War and Society in Colonial Zambia, 1939-1953

War and Society in Colonial Zambia is an accessible monograph that documents the far-reaching impact of the Second World War on Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) during and after the conflict. The study is based on an impressive array of hitherto underutilized archival sources at the National Archives of Zambia and on oral evidence gleaned from the interviews the British Broadcasting Corporation conducted with Zambian ex-servicemen in the 1980s. Informed by what Alfred Tembo dubs the “war and society approach” (p. 2), the monograph buys into wider scholarship that investigates the effects of war on not only belligerent countries but also those peripheral to the actual fighting. Alfred Tembo insists that although Northern Rhodesia was far removed from the battlefronts of the Second World War, the territory nonetheless contributed vital human and material resources toward Britain’s war effort, and that the conflict profoundly transformed the colony socially, economically, and politically.

Written thematically, the book is divided into six main chapters. It begins with a lengthy introductory section that reviews literature on the impact of wars on society. This is followed by chapter 1, which details the mobilization strategies colonial and military authorities in colonial Zambia enacted to recruit African servicemen for the Northern Rhodesia Regiment (NRR). The chapter shows that the authorities resorted to propaganda, promises of good jobs, and, sometimes, outright coercion to induce Africans to join the NRR. They further successfully appealed to African chiefs to persuade their subjects to enlist in the colonial army. According to Tembo, this important responsibility resulted in the revival of chiefly power. But this assertion is more assumed than proven in the study.

Tembo emphatically stresses that while the mobilization strategies of the colonial officials and military authorities significantly contributed to recruitment of Africa servicemen, no less important to the mobilization exercise was the recruits’ own agency and willingness to join the army. This agency was as much rooted in the long-standing practice of labor migration as in Africans’ perception of war service as a source of employment via which they could earn money, gain material goods, enhance social respectability, and, in keeping with local beliefs about war, celebrate their virility and masculinity. Combined, government mobilization efforts and Africans’ own positive re-
action to the call to arms proved successful. By the end of the war in 1945, no less than fifteen thousand askaris, as African servicemen were called, had served in the NRR and seen action in India, Palestine, Burma, Ceylon, and East Africa.

Chapter 2 explores the economic impact on Northern Rhodesia of Japanese conquest of British and other Allied colonies in Southeast Asia in 1941-1942—and the consequent loss of rubber, tin, jute, iron, oils, and other raw materials on which Britain industries had hitherto depended to manufacture goods. Informed by the metropole-periphery discourse, the chapter shows that the loss of these vital raw materials, coupled with severe reduction in the shipment of nonmilitary goods occasioned by the sinking of ships by Axis powers, severely reduced Britain’s capacity to manufacture goods or to export them to the far-flung corners of its empire, including Northern Rhodesia. This led to a critical shortage of imports and resultant high cost of living in Northern Rhodesia, a territory which prior to the outbreak of hostilities in Europe had heavily relied on British imports. In response to these challenges, the governments in both Britain and colonial Zambia increasingly intervened in the colony’s economy. They not only called upon ordinary people in rural Northern Rhodesia to produce raw materials including rubber and beeswax “needed for the successful execution of the war” (p. 57) but also fixed prices for such raw materials.

“War and Economics of the Home Front” is the subject of chapter 3. The chapter demonstrates that fighting during the Second World War crippled world trade and the supply chain of consumer commodities. Besides wreaking havoc on Britain’s domestic economy, this situation equally affected Northern Rhodesia, leading to hyperinflation, hoarding of goods, a black market, and profiteering. Such conditions exacerbated the suffering of ordinary people in the colony. To reverse these adverse conditions, Tembo argues, the colonial state in Northern Rhodesia introduced, among other austerity measures, price controls and the rationing of commodities. But such measures neither led to the recovery of the economy nor eased the hardships of the colonized in the territory.

Chapter 4 examines why imperial Britain evacuated Polish refugees to wartime Northern Rhodesia, the course of their migration, and, most importantly, the racial and gender tensions that their settlement in the colony sparked. Tembo argues that the evacuees bore the brunt of racial and gender discrimination and hostility at the hands of older white settlers, especially those of British origin. This hostility, according to Tembo, was reinforced partly by the older settlers’ fear of competition for jobs with the evacuees and partly by the exclusionary immigration policy by which the colonial officials in Northern Rhodesia sought to keep non-English immigrants out of the colony.

The impact of the Second World War upon Northern Rhodesia’s premier industry, copper mining, is explored in chapter 5. The chapter maintains that since Britain required copper to manufacture ammunition with which to defeat Axis powers and rebuild its war-torn economy after the war, British authorities turned to Northern Rhodesia for regular supply of the base metal. Consequently, the authorities in London together with their subordinates in Lusaka went to great lengths to expand copper production in Northern Rhodesia. To maximize the production of the red metal, the authorities stimulated fresh investment in the copper industry. To enable European settler farmers to increase the production of foodstuffs needed to feed the rapidly growing industry, the authorities in Northern Rhodesia also conscripted Africans to work on settler farms in 1942. These and other measures resulted in phenomenal expansion in the production of copper and unprecedented export of the metal to Britain, which remained the essential monopoly buyer of the mineral throughout the war and beyond. But Britain’s dependence on Northern Rhodesian copper came
at a huge political price to the colony's nationalist movement. In order to monopolize the trade in Northern Rhodesian copper, the British government tightened its political control over the territory in the aftermath of the war. This delayed the granting of political independence to Northern Rhodesia.

The final chapter reconstructs the demobilization process of servicemen, the society to which they returned after the war, and, most importantly, their postwar life experiences. It insists that the process of demobilization was as deeply racialized as it was it cumbersome. Thus, while the Northern Rhodesia government rewarded European veterans for their war services with land, well-paying jobs, and attractive gratuities, it did not extend the same benefits to African ex-servicemen. Consequently, this impoverished former African servicemen, turning them into bitter men who spent the rest of their postwar lives trying to improve their economic welfare through, inter alia, investing their meager pensions in varying small-scale business ventures—often in vain. Preoccupied with issues of bread and butter, the ex-servicemen, the chapter concludes, played no significant part in the nationalist struggle.

Though not a page-turner, War and Society in Colonial Zambia is penned in good prose. Its evidentiary base is also solid and impressive. Moreover, the book's author should particularly be commended for mining the rich but long-ignored archival sources at the National Archives of Zambia in Lusaka. These sources shed ample light on the views and policies of British and Northern Rhodesian officials regarding the mobilization of human and material resources for the execution of the Second World War. Tembo further admirably captures the experiences of African servicemen during and after the conflict, in many instances in their own voices.

Tembo's study, however, does not escape the usual complaints. For one thing, the book is notoriously repetitive. Arguments or points raised in the introductory section of the study are repeated almost verbatim in many subsequent chapters, as well as in the concluding section of the monograph. This makes reading it tedious. Second, the question of African agency—which admirably animates the discussion on why black Northern Rhodesians enlisted in the NRR—is largely confined to chapter 1 but lost in most of the other chapters. Thus, for example, why rural Africans enthusiastically engaged in the production of rubber and other raw materials needed by resource-poor Britain in the early 1940s (see chapter 2) is left to the reader's guess. This gives rise to the erroneous impression that African involvement in the production of said raw materials was no more than at the bidding of their colonial masters. Needless to say, this perspective robs them of their own agency. Moreover, the study's argument that African veterans made no significant contribution to the combat for political independence raises eyebrows as it is not backed by convincing evidence. There is indeed much evidence to support the perception that some ex-servicemen, such as the world-famous Mukuka Nkoloso, became a thorn in the flesh of the colonial state once they returned to Northern Rhodesia after the war. In the 1950s, Nkoloso was in fact deported from Zambia's Copperbelt for his nationalist activities.

Lastly and most ominously, the book under review hardly tells us anything new about the Second World War or its impact on the Northern Rhodesian society. Its major themes, notably the mobilization of human and material resources for the war effort, the increase in copper production during the war, and the demobilization of African servicemen, have all received attention in most general histories on colonial Zambia—a point Tembo himself concedes. These limitations notwithstanding, historians, political scientists, economists, and general readers will certainly find his empirical study a treasure trove of information on the important contributions Africans made to the British war effort, not to mention the high
price they paid for their participation in a conflict not of their own making.

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