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# Working Through a War: The Traders of John Holt & Co. in Cameroon During the First World War

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the experiences of John Holt & Co.'s European and African traders who were in German-controlled Cameroon when war broke out in August of 1914. Using company and government archives, the paper argues that local employees, who came from multiple European countries and from across the west coast of Africa, faced significant hardships but, through skill, experience, and self-interest, kept the company afloat at a time of crisis and transition. The paper begins with an investigation of how the German government in Cameroon made British employees prisoners of war and then, after the British conquest of Douala, German employees were subjected to the same treatment by occupying forces. The second part explores the breakdown of trading networks and the difficult situation of employees in the interior who suffered from a lack of security, the violence of invading armies, and the destruction of property. Despite the hardships, wartime conditions also created economic opportunities for some African employees, and part three explores their enlarged responsibilities during the war years. The final section examines the post-war era as the region transitioned from German to Anglo-French control, exploring some continuities with the pre-1914 period as well as the consolidation of some companies and an increasing expatriate dominance over the commodities trade.

## KEYWORDS

World War One; colonial capitalism; John Holt & Co; commodity capitalism; Cameroon; labour history

## Introduction

On August 25, 1914, a German military officer paid a visit to the Lolodorf warehouse of John Holt & Company. The officer advised the chief clerk, an African trader named P.S. Parboy, that war had broken out and that the German colony of Cameroon was under attack by a combined Anglo-French force. He had therefore ‘received orders from the Governor to take charge of all English

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property,' and Parboy was forced to hand over the store's keys and all the cash on hand – a total of 208 Marks – and was advised 'to clear out of the place.' Parboy, who had been working for John Holt & Co. for five years, begged to stay on site, saying that he had nowhere to go and needed to care for his wife, two children, and four other traders. The German officer was persuaded to allow them to remain on the premises, even after they were officially declared Prisoners of War. This was a mixed blessing. Over the following year, Parboy's team was frequently visited by Germans who took goods and rarely issued receipts. In February 1915, when a former German employee, Mr. Busch, arrived at the station, the staff begged him to obtain the keys to the store in order 'to let them have some goods to buy food.' Busch passed out sellable items, and Parboy kept careful records of what everyone took. He did his best to secure company assets and to navigate life in a war zone.<sup>1</sup>

Parboy's employer was one of the largest companies in German-controlled Cameroon. Liverpool's John Holt and his brother Jonathan had established their first 'factories' (trading posts) in the Cameroon rivers in the late 1860s.<sup>2</sup> Despite rivalries between Germany and Britain, the company had survived and thrived after the establishment of the German Protectorate in 1884. Parboy and other traders had steadily expanded the company's reach, exchanging wood, rubber, and palm products for manufactured goods such as cottons, tinned and fresh produce, guns, and alcohol. These goods were transported on bush trails, roads, and especially waterways serviced by canoes, barges, lighters, and steamboats.

In the south-east, the company developed plantations, including a large rubber plantation at Ebolowa (east of Kribi). The company also had retail establishments in larger centres that catered to an African clientele, stocking everything from earthenware to bicycles, typewriters, canned goods, cloth, and guns. While agents and senior traders were usually British or German, the vast majority of employees – traders, clerks, skilled workers, and manual labour – were recruited from across western Africa, including Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.<sup>3</sup>

The war in Cameroon began in August of 1914 and lasted until March of 1916. Historians have explored military engagements, recruitment, the experiences of soldier and carriers, internment, and the challenges faced by veterans and women.<sup>4</sup> Less studied are the difficulties encountered by European and African traders who found themselves on the front lines of the war. In an economy dominated by extractive enterprises and largely controlled by expatriate companies, it was company traders and subcontractors who did the lion's share of profit-making work. Scholars have shown the importance of their intermediary role, particularly in the rubber boom years between the 1890s and 1913.<sup>5</sup> Analysing the experiences of the traders of John Holt & Co. during the war, particularly the agents, assistants, and clerks, augments these studies, serving as a lens to understand the economic continuities and

disruptions of both the war years and the ensuing recolonisation of the region under Anglo-French rule. This study also explores the agency of traders in a time of crisis, emphasising the crucial importance of their labour and their ongoing pursuit of both their own and the company's economic interests as they navigated the conflict and its aftermath.

I begin by providing some background on the responsibilities and compensation of the company's traders – primarily the European and African agents, assistants, and clerks – in the pre-war period, and in part two I turn to the war itself. While economic disruption, looting, and theft were universal problems for employees across the fighting fronts, Europeans were more likely to face internment, while Africans, most of whom worked in the interior of the colony, were caught in the middle and at risk of assaults and material deprivations. In part three, I show how European and African employees were instrumental to the company's ability to survive and adapt locally, and I discuss their increasing responsibilities and opportunities, particularly after the Germans left in 1916. In the final section, I explore the post-1918 period, showing how John Holt & Co. faced new competition from British and returning German competitors, but worked with these large companies to preserve a dominant position in the commodities trade. I also look at conditions of employment after the war. Expatriate employees saw some improvements in salary and benefits, but dramatic changes in compensation do not seem to have extended to African employees. Despite this, entrepreneurial local traders did embark on new kinds of partnerships with the company.

### **Pre-War: Duties and Compensation**

John Holt had begun in Africa as a trader on the Spanish-controlled island of Fernando Po (Bioko) in 1862. The company expanded first to the Elobey islands, the mainland of Spanish Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Gabon, and then into the Nigerian Oil Rivers, Lagos, and the Congo region. From bases on the coast, the company's strategy was to push inland, bypassing existing intermediary networks to trade directly with the producers of palm products, wood, and rubber.<sup>6</sup> In Cameroon, their progress had been steady as their traders moved up the Wouri, Sanaga, and smaller rivers, establishing dozens of seasonal and permanent stations.

The company had benefited from the expansion of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century and worked with British, Spanish, French, and German administrations to further its regional reach. It had brokers in multiple European ports and it was headquartered in Liverpool, with a management team made up primarily of family members. Their highest-ranking employee in Africa was James Deemin, who had worked his way up from a junior employee to company lawyer and Agent-General.<sup>7</sup> Deemin travelled frequently between Libreville, Lagos, Douala, and elsewhere in the Gulf of Guinea, checking in with agents who were, in the case of

Cameroon, primarily recruited from Germany and Britain.<sup>8</sup> These men (there were no female agents) were tasked with facilitating the commodities trade, keeping company books in order, managing the workforce, liaising with German officials and local partners, giving out and keeping track of credit, and overseeing shipments.<sup>9</sup> Their direct reports, also Europeans, were known as assistants. Their jobs were to trade, assist the agent, inspect or run posts, oversee workers, and ensure the quality and quantity of purchased commodities.

Compensation for assistants and agents included a salary plus commission. In 1910, a European first-termer made approximately £60 in the first year, £70 in the second and £80 in the final year. A second termer might be paid £120 per annum. They might then be promoted to agent and see a further salary jump.<sup>10</sup> For agents, rates fluctuated considerably, with some favourites, such as British–Anglo–Austrian national Rudolph Fleischberger, receiving £225 per annum. This was considered high enough that Jonathan Holt asked for it to be kept confidential as they ‘were special terms and might cause discontent’ among other traders.<sup>11</sup> As a contrast, an agent from Gabon named Mr. Bennett, at a comparable level of experience, earned only £150 for his first two years. This had gone up to £350 for his final year.<sup>12</sup>

The largest group of Holt employees, the traders, reported to the assistants and agents. This primarily African workforce were either directly employed or were subcontractors sometimes referred to as ‘Tradebacks.’<sup>13</sup> The company employed many Sierra Leonians, Ghanaians and other Africans from across the region, such as Parboy, who were also valued for their accounting and translating skills. If they were hired to manage a small post they were known as clerks and their jobs included supervising staff and developing networks to facilitate the purchasing of ivory, rubber, and other goods, either through local mediators or via Tradebacks who forged direct links to producers. Their pay packages were heavily based on commission and in this respect were similar to compensation for Europeans. Tristan Oestermann has shown that at the height of the rubber boom, skilled Africans could earn more than newly arrived Europeans given the depth of their local networks and their established trading practices. This created ‘a colony of opportunity,’ although the intense competition also brought with it an increase in risk, fraud, and violence.<sup>14</sup>

The company was keenly aware of competition, and in 1910 Jonathan Holt acknowledged that they might have to reduce their margin on supplied cargo from 15% to 10% in order to compete with German rivals and ensure they could meet their rubber quotas.<sup>15</sup> But this era came to an end shortly before the war when the rubber market crashed. Only the most diversified companies like John Holt were able to survive, and even then this was with difficulty. After a disastrous year in 1912, Jonathan Holt advised his agent that ‘it would be wise to give your men a good hint that ... it will be impossible to pay any commissions,’ and the company also begged the German administration for relief from export duties.<sup>16</sup> They also increased investments in their own rubber

plantations and began to develop the wood trade in both Cameroon and Gabon. They were managing to survive, but still in a period of transition when war broke out in August of 1914.

## The War

The Germans faced war on multiple fronts broke out in 1914. British troops attacked across the Nigerian frontier, a naval fleet bombarded the port at Douala, and the French crossed at several points along the eastern border. Recognising that they could not hold the entire colony, the Germans consolidated their forces in the centre and north; one of their goals was to retain enough of a foothold to maintain a claim on the colony in eventual peace negotiations.<sup>17</sup> Because of the German retreat from the coasts, the British and French achieved most of their initial objectives by December of 1914, occupying Douala and gaining some control over the two main rail lines (one built north as far as Nkongsamba and the other heading east to Eseka). But neither the British or French were able to penetrate the German defensive core, and the Germans were able to keep rudimentary manufacturing and supplies going in the near interior. Although they continuously suffered from a lack of war materials compared to the allies, the allies could not break through and the war would last for more than a year longer.<sup>18</sup>

The war caused mass dislocations and destruction. Soldiers on both sides requisitioned people's crops and animals, which led to famines, and they also brutalised local populations. Historian Uwe-Schulte-Varendorff notes that the war in East Africa may have led to as many as 700,000 civilian deaths, and while the numbers are lower for Cameroon, it is possible that there were 'at least tens of thousands of victims.' Helmut Stoecker argues that the region's peoples experienced 'a state of extreme wretchedness' with high infant mortality and pervasive illness including a rise in sleeping sickness (human trypanosomiasis).<sup>19</sup> Cameroonians faced difficult choices. Many, especially the Duala, were hostile to the Germans and so, despite sometimes poor treatment by allied personnel, assisted them as guides, transport specialists, and in food production.<sup>20</sup> But the Germans also had help from groups such as the Beti, and recruited thousands of Cameroonians to fight with the *Schutztruppe*, which would have disrupted peace-time work and harvests.<sup>21</sup> The war was characterised by small engagements, the use of guerilla warfare tactics, and difficult conditions due to rain, illness, and dense forests. All of the fighting armies suffered from supply chain problems, a lack of reinforcements, a dearth of useable roads, and the difficulty in finding carriers. It took 18 months for the Anglo-French armies to drive the Germans from their strongholds, and most of the German *Schutztruppe* – 15,000 or more people, counting family members and carriers – eluded allied capture by crossing into the neutral colony of Spanish Equatorial Guinea in early 1916.<sup>22</sup>

### **Early Wartime Experiences: Internments of Nationals and the Commandeering of Goods**

The news that a war had broken out in Europe came as a terrible surprise to the people in Cameroon. In early August of 1914, James Deemin was in Douala on a tour of inspection and wrote that he was 'totally unprepared' when he was officially informed on August 4 that a state of war existed between the British and Germans. He watched in shock as the Germans seized 'all crafts belonging to the firm, whilst their employees were forbidden to circulate,' which stopped the transport of all their goods and halted their ability to communicate with most of their branch factories. Further, the German authorities commandeered many of the company's provisions and destroyed their liquor stores.<sup>23</sup>

On August 6, company directors wrote to the British Foreign Secretary to convey that they had 'very large interests at stake' and were 'naturally very anxious as to our position.' They were particularly worried about their eighteen British employees, and they were right to be concerned.<sup>24</sup> On August 13, Governor Karl Ebermaier declared that all of the British companies' property would be confiscated and British nationals were henceforth to be made Prisoners of War. Deemin, Rudolph Fleischberger (despite his Austrian origins), and other Holt traders were held in town, and then when the British naval bombardments were imminent, they were placed on board the S.S. Hans Woermann which was anchored at Bonaberi Point. Deemin found the experience both physically difficult and psychologically upsetting. Forced into a small cabin with two others, he and the other internees were cut off from any news, beset by 'heat, mosquitos and dirt,' and left to rely exclusively on bread and margarine for sustenance.<sup>25</sup> Similar internments occurred in other parts of the colony. At Holt's rubber plantations in Ebolowa, the Germans rounded up all the British nationals, including the manager, A.J. Green. When he was taken into custody, Green had to leave close to 100 workers behind and was forbidden to take away any of the company books or the cash on hand. It is not clear how long he remained in captivity, but he was back in Douala by January of 1916.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore a possibility that he endured the same fate as other British and French nationals who were taken by the *Schutztruppe* and forced to travel inland; they were liberated in that same month.<sup>27</sup>

The German military left the city in September and, as the last troops departed, they destroyed their wireless station and inflicted serious damage on some of John Holt's property, pulling down shelves, destroying papers, and saturating the main factory and retail store in gas.<sup>28</sup> When the British arrived they immediately began restoring the wireless station, occupied the property of the big German companies, and seized German ships docked in port. Officer Walter Meyer-Griffith candidly admitted to commandeering goods from local shops: while he issued a receipt for the 3,000 matchets they

took from the Bristol-based company R.W. King, he does not appear to have done the same when he and his troops helped themselves to the goods at the 'fine store' of the Basler mission. They used commandeered rifles, carts, appliances, khaki, typewriters, and other goods to create an Ordnance depot in a building previously owned by a German business, George Steyer.<sup>29</sup>

Deemin and the other British prisoners were liberated, while all of Holt's German employees were arrested. The unfortunate Fleischberger was among them. Fleischberger was married to the daughter of a Manchester City Councillor and in 1914 had been only a week away from receiving naturalisation papers when he had agreed to leave early for Africa.<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Holt, the son of the company's founder, appealed to his friend Major Buckley to help free him, and Buckley agreed that he 'seems to have been remarkably unfortunate to have been made prisoner of war by both Germany and ourselves.'<sup>31</sup> Holt also wrote directly to the Colonial Office to ask for his release, arguing that 'Mr. Fleischberger has been most loyal to us and also to the British in Cameroons.'<sup>32</sup> The answer was a decided 'no,' but the company was given permission to pay the salaries of employees who were now Prisoners of War in England.<sup>33</sup>

Many senior management positions were held by Germans and so the internment and deportation of German nationals was significantly disruptive. Deemin, who had wanted to return to his home in Gabon, was forced to remain in the colony to manage the day-to-day complexities of buying and selling on an active fighting front. He faced a worried, depleted workforce with limited ability to communicate with up-river stations, particularly posts behind enemy lines. The difficulties are captured in company letters, such as the one sent on November 5, 1914 to the Colonial Office where the directors explained that the company shop at Bonaberi had been burnt down and Yabassi had been looted. The estimated cost of these events was £15,000, bringing their overall losses by the fall of 1914 to nearly £50,000.<sup>34</sup> Holt's directors were not exaggerating when they sent another letter on November 18 stating that 'at present the whole of our affairs in Cameroons are in a chaotic state, and we need the help and sympathy of the authorities in every possible direction.'<sup>35</sup> While sympathetic, the British Colonial Office was not in a position to offer significant assistance to anyone, particularly outside of areas they controlled. Employees, in the short term, were obliged to fend for themselves and hope for a quick end to the war.

### ***Looting, Destruction, and Violence***

Reports of widespread chaos were brought to Douala by the Holt employees lucky enough to escape capture. 'Our various traders had cleared out some of [the posts] reaching Duala and bringing news that the Germans were raiding the whole country, killing off natives and looting all the different British factories,' Deemin reported.<sup>36</sup> The Germans were indeed appropriating

some goods, and for these they would sometimes leave receipts. Deemin believed that all sides were looting. British soldiers, he wrote, were helping themselves ‘under the eyes and with the full knowledge of the Allied Forces in Duala Bonaberi and Jabassi.’ British authorities dismissed his appeals, claiming that their soldiers were only seizing goods once factories had been abandoned by the employees. Deemin was incredulous. ‘[t]hey were well aware,’ he sputtered, ‘that their abandonment was not a voluntary act.’<sup>37</sup> Despite his pleas, he was told that it was not the military’s problem to make up for the losses as ‘these they consider are the fortunes of war.’<sup>38</sup>

At Yabassi, the British used a Holt house as a base and set up a Maxim gun on the verandah in a confrontation with the Germans. When the British retreated, the Germans ‘broke into our shops and stores,’ telling their soldiers ‘to help themselves to the goods, which they did most liberally.’ What they didn’t take they saturated with Kerosene.<sup>39</sup> At Ukoko (modern Cocobeach, Gabon), which was attacked by the French on September 21, the agent of C. Woermann advised the German government that Mr. Laub, John Holt’s trader, had ‘fled into the bush’ and that some of his own employees had fought back, been shot, or fled by boat.<sup>40</sup>

Employees were also impacted at Kribi, a coastal factory serving the south-east districts that changed hands several times. In anticipation of a French attack in September of 1914, the German administration halted cargo shipments and ordered the factory closed. Only a few Haussa and other traders from Yaoundé were able to get through with small amounts of rubber and ivory, and their carriers were then sent away ‘empty.’ The agent, Rittersdorf, was in a strange situation: as a German, he was safe in Kribi while the Germans occupied it, but as the agent of a British company’s factory, his employer’s goods, buildings, and workers were potentially at risk. He later speculated that he might have been able to persuade the occupying Germans to let him ship goods to the interior, but ‘this thought never came to us, as we thought your property absolutely safe’ because the attacking forces were English and French.<sup>41</sup> His hope was misplaced. When Rittersdorf and the German troops had to briefly flee in October when a French cruiser bombarded the town, one of the company’s roadside cash stores was robbed. He also found items stolen when he returned to the main factory a week later. The thief, he told his bosses, was one of their former shop employees. After he was able to recover the goods, he stated matter-of-factly that ‘the fellow was shot.’ In November he had to flee when the French returned again. Together with the German trader Mr. Busch, he went to German-held Great Batanga. Busch went back when the town briefly returned to German control, but Rittersdorf left the colony for neutral Spain.<sup>42</sup>

These engagements could be very violent. In an admittedly biased article entitled ‘Savage Warfare and No Quarter: Horrible German Atrocities,’ a British Royal Marine claimed that given the fierceness of German resistance,

‘there was no such thing as prisoners in Kribi, as everyone was immediately executed by having his throat cut’ (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, March 19, 1915). He also spoke of the desolation of the bombarded villages and the ‘homeless and starving’ who ‘would do anything for a biscuit.’ A postwar report on the Kribi population by Ebolowa plantation manager Green claimed that ‘more than half the population was killed by the Germans for having broken open and stolen from the factories in Kribi when the English evacuated the place after the first occupation.’<sup>43</sup> It is certainly possible that the desperate population had taken goods to survive, but it is also likely that the military blamed locals for their own troops’ thefts.

Indeed, many goods were outright appropriated by the fighting armies. The French, for example, did not destroy Holt company buildings at Kribi, but during their occupation the cash stores were rifled and some planks, bags, iron sheets, and nails went missing. Rittersdorf got word from Busch’s partner Gerstenhauer that it got worse when the British raided on April 12, 1915.<sup>44</sup> He claimed that British troops destroyed the main house and took cloth, valued at 1,600 Marks, which had been prepared for sale to a German company. They also took pomades, helmets pants, dish cloths, lanterns, hoes, and cutlasses. British bombardments also led to damage of enamelware and a stove, and during their occupation a large shipment of ivory, which employees had attempted to hide in the storehouse, disappeared. Remaining cash, Rittersdorf was told, was spent on food for the yard workers.<sup>45</sup>

In March of 1916, Parboy visited Kribi to inspect company properties and to try and track down some of the missing goods. What he found out was that ‘large quantities of the firm’s goods’ had passed through Lolodorf on the way to Yaoundé and Ebolowa in 1915. Some of the goods had been sent by Gerstenhauer and Busch to a German officer in charge of appropriations. Further, Parboy wrote, several African employees had advised him that other goods were sold ‘by German traders in Kribi who were still carrying on their business’ and that the cash proceeds were also sent to the German Governor at Yaoundé. ‘All the goods stored in Kribi were disposed of in this manner before the end of July 1915,’ Parboy wrote.<sup>46</sup> Whether it was the British or the Germans who pilfered the factory, they didn’t just take goods; they also destroyed buildings. By the end of the war, there was little left standing. The agent residence, residence for carriers, office, shop, kitchen, and galley were totally destroyed. The clerk’s residence was damaged, the retail store had been shot up, and the door had been forced open on the wholesale store, which was found to be completely empty.<sup>47</sup>

Other Holt properties, and the workers within them, suffered severely during the war. This included the rubber plantations. For most of the war, the company was unable to access their plantations near Ebolowa; manager Green returned in early 1917 and reported that while the buildings were still standing, ‘absolutely everything in the way of furniture has been taken from

both house and store, not even a chair or table being left.<sup>48</sup> The farmers had not been able to work for the duration of the war, and on the nearby Makalat rubber plantation the farm was overgrown with grass as high as 3 feet. Most of the buildings – houses, worker houses, goat house, and others – had fallen down. The rubber was gone and all of the building supplies that were stocked onsite for a planned new house had also been removed. There were also signs of recent tree tapping, implying theft.<sup>49</sup> As in Kribi and elsewhere, the company's mostly African workers were facing a momentous task to rebuild, and many would remain in their posts to get on with this important work when the war ended.

The hopes of dislodging the Germans by the summer of 1915 were dashed by the heavy rains and the sickness of many soldiers, and the planned assault of the German stronghold at Yaoundé was called off. Deemin wrote, 'with a band of Germans at large in the interiors, it would not be safe even if permission was given to open out, except in positions such as Edea, well garrisoned and fortified.'<sup>50</sup> Deemin's spirits were low and the employees of the company were depressed and exhausted. 'The weather we have had during the past 3 or 4 months has been exceedingly trying. Rains have been horrendous this year,' Deemin told Liverpool. 'It is a case of getting into damp clothes every morning and at night getting into a damp bed.' He wanted to leave for the sake of his health, but like his employees, he said that he would continue to the best of his ability 'and stick it out until the war is over in this quarter.'<sup>51</sup>

In the southeast, the deprivations were rumoured to be severe, but Deemin could only guess at the situation. 'The men who could give evidence of the condition of affairs in the various stations ... are either prisoners of War, or are with the enemy,' Deemin wrote to the Liverpool board.<sup>52</sup> He said something similar in a personal letter to Jonathan Holt: the continuing war 'will delay any possibility of obtaining any further information as to our losses' and he was sure that there was no chance 'of saving anything in that district, and one can safely take it that it is a clean wipe out.'<sup>53</sup> The result of this was that the company would suffer major local losses. 'I am afraid,' he said, that 'the cost in life and money will be pretty extensive before the Germans are driven out.'<sup>54</sup> A further difficulty was transportation. It had always been a challenge to find carriers for transporting product to and from upriver stations, as the work was tedious, physically demanding, and low-paying.<sup>55</sup> Few Cameroonians chose to do it if they had alternatives, and the struggle to find carriers meant that Deemin had been unable to move goods out of vulnerable stations at the start of the war. 'If we could only get carriers,' Deemin moaned in early August of 1914. 'I would not hesitate to clear out of Messo and Njassy, as well as Ebolowa, but this would be impossible under existing conditions.'<sup>56</sup> The company continued to struggle with carrier shortages throughout the war. They were competing with the military who had the power to coerce the local population, but even they had challenges in meeting their portage

requirements and had to bring in many carriers from other parts of the west coast.<sup>57</sup>

Across the colony, John Holt's traders were eye-witnesses to the physical assaults, famine, material deprivations, forced labour, and inhumane treatment experienced by Cameroonians.<sup>58</sup> One missionary observer, Carl Jacob Bender, noted the dilemma of being caught in the middle. 'Forced on the one hand to deliver food, to provide information and to provide carriers,' he wrote, civilians might then be occupied by the opposing military and forced to suffer 'all kinds of humiliating punishments, and not infrequently, the loss of their lives and property.'<sup>59</sup> Like other civilians, Holt employees were compelled to work with invading forces, house troops, provide goods, and provide information on enemy movements, navigable riverways and alternate paths. And while all of the traders faced dangers, pre-war racial hierarchies that had fuelled segregation and other German policies were reflected in wartime brutality; Africans were at particular risk of being racially targeted and threatened with physical violence.<sup>60</sup>

John G. Mullen was a Ghanaian trader living in the village of Mbua and in 1916 he published a gripping account of his experiences when the war broke out. While he does not name his employer, it is possible that he was a clerk for John Holt, as the company had a post in this southeast location. In mid-August, he received a note that his boss had been arrested by the Germans. Most of Mullen's labourers fled, and so he was left almost alone to protect the £2,000 in stock at his factory, fending off local thieves seeking to take advantage of the instability.<sup>61</sup> In September a German arrived with a contingent of 'unscrupulous' *askari* troops, already feared in the district, to commandeer the store. Mullen describes how they tied him up and assaulted him, later forcibly ousting him from the store and the village. He was also racially demeaned and assaulted by a German officer after he arrived in Dume.<sup>62</sup> Mullen's account points to a dilemma faced by clerks whose origins were in British-controlled parts of western Africa. They were sometimes viewed as British subjects by the German soldiers even though they enjoyed few of the protections offered to white British nationals.

The British were eager to document German brutality and collected many eyewitness reports. The bias of the officers seeking out witnesses, as well as local anti-German sentiment among specific populations, may have influenced these accounts. Furthermore, these reports do not include any that pointed at allied violence, although scholars have demonstrated that all sides committed crimes against the civilian population during the war. Yet despite their limitations, the reports share consistencies with internal Holt employee letters, company damage assessments, and German documentation.<sup>63</sup> One report by Ebongo Joe, the company's Dibong factory clerk, reveals that he had to flee the factory for Yabassi in October of 1914 but returned five days later to re-open. Upon arrival he found the factory entirely empty save 10 bags of palm kernels. Eye-witnesses told him that a European 'whom I know but not by name' had come in,

accompanied by a policeman, and removed all the goods. 'On the same occasion,' he added, 'one Douala man, Mahapinja, was shot dead.'<sup>64</sup> Another account from a Ghanaian named James Birrell, in charge of R&W King's factory at Wuri, describes how two Germans had tried to capture him and had started shooting at passing canoes. Birrell, fearing for his life, fled to Douala. One of those Germans, Mr. Moring, had also killed a man in Akwa Town.<sup>65</sup> Statements found in the company archives include one from Eliza Kala, John Holt's clerk at Mbonjo, who testified that he had to flee into the bush to escape fighting. He locked the factory with 50 bags of kernels, some palm oil and all of his trade goods inside. Excepting a portion of the kernels, all was gone when he returned three days later. He then had to organise canoes to take away the remaining 39 bags of kernels to the factory in Douala.<sup>66</sup>

Company records also include the testimonies of Enden and Manga Din who were in charge of the Ndokpenda Branch Factory. The brothers recounted how they found themselves on the front line when two German and nine African soldiers arrived in the village and 'began to shoot people and killed, to our definite knowledge, one Dualaman and two Bassamen.' Fearing for their lives, the men fled for British lines. On the road, they caught a German policeman 'and took him to Jabassi [Yabassi] by force.' They were fired on by German soldiers as they travelled; when Enden Din finally made it back at Ndokpenda he discovered that the factory door was open and there was a dead man lying in the doorway. Terrified, he went back to Yabassi.<sup>67</sup>

Across the colony, the company was facing a traumatised population, scattered traders, destroyed plant, and disrupted networks. The uncertainty and suffering faced by European and African employees reveals the vulnerability of a multinational workforce trapped between different sides in a complex conflict. But there is a second part to this story, which is one of agency and opportunity. Business continued, largely through the efforts of the on-the-ground team who were motivated not only by material need but by the possibility of positioning themselves, and the company more largely, to take advantage of the major changes that might come as a result of the war. Poor communication networks and impassable roads meant that company traders who were able to remain in the colony found themselves with considerable autonomy, at least in the short-term. Although they continued to face resistance to their promotion into positions of authority within the company, African traders who partnered with Holt might still position themselves to take advantage of changing conditions to pursue new economic opportunities.

### **New Opportunities and Arrangements**

The war's overall economic impact on western Africa was mixed. Historians have described a 'great dislocation in the internal and external flows of trade' offset somewhat by war demands that encouraged increased production

in some places.<sup>68</sup> Areas producing in-demand palm products benefited, while cocoa producers in places like Ghana suffered. Other challenges included the workforce disruptions created by forcible recruitment, wartime price controls, requisitioning, and the dearth of agricultural workers to bring in harvests.<sup>69</sup> For Africans, particularly in fighting zones, the war was disastrous. But for John Holt & Co., well-capitalised and regionally powerful, the war years proved somewhat profitable overall.<sup>70</sup>

John Holt's agents reported many difficulties in maintaining networks, and the company was also challenged by being cut off from the German ports that had been key to its Cameroon business. Its properties in Cameroon had suffered damage and the local business was severely impacted. But the businesses in neighbouring Nigeria, Spanish Equatorial Guinea, and French Equatorial Africa continued, and the company could make quick adaptations: they benefited from being headquartered in Britain, with a government eager for help in provisioning allied armies, and shipments previously bound for Germany were diverted to Marseille and Liverpool instead. As Michael Crowder notes, John Holt & Co. became a war-time buying agent in Nigeria, and used its influence with the British government to gain priority access to shipping and bank loans over some African competitors.<sup>71</sup> Further, because the war ended in Cameroon in 1916, employees worked fast to rebuild and could take advantage of the departure of German competitors.

Once Douala was in British hands, Holt directors in Liverpool reminded the British Colonial office of their loyalty and their desire to maximise their trading opportunities. Despite the fact that the port was not yet open in November of 1914, the Colonial Office confirmed that 'there is no objection to your shipping goods to Duala' provided that local agents coordinated timing and offloading with the Commanding Officer, General Dobell.<sup>72</sup> Being able to bring in shipments made it possible for the company to stock items that were in demand for the large numbers of arriving allied soldiers and carriers. Although they still faced dangers at sea, correspondence with the Colonial Office revealed that they had one ship already 'afloat and due in Duala in the course of two or three weeks' and another ready to embark in 10 days. They were assured by the Colonial Office that any blockade would not include the port at Douala (it did include Victoria) and would therefore not impede any of their shipments.<sup>73</sup>

Douala's rising cash trade offset some of the losses in the interior. While Deemin acknowledged that 'it will take a long time before trade assumes normal conditions,' he did report that in August of 1915, the average rate of profit on sales was approximately 56% and the shop at Belle Vue alone brought in £2,000 after deducting 2.5% in handling and other costs, and 'there is every prospect of doing as much this month.'<sup>74</sup> In 1917, although Deemin had worried that the cash trade would drop off due to the departure of soldiers and carriers, Green provided an optimistic assessment about

Ebolowa. There was still a steady stream of Europeans and caravans coming through, he wrote. Should their experienced African clerk be sent a 'reasonable stock of well-chosen cargo,' Ebolowa might, Green reported, see 'a turnover of from 3,000 to 4,000 marks per month.'<sup>75</sup> These positive reports gave Liverpool confidence to invest, both here and elsewhere. A photograph of their shop in Edea, taken in December of 1916, shows a busy place stocked with cloth, hats, and many other trade goods, with sales overseen by several African retail clerks ([Figure 1](#)).

The German retreat into Spanish Guinea in early 1916 was frustrating for their Anglo-French pursuers, but there was still much rejoicing when the Cameroon war was declared to be over. The British and French reached a quick agreement to divide the colony between them. The British took over two areas of land that bordered Nigeria, while the French, reversing a 1911 land-transfer agreement with Germany, transferred a southeastern portion to French Equatorial Africa. They also took over the remaining four-fifths of Cameroon's 200,000 square miles of territory as a *de facto* colony.<sup>76</sup> Leaders of the Duala, Bafut, Bamum, and other groups protested in vain; the divisions were endorsed by the Treaty of Versailles and confirmed as Mandates overseen by the British and French respectively.<sup>77</sup>

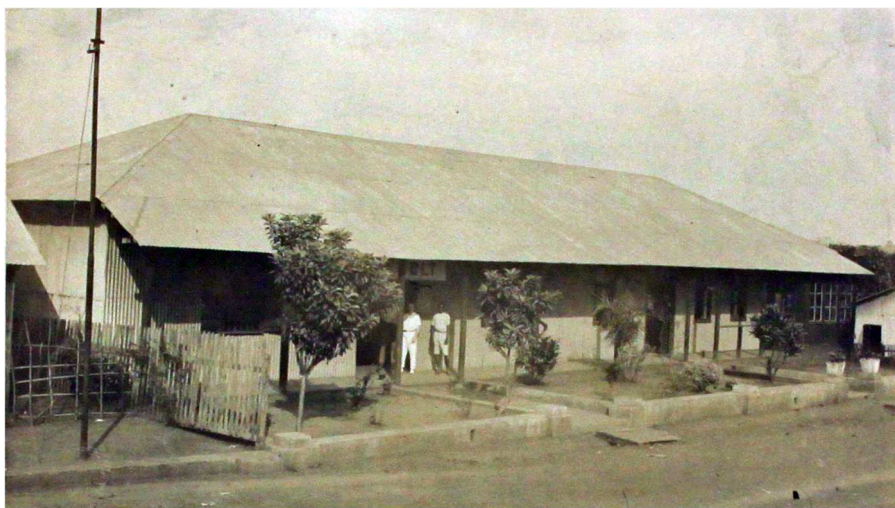
The shift from the fighting phase to the rebuilding phase created money-making conditions, at least while the larger war lasted. With its long-standing connections to both British and French colonial governments in Cameroon's



**Figure 1.** Interior of New Shop in Edea, December 1916 LRO 380 HOL 10/2. Courtesy of Liverpool Central Library and Archives.

neighbouring colonies, the company moved quickly to take advantage of German difficulties. Along with seizing the market share of their former competitors and purchasing German watercraft at low prices, employees moved in to unoccupied German buildings, sometimes with better access to the harbour or with major road and rail links (Figure 2). By 1917, the company occupied Woermann's kerosene store at Akwa, Holtforths House which was a German-owned establishment in Victoria, the Basler Mission Factory in Victoria, and a German factory in Bimundi. In addition, they had moved in to a former Krause & Fehrmann factory at Yaoundé.<sup>78</sup> Until the ban on German business interests was lifted in the 1920s, the company benefited from using German buildings and infrastructure and augmenting its network with traders who had previously worked with German companies and were now motivated to find new partners.<sup>79</sup>

Given the traumas of the war years, the country's recovery was highly variable. Places like Yaoundé and Batanga, where the Germans had built strongholds, experienced significant upheaval for almost a decade. In Yaoundé, respected chiefs had fled with the Germans and, even after their return, were held in suspicion by the French who were unable to immediately establish firm control.<sup>80</sup> In Kribi and Batanga, the population had become so impoverished that they could not pay their taxes. Green advised Liverpool that the French authorities were being punitive, including imprisoning Africans and their leaders, for non-payments. He expressed worry about the draconian measures impacting Cameroonian purchasing power. French demands had thus far 'had no result' as local people 'have neither produce nor cash with which to pay.'<sup>81</sup>



**Figure 2.** German factory occupied by John Holt, March 1917. LRO 380 HOL 10/2. Courtesy of Liverpool Central Library and Archives.

Having the resources to wait for the economy to return to a stable state was not an option for some companies. Even the long-established R.W. King decided to sell to Lever Brothers in 1918.<sup>82</sup> But John Holt & Co. were confident that their large working capital, the depth of their networks, their pre-existing expertise in operating under British and French colonial administrations, and the skill of their diverse workforce would allow them to recover. They were aided by the allies' desire to promote economic stability and develop a steady tax base which led to the preservation, at least in the short-term, of many parts of the existing economic order. In 1917, the allies were still using the German customs tariff on most things (minor changes applied to spirits), kept similar railway timetables, and continued standard trade practices in public markets. They were also improvising with currencies. One observer saw British merchants 'calculate values in marks and pfennigs but use English coins,' and he assured the company that 'in no way has the British merchant sought to substitute his own system for that of the German.'<sup>83</sup> There were some differences: the trade was now largely in cash, rather than part cash and part credit, which suited Holt traders well. And although the French had imposed new licensing costs, these new measures did not particularly alarm Holt traders; some had worked in French Equatorial Africa and could adapt to French rules with relative ease.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to Deemin, there were 9 remaining European managers and a network of African traders left in the territory, and this group proved capable of reopening the largest and most economically important posts in the colony.<sup>85</sup> In March of 1917, the company confirmed that it was able to continue in many of its pre-war locations. In the Douala district, they maintained their town shops as well as factories at Bell Beach, Belle Vue, and Akwa, and they had 27 posts and factories across the Bonaberi, Ekongsamba, Victoria, Mundame, Abo, Wuri, Yabassi, Debamba, Edea, Yaoundé and Ebolowa districts.<sup>86</sup> The major challenge was personnel. Like many expatriate companies, John Holt & Co.'s Board held a bias against hiring Africans into senior management positions, preferring to hire Europeans for assistant and agent roles. But they did have a long-standing practice of partnering with independent African traders, and this served them well as they restarted their trade.

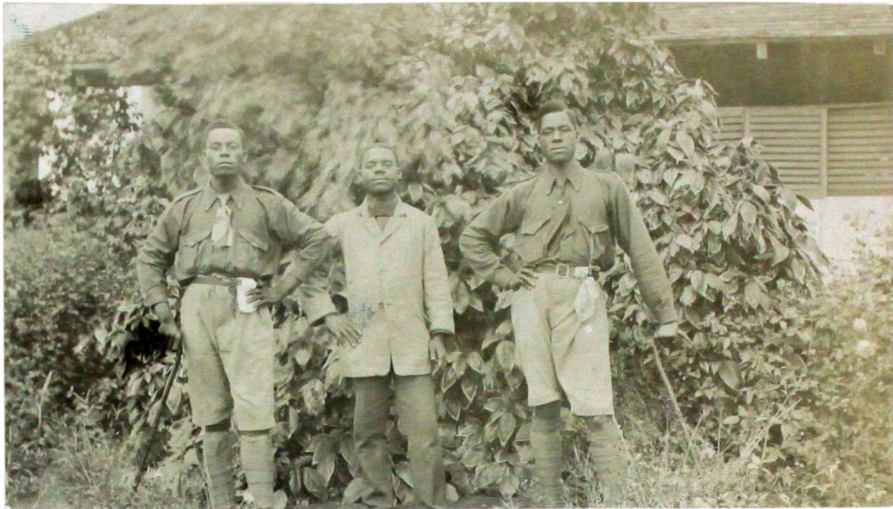
At Eseka, trade had gone quiet as the price of kernels dropped, and 'several Lagos traders have already closed their stores,' Green reported. But the company was able to sustain their presence through their contracts with two local traders: the first was with Mr. Hayes, a Sierra Leonian who they appear to have already been working through in this district. They now arranged to work with a second: he would purchase all his trade goods from Holt for a discount of 10%. Green noted that 'it is now practically the same thing as having five stores in Eseka (Hayes has three) and so we ought to do nearly the whole of the business in this district.' It was more challenging for Holt's directly employed clerk, a man who Green wanted to replace with a European

because he was 'not at all able to deal properly with the other two native traders working with us.'<sup>87</sup> Despite his efforts to remove him, however, this proved impossible: the company was unable to recruit any Europeans given the pressing needs of the larger war.

A preference for Europeans is still evident in Green's assessments of other posts, but he faced the same problem of finding suitable candidates. In Ebolowa he noted that if the plan was to re-open the plantation, 'we should advise sending a European as he would be able to look after both work and the factory.' But he understood that staffing and other wartime constraints might mean that the company would no longer be willing to work the plantation, and given this, 'it is better to keep a good native Clerk there.' While Green didn't believe an African employee could manage both, he did believe that the large store would be in good hands with a knowledgeable African and would easily compete with the other expatriate companies as well as the estimated 300 Haussa and 'the usual Lagos traders' in the area.<sup>88</sup>

At Lolodorf, Green's strategy of working through established African traders also allowed this post to recover in 1917. The partner here was Adolf Ajavon, from Lagos. He maintained Holt's company store and had also started renting a rubber plantation that had previously belonged to a German company. The company made an arrangement with him to sell him all of his required goods with a 15% discount on the Eseka selling prices, and he in turn would sell them all of the rubber he cut at 3 francs per kilogram. 'It is, of course, all plantation rubber, very well made. We are trying to make an arrangement to take all the rubber he gets from the plantation this year,' Green enthused. He added, 'we feel sure that the best way to work this district is by the arrangement made with Ajavon.'<sup>89</sup> The possibilities of earning a good living had come back for some traders, and the 'Africanization' of the workforce, already begun before the war, continued. Nevertheless, Africans still faced biased hiring practices and enjoyed fewer privileges than their European counterparts.

Terms of service for Europeans improved as a result of the war. It was proving exceedingly difficult, Jonathan conceded, to find 'a decent young fellow at £72. £84. £96, per annum respectively' and 'a very large percentage of the good men have now joined the colours.' To find 'a better class of man,' they decided to raise salaries and provide other perks, in part to match those given to European agents and assistants in other places, particularly Nigeria.<sup>90</sup> Europeans would be offered two, rather than three-year contracts, and sent out in first class accommodations. While they would find their own living situations, the company would pay for domestic staff. Outside of major centres, agents would be given an extra £20 per annum to offset higher living costs. Salaries would be £200 per annum for a first term, and then half of that amount during his home leave if he signed a second contract. The next term would start at £250 and go up to £275 for the second year. If a trader



**Figure 3.** *Accra Native Traders in Yaoundé District, May 1917, LRO 380 HOL 10/2. Courtesy of Liverpool Central Library and Archives.*

stayed on for a third term, it would rise to £350 and £375. After that, £400 would be paid out and this was the maximum, since ‘a man who has reached this figure should be sufficiently capable and experienced to take a more responsible berth than that of an assistant.’<sup>91</sup>

Headquarters do not seem to have given equal attention to its large African workforce, but as the example of Hayes and Adolf Ajovan demonstrates, local managers embraced a range of arrangements with entrepreneurial Africans to maximise buying and selling opportunities. For company and partner traders, moreover, the opportunities to make money via commissions were similar for Africans and their European counterparts, and John Holt & Co continued to attract African traders from across the region after the war in Cameroon ended in 1916 (Figure 3).

### **Postwar Continuities and Consolidation**

The recovery that began in 1917 was set back by the region’s post-war slump, but John Holt & Co. had once again returned to profitability by 1923. In that year, capital employed, which included undistributed profits, reached £949,000 compared to £663,000 in 1916. By 1925 they were able to increase their steamers from two to four for the regional carrying trade.<sup>92</sup> While it is not clear how many people the company employed in Cameroon specifically, one 1928 pamphlet claimed that across western Africa they had 150 of ‘only the best type of educated young British-born’ men working as agents and assistants. They also counted over 3,000 African employees.<sup>93</sup>

After 1918, the company faced greater regional competition due to consolidation among the major expatriate companies. Lever Brothers, on a post-war

buying spree, acquired Kings and MacIver's holdings in Cameroon and then took over the Niger Company in 1920. The African Association, Swanzy, and Miller Brothers merged to form the African and Eastern Trade Corporation and they then merged with the Niger Company in 1929 to form the enormous United Africa Company.<sup>94</sup> By the end of the 1920s, there were seven large expatriate companies dominating the Cameroon commodities markets. This group, including John Holt & Co., participated in price agreements and other measures that made it difficult for smaller players, including African competitors, to survive.<sup>95</sup> The French government, for its part, prioritised capital investment in concession companies; these entities enjoyed preferential market access in the French zone.<sup>96</sup> These post-war arrangements were in some ways a continuation of strategies for market domination which had existed before the war, but with larger British and French companies replacing some of the pre-war German interests.

Not all German companies were permanently gone from the region. As several historians have shown, there was a return of German planters and traders in both zones. Instead of giving preferential access to previously displaced Cameroonians, the British took the view that well-capitalised companies were best placed to produce cocoa. They therefore prioritised British planters, but when they found few buyers, they held a 1924 auction which saw some former German owners, with generous assistance from the German government, re-purchasing the lands.<sup>97</sup> In the French zone, despite the liquidation of many German interests after the war, from 1926 some Germans began to return here as well (although in smaller numbers). As Léonard Sah shows, by 1936 there were missionaries, planters, and shipping agents working in both zones including German employees in the United Africa Company and the Woermann shipping line. Sah's lists do not show any Germans working for John Holt & Co.<sup>98</sup>

It is likely that many of Holt's pre-war German workforce did not return to the company. The case of Rittersdorf is instructive. Still trapped in Madrid in 1919, he was tasked by the company's Directors with recovering some of their outstanding debts from the German government. These attempts appear to have been unsuccessful, as was his quest to obtain back pay from his employer of £92. He was worried that the company had tied his money to their claim against the German government instead of paying him directly. 'Considering the loyalty with which I have always served you, I should think that you will do your utmost to spare me,' he stated.<sup>99</sup> He clearly did not get a favourable response from Liverpool; in a subsequent letter he wrote that 'I have made a mistake serving your interests.'<sup>100</sup> He was not only desperate for funds, he also felt humiliated: he said that he was 'the laughing stock of the Government officials who at the time would not understand, how a German during the war, could treat the interests of an English firm the same as his own.'<sup>101</sup> How he ultimately fared is not clear, although the loss of the

paper trail in the archives would imply that he did not receive the needed aid. Rittersdorf clearly felt that the company had not shown him enough kindness in the tumultuous post-war period. And since the colony was no longer under German control, Directors had less incentive to hire German-speaking employees. It is therefore likely that German employment at John Holt & Co. declined permanently as a result of the war.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the outbreak of war in Cameroon created significant difficulties for John Holt & Co., setting the company back at a time when it was already sorely challenged by the decline in rubber prices. Company traders were obliged to respond to the violence, deprivations, and uncertainties caused by the conflict, and they found ways to persevere despite trying circumstances. British employees were interned first, but it was the German traders who endured the longest imprisonments as well as displacement, financial hardship, and exile. African traders were also caught in the war's crosshairs, trapped in interior stations behind enemy lines or in the direct path of the fighting where they sought to protect their lives, jobs, and markets. African traders helped the company to survive by keeping the regional trade going, and in the aftermath of the conflict, were instrumental in allowing the company to rebuild.

While the war brought great hardship, the end of the fighting in Cameroon brought some relief as well as new opportunities for some African traders. Given that the war in Europe was ongoing until 1918, it proved almost impossible for the company to bring in more Europeans, which highlighted their dependence on Africans who took on roles of greater responsibility and found ways to partner with the company to maximise profit opportunities. Partnerships with local traders and producers showcased the company's ongoing willingness to work with entrepreneurial Africans. Nevertheless, racial biases and long-standing practices meant the company would, where possible, prioritise Europeans for managerial positions, limiting African opportunity to move into more senior roles.

The post-war situation saw the consolidation of many expatriate companies and the return of German competitors to the region. And yet German employees of the company, who had been imprisoned and forced into exile, do not appear to have returned in large numbers. The company prioritised attracting British managerial staff, finding it necessary to improve their pay and working conditions. This attention to better terms does not seem to have been extended to the African workforce. But the ongoing employment of many African traders in the 1920s demonstrates that for some African employees, particularly traders on commission, there were still opportunities to make a living by working with John Holt & Co.

Studying the experiences of the employees and partners of John Holt & Co. reveals the difficulties and challenges of operating a business in a war zone. Employee actions ‘on the ground’ also provide insights into the durability of the company’s operations. The company’s diverse business model, its talented workforce, and its broad regional footprint, enabled it to survive the war years, even making some profits, and then weather the shift to Anglo-French control. Holt & Co.’s survival demonstrates how, despite the upheavals of a global conflict, expatriate companies found ways to continue to assert their dominance in the commodity markets of Cameroon and western Africa more broadly.

## Notes

1. Statement of P.S. Parboy, Duala, 22 March 1916, Library and Archives, Liverpool Record Office (hereafter LRO), 380 HOL I/13/2.
2. For more on Holt’s early years, see Cherry Gertzel, “John Holt”.
3. Ibid.
4. Moberly, *Military Operations*; Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*; Njung, “Soldiers of their Own”; Schulte-Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun*. On carriers, see Killingray and Matthews, “Beasts of Burden”. On interned soldiers, see Pérez de Arcos and Murphy, “Transimperial Internment”; de Vries, “Cameroonian *Schutztruppe* Soldiers”. On the economy, see Achenui, “Distortions”. On women see Bambona, “Femmes européennes, femmes africaines”.
5. Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*; Ibid., “A Colony of Opportunity”; Lawrance et al., *Intermediaries*; Austen, “Colonialism from the Middle”; Derrick, “The ‘Native Clerk’”; van den Bersselaar, “‘Doorway to Success?’”.
6. Gertzel, “John Holt”.
7. On his life as a trader, see Deemin, “Autobiography”.
8. A note on spelling: I use ‘Douala’ to indicate the city, and ‘Duala’ to indicate the Duala people. In direct quotations and in place names indicated in primary sources, I have kept the spelling as in the original text.
9. African women were hired as traders, but company management discouraged European women from going to Africa due to beliefs about climate dangers. See Neill, “Merchants”, 211–212.
10. John Holt & Co. (Liverpool) Ltd. (hereafter JH & Co.), to Carl Kurrle, Liverpool, 10 January 1910, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries (hereafter Bod.Lib.), MSS. Afr. S. 1525 15/8, folio 3.
11. Jonathan Holt (hereafter JH) to J. Hinchliffe, Liverpool, 24 June 1909, LRO 380 HOL I/4/11, folio 399–400.
12. H. Bennett to JH & Co., 24 June 1913, Bod.Lib. GB 0162 MSS. Afr. S. 1657 (6), folio 47.
13. Oestermann, “A Colony of Opportunity”, 193–4. Holt’s agent at Elobey also used this term to describe the traders working up the coast in Spanish Equatorial Guinea. See Coast Letter Extracts, Elobey Letter, 24 July 1907, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1.
14. Oestermann, “A Colony of Opportunity”, 194–7. Also see Oestermann and Geschiere, “Coercion or Trade?”.
15. JH to Newport Wright, Liverpool, 10 February 1910, 380 HOL I/4/11, folio 471.
16. JH to Carl Kurrle, Liverpool, 24 May 1913, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 15/9, folio 68; JH & Co. to Herr. Staatssekretar des Reichs-Kolonialamtes Dr. Solf, Liverpool, 20 August 1913, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 15/9, folio 80.

17. Strachan, *The First World War In Africa*, 21.
18. Strachan, *The First World War In Africa*, 25–29, 35–36.
19. Schulte-Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun*, 95; Stoecker, “‘Loyalty to Germany’”, 333. Also see Bah, “L’Afrique dans la Première Guerre Mondiale”, 282. For more on East Africa, see Michael Pesek, *Das Ende eines Kolonialreiches*. Schulte-Varendorff notes the ‘scorched earth’ policies of the Germans as they retreated, which is also consistent with what Emmanuel Kreike describes in *Scorched Earth* about the war in Namibia.
20. For more on the conflict between the Germans and the Duala leadership, see Fitzpatrick, *The Kaiser and the Colonies*, chapter 13; Njung, “Soldiers of their Own”. For a discussion of Cameroonian spies and guides who worked with the allies, see Neill, “Knowledge Keepers”.
21. On the Beti, see Quinn, “An African Reaction”. On recruitment numbers, see Njung, *Soldiers of their Own*, 161–162. Estimates for Africans fighting with the Germans vary, from perhaps 6,000–7,000 in 1914 to as many as 20,000 by the war’s end. As the war went on, the Germans would have had to recruit more locally. Njung puts West Africans fighting with the allies at approximately 20,000, a number that includes Cameroonians recruited locally.
22. Strachan, *The First World War in Africa*, 54.
23. James Deemin (hereafter JD) to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 77–78. The banning of alcohol sales and subsequent destruction was done on the orders of Governor Ebermaier, who feared that alcohol would fuel resistance from an already restive Duala population. See Schulte-Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun*, 72.
24. JH & Co. to Sir Edward Grey, Liverpool, 6 August 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 118.
25. JD to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 78; JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 18 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 49.
26. A.J. Green to JD, Duala, 25 January 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/2.
27. Quinn, “An African Reaction”, 725.
28. JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 18 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 49.
29. Meyer-Griffith, “Some Side Lights”, 414.
30. JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 21 December 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 45–46.
31. Major B. Buckley to JH, London, 10 December 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 61.
32. JH & Co. to the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 7 January 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 32.
33. Mr. Culitt, on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State to JH & Co., London, 16 December 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 54.
34. JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 5 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 85.
35. JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 18 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 50.
36. JD to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 79.
37. JD to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 80.
38. JD to JH, Duala, 3 June 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 73.

39. JH & Co. to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 18 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS.Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 50.
40. Extract from a letter from Mr. Will to Mr. Gätjens, Elobey, 23 September 1914, Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereafter BArch) R1001 3922, folio 118.
41. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Zaragoza, 8 December 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1, 1.
42. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Zaragoza 8 December 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1, 2.
43. A. Green to JH & Co., Edea, 31 March 1917, LCA 380 HOL I/9/1, 7–8.
44. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Zaragoza 8 December 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1, 4.
45. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Zaragoza 8 December 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1, 3–4.
46. Statement of P.S. Parboy, 22 March 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/2.
47. Statement of P.S. Parboy, 22 March 1916, LRO 380 HOL I/13/2.
48. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 4.
49. A. Green to JH & Co., Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 4–5.
50. JD to JH, Duala, 3 June 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 72.
51. JD to JH, Duala, 7 September 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 85.
52. JD to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1915 Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 82–83.
53. JD to JH, Duala, 3 June 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 72.
54. JD to JH, Duala, 3 June 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 71.
55. On the people's rejection of carrier work for rubber trading before the war, and the administration's use of force to address the problem, see Oestermann, "Saving the Supply".
56. JH & Co. to The British War Office, Liverpool, 9 September 1914, quoting a letter from JD to JH & Co., Duala, 3 August 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 113.
57. For a longer history on carriers and other workers in British military campaigns in Africa, see Killingray, "Labour Exploitation".
58. Detailed descriptions of violence against the Cameroon population can be found in Njung, "Soldiers of their Own" and Schulte-Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun*, 71–108.
59. Quoted in Schulte-Varendorff, *Krieg in Kamerun*, 97.
60. For a discussion of the segregation of Duala, and the German justifications on racial, medical, and economic grounds, see Fitzpatrick, *The Kaiser and the Colonies*, 350–4.
61. Mullen and Newell, "An Extract", 402–3.
62. *Ibid.*, 404, 407.
63. To present a fuller picture of wartime brutality, Schulte-Varendorff compares British with German accounts. See *Krieg in Kamerun*, 91. Njung also addresses the question of bias in "Soldiers of their Own", 292–4.
64. "Statement of Ebongo Joe", Report VI, Duala, 12 October 1914, in Anon, *European War*, 7.
65. H. Gwynne Howell, Report No. VIII, Duala, 16 October 1914, British National Archives (hereafter BNA), ADM 137/162, folio 190.
66. Statement of Eliza Kala, Duala, November 1914, LRO 380 HOL I/13/2.
67. Statement of Enden Din and Manga Din, Duala, 9 November 1914, LRO 380 HOL I/13/2.
68. Pallaver, "Organization of War Economies (Africa)".
69. Crowder, "The First World War and its Consequences", 302.
70. Wale, Judith, "The Changing Activities", 124–5.
71. Crowder, "The First World War and its Consequences", 302.
72. H.J. Read, Colonial Office, to JH & Co., London, 23 November 1914, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 84.

73. JH & Co. to Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Liverpool, 28 April 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 15; H.J. Read, Colonial Office, to JH & Co., London, 30 April 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 10/8, folio 14.
74. JD to JH, Duala, 7 September 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 87, 89.
75. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 5. According to a 1911 handbook, a British pound was worth 20,40 Marks. See W. Mertens & Co., *Handbuch für Kaufleute*, 369.
76. The French pre-war land transfer to the Germans had been done as part of the resolution to the Moroccan Crisis. For more on land divisions, see Njung, “British Cameroons Mandate Regime”, 1716–7.
77. Ibid.
78. “The German Buildings We Occupy at Present”, n.d. [likely 1917], LRO 380 HOL I/9/1.
79. The official bans were lifted in the mid-1920s. For more on the postwar activities of Woermann, see Todzi, “Colonial Business”.
80. Quinn, “An African Reaction”, 727–31.
81. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 5.
82. Pedlar, *the Lion and the Unicorn*, 154.
83. C.H. Marcus to JH & Co., 7 July 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1. Walter Nkwi discusses the challenges of replacing the currency, quoting from a 1916 report in Bamenda Division confirming the postponement of the introduction of the Nigerian British Pound. In December 1917, local administrator G.S. Podevin was still recommending retaining the Mark until the larger war was over. See “Colonial Hegemonies at Loggerheads,” 77–79.
84. C.H. Marcus to JH & Co., 21 July 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1.
85. The remaining Europeans were Messrs. Hocken, Beukama, Koch, Wakefield, Hemphill, Shuttleworth, Gabites, Christlieb, and Luff. See JH to JD, Liverpool, 16 November 1915, Bod.Lib. MSS. Afr. S. 1525 13/1, folio 97.
86. “Establishments in Cameroons”, n.d. (likely 1917), LRO 380 HOL I/9/1.
87. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 1–2.
88. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 5–6.
89. A. Green to JH & Co. Edea, 31 March 1917, LRO 380 HOL I/9/1, 3–4.
90. JH to JD, Liverpool, 16 November 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S 1525 13/1, folio 93.
91. JH to JD, Liverpool, 16 November 1915, Bod. Lib. MSS. Afr. S 1525 13/1, folio 93-94.
92. Wale, Judith, “The Changing Activities”, 124–5.
93. Details taken from a 1928 company pamphlet as quoted by Russell, *Remarkable Life*, 121–2. The company continued to grow. In 1948, according to an internal report, they employed 150–60 Europeans and 4,000–5,000 Africans across 200 branches in western Africa. See “Company History”, 19 August 1983, provided to me by John Russell.
94. Tadei, Aslanidis, and Martinez, “Trade Costs”, 480; Pedlar, 155.
95. Ibid; Pedlar, *Lion and the Unicorn*, 155–6. Pedlar lists the seven companies as: The African Association, Paterson Zochonis (Manchester), John Holt & Co., the Compagnie française de l’Afrique occidentale, the Société commerciale de l’Ouest africain, and the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft.
96. Walker-Said, “Expanding Wealth”, 98.
97. Todzi, “Colonial Business”; Goodridge, ““In the Most Effective Manner””, 273. For more on the post-war German return, see Authaler, *Deutsche Plantagen*; Ibid., “Negotiating Social Progress”; Kundrus, “Nach Versailles”, 103-4. Kundrus calls the German strategy an indirect form of colonialism and a way to create a global network of Germans.

98. Sah, “Présence et Activités Allemandes au Cameroun”. Sah includes lists of Germans in the colony in 1936 in Annex I and II, 315–3.
99. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Madrid, [n.d, likely July 1919] LRO 380 HOL I/13/1.
100. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Madrid, 18 August 1919, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1.
101. A. Rittersdorf to JH & Co., Madrid, 4 September 1919, LRO 380 HOL I/13/1.

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