# German Historical Institute London
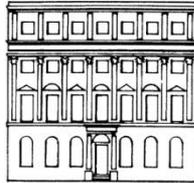


# BULLETIN

# CONFERENCE REPORTS

*Missionaries at War: The Impact of Global Conflict on Christian Missions in the Twentieth Century*. Symposium organized by the German Historical Institute London and the Christian Missions in Global History Seminar, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and held at the GHIL, 9 March 2013.

Rich and varied as it now is, the history of Christian mission in the twentieth century has focused to a remarkably limited extent on the impact of war. Histories of war have made little or no reference to Christian mission. The consequences of global conflict for mission, for mission agencies, and for individual missionaries are as yet too little understood. From a variety of perspectives this symposium examined the interaction of two very different yet also interrelated global phenomena: war and mission. It aimed to present recent and current research on events, institutions, and individuals and to stimulate new lines of historical enquiry into the subject of 'missionaries at war'.

Katharina Stornig from the Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz, presented the first paper, 'Shifting Relations: Nationality, Gender, and Religion in the Catholic Mission in Colonial Togo, 1914–1918'. She began by outlining some details of her methodology, which included the adoption of a 'micro-history' approach, studying in detail the lives of certain individuals or groups of people in order to shed light on larger events. Here Stornig's focus was on German Roman Catholic nuns in Cameroon and their experiences during that colony's occupation by Britain and France during the First World War. Historians often debate the extent to which indigenous agency may have been enhanced in such circumstances. How did these nuns fare? It appears as if war may have had something of an empowering effect—but this should not be exaggerated. Certainly the loss of priests (through repatriation or internment) left something of a gap in ecclesiastical life. And nuns were compelled to take on new tasks, such as nursing wounded soldiers. At a broader institutional and

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

social level, forced interaction between nationals of combatant countries likely led to blurring of what had previously been a relatively clear distinction between religious and secular colonial authority in Cameroon. There were similar consequences for denominational and even sectarian boundaries. The work of the nuns probably helped to mitigate anti-German sentiment locally at least. However, this did little to prevent the loss of German property (missionary and otherwise) to the Allies during wartime and as a consequence of the postwar peace settlement.

Jo Stanley of Lancaster University gave the next paper, 'With Typewriter and Lifebelt: Women Missionaries Sailing in World War I and World War II'. She explained that her research into missionaries formed part of a larger project, on women's experiences of life at sea during wartime. Enemy action apart, those experiences were influenced by gender norms of the time. Stanley described how the death of a woman missionary at sea in 1915 led to restrictions by missionary societies on overseas travel by women. She then gave further detail, based on contemporary written records, of events during the Second World War, when government proved as reluctant as missionary societies to sanction sea travel by women. By 1914 a career in mission already provided opportunities overseas for many women. And they had taken advantage not only in career terms but also in terms of travel and what might be regarded as broadening of horizons. War obviously restricted those opportunities. Some women did travel, however, and recorded their experiences of life on board ship; and these diaries and 'voyage narratives' constitute a valuable historical resource, containing, as they often do, personal reflection on danger and on the possibility of imminent death.

The following paper, by Rosemary Seton of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (SOAS), also dealt with women in a restricted or confined environment but in very different circumstances, namely, wartime internment camps in Shanghai and Sumatra. As in relation to women's experiences at sea, historians have gleaned a great deal of information from contemporaneous diaries and subsequently published memoirs. From these and other sources it has been possible to recreate some of the complexity of life as an internee. For some women internment created opportunity for intimacy and friendship and even for artistic expression (such as in the form of a 'voice orchestra' at the Sumatra camp). Such experiences

may not have been typical. Internment camps were rarely purpose built being instead improvised, and conditions worsened appreciably as time went on because of overcrowding, lack of food, and poor or non-existent sanitation. Internees suffered malnutrition and illness and there were deaths from malaria and dysentery. Although personal bonds endured in many instances, tensions also developed among the internees in part due to differences of background and nationality. Women missionaries' experiences of internment under the Japanese was more varied and more complex than portrayed in the 1997 feature film *Paradise Road*, based in part on accounts of life at the Sumatra camp.

The next two papers maintained focus on missionaries in East Asia, who were more affected by war than their counterparts in many other regions during the 1930s and 1940s. Jocelyn Chatterton (University of Sheffield and SOAS) has based her research in part on interviews with former missionaries. Her subject was 'Protestant Medical Missionary Experience and Dilemma under the Japanese in Occupied China'. She considered how missionaries and the medical institutions that they served may have responded to conflicting imperatives: to collaborate in effect with Japanese authority; or to try to adopt an 'apolitical' stance. Chatterton described their dilemma as akin to being in 'no man's land'. The situation was rendered more difficult by the exigencies of war and internment, which meant a chronic shortage of resources including medical supplies. Missionaries sought to resolve the dilemma of service by debating their moral and ethical choices (whether and how to treat Japanese as well as Chinese patients), concluding that medical missions had work of value to do irrespective of wartime conditions. Chatterton also referred to the importance of race in terms of relations not merely between Europeans and enemy Japanese but between Europeans and Chinese. Part of the pre-war structure of mission and medical care in China was predicated upon a set of power relations rooted in racial inequality, and war complicated these relations further.

In a paper also demonstrating the impact upon missionaries of events in China, Simon Forbes (SOAS) examined 'The Response of British-based Missionary Organizations to the Japanese Occupation of Guangzhou in 1938: Resistance or Collaboration'. He emphasized, with reference to Vichy France, how complicated and contested are terms such as 'collaboration' and 'resistance'. And he noted also that

missionaries in 'British-based' organizations might sometimes be nationals of other countries. Referring mainly to the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society Forbes argued that the actions of personnel at Guangzhou in the late 1930s defied ready categorization: they proved capable of adapting (even through deliberate inaction) to unforeseen and unprecedented circumstances. Missionary attitudes varied. Some were covertly supportive of Chinese resistance against Japanese aggression. Others advocated a 'wait and see' approach. In virtually every case they felt compelled to continue with their work as best they could. They had no influence on the political and military situation. And this worsened in December 1941, when most missionaries became enemy aliens in Japanese-occupied territory. Like Jocelyn Chatterton in relation to the Second World War, Forbes also referred to the way in which Sino-Japanese hostilities complicated race and power relations between Western missionaries and those Chinese people over whom they had previously exerted professional (and in some cases ecclesiastical) authority. Though it caused immense hardship for indigenous peoples, war may also have provided some opportunity for greater indigenous responsibility in church affairs as in provision of medical care.

Mike Leigh (SOAS) gave the penultimate paper, which again focused on the Second World War period: 'God and Mr Churchill: Missionaries and Moral Dilemmas in Wartime Burma.' Leigh explained the longstanding nature of Protestant missionary interest in Burma and how this had been characterized by interdenominational rivalry and also by indigenous (mainly Buddhist) suspicion and reaction. The paper focused on Methodist missions, noting their responses to challenges posed firstly by Burmese nationalism and subsequently by threat of Japanese invasion and occupation. As was the case in other denominations, Methodists debated (within and outside synods) how they might stay true to their vocation yet somehow render assistance if possible either to their home nation or to those Burmese suffering from war. Debate helped highlight the difficulty inherent in any choice between 'militancy' and 'pacifism'. At least one missionary (Robert Acheson) sought to resolve this dilemma by undertaking the role of military chaplain. Leigh noted that while pressures of war prompted difficult individual decisions they also raised deeper questions about the relation of mission to empire and to indigenous peoples.

In the final paper, '"Orphans" and "Intervisitation": Protestant Efforts to Sustain Overseas Mission during and after the Second World War', John Stuart of Kingston University explained how denominational and ecumenical networks, mainly Anglo-American in nature, sought to offset the impact of war on missions. There was particular concern for the future of missions run by German organizations, whose personnel had been interned. The International Missionary Council set up an 'orphaned missions' project, the aim of which was to ensure a continuing missionary presence mainly in Asia and Africa. The project raises questions (yet to be addressed fully) about the extent of missionary commitment to indigenisation and devolution. Stuart emphasized the heavy reliance of the ecumenical movement on American resources, financial and otherwise. He gave details of a transatlantic programme of 'intervisitation' in which British and American mission and church personnel undertook exchange visits, to encourage during 1939–41 American participation in the war against Germany and Italy, to bolster ecumenical relationships, and to plan for the post-war world. These various initiatives fed into Protestantism's contribution to the 'reconstruction' of Europe from 1945.

The papers stimulated a wide range of comments and questions. These helped make clear that for all the ground covered during the symposium there remains much to be studied and clarified about missions, missionaries, and war. Historians of mission have not failed to subject the term 'mission' to scrutiny; they have yet to do the same for the term 'war': what have been its implications for mission and missionaries in theological as well as 'practical' and 'policy' terms? The focus on missionaries throughout these papers was so close as to occlude somewhat the complicated, ambiguous, and frankly problematic nature of the relationship between missions and empire. There were empires other than British, of course, and further research might well be undertaken into missionary experiences in, say, the Ottoman Empire. This might also help provide more insight into a wider range of events during 1914–18. The papers paid relatively little sustained attention to the nature of indigenous engagement with mission and missionaries during either world war: what did local people think and how did they act during the events covered here, and at other times before and after as well as during wars? How and where might such information be located, interpreted, and

given the prominence it undoubtedly deserves? Other aspects of indigenous experience might also be explored, such as the role of African and other Christians on pioneer and related military duties in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The success of the symposium was due in part to the papers presented. It was due also to the lively discussion that the papers stimulated.


JOHN STUART (Kingston University)