
British Colonial Marine Transport Services in the Niger-Benue Confluence Area of Nigeria, 1914–1918

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the British marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria during the First World War. It posits that the flow of the Benue River through the Northern Nigeria/Cameroon border was a major way through which the British war resources were conveyed from the Niger-Benue confluence area to the battlefronts against the German Cameroon. The paper claims that the British authorities used lies as strategy by painting the Germans as land grabbers to get the locals' commitment and support during the war at the expense of marine transport services. It reveals that the colonial authorities' deployment of marine personnel and facilities in the prosecution of the war almost paralysed marine transport services in the area and beyond. The Marine Department (MD), the colonial authority that provided marine services on the waterways, lost 40 British marine officers, 4000 Nigerian personnel and had 12 of its vessels destroyed in the war. The deployment, as discovered, made the MD to neglect its primary responsibilities of maintaining and providing marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area in particular, and Nigeria in general. The development affected nearly every other part of colonial Nigeria economically as the utilisation of Niger-Benue Rivers (which formed the major navigable trading routes) for the war created shortages of imports and scarcity of shipping resources. A wide range of sources from primary to textual analyses in extant literature are used to explain how marine transport in the confluence area fared during the First World War.

Keywords: Marine; Transport; Niger; Benue; River; Confluence; WW1.

Introduction

The First World War was an imperialistic combat that was largely fought between 1914 and 1918, partly due to the tension that was created in Europe by the spread of

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tentacles and influence outside the continent by the warring parties in the era of new imperialism. This was particularly due to the phenomenal expansion in population and rise in the living standard that came with industrialisation in Europe. The development heightened the need for a source of cheap raw materials and ready markets for finished products of European factories (Olaniyan and Alao, 2003, p. 1). Nigeria, 'the biggest of the British dependencies in West Africa and the most populous of British African possessions', therefore found itself involved in the war barely eight months after the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914, to form a single unified British possession without common infrastructures, except the naturally navigable Niger-Benue waterways (Osuntokun, 1971, p. 171).

The Benue River which flows through the Northern Nigeria/Cameroon border into the Niger-Benue confluence area made the territory indirectly a buffer zone as British war resources were conveyed through the river to the battlefronts against the German Cameroon. The war affected nearly every other part of Nigeria economically as the Niger-Benue Rivers which formed the major navigable trading routes were optimally put to use. The marine transport services provided by the British authorities were adversely affected by the 'exclusion of the Germans from the African trade,' creating the wartime shortages of imports and reduction in freight (Crowder, 1985, p. 284). Shipping facilities and personnel for marine transport in the area were diverted principally into the prosecution of the war.

The impact of the war on river transport and the economy of the confluence area and beyond, as observed in the extant literature, are yet to be given scholarly attention. Existing studies on Nigerian history and major historical writings by renowned economic and military historians (Abdulkadir, 2014; Ekundare, 1973; Tangban, 2008; and Osuntokun, 1979) have extensively and elaborately covered and explained the economic and military impact of the war on Nigeria as a colony of Great Britain. The aforementioned works dwell mostly on the enlistment and conscription of Nigerians into the war in the Cameroons and Eastern Africa, their monetary and material contributions, as well as the social, political and economic consequences of involving Nigerians in the war. Much less has been written about the contributions of geographical resources, particularly the Niger-Benue Rivers' navigation, to the successful British campaigns in the Cameroons. More so, the existing studies, pay little or no attention to the state of marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria and beyond during the troubled period. Relying on archival and other secondary sources of data, and textual analysis, this paper examines the state of marine services in the Niger-Benue confluence area during the First World War and the impact of the global arms' conflicts on them.

The Niger-Benue Confluence Area

The Niger-Benue confluence area, within the scope of this paper, is broader in geography than just the point the Benue River flows into the Niger River in Lokoja as it is superficially defined by most scholars. Obayemi (1980), Mohammed (2014) and Abdulkadir (2014) in their various definitions did not give a specific geographical description of the confluence area. However, Mohammed (2014) asserts that the area encompasses the meeting point of the two massive rivers and by inference, the peoples within the circumference of the confluence who depended on the water bodies for means of existence. However, in this paper, the area covers from Lokoja to Gbagana on the Benue, from Idah in the lower Niger through Lokoja to Koton-Karfi in the mid-Niger. It could therefore be defined as the areas within the circumference of the Niger-Benue confluence that is occupied by the Igala, Nupe, Kakanda, inland and waterside Ebira, northeastern Yoruba, Bassa Nge, Bassa Komo, Ganagana and Oworo.

The War, its Frontiers and Marine Services

The First World War rumbled onto the global stage when a Serbian nationalist seeking to free his ethnic group from Austrian domination assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and his girlfriend, Sophie, in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 (Kegley and Blanton, 2011). The assassination was nothing out of the ordinary, but it became an immediate catalyst that sent an already inflammable and volatile Europe that had changed from a system that was fluid and susceptible to pragmatic cooperation to a system dominated by two increasingly rigid and hostile alliances that were born out of imperialistic dispositions, into utter incineration between July 28, 1914 and November 11, 1918 (Bourke and Boyer, 2011).

The belligerent parties were the Allied Forces and the Central Powers. Allied Powers included: France, Russia, Britain, Japan, Italy, Romania, Canada and the United States. The Central Powers consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. Though the assassination snowballed into a series of actions and reactions that shattered world peace, the responses of the belligerents as stated above, were borne out of the ambitions which the state actors had been nursing as a result of the changing economic order in Europe and North America beginning from the 1880s (Roberts, 2001). It was an imperialistic war that was largely fought due to the tension created in Europe by the spread of imperial tentacles outside its shores by the warring parties in the era of new imperialism. The development heightened the need for sources of cheap raw materials and ready markets for finished products of European, in particular, British factories (Olaniyan and Alao, 2003).

The frontiers of the war extended to Africa and other continents that were under the warring parties' (Allies and the Central Powers) imperial influence and control. The Allies, as part of their strategies, were determined to conquer the Central Powers' colonies to stop them from being used as bases for the subversion of often-tenuous authority in their colonies; and to partition these colonies among themselves in the event of an overall Allied victory at the end of the war (Crowder, 1985). In British West Africa, therefore, the Nigerian border with the German Cameroons became one of the buffer zones, where the war was fiercely fought in the Nigerian border communities of Maiduguri, Yola, Dikwa, Kuseri, Ikom and Calabar into the Cameroonian mainland of Duala and Yaoundé, with the appropriation of mainly Nigerian human and material resources.

In all this, MD was the British colonial agency in Nigeria that was heavily affected because it controlled the inland waterways as well as coastlines that served as the main connection between Nigeria and the Cameroons (Nigerian Army, 1992). Consequently, at the outbreak of the war, MD's facilities like crafts and its workforce were deployed to the war zone at the expense of internal marine transport services. The greater part of the facilities was deployed by the British authorities as marine contingent, including some 12 vessels and a large part of the personnel which were specifically sent to assist the naval forces in the operations against the German Cameroons. As a result of these extant realities, MD neglected its primary responsibilities of maintaining and providing marine transport services on the Nigeria inland waterways in general and the Niger-Benue confluence area in particular. However, the skeletal marine services that were provided in the area in the course of the war were relatively safe as the war was fought on the Benue around the Nigeria/Cameroon border in the northeastern part of the country (Annual Reports, 1914).

The development above was consequent upon the proclamation and order that was issued in Nigeria on August 5, 1914, which conscripted the marine and land contingent for combat duties. Consequently, the marine contingent that included MD as a whole was saddled with the immediate responsibility of protecting Nigeria against sea and inland waterways attacks (Ukpabi, 1992). In the First World War period, the MD was under John Percival as the Director of Marine (Blue Books, 1914-1918). Under him, the MD's navigators and river transport workers, who were responsible for the conveyance of cargoes and passengers within the Niger-Benue confluence area and the lower Niger were deployed at high pressure to perform the following duties: strengthen river vessels to carry 350 British, 40 marine officers 4,000 native rank and file, heavy guns and military hardware, protect the armory and conduct minesweeping; and the repair of damaged vessels, among others. Thus, MD became overtly indispensable in the course of the war as the successes recorded in the earlier phase

of the campaign largely depended on the agency and the performance of its onerous duties (Annual Reports, 1914).

Therefore, the marine contingent under Colonel Carter constituted the bulk of British troops from Nigeria that fought against the German Cameroon on the Benue River. On August 29, 1914, the troops attacked and seized one of the German forts in Garoua, a river port on the Benue in the northern part of Cameroon. However, a few days after, the Germans recaptured the fort and killed the Commanding Officer, Lt-Colonel Macleans, and chased the British troops out of the territory (Ngwa, 2015). In the southern parts of the Cameroons, Nigerian forces under the British command suffered similar setbacks in an engagement at Nsanakang. The defeat affected the MD adversely as most of its fleet deployed for the operation were destroyed with hundreds of men killed (Crowder, 1962). With these setbacks, it was clear to the allies that a larger force was needed from the Nigerian territories to fight the Germans in the extremely difficult Cameroonian terrains (Crowder, 1962).

The Strategy

The strategy of the British authorities in convincing the locals, particularly the people of northern Nigeria, was that the Germans had taken parts of their territories and were engaged in the war to claim more land. This deception made the people of the north, particularly those of the upper Benue, to be readily available in high numbers for recruitment and conveyance to the war fronts by what was left of the MD vessels. As elucidated by Abubakar (1980), the British used lies as a strategy to co-opt the northern chiefs and emirs into the war, and to avoid Muslim hostilities because of the psychological closeness the Islamic world had with the Ottomans. The British were able to manipulate the emirs and other northern chiefs, particularly the Shehu of Borno, into believing that the Germans were hawkish. It was also easy for the British to do this because of the general belief among northern Muslims that the colonial government was a protector of Islam in the region (Crowder, 1968).

Emboldened by the insatiable desire to regain the Nigerian territory that was ceded to the German by default in the period of European delimitation of boundaries between 1882 and 1894, Britain took the opportunity created by the war and focused her attention on how to conquer the lost territories and keep them permanently (Osuntokun, 1975). Specifically, the territories lost to the Germans that the British authorities wanted back belonged to the Lamido of Adamawa and the Shehu of Borno, who were victims of the arbitrary European mapping of African boundaries during the partitioning era (Osuntokun, 1975).

This development, which somewhat became a blessing for the British war project soon became a curse for marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area. The department's entire efforts were all diverted into the war operations on the Benue around the Nigeria/Cameroon borders without let or hindrance. The native administration of the north was so committed to the war that it contributed £98,405 to the war expenses (Annual Report, 1916). The contribution, according to existing literature, was done as a show of freewill support to the British authorities by the northern native authorities (Ubah, 1998). What this means is that if the northern leaders were indifferent about the war, the department would not have committed so many resources to it, and it would still have carried out its normal marine operations in the confluence area and beyond. Apart from deploying its personnel to the various war fronts on the banks of the Benue in the Cameroonian territory, the MD in cooperation with the Royal Navy was engaged in raising - from the bottom of the harbour in Duala - the floating dock and ships sunk by the German forces; and provided crews for captured German boats which were used by the Allies in offensive operations in the southern creeks of the Cameroons (Osuntokun, 1975).

To make the operations seamless for the Allies, the MD made the River Benue and the main channel of the Cameroon River navigable to the allied vessels, so that they could fight extensively against the Central Powers gun runners by re-buoysing and dredging at intervals during the war. The activities of the MD were the reasons for the predominance of the British in Cameroon, the capitulation of Duala, a major city in the German colony, and the occupation and administration of some areas of the Cameroons near the Nigerian border like Garoua (Osuntokun, 1975). This made the department to be so absorbed in the Cameroons expedition that its primary assignment of providing marine transport services in the confluence area in particular, and Nigeria in general, was consequently abandoned with dire economic consequences like the reduction in traffic and loss of revenue.

The Consequences

The situation was so damaging to marine services to the extent that the proposal to dispose of some of the services to a privately formed company to ensure efficiency, which had been under discussion since 1913, was finally abandoned and substituted with an increased tariff of fares and freights (except on the Niger service) that was approved for introduction on January 1, 1915, to put the services on a commercial basis, as far as possible (Annual Reports, 1914). Adding to this, river transport in the confluence area, particularly on the lower and the middle Benue, was hindered in the same year when insecurity on the river banks worsened due to unrest caused by the war, and inter-tribal wars in many districts in the Benue valley, which could not be

policed due to paucity of security operatives and lack of marine transport services (Annual Reports, 1915).

Consequently, the usual launch services from the confluence area through the lower Niger to Sapele and Warri that were maintained until the outbreak of war had to be closed down owing to the withdrawal of vessels from active service. The situation was also aggravated by resistance against Nigeria's involvement in the war from the south, when the marine services on the Niger became few and far between due to the war, and the barring of the Germans from the trade on the Niger, particularly the Niger-Delta area. The resistance also had a religious coloration because it was attributed to the activities of a Christian prophet, who was known as Elijah II. He took advantage of the temporary collapse of the palm oil trade during the war period to mobilise the people against the British (Crowder, 1962). The situation escalated up north in March 1915, when the Montoil 'pagans' of Muri Province killed Mr Maltby, an Assistant District Officer (ADO) and his crew (NAI, File 946, 1916, 27).

Thus, marine revenue fell drastically from £68,344 in 1914 to £37,000 in 1915, when its services were greatly overshadowed by the continuance of the war (Annual Reports, 1915). The instability took a serious toll on the MD, which was forced to work under difficult conditions and pressure as from 1916, owing to the shortage of coal and the absence of so many officers and vessels whose crews were on service with the Cameroonian Expeditionary Force. It then became necessary for the MD to lay up to several crafts; only a modified service was maintained on the Niger. Furthermore, due to the death of ten of its officers in June of the same year, the department sold its dredgers, the 'Ivy' and the 'Quora' to the admiralty due to lack of capacity and maintenance. As a result, the department put an end to the periodic dredging and clearing of the Niger and Benue Rivers for navigation (NAI, File 946, 1916, 32). The situation degenerated to the extent that even the usual launch services which were maintained until the outbreak of the war could not be sustained. Several of them, notably the important Lokoja-Onitsha-Warri services had to be closed down owing to the withdrawal of vessels for active military service (Annual Reports on Marine, 1914).

The condition of the MD worsened in December 1915 owing to the absence of several officers, who were deployed under high pressure to strengthen river vessels to carry heavy guns; in protecting with such plating as was available; in the manufacturing of kites for minesweeping; and in repairs of damaged vessels, among others. Success, in the earlier phase of the campaign, largely depended on these efforts (Annual Reports on Marine, 1914). However, by the end of the Cameroonian campaign at the end of 1916, marine operations in the confluence area began to gradually normalise as revenue from marine services jumped astronomically from £37,

000 in the previous year to £54, 164 in 1916. This was due to an appreciable increase in the transportation of both passengers and cargo that resulted from retrenched crafts on the Niger, which were placed in service to run regular transport for the greater portion of the year 1916. Mail services between Lokoja, Forcados and Warri also resumed, but owing to the irregularity of the ocean mail steamers, the services could not be run on any regular schedule. Dredging operations were carried out at Baro and Amaggede during the whole of 1916, but reclamation work which had been suspended for lack of coal, was restarted in June of the same year (Annual Reports on Marine, 1916).

By 1917, the department became helpless due to the death of ten of its officers in the war. Thirty marine officers and 217 rank and files were killed in the course of the war. Owing to these casualties and the absence of several officers on active service, the department modified its operations in the confluence. This continuous modification increased as the war progressed. Its vessels remained laid up and ferry services in most places were in abeyance. However, the provision of coal from Udi enabled a modified service to be maintained on the Niger between Lokoja and Warri and, also between Warri and Degema during the year. Also, a fortnightly mail and transport service from Lokoja to Baro was started in July 1917 (Annual Reports on Marine, 1917).

The war significantly hurt marine services in the area under study for as long as it lasted, so much that even trading firms like John Holt Company, Messrs Elder Dempster, Niger River Transport (NRT) Company, Paterson Zochonis (PZ), *Societe Commercial de Union Trading Company* (UTC), *Companie de Transport et Commerce* (CTC), etc., that kept the waterways busy with trading activities were badly affected as their markets in Europe were ravaged by the war. However, respite began to come the way of the MD with the end of the war. It got £57, 000 for colliers and £73,000 for miscellaneous due to the increased war bonus granted to European and native officers in 1918 (Annual Reports on Marine, 1918). So that by the end of the war in November 1918, normal marine services had returned to the confluence area after all the war-ravaged vessels were put in an order at the marine workshop in Lokoja (Annual Reports on Marine, 1918).

Conclusion

Marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence during the First World War were overshadowed by naval services and warfare on the Benue River by the British against the German Cameroons. The British used the geography of the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria, particularly its navigable waterways, as an auxiliary to unleash its military forces against the German Cameroons. The geographical

advantage, which is one of the major indicators of power in war and international politics, to a larger extent, aided the British in the defeat of the Germans. The British in the course of the war, as analysed in this paper, abandoned their colonial marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area almost in its entirety in favour of the deployment of marine capital and human resources to the prosecution of the war. The consequences of the war on the marine services in the confluence area were dire. The death of marine personnel in their hundreds in the course of the war also led to the laying up of vessels and the closure of mail and ferry services. The situation resulted in a drastic reduction in revenue from marine services and economic activities in the Niger-Benue confluence area. Apart from the neglect of the marine transport services during the war, the MD could not carry out its periodic dredging and clearing of the waterways for silts, rocks, hyacinths and other debris leading to turbulent navigation for the marine vessels during and after the war.

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