

## Participation of Hungarians in the German East African Struggle During World War I<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

The war tensions following the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne led to the Austrian-Hungarian declaration of war to Serbia. This, according to the military alliances, led many of Europe's great powers into war by the beginning of August 1914. However, the fighting was not limited to Europe. The colonial administration in German East Africa, which was cut off from European supplies, had to rely on looted munitions and the transformation of certain areas of the colonial economy into military production. However, the strength and number of enlisted German men at the beginning of the war was finite and very limited. The men from Austria and Hungary, which country was allied with Germany, were few in German East Africa, but those who could be recruited were enlisted into the local German armed forces. One of five Hungarian men died due to malaria sickness, while the rest fought until they were taken prisoner by the British army. Although they were captured along with the German population and foreign soldiers at latest in November 1917, the remaining German East African forces continued to fight in Portuguese Mozambique, then returned to the occupied German East Africa and finally laid down their arms unbeaten in Northern Rhodesia.

### Keywords:

German East Africa;  
World War I;  
Schutztruppe; Hugo  
Callmeyer; Lorenz  
Schmidt; Salgó József;  
Kálmán Géza; Debreczeni  
Gyula; Paul von Lettow-  
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## Introduction

In the last two decades of the 19th century, the spread of European power in Africa accelerated. Over time, the German Empire did not want to be left out. From 1884 it began to acquire and on several coastal areas of the continent and from there, to expand into the interior. At the end of that century, German-administered Togo, Cameroon, German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) and German East Africa (now mainland Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda) protectorates (colonies) were formed in Africa. These were surrounded by British, French, Belgian, Portuguese or Spanish colonies on land. The almost 1 million km<sup>2</sup> area of German East Africa was 180 % of that of Germany (the area bounded by its European borders), but with its population of 7.7 million, it was only 12 % of that of its European “protector”. (Som, 2021)

## War in East Africa

The war tensions following the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne led to the Austrian-Hungarian declaration of war to Serbia on 28 July 1914. This, according to the military alliances, led many of Europe's great powers into war by the beginning of August 1914. On the Austrian-Hungarian side, Germany entered the war, followed by Turkey and Bulgaria in the following months, but Italy and Romania, allies of the former, remained neutral for the time being.<sup>3</sup> Russia, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium also went to war on the Serbian side within days. However, the war was not limited to Europe.

Telegrams about the state of war between Germany, the United Kingdom and France on 4 August 1914 reached the governorates of the African colonies no later than the next day. Afterwards, the German governorates in Cameroon and German East Africa still had a chance to recognize their neutrality by the neighbouring colonies of their opponents already at war in Europe (Som, 2021, p. 249–250). This was made possible by the Final Act of the Africa Conference, signed nearly thirty years earlier in 1885, which allowed the warring parties in Europe to declare their territories in the free trade zone established in the Congo Basin to be war-free and neutral. However, this provision defined this as an option and made it conditional on a common will.<sup>4</sup> In addition, that zone covered only the southern and eastern

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<sup>3</sup> The entry to the World War I of Turkey on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary on 3 November 1914 and Bulgaria on 10 October 1915 did not allow for an increase the Schutztruppe in German East Africa, as the citizens of these new warring parties in East Africa were at most a few.

Italy entered World War I on 25 August 1915, but not on the side of its former allies (the Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary), but on the Entente (the United Kingdom, France and Russia) side. As a result, all Italian citizens who lived freely till that day in German East Africa were arrested and they were placed under police detention in camps previously set up for civilians, as were the British and the French before. (Som, 2021, p. 315, 335)

Romanian declaration of war to the Central Powers on 27 August 1916 did not require any special measures in German East Africa, as at that time not more than a few Romanian citizens were there, as their numbers were not significant even before the war.

<sup>4</sup> „In case a Power exercising rights of sovereignty or Protectorate in the countries mentioned in Article I, and placed under the free trade system, shall be involved in a war, then the High Signatory Parties to the present Act, and those who shall here after adopt it, bind themselves to lend their good offices in order that the territories belonging to this Power and comprised in the Conventional free trade zones shall, by the common consent of this Power and of the other belligerent or belligerents, be placed during the war under the rule of neutrality, and considered as belonging to a non-belligerent State, the belligerents thenceforth abstaining from extending hostilities to the territories thus neutralized, and from using them as a base for war like operations.” (Article XI of the *General act of the conference at Berlin...*)



parts of Cameroon and the western and middle parts of German East Africa; the latter meant a vast area from the shores of Lake Tanganyika to Tabora. (Som, 2021, p. 455)

Following the establishment of a state of war between Belgium and Germany, the German governor of German East Africa appointed a commissioner to negotiate with the Belgian authorities in Albertville (regional administrative centre of Belgian Congo) due to the terminated telegraph connection to abroad via neighbouring British colonies. In addition, to ensure telecommunications and postal traffic to Europe in the future, the main aim was to mutually recognize the neutrality of their colonies in Central and East Africa. The governor's commissioner crossed Lake Tanganyika for the Belgian port city on 7 August 1914, but he was arrested by the authorities there and detained as a prisoner of war. With this, the Belgian Congolese governorate has clearly taken a stand on the possibility of a neutrality agreement provided by the Berlin African Conference. (Som, 2021, p. 292–293)

Under these circumstances, the German East African administrative and military leadership had to prepare for war, which, moreover, may have been multi-fronted in the early weeks, with attacks from all sides except the southern (Mozambique) border. There were 5,379 members of the armed forces in German East Africa at the outbreak of the war. Of this, Schutztruppe (Protecting Force) consisted of 2,756 (2,540 Africans and 216 Germans), while the Police Force (Polizeitruppe) numbered 2,199 persons, and a total of 424 sailors from the light cruiser "Königsberg" and the gunboat "Möwe". In addition to the above, in Rwanda, Urundi and partly in Bukoba, the gendarmerie duties of the German East African Schutztruppe were supported by local paramilitary units equipped with firearms modestly. The units of "ruga-ruga" soldiers were under the control and command of the rulers of the region, who also maintained their army. At the outbreak of the war, their task and role became more valuable: in addition to internal law enforcement, they also performed border protection, surveillance and guarding tasks, primarily to support and supplement the Schutztruppe companies stationed along the north-western border areas.

The German colonial leadership, which was cut off from European supplies had to rely on looted munitions and the transformation of certain areas of the colonial economy into military production. However, the strength and number of enlisted German men at the beginning of the war were finite and very limited. The men from Austria and Hungary, which country was allied with Germany, were few in the German colony of East Africa, but those who could be recruited were enlisted in the Schutztruppe. 2,600 Germans and roughly up to 40 Hungarian and Austrian citizens of the civilian population of the colony could be enlisted in the German forces, together with thousands of Eastern Africans. (According to the 1913 population register, 99 Hungarian and Austrian citizens lived in German East Africa, the majority presumably had the latter nationality /German registers did not distinguish between Hungarian and Austrian citizenship, but citizens of the two states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy did not have the same nationality/.) (Som, 2021, p. 176) In addition to twenty-five Austrian nationals (Clasen, 2021, p. 19–374), the fate of five Hungarian citizens who served as foreigners in the German Schutztruppe on the battlefields of East Africa is known.

**Hugo Callmeyer** (born 17 November 1870 in Budapest), a carpenter from Budapest, was 44 years old during the first weeks of the war and lived as a planter in German East Africa. He served as a volunteer in the very first stages of the fighting: he took part in the raid on Taveta on 15 August 1914. (It was then and there that the enlisted or volunteer German settlers and planters fought for the first time, organized into companies – *Freiwilligen-Kompanie*; Volunteer Company.) However, on 10 September 1914, he was severely wounded in a battle on the western slopes of Mount Erok (Oldoiniyo Orok). A year later he became seriously ill with malaria and died on 17 August 1915 in Aruscha. (Clasen, 2021, p. 63; Som, 2021, p. 298, 429) Three other Hungarians fought throughout the war in East Africa.

**Lorenz (Lőrinc) Schmidt** (born 10 August 1881 in Szalatnak, Baranya county) became a volunteer for the *Schutztruppe*. He was a member of the D Company (FK) of Muansa in early September 1916 when he took part in the battle for the town of Tabora,<sup>5</sup> and was wounded on 13 September in the village of Itaga close to Tabora. The following year he was promoted to senior corporal and served in the supply department of the Western Commissariat (*Feldintendantur West*). He was taken prisoner of war by the British on 9 October 1917; firstly in Mahenge and then he was guarded in Dar es Salaam from November the same year. (Clasen, 2021, p. 296)

**József Salgó** enlisted as a volunteer to a company stationed in Dar es Salaam. On 30 July 1916, he took part in a battle at Kikombo railway station, where the German columns managed to retreat. Half a year later, between 15 and 23 January 1917, he fought in a series of clashes at the village of Ifinga (on the upper part of the River Ruhudje) and was taken prisoner by the British on 4 February at Ngesani. (Clasen, 2021, p. 285; Som, 2021, p. 368)

Until the outbreak of the war, **Géza Kálmán** (born 24 October 1880) worked as an engineer on the construction of the railway from Tabora to Kigoma at Lake Tanganyika. At the outbreak of the war, at the age of 34 he entered the *Schutztruppe* as a reserve lieutenant in mid-August 1914, where he spent a week in Kigoma and from mid-October 1914 he was involved in the protection of the area between the River Kagera and the German-British (Ugandan) border with a unit. In May 1915, he was commissioned to lead a reserve squadron that defended the northern border region of Rwanda against British-Ugandan attacks. The coordinated British-Belgian attack forced the north-western German military leadership to evacuate the districts of Rwanda and Urundi slowly. Lieutenant Kálmán and his unit retreated to Tabora in June 1916. From there, in mid-September, during the battle for the city, his company was withdrawn along with other units. During his retreat to Mahenge, he met with Lieutenant Debreczeni (see below) and his company, with whom they marched for a while. He left the Mahenge area in early October 1917 southwards and then southeast to Newala. In this area, two significant German forces were concentrated isolated, the smaller part of which laid down their arms, including Lieutenant Kálmán. (Two-thirds of the *Schutztruppe*, which continued to

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<sup>5</sup> Tabora was a large city and regional centre in the middle of German East Africa; from January 1915 temporarily, it became the seat of the colony administration due to military situation. It has been connected by railroad to the Indian ocean since 1912.



be a striking force, crossed the River Rovuma, the border with Portugal Mozambique and continued fighting there.) (Clasen, 2021, p. 165; Som, 2021, p. 308–309, 339, 366)

**Gyula Debreczeni** (born ca. 1886) has lived in German East Africa since 1913. He also enlisted as a reserve lieutenant in the German Schutztruppe at the outbreak of the war, around the age of 28. In the first months of the war, he was entrusted with the command of a German squadron along the Northern Rhodesian frontier. However, as early as 1915, he was transferred to the German forces concentrated at the foot of Kilimanjaro. He was soon appointed to lead a raiding platoon tasked with disrupting the British supply. This typically consisted of blowing up sections and bridges of the Mombassa-Nairobi-Kisumu railway line from the seaport to Lake Victoria and partly harassing plantations. In early 1916 he was transferred to Tabora, where he led the training of recruits. During the battle of Tabora, the German units were withdrawn in the middle of September 1916, and during the retreat Debreczeni and lieutenant Kálmán (see above) met for the first time and marched together towards Mahenge in a section. During the fights at Iringa reserve lieutenant Debreczeni was taken prisoner of war by the British on 26 October 1916 and was under custody in Dar es Salaam from that December. (Clasen, 2021, p. 70; Som, 2021, p. 309, 339, 364, 383)

As it can be seen in the story of the five Hungarians described above, Hungarian citizens fought on most fronts and main battlefields in German East Africa during World War I. In particular, the participation of the two Hungarian reserve lieutenants in the war represents the **main characteristics of the German military operations in East Africa**: the duality of the guerrilla fighting and the trench warfare and pulsating retreat in the following period. Its main initiator, developer and commander was the 44 years old Lieutenant Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who had taken over the Schutztruppe just after his arrival to German East Africa in January 1914 (he served in Africa from 1904 except for a few years of service in Germany). Using a very good assessment and exploiting the possibilities, he used a mixed fighting style tactic. He arranged his units for a number of fronts in a standing war but sent platoons preferably for guerrilla attacks, to disrupt the enemy's supply line and weaken his fighting morale. However, at the start of the multi-fronted Entente attack that unfolded in the spring of 1916, in view of the experience of the Battle of Tanga in November 1914, he did not engage in a battle intended to be decisive. Instead, he stopped the powerful attack with his units and then pulled back the main force while keeping the face line. As he occupied his assigned new positions, he withdrew the quarterback and allowed the attacking force to reach the reinforced new line. With this tactic, he managed to hold out on several fronts and successfully intercept large-scale and coordinated attacks. In recognition of his success, the German emperor promoted him to colonel and in 1917 he was appointed major general. Although by November 1917 the entire remaining German East African force was forced to retreat to the river Rovuma, which was the south-eastern border, the fighting did not stop. In the northern provinces of Portugal Mozambique, von Lettow-Vorbeck carried out a campaign that was barely defensible by the enemy, dividing his forces into three columns with a constant change of direction. Eventually, he returned to the occupied German East Africa after continuous

fighting, and finally to Northern Rhodesia, on the news of the German disarmament in Europe, suspended combat operations on 14 November 1918, and then with his still combat-capable unit surrendered on 25 November (Som, 2021, p. 275–461).

Services during World War I in East Africa of five Hungarians have been described above, but it is not impossible that few more served in the German East African Schutztruppe. In addition to the soldiers mentioned before, there are also known **Hungarian civilian internees** living in German East Africa who were under British detention until the end of the war. Anton Mathievitz (born around 1865, Sárissáp?, Esztergom county) was taken into British custody on 5 November 1916 in Dar es Salaam (Clasen, 2021, p. 388). Béla Jakab (born 22 August 1881 in Krizba, Brassó county) was imprisoned in Dar es Salaam at the age of 36 on 10 August 1917 (Clasen, 2021, p. 385). The most well-known Hungarian who was interned in East Africa was Kálmán Kittenberger, a naturalist and hunter. At the outbreak of the war, he was on a hunting trip in the eastern parts of British Uganda, where he was captured and interned by the British authorities, along with citizens of enemy countries (Kittenberger, who later gained national fame for his books about his hunting and travel memories, was transported in 1915 to the internment camp of the city of Ahmednagar in India, from where he was able to return home in the last third of 1919). (Fekete; Som: p. 320)

The Hungarians who were interned in Africa and Asia were allowed to return home in the second half of 1919 into a revolution-torn, partially occupied Hungary, a redesigned Europe.

Gyula Debreczeni (1930) later published his war memories in a book. Géza Kálmán (1923) began his recollections with a detailed presentation of German East Africa, including data on economic and administrative which accounted quarter of his book. The description of the events of World War I in East Africa based on experience and memories is readable and objective, providing sources to learn both about the acts of war and the everyday life of the soldiers.

### ***Summary, conclusion***

The primary goal of this study is to demonstrate the main characteristics of the warfare of German East African military forces during World War I from the point of view of five Hungarian men, who were fighting on the soil of East Africa. The history of these men as a mosaic compiles the overall picture of the fighting events in East Africa between 1914 and 1918. Although German forces did not win in East Africa and did not have the opportunity to do so in the background of European events, the German Schutztruppe, led by von Lettow-Vorbeck, was able to fight until the last days and avoid defeat throughout.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

## Notes on Contributor

Krisztián Som is the author of the book titled *Német Gyarmatosítás Afrikában, 1884–1920* [German Colonization in Africa, 1884–1920], published by the Monarchia Kiadó and Africa Research Institute, Doctoral School of Security and Safety Sciences, Óbuda University, in 2021. The author's research interests include German colonization, history of Hungarian border control and travel documents.

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*General act of the conference at Berlin of the plenipotentiaries of Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Norway, Turkey, and the United States : respecting, (1) freedom of trade in the basin of the Congo; (2) the slave trade; (3) neutrality of the territories in the basin of the Congo; (4) navigation of the Congo; (5) navigation of the Niger; and (6) rules for future occupation on the coasts of the African continent.*

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