

Johann Christian Wallmann, *Sorrows and Joys of Rhenish Missionaries* (1856)

Abstract

The Pietist Johann Christian Wallmann (1811–1865) taught at the Rhenish Missionary Society seminary in Barmen (founded in 1828 in modern-day Wuppertal) and served as Inspector from 1848–1857. In this passage from *Sorrows and Joys of Rhenish Missionaries* [*Leiden und Freuden rheinischer Missionare*], Wallmann recounts the early stages of German missionary involvement in the lands of the Herero and the Nama in what would become the German colony of German Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia). Noteworthy were their efforts to learn the languages of the indigenous peoples whom they hoped to evangelize in order both to preach and to publish the Gospel in their languages. The missionaries also hoped to deploy converts as “native” missionaries themselves once they had been given a sufficient level of instruction in Christian doctrine. Relations with indigenous leaders were crucial, as here with the figure Jonker Afrikaner of the Orlam (“Orlam Hottentotten” in this text, mixed-race descendants of Dutch Afrikaners and Nama), who founded the modern-day Namibian capital Windhoek. It is also important to consider the narrative strategies of the author in presenting a heroic portrait of the missionaries that attested both to their triumphs and to their trials and difficulties in the face of hostile climates and populations. These narrative devices were deployed at the time as a means of instilling enthusiasm in readers and confirming their faith; today they also provide a window into the missionaries’ revivalist theological beliefs and historical worldviews.

Source

[...]

Nine Years in Hereróland.

On May 20, 1844, the foundations were laid for the first house in Hereróland in southern Africa. Up to that time, no European had ever set foot in the country, let alone considered building a house there, and the Hereró were nomads who built no houses. The house was built by Hugo Hahn with Kleinschmidt’s loyal assistance. In those days the two men lived in the place of Jonker, several days’ journey to the south, but Hahn wished to leave the Orlam Hottentots for the Hereró, which was the vocation he received upon his ordination here in Barmen, and in those May days he sought to begin his work in earnest. At the time powerful Hereró chiefs still lived in the southern part of this land, namely, the chivalrous Kahitjené, known as Lightning, for Jonker had not yet begun his raids and peace prevailed between the yellow and black neighbors. Hahn called the plot he built upon Schmelen’s *Verwachting* (Hope); the natives called it Okahangá.

The house was constructed of rammed earth, and the walls would not dry; Hahn left the site after 14 days without completing the building and returned to Jonker with Kleinschmidt. The house stood abandoned for four months. Unfortunate disputes between our missionaries and the Wesleyans who had also come to Jonker absorbed all their energies and ended with Hahn and Kleinschmidt leaving Jonker’s place in early October of this year and moving to their roofless house. Abandoned by their most loyal men, they arrived at Schmelen’s *Verwachting* on October 9, and it was there that our mission among the Hereró truly began. It began with sighs and received the dispute between brothers as a gift. It also immediately felt the curse of the land, the drought and lack of water, for the brothers found the local spring almost completely dried up, and they were glad when they visited Jonker, who returned from a journey to the

Hereró and told them of another spring, two days' journey by wagon, which was far more suitable for a settlement. They then moved on October 31 to Otjikangó to the hot springs and called the place New Barmen. It was no paradise, leaving much to be desired, but it had water and inhabitants enough. The brothers set to the outside work, were plagued by wild beasts day in, day out, and the people were worse than the beasts. They were perfectly satisfied to have the strangers settle among them, but murder, theft, fornication, boldfaced lies and the most shameless begging proceeded unabated, and, what was worse, one could speak with them not at all or only very imperfectly, certainly not about spiritual matters, and at the beginning no interpreter could be found. The language caused the brothers unutterable misery. The people in the place changed often; they came and went as nomads are wont to do. Meanwhile, after a quarter of a year a small tribe of some six family heads settled there permanently. They were very poor folk who had been robbed of all they had by their own people. They joined the missionary as their chief, becoming his people and so forming the basis of the future settled population of New Barmen.

Hahn was at the station scarcely half a year when two new brothers came to his aid, Rath and Scheppmann. Kleinschmidt left the land immediately after their arrival and returned to the Namaqua, among whom he established Rehoboth. Hahn's joy at having two new collaborators was soon dimmed. Scheppmann was there for barely 8 weeks when he was sent to find a better wagon route to Walvis Bay, for in those days people knew little about the wild land and took great detours on their already extremely laborious journeys. Upon this occasion, Scheppmann shot himself so grievously in the leg when he slid down a mountain that Hahn brought him half-dead to Barmen, where it was 10 weeks before he could get back to work at all. And scarcely was he back on his feet when it was decided to send him to Walvis Bay to establish a station, for even then people quite properly realized that it was necessary for the existence of the mission in the interior to have a firm site on the bay, through which the necessary connection to the sea could be negotiated. Scheppmann already left the land in September and traveled to the bay, where he later set up present-day Scheppmannsdorf under the Namaqua, which has become an extremely important emporium for the Hereró mission. Hahn and Rath were now alone with a few loyal people from Klein-Namaqua land and were kept very busy with much outward work and with the language. I find the following recorded in their diary entry for October 31, 1845, that is just one year after the founding of the station, which sketches in a few lines a picture of their work at the time: "Out of gratitude, the poor Hereró who settle here slaughtered one of our cows in the field and almost completely consumed it that night in their huts. Samuel and Franz discovered it by following the trail. What should we do with them? We let them go and took away the spears of the participating watchman and another man, and the earthenware cooking pot of a third man. Many rich Hereró were just here and thought this a good opportunity to direct their hatred towards the poor folk. Within a moment, the huts were pillaged, and spears and cudgels were at the ready to do violence. No talk or remonstrations on our part helped. Finally, Daniel, Samuel, Franz and Marcus grabbed the rifles and only the sight of them brought the rich men to their senses and caused them to return the stolen items. The poor folk owed their lives and their few possessions to this intervention. They also took a sheep from the herd at night and slaughtered it. With our help, some 17 of the poor laid out gardens. Our station now numbers 30 huts and is still growing. The language is going slowly, but there is progress, though we cannot yet think of giving sermons (without an interpreter). Perhaps we will soon begin a school, although we ourselves will then have to write or draw the ABCs."

This hope was not to be fulfilled anytime soon. The second year of this mission followed, bringing many and great hardships. Hahn was alone at the station for all of 1846; his faithful helpmeet also moved to Rehoboth for several weeks. They had run out of provisions so that they had to live out of cans for months. Then Rath went to the Cape to purchase food. He left at the beginning of 1846 and only returned as the year was ending. What particularly increased the hardship was the fact that in this year, Jonker violated the peace with the Hereró. Now his raids began. The first early in 1846 terrified the entire country. The rich fled to the north, and the danger of revenge being taken against Hahn, who was

believed to be in league with Jonker, was very much present. But loyal God mercifully shielded him. Since, however, he could not remain silent about the injustices committed to Jonker, the latter became his adversary henceforth and, since the decline of Jonker's tribe was already advanced, he had to manage everything on his own. Simply by confiscating Hahn's riding ox, Jonker prevented a journey that Hahn had intended to take deeper into the interior at the time, for he only stood at its extreme southern border and wished to see more of it. As one can easily imagine, the actual missionary work made no progress during this miserable year. They had to content themselves with being able to hold the site at all, but the industrious Mrs. Hahn managed to set up a small sewing school with a few girls from the station.

The year 1847 was more fruitful. Although fever and eye disease were especially prevalent and virulent in that year—Hahn and his entire family suffered from both ailments and were thus much hindered in their work—and it was the year in which the late Scheppmann was called home and Kleinschmidt lay on his deathbed; pearls after all grow in salty rivers. Rath returned from the Cape hale and hearty and brought with him a spelling primer for his Hereró, which he had had printed in Cape Town. For us a spelling primer is a paltry thing and not worth mentioning, but in that country these few sheets, the first thing ever printed in the Hereró language, were a veritable event. The people at the station did not ask about it, of course, for they understood nothing of reading, but the booklet was to be the means of introducing them to an art that has contributed in such a wondrous manner to the promotion of civilization among all peoples. Our missionaries rightly recognized, however, that they must influence their people not through books but above all through living speech, and Hahn was the first to venture to give a sermon in the people's language. January 24, 1847, was the day when a white man gave the first sermon in Hereró without an interpreter. This was great progress, and the Lord let the brothers understand that they were making progress after all, albeit slowly and with great difficulty. It is to this time that we can date the actual beginning of true missionary activity among the Hereró. Despite sickness and interruptions, construction began on a small church in Barmen, and there was never any lack of people to hear the sermons; more and more poor folk moved to the place, and all that year the Lord was merciful and Jonker remained quiet. It even seemed as if he wished to approach our missionaries in friendship; at least he offered some signs of affection and helped them here and there. When January arrived the little church at Otjikangó could be consecrated and a service held there. "Oh that the hearts of many Hereró may be opened in this church!" sighed Hahn, when he wrote this note in his diary and a few days later the good news that a new worker had arrived for the mission arrived from the bay. Our missionary Kolbe had been sent from the colony when word arrived of Scheppmann's death and the illness of the other brothers; he also brought a helpmeet for Rath along with him.

But 1848 did not go as hoped. As elsewhere, all hell broke loose there, too. In the first days of the year not just Jonker but also the Red People invaded the land, robbing and murdering. The flight of all the wealthy Hereró, who one year previously had moved southward again, was the next consequence, and rumors came from Jonker's place that the Orlam intended to drive the missionaries out of the country or to force them to retreat, and that all people would be frightened away from the station. One day Hahn sent his faithful Daniel to Jonker's place with a number of Hereró to demand the return of some stolen livestock. There the old brother of the well-known Christian Afrikaner, Titus by name, declared that the presence of the missionaries in Hereróland would not stop them from thieving and murdering; they would murder people before the missionaries' eyes. With a contemptuous expression, the old gray head asked the Hereró what the missionaries were doing with them, whether they were instructing them. Yes, they are, answered the black men. "Have you accepted the Word?" Titus continued. "We have almost accepted it," they answered. "So, what are they teaching you?" Daniel was frightened by the question, since the Hereró who had answered had never attended a worship service because he lived far away. The black man answered, however, "They teach us not to rob, or steal, not to kill, not to lie, and not to commit adultery." This was a slap in the face of the questioner, and even if the heathen had only understood something of the law thus far, it was nevertheless a fine sermon to an apostate like old Titus.

Aside from this din of battle, Hahn also suffered from physical ailments produced by the constant excitement of these times, and in May of that year he was compelled to travel to the Cape with his wife and children for some recreation, which he and his wife sorely needed; at the same time he intended to have a reader in Hereró printed there, as the fruit of his work on the language and for instruction in the school. Thus, he left the country at that time and only returned home in the final days of the year. In the meantime, Rath and Kolbe together had slowly made progress at Barmen, and had ventured a little journey into the interior to the north, for there was some thought in those days of founding new stations. The Lord comforted the hearts of His servants, so that they remained of good cheer despite all the obstacles that the Devil laid in their path. [...]

Source: *Leiden und Freuden rheinischer Missionare*, by I. C. Wallmann, Inspector of the Rhenish Missionary Society. Halle: Julius Fricke, 1856, pp. 13–18.

Translation: Pamela Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Johann Christian Wallmann, Sorrows and Joys of Rhenish Missionaries (1856), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-5020>> [April 20, 2024].