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Byron Farwell. *The Great War in Africa: 1914-1918*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

Book Review

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Bill Hanson

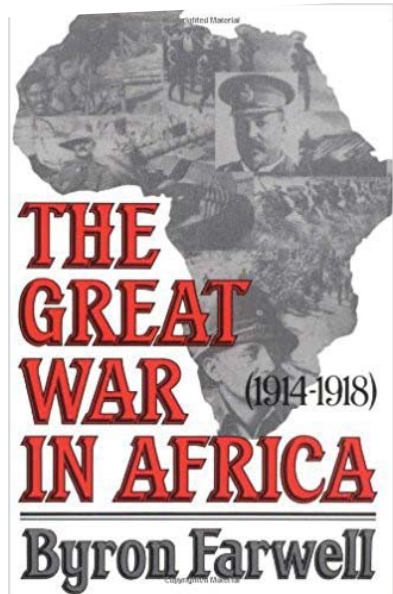
This reviewer was recently gifted Byron Farwell's *The Great War in Africa: 1914-1918*, and it has turned out to be an in-depth but eminently readable account of a little-known period of the history of modern warfare. Of course, the colonial wars were a decided backwater during World War I, which is why this set of campaigns is only dimly remembered—if at all.

Even so, and even though the reader will find little to connect this area of conflict to the larger World War, there are some good lessons to be taken. Further, an astute reader will see many potential connections to the post-World War II period of decolonization and to the current situation in sub-Saharan Africa. Although this work does not have the sweep of

David Fromkin's *A Peace to End All Peace* or Peter Hopkirk's *The Great Game*, like those books, it does show how action occurring well away from the center of attention can have lasting effects on subsequent events.

In many ways, Farwell points out how the war in Africa was the antithesis of the Great War in Europe. Instead of the industrial slaughter on the Western Front, where the sheer weight of metal thrown downrange might be the decisive factor, this was war on a more personal level. While logistics is supremely important in warfare, the vast distances and sparse infrastructure in the region made the possession of towns and railway lines far less important than things like local knowledge, the ability to get along with the local tribes, and the number of native bearers to carry equipment and supplies. At the start of the 1917 campaign in German East Africa, the British commander, Major General Sir Arthur Hoskins, had conquered all the major towns, held all the railways, but was not able to run the German forces to ground—a situation that has become all too familiar today.

For Farwell, the most sympathetic commander is the German Major



General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who fought a brilliant Fabian-style campaign. In many ways, his dedication to keep a “force in being” will remind readers of George Washington’s campaign against the British. Lettow-Vorbeck, a soldier’s soldier, overcame great weaknesses in terms of numbers of troops and equipment, along with conflict with his political superior, to constantly bloody the British (and later, Belgian and Portuguese) while maintaining his force intact, in high spirits, and constantly on the move. British commander Jan Smuts does not come off nearly so well in Farwell’s eyes and he makes much at the end of the fact that Lettow-Vorbeck was the only undefeated German general of World War I.

As the conflict in Africa was an afterthought, support from the major European powers for that theater was fitful. Farwell points out the war in Africa was seen as a diversion and both sides were careful not to divert too much force from the main event—and tried to make the other side divert more forces away from Europe. Accordingly, this was very much a war of improvisations and of colorful characters. This reviewer’s favorite was the pilot who drank a quart of liquor every day—so much so that on the infrequent days he did not drink, his observer refused to fly with him as his hands shook too much.

The feats of improvisation were truly heroic. The sinking of the German cruiser *Königsberg* required the British to tow two monitors all the way from Europe to the southeast coast of Africa, as they were the only ships that could mount heavy enough guns while still being able to penetrate into the Rufigi Delta where the *Königsberg* lay holed up. For you movie fans, Peter R. Hunt based the movie, *Shout at the Devil* on this campaign. The British destroyed the *Königsberg* in a strange, slow-motion battle, but the Germans took the guns and supplies from the ship, and they along with the crew were used to good effect by Lettow-Vorbeck throughout the war. In another incident, the Germans hauled two steamers overland for thousands of miles for use in Lake Tanganyika. The Germans, sometimes beyond the end of their supply lines, were able to create more than sixty *ersatz* items to replace critical supplies. Farwell is at his best here, painting both the action and the colorful cast of characters with vivid strokes.

At the same time, Farwell is unsparing of the players—he portrays them, warts and all, along with the sometimes-vicious infighting on each side. Farwell draws from many primary sources, including the personal accounts of the key participants, and deftly draws material from diaries and letters to illuminate the character of the conflict. Toward the end of the book, the key factor in the conflict for both sides became disease. The casualties from disease versus casualties from combat ratio is truly appalling—sometimes exceeding 1000:1. Further, by 1918, the influenza pandemic struck the region, exacerbating an already dire situation.

Many units that started with hundreds or thousands of men fell to less than one hundred (and often, less than fifty) combat effectives.

In sum, this book will be a good addition to those wishing to get a more complete picture of the Great War—but it is perhaps more useful as an introduction to combat in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a source for lessons in irregular or insurgent conflicts. The reader will see many parallels to other campaigns. For example, the constant British attempts to bring Lettow-Vorbeck's forces to a set-piece battle, along with Lettow-Vorbeck's rebuff of those efforts, reminds this reviewer of nothing so much as Bernard Fall's description of the French trying to bring Giap to heel in *Street Without Joy*. In all, this is a solid and entertaining account that will provide ample food for thought for those interested in this little-remarked, but fascinating chapter of history.