



Typhoons in Micronesia: the history of tropical cyclones and their effects until 1914, Dirk HR Spennemann, Division of Historic Preservation, Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, 2004. 201p.

The Germans were late-comers to the Pacific. When they first came, during the Spanish administration of the islands, they came flying not the German flag—for Germany was not yet a state until the 1880s when ‘the iron Chancellor’ Otto von Bismarck united the country—but the flag of the mediaeval Hansa city of Hamburg. By the time Germany took her place among the powerful nations of Europe, most of the desirable areas of the colonised world had already been taken up by Great Britain, France, Holland, Italy and others.

Consequently, Germany eagerly took what was left and available: in Africa, the Cameroons, Kenya and Tanganyika; in the Pacific, New Guinea, Samoa and Micronesia, ‘*der Inselgebiet*’. In Micronesia, which had been under Spanish claim since the time of Magellan in 1521 and in which virtually nothing was developed beyond the Marianas, phosphate mining and copra production were seen as a source of profit in European and Asian markets. The Spanish were interested in converting native souls to Christianity in Micronesia; the Germans, in economic development and exploitation of natural resources. They set to work earnestly with surveys and assessments for minerals, and in fact did find bauxite, and even gold, in addition to impressive supplies of phosphate, notably on Angaur in Palau.

In agricultural efforts they found citrus fruits on Pohnpei and Kosrae and through experimentation, improved their size, quality and taste. Today on Kosrae, the delicious green tangerines, which abound everywhere and which are affectionately known as ‘Kosraean Coca Cola’, were improved by the German scientists (and later further improved by the Japanese). Various hardwood trees were planted and tested, and can still be seen flourishing today in the Eastern Carolines.

But copra production was the most lucrative economic pursuit, and the Germans encouraged this activity most vigorously. Large plantations were established, employing many Micronesians, and other islanders who were brought in by traders and black-birders, to tend and harvest



the coconuts. It was learned that a maximum yield could be realised by planting healthy trees in rank and file with fifteen feet of separation among them. Again, today, there exist some of the trees that the Germans planted in the Marshall Islands: they are among the islands' tallest and still productive.

In 1884 the Germans established a Protectorate over the Marshall Islands. Some postmodernists look askance at this presumption on the part of the Germans. In the same year Germany pressed claims to the Carolines although Spain protested, tracing their claims all the way back to Magellan. Germany agreed to submit the dispute to adjudication by Pope Leo XIII, whom many expected to rule in Spain's favour since they were a Catholic nation. However, the Pope upheld a draw, opining that Spain did indeed have legitimate claims, but that Germany could trade and establish coaling stations in the Carolines. Thus both sides won! Almost immediately, Spain set-up an administration in Pohnpei headed by a governor, but the Pohnpeians objected to this and never acceded to Spanish control. The German Protectorate in the Marshalls may have been presumptuous, but it was nevertheless upheld and the Germans abided by their own agreements with the Marshallese chiefs.

The copra production proceeded apace, but initially ran into difficulties. The process of making coconut oil from copra requires a plentiful supply of fresh water, but because such supply was never readily at hand on most islands, the Germans were forced to send the copra to Europe for processing. This resulted in a methodology that soon became commonplace throughout the Marshalls, the Carolines, and elsewhere in the Pacific Islands, namely, the burlap bag collection of copra and barter for western trade goods.

The German motivation for her Micronesian colonies was, to her credit, enthusiastic and her approach well prepared for. But she was not prepared for the destructiveness and demoralisation of typhoons. Older inhabitants in the Carolines had described their experiences with past typhoons prior to the arrival of the German colonials, as well as relaying stories told by their elders of terrible storms.



One of these was so intensive that the waves washed over the island for about two hours. The people reputedly gathered in and around a dwelling away from the shore and held on to a rope slung around them. Those who could not reach the place in time were washed away and perished. Most coconut palms and all breadfruit trees were blown over; the taro patches were destroyed, with the tubers washed out or buried. (45–6)

This was a typical account of typhoon destructiveness and fury. On 16 April 1907 a typhoon struck Woleai Atoll in the central Carolines killing 200 people (71, Table 4.3). Many others were injured from falling debris and wave action. Even though there was a German physician on Woleai at the time, he himself ‘had a major contusion on his leg when the storm surge hit his house’ (70). Perhaps not surprisingly, the ‘medical station was destroyed and all pharmaceuticals as well as all instruments were scattered’ (70) thus ruling out all but the most basic of first aid assistance.

Following these storms, of course, massive assistance had to be given to the native population, who had lost their means of livelihood including the production of food. Debris had to be cleared and houses and buildings had to be rebuilt; as well, the ‘many corpses [that] were washed ashore’ had to be buried (71).

Professor Spennemann accounts for some 60 typhoons striking the *Inselgebiet* of Micronesia between 1899, the year of the German purchase of the Carolines and Marianas (except Guam) from Spain, and 1914, the start of World War I and the Japanese capture of all German lands north of the equator in the Pacific. This rough total of 60 typhoons should be understood in terms of the many islands and atolls affected by a single typhoon that would sweep through Micronesia on a generally westward track passing over or near to many islands and atolls, wreaking havoc along the way. From the point of view of German administrators, a single typhoon that hits many islands is ‘many typhoons’. June through November is the time when typhoons are most likely to occur, but they can come at any time of the year, and the data that Spennemann presents clearly show this.



The German period in Micronesia was very short—only fifteen years. But in that span they truly brought the Micronesians into the twentieth century and materially affected their island cultures. They were the agents bringing the carbide lanterns that turned night into day and enabled the women to weave clothing and mats after the sun went down; likewise, the bearers of the small outboard motors that enabled the men to go fishing regardless of wind and weather conditions. They also brought beer, sausages, bread and pretzels that broadened the Micronesians' eating and drinking habits.

Undoubtedly, the German influence on the island peoples would have been much greater had it been of a longer tenure. But while the German period ended because of political reasons, its productivity was hampered greatly by the persistent and impairing typhoons. Typhoons continue to ravage Micronesia today and they are destructive, though not nearly to the extent of times past. Modern technology affords adequate warning, and concrete construction girds human habitation. Still, the inconvenience and interruption are ever-present reminders of the reality of the power of nature's forces.

Dr Spennemann has made a real contribution to the understanding of the German period in Micronesia. The tables of data together with the photos in his book bear mute witness to these great natural impediments to the German colonial efforts. Contemporary and future historians will have to read Spennemann in order to comprehend the German experience in the islands. I would also fancy that the spirits of the colonial officers who coped with the typhoon situations those many years ago are also grateful that their ordeals are further enlightened and memorialised by his thorough and thoughtful work.

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