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## Counting the Cost of War: the Great War's Economic Impact on Africa

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# Introduction.

## Counting the Cost of War: The Economic Impact of the First World War and its Aftermath on African Societies

The Great War was the first conflict fought on a global scale and a "period of immense and significant change" for the African continent (Rathbone 1978). As John Iliffe points out, the war was both the apex of colonialism in Africa, and the beginning of its decline (Iliffe 1979). After the end of the war, the German colonies were divided between Great Britain, France, Belgium and South Africa, completing the process of partition that had started with the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885. At the same time, the war represented the climax of colonial exploitation. African resources and labour were exploited in an unprecedented way, and some colonies were used as a mere battlefield for a war that was entirely European. The more direct effects of the conflict were felt in the colonies where the war was actually fought, for example the German colonies and the neighbouring territories, and in those areas where thousands of soldiers and workers were recruited for the European fronts (Anderson 2017). As a consequence of this unprecedented labour mobilization, the war in Africa also had a profound impact on the relations between colonizers and colonized. Fighting alongside and against Europeans was a new experience that had an impact on power relations in the colonies. During the war, European and African soldiers ate, washed and slept together. And African soldiers discovered that Europeans, who had been regarded by the

majority of Africans *as supermen*, had weaknesses and not only strengths (Ogot 1978). The hardships and labour mobilization of the war period, together with a new image of the whites in the colonies, favoured the development of a more critical approach by the educated elites, that in some cases resulted into forms of 'proto-nationalist' movements against colonial rule, such as that of John Chilembwe in Malawi or Harry Thuku in Kenya (Crowder 1985).

The impact of the Great War cannot be understood solely from the military perspective. Attempts to refashion our understanding of the impact of WWI on Africa need also to include the changes to colonial economies and to pay attention to the management of food and natural resources. Few works have however addressed the economic participation of African societies to the war and the long-term economic consequences of the war on African societies. This has limited a full understanding of the impact of the First World War on Africa. In fact, if not all the African colonies became battlefields or soldier recruitment areas, almost all of them felt the economic impact of the war, either directly through the production of strategic materials for the European war effort, or indirectly, owing to the disruptions to international trade. How did African societies react to these economic changes? How did these reactions impact imperial policies? What were the long-term consequences of the economic change produced by the war?

By answering these questions, the aim of this issue of *afriche e orienti* is to expand our understanding of the First World War. The six papers in this issue cover different aspects connected to the war, including: the production of the colonies to support the European war effort and the impact this had on food production in the colonies; the financial policies of the colonial governments in connection to the war and post-war currency instabilities, and the consequences on financial institutions in the colonies as well as in the metropolises; the recruitment of labourers for the war effort (soldiers, porters and workers) and the impact of their demobilization on post-war African societies; and, finally, how African post-war economies were transformed as a consequence of the war.

The article by Federico Cresti brings us to Libya, one of the least known among WWI's battlefields. In his chapter, Cresti discloses how the Italian army used food as a tool of war against the Libyan population. Even if it is problematic to calculate the exact number of human losses among the population, he concludes that civilians were considered a legitimate target, consequently in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica the Italian army waged a savage hunger war against Libyans which aimed to curb resistance.

Massimo Zaccaria focuses on Eritrea, showing how the local economy was increasingly mobilized to support the war effort. In particular, in analyzing the vain attempts to increase local wheat production, the article argues that to understand the real pressure that war placed on African societies we have to consider also what was attempted but did not succeed.

In 1920, the Italian Government set up a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into War Expenditure which turned its attention also to the situation in the colonies. By focusing on Libya and by using the documentation collected by the Commission, Fabio Ecca provides a vivid account of the massive wastes, profits, and squanderings that characterized the Italian administration in Libya between 1913 and 1922.

Bill Nasson provides a thorough overview of the impact of the war on the Union of South Africa. He reconstructs the emergence of import substitution, the stimulation of industrial expansion, the issue of economic patriotism as well as the world of labour and argues that the costs and adaptations of the war fuelled South Africa's growth into a regionally influential modern capitalist economy.

Post-war demobilization in British East Africa is the topic of the paper by Karin Pallaver. She provides new elements for the understanding of the experience of East African carriers by analysing the British government's currency policies after the war and especially the decision-making process behind the issue of one-rupee notes to pay African porters at the time of demobilization.

Finally, the article by Charlotte Walker-Said explores the impact of the war on French Equatorial Africa after the war. She sheds light on how discourses of 'economic development' in the post-war period justified policies that were almost exclusively aimed at supporting private concessionary companies and industrial associations to promote the export of commodities such as rubber, timber and copper.

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The articles gathered in this special issue contribute to the current historiographical debate about World War I and Africa in two ways. First, they show how throughout the conflict the empires were mobilized to the benefit of the war effort and that without considering the economic dimension of the war it is difficult to understand the impact of this global conflict on Africa. Second, they point out that alongside the hardships of the war, African societies experienced also opportunities (Moyn 2019). As a result, the relationship between Africa and the Great War appears to be much more articulated than previously appreciated, and does not lend itself to easy explanations or broad generalizations. Nevertheless, one point seems to be quite clear: sadly, Africa could not escape the maelstrom of WWI, the world's first truly global conflict.

Karin Pallaver and Massimo Zaccaria, *editors of this issue*

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