



World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict among the European Powers by Anne Samson.

New York: I.M. Tauris, 2019 [orig. 2015]. Pp. x, 306. ISBN 978-1-78831-444-2.

Review by Ian David Stewart, University of New Mexico (ianstew@unm.edu).

In the early 1960s, the distinguished British imperial historian Hugh Trevor-Roper delivered a series of lectures in which he argued that sub-Saharan Africa had no history. When pressed, he later conceded in an interview with the BBC that, “Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach.... At present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.”¹ Like Georg Hegel, who considered Africa “unhistorical” and merely “on the threshold of the World’s History,”² Trevor-Roper was unwilling to acknowledge Africa’s place in the contemporary world. Mind you, in the 1960s, this sentiment was common among mainstream academic historians. It is, however, a jarring revelation that, some fifty years later, Africa and its people continue to be silenced in the pages of peer-reviewed scholarship.

To read Anne Samson’s *World War I in Africa*, it is easy to imagine a continent devoid of Africans (the “empty land” myth)—another nineteenth-century trope Europeans have used to justify the wholesale colonization of the continent or to assert the inferiority of Africans’ culture, economic development, science, language, religion, etc. That said, I would by no means dismiss this otherwise comprehensive study of the campaigns in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi), and German South West Africa (Namibia). But prospective readers should carefully consider just what kind of history Samson³ has produced and, likewise, what kind they are seeking.

First, the book is emphatically neither a “people’s history” of the First World War (hereafter, “the war”) in Africa, nor, more poignantly, an African people’s history of how they fought, experienced, and resisted the war. The author barely mentions the hundreds of thousands of African soldiers, porters, and civilians who died in their imperial masters’ service.⁴ This is understandable, given the dearth of primary sources for the African perspective of life on the frontlines, or back in the villages and towns that supported the fighters’ efforts.

With regard to historical methodology, Trevor-Roper and Hegel were correct, but only in so far as the African in history has been silenced, as it is in *World War I in Africa*. It is possible to write a fuller account of the African soldier’s role in the war, using available sources. For example, an analysis of the composition of Belgium’s *Force Publique* would reveal its reliance on slave labor to bolster its ranks, despite the mid-nineteenth-century abolition of slavery in Africa.⁵ Samson

1. BBC *Listener* (28 Nov. 1963), rpt. in Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1965).

2. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* [1837], trans. John Sibree (London 1861) 103.

3. An independent scholar and historian of the war in Africa, Samson is the coordinator of the UK-based, Great War in Africa Association, formerly, Great War in East Africa Association.

4. See David Killingray, “African Voices from Two World Wars,” *Historical Research* 74 (2001) 425-43; also Hew Strachan, *The First World War in Africa* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004).

5. See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

elides the forced conscription and the use of slaves as soldiers and carriers by all the war's belligerents.⁶ She designates the African soldiers fighting in the war in generic terms like "natives" or with simple military identifiers. She also employs the Swahili term *Askari* (soldier) to denote thousands of East African soldiers. Africans fighting for the British are simply the King's African Rifles. Individual soldiers are nameless, faceless subaltern warriors rendered invisible within the larger context of their military units.

At the outset, Samson states that her book "does not aim to tell the military story, as that has been done elsewhere" (1). This is ironic, given that the strength of her work resides in its military analyses and overviews of the East and South West African military engagements. Her book somewhat atones for the lack of African voices in war by its well researched discussion of military challenges like maintaining troop morale and coping with difficult terrain, ill health, and bad weather, among other things that confronted European commanders in Africa in 1914–18. The author also explains how the vastness of Africa complicated the creation and maintenance of supply lines by land and sea. The erratic supply system often forced British troops in East Africa to choose between uniforms or food rations. Since food generally won out,

the soldiers were thus reliant on local women to supply them with socks and other necessities. The Germans too faced similar issues and when wheat ran out [Gen. Paul von] Lettow-Vorbeck experimented with making bread from local products including sweet potatoes. (143)

Besides the topographical problems, Samson explores the complex geopolitical intrigues of the time, including the tenuous loyalty of South Africa's Boer population.⁷ She observes that British prewar assessments recognized that German South West Africa was the only colony likely to become a belligerent, "in the hope of initiating a rebellion among the Boers in South Africa" (30). Already in August 1914, the question of Boer loyalty preoccupied South African commanders Louis Botha and Jan Smuts as they made plans to subjugate German South West Africa by seizing the strategic ports at Lüderitzbucht (Lüderitz Bay) and the Swakopmund on the Atlantic coast. "Asking the Afrikaners not to rise up against Britain was one thing, but asking the people to support a campaign against a group of people, the Germans, which they felt a close affinity to, was something else" (69). There were comparable assessments of the role that neutral Portugal's colonies of Angola and Mozambique and the Belgians might play in central Africa.

World War I in Africa is an impressive study of the strategic calculus that allowed the Prussian Gen. Lettow-Vorbeck to fend off British and Belgian offensives into German East Africa. It is a history of how Africa served as a vast colonial-era battlefield where Europe's Great Powers could allow their lingering political animosities and frustrations

to come to the fore and be resolved. It gave an opportunity not only for the physical settling of scores through conquest but also psychologically through a battle of wits fought out by the Foreign Offices of the different countries and the soldiers on the ground. As a result, the consequences were far-reaching, impacting on the men who fought and the local communities of both the invaded and invading countries. (43)

Samson's passion for her subject is evident but also selective. She expresses an interest in "the role of the individual in determining the outcome of the war" (222), but ignores or distorts the

6. See Strachan (note 4 above) 641–42 and Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the First World War in Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007) 392–93.

7. Dutch (or Boer) settlers resisted British colonization in the Cape Colony in the late eighteenth century and fought British army in the First and Second Boer Wars (1880–81, 1899–1902).

well-documented maltreatment of the Africans by their European colonial masters. She accepts the Germans' characterization of the Herero genocide 1904–5 as an “uprising” quelled by the lionized Lettow-Verbeck, glossing over the tens of thousands of Herero and Namaqua civilians left to die in the deserts of German South West Africa a decade before the Great War broke out in Africa.

The silencing of history should have been prioritized to shed needed light on, for instance, the German record of “poisoning wells” and “forcing the enemy into waterless areas” (82)—tactics Gen. Luther von Trotha had previously adopted to punish the Herero for the uprising.⁸ Likewise unnoticed is the 1905–7 Maji Rebellion in German East Africa, which left ca. 75,000 Africans dead, primarily of famine and disease.⁹

Of the few Africans Samson does mention, John Chilembwe, a pan-Africanist missionary trained in the United States, was one of the most significant anti-war, anti-colonial activists in southern Africa during the war; but his activism and the rebellion in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) are skimmed over despite the disproportionate response by the British colonial authorities at the time.¹⁰

In her concluding pages, Samson acknowledges that

for reasons of time and space, this history is incomplete Allusion has been made to the impact of the campaign on black inhabitants of East and southern Africa as well as white civilians resident in various territories. It is regretted that more attention could not be given to them within the scope of this study. (227)

To exclude or mute the voices of African resistance is to conceal that the war in Africa was a European conflict fought at the expense of African lives. Estimates show that thousands—perhaps as many as 11,000—Africans died while serving in the King's African Rifles in German East Africa and 200,000 people, including women and children, endured forced military labor during the war.¹¹

Anne Samson has made a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of the various theaters of war in German East and South West Africa—on the periphery of empire—and their strategic value to warmakers in London and Berlin. But, as a history of a European war fought in Africa, her book represents a missed opportunity to spotlight the very people whose lives and lands were most devastated by a war not of their own making.

8. See Jeremy Sarkin-Hughes, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers* (Cape Town: Univ Pr, 2011).

9. See John Iliffe, “The Organization of the Maji Rebellion,” *Journal of African History* 8 (1967) 495–512.

10. Brian Morris, “The Chilembwe Rebellion,” *Society of Malawi Journal* 68 (2015) 20–52.

11. Melvin E. Page, *The Chiyawa War: Malawians in the First World War* (NY: Routledge, 2019).