

The First World War began at a critical time for British-Irish relations. In the weeks before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the controversy over Irish Home Rule had assumed center stage in British politics. Home Rule would transfer domestic Irish governance to the Irish parliament based in Dublin. Upon the implementation of Home Rule, the Dublin parliament would have control over Ulster as well, where the majority of the population were Protestants. Home Rule would thus give effective control over all of Ireland to Irish Catholics, although foreign affairs and military policy would continue to be governed from London. As a compromise solution it had much to recommend it, mostly because it offered the best hope of heading off another round of violence.

Many Irish nationalists saw Home Rule as the first logical and peaceful step on the road toward total independence from England. For this reason, Ulster unionists, including many of the army's most senior generals, feared that Home Rule would lead to the beginning of bloody reprisals against Ireland's Protestant population and, eventually, the end of a Protestant presence in Ireland. In order to resist what they often derided as "Rome Rule," Protestant groups, many with close ties to the army, began to arm themselves. These groups, known as the Ulster Volunteers, were illegal, but had tremendous sympathy among the Protestant population as a whole and among many people in key governmental positions.

John French, Hubert Gough, and Henry Wilson were among those generals of Anglo-Irish stock who saw Home Rule as dangerous. Other senior generals, while not Anglo-Irish, saw Home Rule as an ominous omen for the future of the British Empire. Gough and Wilson made it clear to the government that Home Rule could create a potential powder keg if the government asked Anglo-Irish officers to disarm their fellow Protestants in order to give power to Catholics.

A Home Rule bill had already passed Parliament in 1913 and

was scheduled to go into effect in June 1914. In April 1914 Gough, then commander of a cavalry brigade at Curragh barracks in County Kildare, announced to his officers that he would resign if the government ordered him north into Ulster to disarm the Ulster Volunteers. Fifty-eight of his brigade's seventy officers agreed to stand with him. Gough's younger brother was then serving as Haig's chief of staff. He told Haig that he would resign if his brother did. The "Curragh mutiny" sent shock waves through the British army. Haig warned the government that any attempt to punish Gough for his actions might be met with massive resignations across the British officer corps. The king, furious over the incident, nevertheless urged Parliament to suspend Home Rule pending further investigation.

The July crisis and the start of World War I pushed Irish issues to the back burner. The war temporarily rallied Irish opinion to British colors as Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, volunteered for the British army. The Irish nationalist group Sinn Fein initially supported Catholic participation in the war in the hope that the British government would see Ireland as an ally and therefore be more inclined to enact Home Rule once the war had ended. A number of Irishmen, however, saw the war not as a chance to be granted Home Rule by a reluctant government in London, but to seize independence with their own hands. Led by Roger Casement, Irish separatists raised money among the Irish community in the United States, gathered arms, and opened up channels of communications to Germany.

Like the 1917 insertion of Lenin into Russia, Germany hoped to insert Casement into Ireland at a time when such a move might produce important results. Inciting a rebellion in Ireland promised many benefits. A rebellion could tie down thousands of British soldiers and deny Britain the services of thousands more Irish volunteers. It might also serve as a source of inspiration to nationalists across the British Empire, most notably in India. Given the tensions of the Curragh mutiny, a rebellion in Ireland might also

set the British army's senior leaders in opposition to their own government. The Germans therefore pledged support and weapons to Irish nationalists. In April 1916 British warships captured a German ship laden with arms destined for Ireland, raising British concern about a rebellion.

Two other events in 1916 added fuel to the already tense situation in Ireland. Early in the year, the British government granted a more limited version of Home Rule to the Dublin parliament, but did not extend that rule to Ulster. Sensing that they had been betrayed, Irish nationalists saw the move as the beginning of a permanent division of their island and reacted with anger. Shortly thereafter, Britain introduced conscription to meet the enormous manpower needs of Haig's attrition strategy. While Irish nationalists acquiesced in the voluntary service of Irishmen into the British army, they were aghast at the prospect of the British government's compelling such service. Britain did not attempt to conscript men from southern Ireland until 1918, but the introduction of conscription elsewhere nevertheless increased tensions dramatically.

These issues came to a head in April 1916, when police arrested Casement and two others after they were discovered landing in Ireland with the assistance of a German U-boat. Casement claimed that he had had grown disenchanted with the Germans and was coming to warn the authorities of the German plan to foment rebellion. The British naturally suspected him of treachery and presumed that a German-induced rebellion was imminent. The British army began preparations to meet such a rebellion in force. Three days later, on April 24, Irish nationalists seized the Dublin General Post Office and declared Ireland independent of the British Empire. Already on alert, British units responded in force, clearing Dublin block by block and using gunfire from riverboats to destroy nationalist strongpoints. The British quickly executed the rebellion's leaders by firing squad. By August, they had tried, convicted, and hanged Casement as well.

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*British soldiers establish a barricade during the Easter Rising. Tensions in Ireland distracted British attention in the war's final years, but did not lead to massive troop rotations from the western front, as the Germans had hoped. (© Bettmann/Corbis)*

The brutal crushing of what became known as the Easter Rising inspired a new generation of Irish nationalists. Led by Eamon De Vallera and Michael Collins, they inaugurated a guerrilla war against Britain, which replied by revoking limited Home Rule and dispatching thousands of soldiers to Ireland. In 1918, Britain extended conscription to Ireland, setting off another round of violence. As a result, the end of World War I did not bring peace to Ireland, but a civil war that by 1922 resulted in the fragmentation of Ireland into an Irish Free State based in Dublin and a Republic of Northern Ireland based in Belfast and remaining part of the United Kingdom. Events in Ireland underscored the expanding set of shock waves that resulted from the war.

“NOT WAR AS WE KNEW IT”: THE WAR IN AFRICA

Those shock waves hit Africa as well. World War I in Africa was actually several overlapping wars. The declared war pitted Allied colonial interests against German colonial interests. British forces also fought against Boer separatists, who, as J. J. Collyer put it, saw the war “as a heaven-sent opportunity for an effort to regain the complete independence which they considered they had lost” during the Boer War at the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup> Both sides fought wars against nature as well, as Europeans succumbed much more often to disease than to enemy action. Lastly, the white powers each had to fight against the desires of Africans for greater autonomy or independence. Colonizing whites, a minority everywhere on the continent, had no intention of defeating their European enemy only to see native Africans grow more powerful as a result.

Africa had long been an area of interest to German expansionists. By the mid-nineteenth century, steamships, new weapons, and industrial production of medicines like quinine had enabled Europeans to push into the interior of Africa and extend their power there. Tensions created by the “scramble for Africa” led the great European powers to decide Africa’s future by diplomacy. Many Germans felt that at the 1884–1885 conference on Africa (hosted in Berlin, no less) British and French diplomats had gotten the best territories. All four German colonies (Togoland, German Southwest Africa, German East Africa, and Cameroon) abutted a larger and more powerful British colony. Kaiser Wilhelm II railed at Britain’s denial of Germany’s “place in the sun,” but could do little to change the situation until the outbreak of World War I offered him an opportunity.

Unfortunately for Germany, Britain held most of the advantages in Africa. Relatively secure sea lanes allowed Britain to transport men and materials along the African coast, alliances with Belgium and Portugal secured common borders, and Britain’s greater

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*Boer commandos hoping to use the war to gain independence for South Africa assemble in 1914. The outbreak of hostilities in Europe led to a civil war between commandos like these and accommodationist white South Africans, who remained loyal to the British. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)*

manpower reserves in large colonies like Kenya, South Africa, and Rhodesia assured British primacy in Africa. The British also had far more white settlers in Africa than did the Germans. Most of these settlers feared that if Britain lost the war they might be transferred to German control as part of a peace settlement. They therefore volunteered to fight in large numbers (with the notable exception of many Boers) and gave generously of their money.

The vast, relatively underdeveloped territories of Africa made any thought of conquest and occupation absurd. Military operations therefore revolved around particular strategic goals such as wireless stations, ports, and railway lines. Distance, disease, sup-

ply, and reconnaissance problems all limited the ability of Europeans to operate in the African theater. No general staffs in the European sense existed in Africa, and most white soldiers there were trained to suppress Africans, not to fight other Europeans. German Southwest Africa, for example, had just 140 German officers and 2,000 trained enlisted men, enough to maintain control over the colony, but not enough to threaten British South Africa.<sup>13</sup>

The relative absence of Europeans meant that most of the fighting fell to Africans, whom both sides recruited in large numbers as both soldiers and porters. Europeans understood that in enlisting Africans they ran the risk of training for combat the very peoples they were subjugating. Still, given manpower constraints on other, more important, fronts, they had no choice. One recently arrived British officer was given command of a platoon of sixty men who had been recruited from thirty different tribes. The language problems inherent in such a command turned his forces into what he called a “comic opera.” Most of his European commanders, moreover, were Boer War veterans who were now too old to march through the difficult terrain of East Africa, so they directed his unit’s movements via wireless from Dar es Salaam. This situation, he recalled, was far from ideal, as “the Boer War in the open veldt was as different from East Africa as it was from France.” The paucity of supply systems meant that guerrilla-style forces and Boer-style trekkers often fought much better than conventional forces did. It was not, this veteran of the Somme recalled, “war as we knew it in France, but a constant fight against disease.”<sup>14</sup>

Where the British could bring their conventional advantages to bear relatively easily, they achieved rapid success. Because relations between white colonies had been largely friendly in the years immediately before the war (neighboring colonies were often dependent upon one another for trade), Germany had only a small military presence in Togoland and Cameroon. Both colonies bordered larger and more populous British colonies and had no field de-

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*British soldiers escort Germans out of Togoland in 1915. Before the war, British, French, and German settlers in Africa bore little animosity for one another. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)*

fenses along their frontiers. The British therefore seized effective control of Togoland and almost all of Cameroon's coastline within a matter of weeks. By the end of the war's first summer the wireless transmitters in both colonies were in British hands. With those goals secured and the surrender of the small German force in Togoland concluded, Britain and France divided the German colonial possessions between them and focused their efforts on Germany's other two African colonies.

The war in German Southwest Africa was more complex because of the British belief that the colony, in Hew Strachan's words, had provided "a haven for diehard Boer rebels."<sup>15</sup> British entry in the war led South African Prime Minister Louis Botha, who had once fought against the British, to send South African soldiers to the western front as part of the larger British effort. The British request that South African forces invade German

Southwest Africa created the potential of civil war between Boers, like Botha, who had made peace with the British in South Africa, and those who had fled to German Southwest Africa. The official British history of the campaign in southwest Africa estimates that 11,000 Boers took up arms against Britain during the war.<sup>16</sup>

The existence of a mutual enemy brought the anti-British Boer community together with the Germans. The *South West Messenger*, a Boer newspaper, declared the war a “chance to get even” with the British Empire, which it hoped would “now receive the deathblow, the stab right through the heart.” These sentiments were later echoed by Boer commander Andries de Wet, who urged his fellow Boers to “accept the hand of the German government to free yourselves.”<sup>17</sup> In the Boers, the Germans had a relatively large population with experience fighting the British. The open spaces of southwest Africa, moreover, were ideal for the kinds of guerrilla and trekker tactics for which the Boers were so well known.

The threat of a Boer uprising notwithstanding, Botha and General Jan Smuts were determined that South Africa would support the British Empire. They justified their position on the grounds that South Africans of Boer and English descent alike had to unite to defeat a German takeover of their land. Botha hoped that the war might serve to unite the white settlers of South Africa, thus ensuring his larger goal, the subjugation of the region’s majority black population. He envisioned a rapid defeat of the Germans, followed by the mutual cooperation by the region’s whites to collaborate in the suppression of the much more numerous blacks. Using horses and mules for mobility, and fighting fellow Boers much more often than Germans, Botha’s forces easily captured the southern parts of the German colony. The absence of a major Boer uprising inside South Africa freed up additional troops to invade deeper into German Southwest Africa. In June 1915, Botha won an important battle that forced Germany to admit defeat. He gave the Germans generous surrender terms, which they accepted in July. He then began a series of policies designed

to replace Southwest Africa's Germans with Boers. For Botha, the military victory was one step in a larger scheme to create a white-dominated South African empire.

The final theater of the war in Africa, German East Africa, lasted the longest. There, a talented German guerrilla fighter, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, led a force of African Askari soldiers into Kenya, tying down British forces and moving across East Africa "practically unmolested" by unprepared and outmatched British forces.<sup>18</sup> Lettow's African soldiers were hardy, experienced fighters who had brutally suppressed native rebellions by the Herero and Maji-Maji nations. The Askari fought well for Germany, withdrawing into their own territory and thereby forcing the British to extend their supply lines and expose their flanks as they pursued.

Although later histories written by Europeans rained glory on Lettow and the German officers of the African *Schutztruppe* unit, the Askari proved to be ideally suited for guerrilla warfare. They were seasoned veterans of numerous African campaigns and knew how to move quickly and safely through the difficult terrain of East Africa. As Michelle Moyd has pointed out, German soldiers, many of whom were raised among European theories of racial difference, found themselves having to demonstrate a "flexibility, receptivity to ideas outside the mainstream of the Prussian officer's training, and a willingness to cooperate with their black troops" in order to succeed in this unfamiliar environment.<sup>19</sup>

In 1916, frustrated at their inability to locate and destroy the Askari, the British named Smuts, himself a veteran guerrilla fighter, to command British forces in East Africa. Using lessons learned from the fighting in German Southwest Africa, Smuts chased the Askari into Portuguese Mozambique. Limited by supply problems and ravaged by disease, Smuts's forces nevertheless pressed Lettow onto the defensive, although Lettow's troops continued to inflict damage on Allied interests through 1917 and 1918. Lettow's troops, never more than 3,000 Germans and 11,000 Askaris, required 130,000 Allied soldiers to follow and contain.

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*German officers train local militia in New Guinea. Australian forces captured German colonies south of the equator; Japanese forces captured German colonies north of the equator. (Australian War Memorial, negative no. A02544)*

British forces pursued the Askaris into Tanganyika and then into Rhodesia. Lettow did not surrender until November 25, 1918, when he at last heard of the armistice on the western front.

The war in East Africa was far from the minds of most Europeans in 1918. That spring, the Germans launched their final effort to win the war. Since the surrender of the Russians in 1917, the Germans had transferred 48 infantry divisions to France, bringing their total infantry strength on the western front to 191 divisions. These reinforcements masked a deeper problem in the German system, however, as 10 percent of the German soldiers in November 1917 alone used the rails to get close to home, then deserted. The desertion problem grew through the winter, with military leaders powerless to stop it. Nevertheless, the German soldiers

who remained maintained high morale, as they hoped to end the war, "the cause of all the grief," within a few weeks.<sup>20</sup>

As the German forces in France built strength, the war's secondary theaters faded to insignificance. Everyone involved in the war understood the meaning of the German transfers from the eastern front. The outcome of the war, privates and generals alike knew, rested not in Africa or Salonika or Italy. It depended on the Allied ability to throw back a determined German effort to win the war in the first months of 1918, or not win at all.