

**THE BRITISH CONTROL OF THE GERMAN PLANTATIONS
IN THE CAMEROONS PROVINCE OF NIGERIA
DURING WORLD WAR II, 1939-1945**

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Abstract

The Cameroons was originally a German colony starting from 1884. However, during the First World War (1914-1918), the combined British and French forces invaded the territory, defeated the German troops and divided the colony into British and French spheres. In 1919, the League of Nations upheld this arrangement and entrusted the Cameroons to Britain and France as Mandate Territory. Thus, from 1919 to 1961, the British sphere of the Cameroons was governed as a part of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria. As a former German colony, it harboured substantial amount of German subjects and properties. These properties included plantations, legal estates, factories, companies, missions and privately-owned properties. Available studies on the colonial Nigerian history have omitted the Cameroons Province, most especially the German subjects and properties in the territory. The result of this omission has been the lop-sidedness in the historiography of the place of Cameroons in the Nigerian history during World War II. This study, therefore, corrects this lop-sidedness in the historiography of colonial Nigeria by examining the control and management of the German properties in the Cameroons by the British colonial authorities in Nigeria during World War II (1939-1945), with a special concentration on the Plantations. Archival materials provided data for this historical reconstruction. The history of the German plantations in West Africa is the history of possession, dispossession and repossession, as well as mutation and transpositions.

Introduction

The Second World War (1939-1945) was an implosion between the Allied Powers (Britain, France, the USA and Russia) and the Axis (Germany, Italy and Japan). Although it started from Europe, it spread and involved virtually all continents of the world. It reinvented most of the restrictions inaugurated during the First World War, 1914-1918, such as measures against enemy aliens and their properties. Scholars like Eric Lohr (2003) have argued that no rule of international law was more strongly held than the one protecting the person and property of foreign citizens in wartime. Rubin (1945:167) puts it differently and arrives at the same conclusion: "Probably no rule of international law was regarded in 1914 as more firmly established than the rule that private property within the jurisdiction belonging to citizens of the enemy state is inviolable."

However, on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, nearly every belligerent country hosted vast amounts of property, both real and personal, owned by persons of enemy nationality. Besides, enemy persons were the shareholders in many business and industrial enterprises, corporations, partnerships, etc. In order to prevent such property from being used or such business from being conducted in a manner detrimental to the national defence or in favour of the enemy, the governments of all the belligerent countries adopted measures for placing enemy-owned property and enemy business enterprises under the control or supervision of the public authorities (Garner 1918: 744). These measures against enemy

subjects and properties inaugurated during World War I became more systematic and brutal during World War II. 1939-1945 (Lohr 2003) For instance, in the British Empire, including West Africa, properties belonging to the enemy subjects, most especially Germans, were confiscated and controlled by the British colonial authorities as part of the war efforts.

This study examines the control and management of the German plantations in the Cameroons by the British colonial authorities in Nigeria during World War II (1939-1945). It deals with the continuity and change in the existence of the German plantations in the Cameroons, with a view to exploring the dispossession of these German-owned plantations following the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the repossession of these plantations by their former owners from 1925 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, when further dispossession was effected. It argues that, although it runs counter to the rule of international law protecting the person and property of foreign citizens in wartime (Lohr 2003), the takeover of the German plantations and other German properties in the Cameroons and their placement under the control and supervision of the public authorities by the British colonial Government in Nigeria during World War II was in order to prevent such property from being used or such business from being conducted in a manner detrimental to the national defence or in favour of the enemy (Rubin 1945: 167).

The significance of this study is in the extension of the literature on the German colonialism in Africa, Second World War, and plantation economy as concerns the Cameroons Province of Nigeria. For instance, the literature on the German-African relations has focused more on the German official colonialism in Africa, which covers from the 1880s (when German colonial acquisition began), up to the period of World War I (1914-1918), when the German official colonial rule in Africa ended. This is the subject of the works of Rudin (1938), Cornevin (1960), Gifford and Smith (1967), Louis (1967), Bley and Ridley (1971), Gann and Duignan (1977), and Lindner (2011). Thus, not much has been done about the German presence in Africa after 1918, most especially the status of German subjects, properties and trade in Africa during the inter-war years (1919-1939) and Second World War (1939-1945). Similarly, studies are legion on the history of the Cameroons (Osuntokun 1975, Amazee 1993, Heinzen 1983, McPheeters 1960, Ardener 1962, Amazee 1994, Landis 1960). They have, however, paid scanty attention to the impact of World War II on the Cameroons. Those that have dealt with the Second World War and the Cameroons, even though tangentially, have paid little attention on the impact of the war on the German plantations (Ndi 1968, Goodridge 1996).

In addressing this lop-sidedness, the study relies essentially on primary sources for its analysis. Files of the Central Secretary's Office (CSO) on the colonial Nigerian economy deposited in the National Archives at Ibadan (NAI) provided the data for the historical analysis. They include files of the Department of Commerce and Industry as well as Department of Agriculture and Intelligence Reports on the Cameroons Province of Southern Nigeria. The approach is historical, intersectional, and structuralist.

German Plantations in the Cameroons to the Eve of World War II

The most important of the German properties in the Cameroons were the Plantations, with a total area of about 246,000 acres and a total area under cultivation of about 50,000 acres and valued in 1917 very roughly at £853,500 (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925). By 1939, it was quoted as a total area of about 250,000 acres: that under cultivation was 80,000 (NAI CSO 35679/9,

1939). The plantations included:

- a. **Debundscha** Plantation which was registered in Grundbuch covering area 1681 hectares (4153 acres) and ownership was thus recognized by the German Government. There was a deed of additional 500 hectares (123 5-55 acres). It was Crownland bought from the Government (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).
- b. **Idenau Plantation:** Valid deed of sale of September 1898 for 2000 hectare (4942 acres). Property not registered in Grundhuch (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).
- c. **Tobacco Properties:** The new Anglo-French boundary reduced the size of Essosung Plantation but from a report by Mr Hunter, it would appear that Njombe, Ehinsi and Njongo plantations comprising some 13,000 acres were within the British spheres (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).
- d. **West African Plantation Company—Bibundi** with the area 14,000 hectares.
- e. **The Mukonjo** (Cameroons Rubber Co.) Plantations consisted of (i) part of Jantzen and Thormaehlen property which was registered in Grundbuch. It had an area of 426 hectares or 1052.68 acres (ii) part of Dr Scharlach property with the area 1602 hectares or 3958.7 acres (iii) portion of the land leased from Crown, for 20 years as from 1 January 1909 with an option to purchase, joining the other two. It had an area 492 hectares or 1215 acres (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).
- f. **Company Farms:** There were farms owned by some of the companies. For instance, C. Woermann with the acres of about 10,000 hectares or 24,711 acres contained Bimbia farms, one of the oldest plantations. There were also Victoria farms as well as farms in Malende, Missellele, Moliwe Plantations of area 15,000 hectares or 3 7.065 acres. There was also Oechelhaeuser plantation of area 2375 hectares (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).

These plantations contained oil palm, cocoa, rubber, banana, plantains, tobacco, among other crops.

During the First World War (1914-1918), soldiers from the West African Frontier Force were mobilised for Cameroon Expedition (NAI N1171). The British and the French being the major Allied Powers in West Africa were to prosecute the war. However, unlike the German territory of Togoland which fell in 14 days, the larger German colony of Cameroons fought and held out until January 1916 (Koller 2008). This, according to Killingray (1998:92), was because the Cameroons required more effort involving naval and military forces against much stiffer German resistance. Thus, by February 1916, Anglo-French troops jointly defeated the German troops in Cameroon. In March 1916, Brigadier-General Charles M. Dobell and General Joseph Aymerich partitioned the territory into British and French spheres (Mbaku :x).

Since 1915 when the Cameroons were liberated from Germany by the Allied forces in West Africa, Mr F. Evans had been placed in charge of all enemy-owned property in the British sphere of the Cameroons, including the plantations. In the first instance, he was appointed Director of Plantations by the Military Authorities, and was subsequently confirmed in the appointment (with the title of supervisor of plantations) by the Governor-General of Nigeria after the Military Commander-in-Chief had handed over the Government to the Civil Authorities (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925). Mr Evans kept the plantations and numerous others

open and he maintained and controlled a labour force of over 10,000 labourers, with the aid of nine (9) European assistants. In German times (before the outbreak of World War I) some 130 Europeans were employed upon purely plantation work in the Cameroons.

After the end of the First World War in 1918, notwithstanding the “firmly established” rule of inviolability of enemy private property within the jurisdiction, the framers of the treaties of peace terminating the First World War made specific provision for the retention of such property, either directly as compensation for the claims of nationals of the Allied Nations or as security for such claims. Article 297 of the Treaty of Versailles reserved to the Allied Powers “the right to retain and liquidate all the property rights and interests” belonging to German nationals in Allied territory. The proceeds were to be applied to certain claims of the Allied nationals against Germany. The surplus, if any, could either be applied against the reparation account or turned back, at the discretion of the individual country. Germany was required to compensate her own nationals for this loss of their property.

Thus, the British sphere of the Cameroons, as well as the German properties thereof, was governed as a part of Southern Provinces of Nigeria. Since the owners of these properties were not allowed to return due to the immigration restriction on the ex-enemy subjects, there were so many concerns about the fate of these properties, both privately-owned properties and legal estates of the enemy subjects. There appeared to be three courses open to the Government as to the future management of these plantations, namely, (1) to sell them to the highest bidder, (2) to hand them over to Native, excluding Europeans, (3) to retain them in part or in whole as a possession of the Crown or State. But there was the need to ascertain the enemy properties through inventory and deeds. Of all these courses of action, to sell the properties to the highest bidder became more popular (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).

However, no action could be taken until a complete list of and particulars concerning the titles to the various properties, most especially the legal estates, were discovered. No register of the land alienated to the plantations had been so far discovered; and all that could be done was to piece together the information which could be obtained from the files dealing with the individual plantations. The only maps in existence which showed the position of the various plantations were not complete and were on a comparatively small scale. Owing to the loss of title-deeds, records, etc., it was uncertain whether a particular property was freehold or leasehold, or the exact terms of the freehold and it was not possible to give purchasers a title which they would accept. A clear title should be provided by a further proclamation on the lines of Section 3(1) and (2) of the Nigeria Enemy Property (Disposal) Ordinance of 1917 (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).

Thus, Mr Nichole of Agricultural Department, who knew a little German, was detailed for the work of examining the local records, and he had succeeded in sorting out a number of the files which dealt with the titles and affairs of a number of Plantations. Similarly, Mr Evans was also asked to prepare a report on the plantations. The report should contain a complete list of the buildings, plants, etc., with full description and photographs where possible, particulars as to acreage, the area under cultivation, the nature of the crops, their conditions, their water-supplies, and the character of the uncultivated areas; means of transport, etc. He was able to supply information of 2 out of 27 estates under his charge (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).

It was not until 1921 that substantial amount of the documents of the properties were available. For instance, in April 1921, Mr Whiteman's report was presented showing the present position regarding the German documents available and in how far they were translated and completed. By so doing, 16 properties aggregating approximately 127.506 acres were now ready to be put

up for sale, while there were 44 properties aggregating approximately 123,530 acres for which the titles were said to be doubtful or could not be traced. This provided the grounds for the commencement of the disposal (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925).

However, it happened that by 1923 when the immigration restriction of the enemy subjects had been lifted, the properties could still not find market in Europe, which ultimately led to the purchase of those properties back by the German subjects. This was described by Daily Courier Correspondent as "German Recolonisation (NAI 01435/II, 1919-1925: 150-155)". It noted that the German delegation to the security pact would spring a surprise on the other delegations. Harr Stresseman would disclose that German Planters had already repurchased former possessions in the Cameroons, and he would contend that the League, therefore, was no longer justified in withholding the Cameroons from Germany. It was learned that German owners and agents re-bought the Cameroon plantations during the London auctions of 1924-25 (NAI 01435/I, 1919-1925). Thus, on the eve of World War II, the plantations were in the hands of the Germans.

World War II and the Control of German Plantations in the Cameroons

Although the Second World War began in September 1939, preparations for war and its outcome had started few months before then. For instance, in May 1939, about five months before the outbreak of World War II, there was the question of the control of the German plantations in the event of another war with Germany. The Chief Secretary to the Nigerian Government was requested to report what control was exercised during the First World War (1914-1918) in order to enable the Governor of Nigeria address the Secretary of State for the Colonies in Downing Street, London, on the subject (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 1).

It was observed that during the First World War, these properties were placed in charge of a Supervisor of Plantations (Mr Evans) appointed by the Government. It appeared, however, from the report of the supervisor that the arrangement was not altogether satisfactory and was ill adapted for running the plantations as a commercial concern. In paragraph 7 (3) of his report, the Supervisor recommended (on the assumption that the Crown wished to retain its interest in the properties and participate in profits accruing therefrom) that the management should be entrusted to an independent professional Commercial Agency. He explained the advantages of adopting such a course and it was the course which should be adopted in the event of another war. As to the selection of a Commercial Agency for the purpose, one of the large trading concerns with connections in West Africa, e.g. The United African Company (UAC), would appear to be very suitable or alternatively the Jamaica Banana Producers' Association, which had had banana trading connections with the Cameroons (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 3-4).

While the Secretary of States agreed that under normal conditions the plantations would be likely to be more efficiently and economically managed by a commercial company than by a Government Department, he felt that under the peculiar conditions which would prevail in the event of war, the importance of this particular consideration would be found to be minimised. For instance, the Cameroons would be cut off from their principal market: the ships, also German, by which the produce of the plantations was at present carried, would no longer be available and the demands for cargo space in other ships for essential products would have to be given precedence over most, if not all, of the Cameroons products (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 10). Whether, therefore, the plantations were to be managed directly by

Government or through a commercial agency, it seemed unlikely that it would be found practicable to carry on the plantations on a scale much in excess of the minimum required for essential maintenance (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 10-11).

He suggested, therefore, that, unless the Governor of Nigeria saw any serious objection to this course, he should make provisional preparations for taking over direct management of the German plantations under such general conditions as might be laid down by His Majesty's Government with regard of the treatment of enemy property and of resident enemy subjects on the outbreak of war with Germany. It would also appear advisable that such preparations should be made in the expectation that it would probably be necessary for a large proportion of the total labour force at present employed to be discharged during the war period, which, so far as the products of the Cameroons were concerned, might be expected to be, at any rate for some time, a period of depression. By so doing, the Custodian of Enemy Property, Lagos, would in all probability take over all such plantations. Roebuck, Senior Agricultural Officer, who would be appointed Supervisor of Plantations, would be under Director of Agriculture's directions for agricultural matters and under those of Custodian for all others (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 12).

The Second World War broke out on 3 September 1939. Like during World War I (1914-1918), all German subjects in Nigeria (apart from those in the Cameroons Province) were arrested and interned (NAI CSO 36117/I, 1939-49) and their properties confiscated and vested in the office of the Custodian of the Enemy Property (NAI CSO 35868, 1939-45). It was not until 19 June 1940 that all the Germans in the Cameroons under the British Mandate were taken prisoners (NAI CSO 36117/I, 1939-49: 67).

Although the German subjects in the Cameroons were not taken prisoners immediately the war broke out, the German Plantations were immediately confiscated and placed under the control of the Custodian of the Enemy Property. For instance, in a telegram to the Resident, Cameroons Province, dated 3 September 1939, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Nigeria noted that plantation staff and managers should be informed that all German property in the Cameroons had passed into the ownership of the Custodian of Enemy Property, and the arrangement outlined in the memo of 27 August 1939 (which has been described above) should now be put into effect (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 17). In the said arrangement, it was proposed that in the event of war, German plantations in the Cameroons should be managed directly by Government with Agricultural Department's assistance. Custodian of Enemy Property, Lagos, would take over all such plantations. Roebuck, who would be appointed Supervisor of Plantations, would be under Director of Agriculture's directions for agricultural matters and under those of Custodian for all others. As far as possible, German planters (who were yet to be interned) would be employed to run their own plantations, the policy being to maintain those plantations in full production. Supervisor would receive market price for all produce from approved buyers to whom the produce would be handed over and he would meet all expenses of plantations. Custodian would fix salaries to be paid and current estates books and accounts on plantations would be opened to inspection by Supervisor (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 9). The Resident, Cameroons Province at Buea, should take inventories, take over cash, stores, products and movable property, and exercise whatever supervisory control he could over the work of the plantations and communicate with the Financial Secretary, Lagos, directly (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 17).

The Chief Secretary also directed the Resident, Cameroons Province, to take possession of all properties, offices, and other establishments belonging to enemy trading organizations in the Cameroons, in addition to plantations, as all German properties were automatically vested in the Custodian of the Enemy Property. The Resident should also take a

rough inventory of all belongings, stocks and cash. Premises should be locked and sealed and put under guard if necessary. Personal property and dwelling houses of enemy aliens living under licence needed not be disturbed. The Resident should also send a recommendation as to the person to act as local agent for the Custodian of Enemy Property and a brief report of the action taken should be sent to the Financial Secretary, Lagos (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 18).

In a telegram from the Resident, Buea, to the Chief Secretary dated 4 September 1939, it was suggested that bank balances of all plantations should be pooled and that Henry Roebuck should be authorised immediately to operate this account and to sign cheques for expenditure which was necessary. This was urgent as the labourers' wages for August were due for payment (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 21). In a letter to the Manager, Barclays Bank, Lagos dated 5 September 1939, the Custodian, F. E. Stafford, noted that he should be grateful if the Bank Manager would open an account with the branch at Victoria in the name of the "Custodian of Enemy Property" and would allow Mr Henry Roebuck, Senior Agricultural Officer in the Cameroons, to draw on it. It would for the time being, be necessary for the account to run on an overdraft, the security for which was the combined total of the enemy alien accounts in the Bank's branch at Victoria, the ownership of which, under the Defence Regulations, was vested in the Public Custodian (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 22). In the same vein, the Financial Secretary informed the Resident Buea that he had opened account and arranged sufficient credit with Barclays Bank Victoria in name of Custodian of Enemy Property and had authorised Bank to accept cheques drawn by Henry Roebuck. He might draw on this account on behalf of Custodian but his drawings should be restricted to payment of labourers' wages and should other expenditures be necessary, he should obtain approval of the Custodian (NAI CSO 35678, 1939: 23).

On 19 June 1940, the Germans in the Cameroons who were on parole and employed in the plantations were arrested and interned. In a telegram to the Custodian, Lagos, dated 13 July 1940, West, at Buea, noted that he fully appreciated difficulties of the general situation but advised earnestly to warn Government that additional staff was essential if this business was to continue. Cost of more staff would be negligible compared to value of exports. Without more staff probable breakdown present organisation with produce critical situation (NAI CSO 36726/I/41). In a memo to the Director of Agriculture dated 1 October 1940, the Custodian of Enemy Property noted that the administration of the enemy plantations in the Cameroons should be altered so as to meet the changed circumstances consequent upon the withdrawal of the Germans and the restricted sale of the plantations produce. There was now no need for the maintenance of the two parallel posts of Supervisor and Management and with the departure of the Germans the importance of a political, as distinct from commercial, control of the plantations had considerably lessened. He was satisfied that the administration of the plantations subject to his general control could now safely be left to the Plantation Manager, Mr R.B. Longe, who had already demonstrated his capacity since he assumed full control of the banana side of the estates on the departure of the Germans (NAI CSO 36726/I64A). Thus was the arrangement and the control of the German plantations in the Cameroons by the British authorities in Nigeria throughout the Second War.

Conclusion

In most of Colonial West Africa, the production of cash crops was carried out by the peasantry. Thus, the conventional wisdom has been that Colonial West Africa was integrated into the orbit of the capitalist world economy through the expansion of peasant commodity production in agricultural produce and mineral resources. But this generalisation is not applicable to the German territories where plantation agriculture was the mainstay of the colonial economy. In

both Togoland and Cameroons (the two German territories in West Africa), plantations were used rather than peasant agriculture as was the case in the British and French territories. During the First World War (1914-1918), German territories in West Africa were invaded and occupied by the Allied Forces of Britain and France and the plantations therein were confiscated. After the Great War, these territories were entrusted to the Allied Powers by the League of Nations as Mandate Territories in 1919 and German subjects were barred from entering West Africa until 1923. The German-owned plantations in the Cameroons were, therefore, put up for sell. However, by 1925, these plantations could not attract buyers and could, therefore, not be sold, such that their earlier owners (who returned to West Africa after 1923) bought and repossessed them. In 1939, the Second World War broke out, leading to yet another turn of dispossession. Thus, the history of the German plantations in West Africa is the history of possession, dispossession and repossession, as well as mutation and transpositions.

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