

REVIEW ARTICLES

Little War and Great War in Africa

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Remembering the Rebellion: The Zulu Uprising of 1906. By JEFF GUY. (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2006). vii + 197 pp. ISBN 10: 1-8691-4117-2
Tip & Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa. By EDWARD PAICE. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2007). xxxix + 488 pp. ISBN 10: 0-2978-4709-0

Here are two books on colonial and imperial fighting in early twentieth-century Africa, one lean, the other fat, in keeping with the overall historical weight of their respective topics. Both provide rich, compelling accounts of the searing tragedy of modern warfare in colonial theatres. The subject of the slimmer volume, *Remembering the Rebellion*, is the archetypal small war or punitive expedition against tribal peasant foes, in which a key general principle was the close coordination of 'political control and military command'.¹ In this case, it was the Zulu or Bhambatha rebellion of 1906. In the first decade of the last century, the times were seriously out of joint in the Colony of Natal, with colonists jumpy over rising African dissatisfaction, the air thick as pitch with rumours of looming insurrection, and the military establishment priming its cartridges in anticipation of an almost certain Zulu uprising. It came in February 1906 when the colonial authorities imposed a poll tax as a further leech upon already skinny Zulu homesteads. For a grumpy *inkosi* Bhambatha, it was the last straw. Taking to the hoof, he intrigued with willing neighbouring chiefs and their followers, assembled a skilled impi, and struck out to settle scores with colonial oppressors and their African collaborators.

By using adroit guerrilla tactics, Bhambatha's insurgents were able to keep Natal garrison forces on the hop, even on the back foot for a time. And, as the position of the authorities deteriorated, the rebellion spread. But once they had reinforced their stock of men and firepower, and smartened their intelligence, the tide turned inevitably. The rebellion was crushed with great ferocity. Zulu livestock and food reserves were looted, homesteads were incinerated, several thousand Africans were killed and an even greater number were imprisoned. Other reprisals included the mass confiscation of cattle and goods, and close to 5,000 heavy floggings. The

1 H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: Routledge, 1993), 80.

comparative cost to white colonial society, its militia and their African allies, was slight. That, with bonsai brevity, was the Zulu rebellion cited by Nelson Mandela in his 1962 treason trial defence as one of the just wars of resistance waged by the illustrious ancestors.

Albert Grundlingh and Paul Maylam have both reminded us of the shadow thrown by the Natal rising upon another and bigger war less than a decade later. During the First World War, able-bodied Zulu men did not exactly fall over themselves in responding to the government call for service as auxiliaries. For one thing, that call did not come from too promising a local quarter. One of those put in charge of recruiting was the prominent farmer and former Minister of Native Affairs, Sir George Leuchars. He proved, however, to be a notoriously tainted choice. For, as Lieutenant-Colonel Leuchars, he was remembered all too well for his merciless role in ‘the crushing of the 1906 rebellion’. Not surprisingly, ‘many Africans refused to enlist’.²

When ordinary recruitment failed to raise a sufficient number of African carriers and bearers to sustain four years of fighting in the East African campaign, both sides resorted to coercion to pluck labouring auxiliaries from the societies of East Africa, a sordid saga in African labour exploitation first chronicled by scholars decades ago.³ *Tip & Run*, at almost 500 pages a volume of Dreadnought or Hindenburg dimensions, has much to say on this and a great deal else besides in telling the story of the Great War in Africa. Always far more than just a European conflict, right from the start ‘British, French, Belgian, and German belligerence embraced the entire continent of Africa with the exception of Liberia, Ethiopia’ and a few smaller colonies of the Mediterranean powers. Even these were not ‘exempt from the war, at least in its indirect forms’.⁴ Africa saw the first ever British shots of the war (by a West African infantryman) in August 1914, and also its final hostile exchanges. These crackled on after Armistice in November 1918 until the Prussian Pimpernel of German East Africa, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, finally surrendered grudgingly to the South African general, ‘Jaap’ van Deventer, in Northern Rhodesia. Indeed, even though by then all but on his last legs, von Lettow-Vorbeck only capitulated because Berlin had already thrown in the towel.

In Africa, his dogged guerrilla campaign to resist a British conquest of East Africa and to maintain the idea of an undefeated German *Mittelafrika*, turned the region from modern Kenya in the north to Mozambique in the south, into the main theatre of the Great War on the continent. Sucking in four European empires (Britain, Germany, Belgium and Portugal) and their subjects, black and white, the scale and impact of this sprawling bush struggle made it the largest conflict yet to take place on African soil. Ranging across formidably difficult terrain encompassing

2 A. Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987), 73; P. Maylam, ‘The Changing Political Economy of the Region, 1920-1950’, in R. Morrell, ed., *Political Economy and Identities in Kwazulu-Natal* (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996), 97.

3 D.C. Savage and J. Forbes Munro, ‘Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East Africa Protectorate, 1914-1918’, *Journal of African History*, Vol.7 (2), 1966, 313-42; Geoffrey Hodges, *The Carrier Corps: Military Labour in the East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

4 H. Strachan, *The First World War: Vol.1: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 495.

arid lands to festering tropical jungle to jagged mountains, combatants had to cope with unimaginably extreme conditions. With all forces poorly-nourished on thin rations and saddled with acute supply shortages, invaders and defenders see-sawed across territories that were largely unmapped and teeming with wasting diseases like malaria and amoebic dysentery. As one sardonic British veteran recorded, 'here, one lives like a pig and dies like a dog'.⁵

In a fatiguing East African campaign marked by waste and terrible suffering, that dying was done not only by the over 10,000 British troops who perished, almost two-thirds from ravaging disease. From the large imperial pool of African soldiers and mostly conscripted military carriers, many tens of thousands more died. Nor were these the only Africans upon which the burden of the war fell. For civilian populations of areas churned up into war zones, everyday life became punctuated by ruthless plunder and the arbitrary requisitioning of foodstuffs and labour, as neither command had much compunction in stripping districts of the resources that they desperately needed to keep themselves in the field. It all amounted to a sustained onslaught on colonial land, in which Tanganyika was reduced to 'a mere battlefield'.⁶

It turned into a battlefield on which South African military strength haemorrhaged rather badly. Given the job of dislodging the Germans from East Africa by London, Jan Smuts and his South African brigade commanders had been contemptuous of the local Africanised German army, dismissing Dar es Salaam's disciplined and tenacious askaris as inferior African opposition. But it was the Union's white citizen soldiers who buckled in the bush. Long after it had become evident that it would require the King's African Rifles and other African troops to do what Union servicemen had been unable to do, namely, run von Lettow-Vorbeck to ground, all that Smuts could do was to deplore the danger to civilisation posed by the war in East Africa being waged by Africans. In the end, doing in the German resistance completely was an objective which remained always just beyond the fumbling grasp of British forces under South African command. Through a stubborn, ducking and diving guerrilla campaign in which he continued to find new patches of terrain upon which to keep up the fight, von Lettow-Vorbeck and his small body of *Schutztruppen* ended up thwarting Pretoria's ultimate ambitions of territorial annexation.

Further down south, on the other hand, British colonial power had long before sewn up territorial gain in the east. Yet there were still rural Africans sufficiently exasperated and emboldened to pick at the stitching. To turn again, then, to troublesome Natal. Once upon a time, Winston Churchill wrote a history of the European eastern front of the First World War. Dedicating it to the hapless Czarist army, he titled it, 'The Unknown War'. Churchill certainly knew a fair bit about wars, known or otherwise, and his volume remains a fine and moving narrative, a pioneering excavation of the drama, fearsome mortality and squalor of this front.

5 A. Buchanan, *Three Years of War in East Africa* (London: John Murray, 1919), xvi.

6 J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 241.

Almost as keen on writing history as on making it, he was also, of course, no stranger to colonialism. While he was not famously squeamish about the destructiveness of war nor about colonial oppression, even he had his limits. Those limits were stretched severely by the colony of Natal in the first decade of the twentieth century. As Under-Secretary for the Colonies in the new Liberal government, Churchill was so incensed by the brutish conduct of the Natal colonial government in suppressing the Zulu or Bhambatha rebellion of 1906 that he rounded on what he termed, 'this wretched colony', and denounced it as 'the hooligan of the British Empire'.⁷

That memorable characterisation, a stock-in-trade of many British imperial histories, is cited once again by Jeff Guy in his fascinating and attractively-produced treatment of the Zulu rising. *Remembering the Rebellion* is, as the dustjacket declares, really a compendium of thematically-connected press articles, augmented by arresting illustrations, striking anecdotes and useful maps which provide both a narrative and a centenary commemoration of the 1906 flare-up, described in a classic earlier volume as 'the last tribal revolt on South African soil', and as 'the most severe crisis faced by self-governing Natal in her short history'.⁸

Professor Guy's book is, then, a work of commendably clear and accessible scholarship, providing not only a vivid selection of colour and sepia-tone illustrations, but a very good read, with useful explanatory inserts on the intricate meanings of isiZulu terms, as well as cat-sat-on-the-mat definitions of such things as imperialism, colonialism, and millenarianism. This study is packed with memorable nuggets of information, such as the fact that one of the machine guns used by Natal infantry to mow down rebels was sponsored by the Castle Beer Company. That is a skeleton unlikely to rattle the heritage closet of South African Breweries. Elsewhere, to take but one other example, there is a marvellously simple evaluation of the interpretative issues raised by the historical use of past visual records, on how to read photographs, on the need to be alert to manipulation, and to weigh up the intentions behind displays of dress, posture or architectural style. The author's concise two pages on this are worth any amount of tortured prose on theories of 'reading' 'signs' or the 'grammar of visuality'. As the book suggests of photographs, what matters is really just a commonsense awareness that one needs to take careful account of the 'ideas, imagination, intentions, virtues and prejudices of those involved' in taking pictures.

At the same time, one hesitates to call *Remembering the Rebellion* a genuinely popular history, as it perhaps wobbles a bit in addressing its potential audience. Thus, for all that it bears its author's trademark of crisp and fluent prose, some general readers may well find parts of the text dauntingly dense. With chapters accompanied by discrete 'essays', it is in some ways a pig of a book, not always logical and easy to follow, to say nothing of not knowing what kind of turn the story will be taking next. Keen students of the rich history of African resistance,

7 B. Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850 – 1970* (London: Longman, 1975), 211.

8 S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), xvi-xvii.

on the other hand, would be entirely well-served. In that sense, *Remembering the Rebellion*, for all that it owes its origins to a set of articles in Kwazulu-Natal's *The Witness* to commemorate the 2006 centenary of the Bhambatha rebellion, is what might be best termed a hybrid scholarly book, easier in some bits than others. It is, in any event, a history of the rising that is quite distinct from the more heavyweight scholarly erudition of Professor Guy's numerous other studies of the doughty Zulu and their mixed fortunes, most recently his, *The Maphumulo Uprising*.⁹

As the author notes in his bibliography, the 1906 Zulu rising has sprouted a small crop of histories, starting as far back as 1907 and including Shula Marks's seminal *Reluctant Rebellion*, published now close to forty years ago, as well as a more recent historical atlas. Since the 1930s, the lion's share by far seems to have been published in Natal, and it is nice to see this volume's present academic publisher keeping alive a good provincial tradition of repaying the dispossessed Zulu with scrupulous literary fairness. Professor Guy omits one of the more recent secondary studies, by the military historian, Ian Knight, author of numerous works on the Zulu in nineteenth-century colonial warfare in the venerable British tradition of romanticising the fighting prowess of the impi.

This essay, on the climactic battle - and callous slaughter of retreating rebels - at Mome Gorge, is a sober and moving depiction of how the heart of the rebellion in Zululand was ripped out by Maxims and shrapnel.¹⁰ It is also Dr Knight who reminds us of the eventual poignant fate of the Zulu prince, Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo. Fingered by the Natal authorities as the sly and shadowy fomenter of the rebellion, the colonial government stacked the treason cards to do in what Jeff Guy calls 'that living embodiment of independent African power, the son of the last sovereign Zulu king'. That the prosecution did not get all of its way with suborned witnesses and rigged evidence was due in no small measure to the exertions of Cape liberal advocates like W.P. Schreiner, and one of the few good pale Natal apples of Professor Guy's eye, the admirable Harriet Colenso and her humanitarian circle.

While *Remembering the Rebellion* leaves it there, Dr Knight's 'Mome Gorge' gives the wheel an additional last turn. In the late-nineteenth century, Louis Botha had known Dinuzulu from the good old Boer days of the New Republic, and in the mid-1880s had even bolstered his cause militarily by joining an expedition to defeat his rival Zibhebhu. The signals he received from Natal in 1906 did not make comfortable reading. In the immediate aftermath of the Bhambatha rising, Botha's efforts to mediate between Dinuzulu and the Natal colonial state had been not merely rebuffed but smeared ludicrously as some Transvaal Boer-Zulu plot against peaceful civilisation on the east coast. When Union came in 1910, its first premier released a powerless and spent Dinuzulu from imprisonment onto a farm in the Transvaal, away from the clutches of its hooligan colony. To be sure, Louis Botha was no more a milksop than Winston Spencer Churchill. But the recent grisly vindictiveness of the Colony of Natal had also been too much for his stomach.

9 J. Guy, *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion* (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu Natal Press, 2005).

10 Ian Knight, *Great Zulu Battles, 1838-1906* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1998), 194-215.

The real guts of this book lies in its provision of a shrewdly observed, wholly compelling exposition of the character of the rebellion itself, paying close attention to the contours of the imposing terrain across which it oozed, to the anguish, misery and gratuitous levels of retributive violence which it brought to many thousands of people, and to the desperate and vengeful calculations – and miscalculations – that drove the protagonists in this sad and tragic confrontation. A lot of blood was up, and the brutal consequences are laid bare by the author in a string of stark set-piece descriptions. In one of these, the discovery of the dismembered corpse of a white cyclist hacked down by a frenzied crowd in July 1906 triggered a crescendo of violence. With armed rebels having melted away, defenceless families and property were left to ‘the mercy of the armed colonial militia and the African levies. They received none. For the next three days the troops moved up and down the Mvoti valley killing those who got in their path, and looting then burning homesteads. The valley was black with smoke so thick that it cut out the sunlight’.

Professor Guy has been a long time at his labours on the history of Zulu society and, as is to be expected, he furnishes an imaginative context within which, he argues, the meaning of the rebellion is to be set and understood. Some parts are speculative, warming over enduring mythology and pondering its significance, such as beliefs that Bhambatha had survived the rising, and that his killing (and notorious beheading as a war trophy) had been faked. Others are more interpretative, re-instating the role of the rebellion in animating radical and progressive anti-colonial protest, not only in Harriet Colenso’s time of ‘racial greed’ and ‘money blight’, but in the later history of British imperial decline and decolonisation.

Lastly, at yet another level, *Remembering the Rebellion* makes an explicit and passionate case for the crucial role of history as a lubricant of national reconciliation, as ‘it is our historical sense that enables us to assess changes in society - that allows us to discover where we have progressed and where we have not’. For a South African society in which ‘categorising by race continues to make and mar South African life’, awareness of the history of the 1906 rebellion may have valuable educative force. In the author’s view, the open-hearted nature of the 2006 commemoration of that ‘cruel and devastating conflict’, the capaciousness of its sobering oral traditions, call into question common glib assumptions ‘of the irrelevance of history - unless it can be turned into heritage and marketed’. For the lesson ‘to learn from the history of the rebellion of 1906’ is that ‘it enables us to see the dangers of thinking and acting in terms of race, and the terrible situations that can arise when this is linked with undemocratic practices and institutions’. Even if one thinks that this is rather a lot to be expecting of an academic discipline in a country not exactly famous for its intellectual culture, it is hard not to share Professor Guy’s view that we cannot hope to address South Africa’s problems comprehensively today unless we know and understand fully the disfigurements of the past.

In altogether exceptional detail, a fuller knowledge of the past is the spirit which infuses Edward Paice’s massive narrative of the experience of the First World War in East Africa. Beyond the silliness of its dustjacket claim that ‘here for the first time is the true story’ lies a first-rate popular history, scholarly but absorbingly readable. Mr Paice seems to have read pretty much everything that is

germane to the topic, and writes with assurance in a manner which is sometimes sympathetic and sometimes acerbic. Never overwhelmed by a mass of material, the author deserves the highest praise for the skill with which he unfolds and sustains his story of a twisting and turning conflict across several hundred pages of text.

The significance of *Tip & Run* is not so much its claim of being ‘the untold tragedy’ of the African struggle. After all, the Great War in Africa has been embodied in such striking fiction (and film) as C. S. Forester’s *The African Queen*, William Boyd’s *An Ice-Cream War* and, most recently, Giles Foden’s *Mimi and Toutou Go To War*. There are, too, a couple of substantive histories, neither of which, incidentally, are cited in the present volume’s bibliography.¹¹ The book’s real significance lies in two characteristics. The first of these is wholly convincing. Mr Paice provides the most exhaustive and sustained depiction yet of this relatively neglected Great War campaign, not only laying bare all the horrors of East African fighting and totting up the enormity of its butcher’s bill, but also retrieving and bringing to light those individual human stories that can make the personal experience of war so intensely peculiar and outlandish, or even surreal. In one camp, so maddened was Smuts by his inability to ‘to bottle up’ an enemy force only a fraction of the size of his own, that he even floated the possibility of resorting to poison gas to bring down von Lettow-Vorbeck, the sole German commander ever to occupy British territory. In the other camp, von Lettow-Vorbeck was partial to hippo-fat and a noxious quinine called ‘Lettow-schnapps’, and was rumoured to have had a glass eye that could watch his snaking column of African askari independently of its owner.

Unlike the story of the soldier who said that in East Africa he had ‘met every animal except the jabberwock’, the second defining feature of this volume is historiographical, and perhaps a little less persuasive in its appeal. The author is at pains to demonstrate that the dismissal by British High Command of the African campaign against Germany as a distracting nuisance, a game of ‘tip and run’, was misleading. To the contrary, far from being merely a military ‘sideshow’, Africa mattered so much that the campaign to prevail there was supremely important. In the contest to become top dog in Africa, the stakes could not have been higher, for the outcome would determine the future of the British Empire. Mr Paice invokes the editor of Britain’s *The Leader*, who in November 1914 asserted, ‘to the German, Africa is the key continent of the world. Its owners will possess the balance of power between the old world and the new’.

There is, undeniably, something to this. The Great War was, as one of its foremost historians has emphasised, ‘the prelude to the final stage of the scramble for Africa, played out at Versailles’ as the conflict ‘reinvigorated territorial ambitions dormant since the turn of the century’.¹² Still, there is a line between doing

11 B. Farwell, *The Great War in Africa, 1914-1918* (New York: Norton, 1987); R. Anderson, *The Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign, 1914-1918* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004).

12 Strachan, *First World War*, 642.

adequate justice to the African theatre of the Great War, and inflated claims for its determining place on the 1914-1918 scale of war priorities. True enough, Heinrich Schnee, the governor of German East Africa, was a professional colonial officer whose main concern was that of sustaining Germany in Africa, rather than Germany in Europe. Equally, the Kaiser rather fancied the idea of another fatherland in Africa, turning *MittelAfrika* in its way into Germany's India, the sisal and the coffee in the Crown, so to speak. For all that, however, in the titanic military eruption that was the Great War, the East African conflict remained a sideshow. Not only was the future of Africa decided by the European balance sheet of war. In actual battlefield corpses, the blood of the Somme alone had no equal.

In this otherwise excellent study, it is far better to savour its strengths in gripping historical reconstruction. *Tip & Run* is a satisfyingly wide-ranging assessment of the East African slog, skilfully weaving complex diplomatic and strategic factors into the atmospheric military yarn, a story told with vigour and clarity. For everyone caught up in hostilities, the most deadly enemies were bush, forest and swamp, drought, soaking deluge and withering heat, dysentery, malaria and other crippling diseases, burrowing insects, snakes, and ravenous wild animals like crocodiles and lions. When von Lettow-Vorbeck's men overwhelmed the British and Portuguese garrison at Namakura in July 1918, fleeing defenders thought that river banks and deep water would serve as protection. Instead, around a hundred troops were served up to the crocodiles.

The further British forces chased retreating German columns, often getting their noses bloodied, the more their supply lines frayed and the more their deprivations deepened. For their adversaries, the position was no less dire. With von Lettow-Vorbeck starved of supplies and cut off from seaborne replenishment, Berlin even tried once to provision his forces by Zeppelin. Left to scrape the barrel, the *Schutztruppen* survived by living off the land and relying on the plunder of their more feeble enemies for arms and stores. These the spectacularly incompetent Portuguese provided by repeatedly abandoning depots. By the middle of 1918, a fuming General van Deventer had had enough, instructing Lisbon's command to get out of the way and repair to the coast, leaving all active operations in the hands of British forces. Thus it was that a South African-led British offensive against the Germans in Portuguese East Africa ended up being conducted effectively without the Portuguese.

Mr Paice captures this grubby, overstrained, lurid and drama-laden experience of the Great War extraordinarily well. And he does not neglect its aftermath. Two decades after Armistice, Tanganyika popped up again, proposed as a possible place of settlement for the German Jewish population. While interested in reclaiming Germany's African colonies, Adolf Hitler would have none of it. The German people, he declared, could not ever be expected 'to turn over to the Jews', territory 'drenched in the blood of German heroes'. In the following fateful year, he conferred a further honorary rank upon Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, then almost seventy years of age.

Very different books, in imaginatively different ways, *Remembering the Rebellion* and *Tip & Run* tell us a great deal about the shock of violence and the waging of warfare upon nature and society in Africa. Colonial pacification in Natal

and Great Power campaigning in East Africa involved extremes of suffering and exploitation, much profligate waste, and heavy mortality, even though in neither case was there a chilling logic of annihilation of the enemy, in the sense of 'the complete annihilation of life'.¹³ A point made forcefully elsewhere is that a tendency within military culture towards utter callousness and extreme destructiveness was tempered in colonial wars and then exported to be hardened in the Europe of the Great War.¹⁴ Von Lettow-Vorbeck himself had, after all, been involved in the early twentieth-century Herero genocide in German South West Africa. From the perspective of these humane volumes, it is no less arguable that the sordid nature of colonial ways of warfare continued to have its pathological moments at home.

13 A Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 342.

14 I.V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 165.