Stories of a Herero woman, Uerieta Kaza-hendike (1837-1936), have circulated for a century and a half among German Protestants in the Upper Rhineland and Westphalian region. Known to mission enthusiasts as Johanna Gertze, or more often “Black Johanna” (Schwarze Johanna), Uerieta was the first Herero convert of the Rhenish Mission Society. By 1936, her life had spanned the entire period of the Herero mission she had served since her youth. Over the years, the mission society published multiple versions of her story together with drawings and photos of her.¹

Some Germans even met her face-to-face when she visited the Rhineland and Westphalia with missionary Carl Hugo Hahn in 1859, a year after her baptism.² Other than a few elites, no other Herero received as much written attention from the missionaries as Uerieta did. Why was her story of interest to missions-minded Protestants in Germany?

In 1936, missionary Heinrich Vedder again told her story, this time shaping her into an African heroine for the Rhenish Mission. In Vedder’s presentation “Black Johanna” demonstrated the mission’s success in the past and embodied a call for Germans in the new era of National Socialism to do their duty toward so-called inferior peoples. Vedder used Uerieta’s story to shape an apologetic for Protestant missions within the new regime.

The Rhenish Mission had been in Southwest Africa since 1842 as the only mission society until 1904. Vedder arrived at the outset of the Southwest African-German Wars (1904-1907) and a genocide that went with these wars. He observed firsthand the genocide and served as chaplain at the concentration camp for the Herero in Swakopmund. He remained in the colony until Germany was defeated and lost its colonies during the First World War. In 1922, he returned from Germany having just published his first story of Uerieta, and he remained in the colony through the Second World War. In 1849, at the outset of the apartheid system, Vedder became the Senator

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for the People of Namibia, at which time he published a third version of Uerieta’s story.

Throughout the first four decades of Vedder’s career, starting in 1903, the Rhenish Mission was on the defensive and its representatives sought in various ways to prove its value to the German state and society. During the Southwest African Wars, this project involved defending the mission society and its missionaries against charges of sympathy toward Africans. Missionaries on the ground in Southwest Africa also served the aims of empire in direct ways, by aiding in the destruction of Herero communities and lives. After 1918, defending the mission meant fending off criticisms from Germany’s wartime enemies and trying to maintain a presence in Africa, even as the mission sold off properties at home and in territories no longer in German hands. With the ascendance of National Socialism in 1933, currying favor involved depicting overseas missions not as a sign of Christianity’s fundamental incompatibility with Nazism but rather as a source of a “properly” racist understanding of the world. Although Hitler and the Nazi elite turned out to have little use for overseas missions, missionaries tried to find a place in the “racial state.”

Missionary stories, including Vedder’s Schwarze Johanna in 1936, were rooted in these changing contexts. They reflected political, religious, and social upheavals, but they also represented missionaries’ attempts to intervene in events and shape them to fit their purposes in Africa and at home. Helmut Walser Smith traces the “collapse of fellow feeling” through the modern period to 1941 and the murder of millions of Jews. A “collapse” was also apparent in the actions and words of missionaries from Southwest Africa, who promoted the German cause as they perceived it.

Two Wars

The German colonial government in Southwest Africa entered what would be its final decade of rule with a ruthless war that included the mass murder of Herero and Nama (1904-1907). Horst Drechsler characterized the years that followed the genocide as “the peace of the graveyard.” A heavy peace also settled over the Rhenish Mission and its work. At first the missionaries had appeared to falter in the face of criticisms at home over their role in the

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4 This argument for the 1930s is made by Doris L. Bergen, “‘What God has put asunder let no man join together’: Overseas Missions and the German Christian View of Race,” Douglas F. Tobler (ed.) Remembrance, Repentance, Reconciliation 11 (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 5-17. Overseas missions had developed racist ways of thinking, notably racial specificity and divisionism, which Protestant mission leaders saw as “important lessons for race relations” that “could be transferred on to Jews.” This use of overseas missions went beyond the German Christian Movement and its members’ efforts to fuse Christianity and Nazism. Protestants who never joined the German Christians or who left the movement in 1934 also appealed to the racist practices and ideas found in overseas missions.

5 According to Wolfgang Wippermann, Michael Burleigh, and Detlev Peukert, racial policies and ideology were the distinctive features of the Nazi “racial state”; see W. Wippermann and M. Burleigh, The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); D. J. Peukert, “The Genesis of the "Final Solution" from the Spirit of Science,” 236. A 2009 German Historical Institute conference was devoted to this claim: see Mark Roseman, Devin Pendas, and Richard Wetzell (eds.) Beyond the Racial State (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2013).


colony, but they found their bearings amid the wretchedness of the concentration camps, or what the Germans called Konzentrationslager. These camps operated from January 1905 until the civilian colonial government abolished them in 1908. The captured Herero, mainly women and those unable to work as forced laborers, were consigned to three main concentration camps at Swakopmund, Karibib, and Shark Island. The military ran the camps with assistance from some civilians, including missionaries.

The Rhenish Mission threw its energies into the process of rounding up Herero survivors, setting up four collecting stations in early 1905 at Omburo, Otjosazu, Otjihaenena, and later at Otjozongombe. A directive from Berlin on 14 January 1905 and missionary descriptions make clear the central role missionaries played. Rhenish missionary August Kuhlmann provided a few details in his book, Auf Adlers Flügeln. By his account, the Herero would send a messenger to a missionary, who assured them the missionary had come to bring peace. The messenger would leave and return with his entire community. Confined to an area bounded by thick bush and guarded by the military, the Herero then awaited transportation to one of the concentration camps. In this way, missionaries gathered most of the 15,000 Herero prisoners who went to the concentration camps.

There is an ironic pastoral tone to Kuhlmann’s narrative of this process. Prior to the Herero surrender, he called the Herero “a fleeing flock,” reminiscent of the biblical language describing the disciples who abandoned Jesus in Gethsemane. Once they surrendered, they became “the gathered,” reminiscent of ekklesia, the biblical word for “church” with a literal meaning of “the called-out ones.” The incarcerated Herero, whether in one of the concentration camps or in a work camp, he referred to as “our prisoners of war” and his “little congregation.” Kuhlmann also described collection by other missionaries, including Johannes Olpp and Willy Diehl, who found “great joy” in handing over Herero “ring leaders” to the German authorities. He appreciated the “free hand” the governor afforded missionaries in setting up collection stations. His reports and later descriptions indicate that missionaries believed their “surprising success” with collection resulted from a “trust” relationship that existed between them and the Herero, a boast Rhenish missionaries and mission leaders repeated each time they recounted the history of this period.

There are problems with this claim of trust. Kuhlmann noted that he carried a rifle with him in the collection process, an acknowledgment that missionaries were militarized for this task. Photos taken of surrendering Herero coupled with missionaries’ description of their condition at the time of capitulation indicate the Herero and that he had collected an estimated 5000 Herero. Statistical discrepancies reflect two factors: death tolls in the collection process and concentration camps, and the children, who did not go to concentration camps but were placed under the care of missionaries August Kuhlmann and Friedrich Meier, in Otjimbingwe and Windhoek respectively. See Kuhlmann, 80-85; cf. Gewald, 194.

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8 Nils Ole Oermann, Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa under German Rule (1884-1915) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), 109-12.
9 As of late 1905, an estimated 8,800 Herero prisoners worked as forced laborers in military and civilian projects spread across the colony; Jan-Bart Gewald, Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923 (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 195.
10 Ibid., 185-91.
12 The numbers given of imprisoned Herero vary considerably. Kuhlmann ran the collection camp at Omburo, just north of Otjimbingwe. He estimated that the Rhenish Mission rounded up as many as 20,000
had little choice but to give in. These sites show the complicity, or more accurately, the crucial and central role that missionaries had in this stage of the genocide. Their involvement marked the start of the destruction of the Herero through incarceration.

As for the Herero mission, after 1904 Rhenish missionaries no longer targeted a nomadic people through isolated stations; instead they focused on a concentrated population held captive by military force. With the subsequent growth of the German settler population and its administrative demands, African interests fell under missionary jurisdiction of the missionaries, who took the role of representing the African population by serving as native commissioners in local advisory councils.

In these ways, the Rhenish Mission gained legitimacy in Germany for its work in Southwest Africa. The German administration welcomed and encouraged the new missionary roles. Just days before the Battle of Waterberg and the start of the genocide in August 1904, Paul Rohrbach (1869-1956), a Protestant theologian turned colonial official, met with missionaries and urged them to extend their work. He proposed new mission stations alongside concentration camps, which in effect was an invitation for missionaries to take part in the military operation against the Herero.

The Rhenish missionaries received Rohrbach’s call favorably. In fact, they already intended to expand. In April 1904, they had discussed plans for a station at Swakopmund and announced they were in search of a second site.19 They pledged to supporters that they would continue the work and expressed the view that the Herero uprising would end to the mission’s advantage: “Once the rebellion has been put down, our task will be to set our eyes on a new order for the mission there and to pursue in all seriousness the Christianizing of all that remains of the Herero people.”20 When the government announced plans for a second concentration camp at Karibib, the Rhenish Mission told its supporters that it too was ready to establish an adjacent mission station. In these camps, missionaries would serve as chaplains, mediсs, and pastors to a literal captive audience of Africans.

By focusing its expansion on locations for concentration camps, the Rhenish Mission had endorsed the military campaign against the Herero.22 Barmen assigned missionaries to Okahandja, Karibib, and Swakopmund, the locations where the German military planned concentration camps.23 General Lothar von

16 Oermann, 113.
17 On the structural changes within the colony and the mission work, see Oermann, 167-170.
19 Berichte der Missionsgesellschaft zu Barmen (hereafter BRMG) (July 1904): 262.
20 Kollekttenblatt, no. 2 (1904): 4.
21 On the Deputation deliberation over Rohrbach’s advice to expand the mission once the Herero were put down, see RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (9 Sept. 1904): 428, par. 13. The Deputation rejected Rohrbach’s idea of large land purchases; RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (10 Oct. 1904): 431, par. 11; BRMG (August 1904): 301.
22 It did not restore stations emptied by the disruption of Herero communities; RMG 14, Protokollen 1896-1905 (13 June 1904): 415-16, par 10. In July, the Deputation requested a report of the exact damages to stations, see RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (7 July 1904): 419, par 16.
23 Swakopmund was not a new location for the Rhenish Mission; missionaries had tried earlier but failed. In 1904, the port town appeared ripe for mission work.
Vedder served as chaplain to the concentration camp, hospital, and military, as well as pastor for the German colonists. He was not trained for pastoral work and found that role least to his liking. At his request, he was relieved of the pastoral duties in 1906; RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (25-29 Aug. 1906); Vedder to Spiecker, 8 June 1906, RMG 1.660a, 628; cf. Oermann, 124.

22 On assignments for the new missionaries, namely Friedrich Meier and J. Heinrich Brockmann, see Altena, 442-43, 464. In early 1905, the new civilian governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, lifted the ban on Protestant missionaries. Meier was then assigned to a concentration camp in Windhoek, where most of the 500 prisoners were women and children. August Elger was posted at Karibib. ELCIN V.37, *Chroniken Windhuk 1905*; cf. Gewald, 196. Wilhelm Eich was put in charge of the Herero mission, while Kuhlmann was to care for the children in Otjimbingue; RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (13 June 1904): 415-16, par. 10; cf. RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (10 Oct. 1904): 431, par. 11.

23 The Deputation asked Missionary Carl Friedrich Wandres to write about the situation in Southwest Africa for a German newspaper in South Africa, but the daily rejected his article. The Deputation also appointed Johannes Olpp to prepare a memorandum for distribution in the colony and in Germany that would outline how missionaries were taking part in the war effort; Altena, 467-68, footnote 579; for the Deputation’s request, see RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (13 June 1904): 415-16, par 10; cf. RMG 14 Protokollen 1896-1905 (13 June 1904): 415-16, par 10; (7 July 1904): 419, par 9; cf. Johannes Olpp, *Die Kulturbedeutung der evang[elischen] Rhein[ischen] Mission für Südwest Afrika* (Swakopmund, 1914).

24 A debate in 1904 in German on the role of missionaries in the conflict had raised concerns in Barmen about possible financial repercussions. Specifically, the Deputation feared Berlin might withhold the license for the quarterly house-to-house collection, which could bring upward of Mk 100,000. This was no small sum, given that the average cost per missionary in the field in 1904 was Mk 5000; RMG 14, Protokollen 1896-1905 (27 April 1904): 401-402, par. 4.

25 RMG 128, “Rundschreiben an die Missions-Hilfsges.” p. 7. The deficit in 1905 was Mk 125,387; in 1906 it increased to Mk 188,783, and by 1914 it reached Mk 256,178; see Walter Spieker, *Die Rheinische Missions-gesellschaft in ihren volks-und kolonialwirtschaftlichen Funktionen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1922), 80.


27 *Flugblätter der Rheinischen Mission* ran from 1904 until 1919. The first edition identified the Herero uprising and noted that Germans were well aware of the trouble, “von dem wir aus allen Zeitungen hören”; *Flugblätter* 1 (1904): 3; cf. RMG 14, Protokollen 1896-1905 (27 April 1904): 401-02, par. 4.
The mission society also increased funding for “propaganda.” Costs hovered between three and eight percent of the budget before 1908, and grew to fourteen percent by 1914.32 The Flugblätter were a key component of the public apologetic for mission work: articles appealed for support while defending the missionary. In 1905, the Flugblätter reminded readers that the Herero mission was a “link in the chain” of 180 missionaries; 110 stations; 400 schools; 22,000 students; and over 100,000 converts of the Rhenish Mission, itself “a rather important link” in the overall Protestant German missionary movement. The “noble workforce” of that cause, the Flugblätter announced, consisted of 7500 men and 4000 women.33 Supporting one link in the chain would help secure the whole.

Missionary heroics became the focus of mission literature, upholding the image of a loyal, courageous missionary as a true representative of Germany. Spieker pronounced the missionaries “natural peace mediators … between the white compatriots and the colored natives in the colonies, because they love them both.”34 The missionaries, he claimed, enabled a solution to the colonial war by collecting survivors, which, he added was possible because of the “very great trust” between the missionary and the Herero.35 Spieker’s reports neglected the brutality of the gathering process, the conditions in the collection stations, and the deadly nature of the concentration camps. Instead, he presented the missionary as the glue to restore a fragmented colony.

As the Rhenish Mission carried out its promise to recreate a strong missionary presence in the colony, people at home responded. A steady increase of donations led the mission society to increase its quarterly print-run of Kollektienblätter to 90,000 copies with hopes to further offset the cost of expansion.36 The years between the colonial wars and the First World War were a time to recover and rebuild the mission work, in part by strengthening ties to the German imperial project.

The gains the Rhenish Mission made in that decade, however, dissipated during First World War. Missionaries and their supporters had shared the elation at the outbreak of war, and all sixty-five missionary candidates at the Barmen Mission Seminary were among the thirteen million German soldiers in the war effort.37 When Germany lost its colonies, the tie between the mission society and imperial aims was also lost, and the South African military regime deported three of its missionaries from Southwest Africa, including Heinrich Vedder.38

The situation at the mission head office in Barmen, Germany, was also dire. The mission house was left nearly empty as the war drained much of the vitality from the Rhenish Mission. Germany became preoccupied with the battle field, and the mission field seemed even more distant.39 As Roger Chickering reminds us, “the

32 Walter Spieker, 81.
33 Flugblätter, no. 2 (1905).
34 Ibid., 2.
35 Spieker presented missionary roles in rounding up Herero and bringing them to concentration camps as “saving” the surviving Herero. He boasted that Willy Diehl had collected 3561 Herero at Otjihaenena – 1028 men, 1299 women, and 1234 children – and August Kuhlmann had achieved a similar feat in Omburo; J. Spiecker, “Von der Friedensarbeit der rheinischen Mission in Otjihaenena (Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika),” Kollektienblätter, no. 3 (1906): 2-3.
36 For statistics on public donations, see Kollektienblätter, no. 1 (1907): 1-2. For donations from the local mission groups, see the internal study of thirty-two regional mission societies that showed an increase of fifty-two percent in contributions from 1904 to 1909; “Rund-schreiben an die Missions-Hilfs-Ges.” RMG 128, 59; Walter Spieker, 80.
37 Roger Chickering, Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 195; Leo Grebel and Wilhelm Winkler, The Cost of the World War to Germany and to Austria-Hungary (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 76. On elation among mission supporters at home, see a September war sermon citing a poem that “the German character shall one day restore the world” (Am deutschen Wesen soll dereinst die Welt genesen), EMW (Sept. 1914): 257-63; cf. Menzel, 258-59; Kriele, 342-43.
38 BRMG (1916): 5; cf. Kriele 344-47.
39 Chickering, 96-99.
war was about dying,” and any effort to give a heroic meaning to the vast number of deaths could not suppress the rising despondency. From the Rhenish Mission, twenty-eight candidates and forty-one missionary sons died, as well as seven sons of the Home Inspectors and two sons of the mission Director, Johannes Spieker.

The financial strain of the war brought further changes to the Rhenish Mission. The mission society had faced its worst shortfall in 1917 after having lost contact with most of its mission fields. Missionaries in Southwest Africa had relied on credit from South Africa and these debts came due. The Deputation explored two options: either amalgamate with the Bethel Mission Society that operated in East Africa, or reduce the size of the assets and fields belonging to the Rhenish Mission. A union in the post-war years would help centralize costs, but it might also increase the overall financial burden in an uncertain time. The Rhenish Mission opted to sell property and turn over some mission fields to non-German mission societies, which was not popular with the mission supporters who were in effect the principal investors in the Rhenish Mission. Spieker pleaded with the local mission associations to step in and help alleviate a shortfall of a half million Marks. By 1922, the situation had not improved, and the Rhenish Mission made an appeal to church presbyteries:

Our congregations have a grave and sacred duty to help the mission in its time

of need, because of the blessing that through [missionary] work has been returned to the Protestant churches of the Rhineland and Westphalia, and because the Lord of the Church has given the mission as the most important task to his congregations.

The plea worked, although it brought a new kind of supporter. By the late 1920s the Rhenish Mission was working more closely with the church synods than ever before.

Courting the National Socialists

Amid war and genocide, the Rhenish Mission had cast its lot with the colonial project. The loss of Germany’s colonies and defeat in 1918 put an end to that partnership and brought new challenges. This time the mission responded by turning back to its base in the Protestant churches of the Rhineland and Westphalia. There it found renewed support, especially funding, not only from the local mission networks and individual pastors that had been its mainstay almost a century earlier, but from church councils and bureaucratic structures. The rise of National Socialism and Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933 tempted the mission society with yet another potential partner: the Nazi movement. Its energy and popularity appeared to many church people, including missionaries and spokesmen for overseas missions, to be evidence of German renewal. In the hope of participating in the national revival, some mission leaders offered their services. Their strongest card, based on experience with Africans, and particularly the Herero, was missionary notions of race.

Heinrich Drießler, Home Inspector for the Rhenish Mission from 1928 to 1934 with responsibility for Southwest Africa, played a key role in this regard; by retelling the missionary

40 Chickering, 100.
41 Kriele, 343; cf. BRMG (1916): 1.
42 Chickering, 103-08.
47 RMG 128, 5-6.
48 Ibid., 44-53; until the 1920s, financial support came primarily from local mission unions and individuals.
49 Ibid., 54-55.
stories, he created an appeal for more mission work within the Nazi regime. On 1 April 1933, Drießler joined the National Socialist Party and the national synod of the German Christian movement (Deutsche Christen). He befriended Joachim Hossenfelder, the Bishop of Brandenburg, who called the German Christians “the Stormtroopers of Jesus Christ,” and became a member of the Inspectoratskollegen, a group of missionary leaders noted for their “National Socialist orientation.”

From key positions within the Protestant church, the German Christians aimed to purge Christianity of all vestiges of its Jewish roots by erecting institutions for de-Judaization of Christianity. They also sought a Reichskirche that would unite all German Christians – Protestants and Catholics – under the cross and swastika. Drießler was not alone in his enthusiasm and optimism in 1933. The mission seminarians joined the Stormtroopers en masse. The annual report of the mission that year thanked God for preserving German “self-determination” during the years of democracy, hinting that some credit for this steadfastness should go to missionaries who had “helped” Germans find “inner renewal” and restored national hope in 1933.

Drießler’s descriptions of Africans appeared in the midst of this euphoria. He attempted to link missionary notions of race to the Nazi racist agenda. His depictions of Africans sought to show that the missionary movement had long been a leader in defining and upholding racial differences. Since his duties included an eleven-month field inspection to South- and Southwest Africa in 1931, he wrote seventeen reports and a monograph titled Die Rheinische Mission in Südwestafrika (the Rhenish Mission in Southwest Africa). He retold familiar missionary narratives, and of the six groups of people in Southwest Africa that he discussed, the Herero were prominent. He contrasted them with the missionaries who appeared as diligent and dedicated agents of German ethnological and religious activity. Missionaries had labored to learn the Herero language and collect cultural products, including their fables, myths, and proverbs. The Herero, by contrast, had suffered under a fractured and despotic leadership that perpetuated “pride,” “self-righteousness,” and “distrust” of the whites and the SA until 1936; ibid., 25. The Rhenish Mission had internal conflict over this issue, evident in correspondence between Warneck and Delius, 1 and 15 January 1940, RMG 1.287.


52 Bergen, Twisted Cross, 148-71.


54 In his authorized history of the Rhenish Mission, Gustav Menzel portrays Drießler and others who supported the NSDAP as unrepresentative and isolated; Menzel, 306, also see footnote 545, 429.

55 On Barmen seminarians and the SA, see a 1940 private report by E. Delius, “Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der Rheinischen Mission in den Jahren 1929 bis 1939,” RMG 1.287; cf. Menzel, 304-06. According to Delius, some seminarians did not leave
led them into degenerate acts of “theft, harlotry, idleness, and barbarity.”

Drießler summarized for German readers in 1933 the missionaries’ explanation for the fate of the Herero. Although missionaries had persisted in their effort to civilize them through education and agriculture, the Herero, Drießler concluded, remained a stubborn people until the wars of 1904-1907 broke them. Death, he claimed, was the ultimate evangelist and bearer of “Good News” to the obstinate African: “Only when death comes does the material world seem worthless, and they begin to turn their hearts fully to the grace of God.” Africans who had faced death yet survived and yielded to God’s grace began a slow progression toward civilization; they became a model for their people. The lesson from Southwest Africa was clear: violence could produce spiritual life when missionaries guided the process. Drießler’s book was no mere recounting of mission history: it was an assertion that extreme violence was necessary to renew the spiritual life of a people.

Drießler also contrasted the missionaries with settlers and traders to reinforce how missionaries understood and upheld racial distinctions. Missionaries, he claimed, had focused on elevating “the African” to become a civilized Christian people. The way to improve the Africans was not through the cultural tools of arts and literature, he insisted, but through labor. Unlike missionaries, settlers and traders had an opposite “civilizing” aim: to Indebt Africans and deprive them of their cattle wealth, land, and freedom. He maintained that only the missionaries had understood that an essential racial hierarchy existed in Southwest Africa: the Nama were suited for domestic work, the Herero for farm labor, and the Ovambo for the mines. Similar to the Nazi hierarchy of European people, Drießler argued that each African group had its place according to the level of “civilization” achieved and maintained through the missionaries’ efforts.

Drießler spoke for those mission leaders who wanted a restored German colonialism under the banner of National Socialism. He asked if it was time for Germans to become active once again in southern Africa. His reply was unequivocal; Germany had a responsibility in Africa to both the African and German communities. After all, he argued, the Rhenish Mission’s work in Africa concerned Germans at home as much as Africans abroad: missionaries’ part in establishing German colonies, maintaining peace, and taming the heathen proved

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61 Ibid., 70.
62 During the “wars of liberation” against the Nama (1863-1870), Drießler maintained, missionaries had sought to help the Herero become a “free, independent people.” But freedom and unity had not enabled the Herero to progress because they failed to leave “heathendom” and embrace the “great invisible power of Christianity.” According to Drießler, when missionary colonists made visible the intangible power of the Gospel by creating an agricultural community as a model for Africans, the Herero misread diligence and hard work as “clawing at the dirt all day long,” which had no appeal for their idle character; ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 175.
65 Ibid.
66 After describing the Herero-German War and how the Herero were defeated, Drießler noted that the German colonial government looked to the missionaries to pacify the remaining Herero, which led him into his conclusion about the civilizing mission and praise for the impact the Rhenish had on the Herero; ibid., 146-55; 217-26.
67 One example of the “civilizing” work of the missionaries was in education, where the youth “must be educated through work” and moral education, ibid., 311, 314.
68 Ibid., 191-97.
69 Drießler summed up his book by identifying the distinct labor value of each group, for which he credited the missionaries, ibid., 299-304.
71 Ibid., 96-97.
they were a vital resource for restoring Germany’s national integrity.  

The Making of a Heroine: Heinrich Vedder and Uerieta Kazahendike

Among missionaries who penned narratives about Southwest Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, Heinrich Vedder was the most prolific. Like Drießler, Vedder was convinced the mission field had something valuable to offer in the new era of racialist thinking. Although based in Africa, he kept a close watch on political and religious developments in Germany. Only missionaries, he insisted, possessed the knowledge of the various African people needed to rule them. Vedder placed himself within this tradition by collecting African oral history, fables, and stories to construct narratives about African “tribes.” In the process, he provided his outside publications for other mission societies, local religious journals, academic journals, newspapers in Germany and South Africa, government publications as a senator for Southwest Africa, and his numerous articles in the Afrikaanischer Heimatkalender, to which he was a life-long contributor; see Baumann, Mission und Ökumene (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 73-147.


72 Drießler builds his argument first by pointing out the need to connect the mission work and German settler churches closer: “Diese Verbindung von Missionsamt und Pfarramt ist, missionarisch gesehen, eine große Not,” ibid. Missionaries would then gain more support from the German settlers, and in return, they would help preserve German nationalism among the settlers, ibid., 116-18.

73 In 1927, the Rhenish Mission assigned Vedder to assemble “spiritual nourishment” for readers of German in Southwest Africa. Germans at home were to provide material. Vedder’s boxes of clippings and notes, housed in the National Archives of Namibia in Windhoek, indicate he also collected and disseminated political information. See BRMG no. 1, 5, 6 & 8 (1927): 15, 61, 89, 121; cf. NAN, Holding A-579, boxes 1-7.

74 Vedder’s extensive publications include his monograph, Das alte Südwestafrika: Südwestafrikan Geschichtie bis zum Tode Maharers 1890 (Berlin: Martin Warneck, 1934) that went unchallenged until after Namibian independence. Also notable are H. Vedder Die Bergdama. 2 vols. (Hamburg: Friederichsen, 1923), H. Vedder, C. H. Hahn, and L. Fourie, The Native Tribes of South West Africa (London: Cass, 1966), and H. Vedder, Kurze Geschichten aus einem langen Leben (Wuppertal: Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft, 1953). The United Evangelical Mission Archive in Wuppertal has a record of Vedder’s publications through the Rhenish Mission, but the list does not include many of

Growing up amidst the religious enthusiasm and mission fervor in Ravensberg, Westphalia, Vedder was a product of the culture he would one day foster. His mother steered him toward missionary stories that would inculcate Lutheran piety and revivalist devotion. She narrated stories from her youth and encouraged her children to read Der kleine Missionsfreunde, a publication to which Vedder would one day contribute. Her efforts paid off. In his teens, Vedder aspired to be a missionary; he read the stories, became fascinated with other cultures and languages, and even began to study Greek. As the third child and second son in a lower middle-class farming family from Lenzinghausen, a missionary career offered a path for advancement for those who were religiously inclined, ambitious, and adventurous. In 1903, after six years of training in the Barmen Mission School where he learned six languages, the Rhenish Mission ordained Vedder and sent him to Southwest Africa.

From the outset of his career at the Swakopmund concentration camp, Vedder observed up close the extreme violence of German military and colonists toward the Herero and the mass conversions to Christianity. The war and genocide had shattered Herero communities and cattle wealth; their only exit from the camps was as laborers on farms and in mines. Vedder could advocate for the Herero and help them secure employment that enabled them to leave the camps. But the dispersal of the Herero and Nama after the war made missionary work less cohesive and logistically challenging. In 1910, the Rhenish Mission sent Vedder to Gaub to set up a school for teachers and evangelists to help missionaries carry out multi-lingual visitations in the new colonial context. Gifted in learning languages, Vedder used this position to expand his linguistic skills and cultural knowledge.

When South Africa conquered the German colony in July 1916, they expelled Vedder and two other senior missionaries. Once back in Germany, Vedder was put to work visiting the missionary network, where he developed his skill as a storyteller. After the war, the Rhenish Mission began to publish his stories regularly. In his accounts, African chiefs often perpetrated violence, conflict, and disruption; ordinary Africans showed the destructive outcome of “heathendom”; and wild animals symbolized the moral flaws of Africans, except for lions, who brought dignity, peace, and order, and usually symbolized the missionaries.

For his stories, Vedder sought characters who could bridge the reality of the mission field and perceptions back home. A favorite character was Schwarze Johanna, or Uerieta Kazahendike. Unlike his other characters,

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**Apartheid – Heinrich Vedder und Hans Karl Diehl**
(Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe, 2010).


78 On the number of baptisms, see the monthly *Berichte der Rheinischen Mission* for 1905-1907; cf. missionaries’ astonishment over conversions, see Vedder to Spieker, 5 May 1908 and 1 Jan. 1909, RMG 1,660b, 67-8, 79-81.

79 On motivations for conversion, see Gewald critical comments; Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 193-204.


81 Johannes Olpp (Jr.), who was also deported wrote to Johannes Olpp after the war and noted that next to Vedder’s name on the list of those expelled was written, “Is hostile toward British rule and treats the natives very badly.” Olpp to Spieker, 19 August 1919; cited in Baumann, *Mission und Ökumene*, 39, footnote 78.

82 Vedder’s stories appeared in four publications of the Rhenish Mission as well as in books and booklets. They also spread to other German periodicals, including the national missions journal *Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift* and local religious and popular literature such as the *Evangelisches Monatsblatt für Westfalen*.

83 Vedder, “Allerlei Löwen,” DKMF, no. 9 (1921): 65-68; no. 10 (1921): 73-75.

84 Various spellings are Ueriette, Urieta, Uerieta and Uerita.
many of whom were villains and weak converts, Uerieta had embraced the missionaries, their faith and mission, and remained loyal. She had ascended from the poorest, the Damara slaves, to stand as a heroine next to the northern “gods” in the work of elevating African “heathens” to civilization and faith.85 Starting in her youth, she held vital roles in the Herero mission as a translator, linguist, teacher, nurse, and evangelist.86 She was also a source for Vedder’s compilation of African oral history.87 In a sense, Vedder “knew” Uerieta even before he met her. She was highly regarded among supporters of the Herero mission, who viewed her conversion as the first sign the Herero would surrender to the Gospel.88 One of these supporters was Vedder’s mother, who had met and spoken with Uerieta in 1859, an experience she relayed to her children.89

Vedder appears, however, to have viewed previous accounts of Uerieta as inadequate for the new context in Germany. He reintroduced her through three narratives that elevated her from an impoverished young maid to a pious heroine. Each version characterized her differently. His 1921 account told how he met her during the Herero-German war. In this variation, Uerieta represented renewed hope that, though the colonies were lost, the Herero mission was not. In his 1936 two-volume iteration, Vedder presented Uerieta as a Herero matriarch of Christian faith and a model for the transition from heathendom to Christianity. The third and much shorter narrative came in 1949, in the context of the new apartheid system. Here Uerieta appeared as a faithful, though distinctly African, Christian witness.

Other sources leave little doubt that Uerieta was a remarkable woman. The daughter of a freed Berg Damara slave, her dark complexion made her place in the Herero community ambiguous. When Nama raiders attacked her village in the 1840s, leaving her family impoverished, the family fled to the New Barmen mission, a station run by missionary Hugo Hahn near Otjikango. By 1848, the eleven-year-old Uerieta had endeared herself to the Hahn family and become their house cleaner and children’s nurse. In this role, she learned the languages of the home – English, German, and Afrikaans – which gave her the expertise to assist Hahn in developing an Otjiherero alphabet and a translation of the Bible.90 By the late 1850s, she was teaching Herero and Bergdamara children in the mission school, and from the 1860s to 1880s she travelled with her Baster husband, Samuel Gertze, to form new mission outposts. There is no record for the next period of her life, but around the time of the Herero-German War (1904-1907), Inspector Spieker and Vedder rediscovered Uerieta living near the Otjimbingue mission station, where she served Africans and Germans as a nurse and pharmacist. Her children and grandchildren had taken up roles as evangelists and teachers in the Herero mission.

In 1936, Vedder’s second iteration of Uerieta’s story did not merely adjust trivial facts or update her status. Nor was this version

86 Hugo Hahn acknowledged her role in helping him complete the Herero Bible and dictionary, and other reports celebrated her Christian piety and marveled at her fluency in European languages; BRMG, no. 9 (1958): 135.
88 For Hahn’s version of Uerieta’s conversion, see BRMG, no. 9 (1958): 135.
90 Her family being originally Damara, Uerieta likely spoke the Khoisan dialect, the language of the Nama and Damara in addition to Otjiherero. This might explain how she would be useful to Rhenish missionaries to the Nama during her time in the south waiting for the Hahn’s to return from their first furlough in 1853.
simply a eulogy at the time of her death. Vedder rewrote her story for the new Germany and presented details about Uerieta to fit his apologetic of German missionary work. He embedded his depiction of her in racialized terms he thought would suit the language of the Third Reich. She illustrated Vedder’s claims about the role of missionaries among other “races.”

Vedder altered the previously known details about Uerieta. He retold her entrance into the Hahn home, recast her relationship with the Hahn children, and revised the story of her conversion. According to Vedder’s 1936 version, Uerieta’s entrance into the missionary home was a single event centered on sweeping the house clean. She had shown enthusiasm for sweeping but lacked the skill to do more than “move the dirt around” until Mrs. Hahn instructed her. Uerieta had insisted that an African maid, not a German woman, should do such work and pleaded with Mrs. Hahn to let her stay with them to do domestic chores. Mrs. Hahn relented. Once in the missionary home, Uerieta developed a relationship with the missionary children, whose care Mrs. Hahn entrusted to her. Vedder focused on Uerieta’s affection for the newborn Traugott Hahn (b. 1848), who would later become a well- known pastor in Reval, Westphalia and thus familiar to Vedder’s audience.

A dramatic tone developed as Vedder told of Uerieta’s progress toward the Christian faith. While in Stellenbosch, where the Hahns left her in 1853, Uerieta encountered the elderly and saintly missionary Christiane Kähler, whom mission supporters also knew from the literature. Kähler awakened in Uerieta an interest in prayer. Uerieta then moved to Bethany to live with the family of Rhenish missionary Heinrich Kreft. There during an evening prayer she became more fully “awakened” by observing the piety of Maria, the youngest Kreft daughter, who would die not long thereafter. Vedder tells the story through Uerieta’s voice:

One evening, Mrs. Kreft had much to do. It was time for little Maria to go to bed. I had bathed her when Mrs. Kreft said, “Uerieta, put little Maria to bed; I do not have time.” I brought little Maria to the bedroom and was about to lay her down in her small bed, when she resisted, kneeled down, folded her hands and said: “Pray with me. That is what Mother always does when she puts me to bed.” I wanted to pray, but I could not. I simply could not pray. What shame I had brought on myself! It was the first time in my life that I had been asked to pray with a white child, but I did not know how to do so. I became frightened and I thought to myself, “You have grown up and yet you cannot pray.” This thought would not leave me. At that moment I became awake and started to reflect on my life. Little Maria Kreft had awakened me.

92 Ibid.
93 In Vedder’s clippings is a set of notes based on interaction between him and Traugott Hahn, in which the topic of Uerieta is listed as item 6; NAN, Holding 579, box 2.
94 Christiane Kähler, or “Schwester Kähler,” was one of the first single, female missionaries of the Rhenish Mission; see Gustav Warneck, *Christiane Kähler: Eine Diakonisin auf die Missionsfelde* (Barmen: Rheinische Mission, 1873); cf. “Die Geschichte vom kleinen Krüppel,” DKMF, no. 9 (1861).
Vedder stressed that at this time Uerieta was unable to pray; she had only the desire to pray. When she requested baptism, Missionary Kreft hesitated, not wishing "to force her into anything." 97

In 1857, Uerieta returned to New Barmen to resume her duties in the Hahn home and, according to Vedder, complete her conversion to Christianity. On 15 April 1858, after Hahn’s mid-week sermon of the “glory of heaven” and the “agony of hell,” Uerieta approached Hahn to make her request. Here Vedder tells the story in Hahn’s voice:

After the service, Uerieta wept and asked to be baptized. She had expressed her desire for baptism already once before. [This time] she spoke freely and also confessed the mistakes she had made while in the Kreft home. I gave her until the next Sunday to think things over and made her aware that baptism would bring certain difficulties because she would be the first and, possibly for some time, the only one among her people to become a Christian. For example, she would not be able to consider marriage because after baptism she should not be united with a heathen. 98

Hahn’s warning about limits on future marriage prospects was presumably because he would have a say in who she could marry, though Vedder was unclear on this point. He does tell how, during Uerieta’s week of decision, her resolve would be tested when a young man from South Africa arrived in the village and proposed marriage to Uerieta’s parents. Uerieta was interested, Vedder indicated, but just in time Hahn discovered that the man was a thief on the run. The young man disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. On 25 July 1858 Hahn baptized Uerieta and she took the Christian name Johanna Maria.

Seventy years earlier Hahn had told Uerieta’s story quite differently. He recounted how Uerieta took the initiative in sweeping and proved to be so competent that Mrs. Hahn wanted her as a domestic servant. 99 The theme of awakening African initiative, labor and skill was Vedder’s invention. Hahn stressed Uerieta’s relationship to his older daughter, Margarita, not Traugott, but Margarita was not less known to Vedder’s audience. As for Uerieta’s conversion, Hahn’s version was less idealized and progressive than Vedder’s. Her time in Bethany with the Kreft family was dichotomous, and Hahn blamed Uerieta for being troublesome, noting her “rude behavior,” “disobedience,” “idleness,” “stubborn character,” and “defiance,” all of which he concluded showed she was in need of “chastisement.” 100 Hahn also expressed reservations about Uerieta’s readiness for baptism, but there was pressure on her for marriage, which required Hahn to make his move to convert her. When she requested baptism, he noted, “there is something that is not to my liking, but I cannot say what it is.” 101 He added a remark about her relationship to a Herero man, and, without giving details, hoped “the

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98 Lau, Hahn Tagebücher, 969; DKMF, no. 12 (1861): 181-83.
100 BRMG, no. 9 (1958): 135.
incident with Kamuvandu does not recur.” On the day he baptized Uerieta, he added a note in his journal that her parents were attempting to marry her to an older widower. Vedder had sidestepped entirely the cultural dilemma that Uerieta was negotiating and that were implied in Hahn’s diaries.

A further discrepancy concerns Uerieta’s progress in Christian piety and prayer. According to Vedder, Uerieta was willing but unable to pray until she submitted to catechism in preparation for baptism. In the pietism of the missionary movement, prayer was often the telltale sign of piety. Contrary to Vedder, Hahn’s journal indicated that Uerieta had begun to pray “by heart” in 1853, while in Stellenbosch, and when she arrived in New Barmen four years later, Hahn observed that she “often prays.” Such details would upset Vedder’s progressive narrative toward conversion.

The meaning of Vedder’s alterations and contradictions relates to his message and his audience: he was writing for someone and not just about someone. He shaped Urieta’s story to illustrate a notion about “the African” that supported his apologetic for missionary work as an arm of German expansion. In 1936, the year of Uerieta’s death and Vedder’s two-part biography of her, a newly rearmed Germany was steeped in “the race question.” The return of the Saar to Germany, the Nuremberg Laws, remilitarization of the Rhineland, Berlin Olympics, and Germany’s entry into the Spanish Civil War all occurred in 1935 and 1936. It was to the Germans who witnessed, participated in, and celebrated these events that Vedder addressed his narrative.

In 1935, a year before his Schwarze Johanna appeared, Vedder published his essay, “Race, religion, and mission, according to our experience.” In it he argued that the primary difference between “races” was not physical but psychological; the crucial factor was the “drive to live.” Vedder identified five drives that made the “blond and blue-eyed” race superior to others: Forschungstrieb (the drive to research), Wissens- und Lernenstrieb (the drive to know and to learn), Mitteilungstrieb (the drive to communicate information), mental or intellectual Produktionsstrieb (the drive to produce), and Metaphysischer Trieb (a metaphysical drive that governed the entire thought and conduct of a people). The goal of mission work was to awaken these drives and restore full spiritual life (Seelenleben). “Drive,” he argued, would determine whether a people could prevent or reverse degeneration. The “blond and blue-eyed” people had distinguished themselves by possessing and cultivating superior drives, which gave them a superior civilization. Other races also had “drives,” though these might lie dormant and need awakening. A few races, Vedder added, possessed drives toward destruction, as was the case with “the Jews.”

102 Ibid.; Kamuvandu was a member of Hahn’s community, Lau, Tagebücher, 981, 991. On Hahn’s reflections on Uerieta, conversion, and marriage, see Lau, Tagebücher, 958-59, 972-74, 1082.
103 Ibid., 103.
104 These details may have been too cluttered for Vedder’s version, or it may be that the senior Uerieta had purged these aspects from her story when she told it to Vedder. It could also be that Hahn misread the marriage issue and recorded them inaccurately in his journals. In any case, Vedder’s version removes complexity, if not ambiguity.
105 Frömmigkeit was a common theme in missionary stories. An example associated with Urieta is Maria Kreft, whose death narrative preceded Uerieta’s conversion story in 1861 by just four months; G. Krönlein, “Maria Kreft (Bethanien, 4. März 1862),” DKMF, no. 8 (1862): 117-28.
106 Lau, Tagebücher, 969.
108 Ibid., 19, 22.
109 Ibid.,19.
110 Notes in preparing the manuscript for Das alte südwestafrika: Südwestafrikas Geschichte bis zum Tode Mahareros 1890 (Berlin: Warneck, 1934), indicate that
The African “drive” was dormant, according to Vedder. Through ongoing encounters with developed races, the natural drives of the Africans would awaken, and in time they too could achieve their full human potential. But the “race science” of the 1930s, he maintained, had left out one crucial component: the duty of superior races to elevate the lower races. “The lower the peoples are,” he claimed, “the greater is the obligation of privileged people to offer them a hand so that they too can develop as full human beings.”

He added, “In particular, the peoples that possess colonies should acknowledge this duty and fulfill it.” Other mission leaders agreed that missionary work made its subjects “complete human beings,” and that it took time to elevate the heathen. Johannes Warneck, Director of the Rhenish Mission, had written in 1909 that a long multi-generational process was required before “they can enter into the fullness of [the Gospel’s] spiritual wealth.”

Vedder’s 1935 discussion of race sheds light on the peculiarities in his 1936 depiction of Schwarze Johanna. In addition to representing the ideal African convert and mother of a generation of Africans faithful to the work of the mission, Uerieta also embodied the success of missions in bringing “race” work to completion. Missionaries had awakened in her a latent and natural drive for labor. They taught her to be productive and do more than “move the dirt around.” Living in close proximity with them gave her the language and domestic skills needed to develop as a civilized person and to civilize her people. As a result, she became ever more useful to the missionaries. When she converted, married a Christian, became a mother to seventeen children, joined her husband in mission work, and served the wider colonial communities, she became a matriarch of faith, according to Vedder.

Vedder had indeed written more than a eulogy for Uerieta. He had taken the opportunity of her death to offer an argument for the missionary movement within the dominant racist ways of thinking. Using the popular format of storytelling, Vedder reiterated arguments from his other works, Das alte Südwestafrika (1934) and Rasse, Religion und Mission aus “Unsere Erfahrung” (1935). He dismissed the genocide of the Herero with the statement that “colonial wars are not uncommon” and blamed the conflict on a “people of nature” (Naturvölker) trying to prevent progress. How Uerieta experienced the genocide of the Herero was not mentioned. Instead Vedder boasted that Germans, especially missionaries, had rescued the “tribes” of Southwest Africa – the Nama, Damara, Bergdama, Herero, Ovambo, Tjimba, and Khoi-San – from degenerating into violence, destruction, and self-annihilation. That argument appears vicious, cynical, or at best disingenuous in view of the atrocities Germans committed against the Herero and Nama. The denial implicit in it stands out against Vedder’s claim to be an authority on African “tribes,” having learned their languages and studied their culture, and it contrasts his direct experience of the events of 1904 to 1907 as a missionary in Southwest Africa.

Given an ability to tell stories, an audience prepared to listen, and a new political and ideological context at home, Vedder had framed missionary work in racial language. Mission

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Vedder was exploring this idea of “drive” (Trieb), charting how it might fit with the “races” he was familiar with; NAN, Holding A-579, boxes 1-7.

111 Vedder, Rasse, 29
112 Ibid.
work, he said, was true “race work”: “Our work is rooted in people,” he wrote, adding “the mission is not indifferent about racial values.”

He claimed missionaries had long “wrestled” with such questions:

Jesus’s command to do the work of missions is first to be understood as a gift and then as an assignment to be fulfilled. Neither an individual nor a whole people can refuse it without doing harm to themselves.

He bemoaned the exclusion of mission voices from the race dialogue in the Third Reich, claiming that missionaries knew best from long experience how to elevate the “spiritual life” of a people.

Schwarze Johanna illustrated this apologetic in defense of Protestant missions, even as Germany prepared for a new expansion.

Bibliography


