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(Article begins on next page)

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

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# Pockets Full of Rupees, but Bodies Very Weak: the Carrier Corps and their Demobilization at the end of WWI in East Africa<sup>1</sup>

*Karin Pallaver*

## Abstract

This article investigates how wages and benefits were paid to East African military carriers at the end of the First World War. One of the aspects of post-war demobilization that has not yet been studied is the enormous difficulties that the colonial powers encountered in paying off soldiers and carriers at the end of the war, owing to the lack of currency. To resolve this situation, the British authorities in Kenya resorted to introducing one-rupee paper notes issued exclusively for the payment of carriers. After a few years, however, these notes were suddenly demonetized with no compensation. This article situates the history of the introduction and demonetization of one-rupee notes in the framework of the recruitment and demobilization of African carriers. In so doing, it aims to provide new elements for the understanding of the experience of East African carriers and the complexities of the process of demobilization after the war.

**Keywords:** porters; currency; rupee; banknotes; Kenya

## Introduction

This article investigates how wages and benefits were paid to East African military labourers, and especially carriers, at the end of the First World War. One of the most important contributions the African colonies made to the First World War was military labour. In some areas of the continent, the war necessitated a scale of manpower

mobilization all but unprecedented in Africa, with the exception of the South African mines (Savage, Munro 1966: 313). This huge endeavour of mobilization, and its impact on the societies involved, was particularly evident in those areas in which the war was actually fought, i.e. German East Africa and its surrounding colonies. By European standards, the number of soldiers involved in the East African campaign was relatively small: at the height of the campaign, the Allied Forces numbered 100,000 men from India, East and West Africa, South Africa and the Portuguese colonies, whereas the troops employed in German East Africa numbered 15,000 (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 104). The population of military carriers was much more significant in terms of the number of people employed, however. In many parts of East Africa, the use of draught and pack animals was in fact severely hindered by the presence of the tsetse fly, whose bite causes the sleeping sickness, a disease fatal to many animals.<sup>2</sup> Mechanical means of transport were seldom available before 1940 (Killingray 1989: 483). Therefore, the only way to transport munitions and provisions to the front was by carriers (Gewald 2015). The history of East African carriers during the First World War has been the subject of a limited but significant number of studies, that have reconstructed processes of recruitment (Savage, Munro 1966) and the characteristics of military labour (Clayton, Savage 1974) and have provided statistical information on the numbers of recruited porters, their wages and mortality rates (Hodges 1978; 1986).

In recent years, the scholarly debate has concentrated on the impact of the demobilization of African military labour on the development of post-war anticolonial resistance. As Richard Fogarty points out, there is no doubt that people in the colonies became more conscious during the war of the racist and exploitative relationships that lay at the heart of the empire (Fogarty 2014: 127). As this article will discuss, porters engaged in individual resistance against forced recruitment. At the same time, however, there is evidence of attempts at organized resistance against the recruitment of porters organized *during* the war. It is well known that the armed revolt that Reverend John Chilembwe organized in Nyasaland in 1915 was a response to the forced recruitment of porters – the *tenga tenga* – for the East African campaign (Shepperson, Price 1958; Gewald 2015: 79). In Nyasaland, protests were also raised by local chiefs. For example, the Ngoni chief Chitunga protested the recruitment of porters with the Portuguese government. As a consequence, he was removed from office and exiled by the Nyasaland authorities (Page 1978: 91). Similarly, the Barue rebellion organized in Mozambique in 1917 was also sparked by the recruitment of porters for the war effort. During the war, the colony of Mozambique provided 30,000 porters to the British for the war in German East Africa, whereas 60,000 were employed by the Portuguese themselves (Ribeiro de Meneses 2014: 188–191).

The extent to which the grievances among African carriers during and after the war stirred post-war anticolonial protests is a topic that has not yet been studied, although for Kenya – the colony from which the largest number of porters were recruited –

there is evidence that a number of Africans engaged in the early political activities of the 1920s and 1930s were former carriers (Ogot 1978: 265; Clayton, Savage 1974: 104; Pallaver 2017: 202). The impact of demobilization on post-war African societies undoubtedly varied across the continent and depended on: 1) the extent to which economic and social conditions of the colonies had been disrupted when military staff returned home; 2) the individual experiences of soldiers and carriers on the various fronts; and 3) the extent to which the colonial powers fulfilled the promises they had made when recruiting African military staff. This last point deserves some attention. During recruitment drives in the colonies, the colonial states attempted to render military service more attractive by offering bonuses, high wages, various material benefits, and family allowances as well as educational and vocational training (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 112). The ability and willingness of the colonial state to fulfil the promises it made at the time of enrolment or forced conscription might be a relevant factor for understanding the degree of discontent among demobilized Africans after the war.

One of the aspects of post-war demobilization that has not yet been studied is the enormous difficulties that the colonial powers encountered in paying off soldiers and carriers at the end of the war, owing to the lack of currency. Indeed, the outbreak of hostilities caused dramatic shortages in the circulation of currency all over the continent, and such shortages continued after the war (Pallaver 2015). Adding this element to the analysis might represent a key factor in investigating the complexities of the process of demobilization. In British East Africa, the main problem associated with demobilization was, in fact, that of paying the huge number of porters that had been recruited for the East African campaign. At the end of the war, thousands of men, often in very poor health, began to return home. The problem of how to pay them rapidly enough to avoid kindling unrest became a serious preoccupation for the British colonial authorities.

At the time, the currency of both the East Africa Protectorate and Uganda was the Indian rupee.<sup>3</sup> As silver rupee coins had become scarce in East Africa during the war, at the time of demobilization there was not enough cash available to pay the carriers. To resolve this situation, the British authorities resorted to introducing one-rupee paper notes issued exclusively for the payment of carriers. After a few years, however, these notes were suddenly demonetized with no compensation (Pallaver 2019). This article situates the history of the introduction and demonetization of one-rupee notes in the framework of the recruitment and demobilization of African carriers. In so doing, it aims to provide new elements for the understanding of the experience of East African carriers and the complexities of the process of demobilization after the war.

The article is divided into three sections. The first part reconstructs the history of the mobilization of porters in East Africa during the First World War, while the second section considers the British government's currency policies around the demobilization

of porters and especially the decision-making process behind the move to issue one-rupee notes. The third section looks at the protests launched by various components of the Kenyan society in connection to the sudden demonetization of one-rupee notes in 1920.

### A "porter's war":<sup>4</sup> the Carrier Corps in East Africa

The longest campaign of the First World War in Africa was fought in German East Africa, where German General Paul Lettow-Vorbeck waged a guerrilla war against the Allied Forces with the ultimate goal of diverting as many troops as possible from other fronts. Given that the colony was not close to any strategic target, the Allied Powers had no intention of conducting a massive operation in East Africa. The only significant confrontation took place in the port of Tanga on 2 November 1914 where British and Indian troops, supported by carriers recruited from the East Africa Protectorate, suffered a bitter defeat. Until September 1916, the Germans were therefore able to keep the colony under control without engaging in major battles with the Allied Forces (Samson 2019). They had only minor clashes with the British troops in the border areas. The first attack after the battle of Tanga was instigated in April 1916 by Indian and South African troops commanded by the South African General Jan Smuts, who attacked from Portuguese East Africa. At the same time, Belgian troops entered German territory from the Belgian Congo with the aim of conquering Tabora, the city that had served as the capital of the colony since 1915. In response, Lettow-Vorbeck moved his troops towards the south-east of the colony, beginning what novelist William Boyd has called "an ice-cream war" (Boyd 1982).<sup>5</sup> During this retreat, roads and rails were destroyed and food and grains requisitioned to feed the troops. Lettow-Vorbeck entered Portuguese East Africa in November 1917. The armistice was signed on 11 November 1918, but it was not until 25 November 1918 that he surrendered at Abercorn, in Northern Rhodesia (today Mbala, Zambia), with 155 Europeans, 1,598 carriers and 1,156 soldiers (Strachan 2004: 182). He was the last German General of the entire war to surrender.

The East African campaign had profound consequences on the African societies that were directly or indirectly involved in it. Waves of famine struck the areas where the troops had passed during the war, owing to the requisitioning of food and manpower (Illiffe 1979: 269). Thousands of men were also recruited in German East Africa and the neighbouring colonies for the campaign, causing an unprecedented mobilization of manpower and resources, especially of military carriers. Porters were needed to carry arms and munitions, as well as food and medicines, to the front. For military operations, each soldier required two or three porters. Carriers were also needed to transport wounded or sick soldiers, and a nun residing in Tabora dubbed them "the ambulance of the British".<sup>6</sup>

The British employed 200,000 porters from Nyasaland, about 200,000 from Kenya and 190,000 from Uganda (Ogot 1978: 264; Hodges 1978: 114; Crowder 1985: 295; Page

1978: 94).<sup>7</sup> By 1918, half of the total male population of the African reserves in the East Africa Protectorate had been conscripted (Killingray 1989: 489). A huge number of porters were also recruited by the British in German East Africa during the campaign: a British officer calculated that at least one third of the total population of German East Africa had been employed as porters during the war (Strachan 2004: 5).

In 1914, no organization of carriers existed in the East Africa Protectorate. After the outbreak of hostilities, therefore, this workforce had to be rapidly organized. The first recruitments started in August 1914 to obtain the carriers needed to attack Tanga as soon as Indian troops could reach Mombasa. However, the haste and lack of regulations led to a great deal of confusion. In order to provide more discipline and improve organization, officials thus decided to give to the carriers a military status and to call them the "Carrier Corps" (Savage, Munro 1966: 314-318). The Carrier Corps were composed of different groups of labourers. The gun-porters were front-line carriers of machine guns and their accessories, ammunition, bombs and shells; the unskilled carriers transported food and provisions and also worked as cooks, servants, sweepers, carpenters, tailors, and interpreters, as well as building of roads and camps, repairing railways and constructing ports. In 1917, the Carrier Police force was added to the Carrier Corps with the task of supervising the carriers and preventing them from deserting (Savage, Munro 1966: 321; Hodges 1997: 216).

Initially, only volunteers were recruited. However, the high mortality rate of the first operations, and especially the battle of Tanga in November 1914, quickly eliminated the availability of volunteers despite the high wages offered. Good pays had been an important incentive for promoting the enlistment of men. At the beginning of the operations, wages had been paid at coast rates, i.e. between 10 and 15 rupees together with rations. Wages for carriers varied depending on the region in which they were recruited, as well as their individual experience. In 1915, the wage for coast porters – who were considered the best for military purposes – was 15 rupees per month with rations and 20 rupees for headmen; in Malindi porters were paid 12 rupees without rations. Swahili and Nyamwezi porters received 8 rupees, whereas Nyika and Kikuyu porters were paid 10 rupees (Hodges 1978: 129).

The British settlers complained about this rate of wages, considering it to be too high. They lamented that porters' wages were above those of unskilled farm labourers and were therefore inflating the market, making it difficult for the settlers to secure labourers for their plantations. Therefore, in July 1915, the government decided to reduce the wages of unskilled porters, bringing them down to 5 rupees per month with rations for the first three months, increased to 6 rupees with rations after three months. Gun-porters and mail carriers received 10 rupees per month with rations (Savage, Munro 1966: 321; Clayton, Savage 1974: 83).

This decrease in wages further reduced the number of men available for recruitment, at a time in which the British needed an increasing number of porters to support

the troops that were patrolling the borders with German East Africa. Therefore, in September 1915 the colonial government issued the Native Followers Recruitment Ordinance. Chiefs and headmen were made responsible for recruiting any men available under the age of 35. If they did not provide the number of men required, chiefs could be imprisoned for six months or subjected to heavy fines (Savage, Munro 1966: 322). Chiefs were also required to provide meat and agricultural products to feed the troops and Carrier Corps.<sup>8</sup> The new ordinance contributed to a large increase in the number of men conscripted. The enlistment was for the entire duration of the war, although unskilled carriers were authorized to return home after nine months if war conditions made it feasible. Various cases were reported in which men were tricked or even seized by recruiters. For example, in the Kisii district in the Nyanza province, young men were asked to go to the station to cut grass and were then forced to enrol as porters (Savage, Munro 1966: 317). In July 1916, the British introduced the *kipande*, a metal disc showing personal details such as name, age, place of origin and the fingerprints of the holder, that was used to identify porters once they were recruited and thereby reduce the number of desertions (Pesek 2015: 109). After the war, the *kipande* was maintained as a form of identification for African labourers and to control the mobility of men outside the reserves (Clayton, Savage 1974: 83; Hodges 1978: 112). In 1916, the Military Labour Bureau was founded to deal with the growing demand for porters and soldiers (Pesek 2015: 107-8).

Once the Allied Forces were able to occupy the most important towns of German East Africa – Dar es Salaam was occupied on 3 September 1916 and Tabora on 19 September 1916 – the demand for porters increased further. Allied and German troops were sometimes involved in “a real race for porters” (Pesek 2015: 107). To support the British troops in the continuation of the campaign in German East Africa, a mass levy was therefore introduced from March to August 1917. Although many porters were obtained in German East Africa itself, in the East Africa Protectorate 50,000 men were recruited between 1 April and 1 October 1917. To speed up the process, District Officers no longer operated through chiefs and headmen but rather began to enforce recruitment, often through armed raids (Clayton, Savage 1974: 86). Recalling the mass levy of 1917, a gun carrier said, “[t]hey were recruited by force. At least every house had to produce one young man [...] Their mothers were crying as they went”. A woman described a line of men with “ropes [put] through their ears and tied together” (Killingray 2001: 429). Men and boys were also recruited from the missions. In the Kenya Province, “[t]he call for carriers took away pupils from all Missions to such an extent that work became stationary.”<sup>9</sup> Missionaries themselves contributed to the recruitment of carriers: in April 1917, a battalion of carriers from the Church of Scotland Mission was recruited for service in German East Africa.

Despite compulsory recruitment, colonial authorities reported that “no untoward incidents occurred” thanks to the work of district officials, chiefs and native

authorities.<sup>10</sup> However, resistance to forced recruitments emerged in different forms. A significant number of men deserted, both along marching routes and from theatres of war. Many men fled to avoid conscription, for example escaping to Uganda. Some men volunteered for the army. Fleeing porters also increased the number of squatters on European plantations and therefore the availability of labourers for settlers' enterprises (Overton 1989: 216).<sup>11</sup>

The work of unskilled carriers was tedious and monotonous, as illustrated by this carrier song with its endlessly repeating lyrics: "we are the carriers who carry the food for the carriers who carry the food for the carriers who carry the food for..." (Hodges 1986). The mortality rate for carriers was also very high. Few porters died in battle, but many came under direct fire during military clashes (Pesek 2015: 114). The high mortality rate was due mainly to respiratory and intestinal diseases, malaria, harsh weather and labour conditions, as well as malnourishment (Nasson 2016: 133; Iliffe 1979: 249-250). The number of porters who died during the war is difficult to ascertain. According to a Colonial Office report, of a total of 201,431 military labourers employed by the British in the East Africa Protectorate, 26,193 were confirmed dead and 14,000 had deserted and were presumed dead (Clayton, Savage 1974: 88). According to several statistics, however, the number of dead porters was actually higher, probably reaching 100,000 (Stapleton 2006: 117). The mortality rate also depended upon the distance from home and the length of service. In fact, the mortality rate of porters recruited in German East Africa – who were generally enrolled closer to their place of residence and not for long periods – was lower compared to that of those recruited in the East Africa Protectorate (Hodges 1978: 109, 115).

In July 1917, the problem of the high mortality of conscripted porters in East Africa was raised during Question Time in the British Parliament by a member of the Liberal Party, Percy Molteno. Based on some correspondence he had received from British East Africa, he reported that thousands of carriers were dying each month; he attributed this high rate of sickness to the low-quality food rations that the porters received. Molteno reported that African carriers were entitled to receive 2,989.75 calories per day, whereas British troops were allotted 4,334 calories per day.<sup>12</sup> It was only in July 1917 that a soldier's ration scale was conceded to porters as well (Clayton, Savage 1974: 84). Discipline was enforced by corporal punishment or the suspension of pay. In the 1930s, a report on porters during the war defined their treatment as "a scandal" (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 105).

In general terms, the impact of recruitment, and especially the mass levy in 1917, had profound consequences on the societies involved, especially in terms of agricultural production: men left with the army while women and children were left at home to take care of the fields. The military requirements of the Carrier Corps, for example, had negative consequences on the production of rice in Kenya, especially in the Nyanza Province.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, when porters returned to the reserves they brought with

them diseases such as dysentery (Killingray 1989: 496). From the point of view of the possible benefits that recruitment produced for men and their families, one key aspect is the wages that they received. Carriers were paid only part of their wage during the march, while the remainder was paid at the end of their service. When the war ended, demobilization began, and with this phase, the colonial authorities were obliged to face the problem of paying the carriers' back pay.

### The demobilization of the Carrier Corps

In their analysis of demobilization in the British and French African colonies, Fogarty and Killingray argue that demobilization was not as disruptive there as it was in some parts of Europe. In French West Africa it could be even considered a success, as compared to the violence that accompanied the process in some parts of Europe (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 121). On returning home, some veterans benefited from an enhanced status, whereas others found more disappointment than opportunities for material and social advancement. According to Fogarty and Killingray, however, this did not cause paramilitary mobilization or political unrest. The reasons can be found in the delayed timeline of demobilization – many soldiers from French West Africa continued their service after the end of the war in the Rhineland region in Germany so that French soldiers could be demobilized – and in the exhausted state of populations in the colonies after many years of war (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 113–115).

86 The payment of demobilized troops and carriers was a slow process. In German East Africa, the *Schutztruppe* employed in the East African campaign were not paid immediately after the war and it was only in 1927 that they received their back pay (Moyd 2011: 101). In the British colonies, the demobilization of soldiers was carried out with relative ease, but "carriers were dealt with in a more peremptory way with less care. All too often these unfortunate people were arbitrarily drafted and that attitude also attended their dismissal" (Fogarty, Killingray 2015: 105). Despite this attitude, the British authorities in East Africa discussed at length how to facilitate the process of demobilization and avoid the growth of discontent.

In the East Africa Protectorate, the demobilization of carriers began on 4 March 1918. The colonial government devised a plan to take care of returning carriers, especially those who had been wounded or fallen ill during operations. As early as June 1917, the government had established rest camps where carriers could stop on their way home to receive shelter, food and water. Convalescence camps run by missionaries were also created to assist sick returning porters and soldiers; the aim of these camps was also to avoid the spread of diseases, especially tuberculosis and the Spanish influenza.<sup>14</sup> When demobilization began, District Officers became heavily engaged in the provision of food, water and fuel supplies to these camps, as well as in paying out the wages due to repatriated porters. From the beginning, the payment of wages proved to be extremely difficult. To be paid, porters were required to appear in the accounting books of the

administration and have both a depot number and a *kipande*. Even if they had been registered, however, many carriers could not be easily identified, either because they had been signed on under a wrong name, or because they had deserted their units and joined other ones under new names, often those of their fathers (Hodges 1978: 112). Moreover, operations were made difficult by the absence of a central pay department for the Carrier Corps (Savage, Munro 1966: 339-41).

One of the main problems that the colonial administration faced was the shortage of currency. As a matter of fact, the outbreak of hostilities had caused dramatic shortages in the circulation of currency all over the African continent. There were two main reasons for this shortfall. On one hand, the reduction in trade caused a general decrease in the circulation of money: imports were scarce and more expensive, and African traders and peasants were not able to sell their produce. On the other hand, the war caused a dramatic reduction in the number of coins that could be produced by European mints: nickel and bronze, generally employed to produce small-denomination coins, were now needed to produce arms (Osuntokun 1979: 43; Pallaver 2015). To tackle this problem, many colonial governments resorted to the issuing of paper banknotes. For example, paper notes were issued in 1916 in the Gold Coast to pay labourers and soldiers, although these recipients regarded notes with suspicion and frequently exchanged them for coins at a loss (Killingray 1978: 45). In Somalia, the Italian colonial government also issued paper money to compensate for the scarcity of coins (Caroselli 1922: 373). In January 1916, the government of the East Africa Protectorate ordered the compulsory surrendering of all coins to be exchanged for paper money, but with little success.<sup>15</sup> As Jean and John Comaroff have shown, African societies were particularly distrustful towards paper money during the colonial period because it was not durable and could easily be destroyed (Comaroff, Comaroff 2005).

In view of the planned demobilization, in December 1917 a correspondence began between the War Office, the Colonial Office and the government of the East Africa Protectorate to develop an arrangement to obtain cash for the payment of carriers. The Colonial Office suggested that, if coins could not be used, one-rupee notes had to be imported from India and made available to pay "disbanded carriers".<sup>16</sup>

In reality, rupee notes had already been in circulation in the East Africa Protectorate. Such notes were rarely accepted by Africans, however, as they preferred to be paid for their produce or labour in metal coins (Pallaver 2019: 555). Moreover, the lowest denomination available were five-rupee notes, and these were seen as "unsuitable for the carriers" because they did not lend themselves to making small payments.<sup>17</sup> The Acting Governor of the East Africa Protectorate, Charles Bowring, recommended that the "issue must be quick because we need to be prepared to pay off the men immediately on repatriation."<sup>18</sup> The fear was that porters could cause unrest if not paid. Sir Horace Byatt, who would later become the first governor of Tanganyika Territory, expressed concern about the "danger in releasing German native troops without funds

as they would probably take to marauding and cause unrest [...]":<sup>19</sup> For this reason, even though the eight millions one-rupee notes that the Bank of England was producing had not yet reached East Africa, administrators began demobilizing porters and paying them in silver coins.<sup>20</sup> This move to begin despite the lack of coins is quite revealing as to the urgency that authorities felt in discharging carriers. Local administrators lamented that coins were rapidly disappearing.<sup>21</sup>

When one-rupee notes reached East Africa, administrative officers were requested to do "all in their power to familiarize the natives with the paper currency and to explain them that its purchasing power was equal to that of silver".<sup>22</sup> It was made clear that one-rupee notes had to be used in the payment of carriers only, and should not be used for other payments.<sup>23</sup> In Uganda, the protectorate from which 190,000 carriers had been recruited during the war (Strachan 2004: 5), the Acting Treasurer explained to Provincial Commissioners that "rupee notes have to be used for paying off Military carriers only and that Carriers should be paid *only* by this means". He added that all District Commissioners had to be instructed to explain carefully to the "natives" that a one-rupee note "represents a rupee to its full extent".<sup>24</sup> At the same time, paying carriers in silver coins was discouraged, and all the rupee coins collected with the payment of taxes were required to be sent to Nairobi to address the shortage of metal coins.<sup>25</sup>

The introduction of one-rupee notes was seen as a temporary measure. Bowring, who had long served in East Africa, was aware that people did not like paper notes. He expected that notes, once issued to the carriers, would quickly make their way back to the government via the hut tax and other payments, as people preferred to keep silver coins rather than notes.<sup>26</sup> With the notes that would naturally return to the government, he expected to be able to pay the new groups of porters that were gradually demobilized. However, contrary to expectations, one-rupee notes went into circulation and did not quickly or easily return to the government coffers.<sup>27</sup> New notes were thus needed, and in January 1919 William Cecil Bottomley, a clerk in the East Africa Department, communicated to London that he required an additional eight millions one-rupee notes, as "the gravity of the situation in East Africa does imperatively require our needs should be provided for. We are faced with the prospect of a complete break-down."<sup>28</sup>

It seems, however, that colonial authorities in Nairobi had overestimated the amount of notes needed. In a telegram sent to London on 7 June 1919, the new Governor, Edward Northey, communicated that no more rupee notes were needed for the East Africa Protectorate and that 600,000 rupees had been returned to the Protectorate Treasury by the Military Labour Corps.<sup>29</sup> The reason for this overestimation could be seen in the number of "missing" carriers, i.e. those who had been discharged without pay, had deserted, had died without being registered, or had given incorrect names to the recruiters. Up to 31 March 1922, 13,748 carriers remained still untraced in Kenya with back pay amounting to 66,788 British pounds (Savage, Munro 1966: 341).

What happened to the rupee notes that had gone into circulation? The agreement with the government of India was that, after having resolved the emergency of demobilization, the notes would be withdrawn from circulation. However, after the war specie continued to be in short supply owing to the East African rupee crisis that hit East Africa from 1919 to 1921 (Maxon 1989; Mwangi 2001; Pallaver 2019).<sup>30</sup> The restrictions on the use of notes for the payment of carriers was causing discontent, especially among the settlers who needed cash to pay their labourers. For this reason, Byatt decided that notes could be used for general currency purposes and especially for the payment of African employees and producers.<sup>31</sup> In February 1920, for example, the Currency Board in Mombasa asked the government of India for permission to issue one-rupee notes for the payment of cotton crops in Uganda.<sup>32</sup> In a circular issued on 30 June 1920, a larger plan to promote the use of paper banknotes was proposed: "the native population should be brought to appreciate the value of currency notes and particularly of the new one rupee notes. Until an adequate supply of the new coinage is forthcoming wages of Government native employees should be paid in part, at least, by Currency notes, when available, and in Districts where the public is experiencing difficulties in obtaining coin to pay labour steps should be taken to obtain notes for payment of Government labour. District Commissioners should use their influence with local traders to induce them to accept notes readily and at full value from natives, and should instruct natives that notes are preferred in payment of taxes."<sup>33</sup>

One-rupee notes had been introduced to deal with the shortages of metal coins and the demobilization of carriers was paid almost entirely in notes. After the war, given that coins continued to be scarce, the colonial government openly promoted the use of notes in the payment of farm and government labour, as well as in the payment of taxes and produce. There was a plan to withdraw them, but it was stated that "the withdrawal will necessary be a gradual process".<sup>34</sup> In February 1921, however, the colonial authorities decided to demonetize one-rupee notes overnight with no redemption. It is to this decision and its consequences that the article now turns.

### **A "black mark": the demonetization of one-rupee notes**

After the end of the war, Kenya and Uganda experienced a phase of currency instability that is known as the "East African Rupee crisis". Owing to the post-war increase in the price of silver, the exchange rate for the sterling against the Indian rupee rose from 1s4d to 2s9d in one year. This caused a great deal of concern in East Africa, and in order to resolve the situation, the Indian rupee-to-sterling exchange rate was fixed at 10 rupees to the pound. In February 1920, however, the rupee suddenly returned to pre-war levels (Pallaver 2019: 550).<sup>35</sup> The value of the rupee in East Africa was independent of its value in India, where the rupee was fixed at 15 to the sterling. This difference in exchange rates provoked a massive smuggling of rupees into East Africa.<sup>36</sup> In East Africa, people could exchange rupees for sterling at 10 rupees to the

pound, and then exchange them again in the open market at the official Indian rate of 15 rupees to the pound. Such operations allowed people to obtain a 50% profit. When the value of the rupee decreased, one-rupee notes – more easy to transport than coins – began to be smuggled in great quantities from India in order to profit from the new exchange value.<sup>37</sup> According to William McGregor Ross, Head of the Kenya Public Works Department, the smuggling was carried out entirely by Europeans and Indians (MacGregor Ross 1927: 204). On 19 July 1920, the importation of rupees into East Africa had to be suspended.<sup>38</sup> Attempts were made to limit the smuggling, but given that “a note is an article exceedingly easily smuggled”, such measures were not successful.<sup>39</sup> On 10 January 1921, the governor of the Colony, Edward Northey, telegraphed London that the “[n]umber of notes in country inconsiderable”.<sup>40</sup> Smuggling continued and the bankers in the East Africa Protectorate advised the government that the only possible solution was to demonetize one-rupee notes.<sup>41</sup> On 7 February 1921, the Official Gazette declared that one-rupee notes had ceased to be legal tender *on the previous day* and could not be redeemed (McGregor Ross 1927: 204). In other words, note possessors were not given the opportunity to exchange them for coins, and found themselves with scrap paper in place of their rupees. This sudden demonetization has very few parallels in the history of colonialism in Africa.<sup>42</sup> Generally, when a currency change occurred, a period of some weeks or even months was granted for the redemption of currency. In this case, the rampant speculation and the dramatic losses sustained by the East African Currency Board led the colonial government to demonetize the notes overnight. The impact that this might have on African currency users and on the thousands of carriers who had been paid only with these notes was not taken into consideration.

The operation was subjected to intense criticism. On the pages of the *East African Chronicle*, the newspaper of the Indian community in Kenya, it was lamented that owing to the profit that some people were making off the favourable exchange rate, “the Government comes down with the mailed fist equally on the innocent and the guilty. People who had taken the Indian notes in general circulation by Government permission find themselves stranded through no fault of their own”.<sup>43</sup> The newspaper reported that the demonetization of the notes in Nairobi was causing great “consternation in the [Indian] Bazar” and that it was the chief topic of conversation, as there was a general refusal to believe that the government proposed to offer note holders no compensation at all. The Mombasa Chamber of Commerce condemned “the disastrous effect in undermining the confidence of the natives in the currency of the country.”<sup>44</sup> The Indian and Arab communities of Mombasa organized a protest meeting and passed a resolution in which they stated that “the demonetization of Indian Rupee notes [was] calculated to undermine native faith”.<sup>45</sup> The Lukiiko in Buganda also protested and asked the government to redeem the notes held by the population.<sup>46</sup> Protests were also launched by the settlers, who had used rupee notes to pay their workers.<sup>47</sup> The

Association of Farmers of the Rift Valley sent a resolution stating that they could not "consent knowingly to be parties of a swindle."<sup>48</sup> The Molo Settlers Association pointed out that the demonetization had "defrauded bona fide holders and has thrown all employers who value their good names among their employees the burden of redeeming the Indian Re 1 notes which they had paid out in good faith to their employees prior to the demonetization."<sup>49</sup> The settlers asked the government to redeem one-rupee notes in the possession of *bona fide* holders.<sup>50</sup> African employees working for the government were also involved. As McGregor Ross noted, "Within seven days prior to this notice Government officers had been paying native staff in these one-rupee notes" and many British officials felt indignant (McGregor Ross 1927: 204).

The government explained that it had been decided not to redeem the notes "as it is known that practically all those [notes] in the country must have been imported illegally."<sup>51</sup> In other words, the colonial government maintained that the demonetization without redemption was not damaging the interests of honest African employees and employers. However, not all the one-rupee notes in circulation had been imported illegally. As seen above, large quantities of notes had been introduced by the government itself to pay the carriers at the end of the war, and after demobilization their circulation and use had been openly promoted by the government. Many notes had been still in circulation at the time of demonetization in February 1921. The sources report that the demonetization caused widespread discontent among the population, along with cases of "bitter hardship."<sup>52</sup>

No official protests came from former carriers or, more generally, from African currency users, but there is reason to believe that the sudden demonetization of one-rupee notes added to the grievances held by African military staff owing to the recruitment methods as well as the harsh conditions of the war. As John Overton has pointed out, "in 1917 and 1918 large numbers of repatriated military careers were returning to the reserves, their pockets often full of rupees, but their bodies weakened by the severe nature of carrier labour" (Overton 1989: 218). In February 1921, they discovered that the one-rupee notes in their pockets had been transformed overnight into scrap paper with no value whatsoever and could no longer be used to pay taxes.

The demonetization of one-rupee notes was only one of the steps taken by the colonial administration to resolve the post-war currency crisis. A few months after the sudden demonetization of one-rupee notes, the British colonial government attempted to also demonetize rupee coins and replace them with a new currency, the East African shilling. In the process of currency change, the government decided to cut the value of the subsidiary coins in circulation, the East African cents, by half. It was these small coins that African currency users largely held, and this proposal kindled protests on the part of missionary societies in Kenya and Uganda, local political authorities, such as the *Kabaka* of Buganda, as well as various associations of Indian and Arab traders, and European planters (Pallaver 2019: 552-554). The operation was compared to the

demonetization of one-rupee notes, a move which the *East African Chronicle* defined as "a *Black Mark* and a crime against our administration. It makes the matter much worse when we consider that the native soldiers and porters, when being demobilised on the termination of hostilities, were paid out in *Indian One Rupee Notes* owing to the shortage of silver." The newspaper added that Africans "[h]aving lost over that transaction, [...] are again likely to lose if the cent is reduced without redemption." The colonial government was accused of methods that "savour more of Russian Bolshevism than British Administration".<sup>53</sup>

Similarly to the demonetization of one-rupee notes, the proposal to mark down cents demonstrated the arbitrary nature of the colonial state in regard to currency matters. However, in the case of cents, protests were successful in forcing the government to withdraw the proposal to devalue cents, and showed the power of contestation on the part of different layers of the colonial society (Pallaver 2019: 558). The currency crisis was only resolved in January 1922 when the East African shilling entered into circulation. The rupee, however, continued to be used and did not cease to be legal tender until 1932.

## Conclusion

One of the most important issues connected to the demobilization of African military labourers is the extent to which they took part in post-war anticolonial resistance. David Killingray and Richard Fogarty consider the political impact of soldiers and carriers in post-war French and British Africa to be unproven (Fogarty, Killingray 2015). In relation to the case of post-war Algeria, however, Barry Gearóid has pointed out that Muslims used demobilization to negotiate a "new form of imperial citizenship" (Gearóid 2018). During the East Africa campaign, African carriers were the group of labourers that suffered the most, owing to forced recruitment, extremely adverse working conditions and low wages. Especially during the mass levy of 1916-1917, men in the reserves, squatters, and even people not previously known for their hostility towards the authorities developed intense resentment of the government (Savage, Munro 1966: 333). After the war, the number of homeless people in the urban areas increased significantly with returning carriers. At the same time, the wartime increase of consumer good prices decreased significantly the purchasing power of Africans after the war (Clayton, Savage 1974: 97). In 1919, such economic conditions were exacerbated by the increase in taxation from five to eight rupees per year. Finally, in 1921 the demonetization of one-rupee notes hit carriers more heavily than any other group in the colony.

Demobilized carriers played a prominent role in the political organizations that were formed in Kenya in the 1920s and 1930s. Jonathan Okwirri, the first president of the Young Kavirondo Association, and Joseph Kangethe, president of the Kikuyu Association, had served in the Carrier Corps in German East Africa (Ogot 1978: 265). Philip James Karanja, secretary of the Kikuyu Association, had been one of the Mission Volunteers

headmen, whereas M.N. Karatu, a Kikuyu Central Association leader, had served in the Catholic Labour Corps (Clayton, Savage 1974: 104; Pallaver 2017: 202). These organizations asking for more political representations for Africans were a response to the grievances of the post-war period, including the increase in taxation, the reduction of wages and the limitations on access to land.

As Fogarty and Killingray (2015) point out, the First World War did not shake the foundations of colonial power in Africa, as happened after the Second World War, when thousands of veterans returned to the colonies and joined the anti-colonial movements. However, the presence of a number of former carriers among the ranks of the political activists of 1920s and 1930s Kenya suggests that at least some of the seeds of political activism had been sown during the long, harsh marches of the East African campaign. The demonetization of one-rupee notes discussed in this article added to the store of post-war grievances and was no doubt yet another reason for the increasing discontent.

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## NOTES:

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- 2 - Out of a total of 54,000 mules, donkeys, horses and oxen employed in 1916 for military operations along the central railway in German East Africa, only 600 survived (Strachan 2004: 149).
- 3 - The area of the East Africa Protectorate roughly corresponds to present-day Kenya; it remained a protectorate until 1920, when it became the colony of Kenya.
- 4 - This definition is given in Hodges (1978: 104).
- 5 - He refers to the fact that the German troops were "melting away" chased by British troops.
- 6 - St. H. Souer, *Quelques details sur Tabora, 1914-1918*, Archives of the White Sisters, Rome, A 590 08.
- 7 - A significant number of porters were also employed by the Belgians in the Belgian Congo and in Uganda (Vanthemische 2010: 158; Hodges 1978: 104).
- 8 - East Africa Protectorate (1916), *Report for 1914-1915*, 26.
- 9 - East Africa Protectorate (1919), *Report for 1917-1918*, 23.
- 10 - East Africa Protectorate (1919), *Report for 1917-1918*, 22.
- 11 - Military labourers also reached East Africa through inter-colonial migrations. Indeed, British West African military carriers and transport labourers were employed in the East African campaign, including nearly 1,350 motor drivers from the Gold Coast (Killingray, Matthews 1979: 11).
- 12 - The National Archives, London (TNA), Colonial Office (CO) 691/9, Minutes, Question Time, British Parliament, 13 July 1917.
- 13 - East Africa Protectorate (1919), *Report for 1916-1917*, 8.
- 14 - East Africa Protectorate (1921), *Report for 1918-1919*, 19.
- 15 - Kenya National Archives (KNA) AA/28-2, *Enclosure 18, Order*, 14 January 1916.
- 16 - TNA, CO 691/16, H.J. Read to Treasury, 7 October 1918; India Office Record, British Library, London (IOR) L/F/7/367, *Colonial Office to War Office*, 10 November 1917; *War Office to Colonial Office*, 6 December 1917.
- 17 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Minutes*, 3 January 1919.
- 18 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Telegram from Bowring to Long*, 4 November 1917.
- 19 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Byatt to Secretary of State for the Colonies*, 1 December 1918.
- 20 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Bank of England to India Office*, 1 March 1918.
- 21 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Bowring to Long*, 24 May 1918.
- 22 - KNA, DC/MKS/25/1/1, *Espie to District Commissioner Machakos*, Nairobi, 16 February 1918.
- 23 - KNA, DC/MKS/25/1/1, *Espie to District Commissioner Machakos*, Nairobi, 17 May 1918; see also KNA, AG/48/3.
- 24 - UNA, N/202 *Acting Treasurer to Provincial Commissioner Jinja Province*, Entebbe, 15 June 1918; the emphasis is mine.
- 25 - KNA, DC/MKS/25/1/1, *Disstrict Commissioner Machakos to Ag. Provincial Commmissioner Nairobi*, 27 May 1918; *The Treasury Nairobi to District Commissioner Machakos*, 30 May 1918.
- 26 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Telegram from Bowring to Long*, 4 November 1917.
- 27 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Secretary of State for the Colonies to Secretary of State for India*, 14 December 1918.
- 28 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Bottomley to Robinson*, ? January 1919. ?
- 29 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Northey to Milner*, 7 June 1919.
- 30 - For the East African Rupee crisis, see below.
- 31 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Telegram from Byatt to Secretary of State for the Colonies*, 22 August 1918.
- 32 - IOR, L/F/7/367, *Telegram from Viceroy, Finance Department to Secretary of State*, 24 February 1920.
- 33 - KNA, MOH/1/1809, *Protectorate Circular No. 32*, 30 June 1920.
- 34 - KNA, MOH/1/1809, *Colonial Office to National Bank of India*, 1 February 1918.
- 35 - TNA, CO/533/230, *Currency and Exchange in East Africa*, February 1920. For a detailed account of the crises, see: McGregor Ross (1927: 199-216); Van Zwanenberg and King (1975: 275-96); Maxon (1989).
- 36 - «Dar es Salaam Standard», 5 March 1921.
- 37 - TNA, CO/544/29, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the KLC*, 10 February 1921.

- 38 – Colony and Protectorate of Kenya (1922), *Report for 1920-21*, 4-5.
- 39 – IOR, L/F/7/367, *Minute paper 211/2*, *Financial Department, India Office*, March 1920.
- 40 – TNA, CO/533/255, *Telegram from Northey to Secretary of State for the Colonies*, 10 January 1921.
- 41 – TNA, CO/533/258, *Currency in East Africa*, 1921.
- 42 – For an explanation of the reasons behind the smuggling of one-rupee notes as well as of their demonetization, see Pallaver (2019: 551).
- 43 – «East African Chronicle», 12 February 1921.
- 44 – «The Leader of British East Africa», 26 February 1921.
- 45 – «East African Chronicle», 12 February 1921.
- 46 – «Uganda Herald», 21 October 1921. The Lukiiko was an advisory body to the *Kabaka*, the king of Buganda. After the 1900 Uganda Agreement, it became a legislature and a court of appeal.
- 47 – TNA, CO/533/255, *Telegram from Northey to Churchill*, 14 February 1921.
- 48 – KNA, AG/48/7, *Resolution by the Association of Farmers of the Rift Valley*, 2 April 1921.
- 49 – KNA, AG/48/7, *Circular to M.L.C. Kweresoi, Molo*, 11 March 1921.
- 50 – KNA, AG/48/7, *Resolution by the Association of Farmers of the Rift Valley*, 2 April 1921.
- 51 – TNA CO/533/258, *Currency in East Africa*, 1921.
- 52 – «Uganda Herald», 21 October 1921; «East African Chronicle», 26 February 1921.
- 53 – «East African Chronicle», 5 November 1921; emphasis in the original.

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