

NOT BORING MEDIA

THE SHORTEST WAR IN HISTORY

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

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THE SHORTEST WAR IN HISTORY

The Anglo-Zanzibar War began at 9:00 AM on August 27, 1896. It ended 38 minutes later. In that brief window, Britain defeated an entire nation—making it the shortest war in recorded history.

The conflict erupted over succession. When the pro-British Sultan of Zanzibar died, his nephew Khalid bin Barghash seized the palace and declared himself the new ruler. The British had other plans. They wanted a different, more cooperative sultan on the throne, and they gave Khalid an ultimatum: step down by 9:00 AM on August 27, or face the consequences.

Khalid refused. Instead, he barricaded himself inside the palace with about 2,800 supporters and prepared to fight. His military forces included palace guards, servants, and civilians. For naval defense, he had exactly one ship—a wooden-hulled royal yacht with a few small cannons.

The British assembled a far more formidable force: five warships, armed with modern artillery, anchored in the harbor with their guns aimed directly at the palace. As the deadline approached, British officers sent final warnings. Khalid did not respond.

At 9:02 AM, the bombardment began.

The British ships unleashed a devastating barrage. Shells tore through the palace walls. Fires erupted across the compound. Khalid's yacht, the HHS Glasgow, returned fire briefly before being sunk by the overwhelming firepower. Within minutes, the palace was in ruins.

At 9:40 AM—just 38 minutes after the first shot—the shelling stopped. Khalid had fled to the German consulate, where he received asylum. The British installed their preferred sultan that same afternoon.

The human cost was staggeringly one-sided. Zanzibar suffered approximately 500 casualties. Britain had one sailor injured.

The war's brevity has made it a historical curiosity, but its implications were serious. It demonstrated the overwhelming military power European nations held over African territories during the colonial era. Zanzibar became a British protectorate, its independence extinguished in less time than most people spend eating lunch.

Today, the Anglo-Zanzibar War serves as both a trivia footnote and a sobering reminder of imperial power at its most absolute.

Word Count: 337 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Guinness World Records

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 What caused the Anglo-Zanzibar War to begin?

- A) Britain wanted to steal Zanzibar's natural resources
- B) Khalid bin Barghash seized power against British wishes
- C) Zanzibar attacked British ships
- D) The previous sultan declared war before dying

2 How long did the Anglo-Zanzibar War last?

- A) 38 seconds
- B) 38 minutes
- C) 38 hours
- D) 38 days

3 What does the word 'formidable' most likely mean in this passage?

- A) Weak and disorganized
- B) Inspiring fear through power and strength
- C) Friendly and welcoming
- D) Slow and outdated

4 Which detail from the passage best illustrates the imbalance of military power?

- A) Khalid fled to the German consulate
- B) The war started at 9:00 AM
- C) Zanzibar had 500 casualties; Britain had one sailor injured
- D) The British installed a new sultan that afternoon

- 5** The passage describes Zanzibar's defenses, including a 'wooden-hulled royal yacht with a few small cannons.' Why does the author include this detail? How does it contribute to the reader's understanding of the conflict?

- 6** The passage ends by calling the war both 'a trivia footnote and a sobering reminder of imperial power.' What do you think the author wants readers to take away from this story? Should we treat the 'shortest war in history' as an amusing fact or as something more serious?

ANSWER KEY

The Shortest War in History

1. B) Khalid bin Barghash seized power against British wishes

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: '*his nephew Khalid bin Barghash seized the palace and declared himself the new ruler. The British had other plans.*'

2. B) 38 minutes

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states *it lasted '38 minutes'* and calls it '*the shortest war in recorded history.*'

3. B) Inspiring fear through power and strength

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage contrasts Zanzibar's small force with Britain's 'far more formidable force' of five warships with modern artillery—suggesting powerful and intimidating.

4. C) Zanzibar had 500 casualties; Britain had one sailor injured

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The casualty comparison (500 vs. 1 injured) most clearly shows the massive power imbalance.

5. Sample Response:

The author includes this detail to emphasize how outmatched Zanzibar was. A wooden yacht with 'a few small cannons' against five British warships with 'modern artillery' makes the outcome inevitable. This detail helps readers understand that the war wasn't really a battle—it was a demonstration of overwhelming force against a nation with almost no real military capability.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. The author seems to want readers to see beyond the trivia—yes, 38 minutes is a remarkable statistic, but 500 people died and a nation lost its independence. Treating it only as a fun fact ignores the human cost and the broader pattern of colonial violence. Strong responses will acknowledge both aspects: it's historically interesting, but we should also reflect on what it represents about power, colonialism, and the people who suffered.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Shortest War in History

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 500 Zanzibari casualties vs. 1 British injury. What does this imbalance reveal about colonial power?
- This war is often treated as trivia—"the shortest war!" Should we also consider the human cost when discussing historical 'fun facts'?
- Khalid refused to surrender despite impossible odds. Was this brave, foolish, or something else?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Math: Calculate the rate of casualties per minute. Compare to other historical battles. What does this reveal?
- Research: Investigate what happened to Zanzibar after the war. Create a before/after comparison.
- Perspective: Write two accounts of the war—one British, one Zanzibari. How might they differ?

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Guinness World Records / Britannica