

This Month in Moravian History

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Arrival of the first Moravian missionaries in Tranquebar, July 2, 1760

Moravian historian Hartmut Beck has described the Tranquebar mission, along with the other missions in the Bay of Bengal, as a dramatic, unprofitable and mistake-filled period in Moravian mission history. Tranquebar, now known as Tharangambadi, “place of the singing waves,” is a coastal town near the southeastern tip of India on the Bay of Bengal. During the eighteenth century it was a Danish colony initially evangelized by the Lutherans. Zinzendorf’s missionary zeal was stoked as a young man by conversations with Lutheran missionaries to Tranquebar who gathered around the dinner table of August Hermann Francke, the headmaster of his Pietist school at Halle. In 1758 Zinzendorf sent the missionary Georg Johann Stahlmann to Copenhagen to garner permission for Moravian mission work in the Danish East Indies. The Danish court granted Moravians freedom to establish their own churches and missions in the region, with Tranquebar intended as the gateway to nearby islands. In Zeist on September 28, 1759, Zinzendorf bade good-bye to the first group of Moravian colonists. Stahlmann led the group of fourteen men comprised primarily of skilled craftsmen and two young theologians, Adam Gottlieb Völker and Christoph Buttler. It was one of the last Moravian missions Zinzendorf saw established in his lifetime.

The Moravian colonists sailed on the same ship with the new governor of Tranquebar, with whom they established a friendly relationship. This created jealousy and a

strained relationship with the Lutheran missionaries from Halle who did not appreciate the Moravian competition. The younger Francke, no longer friendly with Zinzendorf, complained in 1759: “Another piece of news which I have received has struck me very much, and troubled me not a little, namely that the Moravians are trying to establish themselves in Tranquebar.”



The group arrived in Tranquebar on July 2, 1760, and established a typical Moravian settlement they called *Brüdergarten*, Garden of the Brethren. Buttler and Völkel immediately immersed themselves in Tamil and Portugese and translated Zinzendorf’s sermons into these languages. Soon the Moravians became very popular in the region. Another detractor, Oluf Maderup, ascribed their popularity to their “irreproachable lives.” He stated, “I cannot describe how the Moravians have insinuated themselves in so short a time into the good will of Danes, French and even Hindus by their voluntary humility and angel-like conduct...If they were as pure in their doctrine and teaching as their life is outwardly to the eyes of the world, there would not be a sect or race to equal them in the whole of Asia.” He further

reported that the natives referred to them as the “Saints” or “Nyanigöl,” which means “the wise men,” a term they also used for their own holy men.

Despite starting off with ample resources and seasoned missionaries, the overwhelming stress of illness and death quickly demoralized the colony. After 40 years in the region, 47 lives were lost and the number of

converts could only be counted on one hand. Rampant alcoholism (stemming from the 18th-century misconception that alcohol protected one from tropical illnesses), political unrest and plundering of *Brüdergarten* during the 1780s contributed to the overall failure of the mission. Although the 1789 Synod decided to continue the mission, the effort was

finally abandoned in 1795, missionaries began returning to Europe, and the property was sold in 1803. Despite so much adversity, the last surviving missionary, Johann Gottfried Hänsel, wrote that God “strengthened our hearts, and comforted us by such a lively sense of His divine presence, that we were frequently filled with heavenly joy...The Lord hath done all things well, and I have lacked no good thing.”

Sources

Image: view of *Brüdergarten*, engraving by Noul. Sources: Hartmut Beck, *Brüder in vielen Völkern* (1981); *History of the Tranquebar Mission* (Evangelical Lutheran Mission Press, 1863); La-Trobe, *Letters on the Nicobar Islands* by John Gottfried Haensel (1812); Müller, *200 Jahre Brüdermission*, vol. I (1931).