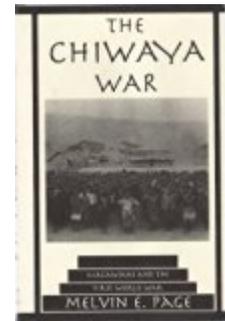


Melvin E. Page. *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000. xvi + 246 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-1234-7.

Reviewed by George Shepperson (Peterborough, United Kingdom)  
Published on H-SAfrica (March, 2001)



## Malawians and the Great War

### 'MALAWIANS AND THE GREAT WAR'

Although it was far away from the Western Front, the Great War in Africa, especially in central and eastern Africa, between 1914 and 1918 has rarely ceased to reverberate in the literary consciousness.

Its appeal to writers of fiction was early apparent. Some of them, such as Francis Brett Young, had been in the campaigns against the determined German commander, Paul von Lettow Vorbeck. Others, particularly after the catalyst of the Second World War, found the sequence of minor battles in central and eastern Africa, in contrast to the great slaughters of trench warfare in Europe, an excellent setting for the delineation, not always on a note of high seriousness, of personal conflicts.

It has been left to writers on non-fiction, notably historians, in the second half of the twentieth century, to give to these African conflicts of the First World War the very serious treatment which they deserve. Professor Melvin E. Page occupies an important place among these historians.

He has been working away at and encouraging the study of the Great War in Africa for over a quarter of a century. This was demonstrated in his doctoral thesis of 1977 on Malawians in the Great War. It was further indicated in his article on the east African campaign of 1914-1918 and Nyasaland (as Malawi in its British colonial period was called) in *The Journal of African History* (XIX, I, 1978) which was devoted to World War I and Africa. Furthermore, Page's commitment to an international as

well as a local approach in his studies of African conflicts was emphasized in his editorship of *Africa in the First World War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987) to which he contributed a stimulating introduction, the title of which revealed Page's general approach: 'Black Men in White Men's Wars.'

Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, Melvin E. Page has published this thoughtful and moving book which must surely enhance his reputation as a student of central and eastern African history and as an important figure amongst the increasing international brigade of World War scholarship. Based on a skilful and intensive study of records, public and private, in Malawi and overseas, and on a valuable body of oral evidence, particularly from Malawi veterans of the First World War, *The Chiwaya War* should prove of considerable interest to a wide variety of readers concerned with African and war studies.

Taking its title from the Malawian word for a machine gun, with its sudden and shattering effects on the innocent and guilty alike, Page's book is no conventional military history of strategy and tactics, victors and vanquished, medals and memorials.

It emphasizes the effects of the 1914-1918 War on the African inhabitants of Malawi, to most of whom it came as a disastrous surprise, making formidable demands on their families, crops and taxes and weakening their resistance against diseases such as the terrible influenza pandemic of 1918-1919.

The possible consequences of the First World War for Malawians had been seen as early as November 1914 by John Chilembwe, an African Baptist minister under African American sponsorship, who became in January the following year leader of an abortive rising against British power in his country. Writing to the *Nyasaland Times* in a letter which the official censor struck out of this newspaper, Chilembwe declared “the poor Africans who have nothing to own in this present world, who in death leave only a long line of widows and orphans in utter want and dire distress, are invited to die for a cause which is not theirs.” Chilembwe’s rising against the British in wartime is skillfully woven into Melvin E. Page’s text; and, from his wide range of sources, written and oral, he makes a valuable contribution of new viewpoints and material to the ever-fascinating story of John Chilembwe and his followers.

Students of Malawian history have too often assumed that the fire in the Government buildings at Zomba in 1919 destroyed the entire archives of this British possession. Page’s diligent and wide-ranging researches demonstrate that many records, official and unofficial, from the Great War have survived. It is from these that he constructs his perceptive book, to which he appends a most useful essay on sources and method and an invaluable bibliography which ought to stimulate other scholars to fill in the gaps which his admirable book, in spite of itself, must invariably leave.

One gap which felt was left was in the area of the individual resistance of African soldiers (askari) to the burdens of the Great War, particularly to its European leadership. During my service in the Second World War with askari from Malawi in Africa and South East Asia, it was my misfortune to note that some African soldiers killed their European officers and some killed themselves. The numbers who fell into these unhappy categories may not have been large; but they surely have some significance for the study of Black man in White men’s wars? I found no mention of any such fatalities in *The Chiwaya War*; and I find it difficult to believe that no Malawian askari attempted to take the law into their own hands during the First World War.

My own experience, however, with soldiers from Malawi in the Second World War and their effects on my subsequent researches into Malawian and pan-African history have convinced me that Melvin E. Page has effectively revealed two important consequences of the Great

War of 1914-1918 for the now independent country of Malawi. The first is that this War was the initial national experience for Malawians, becoming a watershed in the history of their country. And thesecond consequence is that, like other African combatants in the First World War, “the participation of Malawians in the East African campaign drew them inexorably into a wider world—into a modern world system” (p.215).

Melvin E. Page’s fascinating study left me, at the age of 79, wishing that I could be given the strength and the time to produce two books to supplement his own engaging work. The first would be an annotated picture book.

*The Chiwaya War* has only one illustration—and this is a poor reproduction on its front cover—compared with the ten excellent pictures in the book, *Africa in the First World War*, which Page edited in 1987. It is now becoming clear that many photographs, drawings and paintings of the First World War in Africa have survived.

An excellent collection of photographs for Malawi in the Great War was published too late to gain reference in Page’s bibliography: Colin Martin, editor, *Corporal Haussmann goes to War armed with Motor-cycle and Camera* (Kenilworth, South Africa: Martin, privately printed, 2000), a lively, illustrated pamphlet about a young South African soldier in central and east Africa, 1915-1917.

This short work also contains some trenchant comments on the subject of the second book which I would like to write to supplement Melvin E. Page’s: on the *tenga-tenga*, the Malawian carriers, “many of whom died of maltreatment” (p.47); those African porters, without whom, for both sides in the 1914-1918 conflict, campaigning would have been impossible. The commander of the Nyasaland-Rhodesia Field Force, Major General Edward Northey, on his retirement in 1918, sent a farewell message to every member of his Force, which included the significant sentence, “I would award the palm of merit to the Tenga-Tenga.” There is much good material and comment about them in Page’s book; but they gave so much and suffered so much that they deserve a book to themselves. They surely exemplify for the heritage of Malawi the truth of the assertion by the English war poet, Wilfred Owen, made not long before he was killed on the Western front a week before peace was declared on November 11th, 1918: “This book is not about deeds, or lands, not anything about glory, honour, might, dominion, or power, except War. the pity of War.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** George Shepperson. Review of Page, Melvin E., *The Chiwaya War: Malawians and the First World War*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5035>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).