



African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918

Robert Gaudi

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The incredible true account of General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and his exploits in World War I Africa with the legendary "Schutztruppe."

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the continent of Africa was a hotbed of international trade, colonialism, and political gamesmanship. So when World War I broke out, the European powers were forced to contend with one another not just in the bloody trenches, but in the treacherous jungle. And it was in that unforgiving land that General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck would make history.

With the now-legendary *Schutztruppe* (Defensive Force), von Lettow-Vorbeck and a small cadre of hardened German officers fought alongside their devoted native African allies as equals, creating the first truly integrated army of the modern age.

African Kaiser is the fascinating story of a forgotten guerrilla campaign in a remote corner of Equatorial Africa in World War I; of a small army of loyal African troops led by a smaller cadre of rugged German officers—of white men and black who fought side by side.

It is the story of epic marches through harsh, beautiful landscapes; of German officers riding bicycles to battle through the bush; of rhino charges and artillery duels with scavenged naval guns; of hunted German battleships hidden up unmapped river deltas teeming with crocodiles and snakes; of a desperate army in the wilderness cut off from the world, living off hippo lard and sawgrass flowers—enduring starvation, malaria, and dysentery. And of the singular intercontinental voyage of Zeppelin L59, whose improbable four-thousand-mile journey to the equator and back made aviation history.

But mostly it is the story of von Lettow-Vorbeck—the only undefeated German commander in the field during World War I and the last to surrender his arms.

African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918 Details

Date : Published January 31st 2017 by Berkley

ISBN : 9780425283714

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Format : Hardcover 436 pages

Genre : History, Cultural, Africa, Biography, Nonfiction, War, World War I, Military, Military History

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From Reader Review African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918 for online ebook

S. Shelton says

Gaudi weaves an intriguing chronicle of the ferocious campaign in East Africa between the German Schutztruppe and British Commonwealth troops during the Great War—1914 to 1918. He develops the account of this little known Afrikanischer Krieg from the German perspective and in an easy, empathetic, and coherent style. The account is so compelling that we experience the details as if we are participants in the narrative.

The protagonist is Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel) Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck of Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial Army. For four years, Lettow-Vorbeck led his Schutztruppe of well disciplined and highly trained German and colonial askaris troops in skillful guerrilla warfare in a classic tactical retreat through East Africa: British Africa (later Kenya), German Equatoria (later Tanganyika), Portuguese East Africa (later Mozambique), and Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). In failed pursuit were elements of the British Army.

And, peripheral to the ground war in East Africa, Gaudi recounts exactly how the German "battleship" SMS Königsberg (actually a light cruiser) from the Kaiserliche Marine escaped from the British battle squadron in the Indian Ocean; the ship's role as a commerce raider; and its journey up the Rufiji river to hide from the British ships pursuing it. After several weeks of fruitless search, Fleet Air Arm aeroplanes spotted the SMS Königsberg in a remote tributary of the river, hidden under the leafy limbs of a copse of trees. He continues with the particulars of its demise by British naval artillery.

In another tangential episode, he details the German High Command's resolve to resupply Lettow-Vorbeck's isolated Schutztruppe with arms, food, and other necessities.

The scheme was to use the super Luftschiff Zeppelin L57 to carry these supplies to East Africa. In command was Korvettenkapitan (Corvette Captain) Ludwig Bockhold of the Kaiserlich Marine's Naval Airship Service. The L57, after a harrowing flight, finally reached the Nile River in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. But, British Intelligence had broken the German naval codes and sent fake messages to the L57 telling Bockhold to abort the mission and return. He ordered the zeppelin to reverse course and sail to Europe.

In June 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm awarded Lieutenant Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck Germany's highest military award, the Pour le Mérite. In October 1917, the German General Staff promoted Lieutenant Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck directly to Generalmajor (Major General).

The next year, at the 11th hour, on the 11th day, and in the 11th month of 1918, the guns of the Great War fell silent. Two weeks after the armistice in Europe, Generalmajor von Lettow-Vorbeck (Bwana Obersti) marched his Imperial East African troop, the last German command in the field still undefeated in battle, into Abercorn, Rhodesia. Von Lettow-Vorbeck ordered his Schutztruppe to lay down their arms, and he surrendered to Brigadier General Edward Northey of the British Army. The general accepted von Lettow-Vorbeck's surrender in the name of King George V.

British Captain W. C. Downes of the The West African Frontier Force commented on the martial skills of Generalmajor von Lettow-Vorbeck, "He was a genius in the art of bush warfare, a man of indomitable spirit—a most remarkable leader of men, who did not know what it was to be beaten."

On March 2, 1918, Generalmajor von Lettow-Vorbeck rode through the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, leading the survivors of the Schutztruppe in a parade, to boisterous cheers from the defeated and disheartened

German folk. “‘The Lion of Africa’ was the only undefeated German general from World War I still commanding an army of a defeated nation at the Armistice.”

Negatives:

Only two large-scale maps are in this book. To comprehend the details of the campaign, we need small-scale maps (about 1: 24,000) that highlight the geographic features and the movements of opposing forces. Gaudi has a tendency to call most all warships “battleships.” No battleships were involved in the East African campaign.

He labels the SMS Königsberg a battleship. It was a light cruiser.

He discusses the “Indian” Gurkhas. The Gurkhas are from Nepal only.

He states that Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated to Switzerland. He abdicated to the Netherlands.

Terence says

Definitely not a straight up two stars but I can’t quite give it three.

When I was a boy, there was a book in my father’s basement about mercenaries – mercs – that I would often pull out and read when me and my siblings visited on the weekends. It was a pretty “cool” book to a twelve-year-old boy. A few years later, I was a teen-ager finishing high school and moving on to college. I was more mature and my horizons were expanding; and I realized that the mercs I had been reading about were primarily white men from the colonial states of Rhodesia and South Africa and that their opponents were anti-colonial rebels. Or – after the Europeans had left – they worked for the corrupt, authoritarian, if native, regimes that too often replaced them. Not men who deserved adulation.

I was reminded of that book (whose title I wish I could remember so I could add it to the GR library) after I finished *African Kaiser* and was wondering what to write. Unlike those mercs I had been reading about, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck does have admirable qualities. For example, he had no difficulties working with black Africans and accepting them as competent, intelligent fellow humans. [Though it was a very paternalistic acceptance. The black African was as intelligent and as capable as any white European but he needed the trappings of civilization (particularly German civilization) to be fully human. And, of course, it didn’t extend to having any black officers in his army.]

But...he was a complicated man. He led a Freikorps company (precursors of the Nazi’s SA thugs) after the war when conservative elements in Germany brutally suppressed Leftist opposition. He was cashiered and his pension stopped for participating in a monarchist coup. And, though he despised the Nazi’s and they had no fondness for him, three of his sons died fighting for them in World War 2.

The greatest weakness of this book is that it lacks that sense of complication. It’s a hagiography of von Lettow that glosses over any less-than-admirable qualities about the man to focus on his “adventures” in Africa.

That said, *African Kaiser* is a spirited, eminently readable account of Germany’s war in Africa and how its successes were largely due to the commitment and intelligence of one man – Paul von Lettow. It’s not solely about von Lettow, however; we do meet some of the other actors – on both sides – in the theater. The *Oberstleutnant* had an uncanny ability to become the obsessive focus of the commanders he fought against, even if they were sitting in a London office 7,000 miles away (Churchill). And von Lettow *did* achieve his objective – pinning down men and matériel better used against the Fatherland on the Western Front. The

author also brings to light some of the more unusual events of the war, such as the abortive Zeppelin flight that attempted to get supplies to von Lettow's army or the 252-day naval siege of SMS *Königsberg*.

Gaudi's writing can be florid, and I thought the battle scenes often went on a page or two too long but recommended if you have any interest in World War 1 and/or forgotten theaters in major wars.

Leonard Mokos says

Never heard of Gaudi. I hope he's writing 23 hours a day morning noon and night because he's fantastic.

The first feeling I had at the end of this tremendous book was regret. That's it? I can't be with Lettow-Vorbeck any more? I have to leave Africa? Because Gaudi takes you back and puts you there.

It is not just a biography of the amazing German General Paul von L-V. It is a sweep of fascinating once in an era personalities. It is an account of Colonial powers (however cursory). A detail of the unusual challenges and eye squinting countermeasures employed by both sides. An adventure, a war history, a collage of mini biographies, a vicarious tour of exotic topographies and I could go on (and on) about how much I enjoyed this terrific book.

Gaudi, you really trounced the subject. I pity the fool who tries to follow you. "African Kaiser" was like that pie you eat in one sitting because you can't stop taking it in, it's too good.

Get this one.

Phil says

I've always enjoyed reading "micro" histories. Histories of seemingly small things, in this case the sideshow that was the war in East Africa, which reveal larger impacts on the time. The Imperial German Army's East Africa campaign was not about capturing territory or winning the war, but about tying down the enemy's resources at a time when he could least afford to expend them.

General von Lettow was a gifted commander who lead his ragtag army on a chase across East Africa, pursued by thousands of British troops. The story includes improbable events which were news to me: A Zeppelin mission to supply von Lettow's army which made it as far as the Sudan before having to turn back; A battleship stranded in an East African river; commandeered Brazilian river gunboats; and the rise of both Churchill and Jan Smuts, the future leader of South Africa.

Gaudi's book is well written, well researched and fast paced. Highly recommended!

Steve says

I have read countless books on World War I and studied World War I. I read about the battles fought in the trenches in Europe and Lawrence of Arabia's battle in the Middle East against the Ottoman Empire. I was first intrigued by the title and glanced through it before I bought and read it. This was not only a great book, But an interesting read. To me knowledge, it is rare that books about the First World War has been written

about the battles in Africa that were fought during the First World War. This tells the story of guerrilla fighting by native African allies and the Schutztruppe (German defensive forces) led by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. This story has it all from artillery duels, naval bombardments, going through dense jungles, and crossing uncharted river deltas teeming with crocodiles. This also describes the flight of the German zeppelins-airships which was used during the war.

Aditya Pareek says

This book is about one prussian officer and his service to his Fatherland, this book is also about African colonial subjects of the fatherland and the potency of the force that took on The Royal Indian Army and British Troops of The Empire. This book goes into gory details about small afflictions that degrade humanity from men in Jungle/Tropical/Desert modern warfare.

about battleships of the kaiserreich marine and how when shipborne artillery is stripped and adapted to the needs of a rag-tag German led guerilla force it became more than just "fire for effect".

This is an experience, a narrative history and an academically sound work.

5*s Indeed.

HEIL KAISER!

Walter Bonnet says

African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918 by Robert Gaudi

When you hear about World War One you imagine the stagnant, muddy, wet, and cold trenches of Flanders and northern France, very rarely if ever mentioned is the fast moving, static, hot, and deadly war going on in German East Africa at the same time. At the start of the war the German General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck was while a talented a rather unaccomplished general in command of the Schutztruppe, the German colonial soldiers of East Africa. Throughout the book and war Lettow-Vorbeck continues to fight an unwinnable war in a inhospitable land while constantly on the run against the British, portuguese, South African, and Belgian armies, And must overcome every obstacle he faces, all in the name of bringing glory to the Fatherland.

By far one of my favorite elements of the book is how incredibly in-detail the book is, its able to bring to life the true stories of what happened one hundred years ago, it goes into detail exactly how many men were where, which divisions were on the battlefield, and the personal thoughts, motivations, and ideas going through the minds of the men who drove the war onward. We come to know the different figures of the conflict in detail, from the calm and level-headed Vorbeck to the hot-tempered Boer commander Kraut, in the end though each character is driven forward by his sense of duty, patriotism, honor, love of homeland, and his own survival

Another part of the book I enjoyed was the varying points of view and how its able to bring in all these events which at first seem rather unimportant but end up playing a large role in the story. While the story mainly revolves around Lettow-Vorbeck and his Schutztruppe battalions we still manage to hear and see the conflict from the British point of view, mainly through Norman King, a british agent planted in GEA before the start of the war. Through his and the other allied commanders featured we see the frustration, admiration, joy, and hardships shared by the allied soldiers during the conflict. Some of the parts that seem unimportant is how the first chapter of the book tells us about the German Battlecruiser SMS Magdeburg runs aground on the shores of an island before being scuttled by her crew, while seemingly unimportant to the african war the allies are able to capture the germans codes and are able to intercept all Transmissions from Berlin to Dar Es

Salaam, capital of GEA, which later comes in need when the Germans attempt to launch operation China Snow later in the war...

African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918 left me hooked from the moment I started it and is definitely one of my all time favorite books. It's perfect for anyone studying or wanting to know more about ww1, Germany, South Africa, Colonialism, Africa, history, war, or just looking for something to read. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone interested in World War One or History in general.

Steve Mayberry says

You can sense the lack of source material

Benjamin Finley says

This book is amazing. I read a lot of books on both World Wars and this is probably one of the best. The author balances the book very well with background stories, wide cast of interesting characters and in depth details on everything from army equipment and battle tactics to the terrain of the country.

William DuFour says

aN entertaining as well as informative work. With cast of characters of the African campaign of the Imperial Germany and other Europeans. Lots of new information.

Jean says

This book is part of my reading project about World War One. This book takes place in Africa rather than Europe. I remember the Germans in the movie "African Queen". Little seems to have been written about WWI in Africa.

Germany was one of the colonist nations in Africa. They had German East Africa. The author tells about the life of General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (1870-1964) but most of the time about his African campaigns. Gaudi goes into depth about how he created his fanatically loyal Schutztruppe. They were a small colonial infantry consisting of some black and white soldiers. They were trained into a highly efficient fighting force, aggressive and completely self-supporting. Gaudi states it was the first racially integrated army in modern history. They were cut off from the world by the British Blockade. They were outnumbered by British, South African, Belgian and Portuguese armies but they could not be caught or beaten. Gaudi provides a brief review of colonialism in Africa and tosses in a myriad of odd facts. Gaudi compares Lettow-Vorbeck to Glylippus from Thucydides in the Peloponnesian Wars.

The book is well written and meticulously researched. The book reads like a novel instead of a dry history

book. Gaudi does a great job with the descriptions of the naval and military actions. Von Lettow-Vorbeck had a brief romance with Karen Blixen who is better known as Isaak Dinesen, author of "Out of Africa". Von Lettow-Vorbeck was the only undefeated German General of WWI and a recipient of the German Pourle Merite and the Blauer Max. This would be the equivalent of the Medal of Honor. He lived to oppose Hitler and died in 1964.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book was about 18 hours long. Paul Hodgson does a good job narrating the book. Hodgson is a classically trained British actor and audiobook narrator.

Erick Njenga says

Absolutely loved it! Great Book about a Great man.

I initially thought the book focused on German South West Africa but was pleasantly surprised to find out it's actually about the Great war in East Africa; with all the familiar place names landmarks.

Erik Graff says

I like competent histories written with frequent illuminating, often amusing, anecdotes. This, at once a sympathetic biography of von Lettow-Vorbeck and a history of WWI in German Southeast Africa, manages both while giving enough background about the history of the European colonization of the area to concretely set the stage. My sole complaint about this popular history is its lack of footnotes.

Chrisl says

2/25 - Impressive ... much more than expected array of linked history ... starting with Zeppelins ... and "one of the newest and fastest cruisers in the Kaiserlich Marine" ... on to Boxer China ... to Herero genocide, so far ... just arriving in East Africa in 1913, still early in the story ...

Some quotes from Herero section. Would like to hear a conversation between Generals Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and George Crook, comparing fighting Apaches to fighting Hereros.

"Before the arrival of the first missionaries in South West Africa, its history is steeped in Neolithic obscurity. ...

"... excepting the occasional burst of ultraviolence, most Hottentots lived in a condition of Stone Age torpor ... Then, sometime in the mid-eighteenth century, wide swaths of Hottentot territory succumbed to the invasion of a tribe of Bantu cattle herders from the north--the Hereros. This warlike people first occupied the region's arable upper plateau, ideal for cattle grazing--a flat brown landscape resembling the Texas panhandle. Agricultural duties, which were minimal, they relegated to captured Hottentot slaves.

"Over the remaining decades of the century,. the Hereros slowly drove the Hottentots into the dry, rugged hills farther south and east. The newcomers, much taller and far more warlike than the indigenous Khoisan peoples, were possessed of the fierceness that comes from basing one's way of life on a single source: Everything they valued, all wealth and status and personal happiness, had to do with cattle ... Because of

their dominating ways and elegant bearing, the few Europeans who encountered Herero tribesmen in the early days regarded them as the region's 'natural aristocrats.'"

...

"In 1885, Bismarck sent Dr. Ernst Goring, father of future Nazi Reichsfeldmarschall ... make treaties with Hottentots and Hereros alike. But Goring, an arrogant and high-handed administrator, only managed to antagonize the region's native peoples. ... Nonetheless, by 1888 ... Germany's first African colony had taken shape ...

"The presence of extremely strong and independent tribes kept the territories in a turmoil of native uprisings ...

"On the morning of January 12, 1904, the Hereros launched their campaign. They ripped out railroad beds, cut telegraph lines, burned everything in sight. The uprising took many Germans by surprise, even those missionaries who lived and worked closely with the Hereros in the bush. German farmers and traders, whose sharp business practices had done much to inspire the rebellion in the first place, were hunted down and killed ...

Michael says

Hard to rate - somewhere between 4 and a 3 for me. The subject of "African Kaiser" - Paul Von Lettow-Vorbeck and the campaign he led against the British during World War I in East Africa - is truly fascinating. That said, there is something quite peculiar about Gaudi's writing style - I am not sure how to describe it other than uniquely colorful. For some readers this may be a positive but I found it at times pretty distracting. For example, the book is peppered with a number of rather wild literary flourishes (e.g., the author speculates if Lettow may have heard "the voices of von Lettow fighting men out of the ancestral gloom of 1,000 years, out of the shadows of the Baltic forests..." during his baptism of fire), periodically offers up some pretty odd and jarring analogies (both the eye of Sauron and Jim Morrison of the Doors get mentioned), and includes a couple of bizarre one act "playlets" complete with stage directions (I have not seen that before in a history book and probably for good reason). These quirks notwithstanding, I would still recommend "African Kaiser" to other readers. The book is stuffed full of all sorts of interesting details and personalities - I found it impossible to put down.
