

# Primary Sources: The East Africa Campaign



## Introduction

Below are a series of excerpts on combatants and carriers in the East Africa Campaign. Combatants, called *askari*, were recruited into German and British forces. They and white officers were supported in the war by carriers, or porters, who accompanied combatants and transported gear and supplies across the terrain of East Africa. As you are looking at these materials, take care to identify who the author/creator is and when the piece was generated.

As you read, consider the following questions. Find quotes to go with at least three of the questions listed below:

- What differences can you identify in the experiences between German and British combatants?
- Between askari and carriers?
- Between white officers and rank-and-file Africans?
- What can you learn about pay and labor conditions for KAR members and carriers?
- How are the motivations and reasons for getting involved in the war in East Africa different from what you learned about Momar Cisse or Ndiaga Niang in French West Africa?
- How were the French West Africans' experiences different and similar to what you see in the cases shown in this lesson?

## Primary Sources

Introduction

Quotes From  
Combatants

Quotes About  
Carriers

## Primary Source 1: Quotes from Combatants

*Below are two accounts from combatants who served in the German Schutztruppe and British King's African Rifles in World War I. Some biographical and contextual information is provided for each excerpt. The excerpts come from the following sources:*

- *Bror Urme MacDonell, Mzee Ali: The Biography of an African Slave-raider turned Askari & Scout (30 Degrees South Publishers, 2006), 168.*
- *Geoffrey Hodges, The Carrier Corps: Military Labor in the East African Campaign, 1914–1918 (Greenwood Press, 1986), 63.*
- *Melvin E. Page, Chiwaya War Voices: Malwaian Oral Histories of the Great War in Africa, volume 1 (The Great War in Africa Association, 2021), 99, 104–5.*

**Mzee Ali:** Mzee Ali served in the German East African Schutztruppe during World War I. His words come to us here by way of Bror Urme MacDonell, his biographer. MacDonnell knew Ali when he served as a scout for MacDonell's hunting expeditions in East Africa. MacDonell himself was of Scandinavian and Scottish heritage, born in Belgian-controlled Congo, and educated in France and England; he later served in the British African military during the Second World War.

Thus, Ali's words here are removed from us on several levels. They are a colonized African man's memories of the early 1910s called forth during the 1940s, spoken in Swahili, and translated (and in unknown ways edited or adjusted) in the early 1960s by his British-affiliated employer. Nonetheless, with contextualization and careful analysis, the reader of Ali's reminiscences gains some sense of what it was like to be one of the Africans in the German forces—one of the askari—at the cusp of the East Africa campaign:

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 heard news of developments on Germany's western and eastern fronts, campaigns taking place in faraway lands. 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.

All troops and men were ordered to assemble in Tabora. Our officers were to prepare us in full military readiness to fight the British and the Belgians. ... Many of us were seasoned by hardship but the new recruits found the training almost unbearable, as the idea of war seemed to pinch the already merciless attitudes of our officers. Even those of us who had previously served

under them found the training grueling.



*Schutztruppe, c. World War I*



*King's African Rifles returning from Ashanti, West Africa to Nyasaland, 1914*

**Odandayo Mukhenye Agweli:** Agweli was from the western Kenya region of Nyanza. In the passage below, he remembers his time with the King's African Rifles during the First World War:

At Lindi we had some battles. Indian troops joined us in this place to fight the enemy. The actual area was called Kampi ya Ndege (Aeroplane Camp)... We had serious fights. Using

mortars we levelled the whole place before attacking... To this day I still do not know why we fought the Germans and how the war began. Though we admired the European ways of fighting, we were still left wondering why so many people had to die. In our tribal wars the number of the dead was never very big.

I once encountered a German soldier. He did not shoot me, but just warned me that if I moved, that would be my end. "Wewe bibi. Leo ni leo. Itakufa tu. Songa karibu, utaona." said the German soldier to me. (You are a woman. Today is today. You will die. Come nearer and you'll see.) The Germans used to fight from the tops of trees like monkeys.

**Daisa Songolo:** Daisa Songolo served in the King's African Rifles during World War I. He was interviewed on August 17, 1972 at the Old Soldiers Memorial Home, Zomba (Malawi). Today's Malawi was called Nyasaland when it was under colonial rule. The interviewer was Melvin Page, and the translator was Yusuf M. Juwayeyi. They spoke in English, Chichewa, and Chiyao.

Q: How old were you when you joined the K.A.R.?

A: I was just a boy. I could hold a gun without falling down.

Q: Where were you when you first heard about the K.A.R.?

A: I was at my home.

Q: From whom did you hear?

A: We heard from the old men who had been soldiers before.

Q: When it was announced that war was breaking out, what was the attitude of the chiefs in your area towards it?

A: The chief told us to go because to become a soldier meant a great deal of money.

Q: What were you told about the Germans?

A: You don't talk about such things. You don't tell anyone of the secrets of the war. If anyone talks of the secrets of the war, he deserves death. ...They knew very well that the Germans were very fierce people and they had no idea if they would be able to beat them.

Q: How fierce were the Germans?

A: He knew how to use his gun. The Germans' guns gave two sounds at once bah! bah! guhhh! But as for the British, just ta! ta! ta! The two sounds made by the Germans confused the people in that they couldn't tell in which direction the bullets were going.

Q: Didn't they tell you what they would do for you after the war?

A: They told us all sorts of terrible lies. They said that we would be rich people; we would have cars, houses, exemption from tax. But when the war was over, they gave us nothing. The money we received after service was very little; they did not build the houses which they promised us. They told us these things as we fought in the war itself. This made us very courageous. We were not afraid of death because we knew that even if we died, our relatives would receive a lot of money.

Q: Who told you these things?

A: The owners of the war: the Europeans. But it never happened when we came here.



*British ceremony at the Nyasaland King's African Rifles War Memorial, located in Zomba, commemorating soldiers who fought in World War I*

## Primary Source 2: Quotes about Carriers

*Carriers, also called porters, were an integral part of the East Africa Campaign. They transported gear and supplies for soldiers and white officers through the challenging terrain of East Africa. Below are several accounts of carriers, from both British and German forces. Note that there are no passages from the carriers themselves—carefully consider what we can learn about their experiences from the selection of accounts provided. Some biographical and contextual information is provided for the speaker or author of each excerpt.*

*The excerpts come from the following sources:*

- *Geoffrey Hodges, The Carrier Corps: Military Labor in the East African Campaign, 1914–1918 (Greenwood Press, 1986), 104.*
- *Melvin E. Page, Chiwaya War Voices: Malwaian Oral Histories of the Great War in Africa, volume 1 (The Great War in Africa Association, 2021), 40.*
- *Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, eds., Intimate Voices From the First World War (HarperCollins, 2004), 178–79, 182–83.*



*Carriers in the East Africa Campaign, 1916*

**Raphael Simigini Osodo:** Raphael Simigini Osodo was from Bunyala, located near the shore of Lake Victoria Nyanza in westernmost Kenya. He worked as a clerk in service to a local chief during the First World War. The interview notes were provided by his grandson Felix Osodo. In this interview, from July 4, 1970, he recalls the role he played in obtaining men for the Carrier Corps:

My work was to record the names of all the people that were...sent to war. I did all the correspondence with the Government because I could read and write. Letters used to come to me stating the number of men we were supposed to send... I read the letters for the

chief, who... sent his askari to arrest the young men. At the beginning of the war the number we were required to produce for war ranged from 50 men to about 150 men; but at one time... about 500 men.... Many of these young men used to run away and hide in the trees from us. They would only come down by night for meals when we had gone away...Some were very courageous and just joined without being forced into it. In those days there was a rumour that those

who went to the war were eaten by the white men [so no more volunteered.] It was very hard for anyone to escape... because I had his name down and knew exactly where he came from.



*Kings African Rifles moving a field gun into position, 1914*

**Mwachande Makupete:** Makupete was also interviewed by Melvin Page, with translation by Yusuf M. Juwayeyi on August 10, 1972 at the Old Soldiers Memorial Home, Zomba, Malawi. In this part of the interview, Makupete, who was himself a member of the King's African Rifles, responds to questions about the carriers:



*Carriers transported from Dar-es-Salaam to Nyasaland*

Q: When going to the war, what sort of things were you carrying with you?

A: We carried our bags, bullets pwitika [panga for clearing bush], and other things. We were carrying 150 bullets each....

Q: Were you carrying all these things alone?

A: Yes. But blankets were carried by chibalo [punishment duty] people. These were the mtengatenga people.

Q: What sort of people were they?

A: They were people who were made to carry goods.

Q: Where did they get these people?

A: In the villages. They told the chiefs to send such people. After that they were paid money.

Q: How did the chief make his choices?

A: Some were those who were unable to pay their tax. Others came as employees....

Q: What was the difference between mtengatenga and soldiers?

A: There was a difference, because mtengatenga were not given clothes. Soldiers were given shirts and a little hat. That was the difference because the mtengatenga were putting on their own clothes, while soldiers were given everything.



*Carriers in Nyasaland*

**Dr. Ludwig Deppe:** Dr. Deppe, a German settler, started the war working as a physician in the hospital at Tanga. After Tanga's hospital was blown up, Deppe eventually ended up on the campaign trail working in a field hospital for the German side, which was constantly on the move behind the Schutztruppe as it maneuvered through the region between 1916 and 1918. What follows are some of his personal journal entries:

October 1, 1916

Looting is one of the necessary evils of the war in Africa. We have managed to teach our Askaris to behave more humanely, but not to desist from looting per se. All the troops, including the whites, have been directly dependent on plunder for munitions, clothing and food. ... There were many arguments yesterday: one of my sick Askaris had taken three hens and promptly slit their throats. Their owner appeared and started complaining and trying to reclaim his hens. As a punishment, the hens were handed over to other Askaris. But this Askari couldn't be punished with 25 lashes because he's got worms.

October 13, 1916

This morning 35 people ran away from the lookout point in Mtingi, so I had to put almost all the other porters<sup>6</sup> 'on the chain' (they all have iron rings round their necks, which are attached to a chain with six to eight others). This is the only way to control the troublesome new recruits and guarantee that we can leave quickly if need be.

October 14, 1916

The sight of my retinue is enough to make you weep; at the front of the procession is my wheelbarrow with two men, harnessed to it like a team of horses. The wretched tracks are sandy, stony and rutted. To my left are two boys whose job it is to pick vegetables and mangoes and buy eggs, hens and pigeons. One carries a rifle and cartridge bag, a pith helmet and a lamp. The other carries the portable medicine chest and the hospital flag on a seven-metre-long bamboo stick. And then comes my caravan which consists of 27 people.



*Carriers moving supplies at port in Nyasaland, 1918*

# Image Citations

**Page 1:**

Soldiers of the German colonial forces, 1914, National Army Museum, Public Domain, <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1987-05-8-3>

**Page 2:**

German East Africa, Askari Company ready to move out, c. 1914-1918, photograph by Walther Dobbertin, German Federal Archives, Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA3056, CC-BY-SA 3.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv\\_Bild\\_105-DOA3056,\\_Deutsch-Ostafrika,\\_Askarikompanie.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_105-DOA3056,_Deutsch-Ostafrika,_Askarikompanie.jpg)

**Page 3:**

British Central African rifles on return from Ashanti, west Africa, Nyasaland, August 25, 1914, Society of Malawi, Historical and Scientific, CC-BY-SA 4.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British\\_Central\\_Africa\\_rifles\\_on\\_return\\_from\\_Ashanti,\\_west\\_Africa,\\_Nyasaland.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Central_Africa_rifles_on_return_from_Ashanti,_west_Africa,_Nyasaland.jpg)

**Page 4:**

Nyasaland War Memorial, Zomba, Imperial War Museum, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nyasaland\\_Governor\\_Collection\\_Q44178.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nyasaland_Governor_Collection_Q44178.jpg)

**Page 5:**

Force publique during World War I, c. 1916, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Congo\\_be\\_lge\\_campagne\\_1918.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Congo_be_lge_campagne_1918.jpg)  
Askaris moving a field gun into position, c. 1914, National Army Museum, Public Domain, <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=2002-02-589-141>

**Page 6:**

East Africa Campaign, HMT Bechuana carrying native carriers down the coast from Dar-es-Salaam to Nyasaland, International War Museum, Non-Commercial License, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205250399>  
East Africa Campaign, No. 10 Workshop Unit moving on Line of Communication in Portuguese Nyasaland, about to trek through a swamp, Imperial War Museum, Non-Commercial License, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205250390>

**Page 7:**

East Africa Campaign, from steamer to dhow at Port Amelia, Portuguese Nyasaland, 1918, International War Museum, Non-Commercial License, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205250395>