

Challenging European Colonial Supremacy: The Internment of ‘Enemy Aliens’ in British and German East Africa during the First World War – DANIEL STEINBACH

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The First World War is predominantly remembered for the trench warfare on the Western Front. However, the first and last shots of this conflict were fired in Africa. All European colonial powers who were belligerents carried warfare into their African territories. This resulted in an enormous death toll amongst the indigenous population, both soldiers and civilians, and left vast areas in economic ruins. This is especially true for Eastern Africa where the battle of German against British, Portuguese and Belgian troops lasted for four years. Despite this the conflict there was portrayed – and to some extent still is portrayed in this manner – as a ‘gentlemen’s war’ in which the opponents conducted the war according to rules which upheld the power and prestige of the ‘white man’. This paper aims to challenge this view by examining the treatment of prisoners of war and civilian internees by the authorities in German East Africa and British East Africa.

This paper will firstly examine the situation in the first months of the war. At this time, both British and German colonial governments started to arrest “enemy aliens”, mainly businessmen, planters and missionaries. These actions targeted Europeans, who, in some cases, had been living in the colony for decades and who held important positions in the colonial hierarchy. Their arrest and following internment undermined the paradigm of white supremacy, which was overshadowed by nationalistic war patriotism.

Secondly, the conditions of internment will be addressed as this represented the end of an unified European solidarity in Africa. Unlike the British, who were able to deport German prisoners to camps outside the war zone (mainly India and Egypt), the Germans had to deal with their prisoners on the spot. While African combatants, who were held in worse conditions in separate camps were often released after a short time if they joined their former enemy’s troops, European prisoners were held up to three years. Different to the practise in Europe, in Africa civilian and military detainees of all nationalities were held together. This changed the dynamic of the ‘camp culture’

significantly, as the construction of a supportive community within the camps proved to be difficult. Punishment in the camps was often based on forcing prisoners to overstep symbolic racial boundaries, which were central to colonial thinking and practice. Detention in 'native huts', manual labour, and parades on the camp ground were merely intended to humiliate the white prisoners.

German and British newspapers published during the war, and memoirs of former internees published afterwards, were preoccupied with the idea that 'white prestige' had suffered irreversibly through internment of Europeans. However, this notion could be effectively countered by promoting the fair conduct of all parties on the African battlefield, (i.e., the 'gentleman's war'), a narrative that ultimately took hold.

In sum there is a significant contrast between the reality of the war in Africa and its later representation as a 'gentlemen's war'. The argument is presented that the narration of a 'fair war' was necessary to smooth over the challenges to colonial ideology presented by warfare between Europeans on African soil.