

Review: Malawian Soldiers in the First World War

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MALAWIAN SOLDIERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

DOI: 10.1017/S0021853702308223

The Chiyaya War: Malawians and the First World War. By MELVIN E. PAGE.

Boulder: Westview Press, 1999. Pp. xvi + 276. £44.95 (ISBN 0-8133-1234-5).

KEY WORDS: Malawi, military.

This book has been a long time coming. Until very recently, most of the scholarly work on the African military experience in colonial armies dated back to the colonial era. Melvin Page's excellent series of articles on the impact of the First World War on colonial Nyasaland (modern Malawi) were an important exception. Now we finally have the full work that produced these pioneering studies. The book began as Page's 1977 doctoral dissertation. It is essentially a cross between a dissertation-based first monograph and a serious historical study by a veteran Africanist.

The book's greatest strength is the truly impressive body of fieldwork on which it rests. Page and his African research assistants interviewed several hundred Malawian ex-servicemen and civilians (he does not give exact figures) in the early 1970s. Much of his success came from the Malawian army's full support and co-operation in the project. Page followed up this original oral research with additional interviews in the early 1990s. He thus had both the luxury of speaking with African veterans of the First World War (a very scarce commodity these days) and an extra twenty years to put their stories in context. This rich vein of oral history provides an in-depth and intimate account of how the First World War influenced nearly every aspect of daily life in colonial Nyasaland.

Page's stated goal in *The Chiyaya War* is to write a history of the Great War for the Malawian public, and he has largely succeeded in producing an accessible narrative. Arguing that Nyasaland became a focal point of the Anglo-German rivalry, Page traces how common Africans were drawn into a larger global conflict. British colonial authorities recruited and conscripted over 200,000 Malawians as infantrymen in the King's African Rifles (the East African colonial army) and as porters in the Carrier Corps, known locally as Tengtenga. Over one quarter of the 9,000 African soldiers in the Nyasaland KAR battalions became casualties in the ensuing four-year-struggle to conquer German East Africa. Africans in the Carrier Corps suffered even greater losses. These African soldiers and carriers are the heroes of *The Chiyaya War*. Page takes us through their enlistment, training, daily hardships, combat experiences, resistance to military discipline and finally their less than triumphant return home after the war was over.

Yet the book also pays careful attention to how the conflict influenced the lives of the civilian population of Nyasaland. In a chapter entitled 'The Hungry War' Page analyzes how the military's mass recruiting and conscription campaign disrupted food production and the rhythms of daily life. He does a particularly good job of puncturing the colonial myth that the war benefited African women. Rather than growing fat and lazy on their absent husbands' military savings, they struggled to mobilize enough labour to ensure regular harvests.

Page also assesses the overall impact of the war on Nyasaland. He makes a useful contribution to the ongoing debate about the political consequences of African military service by noting that ex-servicemen played only a small role in the African political associations that sprang up after the war. Equally interesting is his discussion of how soldiers who managed to save their wages became a class of *nouveau riche* in sections of the country that had been weakened by the colonial government's demands for men and taxes. In the northern province, ex-servicemen used their money to buy cattle in order to marry into more established families. Page's assertion that the Great War was Malawi's first 'national experience' is less

convincing. Although Africans throughout the protectorate found themselves drawn into the conflict, the book offers little evidence that they emerged from the war with a greater national sense of themselves as Malawians.

Page also has occasional difficulty contextualizing his rich oral sources. Although his final chapter compares the East African fighting to the conflict's other theatres, he could have gone further in analyzing the wartime experiences of his informants. He makes extensive use of colonial narratives and archives but tends to lay official colonial sources and individual African memories side-by-side rather than intertwining them. For example, his African informants' recollections of their service can be summarized neatly under the heading 'war is hell'. Their complaints about conscription, bad rations, brutal discipline, unpaid pensions and a general lack of official gratitude were common to many African and European veterans of the conflict. Not surprisingly, Page's informants claim to be have been the toughest and bravest soldiers in the entire King's African Rifles. Ex-servicemen throughout history have made similar boasts. Page cites colonial sources to support these claims but does not offer an explanation for why Malawians made such good soldiers. His equation of military service with labour migration suggests an answer to this question, but the book would be stronger if he deepened the dialogue between his African and European sources.

These are minor problems. On the whole, *The Chivaya War* makes an important contribution to our understanding of colonial African military service and the impact of the global conflict on a specific African colony. This fine narrative account of Malawians in the Great War will interest both students of Africa and the people of Malawi themselves.

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PROPHECY, RESISTANCE, REBURIAL

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African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet. By ROBERT E. EDGAR and HILARY SAPIRE. Athens: Ohio, University Center for International Studies, 2000; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999. Pp. xxvi + 190. \$20.00 (ISBN 0-89680-208-6); £19.50 paperback (ISBN 1-86814-337-6).

KEY WORDS: South Africa, Christianity, resistance/rebellion, gender, health, biography.

It's not every day that a historian seeking to satisfy his curiosity and desire for justice finds himself fulfilling a prophecy from the 1920s, but so it was with American Bob Edgar. Nontetha Nkwenkwe, whose remains he and co-author Hilary Sapire managed to trace and get exhumed from an unmarked pauper's grave in Pretoria over sixty years after she died in Weskoppies mental hospital, had always told her disciples, 'Look to the Americans. They will help you one day'! Orchestrated by enthusiastic black heritage officials liaising with church and family, Nontetha's solemn reburial back home in 1998 illustrated the rich pageant which is the new South Africa, not least because the choir honouring the Xhosa Christian prophetess came from the Joe Slovo Secondary School, named for the Jewish Communist guerrilla hero, while the archaeologist who exhumed her was an Afrikaner from the University of Pretoria. Historians rarely get to pay their debts to informants quite so fully – using science to rectify an injustice perpetrated by science.