

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IMW-33  
Mutiny in Tanganyika

P.O. Box 770  
Arusha, Tanganyika  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

As anyone who reads the newspapers well knows, the governments of East Africa have recently weathered a series of crises. With the exception of Zanzibar where it is generally considered a popular revolution took place (even if it was engineered from abroad), the army mutinies in Tanganyika, Uganda, and Kenya were all of a similar pattern. Clearly they were not popular uprisings, but in spite of the small numbers taking part, each came perilously close to bringing down its government. Tanganyika, whose government was perhaps the best liked at home and abroad, seems to have suffered most both through violence and lost prestige. Nyerere was not exaggerating when he called the mutiny "a disgrace to our nation;...a national shame".

Even today no one is quite sure exactly what took place in Dar es Salaam between the early hours of Monday morning January 20, when the mutineers first struck, and Saturday January 25 when, at the request of the Tanganyika government, British commandos landed from the H.M.S. Centaur and captured the mutineers' headquarters. The most logical sequence of events appears to be as follows:

Shortly after midnight on Sunday, the soldiers of the First Battalion, Tanganyika Rifles arrested their European officers and all ranks above corporal (sargeants were soon released, however). The soldiers' representatives then drove to State House to deliver personally to the President their demand for the withdrawal




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Dar es Salaam,  
Haven of Peace

of all European officers and a salary increase of 150%. The European commanding general of the Tanganyika Rifles, however, had escaped in the melee and immediately warned Nyerere of the uprising. The recent example of Zanzibar's revolution probably made Nyerere fear a well-organized attempt to overthrow his own government and, after warning all the ministers he could, he left State House and went into hiding. It is not known where he went, but I have been reliably informed he took refuge with the Catholic Bishop of Dar es Salaam (Nyerere is himself a Catholic). The Vice-President, Rashidi Kawawa, a Muslim, is said to have sought refuge in a mosque. Most of the other cabinet ministers dispersed throughout the city.

When the mutineers failed to find Nyerere, they arrested his Minister for External Affairs and Defense, Oscar Kambona (along with the Minister for Home Affairs, Job Lusinde). Lusinde was kept under guard, but Kambona, in his capacity as Minister for Defense, tried to negotiate with the soldiers. (This has led to considerable controversy over his connection with the mutineers because, while the whereabouts of the rest of the government was unknown, he appeared to speak with authority, leading many observers to conclude that he was actively involved in the mutiny. True, he has long been the dominant figure in the more radical wing of TANU, and his early advocacy of rapid Africanization (a policy only recently discontinued by Nyerere) has not made him particularly popular among Europeans. Furthermore his role in the government is a bit of a mystery, and many consider him a left-leaning éminence grise. There is little or no concrete evidence to support the theory that he was behind the plot, however, and there is ample indication that he behaved loyally, honorably, and with courage. Needless to say had he wanted full power, it would not have been difficult to take it.)

Meanwhile, the rest of the troops seized the armory and after arming themselves to the teeth poured into the city to take over the key points, which included the airport, the post office, Cable and Wireless, the Tanganyika Broadcasting Station, and the Standard Bank. This last was the headquarters of the British High Commission (where the commanding general of the Rifles was reportedly hiding) as well as of many other foreign embassies, including that of the United States. The whole maneuver was handled with great speed and efficiency, leading many people to believe that it had been well planned by persons higher than the corporals. But as the head of the police here in Arusha told me, "This is what the army is trained to do, and so don't be surprised if they did it well."

By the time people had awakened on Monday morning, the mutineers were firmly in control. Although there had been some shooting, virtually no one had been hurt. The only force capable of showing effective resistance was the police, a first-rate force which had just been depleted by about 300 men (almost all from Dar es Salaam) who had been sent to Zanzibar to help that government restore order. The few who remained were not eager to do battle against a larger and far better armed militia.

At 1:35 p.m. Kambona went on the air to announce that there had been a "misunderstanding", but that the soldiers had agreed to

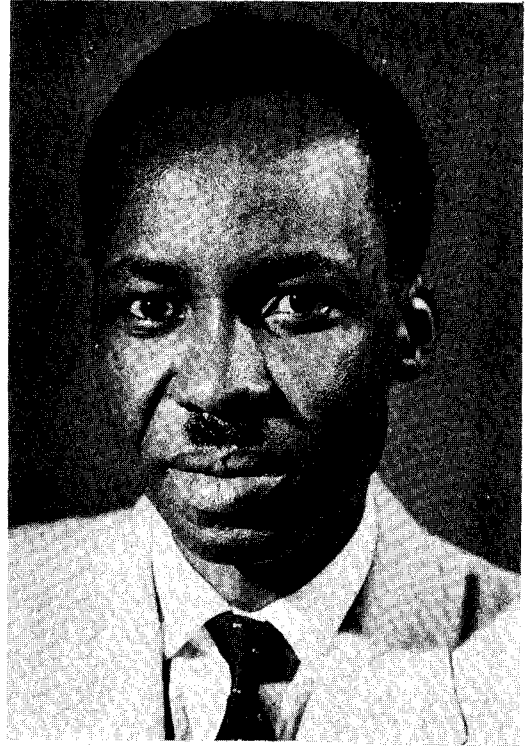
return to their barracks. The European officers (many in their shorts) and their families were shipped off to Nairobi, and the soldiers' pay demands were granted. Before order was restored, however, violence broke out in the Asian quarter of Dar es Salaam. Accounts vary but more than fifteen people died and many more were injured. Large African mobs looted Asian stores while the army and police (which was at that time operating under army orders) tried to restore order. By 4 p.m. calm settled over the city, and the mutineers returned to their barracks.

In the evening, however, the situation deteriorated as the troops again broke out of their barracks. By Tuesday morning they had reentered the city and renewed their control over the post office, radio station, and other strategic points. Rioting Africans again clashed with Asians and Arabs, but armed police fired over their heads and broke up the fighting. At the same time the Second Battalion stationed at Tabora, 500 miles west of the capital, was emulating the First and ousting its European officers. The remaining company of Tanganyika Rifles stationed at Nachingwea in the extreme south were to follow suit the next day.

During the entire episode the most disquieting feature was Nyerere's disappearance. On Tuesday evening he broke his silence of 36 hours with a three minute broadcast which mystified more people than it reassured. He made no direct mention of the mutiny, and his delivery was so terse that many people doubted it was he. There was general relief the next morning, however, when he made a four-hour journey around the capital.

Meanwhile, as the situation began to return to normal in Tanganyika, Uganda and then Kenya were having their own problems. Both asked for British military assistance, and it was granted immediately; their mutinies were quelled almost before they began. But Tanganyika still had problems. Pay negotiations with the troops did not go well, and on Friday evening Nyerere too asked for British help. Early Saturday morning the aircraft carrier, H.M.S. Centaur, opened fire on the barracks and landed a company of Royal Marine Commandos. In a short battle three Tanganyikan soldiers were killed, a number were wounded, and the rest either surrendered or disappeared into the bush. During the next two days peace was restored in the same way in Tabora and Nachingwea.

The mutiny was over, but the outcome had been in doubt until



Julius Nyerere

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the last moment. The government was severely shaken. On the following Monday President Nyerere sent a message to all Heads of independent African states warning them that "the situation in East Africa is critical". The same day he announced that a number of people including trade union leaders and one Area Commissioner had been conspiring with the ringleaders of the Army revolt, and that they had been placed in detention and would be punished. Both Battalions of Tanganyika Rifles were disbanded; the leaders are being held for trial; and forty Dar es Salaam policemen were sacked for their behavior during the mutiny.

The motives behind the mutiny still puzzle people here. The two prevailing points of view are that it was either a simple case of army discontent or else a left-wing coup attempt which failed. The known facts seem to indicate the former. A few weeks earlier Nyerere had demanded an end to the policy of Africanization, or at least to that aspect of the policy which called for preference being given to black Tanganyikans. This caused considerable outcry among labor union leaders and could conceivably have made the soldiers despair of advancement, since they had earlier been assured their European officers would be replaced by qualified Africans. If this was their aim, they certainly achieved it. Within a week African officers had taken over all the important positions.

Nevertheless, there are events which do not fit into this picture. If it were merely an army affair, why did the soldiers go as far as taking over the entire city of Dar es Salaam? Why did Nyerere not emerge from hiding sooner? Why did it spread so rapidly to Uganda and Kenya? Those who prefer the coup which failed approach, point out that Nyerere would not have said the situation is critical were there not something more serious involved.

But regardless of the causes, the revolt was extremely well-timed and nearly toppled the government. The most sensible explanation I have heard came from a friend who lives in Dar es Salaam. He felt it was purely an army affair which took everyone by surprise, but that other elements (i.e., the labor union leaders many of whom have never forgiven Nyerere for in effect nationalizing them) speedily contacted the army leaders to further their own ends.

This is perhaps as close to optimism as one can get over this sorry affair.

Very sincerely yours,



Ian Michael Wright

Photographs courtesy of the Tanganyika Information Services,  
Dar es Salaam.

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