

## Introduction

### Colonialism, Imperialism, and Global Conflict

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There was so little compulsion, so much voluntary effort, and so great an enthusiasm that it makes one rather humble, too.

*A Colony's Effort*, compiled by the Nigerian government<sup>1</sup>

That the African war experience remains just a footnote in European – and especially in German – history books is partly due to the fact that the countries of Europe are reluctant to see any need to draw consequences.

German journalist Karl Rössel<sup>2</sup>

On September 3, 1939, the day the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, declared war on Germany during the Second World War, members of the Ututu Clan Executive Committee in southeastern Nigeria wrote a letter pledging loyalty and support to the king of the United Kingdom and the British Empire. The committee wrote: “Though we are but poor farmers by trade, we are quite prepared to render any assistance which may come to our reach to our British Government who is fighting for world peace.”<sup>3</sup> Local regional leaders called for national unity and a common goal to defeat Hitler. A week after the British declared war on Germany, the Oba of Benin, Omonoba Akinzua II, called on Nigerians to “bury all our differences and use our strength, our money and everything in defence of our country and Britain.”<sup>4</sup> Nigerian newspapers threw their full support behind the British war effort through their editorials and articles. In the editorial of August 26, 1939, the *West African Pilot* called on all Nigerians to render necessary assistance to the government in any form whatsoever, whenever

<sup>1</sup> Nigeria, *A Colony's Effort* (Lagos: Government Printing Department, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> “Africa in World War II: The Forgotten Veterans,” accessed September 13, 2019, [www.dw.com/en/africa-in-world-war-ii-the-forgotten-veterans/a-18437531](http://www.dw.com/en/africa-in-world-war-ii-the-forgotten-veterans/a-18437531).

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Nigeria, Calabar (hereafter NAC), CALPROF, 3/1/2353, “Loyalty to the King and Government.”

<sup>4</sup> *West African Pilot*, September 11, 1939. Cited in Onwuka N. Njoku, “Burden of Imperialism: Nigeria War Relief Fund, 1939–1945,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 6, no. 7 (1977–1978): 79–99, at 82.

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it was demanded, with a view to strengthening the defense of the country against attack either from within or from without.<sup>5</sup> The *Nigerian Daily Times* in two separate editorials emphasized the historic importance of the British government's declaration of war as a commitment to uphold fair and free negotiations.<sup>6</sup> About four years later, on January 2, 1944, the chiefs of Idomi, a small town in the Obura Division in southeastern Nigeria, wrote a letter in support of the British war effort. They pledged their readiness to help in the war by giving full attention to kernel production.<sup>7</sup> The general population in Nigeria would devote considerable resources and funds to the war effort. Later, in 1948, Baron Milverton, the governor of Nigeria (1943–1948), recalled the effort of Nigerians and how much they contributed in both men and material goods.<sup>8</sup> The spontaneous reaction and support for Britain from men and women and from local newspapers was widespread across Nigeria.

In the months following the beginning of the Second World War, increasing numbers of Nigerians offered moral support to Britain. But they did much more, including producing needed agricultural and mineral products, entering the army, and meeting labor needs in several other areas. While Nigeria did not directly experience the conflict on its soil, the war nevertheless had a knock-on effect on its population and on every small village and hamlet in Nigeria.

Oddly enough, Nigerians wrote passionate letters in support of a faraway king and agonized over a war far beyond their borders. Their letters reveal the fascinating attention they paid to the events leading to the outbreak of the Second World War, the most devastating and widespread conflict known to humanity. Like their counterparts in so many other regions of the British Empire, Nigerians appropriated and localized the war itself and expressed their readiness to make sacrifices in order to defeat Hitler. Although dominion autonomy was not extended to the empire's colonies, Nigerian reactions and responses illustrate the necessary cooperation between the British Empire and its colonies and the apparent roles the colony was expected to play in supporting the war effort, and reflect the deep commitment of ordinary Nigerians to the

<sup>5</sup> The *West African Pilot* was a newspaper founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe ("Zik") in 1937. Its mission was to fight for independence from British colonial rule, but it became an ally of the empire during the war. For an analysis of the Nigerian response, see Levi Onyemuche Amadi, "Political Integration in Nigeria, 1939–1945: The Role of Economic Development during the Second World War," *Transafrican Journal of History* 6, no. 7 (1977–1978): 142–153, at 144.

<sup>6</sup> "Up against Habits of the Jungle" and "A Stand for Fair and Free Negotiation," *Nigerian Daily Times*, April 1, 1939, 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Up against Habits of the Jungle," 1.

<sup>8</sup> Lord Milverton, "Nigeria," *African Affairs* 47 (1948): 80–89, at 82.

Allied Powers' objectives and vision. These Nigerian accounts also present the history of the war less as a European war and more as a global conflict.

Yet most studies on the Second World War have given scant attention to the contributions of ordinary Africans or the impact of the war on their lives. Such pervasive neglect of the significant role played by Africans on behalf of the Allies is not only historically problematic but limits our full understanding of the war and its general impact on all humanity. The Second World War, as Paul Mulvey has pointed out, "was truly a global imperial war for Britain, with British and imperial soldiers, sailors and airmen seeing action in far more locations around the world than ever before."<sup>9</sup> Throughout these campaigns, "the contribution of the Empire's Dominions, Colonies and Territories was anything but nominal."<sup>10</sup> And the British colonies contributed more than half of the troops and provided even greater contributions in material resources.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the contributions of small villages and hamlets in Nigeria during the war must also be considered, like the "great cities of England and the United States to get a complete picture of the efforts put out by the United Nations in this war."<sup>12</sup> While historians of the Second World War have raised some important questions in recent years that are significant in grasping a holistic understanding of the event, a particular version of the war narrative has prevailed. That is a tendency, as Keith Lowe rightly argues, to imagine the Second World War as a single, unambiguous conflict between the Allies on one side and the Axis on the other.<sup>13</sup> As Ashley Jackson reminds us, the role of the African colonies in imperial warfare has been consistently undervalued by historians, and their histories are less well developed than those of India and former "white" dominions such as Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> As Nicholas Manserg outlines in his book *Survey of British Commonwealth*

<sup>9</sup> Throughout the war, Briton, colonial, and dominion armies fought around the world – in Europe, West Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Paul Mulvey, "The British Empire in World War Two (Lecture)," Academia.edu, accessed January 1, 2019, [www.academia.edu/444982/The\\_British\\_Empire\\_in\\_World\\_War\\_Two\\_lecture](http://www.academia.edu/444982/The_British_Empire_in_World_War_Two_lecture).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The numbers of troops who came from the colonies and dominions vary. On the figures, see Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), which suggests a figure of 47.6 percent from the United Kingdom (p. 38). In *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 3rd edn. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), Lawrence James has the figures slightly above 50 percent (p. 489).

<sup>12</sup> Nigeria, *A Colony's Effort*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 272.

<sup>14</sup> Ashley Jackson, cited in Kwei Quartey, "How West Africa Helped Win World War II," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, June 6, 2012, accessed January 22, 2019, <http://fpif.org/how-west-africa-helped-win-world-war-ii/>. See also John H. Morrow Jr., "Black Africans in

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*Affairs*, there was no ambiguity – these dominions were self-governing and only themselves decided “whether to remain at peace or go to war.”<sup>15</sup> The colonial empire, on the other hand, as Onwuka Njoku has correctly observed, was “involuntarily sucked into World War II.”<sup>16</sup> The participation of Nigerians in this global war as part of a colonial empire raises a number of broad questions: What roles did European colonial possessions such as Nigeria play in the Second World War? How did the war redefine the relationship between African colonies and European empires in the most important global conflict of the twentieth century? What do we know about the daily lives and wartime experiences of colonial subjects during the war, and how were they shaped by colonial policies, propaganda, and local economic regulations? These questions, among others, and their intersection with empire, colonialism, and global configurations lie at the heart of this book.<sup>17</sup>

In this book, I focus on one of Britain’s most important colonial possessions and its most prosperous West African colony. The wider aim is to explore the lives of the Nigerian population during the Second World War and the extraordinary roles Nigerians played as part of the British Empire. Our knowledge of World War II will look different if we focus on the ways in which Nigerians of all classes, genders, and ages were drawn into a global conflict as part of the British Empire and on the enormous burden they carried as colonial subjects. This book pays attention to the service of large numbers of Nigerian men overseas, the resultant lack of men on the home front, and the enormous implications it had for production and gender as women took up new and increased roles in production, trade, and marketing. Additionally, I examine the different responses to wartime mobilization by Nigerian producers, workers, merchants, children, women, traditional leaders, and colonial authorities.

I unpack how Nigerians, like other Africans, were forced not only to fight in the war and to feed its participants but to pay for it as well.

World War II: The Soldiers’ Stories,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 632 (2010): 12–25.

<sup>15</sup> While each of these dominions joined the war to support the British Commonwealth, they were not compelled, as was the case with Nigeria and other colonies of Britain. Nicholas Manserg, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Cooperation and Post-War Change, 1939–52* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Onwuka N. Njoku, “Nigeria: World War II,” *Worldhistory.biz*, August 21, 2015, accessed December 1, 2018, [www.worldhistory.biz/sundries/44822-nigeria-world-war-ii.html](http://www.worldhistory.biz/sundries/44822-nigeria-world-war-ii.html).

<sup>17</sup> I use the terms *empire* and *colonial power* interchangeably here. For most of the period of the war, Nigeria was treated as part of the empire in terms of the British ideology of a commonwealth of British territories. At the same time, the territory and colony of Nigeria was specifically influenced by this ideology of cooperation, and was a source for extraction, as evidenced in British policies during the war.

I reconstruct what Nigerian men, women, and children from all walks of life were “doing and thinking on the home front and abroad,” to use Emily Yellin’s expression, in service to the empire.<sup>18</sup> Given the enormous financial need during the war, Nigeria, like other British colonial possessions, was forced to invest funds in the war effort abroad at the expense of their own budgets and with little recompense after the war was over. By examining Nigeria’s participation through the lens of wartime regulations, restrictions, food, rationing, and supplies, I reveal the extent to which everyday life on the Nigerian home front was affected by the Second World War. By investigating the multifaceted relationships between Britain and the colony of Nigeria, and by demonstrating how an elaborate system of media control and the dissemination of propaganda designed to promote particular views about the war, fostered engagement, cooperation, and self-determination, I illustrate the complexity of colonial participation in the war. In doing so, I challenge the dominant perception of historians that the Second World War was mainly a European conflict (at least in terms of the contributions of ordinary people), and I examine the preponderant role noncombatants played to support the war effort and their impact globally. This situation underscores the complexity and diversity of the global experiences of the Second World War, illustrating that there is no single societal experience, but many experiences.<sup>19</sup> The portrait of the empire’s ambivalent war goals, the cooperation of colonial subjects and the notion of a commonwealth in which the empire and its constituent parts shared a common goal, and a multidimensional account of the nature and enduring significance of Nigeria’s role as a colony offers a unique glimpse into the complexities and contradictions of the British Empire and the colony’s participation in the war. *Nigeria and World War II* offers a case study through which to investigate the intertwined histories of colonialism, imperialism, and the most enduring global conflict in the modern era.

Those who write history from below – the history of ordinary people and everyday life – face a particular problem. In most cases, these lives are often nothing but ordinary as in a colonial context or during a period of

<sup>18</sup> Emily Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Ashley Jackson has called for attention to be given to case studies in order to capture specific experiences. See Ashley Jackson, “Motivation and Mobilization for War: Recruitment for the British Army in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1941–42,” *African Affairs* 96, no. 384 (1997): 399–417. For an exploration of the local economy during the war, see Toyin Falola, “‘Salt Is Gold’: The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during World War II,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26, no. 3 (1992): 412–436.

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war. My intervention and methodological frame are informed and situated within multiple contextual and theoretical frames – colonialism, local agency, race, gender, identity, labor, children’s experiences, and intellectual and social history. As Sheila Fitzpatrick has highlighted, there are several theories of writing social history. One trend is the focus on everyday dynamics of private life as they relate to family, home, raising of children, leisure, friendship, and sociability. The other is the world of work.<sup>20</sup> In a colonial context and during a period of mass mobilization for war, as was the case during the Second World War, everyday life transcended both the home and the workplace, and it was mediated by the state and other political entities. People in subordinate positions or under state control have been explored by scholars often focusing on the forms of response that James Scott popularized as “everyday.”<sup>21</sup> But I am more interested in interpreting the actions and reactions of ordinary people as a “practice” through which I analyze the strategies of survival and advancement that people develop to cope with particular social and political situations.<sup>22</sup>

Focusing on the role of the civilian population and the enormous burden placed on the colony, I emphasize the unparalleled demands on local manpower, minerals, and agricultural goods amidst new forms of colonial control and regulations. These demands, however, offered Nigerian men and women an opportunity to make sense of their place within the British Empire and to assert both their colonial and individual identities as citizens of both the empire and Nigeria. Nigerians invoked imperialist discourse and ideals such as freedom and liberty in service to the empire despite the contradictions such discourse posed in the colonial context. Indeed, the empire and innumerable colonial subjects inspired by the promise of freedom, liberty, and self-determination worked together to defeat totalitarianism. Nigeria’s critical role through the agency of its civil populations in the war and their place in the empire’s war effort make a macro- and micro-level historical analysis of a single country a welcome one. Thus, I contribute to a better understanding of the themes of society, war, and economy in general, and of the response of traders and local producers to new war-induced policies and demands from Nigerians in particular.

<sup>20</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>21</sup> These include the subtle and mundane ways in which dependent populations express dissatisfaction with their conditions. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 2.



Map 0.1 Map of colonial Nigeria

### A Global War

The Second World War elicited a profound and haunting response on a global scale, drawing in people who are often forgotten in the traditional Eurocentric narrative.<sup>23</sup> In his recent book on the Second World War, military historian Victor Davis Hanson chose “Wars” in his title in order to capture the many diverse landscapes, peoples, strategies, and ideologies that drove this particular war like no other.<sup>24</sup> Britain and France, more than the lesser colonial players in Africa, relied heavily on their African colonies to help fund the war effort and to provide other forms of support for “the common cause.”<sup>25</sup> Britain sought and received the commitment of its citizens at home and its colonial subjects abroad to

<sup>23</sup> General histories of the war include: Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Martin Kitchen, *A World in Flames: A Short History of the Second World War in Europe and Asia, 1939–1945* (London: Longman, 1990); H. P. Willmott, *The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of the Second World War* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Robert Alexander Clarke Parker, *Struggle for Survival: The History of the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); John Keegan, *The Second World War* (Sydney: Hutchinson, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> The National Archives (hereafter NA), London, CAB/66/34/45 – Swinton. Resident minister, West Africa, dated January 30, 1943, reporting on his recent conversations with the governor-general of French West Africa, and later with President Roosevelt.

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support the war effort.<sup>26</sup> In reality, Nigeria became an integral part of the global conflicts that defined the twentieth century on account of being a colony of Britain.

The war had important spatial aspects – the intensive deepening of colonial extraction went hand in hand with the extensive spread of the war beyond European borders. The forms of this spatial integration and the connections between metropole, colony, and the global reach of the European empires shaped relations significantly. During the war, as Ashley Jackson has shown, all parts of the British Empire joined the struggle from the outset – an adventure that led to huge changes and sometimes to great losses on the part of the colonies.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the empire and its countless colonial subjects largely worked together to defeat totalitarianism. Indeed, Britain devoted considerable resources to “sell” the war at home and to win the hearts and minds of colonial peoples. But the surge in identifying with the empire occurred within a specific context and at a historical moment of global importance. This conflicting parallel of a morally superior empire at war with an evil empire epitomized by Germany forced colonial subjects to downplay the differences between empire and colony and to seek new engagements in a pivotal battle between good and evil.

In this context, Britain’s declaration of war on Germany on September 3, 1939, made the African colonies active participants in the war against the Axis. The demands of the war forced British officials to initiate a vigorous propaganda campaign and to restructure the local economy to ensure that Nigerians produced the necessary commodities to support the war effort. In addition to the unprecedented mobilization of the local population, the government introduced new regulations and laws to effectively control the production, marketing, and distribution of local products and imported items. These regulations sought to address the crisis that emerged during the war. But drawing Nigeria into the conflict took an enormous toll on the population. Across Nigeria, communities mobilized and contributed financially in both direct and indirect ways. They supplied soldiers in a variety of capacities and provided material resources, including food items, for the troops.<sup>28</sup> The demands Britain made on African manpower, minerals, and agricultural goods

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*. Judith A. Byfield, Carolyn A. Brown, Timothy Parsons, and Ahmad Alawad Sikaing, eds., *Africa and World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*. Chima J. Korieh, “Urban Food Supply and Vulnerability in Nigeria during the Second World War,” in *Nigeria Cities*, ed. Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 127–152.

<sup>28</sup> See David Killingray with Martin Plaut, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (London: James Currey, 2010); Byfield et al., *Africa and World War II*;

because of the war were unparalleled. The production of resources of such magnitude proved taxing to Nigerians, who endured demand on their labor and suffered food shortages amid new colonial regulations and restrictions and severe economic dislocation.

### Nigeria in the Empire and War

The recurring themes in this book – colonialism, empire, and global war – are used in relationship to their intersection with Nigerian colonial subjects as both instruments of colonial exploitation and collaborators in pursuit of imperial goals during wartime. Colonialism was a critical determinant of the place and role of Africans in the Second World War and of the exploitation of human and natural resources to provision the war. As a colonial project, and for war purposes, Britain continued converting natural resources, land, and people into effective units of commodity production.<sup>29</sup> Nigeria was a consequential part of the British Empire before the war. It was an important source of materials for British industries and an important trading link in British West Africa. In fact, Nigerian trade with Britain was already at a peak a decade before the war began. By 1927, 62 percent of goods imported to Nigeria came from Britain and 45.6 percent of Nigeria's exports went to Britain.<sup>30</sup> So Nigeria was destined to play a key role from the beginning of the war. Nigeria's role varied but remained significant throughout the war.

There were at least two reasons why Britain and the Allies co-opted Africans into the war. The first reason was the Allies' priority in garnering the resources necessary to prosecute the war.<sup>31</sup> This was a pragmatic bid to shore up the number of soldiers as well as necessary products,

UNESCO, *Africa and the Second World War: Report and Papers of the Symposium Organized by UNESCO at Benghazi, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, from 10 to 13 November 1980* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985). Falola, "Salt Is Gold"; David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Sven Beckert has used this expression in discussing capitalism. See Sven Beckert, "American Danger: United States Empire, Eurafica, and the Territorialization of Industrial Capitalism, 1870–1950," *American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (2017): 1137–1170.

<sup>30</sup> Brian Gardiner, *The African Dream* (New York: Putnam, 1970), 257. See also Christian C. Opat and Apex A. Apeh, "In Search of Honour: Eya Ebule As a Legacy of Igbo Resistance and Food Security from World War II," *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 13 (2018): 114–127, at 115.

<sup>31</sup> On Nigeria, see Judith A. Byfield, "Producing for the War," in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield, Carolyn A. Brown, Timothy Parsons, and Ahmad Alawad Sikaing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24–42; Carolyn A. Brown, "African Labor in the Making of World War II," in *Africa and World War II*, ed. Judith A. Byfield, Carolyn A. Brown, Timothy Parsons, and Ahmad Alawad Sikaing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 43–67.

including food, to support the metropolis and the colonial population. The move allowed the colonial government to continue to capitalize on the economic structures that already existed in the colonies. West Africa, especially Nigeria, provided “staging bases for British, American and other Allied soldiers and their supplies and equipment en route to the Middle and Far East.”<sup>32</sup> As a strategic colonial territory, Nigeria became the hub of wartime activities in West Africa and the locus of British colonial initiatives to promote production and other forms of support for the Allies. The country was the source of more than 140,000 soldiers and of agricultural produce, minerals, and timber from West Africa. The importance of Nigeria to the British war effort increased after the Japanese overran the British Far Eastern colonies. Nigerians were then called upon to maximize production in the country’s main export goods such as palm oil, palm kernels, rubber, and timber. Some of these products were already being exported in peacetime, while the exports of others were new developments derived directly from the war and the Axis occupation of areas in the Far East.<sup>33</sup> Thus, agricultural and war policies were closely intertwined and linked many existing colonial departments in pursuit of the war goals.

The second reason for partnering with Africans was ideological. Britain presented a different perception of race and race relations unlike that of Nazi Germany. Its liberal ideology in regards to race relations, although forged within a colonial context, contrasted intensely with Nazism. For most of the prewar period, the dominant colonial ideology had been white superiority and the notion of the “White Man’s burden,” but this changed during the war when African support became critical to the war effort. For Nigeria and other colonial territories, however, their peculiar experiences were influenced by the imperatives of colonialism as a source of identification with what President Dwight Eisenhower called “the Great Crusade.”<sup>34</sup> As the *Nigerian Daily Times* proclaimed in an editorial, the Nazi strategy of violence “has created an intense conviction, particularly among democratic countries, that international dealings will penetrate into the habits of the jungle if differences between larger and smaller nations continue to be settled by reliance on threat or use of brute force.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Peter B. Clarke, *West Africans at War 1914–18, 1939–45: Colonial Propaganda and Its Cultural Aftermath* (London: Ethnographica, 1986), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Nigeria, *A Colony’s Effort*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> *Nigerian Daily Times*, April 1, 1939, 3.