

British Imperial Wars and the Strengthening of the Dutch Reformed Church's Mission: Mashonaland in the late 19th to early 20th Centuries

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Abstract

This focus is on conflicts in which the British South African Company (BSAC) had a direct hand, and in which British forces were victorious. Three specific conflicts will be highlighted: the First Matabele War (1893–1894), the First Chimurenga (1896–1897), and the Second Anglo Boer War/South African War (1899–1902). It is argued that the Cape Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) missionary enterprise directly and indirectly benefited from these wars. The personal letters and other writings of A. A. Louw, pioneer DRC missionary to Mashonaland, reveal a relatively good relationship with Cecil John Rhodes and the BSAC. The weakening of powerful local polities through the colonial suppression of African uprisings might have helped mission stations such as the DRC's Morgenstêr to attain surrogate status as centres of power in the affected areas. After the South African War, a number of Boer prisoners of war were recruited for the DRC missionary campaigns, including Mashonaland. A contextualising feature to this narrative of Afrikaner mission in British Colonial Africa is the fact that two of the foremost recruiting agents were direct family members of A. A. Louw.

Keywords: Afrikaners; British Empire; Dutch Reformed Church (DRC); Mashonaland; mission; British South African Company (BSAC); British imperial wars



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Introduction

There are two background questions that resulted in the writing of this article: 1) What were the historical connections between war and mission? 2) How did British Imperialism influence the missionary enterprise of the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church? I proceed from the counterintuitive thesis that British imperial wars in southern Africa had somehow strengthened the Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC) mission enterprise; in other words that these acted as a series of turning points in the trajectory of the DRC. This is counterintuitive because wars have usually been extremely disruptive of missionary activities worldwide. One example is the absolutely devastating effect WWI had on German missions in Africa and elsewhere.¹

This leads to the further question: Why posit a thesis that seems contradictable, because of its apparent implausibility? The basic answer to that concerns the well-documented case of the growth experienced by the DRC mission in the aftermath of the South African War. Despite the wide-scale destruction, loss of life and limb, disrupted social systems, spiritual angst and more resulting from this three-year conflict, the aftermath was characterised by a period of significant growth in the missionary enterprise of the DRC, on which I shall elaborate below. What makes this particularly interesting is the fact that the white Afrikaner population group, with whom the DRC particularly associated, was the group that actually lost in the abovementioned war. This is the case if one accepts the standard narrative that the vast majority of Afrikaners—irrespective of where they actually lived in southern Africa—were sympathetic to the cause of the Boer republics. Given this somewhat ironic reversal of fortunes experienced through the DRC mission, I thought it might be useful to also consider other British colonial conflicts during the late nineteenth century that could have influenced DRC mission activities. I focus on the so-called First Matabele² War (1893–4) and the Mashonaland uprisings of 1896. These conflicts occurred in relative close proximity to the recently germanised mission of the DRC in the area. In fact, some local Shona rebellions had already occurred in the early 1890s after the imposition of colonial authority, and I shall refer to a specific conflict in 1892 that involved the DRC mission directly.

1 See, for example, J. T. Barton, “The Effect of the War on Protestant Missions,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 12 no. 1 (1919): 1–35.

2 The term Matabele is a colonial era corruption of the word Ndebele. Due to the fact that Matabele is uniformly used in the sources referred to in this article, I have maintained its usage throughout to avoid confusing the uninformed reader with more than one word in reference to the same group of people.

All of these conflicts and associated trauma influenced the mission's work, but how exactly? Is it possible that these conflicts helped to create a strengthened position for their missionary enterprise? I think it is important to point out that all these wars, culminating in the South African War, should ultimately not be evaluated in isolation, but rather interpreted within a rising trajectory of British imperial aggression. The Cape DRC, with their home base firmly ensconced in colonial territory, was over time able to reap the fruits associated with being loyal British subjects, while simultaneously and increasingly identifying as non-British—especially as the 20th century developed. The DRC mission to Mashonaland was under the authority of the Cape DRC and their history demonstrates a bumpy colonial affiliation over time.

Black evangelists laid the groundwork for the DRC mission to Mashonaland. However, these so-called evangelists should be more appropriately described as pioneer missionaries, who under very dangerous circumstances went into the region to establish contacts with chiefs, including with the Matabele king, Lobengula.³ All missionary agents understood at the time that nothing could be accomplished without Lobengula's permission. His resistance to the idea, as conveyed to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society's François Coillard, of having his "dogs" or "slaves" come under the influence of foreign agents was the primary cause for a delayed start to mission work there.⁴ This was not only the case from the side of the DRC, but also for other agents, such as Coillard, who was the first to attempt acquiring such permission, but without success. Hence, the submission of the Matabele at the hands of the Chartered Company through the so-called Rudd Concession of 1888, which effectively contained but not eliminated the threat posed by Lobengula, was the *sine qua non* for the start of mission work in the country. In fact, the Chartered Company subsequently had the power to give or withhold residency to prospective emigrants, including missionaries.⁵

Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that DRC missionary literature from this period generally expresses appreciation and gratitude towards Cecil John Rhodes and his Company. Rhodes also apparently made sure of their loyalty by donating land, and financially supporting their projects. Olivier, for example, writes that Rhodes had once during a time of

3 See W. J. van der Merwe, *Sendinggenade in Mashonaland* (Kaapstad, N.G. Kerk uitgewers, 1952), 19ff.

4 See François Coillard to Rev. J. Smith, as quoted in M. J. de Beer Bester, "Die Betrekking tussen die Kaapse NG Sendingkerk en die Suid-Rhodesiese regering (1891–1937)." MA thesis, (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1969), 5.

5 See M. J. de Beer Bester, 13.

particular food shortages provided and transported supplies to the value of 40 pound to Morgenstêr, and on another instance, he gave a financial donation of 50 pound to the mission.⁶

It is clear that it was not Lobengula's intention to surrender power through the Rudd Concession. In fact, he still referred to himself as king and gave directives regarding which areas he had chosen to reserve for himself, but the Chartered Company simply ignored any of that and treated the whole of Mashonaland as their own. Bester writes that the ownership of Mashonaland changed virtually overnight and with it the prohibition on mission work was lifted.⁷ This misunderstanding, to put it mildly, of who was in charge in the land naturally created much tension and resentment from the side of the Matabele, and the unresolved situation would eventually flare up in the first Matabele War.

Missionary Foundations: The Value of the Rifle and the “Godless” Company’s Actions against Africans

The early years of the Mashonaland mission, which preceded the first Matabele War, was an insecure time for the principal of the Mashonaland mission, A. A. Louw and his colleagues. Active among the Banyai (Shona)⁸ at a time when the Ndebele (Matabele) was very much a force to be reckoned with, the people among whom they ministered obviously had very concrete objectives for welcoming the missionary presence in their midst. After all, the missionaries were not overtly aggressive in their acquisition of land or in subjecting their people, but merely in winning their souls, whatever that meant. Although it is risky to ascribe motives to people whose personal testimony is inaccessible, one should nevertheless ask the question, what were the Shona hoping for in their interactions with the missionaries? One clue is given in an early letter by A. A. Louw's colleague, S. P. Helm in 1892. He relates a discussion between the mission's Basotho evangelists and a Shona group whose chief had formerly agreed to have an evangelist placed among them, but who had subsequently died. Now the question was how to convince the people to continue with their deceased leader's agreed course of action? In the discussion it transpired that the people wanted a token something that would serve as “a light” from the side of the missionaries, since it was evident

6 S. P. Olivier, *Ons Kerk in Rhodesië: 'n Historiese oorsig van die Ned. Geref. Kerk, Sending en Onderwys. 1895–1945* (Paarl: Fisher en Seuns, 1946), 205.

7 S. P. Olivier, *Ons Kerk in Rhodesië*, 14.

8 See A. Dreyer, *Historisch Album van De Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid Afrika, No. 2* (Kaapstad: Cape Times Beperkt, 1910), 42–47.

that the “land is dark and our chief dead” [transl.]. What could serve as such a light? “Een achterlaaier” [a rifle] was the answer. That could not do, due to the laws of the land and the mission’s own policy in this regards, and although the “evangelist” Micha was able to convince them to rather accept some blankets as token of missionary “light,” it remains significant that they asked for a rifle in the first place, I believe. Might it be symbolic of what the mission was understood to be good for in the eyes of their prospective converts?⁹

The matter of protection and the related issue of rifles and their hoped for acquisition by Shona chiefs were also emphasised by A. A. Louw in his autobiographical account. A. A. Louw writes that it was quite evident that these chiefs, with whom they made initial arrangements, primarily expected “temporal protection and benefit from us”¹⁰ [transl.]. He especially mentions the rifle as the most sought after item. Chief Mugabe, who was the local authority where the DRC headquarters, Morgenstêr was established, repeatedly assured A. A. Louw that he had no interest in being evangelised, but that he wanted to have a rifle very much: “All I want is a rifle; other than that I don’t care for anything” [transl.].¹¹ A. A. Louw carried on to describe a situation in which Mugabe incessantly demands a rifle whenever missionaries visited his kraal. This impasse remained until A. A. Louw threatened to remove their mission from Mugabe’s land and move it to a less demanding chiefdom, unless Mugabe ceased his questing after guns, and instead would agree to send a representative to visit all of the kraals falling under his jurisdiction together with the missionaries. Faced with this ultimatum, Mugabe eventually agreed as described by A. A. Louw.¹²

If this rendition of their interactions are assumed to be more or less truthful, and there is no reason to suspect A. A. Louw of being economical with the truth, one has to immediately ask, why? Given that Mugabe had no interest in the message of the missionaries, why would he want them to stay even when they refused his principal demand? The most logical conclusion is that he considered the presence of the missionaries a proxy armour to that of the now inaccessible rifle. This is extremely ironic in light of the fact that A. A. Louw was ultimately unable to protect Mugabe when the latter fell afoul of the colonial authority. Mugabe, from the point of view of the colonial rulers, was responsible for much unrest, attacking and

9 Dutch Reformed Church Archive [PPV 149], Aug. 5, 1892, S. P. Helm to J. H. Neethling.

10 A. A. Louw, *Die Môrester in Mashonaland* (Stellenbosch: Die Christen-Studenteverenigingmaatskappy van Suid-Afrika, 1954), 28–29.

11 A. A. Louw, *Die Môrester*, 40.

12 A. A. Louw, *Die Môrester*, 45.

raiding his neighbours. This eventually led to the threat of his arrest, which A. A. Louw attempted to prevent, but tensions instead escalated to a point where Mugabe was killed and much of his kraal destroyed. A. A. Louw later recalled his own distress at the underhanded way in which the Company officers executed their surprise attack without informing him, the resident missionary, first. Apparently, A. A. Louw's actions to first of all unsuccessfully prevent the attack, but then successfully securing continued right of residence for the people at Mugabe's mountain, were enough to win the trust of Mugabe's people, even though their chief had died.¹³

As things developed, the mission continued to face divided loyalties, but perhaps a steady increase in trust, from the side of the people with whom they interacted. A. A. Louw mentions, for example in a 1894 letter to the sisters of the Banjai mission society, how one Banjai chief had inexplicably (for the better) changed his attitude to the mission after only a year earlier threatening to attack them. Such changed attitudes evidently had much to do with local power struggles. A. A. Louw mentions the influence of another chief in this regard. However, one great stumbling block remained; the Matabele. A. A. Louw expressed frustration and a wish: If only the might of the Matabele could be broken, then the entrance to the Banjai would be wide open.¹⁴

This was written, interestingly, in the aftermath of the first Matabele War, which had already significantly weakened prospects for Lobengula's people. The war and its side effects perhaps contributed to or even caused a situation that is next described: great famine among the people. "Het vooruitsicht voor de Kaffirs is donker voorwaar" [Prospects for the Kaffirs (sic) are certainly dark].¹⁵

The first Matabele War itself took place in the year after the killing of Mugabe. Lobengula apparently felt the need to show who the real ruler of the land was, and so in early 1893 he sent his *impis* to punish the Shona for their disobedience after a Shona chief had refused to pay tribute to him. The following raids into Mashonaland and accompanied loss of life impelled the Chartered Company to act as the rulers that they had portrayed themselves to be.

13 See A. A. Louw, *Die Môrester*, 96–105.

14 DRC Archive [KS 849], 11.4.1894, A. A. Louw aan de susters van de bajai sending vereniging.

15 DRC Archive [KS 849], 11.4.1894.

They retaliated and their superior fire-power ensured a relatively quick end to the conflict, with the result that the Matabele were temporarily pacified.¹⁶

One result of this war, from the point of view of the DRC, was that numerous Boer families who had formerly settled in Mashonaland decided to reverse their trek and return to the south. At the time there had been a DRC minister (Paul Nel) in Bulawayo with the missive of ministering to the white settlers, but he temporarily left during the war.¹⁷ A. A. Louw also reported from Morgenstêr seeing many ox-wagons going past their station towards the Transvaal.¹⁸ However, this evacuation of Boers created only a temporary vacuum, which started to fill already in 1894 as numerous new settlers began to arrive, including many arrivals in the “conquered Eldorado, Bulawayo” [transl.].¹⁹ This created the situation wherein A. A. Louw and the Mashonaland mission would also over time become involved in “white” ministry, as distinct from their primary role as missionaries to “black” Africans (see below).

In an 1895 letter the issue of education came to the fore, especially the fact that the mission was trying to start a school but that there seemed to be zero interest from the side of the populace who, according to A. A. Louw, was completely demoralised from the wars with the Matabele. He speculated whether with the help of the government some form of mandatory education should be introduced, as was the case in the Cape colony. Such a regulation indeed occurred through the intervention of the military, it seems, and A. A. Louw mentioned how this resulted in things going much better in the second half of the previous year regarding school attendance. A. A. Louw still mentioned the relatively small number of converts at different kraals. Work was going slowly according to his estimation.²⁰

Statistics of people baptised, attendees at church, children in school, and so forth bear out A. A. Louw’s pessimistic view of the progress that the mission was making during the early years.²¹ This remained the status quo until the first decade of the 20th century.

16 See P. E. N. Tindall, *A History of Central Africa*, (London: Longmans, 1968), 160–161.

17 S. P. Olivier, *Ons Kerk in Rhodesië*, 23.

18 *De Kerkbode*, 24 November, 1893.

19 Olivier, *Ons Kerk in Rhodesië*, 24.

20 DRC Archive [KS 849], Feb 13, 1895, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

21 Mashonaland Statistiek, 1911-1916, Dutch Reformed Church Archive [KS933], n.d.

The Mashonaland uprisings (First Chimurenga)

Given what I described above regarding a demoralised population and small amounts of converts, it might already seem that my thesis is contradicted. British war with Africans did not have obviously good results for the mission. However, if we take a longer view, things may seem somewhat different. Consider the relatively straightforward imposition of European-style religion and education on an indifferent, weakened, and rudderless population. Of course, results were not immediately forthcoming, but it is well-known that mission schools everywhere were among the most effective tools in converting and Christianising a population. Is there any reason to think it would be different for the DRC mission in Mashonaland?

The Mashonaland uprising, also known as the First Chimurenga, created tensions all around. In 1896 Matabele chiefs followed by Shona chiefs went into rebellion against the colonial authority.²² White settlers in the country were also targeted in certain cases. The colonial authority attempted—seemingly at the first hint of danger—to persuade the missionaries to vacate their posts and move themselves into a laager together with other expats at Fort Victoria. The DRC mission resisted this for as long as possible. They had a virtual tightrope of relationships to negotiate. They did not want to be seen kowtowing to the colonial government. The closer their colonial identification became, the less trustworthy they might seem from the side of the African population. Therefore, A. A. Louw and colleagues attempted to remain at Morgenstêr. They even planned to flee to nearby caves or hide away at a small granite hillock in the event of real trouble rather than to decamp to Fort Victoria.²³ A. A. Louw’s personal letters tell the story of mounting pressure. In May 1896, A. A. Louw wrote for example that their mission station was strong and virtually impenetrable from outside attack. He also claimed that the situation in their area was less threatening than in other parts. A greater threat, it seemed, was that posed by rinderpest to cattle.²⁴

A month and a half later there was a letter from the native commissioner at Fort Victoria warning A. A. Louw that his persistence to stay at Morgenstêr was entirely at his own risk. Natives in several places had suddenly risen and numerous murders had been reported.

22 Olivier, *Ons Kerk in Rhodesië*, 35–36.

23 See Van der Merwe, *Sendinggenade in Mashonaland*, 30, 45.

24 DRC Archive [KS 849], May 3, 1896, A. A. Louw to “Geliefde Oom.”

Should further danger arise, a message would be sent ...²⁵ A. A. Louw, in his reply to the above, thanked the official and apologised if his decision to remain might seem like foolhardiness, but the natives in his area were quite calm, he stated. In the event of danger, he undertook to have his wife sent to Victoria via hammock (*machila*).²⁶

A. A. Louw's apparent unwillingness to give in to the demands of the colonial authority becomes better explained, when only a few days later he writes a letter to the mission secretary complaining about the actions of the "Godelooze Companjie" [Godless Company] as a cause of strife in the land. The question of whether or not to leave the station and go to Fort Victoria recurs. A. A. Louw described his pondering on these pages regarding what would be best for the mission. For the sake of his wife and children, he would be willing to go, but in the meantime he was content to stay. There was no danger in his immediate area and he trusted the judgment of his evangelists regarding the mood of the Africans.²⁷

A few days after the last one, another letter surfaced in which A. A. Louw still contended that no danger was apparent. He reckoned that "onze kaffirs ons te lief hebben om tegen ons op te staan" [our kaffirs (sic) love us too much to rise against us]. He also believed that the Lord would protect them in the event of real danger. On the other hand, he would not want to be stubborn, and so he mentioned almost as an anti-climax that an ox wagon was in fact on its way and that the missionaries would be returning to Fort Victoria with it.²⁸ In the same letter, he mentioned a report regarding 47 people who had been murdered near Salisbury, including someone he had known quite well. As he sat there writing he described hearing the war siren, which meant that the company was calling up "onze kaffirs for their war tegen vihandige Vakaranga" [our kaffirs (sic) for their war against adversarial Vakaranga].²⁹ This is, therefore, an example of direct impact on the mission as a result of British war. Surely this whole saga would have illustrated to the Vakaranga that the mission was powerless to protect them, or did it do the converse, i.e. convince them that the mission and the powerful company was one and the same, with the former perhaps acting as the somewhat kinder, yet ineffectual, face of that very same colonial entity?

25 DRC Archive [KS 849], June 29, 1896, Native Commissioner to A. A. Louw.

26 DRC Archive [KS 849], July 1, 1896, A. A. Louw to Native Commissioner.

27 DRC Archive [KS 849], July 6, 1896, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

28 DRC Archive [KS 849], July 14, 1896, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

29 DRC Archive [KS 849], July 14, 1896, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

In the aftermath of this war, it seems that one effect it had on the mission was an extended leave of absence for A. A. Louw. He wrote a letter in late June 1897, which explained this situation. There were different reasons for his absence, but one of those was that “de onlusten met de Kaffirs, onbestendig bleef” [the kaffir (sic) unrests remain unpredictable]. Therefore, he asked for an extension of leave until March 1898.³⁰

Whilst on leave in South Africa it seems the Louws kept in close contact with matters in Mashonaland. For example, Andrew’s wife, Cinie Louw, wrote a letter on behalf of her husband in September 1897 in which she bemoaned the fact that there still seemed to be no hunger or thirst for the gospel, which had to be carried to the people, rather than that they would come to it of their own free will. When they did come to church or school, they apparently expected to be paid for the effort.³¹

Although, this disinterest in the missionary discourse seemed to have continued for some time, a different note creeps into at least some of the reports of the mission station master during the following period. In November of 1897, A. A. Louw, writing from “Vische-hoek,” asked the mission commission for a third missionary, as well as for a teacher to work especially with women. An expansion of the work was thus envisioned.³² Were there justifiable grounds for expansion at this stage? Or was it the sea breeze at Fishhoek, or something else that planted the seed of optimism in the missionary heart in spite of the rather static number of converts?

Whatever the case, just over a year later A. A. Louw could write from Morgenstêr: “Met ons werk gaat het beter dan ooit te voren; onze school bloeit ...”³³ Whether this was as a result of a strengthening in the teaching staff or a change of direction in the spiritual winds blowing over Mashonaland, or some other reason, is unclear. A. A. Louw did not elaborate. However, the theme of expansion remained present, particularly because of the unexpected growth in population by newly arrived migrants from elsewhere, around 10 000 people under a leader who had been granted permission to settle in Rhodesia by the Chartered Company.³⁴ A. A. Louw did not specify from where these new arrivals had come. Had they perhaps been

30 DRC Archive [KS 849], June 29, 1897, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

31 DRC Archive [KS 849], Sept. 21, 1897, Mev. Louw to “Liewe Oom Jan.”

32 DRC Archive [KS 849], Nov. 27, 1897, A. A. Louw to “De Lede van de ... Zending Commissie Stellenbosch.”

33 DRC Archive [KS 849], Feb. 2, 1899, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

34 DRC Archive [KS 849], May 4, 1899, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

uprooted from the Transvaal under the threatening clouds of yet another, even more devastating war in the region? Whatever the case, these arrivals created a windfall harvest of potential converts to the mission.

The South African (Anglo-Boer) War

When the Anglo-Boer War did erupt it brought with it a host of complicating factors, but also opportunities for the Mashonaland mission. Initially, in his first mention of it, as far as I could ascertain, A. A. Louw described it as something terrible, but also mentioned that they remained unaffected by it, continuing calmly with their work, apparently.³⁵

It scarcely has to be emphasised that the South African War affected the mission differently than the conflicts discussed above. The Matabele and Mashonaland Wars pitted the Chartered Company against black Africans with Afrikaner missionaries in the cross-fire, but still in a quasi-neutral position. A limited role of mediation was possible for them under the circumstances. A. A. Louw and his mission could imagine themselves occasionally in the role of protectors of the Africans, even though the missionaries themselves eventually had to accept refuge and hence protection from the colonial authority. During the South African War, officially between Boer and Brit, the missionaries retained an official, if superficial, neutrality due to the fact that they were British subjects. However, there could be no doubt that their sympathies lay with their fellow Afrikaners. This was possibly exasperated by the close involvement of A. A. Louw's brothers in this conflict. A. F. Louw became a well-known chaplain to Boer POWs on St. Helena, which had direct implications for the DRC mission enterprise, as I shall discuss below. However, more directly, and tragically, the Louw family lost their younger brother Willie, who was executed by a British firing squad after being convicted of treason due to his status as a Cape Rebel fighting on the side of the Boers.³⁶

It would be hard to imagine that this war and the personal cost involved for A. A. Louw—and possibly also other missionaries—would not have strained relationships with the colonial power in what became Rhodesia. And conversely, if this was the case, would the situation have engendered a more sympathetic relationship between Afrikaner missionaries and their

35 DRC Archive [KS 849], Feb. 22, 1900, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

36 See Johan Louw, *Ds. A. F. Louw op St. Helena. Brieue en belewenisse* (Kaapstad: N G Kerk, 1963), 15, 30.

prospective African converts, with both groups now having experienced suffering at the hands of the Empire? Although there is more evidence in support of the former presupposition than the latter, questions regarding such subtleties are not really unequivocally answerable on the basis of the historical documents available. However, what we do have is an indication of a strengthened mission due to reinforcements among the staff. Already in 1901 A. A. Louw wrote expressing his joy regarding the fact that the mission commission had strengthened their hand with the addition of three additional non-ordained missionaries.³⁷ He furthermore pleaded for at least one more ordained missionary, a request necessitated by the expansion of their work, including among the white population in the area of Victoria.³⁸

This was an interesting development, because just as another mission enthusiast, A. A. Louw's brother in law D. F. Malan, would later adopt a missionary attitude³⁹ towards the upliftment of his so-called "own people," i.e. poor white Afrikaners, so A. A. Louw and the Mashonaland mission here set down something of a precedent by also providing not only evangelistic ministry but also education to the white Afrikaans-speaking settlers in that vicinity, many of whom could also have been classified in the category of poor whites, or so it would seem.

Such diverse ministries could now be undertaken because A. F. Louw's chaplaincy in St Helena, along with that of another relative George Murray in Ceylon, enabled a revival among Boer prisoners on these islands, which resulted in a substantial number of new recruits for the DRC missionary enterprise. All of the mission fields would benefit from a strengthening of their staff over the next decade, including Mashonaland.⁴⁰ In early 1902, A. A. Louw's letters made mention of new missionaries in their midst, already before the end of the war, who must have come from a different source than the POW camps, of course.⁴¹ This letter, as well as following ones in 1902 and beyond, speaks of conversions, growth and expansion.⁴²

37 DRC Archive [KS 849], March 12, 1901, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

38 DRC Archive [KS 849], March 15, 1901. A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

39 See Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012), 135–138.

40 See J. W. Kok, *Sonderlinge Vrug: Die Invloed van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog op die Sendingaksie van die N.G. Kerk in S.A.* (Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel, 1971).

41 DRC Archive [KS 849], Jan. 22, 1902, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

42 DRC Archive [KS 849], See April 18, 1902, April 25, 1903, A. A. Louw to J. H. Neethling.

It is notable that even with an expanded missionary force and additional stations, many of the same challenges of a decade earlier seemed to persist, i.e. low levels of interest in the gospel, and a problematic interrelationship between the mission and colonialism. Regarding the missionary perceptions of colonial influence—as distinct from the mission—there is an interesting quote from an early 20th century report, which was in all likelihood drawn up by A. A. Louw in his capacity as head of the mission: “a civilised heathen is a double heathen” [transl.].⁴³ This refers to the situation experienced at Victoria mission station, where colonial mores and practices had a stronger impact than elsewhere, none of it good from the point of view of the DRC mission. Presumably, the theory was that it would be preferable for Africans to experience their first “European” contact via missionaries. Not that that necessarily made a noticeable difference in terms of results. This report tells a story of relatively small interest in conversion by Shona people from various mission stations. From Chibi, for example, a line that seems familiar from other A. A. Louw correspondence I have seen elsewhere, crops up: “De heidenen begeeren’t Evangelie niet ... Op de kralen komen zij meestal langzaam en lusteloos bijeen. Zij luisteren ook maar lusteloos, en na’t Amen is’t òf ‘n gelach omdat zij de oogen moesten dicht houden, òf dadelijk een praatje over tabak of iets dergelijks.” [The heathens do not desire the gospel ... At the kraals they mostly arrive slowly and without enthusiasm. They also listen rather unenthusiastically, and after Amen it is either laughter because they had to keep their eyes shut, or immediately small talk about tobacco or something similar.]⁴⁴

Still, the question arises, why would they be there and expose themselves to the absurdities of the missionaries if they did not feel themselves in some ways pressured to participate in the mission’s activities? Or were they perhaps attracted to the novelty of the mission station with its strange new ways and ideas, even if the people were not in any way convinced by what they were hearing? Although it is unclear when this report was written exactly, the number of stations mentioned suggests a much later date than then late 19th century correspondence of A. A. Louw to the mission secretary, J. H. Neethling, and in fact, the latest document cited by it is from 1912. That gives us a clue, which makes the similarity in tone to A. A. Louw’s letters of nearly two decades earlier quite interesting. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same in Mashonaland, apparently.

43 DRC Archive [B130], Verslag van Zendingwerk (ca. 1912), 29.

44 DRC Archive [B130], p. 30.

Conclusion

The interwoven history of colonialism and the 19th century missionary movement is a well-known theme in historiography, including church history. However, in our current context where decolonisation is such a buzzword it makes sense to revisit this theme to ascertain exactly how these powers of a former era related to one another. The reasons for this should be obvious for historians, because it concerns the simple fact that our contemporary political and religious contexts were formed within the mixing bowl of those initial contacts and conflicts involving Africans, colonials, and of course, Christian missionaries. What I presented here is a narrative of mission and colonialism on the micro level. It is apparent that the different actors in the drama had different, even contradictory expectations of one another. As such, tensions were created on different levels. The BSAC clearly assumed that the presence of DRC missionaries in Mashonaland was to the company's benefit. Probably conservative missionaries, such as the ones at Morgenstêr, were regarded as helpful in strengthening the bulwark of colonial control in the area. Missionaries helped to pacify the population and aided in the people's assimilation to colonial norms and standards, especially through their educational activities.

The Shona people were according to the missionaries' own reports and statistics rather unenthusiastic about the spiritual message the latter attempted to convey. However, some of their chiefs, especially in the early years, were happy enough to have missionaries in their midst. The mission was likely understood as both a form of protection against the attacks of groups such as the Matabele, but also as an important buffer against the might and draconian measures of the colonial authority. This view apparently held true, even when the mission proved to be not very successful in preventing calamitous impositions such as the actions that led to the demise of Chief Mugabe.

As such, the mission really found itself in a classic win-win situation. The fact that their converts grew so slowly was a thorn in the flesh of an otherwise healthy and prosperous body; a body that only grew in relative strength with every war involving the colonial rulers. In each case, they could differentiate themselves further from the increasingly unpopular rulers, but without needing to outright side with a rebellious population. The one instance where such a position possibly became most difficult to maintain was during the Anglo-Boer War and its aftermath. And even though their sympathies during this conflict would have been obvious to the British rulers, the fact is that they were not repatriated. Instead, they

quietly continued with their work, only to gain considerably with a substantial strengthening of missionary personnel through the recruitment of Boer POWs by A. A. Louw's brother, A. F. Louw, among others. Therefore, we may conclude with a degree of confidence, that the assumption that the DRC mission in Mashonaland benefited from the various British imperial wars in the area, is not such a far-fetched notion after all.

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