professional soldiers and respectable men. It is true that the rank-and-file soldiers' respect for their officers was directly tied to individual officers' abilities to lead effectively and to show concern for their troops. But *askaris'* decisions about whether or not to stay with the Schutztruppe through to the end of the East African campaign stemmed from a range of factors and tough choices, including their desires to preserve their pre-war social status and identities. Closer examination reveals that their willingness to risk death in combat was not automatic, unlimited or uniform. It had little to do with nationalism or patriotism, but everything to do with their expectations of what the benefits of continued Schutztruppe membership would bring, including certain levels of care and compensation from the German officers. As one group of hungry, tired and angry *askari* put it to their commander before deserting the column he led in 1917, 'We don't want to die for nothing.'¹¹ But they *were* willing to fight for German officers who could, to their minds, realistically guarantee their status as men of means in the post-war period. On the other hand, *askari* were unwilling to fight for officers who they assessed as incapable of acting as strong patrons; moreover, conscripts, who began to comprise larger numbers of the Schutztruppe in late 1916, had little investment in the organisation.

Using German and British archival materials and published memoirs, this essay considers the everyday reality and the specific advantages or attractions for both the *askari* who decided to stay in the Schutztruppe and those who decided to desert (particularly the conscripts). The first two sections examine the various economic and social factors underpinning *askari* 'loyalty' – they included the degree to which *askari* felt that their officers met their responsibilities as patrons, the presence of household members, and the length of their service – while the final section investigates the equally complex reasons informing the decision of many to desert.

'SAFARI YA BWANA LETTOW': THE STRESSES OF WAR

The Allies and the Germans engaged over 100,000 colonial troops and thousands of porters and auxiliaries drawn from all over the continent and elsewhere to fight the East African campaign.¹² Lettow-Vorbeck's strategy from the outset of the war in Europe was to tie up as many Allied forces as possible in East Africa so that they could not fight in Europe. In 1914 and 1915, the Schutztruppe scored some significant victories against the British force, which tried to invade from British East Africa and from the Tanganyikan coastline.¹³ The German East African economy functioned through 1915 at a sufficient level to sustain operations, fostering high morale

among troops. Things began to go sour, however, when the Allies captured the German colonial capital of Dar es Salaam on 3 September 1916, and the new temporary capital at Tabora on 19 September 1916. Lettow-Vorbeck responded to these Allied successes by sending the majority of his forces south of the Rufiji River to prepare for a retreat into Portuguese East Africa. The Allies pursued and repeatedly tried to encircle the Schutztruppe, but failed to stop its momentum. Schutztruppe columns crossed into Portuguese East Africa in November 1917, and the Allied forces pursued. In summer 1918, the Schutztruppe crossed back into the former German East Africa, and in late October it turned back southwestward and crossed into Northern Rhodesia. The force finally surrendered there on 25 November 1918 after belatedly receiving notification of the German defeat in Europe.¹⁴

Once Lettow-Vorbeck shifted the campaign to the southern half of German East Africa in late 1916, conditions worsened considerably for all of the armies involved. When the First World War began in 1914, the region was still slowly recovering from the devastation wrought by the scorched earth tactics the Schutztruppe had used during the Maji Maji war of 1905–7.¹⁵ Their actions during Maji Maji created famine conditions that resulted in abnormally low birth rates, labour shortages, and reduced crop yields in the region for several years afterwards. In 1913, regional drought exacerbated conditions of scarcity in an area ill-equipped to overcome them. Lettow-Vorbeck's decision to move his forces south of the Rufiji River in late 1916 meant that the region's inhabitants had to suffer through both the German and the Allied armies marching through their lands and requisitioning their food stores, livestock and anything else they wanted. Scarcity was the key issue that everybody in the southern reaches of German East Africa had to confront between late 1916 and November 1918.

African soldiers in the Schutztruppe referred to the latter half of the East African campaign as 'Safari ya bwana Lettow' or 'Mr Lettow's expedition'. German *askari* used this Kiswahili phrase to refer to 'the caravans, Lettow-Vorbeck's columns, which in the year 1918 cut through the wide steppes and forests of Africa in endless forced marches'.¹⁶ The force that surrendered to the British in November 1918 was the remnant of an army which in different phases of the war had drawn on both conscription and voluntary enlistment. Approximately 1,200 *askari* surrendered at Abercorn on 25 November 1918. At their maximum strength in March 1916, Lettow-Vorbeck's army had numbered some 12,000 *askari*, supplemented by 2,000–3,000 irregulars.¹⁷ Between late 1916 and November 1918, the combined effects of battlefield deaths, accidents, illness, capture by Allied forces and desertions dramatically reduced the Schutztruppe's numbers.

After 1916, the Schutztruppe had difficulties resupplying and compensating its troops, auxiliaries, and porters. The Allied blockade of the East African coast made resupply from the sea impossible. Nor could the Germans pay their soldiers' salaries, since their minting capabilities disappeared with the Allied seizure of Dar es Salaam and Tabora. *Askari* who had not been captured, killed or otherwise incapacitated by late 1916 experienced conditions of privation that made many of them consider the relative value of staying with or leaving the force amidst the stresses of a highly mobile campaign fought in a demanding environment. The *askari* and other members of the columns experienced prolonged periods of undernourishment, thirst and physical exhaustion. Such conditions increased their vulnerability to a wide range of diseases.¹⁸ *Askari* who withstood the basic physical demands of the campaign still had to contend, of course, with the ever-present danger of confrontation with the Allies, whose troops had better supplies and equipment than the Schutztruppe.

These hardships produced a psychology of privation among Schutztruppe column members that caused the 'requisitioning' process, long a part of Schutztruppe expeditionary practice and East African warfare more generally, to be even more extortionate than usual. *Askari* and auxiliaries seized grain stores, produce, and livestock from any communities unfortunate enough to lie in the columns' paths.¹⁹ Marine-Ingenieur Bockmann, a Schutztruppe company commander whose unit operated behind the Allied lines in the northern part of German East Africa in late 1917, described one instance in which he ordered his troops to 'requisition' thirty head of cattle from a Maasai community enclosure, or *kraal*, leaving the owners a receipt and instructing them to 'bring the receipt to Arusha at the war's end'. Bockmann noted that '[u]nder all circumstances, I wanted to initiate a friendly relationship to the Maasai through gifts and good treatment'.²⁰ Notwithstanding Bockmann's stated good intentions, the Schutztruppe typically commandeered their provisions 'without any compensation to the owners', and their reputation for this sort of requisitioning preceded them wherever they went.²¹

Despite the ruthless requisitioning process *askari* undertook to feed themselves and their columns, they often could not find enough provisions to maintain minimal nutritional requirements. Officers feared that these shortfalls would lead to 'catastrophe', such as mass starvation or mutiny.²² Bockmann described the disastrous toll that successive forced marches had taken on his column: 'The provisioning question was an exceptionally critical one. Consequently, a large part of the whites and coloureds were already so undernourished, that they could perform their duties only inadequately.'²³ This state of affairs forced Bockmann's superior to break the

force into three smaller columns to be manoeuvred separately, and thus procure supplies more effectively than if they continued moving *en bloc*. After weeks of marching through the Maasai Steppe with its scarce food and water resources, Bockmann's unit was 'at the end of [its] strength'. He reported, 'Europeans, *askaris* and porters had thinned to skeletons, because they had not enjoyed any cereals in a long time.'²⁴ At other times, when meat and produce were scarce, cereals might be the only thing soldiers had to eat.

After crossing the Rovuma River into Portuguese East Africa, the Schutztruppe moved purposefully from fortress to fortress in search of supplies abandoned by the Portuguese forces fleeing the German advance.²⁵ In Portuguese East Africa, these fortresses, or *bomas*, were 'sited at distances of four to ten days' march from each other' and were connected by a series of narrow well-worn pathways.²⁶ The Portuguese force did little to defend the *bomas* – a state of affairs that Portugal's British allies found most irritating. General Northey wrote in his War Diary for January 1918:

In front of NGOMANO, VON LETTOW's troops were nearly out of food and ammunition: but since then they have got everything they want from the Portuguese: more arms, ammunition and machine-guns than they can use or carry: supplies, European and native, including medicines and quinine, which they badly needed, galore: and half-caste women to delight the Askari's heart.²⁷

Although the press had reported that the *askari* were 'starving remnants who [would] be quickly rounded up', Northey felt that actually they were 'the fittest and best of the enemy troops, who have had both the will and the health to stick to their brave commander in spite of all hardships'.²⁸ Both German and British reports noted the ease with which the Portuguese troops gave up their *bomas* – a happy circumstance for the German *askari*, who of course benefited from the food, drink and other amenities they found at the abandoned Portuguese *bomas*.²⁹ For many soldiers, crossing into Portuguese territory held out the promise of plentiful food and wine stores, rest, and a new group of women to 'commandeer' for sex, camp work such as cooking and laundry, and, in some cases, either voluntary or involuntary incorporation into an *askari* household. Such abundant spoils of war convinced some *askari* to stay with the Schutztruppe, since taking their chances alone might lead them into worse circumstances.

Individual *askari* had far better chances of survival if they stayed with the columns. The core members of the columns were battle-tested and surprisingly well-armed soldiers with sound weaponry and requisitioning skills. Large numbers of porters in the columns meant that seizures from civilians could be transported and consumed over time rather than all at once. The

Schutztruppe also resupplied itself by taking stores from Allied units they forced to flee from their *bomas*, or defeated in skirmishes. But seizing goods through potentially deadly confrontation with dug-in Allied soldiers required concentrated force and coordination. Thus an individual *askari*'s chances of securing provisions that would last more than a day or two were directly tied to the logistical and military support the columns provided. Given the environment of scarcity, plus the animosity many people from the southern regions felt towards the Schutztruppe because of their actions during Maji Maji, and the dangers of striking out alone, many *askari* figured that staying with the columns maximised their chances for survival.

Veteran *askari* had far more experience in weathering such rough living than junior troops recruited or conscripted during the war. They had few reservations about taking what they needed as they moved from *boma* to *boma*, and younger soldiers quickly learned the value of seizing goods when opportunities arose to do so. Nonetheless, the constant state of uncertainty about when and where they would have their next meal or fresh water, coupled with the lack of basic equipment and supplies, only added to the anxieties and pressures of soldiering in East Africa.

RESPECTABILITY ON THE MARCH: MOBILE COMMUNITIES AT WAR

Many *askari* ameliorated the stresses of warfare by relying on household members, including wives, children, domestic servants and other dependants, to create mobile domesticity while on the march. *Askari* whose household members accompanied them were less likely to desert than unaccompanied troops, such as conscripts or younger recruits. Desertion cut them off from the relative safety of the columns, as well as the small comforts of domestic life these mobile communities recreated.³⁰ Moreover, those *askari* who deserted abrogated their responsibilities as heads of households, causing dire consequences for their dependants. Respectability was paramount for the *askari*, so moving without their families made little sense to them.³¹

Dependants of *askari* consistently asserted their place in the Schutztruppe way of war, creating difficulties for the officers who had to meet the columns' logistical requirements while avoiding exacerbation of already challenging provisioning problems. A reporter for the *Bulawayo Chronicle* gave a detailed description of Lettow-Vorbeck's surrender at Abercorn:

It was a most impressive spectacle. The long motley column, Europeans and Askari, all veterans of a hundred fights, the latter clothed with every kind of headgear,

women who had stuck to their husbands through all of these years of hardships, carrying huge loads, some with children born during the campaign, carriers coming in singing in undisguised joy at the thought that their labours were ended at last. All combined to make a sight that was unique.³²

This 'shabby cavalcade' numbered 4,500 people, including porters, women and children. Only 1,200 to 1,300 of these were *askari*.³³ Many British observers found the presence of women and children at the surrender remarkable. Sir Hugh Clifford, who commanded the Gold Coast Regiment in East Africa beginning in 1916, characterised them unfavourably as 'a commando of women under military escort, [which] was marched about the country' to serve the needs of both the *askari* and the Germans.³⁴

Yet for the *askari* and their German officers and NCOs, such scenes confirmed the key role families played in the *askaris'* continued willingness to fight. Alongside the porters who moved the army's materiel, women, children, and other dependants served as the logistical backbone of the Schutztruppe,³⁵ carrying the *askaris'* personal equipment and supplies, gathering food, water and firewood, cooking, doing laundry and tending to the sick and wounded. *Askari* households also included '*askari*boys', who worked for the *askari* as servants. Some of them had volunteered to work for *askari*, but some had been 'forcibly carried off' in manpower levies or as spoils of war. Some of the *boys* learned the soldiering profession while on the march with their '*babas*', but their primary role was to work for the *askari* as gunboys and all-purpose servants.³⁶ The culture of privation the war generated meant there was no shortage of young men 'volunteering' to be *askari*boys, who were easily replaced if they fell ill or died.³⁷

Members of *askari* households tied the *askari* to their cultural homelands and provided them with emotional and material support. They also signified an *askari's* social standing, since the bigger his household, the more status he exhibited. During the First World War, as in previous German colonial wars, *askari* household members became part of mobile communities at war, doing all necessary work once the columns stopped marching for the day. In this sense, they were indispensable to the Schutztruppe effort and to the *askaris'* combat effectiveness. They also helped the *askari* recreate some elements of garrison life while on the march.³⁸

The presence of so many non-combatant column members benefited the *askari* but also necessitated a long 'train' of porters to transport provisions for the whole mobile community. In the autumn of 1917, in preparation for crossing into Portuguese East Africa, Lettow-Vorbeck decided to cut the force down 'to a tough fighting column of a maximum 2,000 rifles of which the European officers and men would not number more than 200'. He

planned to leave behind several hundred Europeans and 600 *askari* just north of the border with Portuguese East Africa, to be 'picked up by the British'.³⁹ Lettow-Vorbeck planned to leave behind the women of the column as part of this group, but soon discovered that the women disagreed with his plan:

'This was awkward, but there was little I found I could do about it,' Lettow-Vorbeck said. 'In the conditions which we were facing, it was impossible to deny the troops the comforts to which they had accustomed themselves, and there is no doubt that they would sorely have missed their women, for more than obvious reasons. The women carried the loads. They also carried the children. It had not been unusual in the previous months for an *askari* to break off for a moment in the firing line to go to his *bibi* [Kiswahili: wife, woman] not more than a hundred yards behind to see how she was progressing in her delivery of their latest offspring [...] Most of the women insisted on accompanying their men-folk. When a woman did fall behind in a march, the *askari* would take up his child and march on with it on his shoulders.'⁴⁰

Lettow-Vorbeck's observation highlights the degree to which fighting, family, and community were intertwined in this campaign.

Front and rear, front and home, soldier and civilian, family and camp follower were categories that overlapped and merged with each other in ways that reinforced *askari* visions of themselves as professionals. Their way of war was a non-negotiable part of their identity, and it caused their officers endless frustration. For example, on at least one occasion around January 1917, women accompanying Lettow-Vorbeck's force in the Rufiji region consumed their rations too quickly, and refused to go any further. Some even '[went] so far as to attack and beat the European who was in charge of the transport'.⁴¹ To solve the problem, *askari* hunters were sent out to shoot game. *Askari* households were patrilineal, so women were expected to follow their husbands wherever they went. Many women living under colonialism found ways to negotiate these patriarchal structures to achieve relative economic independence for themselves, but the wartime context limited their options.⁴² To maintain respectability as householders, *askari* could not afford to ignore women's complaints. Both *askari* and the Schutztruppe leadership recognised, in different ways, that failure to respond adequately to the women's demands might spell disaster for column order.

Askaris' tendencies to acquire more dependants while on the march meant that their household affairs featured prominently in the day-to-day management of the columns. At their camp in Nanungu in the north of Portuguese East Africa in autumn 1917, column commander Richard Wenig found himself embroiled in managing *askari* relationships not only with the women who had trekked with them from German East Africa, but

also with a new population of local women. He referred to this period humorously as being ‘under the sign of the women’. Knowing he could not control ‘what happened in two hundred huts concealed by the night’s darkness’, he nonetheless insisted that ‘marriage must be impeded because an expansion of the ladies’ colony [*Damenkolonie*] with the expected arduous marches would be a great evil’.⁴³ Wenig’s priorities as a Schutztruppe officer and his racist-paternalist world-view led him to try to limit column members’ liaisons with local women. He, like many other Europeans, thought of his soldiers as overgrown children, in need of strong guidance. But his story about the events at Nanangu also suggests that *askari* and other column members built and rebuilt their households, asserted or reasserted their masculinity, and found comfort in domestic and sexual connections, however temporarily.

Schutztruppe conscription practices, initiated in late 1916 as German fortunes in the war deteriorated, also helped *askari* reassert their status in the Schutztruppe hierarchy. As troop numbers dwindled in late 1916, *askari* began rounding up ‘all men and boys over the age of sixteen’ from the villages they encountered while on the march. These young men were then ‘immediately pressed into service as porters or *askaris*’.⁴⁴ Senior *askari* had no pity for the new conscripts, and instead ruthlessly upheld the military and social hierarchy of the Schutztruppe organisation. Senior *askari* positioned themselves as the new recruits’ ‘*babas*’, disciplining them militarily but also in the same ways they disciplined their *askariboys*. In fact, senior *askari* probably saw little difference between those they conscripted and their gunboys, since they would all end up performing similar functions as the force shrank. Nonetheless, senior *askari* worked to reproduce the Schutztruppe social order by reinforcing obedience and deference to those of higher rank, even as the socio-economic order of German East Africa shifted around them. Senior *askari* opted to stay with the Schutztruppe because only active membership in the organisation allowed them to perform their version of respectability.

The case of the conscripts was different. The hierarchy of ranks helped the Schutztruppe function effectively under stress, but also made it a difficult place for conscripts. Their immediate status as clients, if not slaves, to the senior *askari* discouraged psychological investment in the new order of things. Conscripts had little stake in respecting senior *askari* because their own identities did not necessarily coincide with those of their new superiors, the senior *askari*. Before the war and in the first half of the campaign, recruits had joined the Schutztruppe voluntarily. By late 1916, membership in the Schutztruppe no longer appealed to young men for whom membership in the

colonial army had little concrete meaning, apart from hardship. The superficial training conscripts received during the war did not socialise them as intensely as volunteer *askari* had been socialised in peacetime. First World War conscripts experienced the harshness of Schutztruppe life on the march without the benefits of having volunteered for service. Many desertions likely came from this population of *askari*, who had a minimal stake in the organisation. The Schutztruppe organisation bound veteran *askari* horizontally and vertically, through their long-term comrades and officers. But the conscripts likely felt no sense of being at 'home' with the Schutztruppe and so felt less compulsion to stay with the force than the old veteran *askari* who treated their conscripts quite badly.

DESERTION: A RESPONSE TO BROKEN CONTRACTS

Nearly 3,000 *askari* (of about 12,000) deserted the Schutztruppe during the war.⁴⁵ Thus at least twice as many *askari* deserted as stayed to surrender at Abercorn. Yet historiography on the First World War in East Africa has inadequately addressed the reasons for such large numbers of desertions. Schutztruppe officers – labouring under the illusions of their own loyalties to the Kaiser – remarked on their soldiers' desertions with surprise, even as they noted an obvious correlation between desertion rates and the often dire provisioning problems the army experienced. Especially after the Allies began achieving measured gains against the German force in late 1916, provisioning for the German force became increasingly difficult.⁴⁶ Even Lettow-Vorbeck admitted in his diary that 'there came a time that all hope was given up and Askaris and Europeans were glad to be captured'.⁴⁷ Karl Vieweg, a platoon leader operating in the Rufiji River region in mid-October 1916, reported that eleven of his forty-three *askari* had deserted, and he remarked that similar statistics applied to the other companies as well. According to Vieweg, Europeans and 'coloureds' (including *askari*, porters and 'boys') received meat only twice a week, and were given 500 grams of flour at the same time as the meat distribution. If there was no meat to be distributed, they were supposed to receive 750 grams of flour, although according to him, 'these rations [were] hardly [ever] at full weight'. These rations were well below the widely accepted colonial standard of one kilogram of starch per day for slaves, day labourers and soldiers.⁴⁸ Grinding conditions of scarcity in the last two years of fighting in East Africa severely threatened the Schutztruppe's ability to wage war effectively, or even to subsist, at the most basic levels.

These conditions also undermined the *askaris'* householder and professional sensibilities. They fought under very harsh conditions with little

foreseeable prospect of recompense or relief, and unsurprisingly they abandoned the Schutztruppe at various points in the campaign. What is perhaps more surprising is that 1,200 *askari* remained till the surrender in November 1918. The *askari* who continued to fight for the Schutztruppe had received no pay since at least 1916. After 1916, Germany issued its colonial soldiers with credit vouchers to be redeemed at some future date. German officials also issued *askari* ‘bush money’ – worthless scraps of paper imprinted with self-made rubber stamps.⁴⁹ The *askari* were fully aware that this money was worthless in any commercial sense. One German officer reported that *askari* registered their anger at the Germans’ inability to pay their salaries by throwing their pay books at the feet of a German NCO.⁵⁰ *Askari* deserted their units in response to their perceptions, usually accurate, that their needs were not being met, and thus that their core identities as respectable men were at stake. Weapons shortages, ragged uniforms, and lack of basic equipment also undermined their professional identities, since they were reliant on abandoned Allied supplies for their ability to continue fighting.⁵¹

Askari deserters risked punishment, capture and injury or death from exposure in the hopes that they would improve their circumstances by leaving the Schutztruppe behind. Rumours circulated among British officials that ‘Von Lettow told Askaris that German East Africa would certainly be given back to Germany at [the] end of [the] war and that every deserter would then be hanged’. The telegram further noted that Lettow’s alleged statement ‘had great effect’, and lamented that, ‘We have been greatly handicapped in German East Africa by the fact that we cannot promise protection [to the *askari*] after the war.’⁵² Certainly in the three decades of German colonial rule, in which public floggings and hangings occurred frequently as part of the punitive regime, *askari* likely took such rumours to heart.

Askari mobilised various survival strategies in the face of the contingent, changeable, and stressful environment. ‘Survival’ included overcoming the dangers of battle, starvation, thirst, or capture, and also continually positioning oneself to maintain status and privilege in the face of changing circumstances. By deserting the force, some *askari* expressed their discontent and disappointment with their German officers who, after 1916, appeared to have become weak. Especially in columns manoeuvring behind Allied lines, German officers had become incapable of providing their troops with even the most basic support required of them in their capacities as patrons. In September 1917, Marine-Ingenieur Bockmann, whose unit operated behind Allied lines in the northern part of German East Africa, had an exchange with some of his *askari* that laid bare their grievances in relation to the various privations they were experiencing in the wartime context.⁵³ Having sent

most of his available porters to pick up provisions that he had left at another location, he ordered his *askari* to help with the daily incremental movement of the materials needed for the camp:

And so it happened that the *askari* did not get the rest that I had promised them after all. They began to grumble and every day there were disciplinary problems. Most notably, the [senior] ranks, from whom I would have least expected it, stirred things up. Now followed inane phrases like: 'We don't want to die for nothing [*burre*, i.e. Kiswahili *bure* = free, for nothing, in vain]. The Europeans are terribly afraid of being taken prisoner by the English because they will be put in chains and made to carry rocks. The Germans have no more strength [*guvu*, i.e. Kiswahili *nguvu* = hardness, strength], the English are now the rulers of the land. The German paper money is good for nothing, they may as well have worked for nothing. [In the King's African Rifles, or KAR] [t]he German *askari* would be promoted one service rank, and would only have to perform duty at the *boma* [i.e., garrison duty].⁷ My sol⁵⁴ Majaliwa, an old soldier [who had served with Schutztruppe founder] Wißmann, mentioned the matter to me and I gave the people a genuinely well-meaning speech. The outcome was that the following night four *askari*, among them both of my battle orderlies and a captured English *askari*, deserted with weapons.⁵⁵

Schutztruppe officers usually avoided having their *askari* act as porters, since the *askari* found such work insulting. Although *askari* and porters worked and lived together while on the march, the *askari*'s responsibilities for guarding against porter desertions and/or pilferage from the loads they carried ensured that their relationship was a tense one. This particular feature of caravan culture formed the specific context for the *askaris*' expression of discontent to Bockmann. They described the Germans in terms of diminished masculinity, a lack of *nguvu* that the British, on the other hand, seemed unequivocally to possess. In German *askari* eyes, the KAR had more men, better uniforms, abundant supplies, and it held out the possibility of enabling its soldiers to live respectable lives after the war. Whether true or not, this assessment gave some *askari* hope that changing sides would create new possibilities for them. Desertion gave the *askari* a chance to connect or reconnect themselves to other communities that could provide for their immediate needs, and potentially also to align themselves with the ascendant power broker in the region. Bockmann's 'well-meaning speech' was not enough to restore the deserter *askaris*' faith in his *nguvu*.

Weighing the diminishing benefits of staying with the force against the privations they were suffering, *askari* did not simply forget that they were professional soldiers. Indeed, it was precisely their own sense of what it meant to be a professional that led them to desert in the hope of improving their conditions, returning to their communities and families wherever they

might be, and recovering the elements of respectability that they had lost during the war. In the view of some *askari*, German officers had failed them as patrons. In a time of great privation and risk, some *askari* searched for new patrons, or turned to alternative social networks that could help them survive until new opportunities emerged.

The small force at Lettow-Vorbeck's disposal in November 1918 had survived an exhausting campaign, but its members faced a new set of white rulers and a changed political landscape. The British and Belgian victors took some time to sort out the future administration of Germany's former territory. Meanwhile, the *askari* underwent a brief period of internment, and then were released and left to reconstruct their lives on their own.⁵⁶ The soldiers had no work and no income. Their commander and ultimate patron General Lettow-Vorbeck finally secured their back pay for them in 1927, but between 1918 and 1927 they had no German support.⁵⁷ German *askari* do not seem to have joined the King's African Rifles or any other regional colonial militaries *en masse*. The East African campaign resulted in widespread, long-term suffering for African populations who lived through the war, particularly in the southern half of the colony.⁵⁸ While East Africans transitioned to a new colonial regime and tried to recover from the war's devastation, Germany began the process of adjusting to its defeat in the First World War, which included the loss of its overseas colonies. For interwar colonial activists, the *askari* became a valuable symbol of Germany's former military glories at home and abroad. They also symbolised Germany's vision of itself as a 'model coloniser' that deserved to get its colonies back. But the figure of the 'loyal *askari*' also covered up the terrible costs of the German colonial endeavour. Many East Africans who lived through the First World War remembered it as only the latest and most egregious example of German colonial abuse and violence, within a longer history that offered numerous examples from which to choose.

NOTES

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- 1 *Askari* is an Arabic and Kiswahili word for 'soldier' or 'police'. European colonial armies throughout eastern Africa used the term to refer to their African troops. The singular and plural forms of the word are the same, although some authors use '*askaris*' as the plural.
- 2 Bror Urme MacDonell, *Mzee Ali: The Biography of an African Slave-Raider Turned Askari and Scout* (Johannesburg: 30 Degrees South Publishers, 2006), 167, 168. MacDonell, a British colonial employee, recorded Mzee Ali's memories

- of his time as a German *askari* in the late 1940s when they both worked as colonial employees in Tanganyika. After many interventions in the manuscript, the book was published as a 'biography,' despite being written in the first person. I discuss the text as a historical source in Michelle Moyd, 'Becoming Askari: African Soldiers and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa, 1850–1918', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2008, 117–20.
- 3 The Kaiserlichen Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika was the full name of the German colonial army in East Africa, composed of German officers and NCOs, and African rank and file.
 - 4 MacDonell, *Mzee Ali*, 169.
 - 5 *Ibid.*
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 84. Ali came from Unyamwezi, an area in the north-central steppe region of present-day Tanzania (formerly German East Africa). The Germans arrived at Tabora, the most important town in Unyamwezi, in 1891. *Mzee Ali* offers very few specific dates as points of reference, but it is likely that Ali joined the Schutztruppe sometime around 1895 when the Germans began recruiting heavily in Unyamwezi.
 - 7 See, for example, Brian Gardner, *German East: The Story of the First World War in East Africa* (London: Cassell, 1963); Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: the First World War in East Africa* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1974); and Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro: An Account of the East African Campaign, 1914–18* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963). For German examples, see Ludwig Deppe, *Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika*. (Berlin: A. Scherl, 1919); and Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika* (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler, 1920), published in English as *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, translator unknown (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d.).
 - 8 Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (Oxford University Press), 103.
 - 9 See, for example, Gardner, *German East*, 193; Miller, *Battle for the Bundu*, 326.
 - 10 The official German history listed the total number of *askari* desertions as 2,847. Another 4,510 were reported missing, and 4,275 were reported captured. Ludwig Boell, *Die Operationen in Ostafrika, Weltkrieg 1914–1918* (Hamburg: W. Dachert, 1951), 424. Strachan uses these same figures in his recent reassessment of the East African campaign (*The First World War in Africa*, 103).
 - 11 Marine-Oberingenieur Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany, RM 8/368, 160.
 - 12 David Killingray, 'The War in Africa' in Hew Strachan (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93; and Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, 93–184.
 - 13 On the Tanga operation, see Ross Anderson, *The Battle of Tanga 1914* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002).
 - 14 On the operational and social history of the war, see Ross Anderson, *The Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign 1914–1918* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2004); and Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007). Contemporary accounts of the war include Deppe, *Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika*; Lettow-Vorbeck,

- Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika*, and Heinrich Schnee, *Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkrieg: wie wir lebten und kämpften* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1919).
- 15 See John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 168–202 and Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez (eds.), *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika, 1905–1907* (Berlin: Links, 2005). The Schutztruppe's scorched-earth tactics during Maji Maji included the burning of villages and food stores, the seizure of livestock, and mass arrests and hangings for those considered ringleaders amongst the Maji Maji fighters. For estimates of the death toll during and after Maji Maji, see Ludger Wimmelbücker, 'Verbrannte Erde: Zu den Bevölkerungsverlusten als Folge des Maji-Maji-Krieges', in *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch-Ostafrika, 1905–1907*.
 - 16 Richard Wenig, *Kriegs-Safari: Erlebnisse und Eindrücke auf den Zügen Lettow-Vorbecks durch das östliche Afrika* (Berlin: Scherl, 1920), II.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 28, 134.
 - 18 Karl Moesta, 'Die Einwirkungen des Krieges auf die Eingeborenenbevölkerung in Deutsch-Ostafrika', *Koloniale Rundschau*, 1–3 (1919), 5–25, *passim*; M. Taute, 'A German Account of the Medical Side of the War in East Africa, 1914–1918', *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 8 (1939), 1–20.
 - 19 Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika*, 241. On famine in the Ugogo region during the war, see Gregory H. Maddox, 'Mtunya: Famine in Central Tanzania, 1917–20', *Journal of African History* 31, 2 (1990): 181–97.
 - 20 Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 157. See also D. Malcolm, Rhodesia House, to H. F. Batterbee, Colonial Office, 3 June 1918, National Archives, Kew, London (NA-Kew), Colonial Office (CO) 691/20, 473–4 for a comment on Bockmann's harshness in requisitioning livestock from the Maasai.
 - 21 MacDonell, *Mzee Ali*, 185, 209; Deppe, *Mit Lettow-Vorbeck durch Afrika*, 132.
 - 22 Wenig, *Kriegs-Safari*, 61; Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 159.
 - 23 Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 155–6.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 159.
 - 25 Friedrich Wilhelm Mader, *Die rätselhafte Boma: Erzählung aus den Kämpfen der deutschen Schutztruppe in Ostafrika im Sommer 1918* (Berlin: Steiniger Verlag, 1942), *passim*; Heinrich Schnee, 'Meine Abenteuer in Deutsch-Ostafrika', Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Nachlass Schnee, Folder No. 17, 27, 40, 42, 52–3.
 - 26 Wenig, *Kriegs-Safari*, 37.
 - 27 General Sir Edward Northey, War Diary, January 1918, NA-Kew, London, Colonial Office 691/14, 120. Capitals in original text.
 - 28 *Ibid.*
 - 29 Mader, *Die rätselhafte Boma*, *passim*; Van Deventer to Colonial Office, June 1918, NA-Kew, London, Colonial Office 691/19, 135–6, 181–2, 185.
 - 30 Nachlass Correck, diary entry for 5 July 1906, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, HS 908. See also entries for 3 May 1906 and 4 May 1906.
 - 31 Ascan Lutteroth, *Tunakwenda: Auf Kriegssafari in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Hamburg: Verlag Broschek & Co., 1938), 156.

- 32 Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1974), 326.
- 33 Gardner, *German East*, 193.
- 34 Hugh Clifford, *The Gold Coast Regiment in the East African Campaign* (1920; repr. Nashville: Battery Press, 1995), 76.
- 35 Allied armies operating in East Africa during the First World War do not seem to have included family members to the same extent as the Schutztruppe.
- 36 August Hauer, '“Watoto”, die Kleinsten der Lettow-Truppe' in Hans Zache (ed.), *Die deutschen Kolonien in Wort und Bild* (Augsburg: Bechtermünz, 2003), 460–3; Heinrich Fonck, *Deutsch-Ost-Afrika: Eine Schilderung deutschen Tropen nach 10 Wanderjahren* (Berlin: Vossische Buchhandlung, 1910), 65, 66–7.
- 37 Germans seemed to have adopted the term 'boy' from the British, appending *askari* to the term to highlight their distinct role.
- 38 Lutteroth, *Tunakwenda*, 158, 170–1, 174, 176, 177, 295–6; Walter Rehfeldt, *Bilder vom Kriege in Deutsch-Ostafrika nach Aquarellen* (Hamburg: Charles Fuchs, 1920), 6–14; Correck diary entries for 28 April 1906, 1 June 1906, and 1 July 1906, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich, Germany, Nachlass Correck, HS 908.
- 39 Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro*, 177.
- 40 *Ibid.* Mosley conducted interviews with Lettow-Vorbeck, from which this excerpt is taken.
- 41 Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences*, 177.
- 42 Dorothy Hodgson and Sheryl McCurdy, 'Wayward Wives, Misfit Mothers, and Disobedient Daughters: “Wicked” Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 30, 1 (1996): 1–9.
- 43 Wenig, *Kriegs-Safari*, 100.
- 44 MacDonell, *Mzee Ali*, 185.
- 45 See note 10.
- 46 Burkhard Vieweg, *Macho Porini – Die Augen im Busch: Kautschukpflanzler Karl Vieweg in Deutsch-Ostafrika; authentische Berichte 1910–1919* (Weikersheim: Margraf Verlag, 1996), 380.
- 47 Lettow-Vorbeck Diary, typescript, vol. 4, Jan 1917–Dec 1918, Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, no page numbers.
- 48 Vieweg, *Macho Porini*, 380–1. On food rations, see Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 695–700.
- 49 Wenig, *Kriegs-Safari*, 74; Vieweg, *Macho Porini*, 409; Lutteroth, *Tunakwenda*, 168–70; G. G. Hajivayanis, A. C. Motowa, and J. Iliffe, 'The Politicians: Ali Ponda and Hassan Suleiman', in John Iliffe (ed.), *Modern Tanzanians: a Volume of Biographies* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), 229.
- 50 Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 160.
- 51 MacDonnell, *Mzee Ali*, 205, 206, 211.
- 52 General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Chief, East Africa to War Office, 17 May 1918, NA-Kew, London, Colonial Office 691/19, 39. See also William. J. Maynard to Assistant Political Officer Shinyanga, 1 June 1918, NA-Kew, London, Colonial Office 691/15, 216.

- 53 Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 152.
- 54 Sol was the most senior Schutztruppe *askari* rank.
- 55 Bockmann, 'Berichte über Deutsch-Ostafrika', 160.
- 56 Van Deventer to War Office, 20 November 1918, NA-Kew, London, CO 691/19, 578–618.
- 57 See Lutteroth, *Tunakwenda*, 169; Sandra Maß, *Weisse Helden, Schwarze Krieger: Zur Geschichte kolonialer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1918–1964* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 67.
- 58 Iliffe, *Modern History of Tanganyika*, 241.