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John Iliffe

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## CHAPTER I

## THE ARGUMENT



This book is designed as a contribution to the reappraisal of European colonial rule in Africa which has accompanied African independence. The reappraisal is part of an attempt to establish the reality and meaningfulness of change in the African past, an attempt which is itself one aspect of a new interest in the history of hitherto inarticulate and defeated peoples. Since this trend in historical studies is directed away from a too exclusive concern with the political and administrative history of the west, it may appear paradoxical to claim a place within it for a book which is primarily a study of European administrative techniques in Africa. Few subjects, it might seem, are more exclusively concerned with the actions of a dominant group within a dominant society. The main purpose of the book, however, is to show that even the structure and operation of a colonial administration can be understood only if they are related to the insights which recent study of modern African history has made available.

This is not a new purpose. Many recent accounts of European rule in Africa are acutely aware of the context within which it must be seen. This study adds little that is original to the understanding of colonial rule which is available from such recent work. Its justification lies rather in the fact that an established interpretation of the events described here already exists, an interpretation which is coherent and well-documented, but which does not accord with recent findings in related fields. The clarity of the established interpretation highlights the points on which reappraisal must concentrate. In a sense, the history of Tanganyika under German rule between 1905 and 1912 is a test case in which

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the contrast between established accounts and current revisions may be seen clearly.

In existing studies of German colonial history, the year 1906 is commonly taken as a major turning-point. In that year, rebellions in South-West Africa and East Africa—Germany's two largest colonies—coincided with a political crisis which centred on criticism of the colonial administration. At the height of the crisis, Bernhard Dernburg was appointed Director of the Colonial Department. A year later the government won a crushing electoral victory after a campaign in which the criticisms of its colonial record were a major issue. Following this victory, it is said, Dernburg began what he later described as his 'reorganisation of German colonial policy'.<sup>1</sup> Sweeping away the brutal inefficiency of the past, he initiated a period of 'scientific colonization'.<sup>2</sup> To use Professor Brunschwig's terms, Dernburg replaced *la gabegie coloniale* by *la colonisation rationnelle*.<sup>3</sup> The new policy, it is argued, brought advantage both to Germany and to her colonial subjects, thus fulfilling the dual mandate which was the responsibility of an imperial power. In East Africa, similarly, the years which followed the crisis of 1906 are seen as a period of rationalisation, reform, and progress. 'The year 1906', according to a recent account, 'was a turning-point in the history of German East Africa. In the early years of German rule progress was slow owing to the hostility of native tribes, lack of funds, and faults in administration. But the period 1907-14 was a peaceful era of reform and economic expansion.'<sup>4</sup>

Thus summarised, the established interpretation of this period in German colonial history centres on four points, some of which are arguments and others merely assumptions.

<sup>1</sup> Dernburg to Bethmann Hollweg, 12 May 1910, Rk 1663/138.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Evelyn Townsend, *The rise and fall of Germany's colonial Empire 1884-1918* (New York, 1930), ch. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Brunschwig, *L'expansion allemande outre-mer (du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours)* (Paris, 1957), part 3.

<sup>4</sup> W. O. Henderson, 'German East Africa 1884-1918', in Vincent Harlow and E. M. Chilver, with Alison Smith (ed.), *History of East Africa*, II (Oxford, 1965), 147.

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First, it is argued that the crisis of 1905–7 was fundamentally a moral crisis. African rebellion was a response to administrative evils which were rooted in immorality. As Dr Townsend explains:

During the first twenty years of Germany's colonial history . . . the native had been most cruelly treated and unjustly exploited . . . Robbed of his lands, his home, his freedom and often wantonly and cruelly of his life by the colonial adventurer, official or trading company, his continuous and fierce revolts were but the tragic witnesses to his wretchedness and helplessness.<sup>1</sup>

If the rebellions were due to administrative immorality, the political crisis which accompanied them was rooted in moral outrage, incensed at inhumanity and inefficiency. From this follows the second point. The stimulus to administrative change was change of heart. Here there is some conflict among the historians. To Professor Henderson, the change of heart was forced on the administration by public opinion. The authorities 'could not ignore the fact that . . . there was a widespread demand for a reform in the colonial administration. The paradoxical result of this election was that (to a great extent) the colonial policy advocated by the opposition was the one subsequently followed by the Government.'<sup>2</sup> Professor Brunschwig, by contrast, sees the election as a moral victory for a reformed government, giving it a mandate to adopt more vigorous measures. 'At last', he writes, 'there emerged a colonial policy distinct from foreign or internal policy.'<sup>3</sup> Whichever view is taken, the third point follows naturally. In the subsequent reforms, the initiative lay firmly in German hands, and specifically in the hands of Dernburg. For Dernburg had a programme, a programme of enlightened economic imperialism, which he elaborated during the election and which he and his successors subsequently implemented. Employing the latest technology, sweeping away the abuses of earlier years, attracting capital investment, and holding an equal balance between the races, the new ad-

<sup>1</sup> Townsend, *Rise and fall of Germany's colonial empire*, p. 273.

<sup>2</sup> Henderson in Harlow and Chilver, *op. cit.* p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Brunschwig, *op. cit.* p. 166.

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ministration inaugurated an era of progress and prosperity. Three points in this account require emphasis. First, Dernburg's programme is commonly described in the most general terms. He urged the colonies forward by better organisation, by investment and reform, but it is apparently unnecessary either to discover in what direction they were supposed to move or to show that the programme was internally consistent. Second, Dernburg's programme is taken from election speeches made early in 1907. He remained in office until May 1910. The established interpretation assumes that he never changed his mind, and states that his successors agreed with him. Third, it is taken for granted that a programme conceived by a colonial secretary in Berlin was necessarily the most important force for change acting in the colonies at this date. This leads on to the fourth general point in the established argument. The success of the 'age of reform' is demonstrated by statistics showing economic development and by the absence of rebellion. In a passage which summarises this view, Dr Townsend writes:

Nothing, indeed, is more significant of the change for the better in the attitude of Germany's colonial administration toward the native than the fact that there occurred no actual native uprisings during the years 1908-1914. Peace prevailed throughout the oversea empire. And freed from the burden of prosecuting an almost constant and devastating warfare in the colonies, the Colonial Office could direct its energies and its resources toward a constructive rather than a destructive rule.<sup>1</sup>

It is not the purpose of this book to deny that real changes occurred in German colonial administration and in German East Africa during this period. Indeed, it may be that the scale of change has hitherto been underestimated. Rather, the object is to show that the process and direction of change was quite different from that suggested by established accounts. These accounts are incompatible with the findings of recent work on other aspects of European rule in Africa. At the heart of this new approach lies the question of the initiative for change in modern Africa. It does not deny that the colonial situation was created by the impact of western

<sup>1</sup> Townsend, *Rise and fall of Germany's colonial empire*, p. 273.

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capitalism and technology on Africa. Nor, save in moments of aberration, does the new approach doubt that in many situations European initiative primarily determined the course of events. Its chief concern is rather to demonstrate an interplay between European and African initiatives by showing that Africans were not the passive objects of colonial rule, unable to influence their fate or to respond rationally to new situations. The first stage in such an argument has been to show that nineteenth-century Africa was not necessarily set on a path to destruction through tribal war and slave-raiding—a path from which only European intervention could save it—but that the nineteenth century was a period of rapid, and at times successful, adaptation to the growing pressures of the outside world. This argument is now well developed in West Africa,<sup>1</sup> although less convincingly stated for the east.<sup>2</sup> It necessitates a reappraisal of the late-nineteenth-century partition of the continent by European powers, which has become the focus of important historical controversy. Although the sequence and relative significance of the various pressures is debatable, it is clear that an explanation of the transition from informal European influence to formal European rule must give considerable weight to the reactions of African societies to their growing economic contact with Europe before the partition, reactions which often threatened the economic and strategic interests of the great powers.<sup>3</sup> When it is realised that change was taking place in Africa as well as Europe, the motives of European statesmen can no longer be explained purely in terms of greed or compassion, but must also be seen to include fear. If the partition was in part a European reaction to changes in Africa, it is logical—as the evidence suggests—that save in areas of great economic

<sup>1</sup> J. F. A. Ajayi, 'West African states at the beginning of the nineteenth century', in J. F. A. Ajayi and Ian Espie (ed.), *A thousand years of West African history* (Ibadan, 1965), pp. 248–61.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapters by D. A. Low and Alison Smith in Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew (ed.), *History of East Africa*, 1 (Oxford, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, 'The partition of Africa', in F. H. Hinsley (ed.), *The New Cambridge Modern History*, xi (Cambridge, 1962), 593–640.

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attraction the European commitment to Africa in the early years of colonial rule was commonly restricted to the minimum necessary to preserve existing interests. Since colonial administrations were not provided with overwhelming power, a new significance attaches to African response to European invasion. By their different responses, African peoples, although seldom able to preserve their independence, could shape the character of European administration most profoundly. A division of African reactions into negative resistance and prudent collaboration is no longer adequate, and many responses can instead be explained as rational calculations of interest and probable consequence.<sup>1</sup>

By thus asserting the rationality of initial African reaction to European invasion, historians have provided a starting-point from which to explain subsequent changes in African response to colonial rule. One fruitful approach has been to isolate the sequence of organisational techniques by which various societies sought to resist, utilise, restrict, or remove European control. Such an analysis is concerned especially with the transition from one technique to another, often as a consequence of new aspirations and organisational possibilities resulting from economic and social change within the relevant society.<sup>2</sup> Three implications follow from such an analysis. First, African response to change can no longer be described in the negative terms of resistance. Attempts to initiate, accelerate, and control change become at least equally important. Second, and following from this, colonial rule cannot be seen as a process of European initiative and African response. Instead, a very complex pattern emerges, a pattern of local initiatives and local bargains, an interplay between European and African aims in which colonial policy, as an isolate formulated by governor or colonial office,

<sup>1</sup> J. D. Hargreaves, 'West African states and the European conquest', and T. O. Ranger, 'African reaction to the imposition of colonial rule in East and Central Africa', both in L. H. Gann and P. Duignan (ed.), *The history and politics of colonialism in Africa*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> J. F. A. Ajayi, 'The continuity of African institutions under colonialism', and J. M. Lonsdale, 'The emergence of African nations', unpublished papers, International Congress of African History, Dar es Salaam, Sept. 1965.

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is only one among a number of variables. Colonial administration is thus seen to be essentially similar to other forms of government, concerned to resolve conflict—sometimes by means of active development planning—rather than to impose a preconceived design on virgin territory. Finally, by asserting the rationality and significance of African initiative, modern study draws attention to conflict within African societies under colonial rule, conflict which is again susceptible of rational explanation, and which in turn helped to shape the character of European administration.

This book is an attempt to revise the established view of the ‘era of reform’ in German East Africa in the light of these insights into the nature of colonial rule. Its argument centres on five points. First, it is suggested that the very real changes in German behaviour in East Africa after 1906 were not primarily stimulated by new policies devised in Berlin, nor even by regret at earlier immorality, but by the fears engendered by the Maji Maji rebellion of 1905–7 in the south and east of the colony. Although originally provoked by maladministration, this rebellion was a rational attempt to achieve more effective organisation against European domination. It was the African initiative to which the ‘Dernburg reforms’ were the European response. Second, the reforms themselves were not primarily the work of an authoritarian and dynamic colonial secretary who imposed a new pattern on German policy. Rather, they grew out of conflict and negotiation between three parties: a governor who feared further rebellion, a legislature determined to assert its constitutional rights against the executive, and a colonial secretary with a responsibility to preserve political tranquillity. Third, when an attempt was made to carry out this programme of reform, it was first opposed and ultimately reversed by a body of European settlers who feared for their security and their economic interests. The reform programme did not merely propose rationalisation; it also proposed that German East Africa should be a country whose economy was based on African agriculture. The reversal of this programme implied

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that the colony should instead be dominated by European settlers. Thus reform did not in practice necessarily imply liberalisation, in the sense of developments more acceptable to the African peoples.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is true—and this is the fourth point—that the colony did not witness extensive rebellion after 1907 and that many African societies experienced economic and social advance. The reason, it is suggested, lies less in European initiatives than in changes taking place within African societies at this date. Partly through internal rivalries, partly owing to the failure of rebellion, and partly because of changing European pressures, many Africans rejected the first relationships established between the Germans and their societies, and instead sought advantage through new modes of behaviour within the colonial context. Attempts to restrict or resist European intrusion were superseded by a widespread desire to utilise western techniques in order to transform African societies. The ‘age of improvement’ which now began was the chief reason for the economic and social advance which took place in German East Africa at this time. Improvement was not, however, a universal aspiration, and other responses to colonial rule produced conflict within African societies. Finally, the fifth stage in the argument describes the new dilemma arising from the changes which took place during these years. On the one side was a powerful European community which had gained a considerable measure of control over the machinery of territorial administration. On the other side, a new African generation was better equipped than its predecessors to contest European domination. The outcome of the ‘era of reform’ was thus a situation of incipient conflict comparable to that existing in other areas of East and Central Africa—notably in Kenya and Malawi—at this date.

The argument begins with an account of the situation from which conflict arose.

<sup>1</sup> For a relevant comparison, see Helmut Bley, *Der Kampf um die koloniale Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1884–1914* (Hamburg, forthcoming).



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## CHAPTER 2

## THE MAJI MAJI REBELLION



When the Maji Maji rebellion began in July 1905, some four million people lived in Tanganyika.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps two-thirds formed dispersed communities in woodland savannah country between 500 and 4,500 feet above sea level, of which most of the colony consisted. Another one-quarter inhabited scattered areas of high or especially well-watered land. The remaining one-twelfth lived in a narrow strip below 500 feet on the eastern coast and extending inland along the three major river systems, the Pangani in the north, the Rufiji in the centre, and the Ruvuma in the south.<sup>2</sup> The great majority were cultivators, to whom cattle-keeping was a respected but secondary pursuit. With rare exceptions, they spoke Bantu languages, whose origins are believed to lie in West Africa, with a subsequent dispersal centre in the region of Katanga and Zambia. Bantu-speaking cultivators probably colonised Tanganyika from the south and west during the Christian era.<sup>3</sup> They infiltrated, mixed with, and finally absorbed peoples of different linguistic groups already resident in the area. Of these earlier peoples, two groups remained. One, the Kindiga and Sandawe, spoke languages related to the Khoisan languages of southern Africa. The second group comprised the Iraqw, Gorowa, and Burungi, whose Cushitic languages were akin to those of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. All these lived in the highland area south-east of Lake Victoria and

<sup>1</sup> Estimates based on hut-tax returns for 1911–12, in *Die deutschen Schutzgebiete in Afrika und der Südsee 1911/12* (Berlin, 1913), part 2, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> These very approximate proportions are calculated from tribal population figures in *Militärisches Orientierungsheft für Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Dar es Salaam, 1911).

<sup>3</sup> For a general discussion of Bantu origins, see Roland Oliver, 'The problem of the Bantu expansion', in *JAH*, vii (1966), 361–76.

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west of the Rift Valley. Bordering them in the plains to north and east were Masai pastoralists, immigrants from the north who spoke Eastern Nilotic languages.<sup>1</sup>

Little is known of the history of Tanganyika before the nineteenth century. Only the coast had a literary culture with surviving records. Further inland, there was no powerful state to preserve elaborate oral traditions which might serve as the nucleus of a territorial history. Instead a slow, complex, and now largely irrecoverable process of migration, settlement, and coalescence took place in this area of marginal fertility on the northern frontier of Bantu Africa. A central theme in this process appears to have been a succession of attempts to enlarge the scale of social and political organisation, attempts in which the consolidating forces of religion and political action were balanced against the fissiparous tendencies of colonising societies. Before 1800, consolidation was achieved only in areas of unusual fertility, population density, and economic specialisation. When the forces of the world economy made their first impact on the inland peoples during the nineteenth century, new opportunities for consolidation became available, and several societies began to adapt to this new environment. Change was rapid, however, and reorganisation often led only to instability. In consequence, when the Germans invaded the area at the end of the century, the scale of political organisations was still very limited, and coordinated resistance was difficult.

The Germans were fortunate to escape united resistance, for their commitment to East Africa was minimal. German interest in the area had long been confined to businessmen who traded with Zanzibar. German missionaries participated in the extension of evangelism during the nineteenth century. Geographical societies and scientific organisations proliferated after the creation of the German empire in 1871.<sup>2</sup> Noth-

<sup>1</sup> Following the classification by Joseph H. Greenberg, *The languages of Africa* (The Hague, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> For the origins of German interest in Africa, see Percy Ernst Schramm, *Deutschland und Uebersee* (Hamburg, 1950).