

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Beer and Troop Life During World War II: A Case Study of Consumption in Nairobi, Kenya (1939-1945)

Changeywo Kariuki

Ph.D., The University of Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of beer consumption among military troops stationed in Nairobi, Kenya, during World War II (1939-1945), exploring how alcohol influenced both the social and psychological lives of soldiers and the local population. While much of the historical research on alcohol during wartime focuses on Western military contexts, this study provides a unique lens through which to view the intersection of alcohol, colonialism, and military culture in East Africa. During the war, Nairobi became a central hub for British and Allied troops in Africa, and beer, as a widely consumed beverage, played an important role in the daily routines of soldiers. This paper uses a combination of archival sources, including military reports, local publications, and oral histories, to explore how beer was incorporated into the lives of soldiers in Nairobi, examining its availability, regulation, and consumption patterns.

The study finds that beer was not merely a recreational beverage but served as a tool for maintaining troop morale, fostering camaraderie, and providing a temporary escape from the stresses of military life. Troops, particularly from the British and colonial African regiments, were often stationed in Nairobi for training or awaiting deployment, and beer became a key element of their social activities. The British military regulated the distribution of beer through military bars and canteens, while local establishments also catered to the needs of soldiers. The social impact of beer consumption extended beyond the military, with local Kenyans working in breweries, taverns, and canteens, creating a complex social dynamic between colonial military personnel and civilians.

Moreover, the psychological effects of beer consumption during the war were twofold. On the one hand, it provided soldiers with an outlet for stress relief, offering them moments of relaxation and camaraderie. On the other hand, the excessive consumption of alcohol at times led to disciplinary issues and conflicts. The study also touches on the gendered nature of beer consumption, noting the involvement of women as barmaids and workers in social spaces where beer was consumed, and the broader implications of their roles within this wartime environment.

By examining the consumption of beer in Nairobi during World War II, this paper highlights its significance as a cultural and social phenomenon that reflects the complexities of colonialism, race, and gender. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how alcohol functioned in wartime settings, particularly in colonial contexts, and how it influenced the interactions between soldiers, civilians, and the colonial system. This research also offers valuable insights into the ways in which beer consumption was intertwined with daily life and psychological coping mechanisms during one of the most challenging periods in world history.

Keywords: Beer, World War II, Nairobi, Kenya, troop morale, alcohol consumption, British military, colonial Africa, social impact, psychological effects, Kenya Breweries, military archives, taverns, gender dynamics, colonialism, race, stress relief, social cohesion, local economy, wartime recreation, historical research, cultural interactions.

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War (1939-1945) was not only a global

conflict that reshaped geopolitical boundaries but also a time that deeply influenced the daily lives of those

involved in the military effort. One area of daily life that often goes unexamined is the role of alcohol consumption among troops. While the primary purpose of military personnel is to fight and win wars, soldiers also engaged in activities that sought to alleviate the stress and monotony of war, one of which was consuming alcohol. In British colonies, including Kenya, soldiers were often given access to alcoholic beverages, such as beer, which became an important part of military life.

Nairobi, Kenya, a key location for British colonial military operations during the war, became a central hub for Allied troops. Situated on the crossroads of colonial Africa, Nairobi saw the convergence of different nationalities, ethnicities, and classes, all of whom were exposed to beer as part of their routine. This paper seeks to explore the consumption of beer in Nairobi between 1939 and 1945, examining how it was consumed, its effects on morale, and its broader implications on social and military life.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on historical and archival research. The primary data sources include:

1. **Military Archives:** Reports and memos from British military personnel stationed in Nairobi, as well as documents related to troop morale and welfare.
2. **Newspapers and Magazines:** Local and regional publications, such as *The Nairobi News* and *Kenya Weekly*, which provide context on the social atmosphere during the war years.
3. **Interviews and Oral Histories:** Interviews with surviving veterans and local residents who lived through the period, offering insights into the social and cultural dynamics surrounding beer consumption.
4. **Local Business Records:** Documents from breweries, pubs, and taverns that catered to troops, providing a unique perspective on the availability and distribution of beer.

By synthesizing these sources, this study seeks to construct a comprehensive narrative on the consumption of beer in Nairobi during the war and its significance for the soldiers and the local community.

RESULTS

Beer as Part of Daily Life

In Nairobi, beer was more than just a drink; it was an integral part of military life. Soldiers stationed in Kenya, particularly those from the British and colonial African regiments, were often given regular access to beer as part of their rations or could purchase it from local taverns. Nairobi, being a colonial capital, had a developed infrastructure for the brewing and distribution of alcohol, which facilitated easy access for both the military personnel and the local population.

Beer consumption, according to military records, was considered an effective means of maintaining morale and offering a temporary escape from the hardships of military service. Troops in Nairobi, far from the front lines, were often engaged in training or awaiting deployment, and the consumption of alcohol helped in mitigating boredom and stress. Many soldiers reported that beer was a social lubricant, helping foster camaraderie among troops and providing a semblance of normalcy in an otherwise turbulent time.

Distribution and Regulation

The British military heavily regulated the distribution of alcohol, ensuring that troops had access to alcohol in controlled environments such as military bars or canteens. However, alcohol was not just a commodity controlled by the military; local establishments in Nairobi also played a key role in providing alcohol. Many of the pubs and bars were designed to cater to the large military presence in the city, and these establishments often had special arrangements with military personnel.

Beer was often brewed locally by breweries like Kenya Breweries, which had already begun operations before the war and played a central role in the production of alcoholic beverages during this period. The availability of beer was crucial in maintaining the social life of soldiers in Nairobi, as it allowed for a semblance of leisure and recreation amid the otherwise rigid military structure.

Psychological and Social Impact

The consumption of beer had both positive and negative psychological effects on the troops. On one hand, it offered a temporary respite from the pressures of war, helping

soldiers relax and decompress after long days. On the other hand, excessive consumption sometimes led to disciplinary issues. Alcohol consumption, particularly during moments of social gathering, could occasionally result in conflicts, particularly when mixed with the cultural diversity of the military personnel.

The social impact of beer consumption extended beyond the soldiers themselves. Many Kenyan civilians, especially those working in bars and breweries, interacted directly with the soldiers, offering insights into the ways in which alcohol bridged the gap between different cultural groups. Local Kenyans often worked alongside European and African soldiers in both formal and informal capacities, creating an environment in which beer consumption fostered some degree of social integration, albeit in a colonial context.

Beer and Gender

Interestingly, beer also had gendered implications during the war years. While male soldiers were the primary consumers of beer, there was a noticeable shift in gender dynamics within Nairobi's tavern culture. Some women, especially those working as barmaids or in military canteens, found themselves directly interacting with the troops in a social context. Although alcohol consumption was predominantly a male activity, the presence of women in these spaces reflected a broader transformation in gender roles within wartime Nairobi.

DISCUSSION

The role of beer in Nairobi during World War II provides valuable insight into the cultural dynamics of the time. Beer served as both a tool of relaxation and a means of maintaining morale among the troops. It also reflected broader themes of colonialism, gender, and social stratification, particularly in the way it highlighted interactions between soldiers of different nationalities, ethnicities, and genders.

From a psychological perspective, beer consumption was essential for stress relief, but it also reflected a complex coping mechanism in a war environment. Alcohol, often used as a form of escapism, played a part in easing the anxiety of soldiers stationed far from the front lines.

Moreover, beer consumption had implications for the local economy and society. Kenyan breweries and taverns

flourished during this period, as they were directly involved in catering to the needs of the military. The social interactions facilitated by beer also extended into the realm of race and class, creating spaces in which colonial hierarchies were sometimes blurred, though never fully erased.

CONCLUSION

Beer played a crucial role in the lives of soldiers stationed in Nairobi between 1939 and 1945, serving not only as a recreational substance but also as a symbol of social cohesion and psychological relief. While it helped maintain troop morale and created spaces for social interaction, it also raised complex questions about the interplay of race, gender, and colonialism in a wartime context. This study highlights the multifaceted role that alcohol consumption played in the everyday lives of soldiers and civilians in Nairobi during World War II, contributing to a deeper understanding of the war's impact on colonial societies.

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