

Review: Lisa Kopelmann and Martin Siefkes, (eds): *Johannes Spieker: Mein Tagebuch: Erfahrungen eines deutschen Missionars in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1905–1907*, Berlin, Simon Verlag für Bibliothekswissen, 2013; and the complementary volume by Martin Siefkes: *Sprache, Glaube und Macht: Die Aufzeichnungen des Johannes Spieker in Deutsch-Südwestafrika zur Zeit des Herero-Nama-Aufstands*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2013.

The history of the former German colony of South West Africa (from 1884 to 1915), in particular the controversial genocide that is linked to the Herero and Nama uprising of 1904–1908, continues to occupy and even inflame the minds, emotions and tempers of historians, politicians, journalists, propagandists, linguists, community leaders and others in both Germany and Namibia.

A principal player in this arena is the government of Namibia. It has spearheaded a drawn-out campaign to extract financial compensation from the German government for what befell the Herero tribe in the years of German imperialism and colonialism. The issue and its ramifications continue to be a source of friction between the two countries. Windhoek seems determined not to allow its claim to be forgotten. Berlin, despite the apologies offered *in situ* by a visiting German cabinet minister in 2004, has steadfastly declined to up the ante, while maintaining that no genocide took place.

It goes without saying that any new, authentic material that can throw more light (rather than more heat) on the

events and prevailing attitudes of those days must be warmly welcomed especially – as is the case here – where the material is a credible, comprehensive, primary, first-hand and highly readable historical source.

Dr Martin Siefkes, a Germany-based linguist and semiotician, was the driving force behind the publication of his great-grandfather's voluminous daily journal (the *Tagebuch*) of his expedition to German South West Africa (GSWA) in 1906, undertaken on behalf of a Protestant missionary society (Book 1). Siefkes has also published separately and under his own name a thoroughly researched complementary volume (Book 2) that contextualises Spieker's *Tagebuch* in terms of both the prevailing *Zeitgeist* and the background under review.

On a note of historical accuracy: the sub-title of Book 1 is erroneous: as a reconstruction of Spieker's travel schedule shows, he was not in GSWA "from 1905 to 1907", but only from 8 January to 7 December 1906 (Book 1, pp. 10-14, Book 2 pp. 19-23).

To start at the beginning: The German *Missionsinspektor* (missionary inspector) Johannes Carl Wilhelm Spieker (1856–1920) of the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* (Rhenish Mission Society, RMS), with headquarters in Barmen, Germany, paid a second official inspection visit to both the Cape Province and to the adjoining German colony of South West Africa from 1905 to 1907. He had been in GSWA before on a similar errand in 1902–1903. His second, and much longer, visit coincided with the disastrous Herero and Nama revolts against

German colonial rule, which had broken out in January 1904.

Travelling alone, Spieker left missionary headquarters at Barmen (part of the present city of Wuppertal in North-Rhine Westfalia) on 11 October 1905. He travelled to London, where he boarded the *Kenilworth Castle* to Cape Town, arriving on 31 October (Book 1, p. 59). Among the passengers were two German VIPs with whom Spieker would discuss the situation in the distressed, war-ravaged German colony. They were the new governor of GSWA, Friedrich von Lindequist, who was en route to assume duties in Windhuk (the German spelling of Windhoek), and a senior officer of the *Schutztruppe* (colonial army), Captain Joachim von Heydebreck (he was to become commanding officer of the *Schutztruppe* in 1911).

Spieker spent a little over two months in the Cape Province, visiting and inspecting the RMS mission stations. He boarded a ship at Port Nolloth and reached Lüderitzbucht in GSWA on 8 January 1906. Spieker covered the German colony extensively, following a roughly zigzag route to the far north. As in the Cape, the primary object of his journey was to inspect the RMS missions in the territory. But, as the *Tagebuch* demonstrates, the scope of his inspection visit went far beyond attending to merely missionary matters, even though this took up most of his time, energy and focus.

As a senior representative of the RMS, Spieker was not without influence in the rough-and-ready pioneer society that was GSWA. He often had intensive and far-reaching interviews and discussions

with top-level government, military, civilian and other leading personalities from the ruling white class, as well as with chiefs and prominent persons from the indigenous tribes. The first group included Governor von Lindequist in his official residence in Windhuk. Spieker invariably took the opportunity at meetings with the colony's movers and shakers to plead for an amelioration of the plight of captured Herero men, women and children in the concentration camps, on forced marches, and at forced-labour worksites. He also called for more lenient policies and improvements for all the indigenous tribes irrespective of whether they had been involved in the fighting or not.

A man of principle and high moral values, Spieker never hesitated to take a firm stand on matters where he felt principles of common humanity, civilised behaviour, morality, reasonableness and common sense were at stake. His persuasive representations might well have resulted in some sorely needed improvements, despite the disapproval, opposition and even hostility of his sceptical listeners. These included not only senior administration officials, but also army officers who were far more trenchant in their views. He was also acutely aware that about 90% of the white community in South Africa (he might as well have included GSWA) was "very unfriendly" towards the RMS and its missionary endeavours (Book 2, p. 161).

Spieker had to endure a stream of accusations that he and his Protestant missionaries had been, and were, 'soft on the natives' and, worse, may even have had a hand in inciting the 'natives'

to rise in rebellion. His more reasonable opponents, however, could not help but concede that Spieker was a man of integrity, decency and sincerity. There was no mistaking that his *Weltanschauung* was deeply and fundamentally entrenched in his solid Lutheran faith.

But there was also Spieker the realist. Although at heart sympathetic towards the oppressed Africans, his *Tagebuch* shows that he believed those who had fought and lost against German colonial rule were themselves responsible, at least to a certain extent, for the predicament in which they found themselves. He reasoned that if the 'natives' were to ascend to a better future, living under the chafing yoke of their unsympathetic German masters might even be a good thing. Spieker consoled himself with the thought that ultimately, the 'natives' would benefit (*es wird ihnen heilsam sein*) and emerge – at some distant date – from their gruelling learning curve (Book 2, p. 167).

Along with converting the nonbelieving indigenous people to Christianity and providing them with an education, Spieker believed the vision and the task of the RMS mission in GSWA was to uplift the 'natives' into the modern world so as to equip them to meet its demands and expectations. One such requirement, which he would often emphasise, was the need to perform hard work on a regular, orderly basis. He also emphasised the need to combat the "natives' natural indolence" (Book 1, p. 66). After all, German colonialism had brought with it to this forsaken corner of Africa the Teutonic work ethic. There would be no excuses, exemptions or deferments.

A favourite stereotype among the white farming community was that the 'natives' were 'useless' as workers. However, Spieker was pleased to see how hard the Herero captives worked, albeit as forced labour six days a week, on the site of the railhead of the *Otavi-bahn* which would, on completion, run from Swakopmund to the north of the colony. This provided him with incontestable proof of how mistaken the white settlers were – at least on the question of black labour. However, typically, when Spieker learned that the captives only earned 3 Marks per day, he urged the management of railway company to raise the wages to 5 Marks at a later meeting (Book 1, pp. 166f.).

Although Spieker did not see any actual fighting (which occurred in remote areas of the vast territory), he witnessed and recorded in his *Tagebuch* some of the devastation caused by the failed rebellion. Some of the saddest sights and scenarios included: ruined or burnt-down mission stations; columns of starving, naked or semi-naked black prisoners being force-marched in the bush – with the women and especially the children who tagged along in an even more shocking condition; the inhuman and inexcusable conditions in some of the concentration camps with their high mortality rate; and Africans' generally sullen and negative attitudes towards white people.

The northernmost point on Spieker's itinerary was the RMS mission station at Namakunde (now in Angola), from where he gradually wended his way southwards again. Once back in Cape Town, he took the RMS *Briton* to Southampton, and was back in Barmen

on 28 March 1907 (Book 1, p. 525, Book 2, p. 17).

Book 1 is a modern (2013) 525-page, soft cover printed and published version of the original handwritten *Tagebuch*. The only divisions are Spieker's daily entries, where each date is set off as a subheading in bold type. The continuous mass of text is, however, interspersed with all too few pencil sketches (redrawn by a modern artist from photographs taken during the journey). These depict the oxwagons and the mule carts in which Spieker travelled, and one or two drawings of the indigenous people he met while traversing the territory. Spieker often described the excruciatingly uncomfortable *treks* in the narrow, unsprung wooden vehicles which were dragged along day after day by oxen or mules over appalling roads. (He also travelled at times in open railway wagons, on horseback and even on foot).

Written 'on the go' either in the veld or at mission stations, the *Tagebuch* is a daily, painstaking quill-and-ink record of Spieker's meetings, conferences, interviews, sermons and a wide variety of experiences, events, places and occurrences to which he usually added his own – mostly privately held – views, impressions, opinions and criticisms of the many different people he encountered during his extensive journeys. There are also notes on his (often precarious) state of health, and invariably on the extremes of climate he had to endure: these ranged from baking hot days to icy-cold nights. The subjects he covered are too extensive to be mentioned here; they are set out, explained, dissected, evaluated, analysed

and severely critiqued by Siefkes in Book 2.

It is a pity that Siefkes has omitted to include at least one reproduction of a sample page of the original *Tagebuch*. This could have been accompanied by the relevant page from the typewritten version (*Typoskript*) which was made (*abgetippt*) by Spieker's youngest daughter, Elisabeth Siefkes (Siefkes's grandmother), in the 1970s (Book 1, p. 9, Book 2, p. 13).

We are informed that, in preparing the Spieker journal for printing and publishing, Siefkes relied almost entirely on his grandmother's *Typoskript*, rather than having to decipher his great-grandfather's handwriting in the original *Tagebuch*. He did, however, refer to the original version occasionally, whenever (as he says) the need arose. I picked up one glaring error (Book 1, p. 26), where Von Lindequist, travelling on the *Kenilworth Castle*, is referred to as the "governor of South Africa"(!). I imagine that this elementary error is more likely to be his grandmother's rather than Spieker's and that it slipped unnoticed into the published book. Unfortunately, this error resurfaced unchanged in Siefkes' companion volume (Book 2, p. 141). And "Ovambobahn" (Book 2, p. 166) should read *Otavibahn*.

While on his journeys Spieker would wrap up his finished pages in packages and mail them to his wife in Barmen, where she was the first to open and read the dispatches before passing them on to their actual destination, the missionary society's headquarters.

The journal ends with the last entry dated 24 January 1907 at Wuppertal in

the Cape. Siefkes explains in a postscript that Spieker undoubtedly continued to write up his experiences, but, since his expedition was nearing its end, decided against using the slow land and sea mail service to Europe. He reckoned that the packages would not arrive in Barmen before his own return home. He probably took the final bundles of pages along with him on his long way back to Germany, where he would have handed them in at RMS headquarters in due course (Book 1, p. 525). Sadly, these final pages have never been found.

Largely as a result of the lack of proper and adequate food during the last winter of the First World War, when he lost 70 pounds (*Pfund*), Spieker died of an infection on 19 January 1920 (Book 1, p. 525). He was only 63.

Book 2, *Sprache, Glaube, Macht*, is divided into three extensive chapters covering some 90 subjects, all taken from or related to the *Tagebuch*. It includes a conclusion, a literature list and an index. But Book 2 is rather like the curate's egg: mostly good, but weak in parts. Siefkes' bias and his one-sided criticisms of the German colonial era in GSWA are evident on almost every page; it escalates as the book draws to its close, by which time my interest and concentration had begun to wane.

A serious shortcoming of Book 2 is the 90-odd books listed under *Literatur*. I looked in vain for publications that present an alternative view to the alleged "fact" of the genocide. These could have included the well-researched, thoughtful and balanced smaller volume by H. (Hinrich) R. Schneider-Waterberg, *Der Wahrheit eine Gasse: Anmerkungen*

zum Kolonialkrieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904 (4th edition, 2007). As his double-barrelled surname might suggest, Schneider-Waterberg's insightful book scores extra points in that besides his archival research he has a lifelong, first-hand knowledge of the Waterberg and the Omaheke area where the fighting (as well as the proven absence thereof!) took place in 1904. He is anything but an academic armchair critic.

I was impressed with Book 1 and enjoyed reading it, although patience is needed to plough through some long-winded sections. Spieker's *Tagebuch* (albeit available only in German) should be required reading for anyone interested in Namibia's early and often wrenching history. It makes for informative, entertaining, heart-warming and occasionally even humorous reading. I found it an eye-opener in many instances and believe that it provides much food for thought for those who unquestioningly accept the genocide as a fact.

Martin Siefkes must be lauded for having rescued his great-grandfather from historical oblivion. Modern Namibians have good reason to honour the memory of this hitherto unknown but well-meaning missionary although it's unlikely they will bestir themselves to name a street after him. Johannes Carl Wilhelm Spieker rightfully deserves to occupy an appropriate niche in the African country's history and historiography.

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