ThoughtCo.

The Legacy of World War I in Africa

by **Angela Thompsell**
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When World War I broke out, Europe had already colonized much of Africa, but the need for manpower and resources during the war led to the consolidation of colonial power and sowed the seeds for future resistance.

Conquest, Conscription, and Resistance

When the war began, the European powers already had colonial armies comprised of African soldiers, but conscription demands increased substantially during the war as did resistance to those demands. France conscripted more than a quarter of a million men, while Germany, Belgium, and Britain recruited tens of thousands more for their armies.

Resistance to these demands was common. Some men attempted to emigrate within Africa to avoid conscription for armies who in some cases had only recently conquered them. In other regions, conscription demands fueled existing discontent leading to full-scale uprisings. During the war, France and Britain ended up fighting anti-colonial uprisings in the Sudan (near Darfur), Libya, Egypt, Niger, Nigeria, Morocco, Algeria, Malawi, and Egypt, as well as a brief insurrection on the part of Boers in South Africa sympathetic to the Germans.

Porters and their families: the forgotten casualties of World War I

The British and German governments - and especially the white settler communities in East and South Africa - did not like the idea of encouraging African men to fight Europeans, so they mostly recruited African men as porters. These men were not considered to be veterans, since they did not fight themselves, but they died in scores all the same, especially in East Africa. Subject to harsh conditions, enemy fire, disease, and inadequate rations, at least 90,000 or 20 percent of porters died serving in the African fronts of World War I. Officials acknowledged that the actual number was probably higher. As a point of comparison, approximately 13 percent of mobilized forces died during the War.

During the fighting, villages were also burned and food seized for the use of troops. The loss of manpower also affected the economic capacity of many villages, and when the final years of the war coincided with a drought in East Africa, many more men, women, and children died.

To the Victors go the Spoils

After the war, Germany lost all of its colonies, which in Africa meant it lost the states known today as Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Namibia, Cameroon, and Togo. The League of Nations considered these territories to be unprepared for independence and so divided them up between Britain, France, Belgium, and South Africa, who were supposed to prepare these Mandate territories for independence. In practice, these territories looked little different from colonies, but ideas about imperialism were starting to shift. In the case of Rwanda and Burundi the transfer was doubly tragic. Belgian colonial policies in those states set the stage for the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the lesser-known, related massacres in Burundi. The war also helped politicize populations, however, and when a Second World War came, the days of colonization in Africa

would be numbered.

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