

Chapter 3. Missionaries Ordered Out as War Comes to Cameroon

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Just when prospects to continue pushing back the spiritual darkness with the Good News of Jesus looked promising, world events intervened with World War I quickly spreading into Cameroon. French and British Armies arrived and ordered the NAB missionaries to leave because of their connections with the Baptist Mission Society of Germany.

Mission leaders in Cameroon were encouraged as representatives of the three Protestant missions in Cameroon concluded a July 28, 1914 Conference that “greatly championed unity of purpose regarding evangelism [1].” But just nineteen days later relationships between European countries became tense when the Austrian-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia and hostilities in Europe quickly expanded. Germany aligned itself with the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and invaded France that was backing Serbia. Britain then sent troops to help France. In August of 1914 almost all European countries became engulfed in what would become known as World War I. The USA hesitated in becoming involved but in 1917 would declare on Germany and send troops to join the Allied Nations opposing Germany on the battle fields of France.

The European War Spreads to Cameroon

Even though Cameroon was a German colony, it was hoped that an earlier treaty would be in effect and a country’s colonies in Africa would be involved in war activities. But this hope faded quickly as Britain and France sent naval warships to Africa to stop any German ships from using the ocean ports of Cameroon to ship raw materials to Germany.

On September 5, 1914, a British landing party probing the African coast came ashore at Bota in Cameroon and made off with stocks of food stored there by the German military[2]. The British war ships approaching Cameroon had much more fire power than the German ships and the land defenses so the German military surrendered Douala, the main seaport, on September 27th. Britain and France had assembled 4,000 soldiers from their African colonies, led by European officers, to invade and take over Cameroon. When Douala surrendered, a significant part of the German Army retreated inland along with many German civilians believing, as German officials proclaimed, the war in Europe and therefore in Cameroon, would end quickly in their favor. Then Germany would once more rule Cameroon and German citizens could return to their homes in Douala and their coastal plantations and processing industries.

With coastal Cameroon occupied by the Allied military, any remaining German citizens, including German missionaries, were sent to internment camps and eventually out of Cameroon. The five NAB missionaries based in the coastal area were also told to leave Cameroon and go home because of their connections to the Baptist Mission Society of Germany.

Combat battles ensued as the British moved inland beyond Douala. At Tiko the British “in a sharp fight drove off the Germans and killed their commander”. One of the strangest engagements took place as the British approached Buea. A British lieutenant reported: “Our advance party was on the point of stumbling on the

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German outpost when what should happen but elephants suddenly walked in between and scattered both opposing parties in all directions...After a few minutes our men went forward again to find the Germans had bolted from their outposts, but soon returned and opened fire on us.”

Missionary Work Disrupted by the War

When the war started there were six NAB missionaries in Cameroon. The five based in coastal areas were told to travel to England by ship. From England passenger ships were still available to cross the Atlantic since the then neutral USA would not enter the war until three years later in 1917.

The sixth NAB missionary, the unmarried Herman Kayser, was in the interior grasslands east of today’s Fouban among the Tikar people groups. Because of his inland remote post, Kayser did not hear of the war immediately. When the news reached him he realized that with supplies cut off and the battling armies moving toward his area, it was time to leave. Others had circumvented the British and French armies in Cameroon by going to the Spanish colony of Rio Muni, today’s Equatorial Guinea, immediately to the south of Cameroon. To get there it would take about 600 miles of walking.

After 2 months Kayser made it to Rio Muni’s coast where he was able to board a boat for Fernando Po Island, also a Spanish possession, about 125 miles across the water and just 20 miles off Cameroon’s coast. On the way a French naval vessel stopped the boat and an officer came aboard looking for escaping Germans. With a distinctive German name, Kayser was a suspect. Even after producing his American citizenship papers the officer was not convinced. Kayser pressed his case: “I was an American and therefore he had no right to interfere with my plan to return to America[3].” The officer relented and the boat continued to Fernando Po where Kayser took passage on a ship to the neutral country of Spain and then another ship to America and home.

The German Missionaries Experience a ‘Time of Troubles’

After Herman Kayser left Cameroon, German Baptist missionaries Jacob Hofmeister and John Sieber remained in the Grasslands among the Wute people. The German Army was still in control in that area. As a German citizen, Hofmeister was expected to help the German Army, which he did, assisting in the transportation of army equipment[4].

But Hofmeister felt he should find out how the churches in the British-controlled area were doing so he ventured back to the coast. However, unfriendly Cameroonians who knew he was a missionary from Germany turned him over to the British Army who took him to a prisoner of war camp in England. Eventually the British recognized Hofmeister’s role as a missionary and allowed him to return to Germany. There he was reunited with his wife who had left Cameroon earlier through Spanish Rio Muni and returned to Germany via Spain. Hofmeister’s German missionary colleague, John Sieber, would also be taken from Cameroon as a prisoner of war and eventually return to Germany.

NAB Missionaries Carl and Hedwig Bender Oppose Deportation Orders

When the British and French had earlier ordered the five NAB missionaries in the coastal area to leave because of their connection to the Baptist Mission Society of Germany, NAB Missionary Carl Bender at the coastal Soppo mission station objected. He decided to press the case that as an American citizen he was exempt from the deportation order. So Carl and Hedwig Bender remained after their three fellow missionaries had left for home.

“On November 15, 1914, Sunday morning church services at Soppo had just finished when young people started shouting, ‘The English^[5] are coming! The English are coming!’ The Benders...had recently mounted several flags at the Baptist Mission gate, one white Cross-emblazoned Christian flag...and one faded red, white, and blue Old Glory to announce American citizenship and protection^[6].” When Major Rose, the British officer in charge, arrived he requested that lunch be prepared for him and his officers which Mrs. Bender did. This enabled Mr. Bender to strike up a friendly conversation with Major Rose and led to the Benders remaining in Cameroon even though their colleagues had left for home.

However, when the Benders were told their names were on the list for the next deportation, they decided to go to the military headquarters in Douala to clear up the matter. Once in Douala, however, the Benders “found themselves in short order in the city prison, apparently as prisoners...The following day...he [Bender] discovered there had been a change of officers^[7].” Since Bender had earlier received a pass to Douala and letter of recommendation from the British Army Political Officer in Buea, he challenged the French Officer responsible for their being held as prisoners. As an American, Bender demanded they be allowed to return to Soppo or be given two first class tickets to New York on a regular passenger ship. The Benders were quickly allowed to return to the Soppo mission station.

New Opportunities for Missionaries under Difficult War Conditions

During the 1914-1918 war, financial and material support could no longer be sent into Cameroon for the Benders. However they were able to raise some of their food and had two cows. But they needed more. Bender’s well-kept records listed gifts from a variety of friends^[8]. For example, there was flour from British Army Major Rose, food from Cameroonian Pastor Lotin Same in Douala, quinine (to fend off Malaria) from Dr. Moreland of the American Presbyterian Mission, cheese from Monsignor De Coninic, a French Catholic missionary now in Cameroon, replacing the deported German Catholic missionaries.

With most other missionaries from the area gone, Bender was also welcome to minister in the Catholic centers^[9].” The great changes taking place created a new openness to the Gospel as more and more Cameroonians left their traditional ways and “...hundreds now thronged to churches as never before^[10].” New churches were started in villages far beyond the mission station at Soppo.

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The War Ends, But Results in Discouraging News

World War I came to an end on the battle fields of France with the Armistice of November 11, 1918. That ended the fighting but it would take six months at the Paris Peace Conference to conclude the Treaty of Versailles. Finally Carl and Hedwig Bender could think of rejoining their five children who had been left in school in Germany four years earlier when a war in Europe was unlikely. It would take until October 1919 for things to settle down to the point where the Benders could arrange passages from Cameroon to Europe to rejoin their children. Since missionaries with previous ties to Germany were still not allowed to return to Cameroon, the Bender family went home to America.

For the North American Baptist missionaries, the hope of returning to Cameroon to resume advancing inland with the Good News of Jesus was very dim. In 1924 even the usually upbeat NAB General Missionary Secretary William Kuhn felt Cameroon would continue to be closed to NAB missionaries: “In consequence of [Paris Peace Treaty] settlements after the late war [WW I], mission work in the Cameroons has passed into other hands, and neither we nor the Baptists of Germany can ever hope again to share in that work^[11].” The “other hands” into which Protestant mission work had passed was the Paris Evangelical Mission who were doing a good work but faced an overwhelming task. But France would not allow missionaries from Germany or their American colleagues return to Cameroon. To complicate matters even more, Cameroon was now divided between France and Britain with five-sixths of the land going to France. The one-sixth under Britain was along the Nigeria border and administered from Nigeria by the British.

Under existing conditions it was impossible for the NAB missionaries and their German colleagues to return to Cameroon. It appeared they would never be able to resume advancing with the Good News of Jesus into the unreached areas of Cameroon’s vast interior Grasslands.

NOTES:

1. Henry, Helga Bender. p. 73. *Cameroon on a Clear Day: A Pioneer Missionary in Colonial Africa*. 1999. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
2. Farwell, Byron. p. 40. *The Great War in Africa: 1914-1918*. 1986. New York: W. W. Norton Co. All quotes and references about WWI in Cameroon are from Farwell pp. 40-57.
3. Kayser, A.P. Sr., ed. p. 29. *Kamerun Missions*. 2008: n.p. (Self-published autobiography of Missionary H.P. Kayser.)
4. Hofmeister, Jacob. p. 160. *Missionary Jacob Hofmeister: Experiences in Mission Service in Cameroons, Vol 3*. 2005. Edmonton: Privately published. Translation by Dieter Lemke of *Missionar J. Hofmeister: Erlebnisse im Missionsdienst in Kamerun, Dritter Band*. 1926. Kassel, Germany: J.G. Oncken G.m.b.H. All quotes and references of Hofmeister’s story are from Hofmeister, *Vol.3*. pp. 160-189.
5. In Africa, it was common to call all people from the United Kingdom of Britain “English”, instead of “British”, even though people from Britain’s Scotland and Wales may not consider themselves “English”.
6. Henry, Helga Bender. p. 85.
- 7-10. Footnotes are pp. 89, 124, 102-103, 128 respectively from Henry, Helga Bender.
11. *Baptist Herald*, October 1, 1924. p. 11. (Periodical of the North American Baptist Conference.)