

A Review of: „German Colonialism in Africa 1884-1920” by Krisztián Som¹²

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This is the third monograph by the author, Krisztián Som, whose research and writing began a quarter of a century ago. He previously published two studies on the history of the police forces of the German colonies.

Monarchia Publishers and the Africa Research Institute of the Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences at the University of Óbuda jointly published the book „German Colonialism in Africa, 1884-1920” in November 2021. The book was peer-reviewed by Dr. habil János Besenyő and edited by Ákos Bíró.

The list of publications, which are dealing with the history of African colonies in Hungarian language, is not too long, and those that are focusing on the period of German colonialism are rare, but fortunately, they are not unprecedented. There are works (books, theses) describing the life of a single German colony or the colonial period, but the one written by Krisztián Som is more comprehensive than the previous ones and covers the four African colonies of the German Empire in detail. In the history of Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, Tanzania, Rwanda and Urundi the three-three and half decades of German colonial rule was a brief period. However, this period was significant in the lives of those countries and peoples. The German colonial government developed the territorial administration; however, some territories operated under supervision. In the field of education, the establishment of governorate schools were a step forward, but of greater importance were the growing church schools. In many provinces, the modernisation of health care brought the achievements of modern medicine. However, alongside this development, German colonialism (also) had a significant downside. In all German colonies, there was a resistance to the introduction of foreign (European) rule. In German East Africa and German Southwest Africa, this extended over vast areas of land. These resistances were suppressed by the Berlin government through a major redeployment of troops, with the use of firearms; terrible reprisals were carried out, leading to the extermination of a large number of the civilian population. The memory of these events still lives on in Namibia, and the German governments of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries made several gestures to gain their forgiveness.

By the very end of the 1900s, life in the German colonies had entered a period of relative

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calm, because of the harsh crushing of resistance and the reform of the colonial administration. This significantly contributed to the revival of the local and colonial economy. Investment increased, and infrastructure began to develop at an ever-increasing rate. In addition, railways and telecommunications also developed. Plantations became more widespread and provided livelihoods for more and more workers.

However, events in Europe have finally brought about a radical change in Africa. Within days, the outbreak of the First World War had significant results in Africa because the neighbouring colonies became hostile territories. The German colonial governorates recognized that they had a very low combat value of colonial police forces against an external aggression. They attempted to recognize their neutrality by neighbouring governorates in the early days but all these attempts were unsuccessful.

The African battlefields of the First World War, however, required the commitment of a larger force and for a longer period, contrary to the expectations of the Allied powers. Only Togo, with its small population, resisted for a few weeks. German Southwest Africa was fought for 11 months, Cameroon for 19 months, while in German East Africa and the nearer countryside German colonial forces were at war until the very end of the war.

In German East Africa, Lieutenant-Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck used the opportunities in the military situation very effectively because his relatively small force, - which was divided into several parts by several fronts on long, open borders - successfully held off a British force that was considerably larger than the German.

The book has a standard B5 size, 491 pages in total, and it is divided into three main sections. On the back cover, a quote from the Imperial German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, "I do not want any colonies; they are only good as supply stations." This quote is in stark contrast to the content of the book. This is apt to raise the curiosity of the person who is holding the book. The author's introductory reflections are followed by a foreword of Dr. habil János Besenyő, the Head of the Africa Research Institute at Óbuda University.

In the first part of the book, the reader will read about the history of the Prussian African trading colonies in the 18th century, which is not a direct precursor to the German colonial efforts and achievements of the late 19th century. With change in Bismarckian policy in the mid-1880s, a supervisory body for the German colonial administration was set up in the imperial government.

In addition to a historical account, we get an overview of the main data on the German colonies. Following this chapter, Krisztián Som presents the history of the establishment of the German protectorates in Togo, Cameroon, German Southwest Africa and German East Africa from the immediate antecedents to the outbreak of the First World War. The reason for this division is clear: each colony was a separate administrative unit, its natural environment and population density provided significantly different economic opportunities, so its development path was therefore different. The presentation of each colony covers the

history of the establishment of its administration, population trends, the main settlements, economic development, infrastructure and public services. The author introduces some of the research and activities of some Hungarian citizens during their stay in the German colonies in Africa. The chapters provide a picture of the numerical changes in life in the colonies through data sheets, ranging from economic indicators and population figures to local wages and prices. Detailed maps at the end of each chapter will help the reader who may be less familiar with the geography of the German colonies.

After a while, Togo in West Africa became a model colony for Germany. However, the future of steady development was limited by the size and potential of the land devoted to commercial agriculture, and by the labour market opportunities resulting from population density. Over time, its budget became less and less dependent on subsidies from the Berlin government, and the balance of income and expenditure was then balanced, Togo was the only one of all the German colonies to do it.

Cameroon's vast rain forested landscapes, savannah in the north and more populated coastal areas offered very different opportunities for investors and residents alike, but economic growth was slow despite the opportunities. Following the establishment of colonial borders, Cameroon was the only one among the German colonies to gain significant territory in 1911.

The history of German Southwest Africa is very different from that of the other German colonies, and even from the colonies of the wider region. The vast protectorate was very sparsely populated, many areas were covered by deserts, and the scarcity of rainfall limited the cultivation of the savannah. However, its mining industry grew from strength to strength at the turn of the century, with significant diamond mining along the coast and ore mines with substantial production in the north. These also increased the influx of German labour significantly. The early history of German patronage of East Africa was essentially influenced by competition with the British. It was the only German colony not established at the direct will of the German government, and for many years, it was controlled by a joint-stock company, the German East Africa Company. The population density and agricultural potential of the country, which was eleven times the size of present-day Hungary, varied greatly and the development of some regions was therefore different.

After a while, there was a relatively peaceful time for the colonies, and it had a positive impact on their economies and development.

The introduction to the second chapter briefly summarises some of the major stages leading up to the First World War and the situation of the African colonies in that context. Each chapter describes the defensive struggles of the four German colonies and the invasion operations of the Entente forces separately. The chapters are justified by the fact that the outcome of the fighting on the German side was unrelated to the other defences, although the British movements in East Africa was influenced by the liberation of troops tied down in Southwest Africa in 1915. In particular, the Author gives a detailed account of German events



in East Africa, for which, in addition to contemporary and later sources, he has drawn on reports and publications by the two opposing commanders. In addition, the later published memoirs of two Hungarian officers who fought for the Germans in East Africa over a long period of time are also included. Two of the more specific events of the East African theatre of operations were the military operations on the frontiers of the region and the battle of the German light cruiser *Königsberg* and his crew. The reader will also learn about the supply problems and the results of efforts to solve the supply shortage of the German East African forces and government. In addition, the reader will learn about the wartime resupply efforts of the Berlin command, including the journey of the L59 airship, which is of aviation historical significance. The maps of the East African theatre of operations are a special feature, because most of the settlements, towns to villages, which were involved in the operations, are depicted. The maps greatly help the reader to locate the events of the war.

The third and final section briefly summarises the afterlife of the four German colonies, with a focus on their possible German connections.

The author adds a total of 26 map supplements and 4 picture supplements. Among the used sources, 175 have been published in print (books, studies, journal articles, encyclopaedia articles, etc.) while 23 are the online sources which are available on the internet.

The book will be a help not only to readers who are interested in African history, but also to those who research the subject directly or indirectly, whether they approach the decades of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the period of German colonialism and the First World War from an economic or military perspective.