

Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa. Michelle Moyd. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780821420898

This is a social history of the German colonial army, the *Schutztruppe*, in German East Africa (GEA), from its hasty creation in 1889 until its disbandment at the end of World War I. On the basis of a diverse and intriguing body of sources—among them official reports, correspondence, field manuals, dictionaries, phrasebooks, and newspapers—Moyd persuasively frames the army’s African soldiers—the *askari*—as willing and loyal agents of colonial oppression, without which “German colonialism in East Africa could not have existed”(4).

The volume is organized into five thematic chapters inclusive of pertinent mini-biographies of selected *askari* used to exemplify general/abstract contentions. Chapter 1 offers a socio-cultural history of *Schutztruppe* recruitment that compares the experience of the first generation of recruits from the Egyptian Sudan with Shangaan soldiers from Portuguese East Africa and the bulk of the recruits from within GEA. Chapter 2 discusses the training and socialization experiences that turned recruits into loyal *askari* ready to inflict plunder and violence on GEA’s subjects. Chapter 3 examines the *Schutztruppe* way of war as manifested in three key colonial phases: conquest in the 1890s, the Maji Maji War (1905–7), and World War I (1914–8). The author shows how, in exchange for high wages, respectability and validation of their masculinity, the *askari* did not shy away from brutal military practices. The chapter also highlights the essential role that *askari* wives and extended families played in the campaigns, not only as boosters of morale, but also as logistical support. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the daily life of the *askari* and their extended families away from the battlefield, and analyzes socio-economic activities in the *maboma* (military outposts) scattered throughout GEA and the *askari* villages that emerged in their proximity. Chapter 5 shows how the *askari* were much more than loyal soldiers, as they assisted the civil administration in a variety of ways, first and foremost as tax collectors. Furthermore, with their lifestyle, attire and wealth, and as performers of a variety of celebratory rituals, they epitomized colonial progress and broadcasted colonial values.

Overall, the volume’s salient points dovetail with the growing body of Africanist scholarship that in recent decades has highlighted the importance of African agency for the colonial project and debunked the simplistic understanding of colonialism as a top-down process exclusively in the hands of Europeans. Moyd shows that the *askari* expected their service and social relations to unfold within colonial confines of obedience, but they also expected to be treated with respect and to be granted a certain degree of esteem. They managed to obtain both, along with a good degree of power and autonomy for themselves and their families. In return for their ruthless service as both soldiers and as a “constabulary force, assisting in the day-to-day policing and administration of the colony” (17), the *askari* had privileged access to war spoils. They could validate their masculinity by capturing women and children to extend the size of their households, while salaried service gave them access to the emerging cash economy and the ability to engage in conspicuous consumption and patronage.

The loyalty of the *askari* was not to an ideal, but to a contract that afforded them both wealth and status. The author takes exception to traditional colonial historiography depicting African soldiers as devout stalwarts of the colonial project, arguing instead that allegiance was predicated on their employer’s ability to afford them the status of *big men*. On the other hand,

Moyd also challenges nationalist African historiographies that have traditionally depicted African colonial soldiers either as villainous collaborators or unscrupulous mercenaries who engaged in alien practices. Their way of war was the composite result of regional, African and European experiences, many of which predated the colonial era. What was undeniably new, and what turned the *Schutztruppe* into a brutally effective army, was the combination of autochthon predatory practices typical of African slave armies with deadly European technology, such as the Maxim gun.

Whereas most of the volume's points have been argued before, they have struggled to gain wide acceptance in colonial studies, in particular within politicized historiographical circles keen on explaining any African plight as exogenous to the continent. Moyd offers new, compelling evidence that hopefully will contribute to pointing the debate on colonialism in the right direction.

The text's main weakness is one of style: this is a revised dissertation that has not shed its original doctoral tone. For example, undeniably important points about the *askari*'s status as *big men*, the respect they commanded and their loyalty and access to spoils and patronage are reiterated throughout the text to excess. These redundancies betray a misplaced sense of anxiety about sound scholarship and result in an exposition that is not always engaging. They also take up space that could have been better used to shed further light on aspects of the *askari* experience, for example their fate after World War I, which is only glanced at in the conclusion. Obviously these minor flaws do not detract much from a very important contribution to the historiography of colonial armies and colonialism tout court.

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