

# The End of Germany's Colonial Empire

**Daniel Steinbach** asks why the loss of the German colonies in Africa was perceived as a powerful symbol of Germany's deliberate humiliation at the end of the First World War.



An East African native Askari holding the German Empire's colonial flag.  
Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA6369

Famously, Germany's first and last shots of the First World War were fired in Africa. From its beginning to its end this war was a global event which changed lives, but also borders, on all continents. One of the most significant changes was the collapse and demise of Germany as a *Weltmacht*: Germany entered the war as a global power, with colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, but left as the first European state to lose all its overseas possessions.

In the three decades prior to the First World War, Germany had taken possession of four colonies in Africa (the Cameroons, Togoland, Southwest Africa and German East Africa), as well as scattered islands in the Pacific and the concession Kiautschou (Tsingtao) in Northern China. While these colonies never resembled the large, connected possessions of its imperial rivals, France and Britain, they were nonetheless important cornerstones for Germany's ambitious *Weltpolitik* and fuelled the imagination of many middle-class Germans. Hence it not surprising that Germany's war aims from 1914 included a consolidated and expanded colonial empire in Africa – a *Mittelafrika* mirroring a German-dominated *Mitteleuropa* after a victorious war. Not only did these sweeping imperial plans never materialise, the war marked the end of Germany as a colonial power.

At the beginning of the war, when Britain and France swiftly turned to their Asian and African colonies for resources and manpower, Germany found access to its overseas territories blockaded. Unable to transport colonial soldiers and labourers to Europe, Germany could also not send meaningful military support to its colonies, which instead had to rely on locally available resources and infrastructure for their war effort.

For the German colonies in the Pacific, the war ended within a couple of weeks with hardly a shot being fired. With a small European population and a local colonial police force, these territories were no match for the professional forces of the regional Entente powers: Already on 29 August 1914 German Samoa was occupied by New Zealand without any resistance, while the various islands of German New Guinea were conquered in September by Australian troops from the south and Japanese troops from the north after very little German resistance. Although of minor importance for Germany's global trade network, these islands featured prominently in German imperial culture, ranging from songs and novels to the celebrated works of the expressionist painter Emil Nolde, who left New Guinea just before the outbreak of the war.

The German concession of Kiautschou in China was strategically and economically much more important. As home to the German East Asia Squadron, it was in a much better position to defend itself. However, after weeks of heavy fighting against the Japanese army and navy, which cost the lives of nearly a thousand soldiers, the German commander capitulated on 7 November 1914. Kiautschou's German military and civilian population were transported to prisoner-of-war camps in Japan where they received surprisingly good treatment. While imprisoned for the duration of the war, these men – like many POWs – were keen to assert their national identity

Tsingtao: captured German driver with Japanese soldiers.  
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by forming orchestras and choirs, cooking and handcraft workshops, or camp universities. The Japanese population was fascinated by these German customs, and developed a taste for the German cake *Baumkuchen* and a love of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony, both of which continue to be core parts of Japanese culture to this day.

Germany's most important colonies were, however, in Africa. In the decade prior to the war Germany had invested in the modernisation of infrastructure in its African colonies to improve the export of minerals and agriculture products, including harbours, railways, and telegraph communications. Like all other colonial powers, Germany had rationalised its presence in Africa by promoting the ideology of a 'European civilising mission' – that is, bringing the rule of law, order, stability and peace to Africa and the Africans. Yet, in August 1914, Germany – like France and Britain – showed only little hesitation in turning their colonies into theatres of war.

The initial aim of the Entente powers was the destruction of naval and communication infrastructure that could allow Germany to attack transport and warships in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. But, within weeks, all the colonies were the centre of large

The German Empire and its colonial possessions in 1914.



campaigns in which tens of thousands of Africa soldiers – many of them newly recruited or pressed into service – fought under French, British or German officers. With the exception of Togoland, which was occupied within days, German colonial troops in the Cameroons and German East Africa (modern Tanzania) successfully resisted defeat for several years by withdrawing deep into the hinterland. Especially in German East Africa, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck drew ever-increasing numbers of Allied troops – variously originating from the surrounding colonies, South Africa, India and the West Indies – into

a guerrilla-style war which lasted until 25 November 1918, a week longer than the armistice in Europe. However, his tactic of not only destroying transport infrastructure, but also his scorched earth policy, resulted in a legacy of raging famines that left hundreds of thousands of African civilians dead or destitute and devastated the colony's economic and social structures for decades.

Aside from the military difficulties posed by war in Africa, Germany and its enemies also faced an 'ideological' dilemma: How could they justify war against another colonising power

Propaganda poster: 'German women's protest against the coloured occupation troops on the Rhine.'  
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German members of von Lettow-Vorbeck's Schutztruppe in their compound at a prisoner-of-war camp in British East Africa.  
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without simultaneously undermining with very idea of European supremacy on which colonialism was based? In its propaganda, Germany stressed the strong bond and loyalty of its African soldiers and civilians towards their colonial rulers; while British and French propaganda portrayed Germany as a failed coloniser who had only held its control over the African population through excessive brutality. Yet, despite these protective sentiments, in practical policy on the spot both sides were united in suppressing any attempts by the African population to use the war to improve their economic and political position. Obsessed with not undermining 'white prestige', German soldiers and civilians were treated cordially by the occupying troops, and both sides co-operated in a variety of ways to avoid any power vacuum. However, any good treatment withstanding, as soon as the threat of an organised African resistance subsided, France and Britain quickly began rounding up German civilians in the conquered territories. Military POW were mostly sent to internment camps in North Africa or India, whereas the majority of women and children were shipped to camps in Europe. By the end of 1918 the African colonies were mostly void of Germans.

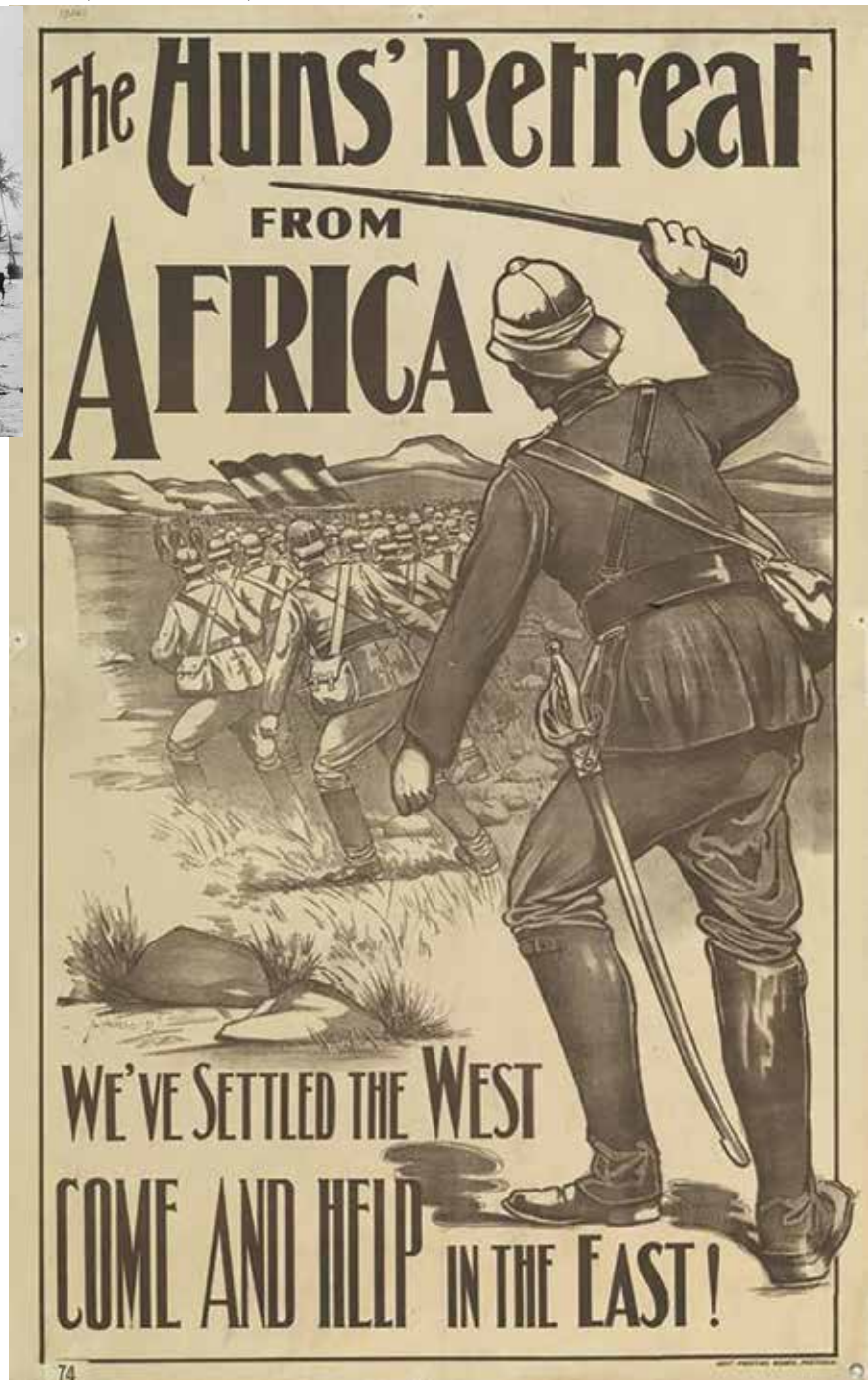
The exception to this was German South-West Africa (modern Namibia), which had by far the largest German population of all colonies (around 13,000 in 1914). Unlike the transient population in the other colonies many of the Germans here regarded the colony as their new *Heimat*, and perceived the land as 'German soil' as worthy of defence as Germany proper. Recruits and volunteers in 1914 enthusiastically joined the colonial troops to prevent a conquest by neighbouring South Africa – an endeavour that was ultimately unsuccessful. Yet, while half of the German population was deported after the German surrender in July 1915, most farmers, missionaries and traders were allowed to stay in the colony and keep their property. They thus became the only German subjects to remain in a former German colony after 1918.

In Germany itself, the collapse of its colonial empire only caused limited concern to the public and the government during the war. Confident that a decisive German victory in Europe would also lead a restoration and enlargement of Germany's colonies, even many imperial enthusiasts shifted their attention to the recently occupied Russian territories: modern colonial fantasies mixed with older views on Eastern Europe as the natural area for

A company of the German Schutztruppe parading for inspection in front of the military barracks in Dar-es-Salaam, 1912.  
© IWM (HU 94484)



Propaganda poster: 'The Huns' Retreat from Africa'.  
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German expansion and domination. Yet, with the armistice in 1918 it quickly became apparent that a defeated Germany could neither hope for control of Eastern Europe nor a return of its overseas possessions. When the details of the Treaty of Versailles became public in June 1919 the loss of the colonies was perceived as a powerful symbol of Germany's deliberate humiliation at the hands of its victors, a feeling that united many sections across the political spectrum that had previously been lukewarm or outright critical of Germany's colonial ambitions. The sentiment of being excluded from the group of 'civilised' and thus 'civilising' nations overshadowed even economic arguments for overseas possessions. This was also manifest in a sweeping and viciously racist propaganda campaign against the African and Asian colonial soldiers who formed the backbone of the French occupying forces in the Rhineland. In the eyes of many, Germany had turned from being a coloniser to being colonised itself.

Consequently, the idea of a return of the former colonies became closely associated with a revival of Germany itself as most colonial revisionists rejected the new 'Weimar Republic'. This attitude was personified in Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck who, celebrated as the only 'unbeaten' German general, became an influential and widely published activist. Weimar Germany, once described as 'a post-colonial state in a still colonial world', witnessed a culture of colonial nostalgia with countless memoirs of former colonial administrators, veterans or settlers being published alongside novels, picture books and films, celebrating Germany's colonial achievements and lamenting the loss of the 'German lands overseas'. Despite the failure of all diplomatic efforts to restore any of the former colonies, hundreds of Germans returned to these territories as settlers or missionaries, and reciprocally 2,000

former African subjects lived in interwar Germany.

Despite its aspirations and its activities, Germany was only ever a minor player in the imperial world, and its short tenure as a colonial power came to an end with the First World War. Yet, in some sense, these colonies – especially those in Africa – became more important to the German imagination after the war than before it. More specifically, in popular culture and imagination, the First World War in Africa – which was, to be sure, brutal and bloody – became the subject of collective nostalgia, and through this the idea of Germany's 'rightful place' as a colonial within the

colonial sphere was redeemed and preserved. This rehabilitated image of Germany as a successful colonial force, unfairly cut short, persisted over the decades that followed, overshadowing the atrocities committed in its colonial wars and – indeed – the First World War.

Daniel Steinbach is lecturer in Modern History at the University of Exeter. He is working on the First World War as a global conflict. He is currently finalising a book on the war in German and British East Africa and an edited volume on colonial photography during the First World War.