

Taveta, Occupation of

By [Norman Aselmeyer](#)

Summary

The German offensive along the northern frontier of German East Africa began with the capture of Taveta, a British border post at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro in present-day Kenya. Held for nearly two years, Taveta and its surrounding area served as a strategic base for German raids on the Uganda Railway and became a key battleground of the East African campaign. Beyond its strategic value, Taveta's capture had significant psychological impact on both belligerents in the war's early stages.

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Pivot of the Caravan Trade

Throughout the nineteenth century, Taveta was an important marketplace and resting stop for caravans in the Kilimanjaro region. In the language of the Wataveta people, Taveta means “the plain” and denotes the geographical character of the land.¹ Lying south-east of Mount Kilimanjaro and at the northern end of the Pare Mountains, Taveta occupies a narrow corridor within a long mountain barrier extending from the coast. This so-called “Taveta gap,” together with abundant water and food provided by Kilimanjaro's proximity and the security afforded by dense primeval forest, made it a pivot for all caravan routes leading north-west and west. The Anglo-German Partition Agreement of 1886 placed Taveta within the British sphere, designating it a border post merely two and a half miles from the Anglo-German frontier.² Despite serving as an important transit point for goods from the Kilimanjaro region, the colonial administration dismissed Taveta as a backwater of “very little economic or political importance.”³ On the eve of the war, the Wataveta numbered approximately 2,000, while the emerging township of Taveta contained no more than 200 residents.⁴

Occupation without Opposition

The occupation of Taveta on 15 August 1914 marked the first military engagement by the [Schutztruppe](#), the German colonial troops, on the northern border of German East Africa. It was the most important event in the early stages of the war, as it sealed the involvement of the German colony in the conflict and had a significant psychological impact on both belligerents. The order to invade British territory had been issued on 6 August by the commander of the German forces in [East Africa](#), [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#). However, officers stationed in the northern districts hesitated to act, uncertain about the neutrality provisions of the Berlin Act. Lettow-Vorbeck, who placed little value on international agreements under the circumstances, proceeded with his plans despite objections from Governor [Heinrich Schnee \(1871-1949\)](#), who was determined to maintain neutrality and avoid open hostilities.⁵ Prompted by intelligence reports indicating that British reinforcements from India were en route, Lettow-Vorbeck summoned his troops to the Anglo-German border and instructed them to seize Taveta and destroy critical infrastructure.

Governor Schnee dismissed the action as an “unnecessary provocation.”⁶ Lettow-Vorbeck’s order was transmitted on the night of 13 August by [Tom von Prince \(1866-1914\)](#), a retired army officer and leader of the volunteer settler forces. It was executed in the early hours of 15 August under the command of [Albrecht Hering \(1873-?\)](#), another settler who had joined the volunteer units.

Taveta was seized without much resistance. Isolated from the country’s railway by seventy-five miles of waterless desert, the British deemed the border post “virtually indefensible.”⁷ The Assistant District Commissioner, [Sydney Hubert La Fontaine \(1885-1964\)](#), who was instructed to vacate the station in the event of a German invasion, had only twenty-two armed police available. At daybreak, two German companies of African troops, about 200 in total, overran Taveta station. Another column of European volunteers of about the same number went astray on the way to Taveta. When La Fontaine opened fire on the German intruders, he triggered a heavy counterattack but managed to escape to Voi, leaving Taveta under German control. His Goan clerk, Manoel Vincent Rodrigues, was captured by the Germans. The brief skirmish claimed the lives of one German officer, the government forest officer [Friedrich Bröker \(1882-1914\)](#), and one African police officer from the Mtende people, who was killed by German troops during an exchange of gunfire at the border post.⁸

Although a tactical fiasco, the operation was a strategic success for the German forces. The Taveta district was a crucial defence zone against a British advance into the Kilimanjaro region and a good base for raids on the Uganda Railway, as it was the last watering-point before the Serengeti desert. With the withdrawal from Taveta, the British lost their principal

source of intelligence regarding military operations in German East Africa.⁹ Nevertheless, the British military downplayed the incident and declared it an “unimportant affair.”¹⁰

Under German Occupation

Under [Georg Kraut \(1870-1964\)](#), Taveta was heavily fortified and garrisoned. According to one missionary, the Germans “changed the whole country” during the occupation.¹¹ By 1916, the former settlement lay devastated. Nearly the entire Christian community, comprising the vast majority of town inhabitants, fled to the mission at Wusi, sixty miles away, while the African clerics were imprisoned. The remaining residents endured brutal treatment: the Germans mistreated the Wataveta, forcing them into labor and plundering their crops. Many retreated into the forest to escape gunfire and evade conscription into military and labor units. The Wataveta later remembered the German occupation as “very harsh.”¹²

The Church Missionary Society station at Mahoo, situated on two cinder cones in Taveta, became the centre of the Schutztruppe position. The church of St. Paul and mission buildings suffered heavy damage. One mission hill was converted into a fort with stone walls, a watch tower, and surrounding trenches.¹³ From their Taveta stronghold, the Germans launched a string of incursions into British territory and flying columns against the Uganda Railway. As the German nerve centre of military operations, holding 900 troops in early 1916, Taveta and the surrounding region became a major battleground in the struggle for Kilimanjaro.¹⁴

Taveta Recaptured

On 9 March 1916, British forces reoccupied Taveta as part of a major offensive launched four days earlier under the newly arrived command of [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#). Determined to break the German defensive line on the Kilimanjaro front, Smuts declared that the Taveta position “had to be forced at whatever cost.”¹⁵ To support the advance across arid terrain, the British had constructed a military railway from Voi toward Taveta. This logistical effort enabled the capture of the German fortification at Salaita Hill (also known by the Maasai name, Iltorrobo Mountain), east of Taveta. The scale of the offensive forced the Schutztruppe onto the defensive. When [Jacob van Deventer \(1874-1922\)](#) South African Mounted Brigade entered Taveta on the evening of 9 March, they found the town deserted and met no resistance.¹⁶

Following the British recovery of Taveta, former residents returned to the settlement and gradually rebuilt it. As an important supply station, coercive measures persisted under British

control. After the war, the British re-established the colonial authority and promoted large-scale European colonization in the region.¹⁷ However, Taveta's strategic importance diminished, and the area, now insulated between the two British-controlled territories, was transformed into a peripheral outpost.

Memories of the war remain deeply embedded in local consciousness. As the sole British imperial territory occupied by enemy forces during the conflict, Taveta bears distinctive scars that endure from that period. Local tradition maintains that certain tracts of land remain infertile, a condition attributed to the blood spilled in battle.¹⁸ This singular wartime experience has engendered a distinct culture of remembrance across the region. The landscape itself serves as a living memorial, marked by war graves, the skeletal remains of military infrastructure – railway lines, watchtowers, and trenches – and preserved battlefield sites. Complementing these historical landmarks are commercial institutions, including a privately run World War I museum and guided battlefield tours. From 2014 to 2019, Taveta served as the focal point of Kenya's official commemorations marking the centenary of the First World War. Currently, a public World War I Memorial Museum is under construction in Maktau (Mwaktikau/Mwashoti).

Norman Aselmeyer, University of Oxford

Notes

1. Hollis, Claud: Notes on History and Customs of People of Taveta, Kenya National Archives Nairobi (KNA), DC/TAV/2/1. [↑](#)
2. Bennett, Norman Robert: The British on Kilimanjaro, 1884–1892, in: Tanganyika Notes and Records 63 (1964), pp. 229–244. [↑](#)
3. Ainsworth, John: Reminiscences of East Africa, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MSS. Afr. s. 380, p. 18. [↑](#)
4. These numbers are estimations as precise data does not exist. Early government or missionary estimations of the Taveta population were often too high given later census. Taveta was officially accorded township status on 8 November 1921, see Kenya Gazette, 16 November 1921, p. 1000. [↑](#)
5. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul: Private War Diary, The National Archives of the United Kingdom Kew (NAUK), CO 691/27, fol. 194v–195r. See also Schulte-Varendorff, Uwe: Kolonialheld für Kaiser und Führer. General Lettow-Vorbeck – Mythos und Wirklichkeit, Berlin 2006, p. 29; Bell, Ludwig: Die Operationen in Ostafrika. Weltkrieg 1914–1918, Hamburg 1951, p. 47. [↑](#)
6. Farwell, Byron: The Great War in Africa, 1914–1918, New York 1986, p. 125. Only a few

years later, in 1919, Schnee acknowledged that the capture of Taveta had been “necessary” to keep the British at a distance; see Schnee, Heinrich: *Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkrieg. Wie wir lebten und kämpften*, Leipzig 1919, p. 69. For a revealing account of the relationship between Schnee and Lettow-Vorbeck, see Schnee, Heinrich: *Mein Verhältnis zu Lettow-Vorbeck* (1920), *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Berlin, VI. HA, Heinrich Schnee Papers, Nr. 22. ↑

7. Hordern, Charles: *History of the Great War. Military Operations East Africa*, volume 1: August 1914 - September 1916, London 1941, p. 22. ↑
8. La Fontaine, Sydney H.: *Reminiscence of an Administrative Officer in the Early Stages of the East African Campaign, 1914–1918*, KNA, DC/TTA/3/2; Hering, Albrecht: *Bericht über das bei Taveta am 15. August 1914 stattgehabte Gefecht*, in: *Kaiserliches Gouvernement Deutsch-Ostafrika* (ed.), *Zusammenstellung der Berichte über die in den Monaten August, September, Oktober 1914 stattgefundenen Gefechte der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika*, Morogoro 1914, pp. 7–12, online: <http://bwana-lettow.blogspot.com/2014/11/bericht-uber-die-eroberung-tavetas-auf.html>; Ludwig Boell asserts that two British askari were killed, but there is no further evidence to support this claim; see Boell, *Die Operationen in Ost-Afrika*, p. 48, fn. 1. ↑
9. Platts, William A. F.: *Occupation of Taveta* (Enclosure No. 1), NAUK, CO 533/140, fol. 441; Miller, Charles: *Battle for the Bundu. The First World War in East Africa*, New York 1974, pp. 40f. ↑
10. Ward, Launcelot E. S.: *Our Frontier. Unimportant Affair*, in: *East African Standard*, 22 August 1914, p. 15. ↑
11. Verbi to Manley, 28.2.1916, Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham, CMS/B/OMS/G3 A5 O, Reel 369. ↑
12. Frontera, Ann E.: *A History of Taveta. Persistence and Change*, volume 2: *Fieldnotes*. PhD diss., Northwestern University 1976, pp. 25, 62, 80. In his own account, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck portrayed relations with the Wataveta in a markedly positive light: “The natives trusted us and sold us their produce. The relationship was excellent.” Von Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul: *Heia Safari! Deutschlands Kampf in Ostafrika*, Leipzig 1920, p. 35. ↑
13. McGregor, Arthur W.: *A Visit to Taveta after the Germans have been Driven Out*, in: *The C.M.S. Gazette*, 1 July 1916, p. 189. The remains of the watch tower (the so-called German pillbox), trenches, and stone wall can still be seen today. ↑
14. Anderson, Ross: *The Forgotten Front. The East African Campaign 1914–1918*, Stroud 2004, p. 108. ↑
15. Smuts, Jan C.: *Introduction*. In: Crowe, John H. V.: *General Smuts’ Campaign in East Africa*, London 1918, p. vii. ↑
16. *Record of the 3rd King’s African Rifles during the Great War in East Africa 1914–1918*,

NAUK, WO 106/273, fol. 36. ↑

17. Frontera, Persistence and Change 1978, pp. 19–48. ↑

18. Interviews by the author in Voi and Taveta, 11 November 2019. ↑

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[Norman Aselmeyer](#)

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