



## The Supply of Staple Foodstuffs to the Armed Forces in Nigeria during the Inter-War Years

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**Abstract.** This research explored the critical role of staple foodstuff supply in sustaining the Nigerian Armed Forces during the inter-war years (1919-1939). It investigated the challenges and strategies employed by the colonial government to ensure adequate provision of essential food items to troops stationed across the vast Nigerian territory. The study relied essentially on primary archival sources for its analysis. Files of the Central Secretary's Office (CSO) on the colonial Nigeria war-economy and the armed forces deposited in the National Archives at Ibadan (NAI), Enugu and Kaduna provided the data for the historical analysis. The study of this phenomenon in West Africa will contribute towards a more global perspective of the history of the Great War. By examining factors such as agricultural production, transportation infrastructure, storage facilities, and procurement policies, the study threw light on the complex logistical operations involved in feeding the military during this period. Additionally, it analyzed the impact of food shortages, economic fluctuations, and global events on the supply chain and its consequences for the morale and effectiveness of the Nigerian Armed Forces.

**Keywords:** Armed Forces, Strategy, Government, Infrastructure, Fluctuations.

### 1. Introduction

In 1918, the First World War ended, and peace agreements with the defeated countries set in, starting with the Treaty of Versailles signed in 1919 between the Allies and Germany to those of Sevres (1920) and Lausanne (1923) signed with Turkey. The acceptance of the terms of the Treaty by Weimer Germany (albeit reluctantly) as well as the formation of the League of Nations once again created a peaceful atmosphere in the post war international environment. For instance, the Covenant of the League required it to encourage members to cooperate in the areas of commerce and trade.

This new state of affairs had palpable implications for the international economy. Bottlenecks to trade engendered by the war such as shipping shortages and other restrictions on overseas demand were being removed. In the case of Nigeria, various war time policies of the government were revisited, amended, modified and relaxed. For instance, Aliens Restriction Ordinance, 1914, which proscribed all aliens, including persons naturalized as British citizens in British Possessions, was abrogated in 1919. Trading with the Enemy Act, 1914 and Trading with the Enemy (Extension of Power) Act, 1915 which prohibited trade with firms of enemy nationality or association with them in non-enemy countries were also relaxed. Receivers Offices were established in order to consider claims made against enemy firms liquidated during the war. All these Post-War developments had implications for the movement of foodstuffs across the global market. This chapter deals with the food provisioning of the Armed Forces in Nigeria during the Inter-War years. By so doing, it looks at the Nigeria Regiment, its post-war structure and engagements. It also deals with world food situation after the First World War and throughout the Inter-War period. This will be interspersed with the Nigerian case study. Information on the food provisioning of the Armed Forces in the Inter-War years is very scarce and scrappy. This could be due to the relaxation that attended the Post-War period. Although there was periodic shortage of food in the Inter-War years, it did not attract the same magnitude of attention and organization that was the case during the war.

### 2. The Nigeria Regiment in the Inter-War Years

The full units of the Nigerian Regiment during the First World War were as follows:

No 1 Battery Artillery	Zaria.
No 2 Battery Artillery	Calabar
1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion Nigeria Regiment	Kaduna North
2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion Nigeria Regiment	Lokoja
3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion Nigeria Regiment	Calabar

4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Nigeria Regiment Lagos

While training Centres at Zungeru and Kaduna were disbanded after the Great War as from January 1919, in 1921, the formation of two new units to the Regiment was effected, namely, Machine Gun Platoon, Nigeria Regiment, Kaduna North, and Signaling School, Nigeria Regiment, Kaduna North, Northern Nigeria.

Towards the end of the First World War in 1918, so many changes took place in the Nigeria Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel F. Jenkins C.M.G. was administering the Regiment as Acting Commandant. There was attention on winding up the overseas contingent in April 1918, the establishment of the Emergency Force in May 1918 and subsequently the formation and demolition of the 1st (Nigerian) West African Service Brigade.

On January 1, 1919, General Cunliffe reassumed personal direction of the Regiment as Commandant. By 1919, the establishment remained the same as in 1917, so that duties and employment reduced the number available for training to approximately 1900. The number of rank and file employed on patrols or escorts, exclusive of specie and Small arm ammunition escorts were 1381. The provisional establishment of the Regiment was increased to 124 officers, 78 British non-Commissioned Officers and 3328 rank and file in July when the Service Brigade received orders for overseas and recruiting was opened. The strength of the garrison on 31 December, 1918, was 96 officers, 73 British non-commissioned officers and 2807 rank and file.

After the war, there followed the demobilization of the West African Service Brigade and the re-organization of the Nigeria Regiment so as to bring it up to its pre-war establishment. On 19 November, 1918, the secretary for the colonies telegraphed that the Regiment would revert to pre-war establishment (as broad basis) from 1st January, 1919. The question arose where the various units of the two Battalions allotted to the Southern provinces were to be stationed. As far as the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lagos, was concerned, the distribution was as follows:

Lagos—Headquarters, one Service Company, Depot Company  
 Ibadan—three Service Companies  
 Abeokuta—one Service Company (temporary)  
 Agbor—one Service Company

**Source:** NAI N.699/1919 or CSO 19/7/502, “Annual Report on Nigeria Regiment, 1918”, p.1

The redistribution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion with headquarters at Calabar proved less difficult and in the main the stations where troops had been retained during the War were adhered to. In those cases, quarters already exist. The garrison at Bamenda had been increased to two Companies and provision of quarters was necessary. It was proposed to station one company at Enugu on the eastern railway as soon as quarters could be erected.

The outstanding feature of the year was the uprising in the Egba District. Operations, so far as the Regiment was concerned, commenced with the dispatch of a company under Major Frazer Ist N. Regt., to Abeokuta on the 1st June. This company was subsequently reinforced by a further half company which brought the strength up to 155. About the middle of June, the rising assumed such a grave appearance that the General Officer Commanding the Service Brigade assumed control and Major Frazer’s company was placed under his orders and remained in the district throughout the operations and after they were over.

Excluding those operations, 9 patrols and 16 escorts were carried out, involving the employment of 36 officers, 15 British non-commissioned officers and 1381 rank and file Infantry, and 1 officer and 30 rank and file No. 2 Battery. These do not include specie and small arms and ammunition escorts.

The more important were the Ekwi patrol in the Abakaliki District, and the Udi-Okigwe patrol. The latter had become a ‘hardy annual’.

In 1921, a party of French native troops, consisting of fifty rank and file, in charge of one Officer, coming down from Zinder was to be accommodated at the West African Frontier Force barracks in Lagos from the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> to the afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup> of February.

In 1922, there was a subject of a training grant to enable companies and other units of the West African Frontier Force to carry out a short period of collective training annually under service conditions. The training was to take place during the months of January, February, or March, 1924-25, and £2,000 was budgeted for it. Battalion concentrations were as follows:

Three companies and headquarters, Ist Battalion, at Farnisau (5 miles from Kano). One company marched from Sokoto to Kano. The other two and Battalion headquarters marched from Kaduna to Kano.

Three companies and headquarters, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, at Keffi. Headquarters and one company marching from

Lokoja and proceeding to Kano after the camp. One company marching from Ankpa. The third company was stationed at Keffi.

Three companies and headquarters, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, at Enugu. Headquarters and two companies from Calabar by march route from Aba. One company marching from Okigwe.

Headquarters and three companies, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, at Ede.

One company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained at Maiduguri; One company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, at Yola, carrying out collective training at Song.

One company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, at Abakiliki, has two platoons on escort duty. The other two standing by if required.

Half company, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, at Agbor.

The Artillery marched from Zaria to Karre.

Royal West African Frontier Force by 1931. King's African Rifles (KAR)

**Source:** NAI 26771/II, RWAFF Pay of Officers and OWAND NC. P.10

### **3. World Food Situation in the Inter-War Years**

The First World War destabilised the food supply chain across the world. In accordance with the reconstruction initiatives, the big scale food aid operation took place in 1919 when the United States shipped more than six million tons of food commodities to Europe. It was aimed at alleviating the war affected European populace from hunger and malnutrition problems due to shortage of food production and supply. There was also high cost of living after the war, due to the scarcity of food and basic necessities of life, whose production was affected by the war.

However, as capacity grew faster than demand in the mid-1920s, both local and international agricultural prices dropped totally. Demand was slow to develop because agricultural product consumption was price and income inelastic, and the European population was growing at a far slower rate than before the war. Because of the excess production, which was either stored or financed with a short-term loan, and because of the poor elasticity of food demand, agricultural product prices fell well before the Great Depression.

By the end of the First World War, Korea had experienced Rice riots, and as a result of Japan's takeover of Korea, the country began to look to its colonies for food. Beginning in 1920, the Japanese government responded to the situation by launching a

series of Rice Production Development Programs. These strategies attempted to increase rice output by introducing superior seed varieties, boosting fertilizer input, and ensuring a steady supply of water. As a result, Korean agricultural output increased by 1.6 percent every year from 1920 to 1930. Rice production, in particular, expanded at a quick rate of 2.1 percent each year, accounting for almost half of overall output in real terms.

The agricultural downturn that lasted two decades, from 1920 to the early 1940s, is notable for its low prices in most years. The impact of global price volatility on the prices obtained by producers in developing nations has been demonstrated. 'Despite the fact that there was a boom in the mid-1925, it was predominately an industrial boom,' according to Lionel Robins. The increase in profitability of certain food production lines was modest. The relative fall of agriculture was causing considerable political strain around the world, as well as desperate attempts to avoid the repercussions of technological advancement through pools and restriction programs. Export prices declined by 69 percent between 1926 and 1927, while producer prices plummeted by 75 percent.

### **4. The Effects of the First World War on Nigerian Foodstuffs**

In the specific case of Nigeria, there was shortage of food and rise in prices of foodstuffs. The prioritisation of the military food provisioning led to the shortage of food for the civilian population. This shortage was experienced throughout the war period and the post-war period. By 1914, there had been a great shortage of food in the northern provinces of Nigeria, such that it was cheaper to import rice than to attempt to buy guinea corn locally. In 1918, the food situation was very acute. Rice was unobtainable except in small quantities. The food shortage of 1918 also affected corn. It was difficult to obtain and forward corn rapidly in the then existent conditions. Corn was practically unobtainable at the time. The local population was asked to economise in every way in the use of wheat flour, in order to assist in a small way in the conduct of the War.

The food deficit persisted a year after the war ended, in 1919. For instance, a telegram from Secretary of State dated 10 November, 1919 noted that there was the danger of shortage of local foodstuffs; and that merchants were pressing for permission to export further supply of rice to West Africa for their native employees. Because of the severe shortage of local foodstuffs in Nigeria as a result of the First World War, the Oyo Native Authority enacted restrictions

prohibiting the shipment of yams and other commodities from Oyo. The offenders were liable to £5 fine or three months imprisonment.

As has been seen, the price of garri in Lagos rose from 2/6d to 2/9 a measure, of which the pre-war price was 6d. The white-capped chiefs expressed a wish that government should control the price and fix it at 1/-. Due to this high cost of garri, its export and transportation into French Territories was prohibited. As a result, permissions were required to take foodstuffs out of Nigeria. Archival materials contain such requests for permission to take certain foodstuffs (beans, corn, egwusi, garri, sheep, rams) to Accra, Ghana and other parts of West Africa.

In the case of rice, there was the danger of shortage of local foodstuffs. Merchants were pressing for permission to export further supply of rice to West Africa for their native employee. Annual rice ration almost exhaust additional supplies from United Kingdom could be allowed only in case of necessity telegram minimum requirements in 1920 for colony. In April 1920, the Central Secretary Lagos circulated information to the Port Harcourt Chamber of Commerce, noting that rice, other than Burma rice, would be shipped to Nigeria from the United Kingdom up to a maximum of 35,000 cwts. Similarly, on 8 May, 1920, the Imports and Exports Licensing Section of the Board of Trade, London, noted, contrary to the April message, that the Ministry of Food had now agreed to the export of a maximum quantity of 20,000 tons of Burma rice to the West African colonies, the British West Africa and Liberia in respect of the 1920 requirements.

Lord Milner had received representation to the effect that the supply of locally grown foodstuffs in the West African colonies might be deficient and that more rice might, therefore, be required for consumption. However, supply from the United Kingdom could not be increased except in case of necessity, but if the reports of the shortage of local foodstuffs were substantiated, it might be necessary to revise the allocation.

The Royal Commission on wheat supplies and the Secretary of State for India were now prepared to agree to the shipment of 10,000 tons. The requirements of the West African colonies have been revised owing to local scarcity in the Gambia and the Gold Coast, as follows:

Gambia	2,800 tons (in addition to rice being obtained from other sources)
Sierra Leone	1,000 tons

Gold Coast	6,000 tons
Nigeria	1,750 tons

**Source:** NAI N121/1920 OR CSO 19/8/7, "Rice Supply for Nigeria",

The Governor of Nigeria, Hugh Clifford, wanted to know how much of the 10,000 tons of Burma rice would be allotted to Nigeria, noting that no efficient means of controlling retail price in Nigeria. He suggested that the allocation to firms should be made in England with stipulation attached providing details of allocation.

In 1919, there was a modification of Order in Council made under the Customs Ordinance of 1916 with respect to exports from Nigeria to foreign destinations. The modification Order came as a consequence of relaxation of war-time restrictions on exports. This development occasioned an open general license issued which allowed for the free exportation of some certain foodstuffs by freight from Nigeria to Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland and Switzerland. This permission was allowed on the following grounds. For Norway and Sweden, individual guarantees in respect of exports were no longer required but the goods must be consigned to appropriate imports association. Shippers were expected to forward to the Custom shipping bills or specifications and if the guarantee had previously sent to this department, the reference number of the relative papers should be furnished.

In the case of Denmark, the usual certificates form of the Danish Associations must be produced to the customs at the time of shipment. Where goods covered by one certificate were to be shipped in instalments, special arrangement had to be made with the custom at the time of shipment. For Holland, all goods might be consigned to the Netherlands Overseas Trust for account of the sub-consignee without the prior production of an N.O.T certificate, through exporters who actually had certificates were ordered to hand them over to the customs at the time of shipment. The procedure was applied to other outstanding licenses. Lastly, for Switzerland, all consignable goods must be consigned to the Societe Suisse de Surveillance Economique for account of the sub-consignee without prior production of any form of certificate, through exporters who actually held certificates were instructed to hand over to the customs at the time of shipment.

By 1926, there was the introduction of 'produce export regulation' for principal export products from Nigeria. This was to apply to all produce exported from the port of Lagos. All palm oil inspected and graded was

forthwith to be displayed in casks or other suitable receptacles which would be effectively closed to the satisfaction of an inspector or examiner. The amount of 1 d. per ton was to be collected by the customs department on the palm produce exported to cover the cost of the inspection of produce. As a result of pot-war adulteration of produce by producers, a rigorous inspection of produce was started. Equally, any person who was to ship or attempt to ship export produce which was not inspected or graded was liable to pay a fine of £50 or imprisonment for 3 months. The inspection of the produce must take place before the sale irrespective of the quantity offered or purchased. In the event not reaching the standard of purity at least 10% for oil, it would not be removed until when cleaned and brought up to the standard.

With the approval of the Honourable Treasurer, the Lieutenant Governor of Northern Provinces opened and administered 'Grain Accounts' in Jos and Bukuru in 1927. This development was started as a result of the good grain harvest in the Northern Provinces during this time period, and for the benefit of the public workers. This was also intended for the acquisition of grain stocks to be sold to Public Works Department employees. For these accounts, the maximum advance authorized increased from £250 in 1920 to £500 in 1926. The 'Jos Grain Account' increased the maximum advance amount from £500 to £800 in 1927. Furthermore, under the direction of the

Director of Public Works, grain consumption altered by the end of 1927.

Furthermore, from the end of 1926-1927 until 1930, over 400 tons of paddy rice from the northern provinces were brought in at 42d per pounds. Due to unavoidable delays in the production of the parboiled rice plant, the milling and selling of the 1920-1930 purchases had to be postponed until the dry weather of 1929-1930. Unfortunately, the extremely bad weather affected the selling of rice in Zaria and Kano. There were products which were difficult to sell, for instance, forty tons of rice was sold at Zaria and Kano at 2d, instead of per pound, a price which only covered overhead expenses, depreciation. But the sales demanded that the prices had to be reduced to 1½ d. per pound. By implication, this only covered out-of-pocket expenses.

The world-wide fall in the prices of goods began to make itself felt in 1929 and became intensified during the 1930s. The markets registered prices which had never been so low for decades even prior to this period. This adverse condition affected Nigeria trade severely. In 1929, overall imports amounted to £12,007,301 and in 1930; it decreased to £11,691,949 (as compared to £14,062,194 in 1928). It should be noted, however, that the validity of these data for comparison purposes was heavily influenced by the steady decline in prices of practically all goods (including groceries) that began in 1924. Therefore, the comparisons could not be true of the volume of imports.

**Table 1.1:** Foods and Drinks

Food	1927	1928	1929	Total
Beer	1,043,306	1,126,235	867,063	3,036,640
Wines	182,047	163,387	109,106	454,540
Bread & Biscuits	34,041	42,310	55,598	131,949
Flour	65,531	83,844	80,719	230,094
Fish	301,075	358,529	352,511	1,012,115
Rice	184,873	186,390	221,145	592,408
Salt	1,113,591	1,066,149	1,048,719	3,228,459

*Sources: Blue Book 1930, Annual Report on the Agricultural Department of Nigeria 1930*

The table above showcases the quantity of irregular importation of foodstuffs into Nigeria during the period of 1927 to 1929. Such irregular importations were quite negligible. Precisely in 1930, Nigeria imported various food items from different countries of the world. The quantities of food items Nigeria imported in the year 1930 from different countries included: biscuits, bread, cake, confectionery, cheese, rice, corn meal tea, sugar, egg, fish, milk, butter. The total quantity of food items imported into Nigeria at this period amounted to 6,855,692 tons, while the total value amounted to £557,106.

Nigeria, on the other hand, exported a variety of foods to other countries in the world in 1930. The food items exported by Nigeria were groundnuts, palm oil, palm kernels, benniseeds, potatoes, rice and millets.

In 1936, some parts of Nigeria, especially the southern provinces witnessed shortage of food due to poor rainfall (drought). These provinces were Ogoja, Owerri, Benin, Warri, and Onitsha. In Onitsha province, there was an estimation of low harvest that was beyond normal harvest during this period. Yam crop was adversely affected. This situation was the same in Abakaliki Division, Owerri, Ogoja and Calabar. The same was the situation in Oyo and

Abeokuta provinces. The residents of Ijebu province also experienced food shortage with exorbitant prices as a result of lack of rainfall. Abeokuta rainfall in 1935 and in 1936 was 27 and 21 inches, respectively. This brought about poor production of maize, rice and yams with 50 to 100 per cent price increase. In Ondo and Benin provinces, rain shortage generally caused crops backwardness. The poor rain negatively affected crop yields and caused increase in prices of food.

In the northern provinces, there was severe drought in 1935 and 1936 between the early rains and general rains. These affected crops yield in some areas. The drought, however, broke in good time and some food crops yielded very satisfactory as far as one could envisage. This was witnessed in Zaria, Sokoto, Ilorin, Bauchi, and Kano provinces. In 1936, 1937 and 1938 Nigeria imported several foodstuffs from various countries.

Food supply was not at all satisfactory; prices being very high and almost out of reach of the pocket of the average soldier. The position in the northern provinces was very acute at the moment and the Commandant asked for the immediate increase in the per diem as a temporary relief. It was known that prices also reigned very high comparatively in the southern provinces.

## 5. Conclusion

The focus of this write up was on the food provisioning of the Armed Forces in Nigeria during the Inter-War years. It looked at the Nigeria Regiment, its Post-War structure and engagements. The world food situation after the First World War and throughout the Inter-War period was closely monitored and interspersed with Nigeria as the case study. It was averred that although there was periodic shortage of food in the Inter-War years, yet, it did not attract the same magnitude of attention and organisation that was the case during the First World War.

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