

Kamerunian veterans of Germans' garrisons and the post- Great War period

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the post war period, a largely forgotten issue of the study of the history of Great War campaign in Cameroon. The paper analyses how in the First World War aftermath, Kamerunian soldiers who have been enrolled in the German colonial army (Schutztruppe) adapted to the new socio-economic and political contours created by the departure of their military masters. Drawing from the theoretical framework of "New Military History", and using mainly primary records like archival materials, interviews and then secondary literature, the article will re-interrogate the social trajectories of these soldiers, and the challenges they faced in the post Great War period. How these soldiers rehabilitated themselves and adapted to the new socio-political and military environments imposed by the French and British victors following the Great War expeditions, will be examined. This helps link the past with the present, and brings to light the sacrifices of Cameroonian military men over time.

KEYWORDS: Great War, Cameroon, schutztruppe, veterans, reinstatement.

1 INTRODUCTION

Confrontations of European colonial forces namely Belgium, France, Germany and Great Britain in West Africa, transformed German Kamerun (nowadays called Cameroon) into a huge battlefield. Battles for the control of this strategic territory registered numbers of casualties and Prisoners of War [1]. Literature deserved to this topic is highlighted by the battle history approach with a focus on militaries aspects. This creates an historical void on the African context of the First World War. Then the purpose of this paper is to go beyond the descriptive approach defended by military historian specialists. Its objective is to retrace the social trajectory of Cameroonian natives from the *Schutztruppe* (Colonial army in charge of protection of German colonies) during the post conflict period, a topic considered as the missing puzzle of the apprehension of the Great War history in a context of global perspective.

The position defended by this study is that, in the German Kamerun, the epilogue of the conflict determined veterans' trajectories during the Great War aftermath. This thesis comes from analyzes of military operations led by the Allies toward Germans; in the northern front, localities like Banyo, Garoua and Maroua military assaults resulted into prisoners exchanges. This was the same case with the southern fronts, notably in Yaounde, where soldiers from the various colonial troops were considered as captives, and then exchanged on the banks of river *Nyong* [2]. But the case of *Mora* was particular. *Mora* is a locality of 1735 km², situated in the Far North Region of Cameroon sharing borders in the west with the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in the north with the *Waza* National Park, in the south by the city of Tokombéré. According to Engelbert Mveng an eminent specialist of Cameroon's colonial history, a garrison sheltering the 3rd *Schutztruppe* Company was created there in 1902 by the Germans [3]. This military base was an exception within the Great War epilogue because, it resisted against all British and French attempts and no Kamerunian combatants were treated as War Prisoners after the siege [4].

2 MATERIALS AND METHOD

The New Military History approach formed the basis of this study. According to Peter Paret the New Military History perspective: "stands for an effort to integrate the study of military institution and their actions closely with other kind of thematic like society[...]"[5], in other words, paying greater attention to interactions between the military domain with social, political and cultural domains. This paper goes further, while the New Military History emphasizes on the interactions between military structures and the civil world, this paper proposes reflexions on the soldier, a member of the military structure, with an accent on his life condition after the Great War episode.

To fulfill our objective, efforts will be made through a collection of materials from a variety of sources. Materials such as books, papers, archives, iconographies and oral materials related to the First World War campaign in Cameroon in general and specifically in the former Germans stronghold in Mora will be used. Written sources include literatures published by some protagonists of the Cameroon's campaign like Brigadier General Georges Howard from the British colonial forces and General Joseph Gaudérique Aymérich from the French colonial forces will be include in other to have a systemic view of the conflict. Unpublished documents made by military reports available in the National Archives of Yaounde; such as the straightforward report of the Mora siege written by Hauptmann Ernst Von Raben, Commandant of the German's Garrison of Mora and translated by Captain J. Lemoigne of the French colonial infantry remains indispensable for the apprehension of the soldier's daily life during the siege. Finally, a field visit will be made in Mora and Ngulmakong localities in other to get information through interviews with Kamerunian Veterans descendants.

3 DISCUSSION

The Mora military expedition led by the British and French coalition forces has been a subject of literature prolixity. Sergeant Fritz Damis from the 3rd Company of the Mora garrison and assistant to Captain Von Raben published a diary entitled: "Auf Dem Moraberge" where he detailed Von Raben surrender agreement with the Anglo-French forces. We learn from this testimony that, Germans conditioned their capitulation by a certain number of accommodations. This version is confirmed by the military diary written by Captain Ernst Von Raben himself. He wrote that the Mora surrender agreement insisted on the treatment of African Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) according to the Geneva Agreement on War. Brigadier General Georges Howard in his book "The Great War in West Africa 1914-1916" gives only a limited descriptive narration of the siege.

However, after reading these interesting books, we noticed that issue like the reinstatement of veterans; particularly soldiers from the German colonial army are forsaken. Added to this historical void, materials which could allow retracing the trajectory of these personalities are rare and in some cases are not available. This embarrassing situation is considered as a missing puzzle for the edification and the study of the Great War history widely. Which poses a central question for this research: following the departure of the Germans, how were veterans rehabilitated and adapted themselves to the new socio-political and military contexts created by the French and British rules?

4 RESULTS

4.1 KAMERUNIAN COMBATANT STATUS ISSUE AFTER THE SIEGE OF MORA

German positions in the northern front were targeted by the Anglo-French colonial forces. Commanded by Captain R.W Fox and Commandant J. Ferrandi, units from Nigeria and Fort Lamy (Chad territory) attempted to capture the Mora stronghold [6]. Hauptman Ernst Von Raben at the head of the 3rd Schutztruppen Company (Picture n°1) dispatched military staff to the Mora Mountain, in other to have tactical advantages over his enemies [7]. The siege began with harassing attacks of the mountain flanks, through patrols along Germans defensive lines. From 27th of August 1914 to the 15th of February 1916, both belligerents spread their units for the control of this strategic position. German forces included 14 Europeans, 125 natives soldiers accompanied with their wives [8]. In spite of the recruitment of 65 newcomers on the eve of the war, their training was insufficient to contain the coalition forces whose superiority in numbers was evident.



GERMAN GARRISON, MORA (PRE-WAR)

Picture n°1: The German Garrison in Mora

Paradoxically, the Kamerun Schutztruppen transformed this weakness into advantage; in the tactical domain for example, their inferiority contributed to facilitate their mobility around the mountain and it enabled them to conduct reconnaissance operations inside enemy's lines and made their defense position impregnable. This situation was verified during the siege, where although multiple assaults were attempted by the coalition, Mora stronghold was undefeated to the end of the conflict. The *statu quo* caused by the tenacity of Germans forces, obliged Allied commanders to propose a surrender deal to Captain Ernst Von Raben. Through a letter from General Cunliffe on 15th of February 1916, Anglo-French military officers proposed to the German opponent to surrender, since their comrades on the southern front had been defeated and had evacuated Kamerun [9]. According to Sergeant Fritz Damis of the 3rd Schutztruppen Company, the letter stated surrender terms; officers were authorized to keep their swords and NCOs including native soldiers with their families, could freely return to their homes. In addition, Hauptmann Ernst Von Raben demanded the British the payment of 60 000 Shillings in salary arrears of native soldiers [10].



Picture n°2: Germans' ammunitions displayed during their capitulation in Mora

Von Raben's demand was accepted. Describing German's surrender which took place on the 18th of February 1916 (Picture n°2), Golf Dornseif noticed that an impressive number of military equipment held by Germans included cartridges, guns and machine gunners were displayed. White officers accompanied with 165 native Non Commissioned officers soldiers. British colonial military officers kept their word by respecting surrender agreements and invited their opponents for a dinner

marking the end of the war. This celebration was boycotted by French military agents [11]. It was in this context of colonial transition that freed from their masters, Kamerunian soldiers with their wives henceforth began a new life. Some of them were reintegrated into the British colonial army, while others were returned to civil life, among them were Bagigla Maldé, Evina Bessala and Joseph Zoa.

4.2 EVINA BESSALA AND BAGIGLA MALDÉ: FROM THE SCHUTZTRUPPEN TO THE FRENCH'S COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

Evina Bessala, son of late M. Bessala and Mrs. Abomo, was a Kamerunian born in 1900 in *Emvella*, a village of the District of *Djougolo* in Yaounde [12]. He was recruited in 1911 as soldier in the German colonial army when he was 14 years old and served there for five years as a sergeant [13]. He participated actively in the defense of the Mora fort. At the end of the war, he decided to stay in northern part of the country and was offered to him a new career by the French. He was employed as a prison warder in Mokolo, a locality of the *Margui Wandala* division. He worked for this colonial service for 12 years, in a context where, security domain and overall prison warder agents were understaffed; an annual report on security and the situation of prisons in the northern part of the country revealed this administrative and security shortage faced by the colonial authorities. Indeed, for the control of Kaélé with a population of 80.000 inhabitants, the National Guard which both served as prison warder and police services had only five units to maintain law and order [14]. To resolve this problem, colonial authorities decided to recruit new agents among the Great War veterans. After serving in the penitentiary department, Evina Bessala was appointed to the colonial administration; precisely in the Mora subdivision office where he spent the rest of his life.

German settlement in Mora necessitated the recruited of some natives from villages all around to reinforce the colonial army. According to interviews with *Ltidiwé* village elders, (*Ltidiwé* is a village found in the Mora Mountain. It sheltered German's colonial units during their resistance in the First World War) locality sheltered the 3rd Company of the Schutztruppe during Great War hostilities and many youths from there fought beside this military unit [15]. Unfortunately they are not mentioned in the war archives, but their names are still remembered by the inhabitants. This is the case of Ladé Adissé, Hirdé Nagouï, Djuité Awoula, Wandala Malda, Nepba, Malda and, Bagigla, Malda. Wandala Malda and Nepba Malda, who were brothers, died after a fierce encounter against French units during the siege, Bagigla Malda on his part, escaped death by the skin his teeth to death. After the departure of Germans, the French colonial authorities employed him as a civil servant [16]. Besides, he benefitted from the agreement accepted by Hauptmann Von Raben, and founded the village of *Galbi* [17] which he ruled until his death. Nowadays, Galbi is administered by his grandson called Djoubari.

4.3 FIRST WORLD WAR EPILOGUE IN THE GERMAN'S STRONGHOLD OF YAOUNDE: JOSEPH ZOA, FROM THE GERMAN COLONIAL ARMY TO THE CHURCH

The taking of Yaounde by Allied troops in the 1st January 1916, marked the Great War epilogue on the southern front. Many casualties were registered; prisoners of war were detained by both belligerents. According to Brigadier General Georges, all of them had been well treated during their detention [18]. Jean Paul Messina on his part refutes this claim. He says that after the withdrawal of Germans troops from Yaounde, the coalition forces notably the French soldiers were particularly inhumane towards native soldiers and civilians who served in the German colonial administration [19].

Accused of complicity with the enemy, they were placed under surveillance and then jailed without any form of trial. On the other hand, German military officers who were the main target of the Allies were simply interned out of Cameroon. This controversy is illustrated by the story of Joseph Zoa, a former Kamerunian soldier enrolled in the Schutztruppe on the 21th October 1914. He had been captured during the battle of Yaounde with three others comrades and sentenced to death while their chiefs, the Germans, under whom they fought, were simply exchanged with the other white prisoners on the banks of the *Nyong* River [20]. Two others natives were also alleged to have been executed by the French colonial forces. Joseph Zoa's life had been saved, thanks to the intervention of the officer's mistress, a native woman who spoke *Ewondo* like him [21]. This sentence based on the racial motives totally in violation of the international conventions on war, confirms once more the hypothesis that the native soldiers were a tool within the colonial forces. Eyelom confirms this position when he said: "On les utilisa uniquement pour défendre les honneurs des nations européennes. On fit d'eux des misérables soldats noirs combattant pour les aspirations de l'homme blanc. Ils furent placés sur la première ligne de feu comme des chairs à canon." [22].

Regarding their reinstatement, specific information on the reconversion of the southern front's soldiers who participated in the Great War in German Kamerun was lacking. The victors' military reports noted that the process was immediately assured. In fact, the Germans departure has caused administrative and security problems. To fill these gaps, newcomers essentially militarized, decided to give priority to these essential issues. For this, the Allies officers with the troops placed

under their command assumed the parallel duties of administrative and security functions. As it has been observed, on the coalition's side, the demobilization and the reinsertion of soldiers into civil life were not a reality. But on the German side, the reconversion was eased by the absence of constraints like military instructions and expeditions because of the Germans departure. Only the case of Joseph Zoa was well known. This former German colonial soldier integrated civil life by opting for the priesthood [23]. In 1923 the Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Cameroon, His Lordship François-Xavier Vogt, appointed him as a catechist in the locality of *Ngulmakong*. There, he created with the assistance of the Vicar a new Catholic mission. In 1929, the church authorities decided to send him to Nlong, where he established another missionary post and there, he devoted all his life to the service of the Church.

5 CONCLUSION

At the end of this reflexion, it can be said that, the Great War epilogue determined the trajectories of Cameroonian soldiers of Germans' garrisons during the post conflict period. This situation impacted their reconversion process into the new civil life defined by the French and the British coalition rulers. Illustrative cases show that, soldiers from Germans garrisons were not only combatants, but also agents of social changes. Some of them created village, parish and served in the colonial administration. Whatever the case it may stand for, a combatant's destiny depended on his capacity to resist enemies' assaults and later, on the victor's sentence. That was the case in Mora, where soldiers and their assistants benefitted from special treatment from the victors. The southern fronts on the other hand, ex combatants of the German colonial army were captured and received poor treatment from the Allied. Evina Bessala and Joseph Zoa were examples that demonstrated if it is necessary that, the Geneva Agreement on war prisoners issue had been subjectively applied according to racial and social considerations. This situation raises questions concerning the image of native soldiers in the colonial military system. Responses to these questions will reveal more about those who gave their lives defending interest which were not their concern, in a context which they were considered as "tools" by colonial masters.

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