

Cindy Patey Brewer

Christian Love and Other Weapons

The Domestic Heroine of the Multiracial Colonial Mission “Family” as an Antiwar Icon in Hedwig Irle’s Mission Memoirs

Shortly after the end of the German-Herero War (1904–1907), during which roughly 80,000 of the approximately 100,000 Herero people were exterminated by the German army in the former colony of German South-West Africa,¹ Hedwig Irle’s (1857–1938) 1909 mission memoir, *Wie ich die Herero lieben lernte* (How I learned to love the Herero), appeared in print. Her brother, Dr. Konsistorialrat Gustav von Rohden, wrote the introduction in which he compares the missionary efforts to convert the Herero tribes to Christianity with the colonial war to suppress the Herero uprising: “We sympathize, that the Herero resisted the inward conquest through Christian love as much as they resisted the outward subjugation via German weapons” (Irle 1909, 3).² Rohden’s comparison between Christian love and German weapons is striking but not surprising when one considers that missionaries have long imagined themselves as Christian soldiers, fighting and sometimes dying on the mission battlefield.

This romantic view of the missionary warrior has roots in the New Testament³ and asserted itself in mission literature of all varieties, appearing in the most fanciful poetic forms as well as in the most mundane mission reports. This icon of religious valor fueled public support for the missions among European Christians at home and impassioned many a young person to venture out into the mission fields abroad. During the initial fervor of Germany’s colonial period, 1885–1918, mission and colonial supporters touted a partnership of church and state in colonizing foreign lands and Christianizing the natives.⁴ In this con-

1 This number is difficult to ascertain, most historians estimate somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 Herero killed. See Bley (1968, 150–151), Oermann (1999, 102) and Krüger (1999, 63).

2 This and all subsequent translations from German originals are mine.

3 Ephesians 6:13–17.

4 In Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was great enthusiasm among missionaries for collaboration between religious and secular entities in colonizing Africa. Christianity, commerce, and civilization became catchwords for missionaries, politicians, and settlers alike, even though in practice these objectives rarely worked well together (see Hastings 1994, 283–293 and Porter 1985). In Germany in 1893, we see similar expectations, for example, in the magazine *Kreuz und Schwert*. But here the magazine already adds a qualifier to their support: “The new magazine wanted to be a support to government, so long as it used wholesome