

Reappraising the First World War: A century of remembering the Great War in East Africa

Imperial War Museum, 10 July 2012

Dr Anne Samson

The East Africa campaign involved men from across 23 territories, black, white, Indian and Coloured (South African Mixed-race). Of these, approximately 75% died from disease and malnutrition. Although most of the fighting forces were volunteers, not all of the support services were. The war cost £72million or four times the 1914 British war budget. When compared to the Western Front, these figures are negligible. It is therefore not surprising that very little has been written about the campaign. A recent search of the British Library, Library of Congress, European Union Library and Amazon led to 275 books being identified as published on the topic (this is not exhaustive as the search was dependent on the tags linked to each entry). These include memoirs and general histories in eight different languages covering sixteen countries. For such an apparent insignificant sideshow, the East Africa campaign provides, in my opinion, an ideal case study for an analysis of imperial and other relationships.

Although the campaign had little impact on the outcome of the war and few British soldiers fought in East Africa, a large number of Indian troops and a significant number of Rhodesians were involved from 1914 whilst South Africa joined in 1916 providing white and Coloured soldiers, black labourers and Indian stretcher-bearers. In 1917, troops came from Gold Coast, Nigeria and the West Indies with support from Sierra Leone. Yet, there is very little memory of the campaigns in those countries. Looking at South Africa in particular, this lack of memory is in contrast with Delville Wood (South Africa's Gallipoli) – where only white soldiers were involved and which is commemorated on 15 July. The monument at Delville Wood in memory of the South African dead, although meant to be all inclusive from its origin has only, since 1994, really become so, despite the mention of the East Africa campaign in its earlier displays.

The SS *Mendi*, which saw over 630 mainly black men drowned, when it sank off the Isle of Wight in 1917 is more widely known – through an anti-apartheid song, various memorials, a civilian bravery medal and a garden of remembrance. Why is this? All the incidents mentioned were part of the 'white man's war'. The answer – it did not suit South African national politics at the time, or since. And the same conclusion can be drawn with regards other countries or territories involved. However, a memory has continued in various ways and because there is currently no national gain in promoting this memory, an analysis of what there is provides a fertile ground for researchers of memory and the development of communal remembrance.

Of the 275 books published on the campaign, 195 are published in English, 59 in German and the others French (Belgian involvement), Danish, Italian, Portuguese and Polish. They consist of 22 novels, 101 memoirs and biographies, 7 American and 2 British theses, 11 academic texts, 4 films (3 of which are based on books), 28 regimental histories and the remainder regional histories and popular accounts. Twenty-one texts have been reprinted, some as many as six times, and 17 were privately published, of which six were published before 1970 (the year Jay Winter and Antoin Prost mark as the end of first hand witness publications). So, what does this tell us?

The timing of the publications provides some idea of external influences on memory. For example, during the war, a number of memoirs came out which focused on forces or large groups of men setting out their experiences as the conditions were so different to those on the Western Front. At the end of 1916, Jan Smuts, the then Commander-in-Chief announced that the Germans had been defeated and that only 'mopping up' operations were required with the result that many troops were recalled from the front in addition to the South Africans sent home to recuperate. This enabled them to tell their story – the record 15 publications in one year bear witness to this. **[SLIDE]**

The number of memoirs published declined in the early 1920s but then increased again in the 1930s, when we see Italian publications for the first time (one in this study and two identified subsequently). These appeared at the time of growing tension in Europe where Italy under Mussolini had sided with Germany under Hitler. Mussolini saw a future war as an opportunity to lay claim to African territory Italy felt denied at the end of the First World War when the country was allied with France and Britain. During this time, too, there is an increase in the number of German memoirs published, possibly for the same reason behind the Italian publications. Portuguese publications are very scarce – three in total, of which two are in Portuguese and one in English. Portugal's involvement in the campaign was problematic – for all involved. Portugal was neutral until April 1916. However, local governors in East Africa supported the Germans by allowing material to be smuggled through their territory. Once Portugal entered the war, there remained difficulties and concerns around the country's participation. This was not aided by the fact that the government was unstable, changing roughly every six months. Finding a context in which to place Portugal's involvement which extended to four expeditionary forces to Africa was therefore difficult. The first attempt to provide an overview of the campaign occurred in 1990. More recently, academics are beginning to focus on the theatre which suggests that Portugal is in a place to deal with its past.

Belgium published its first histories of the campaign in 1917 and 1918, these being the official histories which were to the glory of Belgium. In the wider context these documents are justifications, possibly prompted by German publications, for why Belgium should be awarded

territory in East Africa at the end of the campaign. The Americans, involved only strategically and through the peace discussions have spent a considerable amount of time on the campaign. This has been mainly through military study but also the production of film. The first three American studies took place in the 1930s and the latter four in the early 2000s – the timing and focus suggestive of US preparation for future wars.

The years after World War Two saw a general decline in the number of publications although an increase in novels and films on the theatre occurred. This was perhaps for escapist purposes – something more exotic than the horrors of the concentration camps. From the 1960s onwards, there is a drying up of memoirs but an increase in the number of academic texts on the campaign. The work by Jay Winter and Antoin Prost (2006) suggests that this trend is due to the development of universities and academic studies as well as the dying out of war veterans. Bruce Vandervort (2009) notes that the period between 1960 and 1990 was the heyday of publications on the campaign. Until recently, before undertaking this study, I would have agreed with him as the primary texts most historians use were published during this time. Since 2000, there has been a ‘surge’ in publications, mostly articles, some grand narratives which now encompass economic, social and cultural aspects and novels (five in five years). There has also been resurgence in memoirs being published – now by descendents of those who fought.

The advent of self-publishing, since about 2010, is already bringing about a noticeable change in publication where authors can write and produce text freely without any interim checks and balances. Two cases spring to mind: Bruce Fuller’s *They chose adventure* and Alan Rutherford’s *Kaputala*. The former, a study of seven Fusiliers and Frontiersmen from New Zealand, can be best described as a journey in discovery whilst the latter contains an introduction which is striking in its anti-war stance and tone. Similarly, the number of popular journals is increasing and articles on the campaign are appearing all over the internet. Although these are mostly referenced and accurate, there is a concern amongst some of the authors using these outlets that ‘telling a good story’ is at the expense of the truth. At the other extreme, authors are being restricted by the threat of litigation by family members who refuse or cannot accept the conclusions drawn from documentary evidence. This is despite the publication going through the basic checks a publishing house has in place. Brian Garfield’s *A colossal fraud* is a case in point and his experience has influenced others in their approach – myself for one. The field of historical writing is undergoing its next radical change (1960, 1990) but it is yet too soon to see how this will play out.

Another change which is discernible in recent years is the diversity of person involved in remembering the campaign. Mention has already been made of the languages books have been published in and this has increased in recent years. Not discussed earlier, though, was Denmark. Denmark was a neutral country during the war, but Danes were commandeered by Germany to take a neutral ship to East Africa to get supplies through. This may well account for the Danish awareness of the campaign, resulting in three publications of which two are novels on the same topic. The anomaly though is Poland. The only Polish book identified was written in 2009 but no obvious link has been drawn between the campaign and the book which is a military account. At present I am waiting to hear from the author how he came to hear about it.

The involvement of black, Coloured and Indian Africans (and there is a whole other discussion to be had here regarding nomenclature and identity) in remembering the campaign has also started albeit at a secondary or tertiary level. The consequence is that the original story has been lost as only one memoir, and that second-hand, of an African Asian/Indian involved in the campaign has so far been identified. Having said this, the history of the majority of participants has not been completely lost as eleven percent (31) of the books and memoirs identified concern black, Indian and Coloured involvement in the campaign. Although there were quite a few publications immediately after the war, there has been a noticeable increase in the books published from the time of the American civil rights (1970s) and international anti-apartheid movements in the 1980s. No publications are recorded between 1956 and 1971.

Acts of remembering are changing. This paper has focused on books in the main. However, since about 2005, other forms of remembrance are starting to take place, such as battlefield tours, discussion fora and websites, and there has even been a discussion on a possible battle re-enactment in Tanzania. The oldest act of remembrance identified is the Comrades Marathon. This is an annual 56mile or 90km race between Durban and Pietermaritzburg (or the reverse) in Natal, South Africa. It was started on Empire Day in 1921 on 24 May by Vic Clapham who had fought in East Africa. Yet, it is only in the past few years that the race's origins have been acknowledged – on the website.¹

The advent of the internet (approx 1990) has radically altered access to information. When I started my research into East Africa in 1998, I recall 'exhausting' the East Africa World War returns on the then dominant search engine – Yahoo. Twelve years later, I am inundated with references to the East Africa campaign. In addition to websites, books and articles being more readily available, discussion fora are popular. For the non-academic historian this is the 1914-1918 Forum although there are others such as Axis. For the academic of World War One there is H-Net and the First World

¹ <http://www.comrades.com/History/The-First-Race.aspx>

War Society. An analysis of the 1914-1918 Forum identified that in each of the two years sampled 2008-2009 and 2011-2012, 150 discussions featured the campaign and in the year 2011-12, 73 separate people were identified as having commented on the campaign. More specifically, of the 243 discussions found in the sub-section on Sub-Saharan, 134 deal specifically with East Africa, the first post being placed in October 2003. This compares with 898 discussion threads on Gallipoli and 595 for Delville Wood. The question, not addressed in this paper, but significant for this discussion, is what were the other 109 discussions in the Sub-Saharan section about? Given that the West African conflicts, South West Africa and Angola would fall into this category, the finding suggests that there is perhaps less of a memory around these theatres than that of East Africa. Silences sometimes speak louder than noise.

The forthcoming centenary is going to be very interesting in terms of memory development as based on the current trend and cultural definers there is likely to be an increase in remembrance dependent on the economic benefits which can accrue as a result of battle-site visits. This has already been identified through the interest of local hotels/safari parks in Kenya which have significant sites within travel distance. Being involved in some of the discussions around battlefield tours and the re-enactment as well as travelling to see some of the sites has raised new questions around remembrance and memory which is culturally and nationally based. There is a clear distinction between the approach of the British/Western person and that of the African. This was brought home on a recent trip to the battlesites in Tsavo on the Kenya/Tanzania border. A group of Masai women questioned our interest in a dusty hill which only goats roamed on and were eventually satisfied, although still not completely convinced, when our Masai guide explained that we had come to see where our great British chief had fought the great German chief. For the Masai, although the oral tradition around chiefs is important, visiting the sites is not significant.

On the same trip, we went to see a Hindi monument in Maktau – significant for Indian troops showing South Africans how to fight – and our driver became obviously emotional. He was astounded to discover the memorial alongside a road he had driven down since a child. He was now retired and had never heard about this memorial or more importantly, that the majority of names on it were of his family – Khan (this is one of the few Hindi (Swahili for Indian) memorials which actually has names recorded). Interestingly too, his previous neighbour, also a friend, who runs the nearby safari resort and who took us to see some forts which had recently been uncovered as well as the nearby railway station, had not registered on the fact that his friend had the same surname as those on the memorial. I interpret this omission as a combination of culture and economics. The two men are both African, one black, the other Indian. For the black man, more rooted in his tradition

and tribe he has no need for links to the past or another world whereas for the Indian, uprooted from his homeland for whatever reason, this was a link home or part of his identity. However, the economic rivalry between the two in terms of battlefield tours and income would have been significant. When our resort host took us out to the sites he wanted to show us, he made a point of telling our driver he could not join us – there was no room in the vehicle!

Although these are two personal stories, they resonate and explained the difficulty I was having in understanding the differences around battlefield tours across the territory. Kenya is further advanced in this regard which is not surprising given the white Kenyan and ex-pat community there which has an interest in the campaign. This has resonated to the park owners who have seen an increase (albeit small at present) in people interested in looking at something other than animals. In contrast, Tanzania which has a small white/ex-pat community is struggling. There are a couple of black Tanzanians interested in developments but they are not driving things forward in the same way as Kenya or even South Africa/Zambia, where again white Africans are taking the lead. As mentioned earlier, once economic benefits are recognised, I think there will be a change in remembrance around the campaign in Africa.

It was through my association with this group of non-academic historians trying to set up battlefield tours which brought me into contact with the Great War in East Africa Association, started by an enthusiast. In his drive for a battle re-enactment in Tanzania for the centenary, he tracked down interested colleagues across the world. A few months after setting up a website, he suddenly died (July 2011) and the group started to languish. In November of last year, having been included in numerous emails by different members working on different aspects of remembrance, I decided to take over the co-ordination of the Association to ensure the continued sharing of knowledge across the theatre and to organise a conference after coming across the suggestion by someone in the British South African Police Association. The conference is taking place this Saturday (14 July 2012).

Given my interest in the development of memory and the role of the historian in this regard, my taking over the co-ordination of the association has made me more reflective on this front. To what extent am I creating a memory of the campaign through the information I post on the site? The historian plays a dual role – recorder of information based on primary and secondary research – and activist – creator of a market to ensure credibility, legitimacy and income through the sale of books, tours etc. This potentially brings the historian into the political field as an orchestrator of remembrance. It is a fine line to tread and being aware of the boundaries of the recorder and activist is crucial to undertaking valid historical research.

But as Paul Fussell (2000) has noted: 'in every piece of non-fiction, there is an element of autobiography'. It is this acknowledgement which has enabled me to start investigating the reasons people have become interested in the campaign. In 2009 I posted a question on the 1914-1918 Forum asking this question. Three years later I was able to discern the following from the twenty-one responses received: 43% (nine) respondents came to the campaign through a family member or close family friend, four due to living in a related country and the remainder through battle honours, armaments, mining and wider reading. This tends to suggest that the search for identity in the West is a major factor. It is indicative of what Pierre Nora (Winter 2006) regards as 'a sign of profound political disorientation'.

An aspect which requires further detailed study relates to identity. I have mentioned identity as a reason for studying the campaign but there is also an issue of identity around those who fought. Using the English speaking troops is a case in point. Ewart Grogan, a leading East African settler who walked from Cape Town to Cairo, was Belgian Liaison officer during the war and was involved in the conscription campaign in British East Africa is regarded as South African by his peers. This came as a shock to me as I naturally assumed he was British, his having been born in that country and having only spent four years in South Africa trying to 'find himself'. There are the seven New Zealanders referred to earlier, most of whom were born in Britain and then CP Crewe, the brother of Lord Crewe. CP, who owned a Port Elizabeth newspaper, was involved in recruiting in South Africa and led the South African troops on Tabora, is often regarded as South African. Similarly, Boers fought on the side of both the British and Germans, having been resident in the respective East African colonies yet had been born in South Africa, against whom the German Boers fought. Why? What is the link to the Anglo-Boer or South African war? Is there one? Where do we draw the line? How do we determine someone's identity? Is it important? In trying to understand South African and other African history, it is important.

This paper has taken a fleeting look at remembrance over the past 100 years and has raised more questions than answers. There are flaws no doubt in the methodology and subjective nature of the classifications and analysis but it has, at least for me, opened up new avenues of study and brought to light many sources I had not been aware of.

Bibliography

Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and modern memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Rutherford, Alan, *Kaputala, the diary of Arthur Beagle and the East Africa campaign 1916-1918* (Handover Fist, 2001)

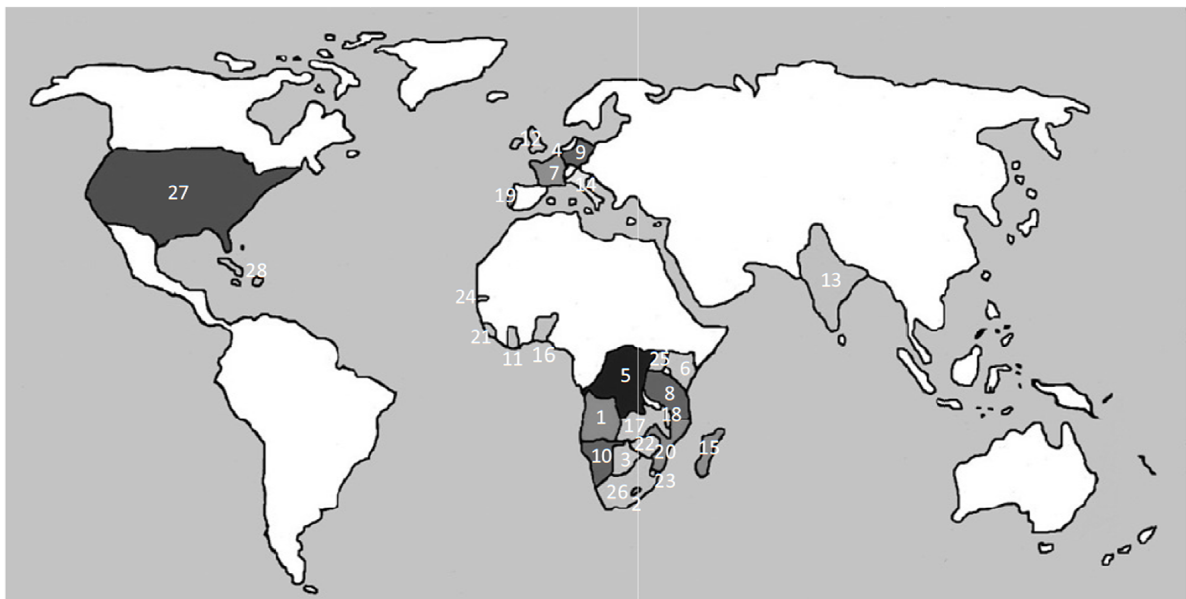
Vandervort, Bruce, 'New light on the East African theatre of the Great War: a review essay of English language sources' in Stephen M Miller (ed) *Soldiers and settlers in Africa, 1850-1918* (BRILL, 2009)

Winter, Jay & Prost, Antoin, *The Great War in history: Debates and controversies, 1914-the present* (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Winter, Jay, *Remembering war: The Great War between memory and history in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 2006)

Slides

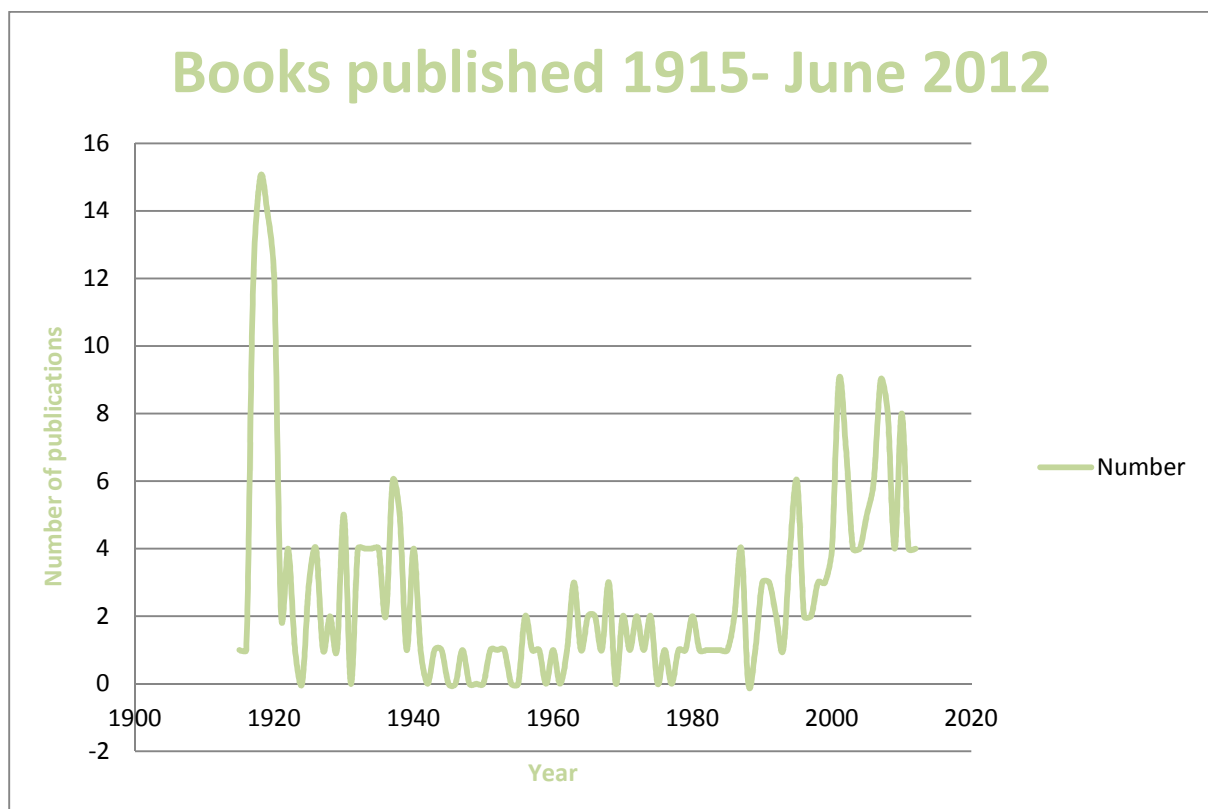
Countries-/ Territories involved in the East Africa campaign



- 1.Angola, 2.Basotholand, 3.Bechuanaland, 4.Belgium, 5.Belgian Congo, 6.British East Africa, 7.France,
8.German East Africa, 9.Germany, 10.German South West Africa, 11.Gold Coast, 12.Great Britain, 13.India, 14.Italy,
15.Madagascar, 16.Nigeria, 17.Northern Rhodesia, 18.Nyasaland, 19.Portugal, 20.Portuguese East Africa,
21.Sierra Leone, 22.Southern Rhodesia, 23.Swaziland, 24.The Gambia, 25.Uganda, 26.Union of South Africa,
27.United States of America, 28.West Indies

Novels and Films* of the East Africa Campaign

- Gertrude Page, *Follow After* (1915)
- Herbert Strang, *Tom Willoughby's Scouts: A story of the war in German East Africa* (1919)
- Gertrude Page, *Far from the limelight* (1925)
- Friedrich Wilhelm Mader, *Die helden von Ostafrika: Am Kilimanjaro abenteuer und kampfen Deutsch-Ostafrika* (1927)
- Francis Brett Young, *Jim Redlake* (1930)
- Balder Olden & Lorna Dietz, *On virgin soil: a novel of exotic Africa* (1930)
- CS Forrester, *The African Queen* (1935) *
- Christen P Christiansen, *Sonderjyder Forsvarer Ostafrika, 1914-18* (1937)
- Josef Viera, *Deutsch-Ostafrika unverloren! Erzählung aus den deutschen Kolonialkämpfen im Weltkrieg* (1943)
- Wilbur Smith, *Shout at the devil* (1968) *
- Philip Jose Farmer, *Tarzan alive* (1972)
- Alan Schofield, *Lion in the evening* (1974)
- William Stevenson, *The ghosts of Africa* (1980)
- William Boyd, *An ice-cream war* (1982)
- C Weber & D Lint, *The Jungle Navy* (1999) * based on *The Phantom Flotilla* by Peter Shankland (1968)
- Gloria Whelan, *Listening for lions* (2005)
- Hamilton Wende, *The king's shilling: a novel* (2006)
- George Lucas, *The Young Indiana Jones* (2007) *only
- HJ Popowski, *Haya Safari* (2008)
- Alex Capus, *A matter of time* (2009)
- William Powell, *Chui and Sadaka* (2010)



Publications of the East Africa campaign – Black, Coloured and Indian involvement

- Francis Brett Young, *Marching on Tanga* (1927)
- WD Downes, *With the Nigerians in East Africa* (1919)
- GM Orr, *The Indian Army in East Africa 1914-1917* (1919)
- AJB Desmore, *With the Second Cape Corps through Central Africa* (1920)
- Ivor Dennis Difford, *The story of the First Battalion Cape Corps* (1920)
- HC Clifford, *The Gold Coast Regiment in the East African campaign* (1920)
- W Lloyd Jones, *KAR: Being an unofficial account of the origin and activities of the King's African Rifles* (1926)
- WS Thatcher, *Indian Army, Fourth Battalion Duke of Connaught's Won Tenth Baluch Regiment in the Great War* (1934)
- Geoffrey Hodges, *The Carrier Corps* (1956)
- H Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A study in the military history of East and Central Africa 1890-1945* (1956)
- J Gus Liebenow, *Colonial rule and political development in Tanzania: the case of the Makonde* (1971)
- KW Grundy, *Soldiers without politics: Blacks in the South African armed forces* (1983)
- Geoffrey Hodges, *Kariakor: The Carrier Corps* (1986)
- Melvin E Page, *Africa and the First World War* (1987)
- Albert Grundlingh, *Fighting their own war: South African blacks and the First World War* (1987) [Thesis, 1985 covers Black, Indian and Coloured involvement]
- TJ Stapleton, *No insignificant part: the Rhodesia Native Regiment and the East Africa Campaign of the First World War* (1990)
- SD Pradhan, *Indian Army in East Africa* (1991)
- M von Herff, *They walk through fire like the blondest Germans: Africa soldiers serving the Kaiser in German East Africa* (1991)
- Ian Gleeson, *The unknown force: Black, Indian and Coloured soldiers through two World Wars* (1994)
- Malcolm Page, *KAR: A history of the King's African Rifles* (1998)
- Norman Clothier, *Black valour: The South African Native Labour Contingent 1916-1918 and the sinking of the Mendi* (1998)
- DD Phiri, *Let us die for Africa: An African perspective on the life and death of John Chilembwe of Nyasaland/Malawi* (1999)
- George A Shepperson & Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Nyasaland rising of 1915* (2000)
- Melvin E Page, *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War* (2000) KP Adgie, *Askaris, asymmetry, and small wars: Operational art and the German East Africa campaign 1914-1918* (2001)
- JB Gewalt, *Colonial warfare: Hehe and World War One, the wars besides Maji-Maji in South-western Tanzania* (2005)
- Bror Urme MacDonell, *Mzee Ali: The biography of an African slave-raider, turned askari and scout* (2006)
- Alexandre Binda & David Heppenstall, *Masodja: A history of the Rhodesian African Rifles and its forerunner – The Rhodesian Native Regiment*
- Tanja Buehrer, *Die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika: Koloniale Sicherheitspolitik und transkulturelle* (2011)
- Opolot Okia, *Communal labour in colonial Kenya: The legitimisation of coercion 1912-1930* (2012)
- Andrew Kerr, *I can never say enough about the men* (2012)