

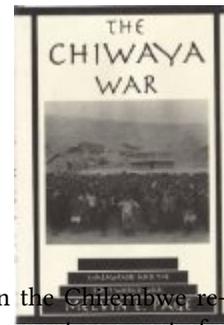
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melvin E. Page. *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000. xvi + 246 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-1234-7.

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In *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War* Melvin E. Page analyzes the impact of the Great War in the British colony of Nyasaland. Using a wide variety of sources, including archival materials, published and private papers of colonial officials, and interviews with Malawians, he concludes that the war was Malawi's initial "national experience," and a "transitional epoch in Malawi's history."

Page begins with an analysis of the role of Malawian troops in the British campaign against the Germans in East Africa. He describes the conditions of recruitment and service of the Malawian soliders, or askari, as well as the harrowing experiences of the tengatenga, laborers who suffered terrible privation and a harrowing mortality rate throughout the war. Malawian troops, whether soldiers or laborers, served in deplorable conditions, and participated in some of the bloodiest and most protracted fighting to be found outside of Europe. Page then considers the plight of civilians on the Malawian home front. He observes that those who remained in their villages suffered as well, with drought and war-time shortages exacerbating the problems of families dealing with the loss of loved ones and wage earners. His narrative of the war ends with a discussion of the post-war period, when influenza, carried by returning porters and soldiers, ravaged a population already staggered by the demands of the conflict. Page observes that in 1914 the war struck a people already traumatized by colonial occupation. To most Malawians it appeared to be an exacerbation of an existing crisis, rather than the advent of a new one.

Page argues that the war was Malawi's first truly "national" experience. While some scholars locate the

origins of Malawian nationalism in the Chitembwe rebellion of 1915, Page sees that movement as a part of a larger pattern of responses to the war. The war instilled a novel sense of camaraderie among veterans, and gave all Malawians a sense of common complaint. However, Page also takes pains to emphasize the important continuities between the pre- and post-war periods. In general, he credits the war with accelerating existing trends rather than initiating new ones.

In the final chapter, "Fighting for the World," Page impressionistically demonstrates the commonalities between Malawi's wartime experiences, and those of other world regions. Using an eclectic array of sources, he shows that many of the significant trends at work in Central Africa during and after the war mirrored developments throughout the continent, and in the Western World.

The author describes the work as a "reorienting" of his Ph.D. dissertation, the research for which was conducted during the 1970s. While he does include "considerable additional material and new evidence," the majority of the interviews and secondary sources date from the 1970s. The book's concern with identifying the origins of Malawian national identity is interesting but reflects the focus of scholars of an earlier era. *The Chiwaya War* is most convincing when the author employs his archival sources and oral traditions to assess the role of the war in Malawian history. It is less effective in placing the Malawian experience into a global context.

The Chiwaya War is a careful and thoughtful study. It will prove useful to scholars interested in Malawi, war and society, and global history in the twentieth century.

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