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QUESTION:

How did the First World War impact colonial Zambia?

The first world war was essentially a quarrel between European powers which involved Africa, both directly and indirectly, because at the outbreak of hostilities the greater part of it was ruled by the Europeans. The period between the world wars was a time of intense political and intellectual change for people in Africa. For Europeans, it was a time of consolidation, during which they tried to build up a more effective colonial administration. The war had significant implications for Africa. More than a million african soldiers from different African societies were affected by the war, men as well as women and children were recruited and often forcibly used as carriers to support armies whose supplies could not be moved by conventional methods such as road, rail or pack animal. Therefore, to Africans who fought as soldiers in Europe or carried munitions and food on African battlefields, and to Africans who contributed to the war off the battlefield with their labor and their produce, the war seemed to centre on Africa itself. Therefore, this essay will discuss the ways in which the First World War impacted colonial Zambia.

The recruitment of Africans to fight the war alongside their colonial masters was crucial. Although Africans had demonstrated an aptitude for warfare during resistance to colonial incursions, even fighting in European armies in small numbers, it was not until the outbreak of the First World War that Africans were enlisted in great numbers to fight on the side of their colonial masters. More than 2 million Africans served in the war as soldiers or carriers. In the war, between 750,000 and 1 million Africans including Zambians were recruited into service as porters, hauling the equipment of the opposing armies “through forest and swamp”.¹

The war brought both positive and negative economic effects in Zambia. This was owing to the fact that by 1914 prior to the war, Africa was already recognized as an economically important part in a global perspective.² Hence, the colonial masters took advantage and exploited Africa of its raw materials and resources such as ivory, gold, diamond and copper. A positive impact the First World War had on African societies was the development of more mines. In the mining sector, some products were developed, whereas others were interrupted after the outbreak of the war. In Zambia, the mining sector remained the most important export of the economy, whereas other industries were negatively affected by the congestion

¹ Richard J. Reid.: *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2009), p. 192.

² W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Dar-es-salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1981). p.76.

of the British Empire's transport network and the uncertainty of deliveries. The search for new resources to support the war led to the opening of new mines. For example in Zambia, the copper mining companies expanded production to over 200,000 tons by 1914 and during the First World War, Zambia became one of the copper producers. The war effort needed copper for brass shell and bullet castings and for electrical wiring in trucks, tanks, ships and aircraft.³

Another positive impact the First World War had was that it stimulated the agricultural industry in Zambia. Since food, staff were largely needed in the industrial areas and by warring nations. The colonial government came up with a number of measures in order to stimulate agricultural production such as the introduction of subsidies on transport, agricultural inputs as well as African Labour Crops, where blacks worked under military command on white farms or commercial farms producing maize and wheat for the Copperbelt in the case of Northern Rhodesia. As Samuel Chipungu argues that the war acted as a catalyst of peasant commodity production and differentiation in the southern province of Zambia.⁴

Even though removed from remote villages, soldiers fought far away from their homes and returned with new views and new things. In Central and Southern Africa, they started small businesses where they sold basic goods needed for homes. Songs, which they had chanted while at war, as "take the happy tidings where trade can be done" were taken seriously by the ex-soldiers.⁵ In Zambia, many demobilized soldiers also became traders. For example, through their trading activities, new and modern products reached African homes in the different parts of the country.

The First World War also had benefits for both the colonial administrators and the ex-soldiers. For the colonial administration, the Zambian ex-soldiers could be called up in times of crises and shortage of personnel.⁶ Additionally, even though there was the fear of unemployment, the soldiers could nonetheless work in the expanding city as drivers, porters, teamsters, photographers, mechanics, launderers, and newspapermen, among other prominent occupations. For the ex-soldiers, money from savings and payment of discharge bonuses enabled them to easily enter into trade and transportation.

³ K. Shillington, *History of Africa* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), p. 368.

⁴ S. Chipungu, *The State, Technology and Peasant Differentiation in Zambia: A case study of the Southern Province, 1930-1986* (Lusaka: Historical Association Zambia, 1988), p. 71.

⁵ Paul Bohannon, *Africa and Africans* (New York: Pegasus Books 1964), p. 212.

⁶ Bohannon, *Africa and Africans*, p.225.

In Zambia, although the introduction of Christianity in this area pre-dates 1918, the German missionaries who were responsible for introducing and maintaining it had left the territory after Germany lost the war. The ex-soldiers took on the responsibility of spreading the “glad tidings” among their own people, against the wishes of their semi-divine traditional rulers. Traditional rulers often found ex-soldiers obstinate, and sometimes the veterans were not submissive even to their own priests. This was largely because of their German military training and the very stringent religious instruction they had received from the German military chaplains. Consequently, they constituted a new elite, and at the same time wielded influence out of proportion to their small numbers in their particular communities. Similar patterns of ex-soldiers’ influences occurred in other parts of Africa as well, such as the emergence of a new socio-economic dynamics within ruling class Ngonde society in northern Nyasaland.⁷ Returning soldiers also opened new religious structures, which represented nodal zones of conversion. Churches were set up in villages even if this was against the wishes of the traditional rulers, and the veterans also introduced entertainment such as dancing.

The First World War had another positive impact on the economy of some African societies such as Zambia. The war was a true watershed in the economic history of Zambia, as it created a favorable situation for the white settlers, and at the same time caused a closer incorporation of Zambian peasants into the colonial economy. The value of settlers exports recovered in 1915 and 1916 compared to declines experienced throughout 1913 and 1914. The settler’s success was based on pre-war investments, but also on the maximization of opportunities arising out of the war, especially the production vegetables and meat to sustain the allied forces. African colonial production of food stuff came under the control of the state, owing to the enormous demand for foodstuff for troops and porters engaged in the First World War. Thanks to this, the Zambians increased their wealth significantly during the war, since they sold cattle to the army and since mainly male and low grade cattle were sold, stock reserves could be maintained.⁸

The First World War also led to the acquiring of knowledge about medicines by Africans which is a positive impact on African societies. Most of the Zambian people who were taken to European countries and managed to come back had come with some knowledge on how to make medicines and deal with agriculture. The mobilization of Europeans forced the government to review its policy towards the training of Africans for positions previously

⁷ E. Melvin, *The Chiwaya War: Malawians in the Great War and After* (Boulder: Colorado, 2000), p. 205.

⁸ Daniel Hall, *Agriculture after the war* (London: Murray, 1916). p.5.

filled by Europeans, like agricultural supervisors, postal officials, custom officers and mechanics, among other professions. Medical schools were established to train assistant doctors.⁹

Ex-soldiers were not only responsible for challenging the traditional status quo, but caused serious challenges even to the colonial administration which is another positive impact of the First World War. One of those areas where that happened was in labour militancy. Far from assuming that trade unionism took roots in the post Second World War period, the African experience as far as the ex-soldiers were concerned had started with the formation of labour unions after the First World War. In fact, it was an important and disruptive force which the war veterans brought back with them. Education is another important impact that cannot be left out as it awakened Africans and led to the birth of Nationalism.¹⁰ With the onset of the war, indigenous traditions of learning were replaced with western education. For example, in colonial Zambia due to increased demand for copper from the colony generated sufficient funds to accelerate educational development. Thereby, producing university graduates in the tens of thousands across the region.

The First World War on Africa also spelled the end of colonialism in Africa. The Europeans powers were all weakened by the war. While they were able to retain control over their African colonies, their colonial subjects noted their weakness and they began to grow restless as a result. Since the European powers decided to again plunge themselves back into combat a generation later, there was no time for Europe to recover from the first conflict and strengthen their hold on Africa. Returning soldiers of Zambia proved not just a logistical nightmare, particularly given the post-war shortage of merchant shipping, but were also a potential source of domestic unrest. Many of the veterans returning to their colonies resented the local chiefs who had helped force them into military service and during 1919-1920, were at the forefront of industrial disputes, assaulting chiefs and settler plantation managers, symbols of the unequal colonial system of economic and political rule.¹¹ If the world war one

⁹ Michael Crowder, "Recruitment of African Troops for the 1914-1918 War", in Michael Crowder (eds.) *Colonial. West Africa. Collected Essays* (London: New York, 1978), p. 117.

¹⁰ R. Oliver And A. Atmore, *African since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 215.

¹¹ Edward Paice, *World War I. The African front* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008), p.23.

had not occurred, it is likely that Europe would have continued to maintain its hold over Africa until the 1980s and 1990s. The inhabitants of the continent lacked serious cohesion and absent any external factors, it is likely that Europe would have continued to exploit that lack of cohesion to maintain their rule over the region.

Not only did the First World War impact Zambia positively but it also had negative impacts as well. A negative way in which the First World War had negatively impacted Zambia was that the British had taken so many descendants. The slaves who were taken from African societies to fight along side the British had such a huge number of people who were not combatants. They were recruited to carry heavy weapons and supplies which affected their body and badly paid and given food which was either of poor quality or foreign to them. While travelling through new territories for them, they often fell sick and were affected by different types of diseases thus causing death to many numbers of Zambians. The other impact is that the First World War caused people who did not even go for war to remain starving and thus causing death within Zambia. France recruited the most substantial number of African soldiers for the western front.¹²

In Africa, the granting of major timber concessions to Europeans denied Zambians access to forest areas that had long been vital to their strategies of production and survival. British agricultural officers surveyed the boundaries of forest reserves in the region and relocated families whose herds and fields lay inside the border. As a result of this relocation, Zambians who were formerly mixed herders and used the forest and savanna to feed their crops became exclusively agriculturalists outside of the forest zones.¹³

Another way in which the First World War economically impacted African societies was that during the war, the needs of European powers led to economic expansion in Africa. This led to expansion on the growth of cash crops and small-scale industry and capital investment and exports appear to have risen. However, this expansion in agriculture also had a negative impact as it led to the demise of industries in Zambia. This was because the allied powers only promoted their own countries, for instance only goods or raw materials which had a market in Europe were promoted in Zambia. Raw materials that had no value were abolished. The production of staple food crops such as millet, cassava, sorghum was discouraged by the colonial governments so that Zambians grew and ate cash crops such as maize, tobacco,

¹² <http://www.hyperhistory.net/apwh/essays/comp/cw30wwiafricalatamerpacific>, retrieved on 28th July 2020.

¹³ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 87.

coffee and cocoa. The production of cash crops took away African staple food.¹⁴ In addition the African men abandoned their food crops to cash thus they moved from subsistence to commercial farmers. The production of food was left for women while cash crops became a male dominant activity.¹⁵

Human losses is also another impact that rose as a result of the war. The First World War acted as a catalyst in the deterioration of health conditions notably housing, sanitation and diet.¹⁶ Hence, health problems like typhoid and typhus epidemics including deficiency diseases like kwashiorkor and Marasmus become an essence product of deterioration in living conditions endangered by the war. This emergence of pathological diseases such as tuberculosis and also other occupational ailments were brought about due to expansions of mines and manufacturing for example on the Copperbelt mines in Northern Rhodesia. Furthermore, the phenomenal expansion in copper production resulted into conflict between Europeans and Africans of which constituted a serious injury to the physical well being of the black mine workers.¹⁷

However, the migrant labour system had a negative impact on Zambia. In the countries where these labourers originated, there were generally social disorganizations characterized by broken families, illegitimate children, divorce and underdevelopment due to the lack of balance in the population caused by the continued absence of a large number of able bodied men.¹⁸ Furthermore, families, traditions and culture were torn apart because the people were separated from their family unwilling. Most of the Africans who became soldiers had never before left their native lands or even their own home districts.

In conclusion, the First World War presented Zambia with opportunities and constraints. In general, the Zambian economy was brought under tight control by European colonial powers, by way of price controls, the requisition of food crops, the compulsory cultivation of certain

¹⁴ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 129.

¹⁵ Hall, *Agriculture after the war*, p.2.

¹⁶ David Killingray and James Matthew, "Beasts of Burden: British West African Carriers in the First World War", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 13, 2 (1979), p. 21.

¹⁷ Killingray and Matthew, "Beasts of Burden: British West African Carriers in the First World War", p32.

¹⁸ F. Wilson, "Southern Africa" in Oliver. R and Fage. J.D. (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Africa, volume 8 from 1945-1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 263.

crops, and the recruitment of labor, both for the army and for economic production. Another impact the war had on Zambia was that it caused the intensification of the cultivation of cash crops and foodstuffs, the development of an industry for local transformation of food, and new investments in the mining sector. During the war, the resources for the society were surveyed in an unprecedented way, through mineralogical and agricultural studies research. This led to an increased knowledge of the economic potential of the Zambian society, as well as the creation of new instruments to exploit colonial resources.

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