Allied Treatment Of Protestant Missionaries
In German East Africa In
World War I

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The fate of German missions during and after World War I is a neglected topic in African Church History. Dr. Pierard surveys the work of German missions from 1885 onwards and notes that despite the destructive disruption of war the work of missions continued. Beyond the regrettable treatment suffered at the hands of the Allies by many German missionaries and their African colleagues a spirit of maturity and indigeneity developed in many of the churches founded by German societies. Additionally a new internationalism emerged within protestant missions to oppose the misguided patriotism that threatened the growth of the African church and the integrity of the Gospel.

Most people in the missiological community are aware of the significant work of Protestant missionaries from Great Britain and North America in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands during the nineteenth century, but the story of German involvement is much less known. Actually it reaches back to the year 1706 when two missionaries trained at the center of Pietism in Halle were sent to work in the Danish commercial enclave of Tranquebar in South India. Moreover, the endeavor of the Herrnhut or Moravian Brethren in various parts of the world during this century was the most extensive outreach since that of the Nestorian Christians in Asia between the fifth and twelfth centuries. Under the influence of the neo-pietistic Erweckung (revival), around ten different German Protestant mission societies were formed in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Their headquarters were located in various cities, from whence they drew their names, and they appealed to a wide constituency for support. Some were ecumenical (United Church—Lutheran and Reformed), others were confessional Lutheran, and still others (formed later in the century)
were faith missions, that is they sought support from Christians regardless of their church affiliation.

The societies labored in Africa in the Gold Coast, Togo, Cameroon, South Africa, Southwest Africa, and East Africa. There were also noteworthy works in Turkey, the Middle East (Syria, Palestine, and Egypt), North and South India, China, and Indonesia. When Germany entered the ranks of the imperial powers in 1884-85 by proclaiming “protectorates” over Southwest Africa, Togo, Cameroon, Tanganyika, and a number of places in the South Pacific, the mission boards expanded and/or redirected their efforts toward their country’s new overseas possessions. At the same time, several more societies were created (the total reached thirty) while the amount of workers multiplied. In 1885 an umbrella organization was formed, the Standing Committee of German Protestant Missions, which worked behind the scenes to deal with the government on missionary matters and to mediate differences between the societies. In 1911 the 1,417 German workers comprised 6.7% of the total Protestant force from Britain, Europe, and North America that were engaged in evangelism, church planting, and social ministry in other parts of the world.²

Scholars of German missions have debated extensively just how much of a role the missionaries and their leaders back home played in advancing colonialism, but space precludes any substantive discussion of this.³ For example, was missionization automatically the concomitant of colonization? What did missionaries mean when they talked about the “spiritual conquest” of the German colonies? How did missions distinguish between “evangelization” and “civilization?” Did the missionaries’ educational program lead to the goal of “discipline, authority, and subordination?”

Regardless of how one may respond to these issues, it is clear that after thirty years of imperial rule mission works in the German overseas possessions were thriving. In addition, the colonies in many respects had become “closed markets.” Although in most locales missionaries from British and American boards continued to operate already existing stations, few were able to open new ones.

**War Comes to the Colonies**

On August 5, 1914, the day after the British entry into the European conflict, the decision was made to launch military operations against the German overseas territories.⁴ This was allegedly to protect British seapower by eliminating the German system of colonial communications (cables and radio transmitters) and
coaling stations that would support naval operations and threaten the security of
the Dominions. The Germans, however, had expected the implementation of the
Berlin Act of 1885’s provision which implied that countries holding territories in
the central strip of Africa running between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans could
proclaim the neutrality of these in event of a European war. The Berlin agreeemen
to also provided for free trade, freedom of religion and worship, and special
protection for missionaries and explorers in the region.

Unfortunately, such was not to be the case, and the Allies moved swiftly to
conquer the German Pacific and African possessions. By October 1914 the
Japanese had seized the Kiaochow enclave in China and the islands north of the
equator, the New Zealanders Samoa, and the Australians New Guinea and other
Pacific islands. In Africa French and British troops overran Togo in August 1914
and Cameroon in February 1916 and divided the territories between then, the
larger parts going to France. After first suppressing an Afrikaner rebellion, South
African troops captured German Southwest Africa in July 1915.

The most arduous and dramatic colonial campaign was in East Africa. The
German colonial militia, led by the brilliant and resourceful Colonel (later
General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, tied down a large number of British and
colonial troops. The Tanga operation in November 1914, conducted by Indian
and other forces from the Empire, was one of the more notable disasters in
British military history, and there were tensions between the British and Belgians
over the conquest of the northwest region, Rwanda and Burundi. The German
units then carried on a guerrilla-style operation in the back country and were
chased by a British force five to ten times their size, which by February 1916 was
under the command of General J. C. Smuts from South Africa. Although by the
end of that year most of German East Africa was under the control of Britain and
Belgium and Smuts had left for England, Lettow-Vorbeck moved into
Mozambique and conducted a hit-and-run campaign while living off the land.
Now pursued by the King’s African Rifles, he led his band back into Tanganyika
and then advanced into Northern Rhodesia, where on November 25, 1918, two
weeks after the Armistice, he surrendered.\(^5\)

**Treatment of the Missions**

In West Africa, both in the British Gold Coast and the conquered German
possessions, missionaries of German nationality were forcibly repatriated and
many of the able-bodied men were interned, ostensibly to insure that they did not
eventually end up in their country's army back in Europe. A similar policy was followed in Egypt, India, and the Pacific islands. In Southwest Africa, however, they were allowed to continue their work. This was also the case, with some exceptions, in the Union of South Africa, China, Japan, and the Dutch East Indies. In East Africa the picture was more complicated because of the effective resistance put up by the German forces. Here six Protestant societies were active—the Moravian, Berlin, Leipzig, Breklum (Schleswig-Holstein), Neukirchen, and Bethel missions. The German Seventh-day Adventists also had a small work on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria. Of the three Roman Catholic orders working there, only the Benedictine fathers of St. Ottilien were German in origin. The Black Fathers (Congregation of the Holy Spirit) and the White Fathers (Society of Missionaries of Africa) were both French orders.

The Leipzig Evangelical Lutheran Mission Society which ministered among the Chagga people in the foothills of Kilimanjaro had a staff of 29 missionaries working in 16 stations. All of these were soon behind the British lines. Many of the males of military service age were conscripted into the German militia and eventually ended up in prisoner-of-war camps, but a few were allowed to continue their labors down to the end of the war and were repatriated in 1920. The number of active stations steadily decreased as workers were removed or subjected to severe restriction of movement. Throughout the war they were unable to receive financial support from the homeland, but Lutherans in the United States did send some help.

The Bethel Mission's work in the Rwanda area south of Lake Victoria continued undisturbed until spring 1916 when Belgian forces moved into the area and the missionaries were repatriated. However, the mission's other field in Usambara remained more or less operational throughout the war, but many of its workers had been drafted into the German forces and in 1917 the British interned all males under the age of 45. The Breklum and Neukirchen stations in Burundi were also abandoned at this time, but in 1917 the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) assumed the care of a Bethel station as Bukoba on the western shore of Lake Victoria.

In the Southern Highlands, the Lutheran Berlin Mission and the Moravians had thriving educational works. After the outbreak of war, many of the missionaries provisioned the German troops, and some even smuggled propaganda across the border into Nyasaland to foment African unrest. The latter came to a head in the celebrated John Chilembwe uprising in 1915. The following year the Allies subjected German East Africa to a three-sided
coordinated attack—Smuts from the north, the Belgians from the west, and General Edward Northey from the southwest. When Northey’s forces occupied the region between Lakes Nyasa and Rukwi where the German works were clustered, they rounded up the missionaries and transported them to Blantyre. After this, the men were separated and sent to detention camps in Tanga, Mombasa, and Egypt, while the women and children were taken to South Africa. Many of the indigenous Christians continued to perform ministerial functions, but conditions among the Africans deteriorated as European demands for labor service increased. The Scottish missionaries in Nyasaland, both the Church of Scotland’s Blantyre Mission and the United Free Church’s Livingstonia Mission, together with the Anglican Universities Mission to Central Africa, then occupied the war zone. In the early postwar years they rebuilt the shattered mission enterprises. 9

Other mission works, for example, the Berlin operations in Dar es Salaam and the region west of the capital and the Moravian field at Urambo northwest of Tabora, were also dislocated. The Berlin missionaries at all but one station were imprisoned, while the Moravian workers were interned by the Belgians in 1917, removed through the Belgian Congo, and repatriated later that year. 10

It should not be forgotten that early in the war the Germans themselves arrested British missionaries and exploited their African converts for labor and porterage. CMS and UMCA missionaries had already initiated enterprises in Tanganyika before the German takeover in 1885, and those who were working in districts under German military control experienced significant losses until British forces occupied these areas.

Emergence of African Leadership

One of the most unfortunate by-products of the war was that African Christians suffered at the hands of both sides. They were forced to work as carriers and laborers, while the staffs of schools and churches were often interned. Many of the Christian communities declined or passed out of existence. Traditional religious practices revived in some places and Islam made substantial gains, especially in the north and along the coast.

On the other hand, a number of indigenous Lutheran pastors and other leaders took advantage of the situation to assert themselves. The best-known was Martin Ganiyas, who was ordained by the missionaries before they departed and led a noteworthy congregation in Dar es Salaam. In Usambara a group of seven
“shepherds” was named to run the Shambaa church during the missionaries’ absence. Lutheran teachers in the Kilimanjaro region labored unpaid for six years and their endeavor thrived.

Another example was a Haya man, Andrea Kadjerero. He was baptized by the Anglicans in Uganda in 1906 and then worked with the German missionaries in Bukoba. When they were interned in 1916, Kadjerero secured Anglican assistance for the work together with a group of African lay leaders. Since he had also learned some rudiments of medical care, he combined the preaching of the Gospel with care of the sick. Kadjerero regarded the Evangelical Church in Bukoba as very much the work of his fellow catechists and leaders, and in 1929 he became the first African pastor in this mission church.

In the Bethel Mission in Tanga Province Luka Jang’andu essentially carried on the work when most of the missionaries were forced to leave. In 1921 the remaining ones, who had been looking after mental patients, were expelled, but before departing they ordained Jang’andu and six others who had essentially been doing the work of pastors during this time. When the missionaries returned, they found it difficult if not impossible to restore the authority they once exercised over the African leaders. The indigenous church principle had taken root in Mandatory Tanganyika, and after World War II the Lutheran church in Tanzania would become a thriving institution.

The Internment of Missionaries

The major British internment camp was at Ahmednagar in India. Although intended for civilians of German nationality who lived in India, many of the East African missionaries were taken there as well or to the other Indian camp at Belgaum. The men of military age were segregated from the older ones and placed in a “prisoner of war” compound, and family units were often separated. In 1916 the Golconda, a small and antiquated steamer, made two harrowing voyages to Europe repatriating women, children, and aged civilians from India.

Typical of the experiences which the East Africa missionaries underwent was that of the senior Leipzig worker, Johannes Hofmann. He had first gone to Africa in 1886 and now directed the mission among the Wakamba in southern Kenya. On August 14, 1914, the district commissioner informed him that Great Britain was now at war with Germany but he would be left undisturbed providing he did nothing to aid the enemy of British East Africa’s colonial ruler. (The territory was officially renamed Kenya in 1920.) Hofmann replied: “Being a minister of
religion in this country and therefore under the obligation to teach the people loyalty to their government, I would not regard it as in keeping with my position to do anything which is harmful to this country and I pledge not to do so.” On September 4 the D.C. instructed Hofmann that he might not leave the district without his permission, must not attempt to communicate with “the enemies of England,” and was to channel all correspondence to the German mission society through his office. The missionary dutifully responded: “I beg to affirm that I shall be fully obedient to these orders and to assure you that even without this warning I would not have acted against them.”

Still feeling secure in his position, Hofmann on November 2 wrote J.H. Oldham in London, who had just offered the help of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland to the German boards in order to sustain the international fellowship and cooperation that had begun at the Edinburgh conference in 1910:

We enjoy the confidence of the Government, which we have always wished to justify, and so the declaration of the missionaries, that they should not in any way assist the enemies of the country in which we reside, nor give any information to the same, or leave our District without permission, has been considered by the authorities as sufficient guarantees for our proper behaviour.

Their only hardship was an inability to get letters through to the home committee in Leipzig. He asked Oldham to tell the board how they were doing and there was no possibility of communication with their colleagues across the border in German East Africa.15

In spite of these assurances of loyalty, the British authorities abruptly expelled Hofmann from the territory on December 2 and transported him to India. Since he was over 45 in age, he was placed in the civil detainees camp at Ahmednagar and some months later was moved to Belgaum where he was named pastor (“chaplain for the evangelical inmates”) of the camp. In a valiant effort to preserve the work, he wrote to the field director of the Africa Inland Mission requesting that one of its missionaries in the Machakos district “pay a visit to our people and give them some spiritual help and comfort from time to time.” The AIM acceded to his wishes and sent a few people there. The Leipzig Mission offered to sell the property to the AIM, but the British government forbade any
negotiations and instead confiscated it and auctioned off the movable assets. Eventually the AIM did take possession of the station.

The Moravian Archives in Herrnhut contain numerous letters from interned missionaries and reports of their treatment that were submitted later. For instance, at the outbreak of the war the Nyasa mission had fourteen (male) missionaries, four non-ordained "brethren," and one nurse on its staff. Four of them were drafted into the German forces and the others were deported in June 1916. One man died of wounds in a military hospital and another of disease while en route to internment. As mentioned earlier, the women and children went to South Africa and were housed in a facility near Bloemfontein until their repatriation in 1919. The final destination of the men was Egypt, and they did not return to Germany until fall 1919.\(^\text{16}\)

Traugott Bachmann, a veteran of over two decades of service in the Nyasa mission, prepared a lengthy report of his 42-month confinement which clearly reflected the bitterness that had developed between the Christian communities of the warring nations.\(^\text{17}\) He told of Dr. James Hetherwick of the Scottish Blantyre Mission who, when he met with the interned missionaries, was "cold, stuffy, and hardly opened his mouth." When he gave a sermon referring to the Germans as "Huns," Bachmann commented that these people were "first Englishmen only then were they Christians." He then lamented that upon their removal to Mombasa no Protestant Christian or missionary visited the group, although the Catholics cared for their fellow believers.

Finally, he was taken to Egypt where in the Tura military camp the captives endured "abominable" conditions and the English commandant said "the missionaries are the most dangerous of all the people." He then was put in the civilian camp at Sidi Bishr where conditions apparently were better. He described how he had come to "hate" the English and said that if he were a man of God like in olden times, he would have called down fire from heaven upon them. After expounding at length on the evils of English mission policy, Bachmann affirmed that his experiences of mistreatment had made him a patriotic German. God would use this humiliation to enable the Germans to do great deeds of service for him and others. "We will first be nationalists, that is care for our own people and then we will be true, not credulous, internationalists who will serve our neighbors."

On the other hand, the German missionaries suffered from a nationalistic outlook of their own. To cite one example, in May 1915 the German Colonial Secretary Wilhelm Solf sent a telegram to Herrnhut congratulating the society on
the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the first Moravian missionaries in Dar es Salaam and praised them for being "courageous and indefatigable champions" (Vorkämpfer) for Christian convictions and German Kultur. Both the directors of the Moravian church and mission society co-signed a response expressing joy that after more than 150 years of missionary work in all parts of the world, "we were able to direct our efforts to the natives of our own German colonies." They were "confident that the foundational work of German colonization and missions during the last generation will continue to be blessed, and we commend our beloved fatherland and its colonies, as well as the total work of German missions, to the protection and blessing of God." The internationalism that supposedly was the hallmark of Protestant missions had been consumed in the fires of war.

**The Confiscation of Mission Properties**

As the Allies took over the German possessions and expelled or interned the missionaries both there and in their own territories as well, the question of what to do with the mission properties became a critical one. The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh had set forth the vision of a world-wide Protestant Christian community, and through its Continuation Committee headed by John R. Mott, a program to make this a reality was to be developed and implemented. But the outbreak of the World War in 1914 pitted Christians against Christians and shattered the ecumenical dream. A few people like J.H. Oldham sought to uphold the ideal of missionary freedom and render assistance to the "orphaned" German missions, but the tide of public opinion in the Allied countries was running increasingly against this.

Meanwhile, the Germans had become strong exponents of the "supranationality" of missions, the principle that both the Christian church and its missionary enterprise comprised a movement that transcended national boundaries. This phrase came to be used in missionary circles during the war years, but Allied government figures viewed the German mission assets essentially as "alien" property which they intended to keep for themselves. Then the nascent ecumenical movement suffered an apparent mortal blow when the United States entered the war. Oldham and Mott had tried desperately to hold the missionary movement together, but in July 1917 the executives of the German mission agencies publicly repudiated Mott who was a close friend of President Woodrow Wilson.
Actually, the efforts of Oldham, Mott, and other missionary statesmen to maintain international solidarity were not as futile as it appeared on the surface. When the victorious Allied figures gathered in Paris after the Armistice to draft the peace treaties with their vanquished foes, they had already decided to confiscate all foreign properties belonging to German citizens and use the proceeds from the sale of these to satisfy German debts to nationals of the Allied governments. This action would have meant the total destruction of the German missionary endeavor. However, the British and American mission forces combined efforts to lobby the peace negotiators. Mott, Oldham, and others who had connections in high places worked quietly behind the scenes to persuade the delegates to include a clause protecting mission assets. The result of their labors was the inclusion of Article 438 in the Treaty of Versailles which stipulated:

Where Christian religious missions were being maintained by German societies or persons in territory belonging to them, or of which the government is entrusted to them in accordance with the present Treaty, the property which these missions or missionary societies possessed, including that of trading societies whose profits were devoted to the support of missions, shall continue to be devoted to missionary purposes. [The Allies] will hand over such property to a board of trustees composed of persons holding the faith of the Mission whose property is involved.

This essentially preserved the German missionary operations.

The Missionaries Return

With the establishment of the League of Nations mandate in Tanganyika in 1920 all remaining German citizens were expelled; the last ones left in 1922. In accordance with the provisions of Article 438 other mission societies took over the German works—Livingstonia the Moravian and the UMCA the Berlin society’s field in southern Tanganyika, the CMS the Bethel Bukoba enterprise, Methodists the Neukirchen work, and American Augustana Lutherans the Leipzig field. In 1922-23 the English CMS saw its resources stretched too thinly and turned over its main work in Tanganyika to the Australian CMS and transferred the Bukoba stations to the South African Wesleyan Methodists. However, the
latter caused so much resentment among the African Christians that the
Methodists withdrew in 1927 and the Germans resumed their work in Bukoba.

As passions cooled the old German boards began to reclaim their fields of
endeavor and by 1930 they had all returned. Some of the old and new groups
even worked alongside one another. Then, the coming of the National Socialists
to power in Germany brought a new and even more ominous cloud over the
mission enterprise in East Africa, and eventually it would be left destitute as the
Nazis banned the export of foreign exchange to provide for missionary work in
all the German fields.

However, this time around, the ecumenical basis of missionary endeavor was
stronger. The mistakes of the old nationalism which had so vitiated the enterprise
were not to be repeated to such a measure in World War II. Besides, the German
works were far weaker than before World War I, and there were no longer any
German colonies which were tempting objects of conquest. It was clear that
nationalism was the enemy of effective Christian missionary work, and the
Protestants now had to learn the lesson which the Roman Catholics already had,
that in order to be successful the effort had to be rooted in the people themselves,
or to put it in theological terms, it had to be indigenized and contextualized.

NOTES

NB: An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Tenth Annual
Pan-African Studies Conference, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana,
U.S.A., 16 April 1993.

1 Although an enormous monographic literature on German Protestant missions
now exists and it continues to grow steadily, the best historical survey is still the
two-volume work by Wilhelm Oehler, Geschichte der deutschen evangelischen

2 Arno Lehmann, “Der deutsche Beitrag,” in Gerhard Brennecke, ed.,
In the 1920s the German percentage of Protestant missionaries fell to 2.5% but
by 1936 it had risen to 5.6% (1,561). After World War II the proportion remained
steady at 2.5%.
For an introduction to the question see Horst Grünner, *Christliche Mission und deutscher Imperialismus 1884-1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1982).


Africans in the church in the Mlalo district of Usambara believed that during the period of wartime control their church had prospered as never before.


15 Joseph H. Oldham (1874-1969) was secretary of the Continuation Committee of the World Missionary Conference and the recognized leader of missionary cooperation in Great Britain. Keith Clements is currently preparing the definitive biography of him.


17 M.D.q.8.2, Nyasa. Moravian Archives, Herrnhut. All quotations are from this document.

18 M.D. D.a.1, Correspondence with the Foreign and Colonial Offices, Moravian Archives, Herrnhut.

19 Mott (1865-1955) was the primary personality in the international missionary enterprise and the emerging ecumenical movement. Founder of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions and the World's Student Christian Federation and a top official in the YMCA, he traveled throughout the world promoting Christian cooperation. He was the one most responsible for convening the Edinburgh conference and presided over it. The principle biography is C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).


23 A useful contemporary account of the state of the missionary works in Mandatory Tanganyika is Julius Richter, *Tanganyika and Its Future* (London: World Dominion Press, 1934).