



Panikos Panayi

# All British Empire mobilized during WWI

*Professor of European history at De Montfort University, and author of 'The Germans in India: Elite European migrants in the British Empire', published by Manchester University Press in 2017.*

■ ■ You observe that Christian converts in India remained small in numbers because “even one conversion often required an extraordinary amount of effort.” My impression is that Hindus were especially resistant to Christian conversion, right? If so, compared to what other sociocultural contexts?

The groups which were most likely to succumb to the missionaries consisted of lower caste Hindus, for whom Christianity offered salvation and so the missionaries tended to focus upon them, even though they did sometimes succeed in converting people higher up on the social scale, most famously, Anandarao Kaundinya, born to a Brahmin family in Mangalore in 1825, who became a Christian in 1844 after reading the scriptures and falling sick, although he did face much hostility from his family and that of his first wife Lakshmi. Missionaries in India, whether German or otherwise, tended to avoid proselytising to Muslims, and, especially Sikhs. In the case of the latter, little missionary activity took place in the Punjab, because of the difficulty of securing conversions amongst believers of this faith. Amongst German missionaries Karl Gottlieb Pfander, who made his way to Agra via central Asia, specialised in the study of Islam. Once in Agra he became involved in theological disputes with Islamic scholars. He became the German missionary with the reputation for some of the most aggressive preaching and disputation in public places, concentrating in Moslem areas (having mastered his knowledge of Islamic scripts) not only in British India but also elsewhere in the Middle East.

■ ■ At least in the case of ‘American’ missionaries, many scholars argue that more often than not they acted under the influence of or in coordination with the American government, or otherwise served as scouts of sorts for the burgeoning imperial power. I wonder if you have come across similar cases with regards to the German missionaries who went to India?

The German missionaries did not act on behalf of the German government. The activities of the two main groups, the Basle and Leipzig Missions, began before the establishment of the German nation state in 1870. German missionaries always knew that they were operating in the British sphere. There is no evidence of their politicization: they were highly devout Christians guided by their religion who had undergone training in seminaries in Basle and Leipzig before sailing to India.

■ ■ Conversely, in some other cases, imperial ambitions of western powers created obstacles for missionaries who only wanted to spread the message of Jesus Christ.

Have you noticed any such examples in your investigation, especially given the fact that, as you mentioned, an overwhelming majority of Europeans in India in the early 20th century was of British origins to the point that European was used interchangeably with British?

Until 1833, foreign missionary organizations could not establish their own organizations in India, which meant that Germans who worked in the area controlled by the East India Company had to work for British organizations until that time, especially the Church Missionary Society. When the First World War broke nationalism resulted in the ethnic cleansing of Germans from India and, in fact, from the entire British empire, whether missionaries or otherwise.



(The Germans in India, Figure 3.3)

The oldest house of Gossner Mission opened in Ranchi in 1845 which served as a multipurpose building where the missionaries lived and where teaching took place.

■ ■ You observe that German missionaries who went to India ultimately “remained wedded to the idea of the superiority of Christian European culture.” In light of that, to what extent did their descriptions of India and its people contribute to the creation of an ‘Other’ in their origin homeland (as a “justification for imperial expansion”) or the wider European context?

As I mentioned above, the German missionaries were not driven by political ideology but by their faith. As products of their time, they clearly had an orientalist perception of the world around them. However, it is too simplistic to view missionaries as instruments of imperial power. Missionaries were highly educated people and immersed themselves into the populations they wished to convert by learning their languages and understanding their environment. There may have been a utilitarian element to this because the ultimate aim consisted of converting souls to Lutheranism (or in some cases, Roman Catholicism) but this immersion into the local environment meant that they developed a respect and understanding of the people and locality in which they lived and worked. For example, the pioneers of Basle missionary Herman Gundert (the grandfather of Hermann Hesse) produced a Malayalam grammar published in 1860, followed by a Malayalam and English

Dictionary, which appeared in 1872. Meanwhile, Hermann Mögling and V. D. M. Weitbrecht of the Basle Mission wrote *Das Kurgland und die evangelische Mission in Kurg*, which devotes just 81 from 334 pages (in part 3) to the evangelical mission. The rest looks at the land (which included observations on plants, climate and landscape) and the people (including family and religion) and the history of area. Like much missionary research, this was truly scientific.

■ ■ With regards to the horrible experiences of Germans in India during the First World War, you draw an interesting conclusion about the “unity” of the British Empire as an entity which was mobilized as a whole to deal with the enemy, whether real or perceived. One might argue, however, that the Indian contribution to the British cause in the First World War had been an outlier case. What’s your take on that?

At the end of the First World War the British imperial historian, Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas in his ‘*Empire at War*’, wrote that: ‘It was not the United Kingdom, with an overseas tail attached to it, that went to war; it was the whole great world-wide unit, the British Empire, acting as one, with very rare exceptions feeling and thinking as one.’ The persecution of the Germans during the First World War represents one aspect of this unity. More importantly was the mobilization of resources, ultimately controlled by the imperial centre, but men volunteered to fight in this global war for the British Empire from all of its possessions, not just the white dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa but also, for example, Cyprus, India and Jamaica. This may seem hard to believe in the age of the nation state, but the First World War took place at the height of empire and the Great War was a global war.

■ ■ What’s the legacy of the German missionaries’ activities in the 19th and early 20th century in India, especially in terms of establishing schools and charitable organizations?

Although the German missionaries may ultimately have converted relatively few Indians, they nevertheless had a larger impact through the schools which they established, without which tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of Indians (if we take a long-term perspective which looks at the survival of the schools established during the nineteenth century after their transfer to other organizations during the First World War) would never have had the chance of an education, pointing to the importance of missionaries in the spread of education globally during the nineteenth century, despite its religious, racial and gendered message. The Indian intermediaries which the German missionaries used to help with conversion played a central role in the spread of Lutheran Christianity and, increasingly, as the nineteenth century progressed, they moved to the centre of this religion, when they became pastors. This process became more noticeable as a result of the ethnic cleansing of the First World War when this religion became increasingly Indian not just in terms of worshippers but also employees. Despite the relatively few Indians in terms of the overall population upon which the German missionaries may have impacted, they form part of the mosaic of Christian activity in India which predates the nineteenth century. Understood as part of the tapestry of Christianity, the Germans formed part of a network of welfare activity impacting upon millions of Indians.

