

THE FORGOTTEN. AFRICAN SOLDIERS AND PORTERS OF THE BELGIAN COLONIAL FORCES IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Between 1914 and 1917, the *Force Publique*, the Belgian colonial army, took part in the First World War. First in defensive actions in collaboration with French and British forces in Cameroon and in Rhodesia, then with offensive campaigns in German East Africa against the German troops of Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck. Their intent was to exchange their territorial conquests against parts of Portuguese territory on the bank of the Congo River, and thus gain access to the Indian Ocean. Even though it did not work, the *Force Publique* realised crucial victories in Tabora (1916) and in Mahenge (1917). If these victories, as well as the role of the colonial troops during World War I, have offered some interesting studies, yet the difficulties among Congolese soldiers and indigenous auxiliaries (porters and boys) remain untold. During these military campaigns, thousands of Congolese men were indeed recruited as soldiers from every part of the colony, while about 260,000 indigenous auxiliaries were recruited as porters, to transport equipment essential for the success of military operations. Alongside them, women and children served as the logistical backbone of the troops, carrying soldiers' equipment and supplies, gathering food and water, cooking and doing the laundry. The living conditions were rendered arduous by the huge mobility demanded by the war. Weakened by insufficient food, a harsh climate, the lack of rest or the unsuitability of hygiene and medical care, many porters died from unhealthy conditions. Men became sick rather than die fighting. After the war, despite the crucial role they played and the harsh conditions they endured, indigenous soldiers and porters, living or dead, were forgotten and disregarded to a certain extent by the Belgian State. If they were granted multiple expressions of appreciation and gratitude, they were not on the national agenda.