

**FORGOTTEN VETERANS OF THE FORGOTTEN ARMY: THE STATUS OF
NORTHERN NIGERIAN EX-SERVICEMEN AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

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ABSTRACT

In the African Military historiography, the place of ex-servicemen has largely been neglected for quite some time. This might not be far from the fact that after the Second World War, the British colonial government and the military authorities did not accord these veterans their proper place in post-war society. This paper uses both primary and secondary materials to explore the vestiges of the colonial ingratitude to the people that sacrificed their youthful valor and defended the British colonial empire from imminent collapse in the hands of Imperial Japan and Italian Fascists in Southeast Asia and East Africa respectively. The paper maintains that Northern Nigerian troops in particular and the Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF) in general had played a vital role in the survival of the British Empire in East Africa and the Far East, but when the war ended they were not rewarded as appropriate. This led to the general neglect and suffering of these veterans in the colonial and post-colonial periods because the majority of them were not appropriately demobilized and reintegrated into their societies by both the colonial government and the post-colonial Nigerian regimes.

KEYWORDS: Ex-servicemen, Nigerian Legion, Northern Nigeria, Veterans,

INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, the British colonial government and the British colonial military authorities refused to handle the affairs of the African-mobilized troops with the necessary ethos throughout the disarmament and demobilization of the troops. This, surely, made it clear to the troops that any promise of proper reintegration must be viewed in a careful and apprehensive manner. The troops of the 81st and 82nd battalions of the famous Burma 14th Army were popularly considered the forgotten regiments of the Second World War contingents from across the African continent whose contributions to the war efforts were almost completely concealed by the colonial authorities and the military authorities that managed the war fronts in the Far East.¹ More than 90,000 African troops were engaged in the 14th Army, and more than half of that number came from Nigeria. Even in Nigeria, more than 75% of the mobilized troops came from the Northern Provinces of Nigeria. After the war, many promises were made to the troops since they were in India before their evacuation and subsequent movements to West Africa. They were promised jobs and all other benefits of participating in the war by their commanders at the war theatres. It however appeared that the troops were only enticed to remain calm until their shipments back home, where they discovered that they were deceived and abandoned to their fate. None of the promises were accorded sufficient consideration by the appropriate authorities, both within the colonial circle and by the subsequent independent Nigerian governments.

Post-Second World War British Policies on Nigerian War Ex-servicemen

Spurious allegations suggest that up to the time when the First World War started, there were no clear provisions for any scheme for resettlement exercise of the African soldiers after

¹ John, H. Morrow Jr. "Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers Stories", in *The Annals of the American Academic of Political and Social Sciences*. Vol. 632. (Sage Publication. November 2010). Pp. 12 – 25.

the War were widely circulated throughout the colonial world.² In fact, according to some scholars; up to 1918, when the end of the First World War approached, there were no clear blueprints adopted by the colonial government on the fate of the mobilized Nigerians, who fought on the side of the British and her Allies.³ It is very difficult if not impossible to accept this assertion in its entirety. This is because The British Government's plan for demobilization and resettlement appeared in the January and February 1919, issues of the *Monthly Labor Review*. The plan provided for the demobilization of armed forces by trade following the needs of industry and only as rapidly as the industry was prepared to absorb them. Less direct control could be exercised by the Government in the demobilization of civilian war workers. The plan contemplated, however, active assistance by the Government in the reorganization of the industry. The extent of the problem of demobilization and resettlement in the United Kingdom may be indicated in a measure by changes in employment during the war.⁴ However, in Africa, this may not necessarily be correct because at the time there was no moral dimension in the colonized-colonizer relationships. After all, since the Berlin conference, the guiding principles that governed the ensuing relationships between the colonial powers and their subjects had been the right of conquests which was then the legal framework for colonial rule.⁵

Although in Africa the situation remained like that for quite some time, the issue was not the same in Europe and other areas that were affected by the war. In Britain and other European countries, the idea of how to deal with veterans' affairs was designed to involve governments and the general public to shoulder the burden of taking care of the ex-servicemen since it was

² J. Hussaini, "Demobilization Policies and the Challenges Facing the Nigerian Army, 1970 – 1983" (Ph.D. History, UDUS, 2016) P. 78

³ C. N. Uba, *Colonial Army, and Society in Northern Nigeria*. Kaduna: Baraka Press, 2011. P. 43

⁴ Benjamin, M. Squires. *Demobilization and Resettlement in the United Kingdom; Monthly Labor Review, Vol. 8. No. 5. May 1919.*

⁵ Babou, Cheikh Anta. "Decolonization or National Liberation: Debating the end of British Colonial Rule in Africa." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences: Vol. 632. 2010.* Pp. 41 – 54. P. 43

concluded that the governments could not cater to the needs of the war veterans.⁶ Therefore, from the onset, it was made clear that Europeans did not take the risk of abandoning the veterans after their demobilization from the army for obvious reasons. As such they adopted different measures to curtail the consequences of creating a community of disgruntled class of ex-servicemen amidst several other post-war challenges. In other words, European countries recognized the imperatives of post-war challenges of returning the soldier to the land.⁷ In England, and elsewhere, a new kind of agriculture known as the “farm colony” was developed purposely to cater to the millions of returning soldiers from the battlefield. This is because; it is believed that a large number of the ex-soldiers would be accommodated in such a program. Official commissions in England developed plans by which the state sold to the returning ex-soldiers ready-made farms of from three to thirty acres, which a single man cultivated. The farms were grouped about the size of a village community, with educational, recreational, and cooperative agencies for marketing and buying. Then an educational expert would be shouldered with the responsibility of directing the activities of the colony. The veterans were sold small farms, with a house, barn, and sufficient capital on easy terms, the state advancing nine-tenths of the capital, to be re-paid on long-term installments. The idea behind the program was that the ex-soldiers should remain on the farm under these conditions, and it was believed that production would increase, and a new interest in agriculture would be awakened. The successes of the program in Europe led to its advocacy in the Americas and elsewhere. Such a program proved very helpful as this involves no permanent burden to the nation because it pays for itself.⁸

⁶ Deborah, Cohen. *The War Came Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914 – 1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. P. 10

⁷ Frederic C. Howe, “A Constructive Program for the Rehabilitation of the Returning Soldiers” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 80, Rehabilitation of the Wounded (Nov. 1918)*, pp. 150 – 152. P. 152

⁸ Frederic C. Howe, “A Constructive Program for the Rehabilitation of the Returning Soldiers”..... Op cit.

It also appeared that Britain was not unmindful of the plight of European veterans after the First World War. It, however, maintained the idea that the War's burden could not be met by the State alone. Therefore, the notion of 'Voluntarism' was used by Britain to escape the inherent burden of taking responsibility for her unpopular policies toward the veterans. This assisted the British government in shifting the burden from the shoulders of the State to the society through the application of the idea of public benevolence as a fundamental channel for developing ex-servicemen's organizations in Britain.⁹ As early as 1943, the British colonial government set up the Hoskyns – Abrahall Committee to look into the situation and proffer a cogent guideline on how best to demobilize the soldiers who participated in the Second World War.¹⁰ The Committee came up with the following broad provisions that could allow the government to conduct demobilization and resettlement of ex-soldiers exercises successfully:

- i. A considerable proportion of the demobilized soldiers would be seeking paid employment, preferably with the government. Therefore, undue haste in the exercise must be avoided, and 'no expense should be spared if the final result is a satisfactory citizen in employment is produced, as against a discontented and unemployable ex-soldier.
- ii. The Labor Department should endeavor to register all ex-soldiers and set up 'Holding Camps' where they and their families would remain for some time under some form of military discipline and supervision to prepare and train them for civil employment.
- iii. The program for post-war economic reconstruction and development should be designed in a manner that would create and provide employment for ex-soldiers.¹¹

⁹ Deborah, Cohen. *The War Came Home: Disabled Veterans op cit.*

¹⁰ Geoffrey, I. Nwaka. "Rebellion in Umuahia, 1950 – 1951: Ex-servicemen and Anti-colonial Protest in Eastern Nigeria." *Transafrican Journal of History*. Vol. 16(1987). Pp. 47 – 62. P. 53

¹¹ Geoffrey, I. Nwaka. "Rebellion in Umuahia, 1950 – 1951: Ex-servicemen p. 53

The demobilization of African troops started in 1945, precisely in October. Ernest Bevin was appointed the British minister of Labor and National Service and he became the general overseer of the whole demobilization exercise. When the exercise commenced it was expected that by October 1946 it was going to be completed. Therefore, the troops of the Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF) started to be demobilized in October 1945. The returning Nigerian troops disembarked in Lagos which was their designated demobilization center. The ex-soldier's pay was calculated and documentation of everyone was also completed there and discharge books were issued to everybody. In return, all the ex-servicemen were ordered to return all equipment and the surplus clothes in their possession. From there they were directed to move to their dispersal centers at the staging camps in their respective provinces. The following staging camps were stipulated in the Northern Nigerian provinces by the colonial demobilization agency for convenient execution of the demobilization exercises. They include Bauchi, Gboko, Gusau, Kano, Katsina, Kontagora, Lokoja, Otukpo, Yola, and Zaria. From these centers, each ex-soldier was discharged and sent to his place of origin or place of enlistment.¹²

In 1945, the government established the Resettlement Branch of the Labor Department, backed by the Employment of Ex-servicemen's Ordinance No. 48 of 1945, to register demobilized soldiers and obtain for them such employment as was available. The Ordinance obliged employers to reinstate all ex-soldiers in their pre-enlistment jobs. There were also legal obligations on employers to hire ex-servicemen up to a specified quota to fill any vacancies that would occur in their establishments. The quota restrictions implied that preference would be given to ex-soldiers by employers until not less than 10 to 15 percent of those employed were ex-servicemen. In addition, 100 percent of all vacancies for messengers, gatemen, and cleaners and

¹² Miller, E. A. *Colonial Annual Report on the Department of Labor and the Resettlement of Ex-soldiers, 1945*, Lagos: Government Printers, 1946. 18

50 percent of vacancies for motor drivers were to be reserved for ex-soldiers. Accelerated salary increases were approved for them to cover the period of their services, and slightly lower educational standards were sometimes required of them for employment. Disability pensions and gratuities were paid to those who were incapacitated as a direct result of their service in the army.¹³ Circular Notices and Instructions were constantly issued for the retraining of ex-servicemen at the Trade Training Schools and in some agricultural and educational institutions. A 'Supernumerary Vote' was set up to enable government departments to engage ex-servicemen in excess staff in permanent employment. Disused army toolkits were to be issued at a nominal cost to interested tradesmen to enable them to establish on their own. Also, ex-soldiers were exempted from liability to pay tax for the two financial years immediately following their discharge from the army.¹⁴

Nigerian Ex-servicemen Welfare Association (NEWA)

The demobilization exercise in the Nigerian Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF) started in October 1945; therefore, after these exercises, the colonial government facilitated the formation of an association under the patronage of His Excellency the Governor-General of colonial Nigeria. The central aim of establishing the association was to be able to poster the spirit of comradeship and self-help among the ex-servicemen.¹⁵

The first attempt by the British Colonial government to address the eventualities of the Second World War was the intervention into the affairs of the demobilized veterans of the War. First of all the colonial government developed a Rehabilitation center (unit) at the 37th Military General Hospital in Accra, Ghana. This was to ensure that those soldiers who needed serious medical

¹³ Geoffrey, I. Nwaka. "Rebellion in Umuahia, 1950 – 1951: Ex-servicemen P. 55

¹⁴ Miller, E. A. *Colonial Annual Report on the Department of Labor and the Resettlement . . . op cit. p. 18*

¹⁵ Abubakar, M., "The Nigerian Ex-servicemen Welfare Association and the Resettlement and Rehabilitation of the World War II Veterans: A Study of an NGO Under Colonial Rule, 1946 – 1960", (Ph.D. History, UNIMAID, Dec. 2015) p. 44

attention as a result of the war were catered for.¹⁶ The idea of establishing this unit emanated from initial Britain's rehabilitation scheme intended to serve both African and European soldiers serving in the colonial military. The unit was short-lived because it was closed in 1947 and the colonial government allowed the Voluntary agencies to take over the responsibilities of the disabled soldiers.¹⁷

One significant impact of the First and Second World Wars on the colonial world was the consequent emergence of institutionalized veterans' organizations throughout the colonial world, which were hitherto completely absent, especially in Africa. The idea of the formation of the Nigerian Ex-servicemen Welfare Association (NEWA) emanated from the assumption that the government alone could not carry out the gigantic task of catering to the social welfare and future economic situations of the demobilized soldiers of the Second World War. When it was formed, NEWA was affiliated with the British Empire Service League (B.E.S.L) and came under the patronage of His Excellency the Governor-General of colonial Nigeria. Its inaugural Chairperson was Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma.¹⁸

The mobilization and the difficulties of demobilizing soldiers recruited to serve the British colonial government in the Second World War placed considerable strain on imperial systems that were not completely resolved through post-war reforms. Therefore, the events that led to the subsequent establishment of NEWA were the complaints from the discharged soldiers from the military service about resettlement and compensation policies.¹⁹ The establishment of NEWA did not address the socio-economic challenges of the ex-servicemen because, in 1944, an ex-servicemen's division was established in the Nigerian Department of Labour to register veterans

¹⁶ Jeff, D. Grischow, *The Journal of African History*. Vol. 52. No. 2. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011). P. 180

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Abubakar, Muhammad, "The Nigerian Ex-servicemen Welfare Association.... Op cit. P. 45

¹⁹ Toyin Falola, *Colonialism, and Violence in Nigeria*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. P. 159

and servicemen. Out of more than 100, 000 returning veterans, the division registered about 3,000, but the government could find jobs only for 150. It, therefore, became seriously contested, and the general outcomes of the whole scenario of involving colonial subjects in the center of European conflicts gave birth to the pressure for reforms of the entire colonial machinery to avoid the inevitable socio-economic and political crisis inherently present in the aftermath of such conflicts. The returning soldiers constituted such a body of disgruntled elements without any effective channel to challenge the colonial government against the seeming injustice towards them. In southern parts of Nigeria, maybe due to the level of Western education in the region, there were movements for the establishment of the Nigerian Legion; as a rival body to the government-sponsored NEWA. Nigerian Legion was informally established in 1946 in Lagos, but it remained an ineffective regional veterans organization with representatives mostly from Lagos. The bulk of the ex-servicemen from Northern Nigeria were not immediately incorporated into the organization because the Nigerian colonial government refused to cooperate with their activities due to its seeming association with the NCNC and the ZIKIST movement. In addition to this, the majority of the Northern Nigerian ex-servicemen were not literates and could not be easily contacted. In most of the Northern provinces, it was the ex-servicemen of southern origin who attempted to form the core members of the veterans' organization.²⁰

Conclusion

²⁰ In Sokoto province, for instance, the entire members of NEWA were ex-servicemen who came and settled in Sokoto town from various parts of Western and Eastern provinces of Nigeria. The attempts by the officials of the Lagos-based Nigerian Legion to attract large followings from the Northern Provinces of Nigeria met with stringent colonial government resistance. Due to this kind of exegesis throughout the colonial period, the Nigerian colonial government refused to allow the Nigerian Legion to effectively institute its activities because of political susceptibility and the general resentment towards the colonial enterprise. Therefore they have to wait till after the Nigerian independence before they were given a charter by the Nigerian government in 1964.

This chapter discusses the essentials of colonial relationships especially during and after the beginning of the Second World War, where it appears that there is a telepathic relationship between the Nigerian people and the British colonial government which started in the wake of the 20th century and became fully matured when the Second World War started. The British colonial government dragged the Nigerian people into the center of their imperial conflicts and engaged them in various capacities. After the successful completion of the war; the troops from Africa were not accorded recognition. They were then subjected to undue hustles of ineffectual demobilization processes and out-of-context reintegration procedures despite their immense contributions to the survival of the British colonial empire. The British used that opportunity to consolidate her grip on Nigeria more than ever before even though after the war, colonialism was shaken to its roots by the events of the war and what followed thereafter. There is no doubt colonialism had a great impact on the people of Nigeria because it influenced the course of events in the timeline of Nigerian history long after the attainment of independence. It was clear that the British colonial government discovered that the Nigerian people were committed to succumbing to their propaganda and participated in the European crisis with a zeal to depend on the British Empire against its enemies. During the First World War Nigerians were used to address the internal challenges and the external threat from Germany. In the Second World War also Nigerians in the Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF), together with other African contingents fought for the survival of the British Empire in the most difficult terrain and jungle warfare in that remote part of the world against the Japanese. However, despite all these sacrifices, their contributions did not receive appropriate recognition from the Crown. After the wars were won the Nigerian people were demobilized and sent back to Nigeria and left alone at the mercy of NEWA for their welfare and rehabilitation. NEWA on its part did all it could with

the meager resources that were at its disposal to address the basic challenges of welfare and rehabilitation of the veterans with relative success. The inadequacies of NEWA made it inevitable for the foundation of another veterans' body; the Nigerian Legion, in 1964 as a successor organization of the ex-servicemen in independent Nigeria with legal status from the Nigerian government.