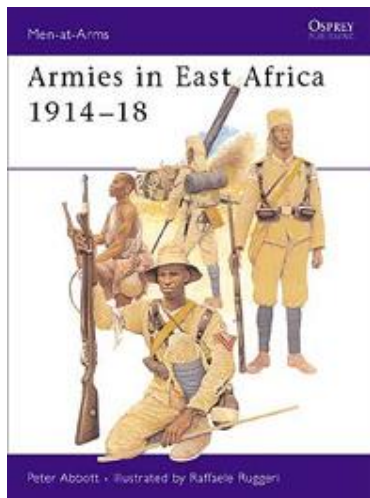


Armies in East Africa 1914-18
Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 379 (2002)
By Peter Abbott and Raffaele Ruggeri

Review by Rob Morgan

I was writing a few notes on Mobility in the Great War for the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers *Journal*, and it crossed my mind that of *all* of the land campaigns of that war, this one was the most mobile and



incredibly ÷wargamableö theatre of the war! This book is a must, as a starting point for the campaigns of von Lettow Vorbeck who wasn't beaten in the field, and whose war began on the first day raiding into the Congo, and only ended two weeks after the Armistice in Europe. The Germans fought the British Imperial forces, the Belgians and the Portuguese in a war of rapid and continual movement.

Abbott opens with a view of the strategic background -- Africa was, after all, a place of frequent conflict -- and examines the small, and for the German part, almost without reinforcement, forces which began the campaign. The British attacked Tanga on the Indian Ocean and were repulsed. The first exchange of stores, weapons and gear took place! This became a war of small-scale attacks carried out by no more than a company strength in many cases, against poorly prepared Belgian troops in particular. This was, as Peter Abbott explains, a war in which the natives, Askaris, tribal auxiliaries and porters vastly outnumbered the Europeans. It had a naval aspect too; the cruiser *SMS Königsberg* was trapped in the Rufiji Delta and eventually destroyed, the sailors and ship's guns were incorporated into the German force by von Lettow Vorbeck. There were also German warships on the lakes of Africa, powerful gunboats which could raid the Belgian Congo and were eventually destroyed in a small and worthy campaign by two Royal Navy warships.

The year 1916, saw a substantial Allied offensive intended to eliminate the German Colonial Army once and for all; to this end, large South African forces were brought in, with armoured cars. The ports were captured, and the Germans were forced into less than a third of their vast East African Empire. There were offensives by the British, Portuguese and Belgians, with some success, though stalemate ensued as sickness took hold of the

Allied troops. Cavalry were of little use, the Tsetse fly saw to that. It was the native porter who carried the campaign onwards.

The last two years of the war were years of rapid movement, of skilful raids by small German units and columns, and a pursuit which looked at several stages likely to end in German surrender. It didn't. Peter Abbott's text is clear and well written and he deals with the small incursions and the larger troop movements by rail and engineer-built roads for the British and Allies, entirely on foot for the Germans; who captured, quite regularly, stores, uniforms and weapons enough to sustain them in the field. Effectively, this was a colony on the move, since von Lettow Vorbeck held no towns or infrastructure. There was even an attempt to reinforce and resupply him from Europe by sending a Zeppelin, Z58, to his aid.

This was a war of remarkable rearguard actions, of feints and attacks on supply depots. I'm often reminded, reading this, of the last weeks of the Confederacy and Lee's epic yet doomed series of small sharp battles before Appomattox. Abbot provides some detailed (and incredibly useful for the wargamer) information on the equipment and arms which the German forces had as the war progressed. The *Konigsberg's* guns were all destroyed by the beginning of 1918, and it was Portuguese guns and British mortars (especially useful in the bush) which supplied the firepower. The war took a serious toll of British and Indian troops, and by the end, it was the African battalions of the King's army which were most active; for the British, men and horses, this was a substantial if forgotten graveyard. By 1918, the Portuguese were exhausted and stuck in their garrison forts, and though the Belgians employed cyclist companies (!) the vast areas of the bush were the province of the Germans and their Askaris.

The plates are perfect. They illustrate the components of the German forces, native, auxiliary, European and naval; the South Africans, and the diverse British elements involved in the war. Take a look at the Masai warrior (Plate C3), as well as the Belgians and the Portuguese.

Tremendously useful, this book is a must for Great War wargaming.

As for figures, well, I still have a selection of the old Peter Laing 15mm German *Schutztruppe* and natives, but in that scale although you might find a few suitable figures in smaller manufacturers' lists, but look in vain at Peter Pig or Mick Yarrow's ranges, sadly. Irregular, stalwarts of Great War figures, also miss out on East Africa, but you could cobble a force in 6mm using their lists. The range, and this includes everything from Askaris to Portuguese and a superb series of Masai warriors, is that of

Frontline's IT Figures. Very well detailed and worth a look. Bear in mind, of course, that the Europeans in the German forces were virtually indistinguishable from their enemies by 1917, due to what might be called "kit redistribution!" Buy the book, and fight the campaign.