Editorial

Remembering the Centenary of the Start of the First World War in Sierra Leone.

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Even though the battlefields are now distant in time and place, the memorialization of the Great War of 1914-1918, subsequently renamed the First World War, remains an important element in the reproduction of coloniality and nationhood in Sierra Leone. For more than six decades, hundreds of soldiers, police, veterans, nurses, boy scouts and girl guides, teachers, school children and government officials adorned with scarlet paper poppies congregate every year on November 11th at the cenotaph in the front of the Secretariat Building at George Street, Freetown to remember the 1,109 First World War, and 247 Second World War Sierra Leone dead. Two-minute silences at the eleventh hour, prayers by clerics, and the laying of wreaths by immaculately dressed military officers at the base of the cenotaph usually mark the moment in 1918 when the First World War formally ended. Homilies from an assortment of government officials, British dignitaries, and military men recall the “valor”, “bravery,” and “sacrifice” of the soldiers who died in the two global conflagrations and those serving in ongoing conflicts. Remembrance Day rituals have become both important elements in the construction of Sierra Leone postcolonial nationalist narrative, and affirmation of its colonial heritage and membership in the (British) Commonwealth.

As historians are aware, all nationalist and neo-imperial narratives are constructed on partial truths; there is much about the past that is excluded, occluded or unremembered. Very few, educated Sierra Leoneans served in the war; fewer still fought and died out of deep conviction for its disputed causes, or in defense of the British Empire. The majority of Sierra Leonean servicemen, recruited by chiefs and local headmen, had little or no formal education or any inkling of the events and issues surrounding the war that would eventually consume millions of lives. Like thousands of other Africans, they had participated in the First World War not as citizens of independent, sovereign countries, but as British colonized subjects in primarily an inter-European imperial and national military contest in which they had little direct stake.

Indeed, there was very little indication when Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian student, assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, the Duchess of Hohenberg, on June 28th 1914 that the ensuing conflict will have any significant impact on Sierra Leone. While European press reaction to the assassination had been mostly belligerent and jingoistic, the Sierra Leone press response
had been understandably circumspect. The *Sierra Leone Weekly News* viewed “Servia” as a distant and obscure part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and took great pains to describe the confusing sequence of events that led to the assassination, and the reactions that had precipitated another major “European War.” In a few weeks, it became evident to readers of the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* that this European war was radically different from those of the nineteenth century; it had rapidly mutated into “The Great War” as the different European imperial powers mobilized millions of men across the world to fight and labor in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Atlantic Ocean.

Sierra Leone, including its recently incorporated “Protectorate (1896),” inevitably became part of the British imperial war effort. The leaders of various communities and faiths across the country declared their loyalty and support for their colonial overlord. These declarations were not only made at public gatherings and meetings with colonial officials, but also penned in letters that found their way to King George V. Paramount chiefs, many adjusting to their redefined roles as subordinated overseers of their people, provided grain and cattle for British troops; they also zealously mobilized their people to join in the war effort. Even Muslim leaders, perceived as potential fifth columnists after the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers, united with their Christian counterparts in dispatching letters praying for British victory against the Germans and Turks.

Just as in the heydays of the nineteenth century antislavery campaign and in the Second World War that followed, Freetown, the capital of the Sierra Leone colony, became a strategic naval base for the British during the Great War. The Freetown Harbor was once more reinforced for the resupplying of British warships and for maritime military operations in the central Atlantic. The British also established a Prize Court in the city for the adjudication of German merchantmen, cargo, and ships captured within this maritime region.

Sierra Leoneans from every ethnic group in the country fought, labored, and died in the Great War. Over 21,000 served as soldiers, carriers, and laborers in Cameroun, Mesopotamia and East Africa. They majority of these recruits were drawn from the newly incorporated regions of Sierra Leone rather than the Colony, which had been under British rule since 1808. Despite their protestations of loyalty, British colonial officials limited the recruitment of the Creole, whom they considered “uppity,” “recalcitrant.” Sierra Leone troops, who fought as part of the Royal West African Frontier Force in the Cameroons, supported Britain and France’s military efforts to capture the port of Douala and a German base called Herman’s Farm. While Douala fell by the end of September 1914, Herman’s Farm proved more difficult to capture, and the fighting lasted until the German’s surrendered in early 1916.

The efforts of Sierra Leoneans who served in Mesopotamia and East Africa from 1917 to 1918 are equally heroic but less seared into public consciousness. In Mesopotamia, they supported British military activities against the unraveling Ottoman Empire. Sierra Leoneans worked as crewmembers of steamers, drivers of launches, and dockworkers with Inland Water Transport. Some even manned gunboats on the Euphrates River. In East Africa, the Sierra Leone Carrier Corps transported ammunition and other supplies.
for military colonial troops from Nigeria and The Gold Coast to fight against the Germans.

The various battlefields of the First World War claimed more Sierra Leonean lives than those of the Second World War. As indicated on the cenotaph at George Street, over a thousand men died in the process of supporting Britain’s war efforts in Africa and the Middle East. The survivors returned from their various battlefields with tales of the harrowing hardships they had experienced and the horrors of modern twentieth century warfare that they had witnessed. A few received medals and certificates of commendations for acts of bravery they displayed in the heat of war. Private Monde Yeraia, for example, received a Distinguished Conduct Medal for trying to save his wounded officer, Lieutenant Parker.4 Like many others, Yeraia also returned home with war-related injuries. Many more suffered from chronic and infectious diseases, including tuberculosis and influenza. Returning veterans also had to “fight” colonial officials for back pay and bonuses, resulting in protests in 1919.

It was not only bodies and minds of the war veterans that bore the scars of conflicts, the First World War also had serious deleterious effects on the larger Sierra Leone economy, society and politics. The conflict disrupted agricultural export and production, which like those of other African colonies had become inextricably incorporated into the European centered capitalist economy and global market. The British declaration of war against Germany resulted into a sudden 50% loss of agricultural export market in 1914 and 1915. Britain and the United States subsequently took some of this market share, however, maritime warfare, which disrupted shipping, ensured that the trade problem continued until the end of the war.

Apart from the loss of market share, the drop in agricultural production was also due to the withdrawal of thousands of able-bodied men in rural areas to serve as soldiers and carriers in the various theaters of war. The enthusiasm by chiefs to requisition young men to serve as soldiers and carriers waned by 1917 and 1918 as labor shortage became evident across the country. Many of these men were farmers, and a significant percentage of them were still held as enslaved or bonded labor by chiefs and local elite families. Though many of the enslaved men used their wartime pay to emancipate themselves, the “stain” of enslavement would not be lifted on Sierra Leone, a colony founded on antislavery and abolitionist sentiments and efforts, until 1928.

The First World period was not only time of social change; it was also a time of epidemics, pestilence and social discontent. From 1915 to 1916, a smallpox epidemic that originated in neighboring Guinea raged through western and northern Sierra Leone. Local and colonial medical practitioners could not contain the spread of the epidemic. It overwhelmed several communities, and severely disrupted farming. A plague of locusts followed on the heels of the smallpox outbreak. Before the communities could recover from the smallpox epidemic and the locust plague, influenza from Europe rapidly spread through the entire country in 1918. By 1919, Sierra Leone was experiencing near famine conditions and serious food shortages. The interlocking hardships from the epidemics and the grievances emanating from the First World War
eventually led to major social protests in Freetown and many of the major regional towns in 1919. Although the protestors repeatedly clashed with colonial security forces, the main targets of their anger became Syrian merchants, who were suspected of hoarding rice and seen as lacking support of the colonial state.

Popular and personal memories of the hardships and turmoil of the First War period in Sierra Leone have understandably receded with the passing of veterans and those who lived through it. As a child, I was always deeply enthralled by the recollections of the “Kameroo War” period of my putative grandmother, Mamy Yabundu, who was born and grew up in Kamalo, Sanda Loko Chiefdom, Karene District. She told of the great sorrow of women crying for sons and brothers forcibly shipped off to fight the white man’s war, the fear of people fleeing strange diseases and resisting governmental orders, and the great hunger following the arrival of the locusts. In the 1990s, whilst I was in graduate school I realized that Mamy Yabundu’s recollections contained much more substance about the realities of Sierra Leone’s wartime experiences than the official encomiums in front of the Freetown cenotaph. Festus Cole, whose article on Sierra Leone’s role in the start of the First World War is in this volume and who has produced the only doctoral dissertation on the First War experience of Sierra Leone, is amongst a small group of historians who have attempted to close the gap between official and popular recollections of the event.5

Understanding the complex impact of First World War on Sierra Leone is important since recent events seem to contain echoes of the country’s experiences a hundred years ago. The brutal civil war of 1990 to 2002, like the First World War, caused widespread economic, social and political dislocation. Various disease outbreaks, of which the most lethal is the current Ebola epidemic, have cut deadly swaths across the country. Government and local officials, like their colonial counterparts a hundred years ago, have proven unequal to the task of arresting the spread of Ebola, and the country is rife with a similar fear and despondency that accompanied the outbreak of the influenza epidemic. Rather than allowing these recent events to layer the memories of the First War World or to be obfuscated by nationalist and neo-imperialist myth-making of Remembrance Day commemorations, Sierra Leoneans need to understand more fully the forces, structures and conditions that still generate the manifold forms of violence and privations in their lives.
Notes

1 The Sierra Leone Weekly News, Saturday August 8, 1914, p. 8.
2 (CO 267/560).
3 (CO 267/560; CO 271/20).
4 WO 372/22/114808, Medal card of Yeraia Monde Corps: Sierra-Leone Battalion Regiment.