

Hayley C. Roy

AAHN H-31 Pre-doctoral Grant

Research Statement

July 1st, 2025

My Ph.D. dissertation, generously supported through the AAHN H-31 Pre-Doctoral Research Grant, focuses on nurses who traveled to and worked contracts in German overseas colonies from 1888 – 1918. Over the course of these three decades, nursing in Germany transformed from the religious (Protestant) motherhouse model to a secular, trained and licensed career for women that is a recognizable forerunner to modern nursing. Nurses were, aside from the wives of missionaries, the first women to work in the German colonies. Their influence, however, extended far beyond the colonial context. My project demonstrates and analyzes how the specific needs of settler colonialism, especially the need for obstetrics nurses, directly caused the standardization of nurse training in Germany.

While colonial nursing history has recently benefitted from excellent scholarship, especially in the British and American empires, the German case has remained direly understudied. This is in part due to the stripping away of the German colonies directly after World War I, which stunted the historiography of the empire in general. My research fixes that gap by demonstrating how German colonial nurses used their host association, the German Women's Association for Nursing in the Colonies, to leverage their collective influence and take advantage of the political context of their day. They simultaneously earned respect among doctors in notoriously masculine colonial circles who, once their greatest opponents, became their most vocal advocates. Nursing educators refined nursing practices in the colonial context before major nursing reforms were passed in Germany. However, while this observation makes a key intervention into German historiography, it is not their men allies who form the heart of my study, but rather the on-the-ground experience of nursing women.

My research compliments my aims in teaching nursing history by demonstrating the power of nurses to influence and transform their social and cultural contexts. The nurses dispatched to work in present-day Tanzania, Namibia, Cameroon, and Samoa formed relationships with their indigenous patients and sought to improve their health outcomes. They most often perceived their work as humanitarian and, even if not directly for a specific church, Christian service. At the same time, they were agents of an oppressive and violent colonial apparatus and often espoused racist and paternalist views. By analyzing and criticizing this complicated and fraught position, my project adds to how nursing historians understand the agency and limitations of nurses.

My project views nursing history from both religious and secular perspectives found in archives throughout Germany, such as the Federal Archives in Berlin, the Prussian Privy State Archives, the FlieBner Cultural Foundation in DÜsseldorf, and the Archives of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising. The AAHN award has offset expenses related to this crucial travel. During my research stay in Germany, I have uncovered published and private

accounts of nurses outlining their objectives and experiences, documents from colonial administrators, training books, and parliament meetings. These materials highlight the myriad influences that charted the trajectories of colonial nurses. On the other hand, they demonstrate the role of this relatively small group of several hundred women from a segmented chapter of German history on pushing forward the global professionalization of nursing.

Based on these archival materials, I also compiled an extensive database of individual nurses and their movement throughout the German empire. The database tracks their name, professional/religious affiliation, and when possible, tenure in each location. Rather than making singular trips to just one colony, it was fairly common for nurses to serve consecutive contracts in different regions. In this way, they served as a vessel for the circulation of medical knowledge across diverse tropical settings. My database also proves that far more nurses worked in the colonies than previously thought by historians. In the future, I hope to use this database as a starting point for a digital mapping project that shows the mobility of women nurses from Germany and other empires at the turn of the twentieth century.

As of writing this report, I have outlined my dissertation and consolidated my sourcebase. I will remain in Germany for a six-month fellowship at the Centre for Empire Studies at the University of Münster, where in addition to writing I will arrange a seminar highlighting nurses' roles in negotiating the limits of empire.

I am extremely grateful for the AAHN's support and look forward to sharing my work in published form in the near future.