

THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN MOZAMBIQUE (1914-1918)

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Portuguese Expeditionary Forces entering Kionga, north Mozambique.

Source: Fundo Iconográfico da Biblioteca da Liga dos Combatentes

(Iconographic Archives of the League of Combatants Library)

Background to the campaign

In the late 19th century the scramble for Africa by the main European powers did not merely produce results of a scientific nature allowing researchers to improve the existing knowledge of the region's geography and ethnography.

This advance was essentially economically motivated, enabling the European continent to find a vast market in which to sell its goods. At the same time, it was also a place for access to the various raw materials which were vital for its emerging industry. Political issues also became relevant in this move. The exploitation and disorderly occupation of certain areas of the African continent with the aim of conquering as much territory as possible, at the time led to the

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emergence of different disputes between the various European powers. For that reason, the various colonising states sought to settle such conflicts through diplomacy: at the Brussels Conference in 1876, and at the Berlin Conference² between 1884 and 1885. Their intention was thus to establish spheres of influence and rules of occupation of the African continent.

The agreements issuing from the Berlin Conference promoted an orderly scramble for the African continent, although in reality its territories were often occupied by the first countries to raise their flags in such places, accompanied by their respective military garrisons. In the same context, it was noted that the major European powers did not respect all legalities equally having, under different circumstances, often intended to occupy, or indeed actually occupied, the colonies of less important countries by force.

Portugal felt this reality quite harshly with the English ultimatum of 1890 against the document of the Rose-Coloured Map³, as this Portuguese intention collided with the interests in the region of Great Britain, which wished to build a railway line linking some of its possessions from Cairo, in Egypt, to Cape Town in South Africa. The German conquest of the region of Kionga, on Mozambican territory, which was officially recognised on 10 September 1894, is an example of this type of control.

Once the new republican regime in Portugal had been recognised internationally the country would enter the war on the side of the Allies against Germany, based on two justificative aims: the colonial issue and the European-Peninsular issue⁴. The colonial theory was that the country joined the war with the aim of defending its colonies in Africa, as these were very profitable in economic and strategic terms for the major powers, and might serve and indeed had on more than one occasion served to offset the balance of powers of European stability.

² Portugal was present at this conference which on 26 February approved the General Act defining a new concept of colonial rule, which replaced the historic right by the right of effective occupation. Dorbalino Martins, *Estudo de Pesquisa sobre a intervenção Portuguesa na 1ª Guerra mundial na Flandres*, p.23.

³ In 1886 and 1887, Portugal began negotiating with France and Germany, and agreements were signed on maritime law and border adjustments. Attached was a map of Portuguese southern African in which Angola and Mozambique appeared united, the whole area being coloured pink, explaining the reason this map became known in history as the Pink or Rose-Coloured Map. Idem, p.23.

⁴ Major Abílio Lousada, *História Militar de Portugal*, pp.109 and 110.

In turn, the European and Peninsular theory advocated that Portugal should enter the Great War for two reasons: the first, which was more remote, concerned regaining a seat in the European league of nations; the second, more consistent and determinant, involved repulsing the Spanish peril in the context of the Peninsula. These two theories completed each other, although the colonial theory weighed more in the decision-making. This situation was clearly verified in 1914 once the Portuguese territory in south Angola and north Mozambique was invaded by Germany. This then became the main reason for war being declared. In this way the country entered the Great War with the intention of regaining areas that had previously been seized, thus preventing the Germans from increasingly pursuing their incursion into Portugal's colonies. Although Mozambique was a secondary peripheral theatre of war it was no less a focus of interest for the Great Powers due to its geographical position and the importance of its ports as access to the neighbouring countries. It was also a valuable territory because of the wealth produced by farming, decisively complemented by the value of its subsoil.



Independent country
 International zone
 Portuguese possessions
 Spanish possessions
 Italian possessions

German possessions
Region exchanged with the 1911 treaty with France
Belgian possessions
French possessions
British possessions
British dominion
Zone of British influence
Anglo-Egyptian Condominium

1. Southern territory
2. Mauritania
3. Senegal
4. Guinea
5. Upper Senegal and Niger
6. Ivory Coast
7. Dahomey
8. Niger military territory
9. Oubangui-Shari-Chad
10. Gabon
11. Middle Congo

Map representing colonial dominion in Africa in 1914

Source: www.atlas.historique.net;2002.

So, the German African Empire, consisting at the time of present-day Namibia, Tanzania, Togo and Cameroon, had always had its sights on the territory of Mozambique. As with the *Mitteleuropa* project, a political concept in which Germany controlled the Central European union, and was set in motion during the First World War, the Germans also envisaged redistributing the colonial possessions of Portugal, Belgium and France at the end of that war in order to constitute so-called *Mittelafrica*. It was with this idea in mind that both in 1889 and in 1913 Germany and England actually signed secret treaties sharing out the Portuguese colonies.

In this context, Portugal's aim in the war in Mozambique was mainly twofold: to recover the lost portion of the Kionga territory which was then in the hands of the Germans and, at the same time, to secure a passage to the north bank of the River Rovuma in enemy territory, with the strategic aim of definitively opposing Germany's intentions to take over possession of the Portuguese colony.

The Theatre of Operations



Map showing the operational zone at the Rovuma border, north Mozambique

Source: General Ramires de Oliveira, História do Exército Português, p. 197.

At the start of the war in 1914 Mozambique could be described as a colony 8.5 times the size of mainland Portugal. At the time it had a largely autochthonous population numbering in the region of four million. Added to this were European citizens of Portuguese origin, approximately twenty thousand, making this the second largest colony after Angola.

The operational zone in north Mozambique, site of the main military manoeuvres during the First World War, had as its particular characteristic the dense forest cover, with large trees that significantly hindered the progress and safety of the troops on the ground. The presence of the grasslands did not help the military operations, either, as it limited both observation and firing, although favouring an approach with an element of surprise, which made infantry the best arm for this type of scenario.

The climate in the zone presented two very different seasons. The so-called rainy season went from October to April and was characterised by high temperatures, which varied sharply between day and night. The dry season had high humidity and ran from May to October. It was the best period for military

manoeuvres in the region provided one had water, which was considered a priority and decisive resource whilst operations were under way.

Similarly, the crossing and utilisation of the banks of the River Rovuma in military operations were also influenced by the seasons and worsened considerably during the rains. There were places, however, where the border could be easily crossed in both directions. This was the case of the mouth of the river Lugenda in Negomano, and the Serra Mecula area. It was also possible to cross the border near Lake Nyasa, other than over the river.

However, disease was the factor that most affected the mainland troops in the region. These included respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis, influenza and pneumonia, those derived from the poor quality of the water, including dysentery, those caused by malnutrition, such as scurvy, infectious diseases due to the soldiers' poor conditions of hygiene, and also the typically tropical diseases such as malaria⁵.

To get a general idea of the distribution of resources and of the population in order to understand the colony's military capability, the Portuguese were mainly present in the south in the city of Lourenço Marques, which had a cool non-tropical climate, whilst most of the native population was concentrated in the central and northern regions of the colony. They lived in areas that were sparsely populated with Portuguese settlers, where the administrative apparatus was small and with scant resources to maintain the colony's borders safe, or even to guarantee the vassalage of these native peoples.

It was this absence of forces to protect the borders that allowed the Germans successfully and without opposition to conquer the Kionga border post in one single attack and then to occupy the entire adjacent bay, decimating the Portuguese forces garrisoned in the region. Kionga's easy occupation made Germany believe it could advance southwards and just as easily occupy the Portuguese colony. It also advanced towards the River Rovuma where, in the Maziua region, it conquered the respective military post on 25 August 1914.

These successive attacks and the occupation of Portuguese territories in north Mozambique led to the Portuguese authorities' decision to send several military expeditions, hoping with this action to prevent the German advance and if

⁵ Marco Fortunato Arrifes, *A Primeira Grande Guerra na África Portuguesa*, p.208.

possible regain the territories lost thus far. In this way, Portugal also contributed to the war effort of the Allies in the region of South East Africa, by holding back the troops of Lieutenant-Colonel von Lettow Worbeck, to prevent them crossing the River Rovuma in Mozambique. Instead they were cornered in a small part of the former colony of German East Africa between the River Rufiji and the River Rovuma. To ensure the success of these attacks the Allies had drawn up a plan in which England attacked from east to west, from British East Africa, and Belgium from west to east, from the Belgian Congo, thus trapping the German troops.



Trestle bridge over the River Rovuma built by the Portuguese forces in north Mozambique.

*Source: Fundo Iconográfico da Biblioteca da Liga dos Combatentes
(Iconographic Archives of the League of Combatants Library)*

Organisation and missions of the expeditionary forces in the Mozambique campaign



*A Portuguese expeditionary force marching in north Mozambique.
Source: Fundo Iconográfico da Biblioteca da Liga dos Combatente
(Iconographic Archives of the League of Combatants Library)*

Following a different path to its European allies, Portugal sent expeditionary forces to its colonial territories. The decree dates from 18 August 1914 ordering the army to organise the first military expeditions to Mozambique and Angola.

In this context the Mozambique campaign consisted of four expeditions. The **1st Expedition** was commanded by Artillery Lieutenant-Colonel Pedro Massano de Amorim and began shipping out of Lisbon at the Disinfestations Dock from 11 September 1914. The aim of this expedition was to recover the Kionga territory, but this proved impossible, given the expedition's operational incapability.

The expedition settled in Porto Amelia where, together with the local inhabitants, the soldiers improved the region's road network and the telegraph lines. This expedition was constituted on the basis of the 15th Infantry Battalion, with a total of 1539 men who disembarked in Porto Amelia on 1 November

1914. As we have said, although their main objective was to withstand potential German attacks and prevent possible rebellions by the Mozambican natives, it engaged in Porto Amelia in non-military activities until the arrival of the 2nd expedition. During that period no border inspections or indeed any reconnaissance were carried out with a view to gathering information for future operations. This expedition was constituted by the following:

- 3rd Battalion of the 15th Infantry Regiment (Tomar)
- 4th Battery of the Mountain Artillery Regiment (Évora)
- 4th Squadron of the 10th Cavalry Regiment (Vila Viçosa)
- Engineering personnel (Lisbon)
- Health services personnel (Lisbon)
- Military administration personnel (Lisbon)

The **2nd Expedition** set sail for Mozambique in October 1915 under Artillery Major José Luiz de Moura Mendes. It consisted of the 21st Infantry Battalion with a total of 1558 men. The objective of this expedition was to occupy Kionga and some German territories north of the River Rovuma. As regards these objectives, the Kionga region was already abandoned when it was occupied by the Portuguese forces although they were totally incapable of conquering any German territory. This expedition was constituted by the following:

- 3rd Battalion of the 21st Infantry Regiment (Penamacor)
- 2nd Battery of the 7th Machine Gun Group (Castelo Branco)
- 5th Battery of the Mountain Artillery Regiment (Évora)
- 4th Squadron of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (Estremoz)
- Engineering troops
- Health services
- Military administration.

Following a decree dated 15 May 1916, the **3rd Expedition** was set up under the command of General José César Ferreira Gil. During this expedition several locations on German territory, such as Nevala and Massassi, were occupied although later these occupations were not maintained. The third expedition to

Mozambique was one of the largest, with 128 officers, 352 sergeants and similar, and 4356 soldiers. It left Lisbon on a number of ships between the months of May and July 1916. It had 3 infantry battalions, 2 artillery batteries, 3 machine gun batteries, 2 engineering companies and a camp hospital. These were complemented by the troops of the second expedition and also by 10 companies recruited locally, which operated on German East African territory until December of that year. Major Moura Mendes, head of the 2nd expedition, took command of artillery. The many forces of this expedition were as follows:

- 3rd Battalion of the 23rd Infantry Regiment (Coimbra)
- 3rd Battalion of the 24th Infantry Regiment (Aveiro)
- 3rd Battalion of the 28th Infantry Regiment (Figueira da Foz)
- 2 companies from the 21st Infantry Regiment (Castelo Branco)
- 1st and 2nd group of the Mountain Artillery Regiment (Évora)
- 1st Battery of the 4th Machine Gun group (Estremoz)
- 1st Battery of the 5th Machine Gun group (Coimbra)
- 2nd Battery of the 8th Machine Gun group (Valença)
- Mixed engineering company (Lisbon)
- Engineering services
- Wireless telegraphy services
- Camp hospital
- Ambulance
- Bakery
- Vehicle company
- Veterinary services
- Administrative services

The **4th Expedition** embarked in at Lisbon in phases between July and October 1917. It was under the command of Cavalry Colonel Tomás de Sousa Rosa, and disembarked in Mocímboa da Praia in Mozambique on 12 September 1917. It comprised approximately 6.000 men, having been reinforced by the Mozambique garrison. Its main aim was to coordinate and cooperate with the Allied forces with the intention of occupying and luring to its positions on the

River Rovuma the German force, to relieve German pressure on the English and the Belgians. Accordingly, Allied Command informed Sousa Rosa of its intentions to keep pushing the enemy towards the Rovuma, whose defences the Portuguese should strengthen, even offering reinforcements for that purpose. This expedition was composed as follows:

- 3rd Battalion of the 29th Infantry Regiment (Braga)
- 3rd Battalion of the 30th Infantry Regiment (Bragança)
- 3rd Battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment (Porto)
- Engineering company (Lisbon)
- Two batteries of the Mountain Artillery Regiment (Évora)
- Two machine gun batteries
- Health services
- Military administration services

The Mozambique campaign, which began with the German attack on the Maziúá border post in the Rovuma region on 25 August 1914, continued for a further four years, between 1914 and 1918. The four expeditions involved the participation of about 40.000 combatants, including native troops and troops from mainland Portugal, and resulted in 4.800 dead, 1.584 wounded, 678 prisoners of war, 5.467 missing and 1.283 disabled.

The 1918 Armistice found the Portuguese troops both physically and morally exhausted. Immediately after the Germans withdrew their mission was not at an end for they were given another slow and gruelling task. This was to rebuild and upgrade the various military border posts with the support of the local populations. Once repaired these posts were again staffed with Portuguese garrisons.

However, it was only in 1919 through the decisions of the Treaty of Versailles that Portugal obtained recognition of the integrity of the Portuguese colonies and a solution for the issue of the return of Kionga, the Mozambican territory occupied by the Germans in 1894. These gains were the result of Portugal's efforts in the African theatre of war but mainly in the European theatre of war.

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