"Boy's and Girl's Own Empires: Gender and the Uses of the Colonial World in Kaiserreich Youth Magazines"

Jeff Bowersox (University of Toronto)

The era of Germany's "unification" and rise to Great Power status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with an age of unprecedented global interaction. At the same time that residents of the recently formed nation-state struggled to define their nation, who belonged to it, and what roles they would play in maintaining it, they also became ever more aware of the world beyond Germany's and Europe's borders. Dramatic advances in transportation, expanding commercial and communications networks, and the various foreign interventions and adventures that these facilitated brought distant corners of the globe into Germans' everyday lives. A developing mass culture provided media -- books, periodicals, films, museums, exhibitions, zoos, panoramas, advertisements, toys, and myriad other products and productions -- for making sense of it all. As the exercise of formal and informal colonial influence increasingly defined the nature of these global encounters, colonial references came to structure the idioms through which Germans across lines of class, gender, and region understood their place in the wider world. Germans were fluent in the language of colonialism, and, through these various media, they spoke it on a daily basis.

While Germans were increasingly interested in efforts to maintain and develop their own, recently acquired colonial possessions, this interest was predicated on and intimately intertwined with Germans' familiarity with a larger world order defined by empire. They defined their world
in terms of hierarchies of relative civilization, and in this world it was generally assumed that the civilized, however defined, had a right and duty to intervene in the affairs of the less civilized. Indeed, the very measure of a society's vitality was its ability to spread progress, however defined, to those in need. Just as social reformers argued for the need to mould the unruly working classes in a more "respectable" image and nationalists demanded the Germanization of backwards national minorities within Germany's borders, so did this conception reference, explain, and justify the expansion of European influence around the globe by establishing a fundamental opposition between civilized and uncivilized. The expressions of this worldview in the media of mass culture were not monolithic and consistent, but they were no less important for their flexibility. As producers shaped their products to appeal and apply to specific audiences, they referenced empire in various and sometimes contradictory ways, always inflected by notions of gender, race, class, confession, nation, and Kultur.

In an effort to illustrate the prevalence and utility of empire in German popular culture around the turn of the century, I will focus on media aimed at German youth. Such products are particularly instructive because they illustrate more than simply the prevailing cultural reference points of the day. Given pervasive fears of declining national virility in an era defined by national competition and the survival of the fittest, raising a generation capable of building a strong community at home and promoting its interests abroad was a central social concern. A host of reform movements aimed at educating and invigorating young Germans turned their attention to ameliorating perceived degenerative influences, in particular the baleful effects of industrialization and the Tangel-Tangel of mass culture. In line with the most progressive pedagogical practices of the day, reformers demanded that products for children contain entertaining yet enriching content, content that engaged imaginations as it conveyed practical
lessons and encouraged appropriate behavior. Although profit was usually the primary motive for producers, many sought to distance themselves from trashy commercial culture by infusing their products for youth with self-consciously instructional intentions. A critical reading of these materials provides a glimpse not only into the terms in which young Germans came to understand their world but also into how various adults wanted the world to appear to their children.

Producers of media for youth faced prerogatives that were sometimes difficult to reconcile. Young readers demanded entertaining content; pedagogues, politicians, and many parents demanded educational material; and all demanded relevant and current topics. Using empire, producers could address all of these, specifically by directing young Germans’ interest in the exotic world down pedagogically responsible avenues, providing lessons to boys and girls about their respective roles in German society and in the wider world. In this piece I will examine the utility of colonial references in two mainstream youth periodicals, one for boys and one for girls. Both journals relied on a fundamental opposition between a civilized European world and a chaotic colonial world, but their details differed according to contemporary gender ideals. Ultimately, the image of a colonial world defined by chaos and backwardness could provide both boys and girls with spaces for adventure and personal development not available within the confines of the civilized metropole. It was a space for independent and heroic action and for the illustration of the ultimate superiority of European civilization. This vision, shaped to suit current events and the growing interest in Germany's own colonial efforts, remained relatively constant in media aimed at German boys over the course of the period.

In media aimed at girls, by contrast, the colonial world was initially far less adventurous and chaotic. Instead, it provided tamed, exotic decoration or examples of foreign barbarity that
reinforced European notions of civilized femininity. However, under the influence of the middle class women's movement, empire became something more. Just as the adventure found on the frontier could entertain while promoting an active masculinity, so did publishers and contributors eventually try to promote an active, yet still domestic femininity through the example of women struggling at the margins of civilization. This project found its clearest expression when focusing on Germany's mission in its own colonies. By serving in their natural roles as bearers of *Kultur* to those most in need of it, female colonizers proved the necessity of capable women for ensuring Germany's vitality both at home and abroad.

* 

*Der gute Kamerad* [*The Good Comrade or The Good Pal*] and *Das Kränzchen* [*The Circle*] were two of the most popular youth journals of the period and were considered even by their Social Democratic competitors as politically "neutral."¹ Their close institutional connections make them especially useful for comparison. The Stuttgart publisher Wilhelm Spemann began publishing *Der gute Kamerad* in 1887 in an effort to reach primarily middle class boys between the ages of ten and fourteen. In the following year, he established its sister journal to reach girls of the same age and class.² The two publications shared publishers and editors, and they also shared a common mission. They aimed to prepare their respective readerships for their future roles as men and women capable of promoting the well-being of Germany, and they aimed to do so in an entertaining manner. To this end, both combined fictional features with general interest stories containing self-consciously educational content. Serial stories were accompanied by reports on current events, famous personages, and technological advancements as well as informational articles on various topics in ethnography, geography, and natural history such as readers would have encountered in their classrooms. By
paying close attention, readers could learn how they could best contribute to German society at home and abroad. Despite their connections and shared goals, *Der gute Kamerad* and *Das Kränzchen* were very different in content and emphasis according to prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity -- specifically the public roles of each. Like most youth literature, they generally followed the dictum "the girl stays at home, the boy goes out in the world to roam," and their visions of the colonial world followed suit.³

*Der gute Kamerad* focused on attracting boys with serialized tales of exotic adventure and informational reports on technological and military marvels or discoveries in the fields of ethnography and geography. Imagined as a frontier ripe with excitement, the colonial world fit well into *Der gute Kamerad*'s general mission. A wildly popular setting for adventure literature, the colonial context also provided authors the opportunity to portray men wrestling, training, and improving that disordered space. In this realm readers found examples of such stereotypically masculine qualities as bravery and daring but also respectability, humility, diligence, an appreciation for hard work, and intelligence. In *Der gute Kamerad*, boys were to imaginatively engage in the colonial world as hunters, explorers, adventurers, and agents of European civilization.

*Das Kränzchen* initially encouraged a different way of relating to the colonial world through its focus on the domestic sphere and "woman's work." The journal did encourage girls to be aware of the colonial world but only insofar as it related directly to their lives and presumed roles in the civilized metropole. Rather than active participation in civilizing efforts and the adventure that came along with it, for most of the period under consideration *Das Kränzchen* encouraged readers only to observe a colonial world defined in terms of domesticity and civility.
Readers encountered a safely exotic world, shorn of the chaos that produced the excitement and opportunities for personal development that characterized boys' literature in general.

A few examples can illustrate this dichotomy. From its founding in 1887, *Der gute Kamerad* made an exoticized colonial world a central part of its offerings to readers first and foremost through the serialized adventure stories included in every issue. Roughly ten stories appeared each year between 1887 and 1914, and fewer than a handful of these took Europe as their setting. The rest took place in Africa, the South Pacific, China, Latin America, the American frontier, or on the high seas. Karl May, whom Wilhelm Spemann helped to make one of the most popular authors of the period, contributed seven novels within the journal's first eleven years.\(^4\) May's *Die Sklavenkarawane* is typical of *Der gute Kamerad*'s standard fare, with its tale of hardy European frontiersmen and their loyal native subordinates who wrestle with chaotic environments and savage peoples.\(^5\) In this story Emil Schwartz, a blond-haired and blue-eyed German professor of natural history, travels through Sudan to collect local flora and fauna for museums and his own research. Along the way the fearless scholar-warrior is drawn into conflict with the murderous Arab slave-trader Abu el Mot, who raids local towns and enslaves the poor black population as well as any Europeans, including Schwartz's own brother, who get in the way. Through exceptional wit, courage, and skill with their fists and firearms, Schwartz and his comrades succeed in defeating the slavers and freeing their prisoners. May and other authors created opportunities for adventure and excitement in their stories by presenting their non-European settings as chaotic, underdeveloped spaces understood to operate according to different rules than the orderly, civilized metropole.

By contrast, only on very few occasions did readers of *Das Kränzchen*’s serialized stories get a glimpse of the world beyond Europe's boundaries, and that world was far from
adventurous. Luise Glaß's *Annele* was one of only a handful of stories over the entire period that include non-European settings and, like virtually all of the stories in the journal, was a sentimental *Backfischroman* in which the plot revolves around the female protagonist coming to terms with her domestic responsibilities. Egypt serves as the setting for a tame travel report wrapped around an extended discourse on national identity and the necessity of maintaining it in a foreign space. The dramatic tension comes not from any threat but rather the question of whether Annele can help convince a German who has "gone native" during his long stay in the Orient to reclaim his national identity. Glaß's Egypt is sufficiently strange, wondrous, and chaotic to provide an exotic flair to her tale, but it is also sufficiently domesticated not to frighten or over-excite her apparently impressionable girl readers. The passive heroine encounters no physical danger during her stay abroad; even when she walks through the disorderly streets of Cairo, German men chaperone her at all times. The limits of feminine respectability meant that Glaß's *Annele*, unlike May's heroic Emil Schwartz, could become nothing more than a tourist unprepared to survive in this exotic environment on her own.

The distinction between these two perspectives on the colonial world -- dangerous versus safe, active participation versus passive observation, masculine versus feminine -- becomes particularly clear with a look at informational reports, similar to classroom readings, that served as the journals' educational content. Both journals relied on a fundamental opposition -- between a progressive and civilized European world on the one hand and a variously backward colonial world in need of European assistance on the other -- to situate their readers in the wider world and to entertain them, but they used very different details to establish this binary and, in turn, put this binary to very different ends.

[Insert Illustration 1 here]

Compare, for example, the engagement with exotic animals in illustrations 1 and 2. Illustration 1 embodies the masculine engagement with the colonial world promoted in Der gute Kamerad. The lioness marks this space as a wild frontier ruled not by civilized rules of decorum but by a Darwinian struggle for survival, and its cultivation requires the efforts of capable men with stores of bravery. Appropriately, the stalwart hunter stands tall and proud as he faces down the prowling predator while the natives, marked as subordinates by their dress and fearful postures, look to their white master for leadership and protection. Der gute Kamerad regularly used portrayals of freely roaming animals to emphasize the raw-ness and danger inherent in the colonial world, a danger faced most often in the form of a thrilling hunt such as this. By contrast, not a single story in Das Kränzchen described the hunting of wild animals or the threat that they could pose to humans. Das Kränzchen recognized and played to an interest among its readers in the very same exotic creatures portrayed in Der gute Kamerad but instead offered stories that examined them in controlled environments like ranches, circuses, and zoos. As illustration 2 demonstrates, girls encountered a colonial world that need not be so dangerous after all. The accompanying article explains that lions are the "dearest" creatures when born; for months they are tame enough to play with toddlers.

The purpose of such distinctions becomes clearer with an examination of ethnographic reports on the habits and characteristics of non-European peoples. Der gute Kamerad taught a
relatively straightforward lesson through factual reportage focused primarily on the activities of men -- hunting, fighting, trade and other economic activities; the use of technology; and forms of political organization. As in illustration 1, these portrayals suggested that European men possess particular virtues lacking to varying degrees in most of the colonial peoples they encounter, and this disparity requires European men to bring order and prosperity to the colonial world. Stories of native simplicity, superstition, and corruption, for example the humorous tale of a tyrannical "nigger king" confounded by a European trader able to create fire with a magnifying glass, encouraged readers to value intelligence, bravery, independence, selflessness, and command of the advances of European civilization. The protagonists in these stories and reports embodied the virtues that German men needed to build a stronger nation at home. Editors of and contributors to Der gute Kamerad tried to teach boys to develop these virtues through an imaginative engagement with the colonial world.

Das Kränzchen constructed a more ambivalent relationship between its readers and the colonial world, one built around passive observation of circumstances among colonial peoples rather than models of feminine behavior constructively promoting the cause of civilization. However, the editors and contributors put this observation to good use to promote a domestic femininity that accorded with the goals of the middle class women's movement in Germany. Particularly in its first decade and a half, Das Kränzchen offered a virtual ethnographic world tour of fashion and manners among peoples scattered across the spectrum of civilization. Contributors used pieces on clothing styles to plead for more simplicity and practicality in German women's dress. One writer used the tastes of "savages" -- specifically the "gigantic" ear piercings of the Masai or the "quite glorious buns" among the Pauans and Greenlanders -- to mock the elaborate costuming of European high fashion. Frequent articles outlining the horrors
of foot-binding among the Chinese offered more extreme examples of the ways that fashion
could constrict and confine women unnecessarily. Likewise, the lifestyles of women and children
among the Japanese, Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans, Indians, North Africans, and even
black Americans provided opportunities for Das Kränzchen's readers to place their own,
comparatively more civilized, everyday lives in a global context. The emphasis on efforts to
educate these peoples on a European model paralleled the journal's frequent pieces promoting the
efforts of the middle class women's movement to increase educational opportunities for German
women at home.

Where Der gute Kamerad encouraged its readers to identify with the main characters of
its stories and reports, before the turn of the century Das Kränzchen's portrayals of the colonial
world only encouraged readers to compare their experiences. Such articles entertained insofar as
they gave girls a glimpse of strange and horrifying situations and practices around the world, but
they did so in a way presumed appropriate for feminine sensibilities. These were patently not
exciting. Germany's future men needed to take part in imaginative adventures in the colonial
world in order to develop manly virtues, while such adventures risked over-stimulating the
nation's future wives and mothers and also risked a dangerous blurring of gender boundaries.
Nevertheless, despite contemporary concerns, it became apparent that many German girls were
also interested in the very same adventure literature that pedagogues believed could develop
maturity and independence in German boys.11 Because reformist pedagogy advised that the most
effective education made use of the media and themes that fired youngsters' imaginations, this
realization led Das Kränzchen's editors and contributors to encourage readers to relate to the
colonial world in new ways.
In these two journals, this shift was facilitated by the rising public interest in Germany's own colonial possessions overseas, an interest spurred in particular by wars fought in China (1900) and Southwest and East Africa (1904-1908). *Der gute Kamerad* responded by devoting more space to Germany's colonial affairs relative to the colonial world more generally. Before 1900, Southwest Africa or Togo had merited no more attention than Somalia or Bolivia, but thereafter Germany's *Schutzgebiete* increasingly became the focal point of the journal's factual reports on the non-European world. By reporting on the twin aims of colonial administration -- suppressing opposition and building schools and infrastructure -- *Der gute Kamerad* increasingly tied the effort to raise capable men at home with an effort to establish the capability of the German nation on the world stage. *Das Kränzchen* also capitalized on the heightened attention to colonial affairs, for its part, to promote the goals of the middle class women's movement. In 1904, the girls' journal suddenly began reporting on colonizing efforts, like *Der gute Kamerad* with a special emphasis on Germans' good works. As editors and contributors tried to demonstrate to their female readers that German women, too, had a role to play in nation-building both at home and abroad, they increasingly appropriated the colonial adventure that hitherto had been an exclusively masculine preserve. The eventual result was a dramatic change from the journal's previous fare.

Indeed, there was a noticeable and consistent effort in *Das Kränzchen* after 1904 to reconcile prevailing notions of domestic femininity with an active role in the colonial sphere. While the emphasis in the journal's stories remained on domestic, "women's" concerns, editors and contributors began using the colonial sphere to promote a new range of feminine virtues and activities. They did so by educating readers about the ways that women had played and must continue to play a central role in German civilizing efforts. Especially in roles where women
could show off their particular domestic talents -- nursing, teaching, or housekeeping -- they also
could fulfill their role as bearers of German *Kultur*. Readers could look to such models as "the
heroine of Cameroon" Anna Margarete Hesse née Leue for examples of a distinctively feminine
bravery, wit, and altruism honed under extreme circumstances. A true "Samaritan" honored
posthumously by the Kaiser himself, Hesse was a nurse who had selflessly defended her
European patients against tropical diseases and barbaric savages before meeting an untimely
death. These stories proved that girls too could bear and benefit from the challenges to be faced
and the sacrifices to be made in putting the chaotic and adventurous frontier in order.

Although not on the same scale as in *Der gute Kamerad, Das Kränzchen* nonetheless
began promoting character development among readers by encouraging them to imagine
themselves actively participating in the civilizing of the colonial world together with their male
counterparts. This shift is perhaps best illustrated by the first and only colonialist fiction to
appear in the journal before the outbreak of the Great War. In a radical departure from the fiction
that had previously appeared in the publication, the editors chose in 1913/14 to serialize Henny
Koch's *Die Vollrads in Südwest*. The story is similar to other *Backfischromanen* insofar as it
follows the development of the main character, Hanna Vollrad, from a naïve, innocent fifteen-
year-old "into a proper wife" capable of efficiently and effectively running a household.

However, her development takes place in Southwest Africa, where the family hopes to
make a new start after the death of Hanna's mother. There they set up a farm and begin taming
the colonial landscape around them. Not only must Hanna take on her mother's responsibilities;
she must also convince her father and three brothers, who often refer to her using the boy's name
Hänsel, that they cannot do without her feminine qualities. As in literature for boys, Koch's
colonial frontier features as an uncertain chaotic setting in need of order, but she makes clear that
European men cannot accomplish this task without the help of women. The adventurous colonial frontier matures Hanna and allows her to prove her worth as a bearer and promoter of German Kultur. She, and only she, can perform the domestic tasks necessary to establishing a German home: running a clear, orderly, civilized household that is a model for the indigenous population; caring for sick relatives in the absence of any medical assistance; cultivating a vegetable and flower garden to create a sort of tropical paradise out of the barren landscape. At the same time, facing down the challenges of the frontier allows her to grow as an individual. She acclimatizes to the harsh climate, hunts and tracks animals, and even fights against murderous natives in defense of her new German homeland. Unlike in boys’ literature, Koch’s embrace of colonial adventure could not be absolute. To make the story appropriate for the staid pages of Das Kränzchen, she injects a certain ambivalence: one moment Hanna thrills at firing a gun or riding a horse and in the next shudders with remorse at her apparent transgression.

[Insert Illustration 3 here]

Illustration 3: "... She bent her head to the side as far as she could; then the shot rang out . . . ."

Das Kränzchen (1913/1914) Image courtesy of Württembergische Landesbibliothek

Nevertheless, Vollrads represented the culmination of a dramatic change for Das Kränzchen, as a comparison of illustration 3 with illustrations 1 and 2 reveals. In an obvious metaphor for the necessary role that German women must play in colonial affairs, Hanna offers her shoulder as support so that her wounded brother can kill a leopard that threatens them and their herds. Beyond its overt symbolism, though, the image also evokes the previously forbidden danger of the lioness attack rather than the tamed exoticism of the lion cubs, and Koch emphasizes that this young woman had benefited from her adventurous encounter. In so doing, she directed an uplifting message at her female readership, namely that women are strong and
valuable because of their feminine, domesticating abilities. Hanna's father makes this lesson explicit through his eventual realization that "in certain circumstances a real woman is worth more than some men."\(^{15}\)

By 1914, *Das Kränzchen*’s editors and contributors had accepted the widespread interest in colonial adventure and used it to promote their vision of an active, middle class, domestic femininity that complemented the active masculinity promoted in *Der gute Kamerad*. Although they offered different perspectives to their respective audiences, both tried to profit from a self-evident distinction between the European and non-European worlds, using the narrative of a civilizing mission to mediate the encounter between the two. The different developments of colonial entertainment in these publications helps us to understand why such colonial references became and remained a common part of Germans' everyday lives during this period.

Empire was far from a matter of marginal interest for Germans but rather a defining feature of how they understood themselves as a modern, powerful, civilized nation within a globalizing world. In the commercial youth literature developing in Germany from the 1880s, the interplay between consumers and producers determined the various forms of young Germans' colonial encounters. Young readers turned to portrayals of the colonial world because they offered opportunities to escape into exotic worlds where different rules applied than those that governed their mundane *Alltag*. Editors and contributors both responded to and tried to shape this interest. In *Der gute Kamerad* and *Das Kränzchen*, colonial encounters offered familiar, popular, and appropriate sets of references for entertaining and for conveying specific lessons to their respective readerships about their place in the modern world. Although the specific details shifted over the course of the Imperial period, the enduring utility and attraction of such
references did not -- if anything, they only became more pronounced as cultural producers used them to reach new audiences. The flexibility of this popular colonialism, the fact that various colonial perspectives could coexist and compete in media aimed at young Germans, both underscores its appeal and helps to explain its prevalence.

Select Bibliography:


Kerbs, Diethart and Jürgen Reulecke, eds. *Handbuch der deutschen Reformbewegungen 1880-1933* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1998)


Quotations:

pg. 5 "the girl stays at home, the boy goes out in the world to roam" -- "Das Mädchen bleibt zuhause, der Junge zieht in die Welt hinaus."

pg. 7 "Lioness on the attack" -- "Die Löwin im Angriff"

pg. 8 "Playmates" -- "Spielkameraden"

pg. 8 "dearest" -- "teuerste"

pg. 9 "gigantic" -- "riesengroße"

pg. 9 "quite glorious buns" -- "gar herrlichen Chignons"

pg. 11 "the heroine of Cameroon" -- "die Heldin von Kamerun"

pg. 12 "Samaritan" -- "Samariter"

pg. 12 "into a proper wife" -- "zu einem rechtem Weib"
pg. 13 "... She bent her head to the side as far as she could; then the shot rang out ..." -- "... Sie bog den Kopf zur Seite, so weit sie konnte; da krachte der Schuß ...

pg. 13 "in certain circumstances a real woman is worth more than some men" -- "Eine richtige Frau ist unter Umständen mehr wert als mancher Mann."


2 In 1891, Spemann's publishing house joined with others to create the Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, a conglomerate that dominated the production of youth literature. Hubert Göbels, Zeitschriften für die deutschen Jugend: Eine Chronographie 1772-1960 (Dortmund: Harenberg, 1986), pp. 168-77.


4 The stories first published in Der gute Kamerad were Sohn des Bärenjägers (1887); Kong-Kheou, das Ehrenwort (1888/89); Die Sklavenkarawane (1889/90); Der Schatz im Silbersee (1891); Das Vermächtnis des Inka (1891/92); Der Ölprinz (1892/93); and Der schwarze Mustang (1896).

5 Karl May, Die Sklavenkarawane, serialized in Der gute Kamerad, 4 (i-lii) (1889/90).

6 Luise Glaß, Annele, serialized in Das Kränzchen, 11 (xxv-lii) (1898/99).


See, for example, "Neues vom Weihnachtsbüchertisch," *Das Kränzchen* 19 (xiv) (1906/1907), p. 220-221.

Incidentally, this was *Das Kränzchen's* first substantial article on a German colony. "Die Heldin von Kamerun," *Das Kränzchen*, 17 (xlviii) (1904/1905), pp. 767-768.


Koch, *Vollrads, Das Kränzchen* 26 (xxix) (1913/14), pp. 455.