

Lettow-Vorbeck and the Askaris in German East Africa, 1914-1918

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History and historians have traditionally treated Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow Vorbeck very well in relation to the other Schutztruppe commanders in World War I Sub-Saharan Africa. There were four separate German colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa and all of them put up an initial defense against Allied campaigns yet Lettow-Vorbeck and his campaign in German East Africa (GEA) are consistently singled out as exceptional in comparison to the rest. Lettow is hailed as a national German hero and the darling of cold war guerilla aficionados the world over. If tasked with questioning amateur historians or college students with what they may know about World War I in Africa, the most popular answer (if any) will probably be the African Queen (the movie with Humphrey Bogart) the second most popular answer would be Lettow-Vorbeck and his campaigns in GEA. This is not surprising considering that Lettow Vorbeck was never officially defeated in the war. He was still fighting two weeks after the Armistice in France had ended the war and still there was no foreseeable end to his campaign. Lettow-Vorbeck was prepared and determined to continue disrupting the allied lines of supply and communication for as long as he possibly could. Some historians claim he perfected guerrilla war tactics and is the model that other later twentieth century guerrillas are most compared against.

There is almost a cult of hero worship that surrounds Lettow Vorbeck, like he was one of the last of the great chivalrous Teutonic knights. There is no doubt Lettow was a good commander and he commanded excellent troops but he had a few advantages that the other commanders did not have. That Lettow was 'the last man standing' when it was all over and done with is probably the single most important reason that can be attributed to his lasting fame and notoriety. He was a good commander but not so much more deserving than the other Schutztruppe Commanders, at least the ones in the colonies of the German Cameroons and German South West Africa. Both of these colonies offered excellent defensive campaigns and did as well as they possibly could have with the resources they had available.

Paul Emil von Lettow- Vorbeck was born on the 20th of March 1870. He was groomed for a career in the German Imperial Army. His father was a General and he sent his son to the best military schools in Germany[1]. Upon graduation Lettow was commissioned an officer in the artillery. He went on to lead a varied and illustrious career before he ever assumed the leadership of the GEA Schutztruppe in early 1914.

One of his prior assignments was with the German Expeditionary Force that was sent by Kaiser Wilhelm II to assist in the International peacekeeping force in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion in China 1900-1901. On July 27 1900 the Kaiser bade his troop's farewell in Bremerhaven before they embarked on ships for the Far East. He delivered an incendiary speech which would later be used by the British for propaganda purposes in WWI to show the 'true' barbaric nature of the 'Hun'. In the speech Wilhelm said "Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German." [2] While in China Lettow served on the staff of General Lothar von Trotha, Brigade Commander of the East Asian Expedition

Corps. Von Trotha had previously brutally put down native uprisings in German East Africa. Prodded on by the Kaiser's speech Trotha needed no more urging to unleash the same tactics on the Chinese.

After China, General Trotha was tasked with putting down another insurrection in German South West Africa (GSWA) in 1904. He requested Lettow to again be on his General Staff.[3] When von Trotha commenced putting down the rebellion he shocked Germany and the world with the ferocity and brutality of his methods. The genocidal tactics employed by Trotha and his troops were so shameless and ruthless that von Trotha was relieved of command and called back to Germany early. The administrative running of the colony was stripped from the military and handed over to the civilian diplomatic corps.

Lettow was a product of Prussian military schooling and an Imperial militaristic society that extolled the virtue of winning at war at any cost. Lettow learned his lessons well. Although never accused of the brutality ascribed to von Trotha, or the belligerent attitude of Kaiser William II, Lettow shared the same nationalistic beliefs; what was important was victory and only victory. Total war brought total victory. Had he the superiority in numbers and available resources as his enemies, no doubt he would have been every bit as ruthless in the pursuit of victory as von Trotha had been. Lettow never had the numbers but, although he couldn't deliver the blows on his assailants that von Trotha could against the Boxers in China or the Wahehe in GEA or the Herero in GSWA, Lettow still used every available resource, much to the detriment of the natives inhabiting the ground he fought over.

Lettow-Vorbeck is regarded in very different ways by some of the primary historians of the Great War in Africa. Byron Farwell and Hew Strachan have conflicting views on Lettow. Farwell nearly idolizes him where Strachan makes a good argument that popular myths surrounding Lettow Vorbeck paint him in a picture that is more fiction than fact.

Farwell in his popular history "The Great War In Africa" extols how Lettow knew how to get the most out of those that served under him, "Strict but Fair, he inspired an exceptional loyalty in his African troops".[4] Hew Strachan however, goes out of his way to particularly dispute that very assertion. In his "The First World War in Africa" states "Of the 13,430 casualties which they suffered throughout the war, 4,510 were reported as missing, 4,275 as captured, and 2,847 as deserters. Sufficient indications of poor morale are present in these figures to give the lie to Germans claims of extraordinary faithfulness "[5].

Edward Paice in his account of the War in German East Africa agrees with Strachan and also addresses another misconception of the 'hard but fair' governing policy that Lettow and the Germans used on the native tribes which was supposedly validated by the lack of a native uprising which gave rise to the myth of the 'unstinting loyalty' of the civilian populace during the war. The reason that the natives did not rise up and revolt after they had been so brutally repressed as short a time ago as less than 12 years, was that Lettow's and the Allies armies had stripped the land of all available foodstuffs and labor, without paying, and their scorched earth policy left the natives too weak to do anything. [6]

Lettow himself attempts to address the loyalty of his African soldiers (askaris) in his own 'Reminiscences' when he states that "It was the transparency of our aims, the love of our fatherland, the strong sense of duty, and the spirit of self sacrifice which animated each of our few Europeans and communicated themselves, consciously or unconsciously to our brave black soldiers that they gave our operations that impetus which they possessed to the end." [7] Lettow fails to

mention the high rates of desertion in the casualty figures and tries to paint a picture of the happy native, ruled by hard but just masters. Lettow too believes that by his shining example and the examples of the Europeans, they had inspired the Black Africans to fight for a cause larger and nobler than themselves. Just ten years earlier Lettow had been assisting von Troth in a brutal war of annihilation against the Herero tribe in German South West Africa, but by 1918 he believes that he is inspiring his native troops to greatness.

The Schutztruppe askaris in GEA did fight long, hard and well for Lettow-Vorbeck but it wasn't because of loyalty to Lettow or the Kaiser or because of inspiration by their European masters. There were very good reasons why the askaris fought so well but first one needs to know how and why the askaris were different in German East Africa than the other European Colonies.

The initial impetus for the colonization of German East Africa was in 1884 Dr. Carl Peters, a charter member of the Society for German Colonization, started making treaty expeditions into the interior of the continent from Zanzibar.[8] Peters believed that Germany, as a new world power needed room to grow, and it was time that she took her rightful place in the world stage of Imperialism and colonization. Chancellor Bismarck did not want to get embroiled in the European 'Great Game' being played out in Africa but the Kaiser overruled him and granted Peters and his new organization the Deutsch Ost-Afrika Gesellschaft (German East Africa Company or DOAG), a letter of protection by the Navy should his ventures run into trouble. Peters was soon enmeshed in local tribal and native strife and had to appeal to the Kaiser and Reichstag for more military help. The Reichstag granted £100,000, which was not enough to hire European soldiers, but more than adequate to hire African mercenaries. The Germans wanted to model their force after how the British had with their own askaris, after they realized in the 1850's that African troops were less susceptible to the climate and local disease. The German soldier and Explorer Hermann Wissmann was recruited and tasked with finding suitable troops and putting down the unrest in GEA.[9]

In 1889 Wissmann hired an expeditionary force of 25 officers and 56 non-commissioned officers which he had seconded from the German Army, 600 African soldiers recruited out of British Sudan, and 100 Shagaan warriors from Portuguese East Africa. This expeditionary force reached GEA in May of 1889 and started systematically pacifying the country. Wissmann would occasionally supplement his troops with native Rug-Ruga troops that would also fight but the core of the GEA askaris were the descendants of the Sudanese and Shagaan mercenaries. The Schutztruppe became official in 1891 when it was granted the status of Schutztruppe for the new German colony. [10]

The fact that none of the originally members of the Schutztruppe were native to GEA plays an important part to why they aligned themselves and their fates so closely with the Germans. The askaris originally brought their wives with them and developed their own communities around the Schutztruppe station that was separate and different from other neighboring blacks in the vicinity. They brought their own customs, and in the initial brutal taming of the various rebellions over the years the Schutztruppe alienated themselves from the native Blacks and more closely aligned themselves with the Germans. It is no wonder that they fought as well as they did, theirs and the German fates were intertwined, if the Germans fell so did the askaris. Later on necessity forced the German's to recruit from the local populace but they only did so from certain 'friendly' tribes that were felt could be trusted.

Between 1891 and 1914 the Schutztruppe participated in over 75 punitive expeditions. During this time experience dictated that small unit tactics were preferable to European style war maneuvers.

The Schutztruppe successfully adapted their tactics to the situation of tribal warfare in the bush. The askaris became very successful in tribal bush warfare which would later prove very effective against the allies in WWI. This is the source of another myth surrounding Lettow Vorbeck, that he perfected a Guerilla type style of warfare. This is not the case. The Schutztruppe never fought a guerilla type war. It was a bush war. Guerilla warfare is characterized by ideas of national liberation. Lettow was never out to liberate anyone. His sole reason for waging the war he did was purely to draw allied resources toward himself and away from the fronts in Europe where he believed that Germany would decidedly win the war. Lettow's war was purely one of service and self sacrifice to benefit the Fatherland.[11] Lettow was motivated purely by his dedication to the Army and duty as an officer in the war.

In contrast to Lettow Vorbeck are the other two Schutztruppe commanders, Heydebreck in German South West Africa, and Zimmermann in the German Cameroons. Both of these two officers were appointed to their positions by the military department of the Colonial Officer and their loyalties were to their respective colonies. It showed in the way they conducted their wars. All four of the German Colonies had drawn up defensive plans prior to 1914 in the event of 'Universal War'. All of the plans were similar; abandon the coastlines to minimize war damage on people's lives and property, retire to defensible positions in the interior, thereby drawing violence away from populated areas, and hold on long enough to still be able to lay claim to the colony after the war is won in Europe. Lettow, although that was also the initial plan in GEA, was determined not to fight to protect the colony but to utilize the colony as a means to an end, which was that the colony's interests, both political and economic, manpower and resources were all secondary to military necessity. Lettow had no qualms about requisitioning whatever wherever with or without payment for use of the Schutztruppe. [12]

Early in the war, in November of 1914, an initial British Expeditionary force from India attempted to invade GEA at the port town of Tanga. Through a comedy of errors, incompetence and the fog of war Lettow won a decisive victory over a force of 8000 with a force of 1000 men. The British Expeditionary Force was beaten so badly that they retreated to neighboring British East Africa and stayed there until the other German Colonies were subdued and all available Allied resources could be diverted to GEA. This bought Lettow Vorbeck valuable time to develop a defensive infrastructure and detailed lines of supply and communication that would help later in 1916 when the Allies came back on a three pronged invasion to chase him around for the next twenty months until war's end.[13]

It is a shame that Heydebreck and Zimmermann do not get the credit they deserve. Zimmermann in Cameroon fought from August of 1914 until February of 1916 when the last outpost at Mora fell. A prolonged defensive for 18 months, Heydebreck fought overwhelming forces in a landscape entirely different from GEA. Both of these two Commanders minimized the damage on their own colony both in loss of property and life. Lettow maximized casualties, and it was the natives who bore the brunt of the suffering of the war in GEA. Also it was the defense of the other two commanders that bought Lettow Vorbeck valuable time all through 1915 and into 1916 before any real concerted effort was taken to put a stop to him post. Once that did happen, Lettow-Vorbeck was essentially on the run for 20 months. He gained a new nickname by the allies – 'Lettow-Fallback'. He was not fighting a guerilla war, he was fighting a constant tactical retreat. Retreat or not, Lettow accomplished what he set out to do, he tied up Allied resources and denied their use in Europe. His elusiveness gave rise to a grudging respect and admiration by his enemies. Myths started to crop up about him that he was seen carrying wounded askaris off the battlefield and that he trained himself

to go barefoot so he would be ready on the day when they no longer had shoes.[14]

When Lettow finally did surrender and was repatriated back to Germany he received a hero's welcome. Most German people still could not believe that the war had been lost. With soldiers like Lettow that had never been defeated, it made the bitter pill of surrender even more difficult to swallow. Lettow was idolized by the crowds desperate to find a hero after the surrender by the Generals and the abdication of the Kaiser. Eventhough he had never really won the battle for GEA, he had never lost it either.

After the war there was a plethora of first handreports by survivors from all areas and theaters of the war. Lettow wrote acouple of books, his chief of staff wrote one, many English Officers wrote, as did enlisted men on both sides. There was no shortage on accounts about Lettow and the East African Askaris. To this day Military War Colleges draw on these primary sources to teach whole courses on Lettow and his successful campaign against superior forces.

Lettow-Vorbeck was in the right time at the right place. The Schutztruppe and askaris were different in GEA than any other place which gave him a decidedly superior advantage. Their isolation and difference from all other tribes in the countrysince their inception in 1888 was ideal for utilization by Lettow. They identified and aligned themselves with the Germans. This was a resource that is usually attributed to Lettow's inspirational and leadership skills but the askaris ability and willingness to fight for the Germans was in place and functioning long before Lettow came to GEA. The initial British debacle at Tanga bought him much needed time to prepare suitable defenses. He was a good officer and he did what he was trained to do. The cards fell in line for him and he had the correct resources to sustain a lengthy defense for twenty months. He was a good officer and strategist but no genius. More credit is given Lettow than Zimmerman and Heydebrich which is not entirely fair. Their campaigns were equally as difficult and were conducted with less time to prepare and resources at hand.

[1] Farwell, Byron. *The Great WAr InAfrica (1914-1918)*. New York NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.p.106

[2] Görtemaker, Manfred. KAISER WILHELM IICHINA-BASHING "HUN SPEECH" BREMERHAVEN GERMANY JULY 27 1900. November 25, 2010.<http://cambridgeforecast.wordpress.com/2010/11/25/kaiser-wilhelm-ii-china-bashing-hun-speech-bremerhaven-germany-july-27-1900/>(accessed December 16, 2010).

[3]Paice, Edward. *Tip & Run*.London: Phoenix, 2007.p.355

[4] Farwell, Byron. *The Great WAr InAfrica (1914-1918)*. New York NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.p.107

[5]Strachan, Hew. *The First World War In Africa*.New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 p.103

[6]Paice, Edward. *Tip & Run*.London: Phoenix, 2007.p.356

7Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul Emil Von. *My Reminiscences of East Africa*. Kentucky:Forgotten Books, 2010.p. 325-6

[8]Herff, Michaelvon. *"They walk through the Fire like the blondest German" :African Soldiers Serving the Kaiser In German East Africa (1888 - 1914)*.Master of Arts Thesis, Montreal: McGill University, 1991.p.7

[9] Ibid. p. 10

[10] Ibid. p.25

[11]Strachan, Hew. *The First World War In Africa*.New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 p.94-95

[12] Ibid.p.95

[13] KeKenneth J. Harvey, MAJ, USA. *The Battle Of Tanga, German East Africa 1914*. Thesis, FortLevenworth: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2003.P.81

[14]Paice, Edward. *Tip & Run*. London:Phoenix, 2007.p. 241

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