

The Proximity and Distance during British Wartime Expeditions in West Africa, 1914-1918: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

War is an aspect of intergroup interaction across the world. It is a period of uncertainty and psychological conflict due to hostile perception by warring parties to the detriment of the civil populace. During wars, different groups strategise on ways of protecting their interests, usually influenced by proximity and distance. This paper examines the nature and impact of proximity on British expedition during World War I in West Africa, which shaped wartime intergroup relations in Nigeria, Cameroun, Togoland, and Ghana as the managers of the British colonial rule advanced their military strategies. It explores how proximity shaped and dictated both the operationalisation of the war by British strategists, and the indigenous people who acted as carriers and combatants. The study

employed primary and secondary data, including archival materials. At the initial stage, inadequate carriers complicated the challenge of distance to the infantry operations in Bamenda, which led to the recruitment of more Nigerians as carriers. Road networks and cheap means of transportation reduced the distance between military camps and target areas. This paper stresses that, proximity notwithstanding, the cooperation, collaboration and role of indigenous people who served as carriers and combatants also contributed to the actualisation of the war goals of the British forces. More time, human and material resources were expended on mounting attack on distant enemy territories than the enclaves where Britain had proximity advantage.

Keywords: World War I, West Africa, British expedition, Carriers, Proximity.

Introduction

War is a significant part of global history driven by the national interest of states as well as their military, management and grand strategies that there are occasional security-sector reforms to reposition the military and paramilitary personnel for the task of national security. Since ancient times, war has remained an aspect of intergroup relations, creating a channel for different groups to interact for the actualisation of various goals. Some scholars have argued that the humanitarian costs notwithstanding, war is beneficial to societies to the extent that groups adopt different strategies to strengthen their security sector, especially within the context of military strategy.¹

Indeed, war influenced the tempo and the nature of inter-state relations in Europe. From the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, war was basically an instrument of the foreign policy of the great powers which sought to establish alliances, like the Triple Alliance (1882) and Entente Cordiale (1904), for the purpose of preparing for war and balancing power

by discouraging enemy nations from launching attack.² This was the period when Britain initiated the diplomacy of splendid isolation (aloofness from continental entanglements) in order to expand her empire as the land of glory. The colonial context of the African countries that witnessed the war is a sufficient testimony that events in Europe dictated the pace and direction of European activities in Africa. While Nigeria and Ghana were already being colonised by Britain, and Northern Cameroun and Togoland were being administered by France. This experience is traceable to the aggressive European imperialism and the eventual colonization of Africa by the war parties of France, Britain, Germany, and Portugal, marking a radical transformation from empires of informal influence to formalized possessions.

There are many studies on wartime activities during World War I, including mobilisation and deployment of troops to the people of West Africa, colonial masters³, army mutinies⁴, morale⁵, daily life⁶, and the supply of non-combat labour in colonial British West Africa⁷. The United States, for instance, focused all its energies in 1917 and 1918 on mobilizing economic and manpower resources for prosecuting the war in the interest of Allied powers.⁸

However, little attention has been given to the issue of proximity and distance in British West Africa during World War I when belligerent parties sought to overcome each other in their expeditions as far as a hostile perception of the other was concerned. West Africa was so strategic that it served as a source of transport for Allied military's campaigns in East Africa for some time.⁹

The First World War as well as being the first war to be fought on a global scale, was also the first industrialised war across the world involving different countries and powers, including West Africa, where the British and French governments struggled for incompatible goals. The war was not for Africa, but the continent was indirectly involved because the colonial masters were in charge of African affairs at that time.¹⁰ African troops were instrumental to the victory recorded in African campaigns, particularly in

their deployments beyond African soil, as they reinforced European armies on Western and Middle Eastern fronts.¹¹ According to Pallaver, the economies of African colonies contributed to the prosecution of the war through the manufacturing of the strategic materials to enable the Allied powers to emerge victorious, especially by providing the needed logistics for the European fronts. In other words, the people contributed as combatants on the one hand, and as transporters of logistics, weapons and food as well as producers or labourers, on the other hand.¹²

The period before the First World War was characterised by socio-economic inequality and poverty, which can cause violence and inhuman acts against others, undermining intergroup relations in a society.¹³ This paper addresses the intergroup relations traceable to the relationship between France and Britain before 1914, which greatly contributed to the peaceful management of relations between them.

In 1914, all armies in Europe were at least comparable, as the size of the enemy's armed forces arguably gave planners sleepless nights, although the Germans only recorded unpleasant surprises through the use of mobile heavy artillery.¹⁴ After its demoralizing defeat in 1870, the French Army found an outlet in African conquests that created friction with Britain's imperial interests, as did traditional rivalries in the eastern Mediterranean. But for the French people these were marginal issues.¹⁵

World War I was occasioned by the advent of multiple stable states that wanted to capitalise on lapses in social relations on the European continent to undermine the position of others in the international system. The fact that Britain mended her fences with her traditional rivals explains why in 1904 she settled her differences with France in Africa, establishing a relationship that became known as *l'entente cordiale*.¹⁶ The German attempt to humiliate the French in 1911 by challenging their influence in Morocco with a naval demonstration off Agadir made the British support the French explicitly¹⁷; and in West Africa, French and British colonial troops cooperated in clearing Togoland and the German Cameroons.¹⁸

Before the coming of the colonial administrators, and colonial rule, there were many city states in Nigeria under empires and traditional leaderships. So, the act of warfare was not new to them; they had engaged each other in outright wars and combats of defence and expansion of territories, or economically motivated conflicts. It then means that prosecuting World War I was not strange to the various groups within Nigeria and their neighbours in Cameroon and Benin Republic.

Trading states existed, especially those in the Niger Delta and the eastern part of Nigeria, which depended first on fishing, salt making, farming and later participated in the trans-Atlantic trade in the form of slave buying¹⁹ and selling that empowered the European merchants and enriched the continent of Europe.²⁰

In spite being colonial rivals before the war, wartime cooperation manifested between Britain and France, leading to the formation of the Allied troops (Anglo-French troops) commanded by Dobell, who captured Duala and consolidated their operations by launching combined military-naval operations to the north, to the south, to the southwest, and to the southeast of Duala in October-December 1914, thereby succeeding in routing the Germans in different forms.²¹

Colonel C. H. P Carter, Commandant of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) was granted permission to reconnoitre the Nigeria-Cameroon border, as about three columns of Nigerian troops of the WAFF were deployed along the Nigeria-Cameroon border pending orders from Lagos. On August 17, Nigerian troops of the so-called Cross River Column, led by Lieutenant Colonel C. T. Mair, launched an offensive from Ikom on the Nigeria-Cameroon border.²² The choice of Ikom had proximity reason because of the relative nearness of the area to Cameroon compared to other parts of Nigeria.

What manifests in intergroup relations is the social categorisation of individuals into in-groups and out-groups, with the perception of the other, we and them within the groups.²³ This study applies mainly the qualitative method of data collection and analysis. With archival materials and

secondary sources, the study examines how proximity affected both the operationalisation of the war by British strategists, and the indigenous people who acted as carriers and combatants.

Impact of proximity on British expedition

To a great extent, proximity had significant impact on British wartime goals and operational military strategy with attendant implications for grand strategy. In 1914, during World War I, British West Africa and their French counterparts were directly or indirectly involved in local war.²⁴ This local war turned out to be an avenue for different groups to interact for different purposes. To a great extent, proximity influenced the war strategies of the belligerents during World War I, with considerable impact on intergroup relations in West Africa.

The flashpoints or hotbeds of World War I in the British West Africa were Togoland and the Cameroons, while other colonies within the subregion contributed human and material resources to the protection of colonies and colonial masters' interests from Sierra Leone to Gold Coast, Ewe, in German-occupied Togoland, Nigeria and Cameroons.²⁵ The issue of proximity played out as Gold Coast became an available base for the expedition in Togoland, while Nigeria facilitated that of Cameroon.

Britain, a dominant figure in West Africa with various colonies, was seen as an immediate rival of Germany's, considering the several years of cold war against the French in Africa, particularly occasioned by their colonial differences in West Africa around Upper Nile and Siam since the 1890s, but resolved through the Anglo French agreement of 1904.²⁶ In essence, it can be said that the war was characterised by hostile perception between the rival powers, as they had incompatible goals in that regard.

As the war progressed, the wireless station at Kamina in northern Togo made it possible for Germany to communicate with other colonies in Africa. However, they later blew up the transmitting station in Kamina before the Allied troops advanced. The Togo campaign (launched through Gold Coast and Nigeria) was short, as troops from Nigeria were yet to arrive the scene

of battle when the war ended. This reveals that more people would have migrated to safer enclaves, especially from more volatile places like the apparently more challenging military expedition in Cameroon, which was more difficult to the British and French to conquer.²⁷ The proximity impact manifested in the role played by the use of Gold Coast as a base, facilitating the outcome of the war, leading to denouement even before the troops from Nigeria arrived. Again, such a challenging war opened a new pattern of intergroup relations between different groups around neighbouring colonies' frontier provinces, like Dahomey, Togo, Gold Coast and the Nigerian frontier provinces around Cameroon, such as Calabar, Borno, Muri, Yola peoples.²⁸

The active participation of Nigerian troops in the war, especially along the Nigeria-Cameroon border, was an avenue for the people to interact with other groups in different forms. The intergroup relationships manifested chiefly between the Allied powers and the people of West Africa.

According to Elango, "developments that played out during this period showed how the war provided Britain and France a pretext for further colonial conquest and annexation, considering how France entered the campaign with the intention of recovering the territories of Equatorial Africa, presently part of Cameroon, which she was coerced to cede to Germany in 1911."²⁹ The foregoing affirms that the colonial powers desperately needed the territories and indeed the peoples of those parts of Africa to sustain their influence on the continent.

With the indirect rule in place within West Africa, trading became a notable activity which created avenue for different groups and European merchants who at the same time desired that government assist them in dealing with hostile inhabitants and protect them from the representatives of other European powers.³⁰

In this period, migration between Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia and the Gold Coast, with the availability of cheap means of transportation by road and water, was facilitated by the extension of road network within Gold Coast, which decreased the cost of movement of migrants from one region of Gold

Coast to the other and from other West African states into Gold Coast. Cocoa growing in Gold Coast benefitted greatly from the mechanisation of transport, which not only reduced transport costs, but also contributed to the release of labour from head portage.³¹ It was around 1916 that the Colonial Office described the Hausa as a “combative race” that could not be spared as carriers and rather preferred “non-combative” peoples like the Mende and Temne of Sierra Leone.³²

Migrant workers from Nigeria picked up appointments in Gold Coast, where they were engaged in the economic activity of timber work. The government then established timber companies for the management of the forest resources as well as the log and timber products. This led to the growth of notable companies like Mim Timber and Gliksten, known for domestic wood-processing and enhanced furniture and construction work.³³

The role of non-combat labourers during this period cannot be downplayed, as they were also significant in addressing the problem of distance due to their mobility carrying foodstuffs and other items required by the fighters and other civilians involved in military activities. For instance, Killingray identifies a particular labourer called Nwose, who was forced to be identified as number 1475 in the Southern Nigeria Labour Corps. He served in the Kamerun and came back to Lagos, Nigeria in 1916 after sustaining some injuries like African male peasants, and sometimes women and children, who were conscripted or enlisted for service as labourers in European military campaigns in Africa from the mid-nineteenth century to the Second World War.³⁴

The period witnessed government workers and artisans executing colonial projects in the sub-region, like railways.³⁵ During the war, this group of people were saddled with the responsibility of clearing and building roads, as well as constructing defensive posts. They also received orders from the colonial masters as they delivered military equipment and food to facilitate British strategists’ execution of the war. Around October 1915, the seemingly inadequate carriers and supplies hampered the 300 infantry

operations in Bamenda until they were supplemented.³⁶ There were interactions among the people who were involved in the construction works. It was a period when G. S. O. Yola requested authorities in Lagos to send 2000 native sandals to carriers and men of column who aided the advance on Bamenda.³⁷ The advance on Bamenda from the Nigerian side also had to do with proximity, as an attack was easier launched from Nigeria than Gold Coast front.

A significant issue concerning the impact of proximity throughout British West Africa was the active role of carriers whose tasks enabled them to interact with people from other parts of the sub-region as they passed through both British and French colonies, including the campaigns in Togoland and Cameroons. Most of them were recruited in three ways namely: by voluntary enlistment without any form of coercive engagement, compulsory recruitment of fighters and carriers sometimes using the chiefs, and formal conscription.³⁸

The fact that most West African soldiers that participated in the war returned, demobilised and took up trading as occupation means that trade was an important aspect of the wartime intergroup relations; most communities benefited from it; those in the Bamenda area of Cameroun, which was administered by the British as part of Eastern Nigeria, were also active traders and transporters.³⁹ Transportation and trade were unparalleled channels of intergroup relations as different groups could go as far as hundreds of kilometres to purchase what they needed for survival. The foregoing reveals that the search for food security was a significant attribute of intergroup relations during the war, demonstrating the significant roles of the people of West Africa to the British interest.

The exports to Germany ceased, with negative impacts on income. In Gold Coast, the cost of imports increased to the detriment of the people. These made the Ashanti seek to raise prices, demonstrating that they were highly enterprising in that regard.

Also, notable developments included the manufacturing of soap in Gold Coast and local production of coal and roofing tiles in Nigeria as from 1917,

while the export of cocoa and coffee to Europe decreased due to less demand for them during the war.⁴⁰ This aggravated the already manifesting financial crisis in most West African colonies where the Bank of British West Africa could not offer loans to people. This made it difficult for merchants to purchase local products in British West Africa.⁴¹ In the long run however, this showed the economy-driven interaction between financial institution, merchants and the people in various communities.

Trade in such commodities as cocoa and groundnut declined owing to their lack of strategic relevance to the colonial masters at that time, as they needed resources that could ultimately contribute to the prosecution of the war. By implication, every intergroup relation that was hinged on the trading and buying of cocoa and related commodities eventually suffered a setback in this regard. Areas of intergroup relations included the coastal and migrant communities in Southern Ghana, border communities, Southern Nigeria and Cameroons.

As the war broke out in August 1914, Gold Coast was said to have contributed about 2000 carriers to aid the British attack on German Togoland, while the Cameroons' campaign was facilitated by British West Africa's 14,200 carriers from Sierra Leone and Nigeria. Most of the 3,300 carriers supplied by Gold Coast during this operation were Ewe from occupied Togoland. In addition, between 10,000 and 15,000, carriers were recruited in the Cameroons by the Allies, while the Germans impressed several thousand more for their military forces.⁴² This was a channel through which the issue of proximity affected the military strategy of the British, as groups from different geographical locations were assembled at convenient locations achieved a common purpose for the Allies and the colonies they governed. This was a transnational goal that required a nearby location for well-coordinated push for victory.

However, the sudden shortage of coins and increased harvesting of groundnuts in Nigeria and the cocoa produced by the people of Gold Coast did not discourage wartime goals from 1915 to 1916.⁴³ The increase in the railway rates by the Gold Coast Governor, Hugh Clifford, as documented

by Pallaver, also shows that there was high mobility that aided war activities. This was because the railway system was now seen as an avenue to generate more revenues for the colonial government.

Wartime armies, such as the West African Frontier Force, the King's African Rifles and the other smaller territorial forces, continued to draw volunteers from the traditional recruiting grounds increasingly supplemented by conscripts provided by chiefs or secured by force.⁴⁴ This indicates that there were considerable rapport between the colonial masters and different groups to an extent as far as British West Africa was concerned, from Sierra Leone through Gold Coast to Nigeria.

A remarkable issue of proximity was the collaboration and involvement of natives (indigenous West Africans) and Europeans in prosecuting the war at places that needed the engagement of the local people. Of course, it would have been challenging for the colonial administrators to prosecute the war from Europe without the involvement of natives. This was also remarkable in enhancing social integration among people. It was also a period when Georg Zippelius, a Bavarian from Nuremberg, who was a merchant, was deployed during the war and attached to K. Schutz-truppe without prior training as a soldier; he was later captured as a prisoner of war on 23 July, 1915 in Tingere.⁴⁵

The recruitment of Nigerians as carriers climaxed in uprisings against the British and their perceived collaborators (warrant chiefs) in some towns, including Ogoni District in Calabar Province, and Udi District; jail break in Onitsha, Owerri Province, in November 1914, and even beyond 1915 as the people sought to resist what they perceived as the use of indigenous people as slaves to the advantage of the Allied powers. This affected the relationship between the people and the colonial masters.⁴⁶ The foregoing reveals that the relationship between some towns and the British was not cordial, as most of the towns still feared the loss of their lands to the whites whose influence was felt in many parts of Nigeria.

It is true that a broken relationship normally manifests between groups when one of them attempts to resist any development or policies initiated

by government officials. The people also had a negative perception of the clerks and warrant chiefs who were seen as working for the actualisation of the colonial masters' interests. Most of the conquered territories witnessed a shift of allegiance in favour of the British colonial administrators. For instance, Perham notes that contrary to the expectations of the British, the natives of the Cameroons were not hostile to their rulers, creating a scenario where the Muslim group in the northern part of Cameroon remained loyal to the Germans, while dissatisfaction rather manifested in southern towns.⁴⁷ In fact, available archival evidence revealed that the atmosphere of instability which characterised the wartime years was a factor in the compulsory restriction of movement that was occasioned by the unfriendly atmosphere among the colonial administrators, which was not prevented by the distance among their domains. This climaxed in mutual suspicion of different people, with negative impact on even the neutral parties who were allowed to pass or gain entry into a colony after due clearance and satisfaction by the officials. An example is the case of a Swiss citizen, Mr. Ruder J., who was almost denied free passage into Nigeria during the war but later allowed to gain entry after being cleared. There was also the case of Rheiner John Rudolf, who was not allowed to take up a job with John Holts Company in Duala in spite of providing evidence of unsigned contract, apparently due to his previous appointment with a German firm, Koch-Besse and Company, in Duala before 1915.⁴⁸

There was also cooperation between European officials trained by Lugard and Nigerian military officials as well as those not officials who worked together around Lagos harbour and other parts of the subregion under the British sphere of influence.⁴⁹ This was European-African military perspective of intergroup relations during the period.

Concerning the role of the indigenous people, it is worthy to note that inadequate carriers complicated the challenge of distance to the infantry operations in Bamenda, which led to the recruitment of more Nigerians as carriers. Road networks and cheap means of transportation reduced

distance between military camps and target areas. The ability of carriers to cooperate with the colonial administrators as well as some of the local population who supported the expeditions showed that the indigenous people were instrumental to the success of the war.

Conclusion

This paper has explored proximity and distance in British West Africa from 1914-1918. The patterns of the relations were shaped by the state of affairs and the need to achieve the goals of the colonial masters, on the one hand, and the interests of other groups, on the other hand. It is not disputable that intergroup relations in enclaves where troops are assigned to push on, clear and occupy the towns is usually characterised by suspicion and uncertainty. The shift of loyalty to the Allied powers, especially the British, showed that intergroup relations at that time were also dictated by the level of influence during the war.

This paper stresses that the cooperation and role of the indigenous people who served as carriers and combatants also contributed to the actualisation of the war goals of the British forces. More time, human and material resources were expended on mounting attack on distant enemy territories than the enclaves where Britain had proximity advantage. From Nigeria to Gold Coast and Sierra Leone, proximity determined the involvement and contribution of the indigenous people to the war goals of the British colonial administrative officers whose interest in utilising the efforts of carriers remained a priority.

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