



German Colonial Guerilla Warfare in German East Africa and the “China Matter” at the First World War¹²

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Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck is one of the most prominent person of the First World War. His character was woven of the elements of an unbreakable Prussian soldier and a conservative gentleman. His emotional and ideological distance from Hitler and the Nazi regime in general combined with the respect from his Askari soldiers and the incredible performance as a sharp-minded warlord got him adored even by the rivals.

Since we are living in an era, where the public opinion is influenced by protagonists who require drastic re-evaluation of colonial history in general, scientific studies and books can contribute to the intellectual content, which cuts back the expansive nature of current wild thoughts. Nowadays, the colonial past gains more and more interest: activists, movements, mass media, politicians involved themselves into this topic. Smashing statues, renaming public places, deheroisation of historical figures are popular in Germany too.

The topic of this book review is the monography *The African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War of Africa* written by Robert Gaudi. As a historian, he works as a freelancer and contributor of different newspapers. Being an American, he completely went against the *Weltgeist* when he published his monography about the widely-known German General, namely Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who deserved the different nicknames, eg. “Africa’s Lion” and “African *Kaiser*.”

As I have mentioned in the title, there is a thing called “China Matter” in Gaudi’s book. The monography begins with an introduction about the history of Zeppelin. The German military leadership made efforts to take control over the British sky. Firstly, the Britons were intimidated by the German Zeppelins, which threw bombs on them. Secondly, this intimidating factor began to shrink due to the vulnerability of these airships which were working by gas.

The German Zeppelin L 59 (or LZ 104) made a mission in Africa in 1917. This mission had the name Operation “China Matter.”⁴ The majority of German colonies in Africa and Oceania were occupied by the Entente powers, only one German unit was fighting until the end: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck’s *Schutztruppe*. This unit consisted of German Officers and Non-commissioned Officers, which does not mean exception for the first sight, but the high numbers of Askari infantrymen, who served

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² Gaudi, Robert: *The African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War of Africa*. London: Hurst Company, 2017. 2nd Edition ISBN: 978-1849048675 pp. 448.

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⁴ In German: “Unternehmen China Sache.”

loyal their *Bwana Oberst*⁵, namely General Lettow-Vorbeck. This Zeppelin came back to Germany with the encouraging news from Khartum that German East Africa was occupied by Belgian, British (and South African), Portuguese troops but there is a successful guerilla warfare in the jungle of East Africa.

Prussian war machine earned its high reputation in the 18th and 19th century. These descendants of *Deutscher Orden* (Teutonic Order) converted to Lutheranism and ruled Prussia. Those members, who refused the conversion, were expelled and went to Vienna. However, German ancestry was a must in the medieval times, plenty of Prussians (in its medieval context their refers to the old Baltic tribe) became Germanised and got membership among the knights. Hence, German surnames of noble families with the ending “-ow” have Prussian or Pomeranian forefathers. For this reason, Gaudi compares Lettow-Vorbeck to Gylipus: The Spartan warlord had a non-Spartan mother, Lettow-Vorbeck had old Prussian ancestors.

Gaudi’s methodology shows similar patterns with the books from field of cultural history. Even though his monography is about a German soldier and his unbelievable genius, the overwhelming majority of resources are either diaries or newspapers. The mixture of the two fields (military history and cultural history) makes Gaudi’s book easy to read. There is an impression in the air that writing the monography meant a joyful activity to Gaudi. His most favourite author, Richard Meinertzhagen shared numerous entertaining stories and episodes. This English ornitologist of German ancestry was a witness of the military campaign in German East Africa, his *bon vivant* character belongs to the typical personalities of the 19th century, who travelled a lot and gained various experiences, then shared the adventures either in books or among friends.

This monography has got 25 chapters completed with Prologue and Epilogue. These chapters subsequently follow the chronological order. The readers gain information about Lettow-Vorbeck’s ancestry, family, education background, and military experiences. One of the most notable of experiences happened to him in German South West Africa. The colonial war of 1904-1907, which ended with a genocide against the uprising Herero and Nama tribes, taught him a lot about Africa. Observing the guerilla tactics of Jacob Morenga and his troops, enriched Lettow-Vorbeck with a piece of knowledge that had not been taught in the German military tertiary education.

On the battlefield of German East Africa he earned the respect of his Askari soldiers who came from the indigenous population. Lettow-Vorbeck cannot be labelled as a democrat, however, he avoided the ethnic differentiation of his soldiers. Meanwhile, German colonial policies were based on strict racial norms, Lettow-Vorbeck’s classical virtues did not allow him to implement them in the army. Hence, German East Africa’s military history differs from other German colonies: However, the exploitation of indigenous population had extreme tendencies, especially on the cotton fields, and the whole history of this colony started from Carl Peters’s fraudulent letters

⁵ This expression is the mix of Swahili word ‘Bwama’ (it means: Lord) and the German word ‘Oberstleutnant’ (Lieutenant Colonel).



to Bismarck combined with mistreatment of African people to crushing of Maji Maji Rebellion.

Regardless to the loss of First World War Lettow-Vorbeck became a hero in Germany. In the time of peace he was a conservative politician of the German National People's Party. This political party was based on conservatism and monarchism, in a long term the members intended to reintroduce the rule of Hohenzollern dynasty. The capital city Berlin, which became a battlefield of different far-left groups in 1918, was not able to express the gratitude towards the German heroes of East African campaign.

Participating in the crush of Spartacus uprising in January 1919 made Lettow-Vorbeck archenemy of the far-left. The Free Corps militia that co-operated with Friedrich Ebert's Defence Minister Gustav Noske, a prominent anti-revolutionary and anticommunist member of SPD, eliminated those groups, which were interested in a Trotsky's world revolution. Soldiers from *Schutztruppe* joined to these Free Corps units, so did Lettow-Vorbeck. The General could crush the revolutionary activity in Hamburg without killing anyone, which is a notable fact mentioned by Robert Gaudi. Although this gesture did not make him appealing to the left. When he was member of the Parliament of Bremen, the representatives of left groups called him "imperialist" and "oppressor."

The Nazi era treated Lettow-Vorbeck unwell. Hitler made lip service about regaining former colonies, although it was never serious. Easternward expansion and annihilation of the Soviet Union were Hitler's priorities. Knowing his conservative political beliefs, Hitler and his followers detested Lettow-Vorbeck. Gaudi also noted the fact that conservative politicians became first victims of the National Socialist rule. Being an old and retired soldier Lettow-Vorbeck did not fight at the Second World War but his sons did and all of them died. This tragedy meant the end of his bloodline.

After the Second World War, his renown improved. His funeral took place in Tanzania. Former Askaris could meet *Bwana Obersti* again. The ceremony was organised and carried out by the *Bundeswehr*. There are video footages on different websites about former Askaris who took farewell in German from Lettow-Vorbeck. Recognising their heroism, German experts also came to Tanzania to examine who was entitled for German military pension among the indigenous former soldiers.

As it was mentioned above, Gaudi's book is an intellectually wholesome monography. Although the deficits of this book need to be mentioned, eg. Frederick the Great is labelled as "homosexual" (p. 28.), which was a rumour disseminated by Voltaire; "an African band played 'Deutschland Über Alles'" (p. 153) that is hard to imagine since the official anthem of Kaiserreich was the "Heil dir im Siegerkranz"; brothel is called as "whorehouse" (p. 62). Other descriptions like "Carl Juhlke, a handsome blond Teuton" (p. 111) might be the evidence of good sense of humour but has got nothing to do with a scientific work. The lack of exact footnotes can be also disturbing. Occasionally, there was a thought that the author is not that good at German.



Finally, it can be concluded that Gaudi's book is a good contribution to the comparative world history, even if some paragraphs remind the reader to the genre of "infotainment." The adventurous stories, the broad field of research and the excellent story-teller skills of the author make a good combination; hence, I personally recommend for those readers who intend to gain knowledge about the campaign in German East Africa at the First World War.