

Survival of Trade across Lake Victoria during the First World War: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The First World War (1914–1918) had far-reaching consequences on global and regional commercial networks. Lake Victoria, a transport and economic hub in East Africa became an area of interest between the Germans in Tanganyika and the British in East Africa (British East African protectorate and Uganda) where each power sought to disrupt the general supply and the commercial progresses of one another during the War. This study investigates the survival of trade across the lake amidst the hostilities and fear in the region caused by the First World War. Employing Economic Resilience, Informal Economy and Regional Integration Theories, this study illustrates the persistence of trade across the lake during the war period. The study holds that strategic interests of colonial powers and pre-existing trade relations sustained commerce across the lake during the war period. Local traders adjusted to wartime conditions by employing informal techniques including smuggling and barter systems. In the same vein British and German colonial officials reluctantly compromised some level of trade for sustainability of their respective economic interests.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The First World War (1914–1918) had far-reaching consequences on global and regional commercial networks. Port connections to the hinterland were a major factor in the growth of many ports in the late nineteenth century (Palmer, 1999). In Africa, ports which were linked to inland transport infrastructures were meant to facilitate

economic extraction processes (Martin & Sunley, 2010). However, the outbreak of the First World War interrupted this period of port expansion and trade and instead initiated engineering and infrastructural developments meant to serve the needs of the war.

The immediate outcome of the war in Lake Victoria was the total termination of all traffic between Tanzania ports and the port of Kisumu, which resulted in a decline of commodities

exported from Tanganyika notably groundnuts, hides and skins, coffee and beeswax. The War affected the economic developments of Lake Victoria Zone, particularly colonial economies which depended on European markets and capital. The hostilities destabilised the socio-economic fabric of the lake basin and the serious consequences resulting from political disunity within the zone (Ford, 1955). This was evidenced by a decline of booking of the lake ferries due to the unavoidable dislocation of traffic from the British zone. The commercial lake ferries became under the control of the navy for the lake patrol services with the exception of four left for ordinary traffic, *SS William Mackinnon*, *the Clement Hill*, *the Rusinga* and *the steam tug Huseni*. At the same time the world prices of raw cotton dropped. Consequently, the Africans around the lake zone reduced its production due to low benefits. The commencement of the war led to the closure of many businesses in the lake region particularly Kisumu, being that railroads and lake transport were the major entry and exit of cargo in the region through Kisumu (AR, 1914/15). However, the emerging evidence indicates that informal trade systems among the locals around the lake in the three countries—Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika demonstrated remarkable persistence during this period. Economic Resilience, Informal Economy and Regional Integration Theories, explain persistence of this trade despite the war.

Trade in imports was stable until the outbreak of the war in August 1914 when it underwent a rapid decline before it revived later in 1916. Due to disruptions in trade, there was a reduction in revenues from the lake region in 1915 compared to 1913/14. However, new arrangements under which trade was conducted were becoming successful and led to increased revenue, which hitherto relied on the native hut tax (AR, 1924; AR, 1925; AR, 1924; Anyumba, 1995). Overton (1989) further indicates that during the war revenue from custom duties dropped in Kenya as shipping shortages stopped non-essential imports and some exports, yet the colony was to finance its administration. As a result, heavy taxation was imposed on Africans as more taxes that are new were introduced. With such a drop in trade and a decline in the use of the railways and thus less revenue, African taxation remained the only option for the state.

More disruptions occurred during 1915–16 as shown in figure 1.1 when more ferries were further

taken over by the navy leaving Uganda Railways management with only *Rusinga*, *the Clement Hill*, *the steam tug Huseni* and two 50-ton lighters. Moreover, German attacks on the railway line at Voi at some point nearly brought traffic to a standstill. During November and December of 1915, the export trade of Uganda passing through the port of Kisumu stopped. As a result, a great congestion occurred at the ports and trade in Uganda was carried by storing of cargo in go downs. This was because by June 1916, 9,143 tonnes of goods had already been held up for transport at the various ports on Lake Victoria. The situation was saved in December of the same year by the British military, thus the traffic normalized and trade was restored. The ferries, which were taken over by the navy, were restored for trade on First of January 1917 under the military control and only two boats, some tugs and lighters were left for the war. Despite the control and the cessation of the hostilities on Lake Victoria, the trade of the region remained distressed by the extension of the war elsewhere in East Africa and Europe. The severe war towards the end of the war instigated by the Germans resulted in a restriction of both imports and exports of East Africa, a situation which extended up to the period of peace. This condition impacted severely on the economy of East Africa. In particular, the peoples' income were affected and subsequently their purchasing power reduced because they could not export (Ford, 1955).

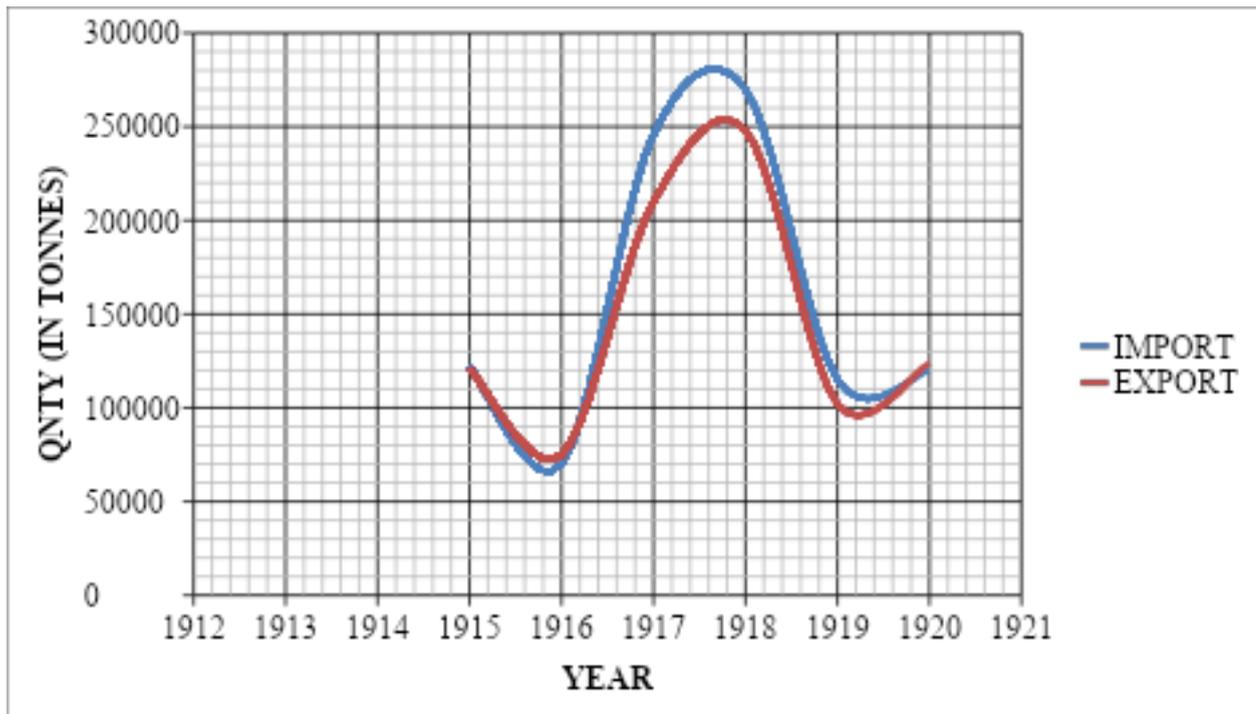


Figure 1.1: Trade across Lake Victoria during the First World War
Source: Uganda Railways Annual Report (1914/1915–1919/1920)

The use of canoes remained popular for transport and fishing during the war. Orango (O.I., 2025) a resident of Karungu, argues that before the advent of dhows and engine boats, their people travelled from Karungu to Uganda and Tanzania by use of canoes. Similar sentiments were echoed by Ougo (O.I., 2025) who indicates that the use of canoes improved fishing and was the main mode of transport connecting Asembo, Uyoma, South Nyanza and Uganda. However, at the outbreak of the war in 1914, the colonial government issued the Victoria Nyanza Fish Protection Rules that controlled fishing in the lake (MacKenzie, 1985; Opondo, 2011). For instance, all fishers had to register their boats and were issued with licenses to determine the times of fishing, trawling was not allowed near the shore of the Lake and nets of less than one inch were prohibited. Moreover, the state controlled and regulated the migration of people to the beaches from the villages by issuing regulations that determined who should be a fisher and where fishing should take place (Overton, 1989). Registration requirements were too demanding to the Africans fishers. A number of African canoe owners could not afford the fees required for licensing and at the same time many canoes were

declared unworthy to be used for both fishing and transport. This further affected the African economy because many people relied on fishing for their daily leaving (Nyakiya, O.I., 2021)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 An Overview of the Impact of World War I on Maritime Trade

Numerous studies have investigated marine travel and trade during the interwar era. No industry was more severely affected by the devastation of the world wars than shipping and subsequently maritime commerce (Ojala & Tenold, 2016). Transport connections to the hinterlands were a key factor in the development of numerous ports in Europe in the late nineteenth century. However, this development was halted when the First World War broke out (O'Brien's, 2015). During the war, a sizable portion of the maritime cargo was lost at sea. Furthermore, the war shattered long-established patterns of international trade, paving the door for the rise of new nations that threatened European dominance in both maritime transport and global

trade (Ojala & Tenold, 2016).

The outbreak of the First World War became an opportunity for the USA and Asia to increase their marine trade. For instance, the US fleet was quite modest in 1913 when compared to her involvement in world trade. Foreign-flag ships were detoured away from US routes as soon as the First World War began. The US government decided to provide financial support to the shipbuilding industry in order to meet the demand for ships for both military and commercial objectives (Bertho, 2010). Prior to World War I, France and Britain initially procured goods for export from their colonies, particularly those in Africa, before sending them to America and other areas for sale. At the height of the conflict, American sailors were able to conduct direct trade with Africa thanks to Europe's focus on defending itself (Gregory, 2008).

At the start of the twentieth century, Britain was the world's dominant maritime power followed by France, and by 1914, the British allies held a larger portion of the world's merchant ships. About two-fifths (19 million tonnes) of the 45 million gross registered tonnes of steamships in the world's fleet were British-flagged. However, in June 1914 the UK's shipping decreased from 44% of global marine tonnage to 36% and to 39%, in June 1919. The same trend was seen for the British Empire (Tenold, 2016). Thus, transition from a peacetime to a wartime economy largely affected European trade. In particular, Allies and laws enforced by neutral nations severely limited Germany's seaborne trade. With the exception of the Black Sea and Baltic, all oceans were under British Navy authority. In the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, German vessels continued to sink Allied and neutral steamships despite these measures. In the fifth month of the war in 1914, 319,000 tons of tonnage had been lost, or around 0.7 percent of global marine trade (Klovland, 2017). Europeans heavily relied on maritime transportation to supply them with both raw materials and consumables during the start of the First World War (O'Brien, 2015). Boahen (1985) notes that ports grew quickly in regions where there were ongoing military operations in Africa or where shipping facilities were needed. Examples include Mombasa, Dakar, Port Harcourt, Bizerta, and Dakar. However, the First World War ended when German ports were captured, ending all German activity in East Africa. British navy blockades prevented German East Africa from importing or exporting manufactured goods or receiving any

assistance from Germany. From 1916 until the entire country was eventually seized, the British progressively advanced into German-controlled East Africa. The achievements of Germany in East Africa were remarkably wrecked by the conflict.

2.2 Theoretical Analysis

This study employs three theories to explain the survival of trade across Lake Victoria during the First World War: Informal Economy, Economic Resilience and Regional Integrations Theories.

A. Informal Economy Theory

The proponents of this theory include Hart (1985), Tignor (2006) and Yusuff, (2011). This theory postulates that informal economic activities operate outside official government structures. This system enjoys much flexibility and adaptability during crises (Godfrey, 2011). Colonial Africa is characterized by this economic orientation (Hart, 2010). When formal colonial trade systems were interrupted by World War I, these informal networks sustained commercial exchanges across Lake Victoria. The theory shows that informal economies succeed due to local knowledge, personal relationships, and faster adjustments to changing circumstances (Maddox, 1998). The survival of trade across Lake Victoria during the First World War can partly be attributed to robust informal economy operating outside colonial control. While colonial authorities concentrated on military mobilizations and formal export commodities, local traders maintained indigenous exchange networks using traditional watercraft and trade routes (Ogot, 1976). Local traders shifted to goods needed for regional consumption including domestic tools, foodstuffs and craft items that were less dependent on European markets.

The diversion of Europeans attention from commerce to war gave room for the Arab and Indian traders to expand their trade using dhows. The reference to the appearance of the first dhow in Lake Victoria can be traced after 1880 and before the colonial ferry services. These dhows were involved in trade between Mwanza and Buganda areas. Mwanza was the only point on Lake Victoria that could be reached easily from the coast and Buganda was the only major trading area in the Lake basin. These dhows were owned by the Arabs and were largely involved in slave trade (Holmes, 1971). However, the launching of the Arab dhow

trade on the lake coincided with the European drive against slave trade in East Africa. Indians used them to carry out trade in household commodities, fishing and fish transportation. By 1908, Uganda Railways operated four steamers and other auxiliary vessels while the private merchants such as Messrs A. Visram had a steamboat and some twenty dhows and Messrs P.H. Clarke Ltd also introduced a small steam boat, all used for cargo business in Victoria Nyanza (Kisumu Province Annual Report, 1907/08). Indian fish traders were the main beneficiaries of the commercialization of the fishing industry in Kenya. Though, there were a few Africans who owned fishing boats and benefited from the trade but, Indians owned a large number of fishing boats, the cold storages for preservation and lorries which they used to transport fish to different market places including Nakuru, Eldoret and Nairobi (Onduru, 1992; Opondo, 2011).

B. Economic Resilience Theory

This Theory analyses how regional economies withstand, survive and recover from shocks. Among the proponents of this theory include Garmez (1986) and Martin (2012). According to Martin (2012), resilience has four dimensions: resistance, recovery, reorientation, and renewal. This theory underscores the importance of diversified economic bases, flexible production systems, and capability for innovation in the face of disruption. According to Ochieng (1985), Lake Victoria Region had a rich culture, based on fishing, simple crop production and increased craft specialization which provided commodities for trade during the face of the First World War.

C. Regional Integration Theory

The emphasis of this theory is based on how pre-existing relations between neighboring communities or regions maintain their economic interaction despite external shocks (De Lombaerde & Van Langenhove, 2006; Kimbugwe, et. al., 2012 and Schimmelfennig, 2018). Cultural ties, shared languages and family connections across colonial borders enabled trade to continue even when formal colonial trade systems were disrupted. Opondo (2011) observes that fishing and travelling across the lake in pre-colonial East Africa was not restricted to the modern state boundaries as in the case today, the lake belonged to all the communities that bordered it. Moreover, beyond

the beach, however, there were no boundaries restraining the movement of fishers on the Lake. They freely roamed the lake catching fish because there were no borders indicating Uganda or Tanzania. Traditionally fishers believed that the Lake belonged to God. Therefore, out of regular interactions, there was a similarity in the canoes and other fishing equipment that were used by the Luos and Banyala of Kenya, the Baganda of Uganda and the Wasukuma of Tanzania. This similarity was a demonstration of the trade relations among different communities around Lake Victoria (Osogo, 1973). These pre-colonial relations continued up to the period of colonization and even today and became the basis of trade networks when the colonial authorities imposed restrictions in trade and movements.

III. FINDINGS

The First World War disrupted the pre-war networks of trade. Before the outbreak of the war in 1914, Lake Victoria was a flourishing commercial zone where British and German territories engaged in regulated trade. Upon the establishment of the lake ports, Uganda Railway ferries transported commodities between the ports within Kenya's waters of the lake and between the ports across East Africa. After the completion of Kisumu dock and repairs at Jinja, Entebbe and Mwanza in 1906, Uganda Railways Corporation witnessed the first indications that trade was developing faster than the available lake transport services (see figure 3.1). This rapid upsurge of trade continued to strain the capacity of the small fleet available for transport services to the utmost despite the addition of more lake ferries (Uganda Railways, 1907)

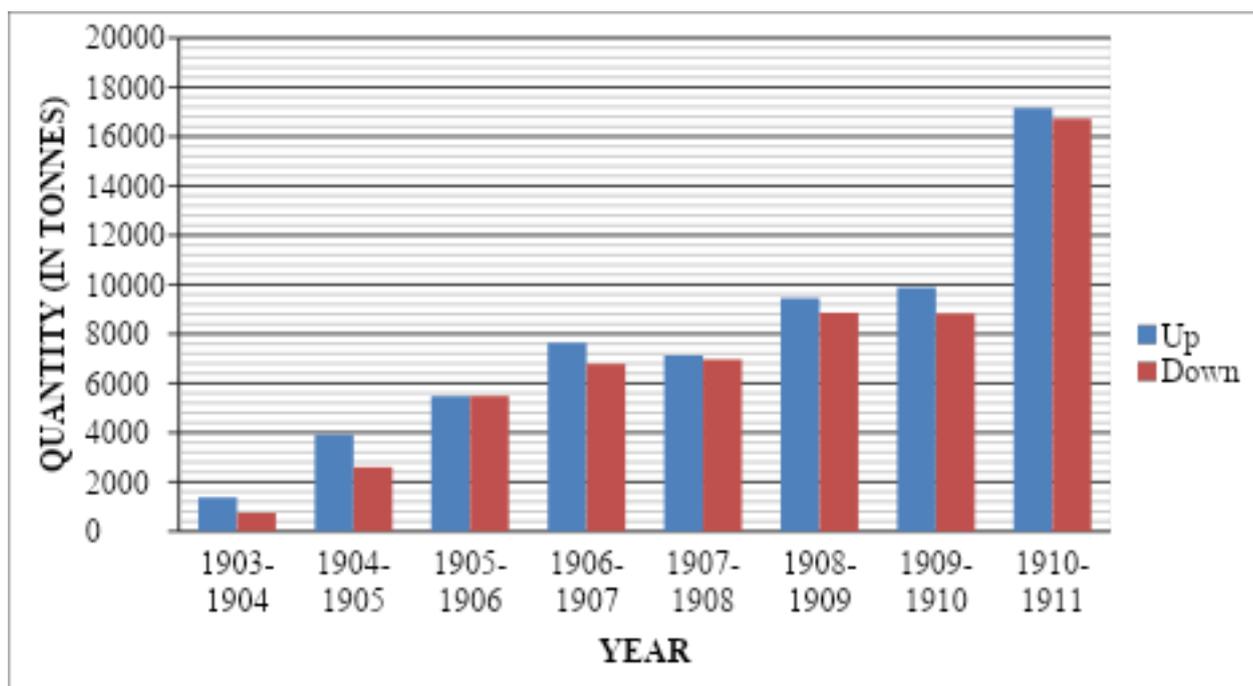


Figure 3.1: Tonnages Transported through the Lake between 1903 to 1911
Source: Uganda Railways, 1911

The principal commodities imported in the lake region included sugar, grains, salt, rice and cement while the export included cotton, groundnuts, sesame and maize (Uganda Railways, 1911). The expansion of trade continued in the next four years, 1910–1914, due to remarkable rapid development of Uganda and the opening up of the wealthy Kavirondo area. The strategic importance of the lake was to ensure that colonial administrations maintained steamship routes and customs posts to monitor trade movements (Uganda Protectorate Archives, 1915).

The war sharply declined this cross-lake commerce especially in 1914 and 1915. British colonial authorities feared that German East Africa would use this trade as an opportunity to smuggle weapons, thus imposing a naval blockade in 1915 (German East Africa Colonial Records, 1916). Similarly, German authorities regulated food exports to prevent British forces from receiving supplies. These actions led to severe shortages of supplies, mainly salt and textiles, which had previously been imported from German territories of Tanganyika.

The strict regulations imposed on transport across the lake during the war period led to the emergence of smuggling networks and informal trade. African traders across the lake including Kisumu, Ssese island of Uganda and Bukoba of Tanganyika had to adapt to other informal and illegal means to continue with trade. They used canoes and dhows especially at night to smuggle commodities which were highly demanded. German East Africa (Tanganyika) was rich in salt deposits, and became a major supplier to British East African territories despite official restrictions. This clandestine was highly organized, with traders using coded signals to avoid exposure. Colonial authorities were unable to curb these activities, because African traders often outwitted European patrols (Uganda Railways, 1921). Moreover, The consequences of the intense U-boat warfare towards the end of the war was the restriction on both the imports and the exports of East Africa, a situation which continued into the period of peace. The shortage of goods in Europe appropriate for export to East Africa and the lack of ocean-going shipping affected the commercial life of East Africa (MacKenzie, 1985).

Colonial governments in East Africa made an effort to stop trade across the lake through coercive means (Sunseri, 2003). However, they discovered that it was not possible to completely stop it because this would endanger their own economies due to symbiotic relations they had. For example, the British in Uganda relied on Tanganyika for salt, while German Tanganyika relied on Ugandan grains. Thus, new arrangements under which trade was conducted were becoming successful and led to increased revenue (AR, 1924; AR, 1925; Anyumba, 1995). Some limited official trade was allowed under strict supervision, highlighting a reluctant concession between military strategy and economic necessity (MacKenzie, 1985; Uganda Protectorate Archives, 1916; German East Africa Colonial Records, 1917).

The British introduced a licensing system for all lake vessels, forcing traders to obtain permits for any commercial activity (Nakyonyi, 2011). At the onset of the First World War in 1914 for instance, the colonial government issued the Victoria Nyanza Fish Protection Rules that controlled fishing in the lake. All fishers had to register their boats and be issued with licenses to determine the times of fishing. Moreover, the state controlled and regulated the migration of people to the beaches from the villages by issuing regulations that determined who should be a fisher and where fishing should take place (Overton, 1989). Registration requirements were too demanding to the Africans fishers. A number of the African canoe owners could not afford the fees required for licensing and at the same time many canoes were declared unworthy to be used for both fishing and transport. This further affected the African economy because many people relied on fishing for their daily living (Nyakiya, O.I., 2021; Uganda Protectorate Archives, 1916). These policies made German officials requisition food supplies for their troops, causing widespread resentment among African producers (German East Africa Colonial Records, 1917).

However, the application of these policies remained inconsistently applied. Allegations of compromising colonial officials through corruption allowed some traders to evade such restrictions. At the same time other traders bribed customs agents to allow smuggling (Overton, 1989). These conducts highlight the limitations of colonial power to fully control African economies.

The findings of this study underscore the significance of inland waterways in wartime

logistics. They also contribute to broader historiographical developments on African economic resilience during colonial rule.

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