



Conscientious objectors: British Seventh-day Adventist youth who refused to take up arms in the First World War in this photo taken in 1917. Standing the tallest in the middle is 22-year-old Walter W Armstrong who, in 1920, became a missionary in Kenya. He was posted to Kanyadoto where he remained until 1928 making major contributions to the work in South Nyanza.

Photo courtesy of Stanborough Press Archive.

Adventism and the First World War in British East Africa (Kenya)

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The outbreak of World War I in 1914 in Europe negatively impacted Adventist missionary activities in British East Africa and specifically South Kavirondo, the birthplace of the Adventist Church in Kenya. Almost as soon as hostilities broke out in Europe, they also began in British East Africa. The British were primarily at war with Germany, and it happened that their colonial holdings in British East Africa (Kenya) and German East Africa (Tanganyika) shared a very long and largely porous border.

With the outbreak of the war, German forces entered British East Africa, advancing on Kisii, the town in southwest Kenya near the Tanganyika border. In September 1914, the Germans took strategic positions in the town, and the British troops were forced to retreat momentarily to a small hill behind Nyamataro and near the town of Kisii where they monitored the movements of the Germans.² The Adventist mission at Nyanchwa was right in the middle of the scuffle as was Kamagambo Mission, which was about 13 miles away. The other mission stations – Gendia, Wire Hill, and Kanyadoto – were all less than 30 miles away. The British forces regrouped, moved in, and following a brief but sharp fight, managed to push the Germans out of Kisii and back beyond the border.

The Forced Conscription

Other than the social and economic disruptions caused by war, the Africans had to contend with conscription (compulsory enlistment for state service, typically into the armed forces), to fight in a war when they scarcely understood why. The Kenyan colonial authorities through the British officers began conscripting young men of between the ages of 18 and 25 to fight in the war. German forces were led by the notable Col. (later General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck in charge of a well-trained army corps backed by heavy artillery in Tanganyika. The British used the services of General Jan Christian Smuts, the South-African military leader who took charge in 1916. The conscription process created a state of fear in the region. It was a mandatory order from the office of the governor in Nairobi.³

When Pastor Carscallen learned of the order, he sought an audience with the Nyanza Provincial Commissioner to discuss this. Carscallen raised major issues with the commissioner: First, Adventist beliefs do not support the use of firearms, killing, or the shedding of blood; Second, serving in the war would force the military to work even on Sabbath, which could also contravene the Adventist belief in the sacredness of the seventh day of the week.⁴

Though the commissioner listened to Carscallen, he insisted that all young men had to be enlisted in the military. He referred Carscallen to the governor in Nairobi. After the meeting between the two, the governor argued that the grounds for exempting Adventists was not persuasive. The governor granted Carscallen another appointment as a follow-up. However, this meeting never took place because the governor hurt his eye while playing hockey and was forced to leave for England for treatment.⁵

Internship in Kaimosi

The threatening presence of German troops a short distance away in Tanganyika made the British colonial administration in Kenya apprehensive about missionaries who were known to associate closely with Germans.⁶ The fact that the headquarters of the Adventist work in East Africa at that time was in Hamburg, Germany, and that some of the missionaries in Kenya were in fact German nationals (Alfred Matter at Kanyadoto was a German national) made the British administration in Kenya all the more suspicious. The decision was made that all the Adventist missionaries were to be interned (confined as prisoners). All the missionaries were immediately recalled from their stations and gathered at Gendia. From there, they were transported to Kaimosi, 100 miles away in the country of Nandi. Except for a few Catholic missionaries who were of German origin, only the Adventist missionaries were fully interned despite most of them being British nationals.

Finances and other resources channeled from Germany to them came under the strict scrutiny of the British government and were in fact entirely frozen.⁷ All the mail and all forms of communication with the outside world were stopped.

The Looting Spree

Arthur Carscallen had left his station Kamagambo for Gendia when word reached him that a marauding mob was about to attack Kamagambo. His wife Hellen Thompson was at Kamagambo with their children at that time. Carscallen sent his trusted cook Barnaba who evacuated them using donkeys and walking through the night to safety in Gendia.⁸

The vandals looted the mission stations, stealing whatever they could move, tearing down any fixtures in buildings and, as was the case with Kamagambo, burning down some buildings.⁹ Carscallen lost vital mission records including photographs and photographic plates he had taken.

Impact of World War I in Tanganyika

It so happened that the Adventist work, which had started in German East Africa (Tanganyika) in 1903 and in British East Africa in 1906, was controlled from Hamburg in Germany, the headquarters of the European Division. British officials became very suspicious of the Adventists in both countries.¹⁰ As the British beat back

the Germans in Tanganyika, the advancing combatants quickly ransacked the Adventist missions for money or other valuables and interned the missionaries. They separated families, sending some of the wives and children back to Germany or making them remain in their stations while their husbands were exiled either to Tanga, India, Egypt, or even to England.¹¹ By 1916, only the Pönig family at the Pare Mission still remained in their station, and that was because of the severe illness of Mrs. Pönig.¹² Then the British suddenly changed their minds, and Elder Pönig was exiled to Ahmednagar in India anyway, leaving behind his ill wife. Also exiled to India were Elder Ohme and Elder Stein.¹³ By mid-1917, though, Elder Pönig was allowed to return to his station. Elder Kotz who was in charge of the Kihurio Mission, was allowed to remain. With the exception of these, nearly every mission station in Tanganyika was destroyed.

When the war ended, most of the Tanganyika missionaries were barred from returning to their stations by the British authorities, denying the Adventist missions there the continuity that the Kenyan mission stations enjoyed after the war.

The Local Missionaries Take Charge

While the European missionaries were restricted at Kaimosi, the work of the Adventist missions was carried out by the following: Isaac Okeyo of Gendia Mission, Daniel Onyango of Rusinga Island, John Tolo of Wire Hill Mission, Petro Oyier of Kamagambo Mission, Mariko Otieno of Kanyadoto Mission, Petro Rakula of Mfangano Island, and Yakobo Olwa of Nyanchwa Mission.¹⁴

These seven carried on the missionary duties until the European missionaries began to return to their stations in August 1916. While they did a splendid job, these were men of limited skill, and there was only so much that they could do. It is important to note that the seven leaders did not conduct any baptisms during this time because they were not ordained ministers.¹⁵

Impact of World War I on Adventism

Between 1914, when World War I broke out, up to August 1916 when the missionaries began to stream back, progress in Kenya was limited but did not entirely stop. The war allowed the African evangelists to emerge from the shadow of the European missionaries. Some of those who had been left in charge became important leaders of the Church in the succeeding years. Secondly, it made a strong case for the advanced training of African staff so they could take up greater responsibilities. After the war, Carscallen saw the need to enhance the training of local evangelists and instituted an education program in Kamagambo with this purpose in mind.¹⁶ An annual ministerial institute would eventually be set up there to bridge the skills gap among the local evangelists. In 1928, a teacher-training facility was established at Kamagambo. Formal ministerial training began in earnest at Kamagambo in 1929, and most of the African evangelists received their training there. On November 21, 1931, Pastor Paul Mboya was ordained as the first African minister in Kenya.¹⁷

Third, the war showed the vulnerabilities of the remote “mission station” model, particularly when it came to security. It became apparent that in periods of great insecurity, the missionaries in the distant stations were extremely vulnerable, both in their personal security and the missions’ property. After the war, only Rusinga Island and Wire Hill escaped with light losses. All the others suffered massively.

When new missions after this, much of the lessons from the World War I period were put into consideration. For instance, Kebeneti, where the work began among the Kipsigis in 1939, was not favored for a mission station, choosing instead Kabokyek along the Kericho-Kisumu highway, 10 miles from Kericho town. Kebeneti is about 50km from Kericho and is deep in the countryside. Chebwai, too, was set up right on the highway between Kakamega and Webuye town. Karura is about 10km from Nairobi CBD while the Kenya Coast Mission at Changamwe was, like Karura, peri-urban (an area immediately adjacent to a city or urban area).

Fourth, the war greatly slowed Adventist missionary activity and the expansion of Adventism in Kenya and Tanganyika. It was not until 1931 that a new mission station was set up in Kenya. This was the North-West Kenya Mission established in Nakuru, and this took place some 18 years after the last one had been established (Kamagambo). The first seven mission stations were established within a seven-year period (1906-1913). Throughout the 1920s, however, no new mission stations were opened in Kenya due to an emphasis being laid on rebuilding the existing ones in Kenya and Tanganyika and also opening up Uganda. This would have a significant impact on the demographic composition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kenya today. Adventists in Kenya are largely drawn from just two communities – the Luo and Kisii – largely reflecting the impact of World War I on Adventism in Kenya.¹⁸

After Nakuru, the Central Kenya (Karura) Mission was set up in 1933 and the Kenya Coast Mission in Mombasa was set up in 1934. The Chebwai Mission followed in 1936, the Ranen Mission in 1946 (relocated from Kanyadoto), the Kipsigis Mission in 1948, and finally the Highlands Mission in 1955. The next seven mission stations after Kamagambo were established in a span of 42 years. By this time, other missionary societies had filled the void left by the Adventists.

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NOTES

1. It was not until 1920 that the name "Kenya" was adopted. Prior to that, it was called "British East Africa."
2. Nehemiah Nyaundi, *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997), 32.
3. Isaac Okeyo, *Adventism in Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1990), 14.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 16.
6. Ibid., 34.
7. Ibid.
8. Virgil E. Robinson, "Kamagambo since yesterday," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, December 15, 1955, 4.
9. Ibid.
10. Virgil E. Robinson, *Third Angel over Africa*, unpublished manuscript, Helderberg College Library, 92.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. *Adventist Yearbook* 1917, p. 231.
14. Okeyo, 14.
15. Ibid.
16. Robinson, "Kamagambo since yesterday."
17. W. W. Armstrong, "Kenya," *The Advent Survey*, March 1, 1932, 4.

18. Godfrey K. Sang, "Whose Church? Ethnicity, Identity, and the Politics of Belonging in the Adventist Church in Kenya," part 5 of 6, 2019, *Spectrum Magazine*, www.spectrummagazine.org.

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