Armies in East Africa 1914-18
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 379 (2002)
By Peter Abbott and Raffaele Ruggeri

Review by Rob Morgan

I was writing a few notes on Mobility in the Great War for the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers Journal, and it crossed my mind that of all of the land campaigns of that war, this one was the most mobile and incredibly “wargamable” theatre of the war! This book is a must, as a starting point for the campaigns of von Lettow Vorbeck who wasn’t beaten in the field, and whose war began on the first day raiding into the Congo, and only ended two weeks after the Armistice in Europe. The Germans fought the British Imperial forces, the Belgians and the Portuguese in a war of rapid and continual movement.

Abbott opens with a view of the strategic background -- Africa was, after all, a place of frequent conflict -- and examines the small, and for the German part, almost without reinforcement, forces which began the campaign. The British attacked Tanga on the Indian Ocean and were repulsed. The first exchange of stores, weapons and gear took place! This became a war of small-scale attacks carried out by no more than a company strength in many cases, against poorly prepared Belgian troops in particular. This was, as Peter Abbott explains, a war in which the natives, Askaris, tribal auxiliaries and porters vastly outnumbered the Europeans. It had a naval aspect too; the cruiser SMS Konigsberg was trapped in the Rufiji Delta and eventually destroyed, the sailors and ship’s guns were incorporated into the German force by von Lettow Vorbeck. There were also German warships on the lakes of Africa, powerful gunboats which could raid the Belgian Congo and were eventually destroyed in a small and worthy campaign by two Royal Navy warships.

The year 1916, saw a substantial Allied offensive intended to eliminate the German Colonial Army once and for all; to this end, large South African forces were brought in, with armoured cars. The ports were captured, and the Germans were forced into less than a third of their vast East African Empire. There were offensives by the British, Portuguese and Belgians, with some success, though stalemate ensued as sickness took hold of the
Allied troops. Cavalry were of little use, the Tsetse fly saw to that. It was
the native porter who carried the campaign onwards.

The last two years of the war were years of rapid movement, of skilful
raids by small German units and columns, and a pursuit which looked at
several stages likely to end in German surrender. It didn’t. Peter Abbott’s
text is clear and well written and he deals with the small incursions and the
larger troop movements by rail and engineer-built roads for the British and
Allies, entirely on foot for the Germans; who captured, quite regularly,
stores, uniforms and weapons enough to sustain them in the field.
Effectively, this was a colony on the move, since von Lettow Vorbeck
held no towns or infrastructure. There was even an attempt to reinforce
and resupply him from Europe by sending a Zeppelin, Z58, to his aid.

This was a war of remarkable rearguard actions, of feints and attacks on
supply depots. I’m often reminded, reading this, of the last weeks of the
Confederacy and Lee’s epic yet doomed series of small sharp battles
before Appomattox. Abbot provides some detailed (and incredibly useful
for the wargamer) information on the equipment and arms which the
German forces had as the war progressed. The Konigsberg’s guns were all
destroyed by the beginning of 1918, and it was Portuguese guns and
British mortars (especially useful in the bush) which supplied the
firepower. The war took a serious toll of British and Indian troops, and by
the end, it was the African battalions of the King’s army which were most
active; for the British, men and horses, this was a substantial if forgotten
graveyard. By 1918, the Portuguese were exhausted and stuck in their
garrison forts, and though the Belgians employed cyclist companies (!) the
vast areas of the bush were the province of the Germans and their Askaris.

The plates are perfect. They illustrate the components of the German
forces, native, auxiliary, European and naval; the South Africans, and the
diverse British elements involved in the war. Take a look at the Masai
warrior (Plate C3), as well as the Belgians and the Portuguese.

Tremendously useful, this book is a must for Great War wargaming.

As for figures, well, I still have a selection of the old Peter Laing 15mm
German Schutztruppe and natives, but in that scale although you might
find a few suitable figures in smaller manufacturers’ lists, but look in vain
at Peter Pig or Mick Yarrow’s ranges, sadly. Irregular, stalwarts of Great
War figures, also miss out on East Africa, but you could cobble a force in
6mm using their lists. The range, and this includes everything from
Askaris to Portuguese and a superb series of Masai warriors, is that of
Frontline's IT Figures. Very well detailed and worth a look. Bear in mind, of course, that the Europeans in the German forces were virtually indistinguishable from their enemies by 1917, due to what might be called “kit redistribution!” Buy the book, and fight the campaign.
One of the least-published campaigns of World War I (1914-1918) was that fought in East Africa by forces of colonial troops – British Empire, Belgian, Portuguese and German. Short of resources, many European, African and Indian soldiers recorded epics of endurance as they hunted the outnumbered but brilliantly led German colonial forces across a disease-ridden wilderness. One of the least-published campaigns of World War I (1914-1918) was that fought in East Africa by forces of colonial troops – British Empire, Belgian, Portuguese and German.