

West African Members of the Police Force in the German Colony of Cameroon (1890s)

Abstract

Taken in the 1890s, this photo shows West African mercenaries of the German colonial police force with a German lieutenant, presumably Max von Stetten. In October 1891, the German colonial administration in Cameroon formed a police force of West African police soldiers to secure colonial rule. However, the recruits did not come from the colony itself, as the indigenous population there was not considered loyal. Instead, Captain Karl von Gravenreuth, who was in charge of building up the troops, had bought 370 enslaved men and women from various parts of West Africa from the King of Dahomey, who were now to “pay off their debt” in the colony through a form of indentured labor, including service as police soldiers. In the following years, additional West African men were recruited as mercenaries for the police force, while the formerly enslaved continued to receive no pay and were subjected to brutal treatment by their superiors. Formerly enslaved women were also used for forced labor in agriculture and in the colonial masters’ households. Brutal mistreatment of the women eventually became the trigger for an uprising of police soldiers in December 1893 (the so-called Dahomey Uprising), which was put down with the help of the German navy. The police force was disbanded and reestablished in 1895 as a so-called *Schutztruppe* or Protective Force. West African mercenaries were again recruited for the new police force. When news of the mistreatment of West Africans that had led to the Dahomey Uprising reached members of the Reichstag, it caused the first colonial scandal of the Wilhelmine period.

Source



Source: “Die ersten Zwanzig Eingeborenen Polizeisoldaten in der Kolonie Kamerun mit dem dt. Ltn.” [“The First Twenty Native Police Officers in the Colony of Cameroon with the German. Ltn.”]. Black and white photograph. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, Inv. Nr. F 67/1754.

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