THE RHINELAND HORROR CAMPAIGN AND THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Erika Kuhlman*

On 11 November 1918 the armistice between the defeated Germany and the victorious Allied powers came into effect, although the peace treaty was not signed until June 1919. This treaty, which imposed sole responsibility for the war on Germany under article 231 (the War Guilt Clause) and consequently demanded high reparations, was bitterly resented in Germany as a slur on German honour. It was only signed when all possibility of armed resistance had been ruled out by military commanders, but still allowed the stab-in-the-back legend (Dolchstosslegende) to flourish, placing the blame for the defeat variously on the home front, a supposed Jewish conspiracy, and big business. The treaty included provisions for the establishment of a League of Nations with the aim of preventing future wars by arbitrating in international disputes. The Treaty of Versailles was not ratified by the US Senate in March 1920, and America also failed to join the League of Nations. The Rhineland was to be occupied and administered by France and Britain for 15 years and a disputed number of the occupying French troops were drawn from their African colonies. These troops were also used when in April 1920 the French marched into the “neutral” zone in response to German troops being deployed in the Ruhr area in contravention of the terms of the peace.

Beginning in April 1920, various German citizens’ organisations, encouraged by their government, launched a campaign against France’s stationing of colonial African soldiers in its zone of the German Rhineland. Far from limiting themselves to the nations directly involved in the situation, groups such as the Volksbund Rettet die Ehre (People’s Federation to Save German Honour) and the Rheinisch Frauenliga (Rhineland Women’s League) deliberately spread their propaganda overseas in an effort to create an international furor over France’s alleged transgressions. While on the face of it, the goal of the drive – known as the “Rhineland Horror” or “Black

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Horror” campaign – appeared to be to rid the area of African soldiers, the crusaders clearly wanted bolder outcomes. Still reeling from the cease-fire and more recently a humiliating peace settlement, the propagandists desired nothing less than the international discredit of the French, a halt to France’s efforts to separate the Rhineland from the rest of Germany, an end to the entire occupation, and the restoration of German honour in the eyes of its own inhabitants and of other nations.¹ To reach these goals, the propagandists sent tentacles across the Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea to insure international support for their cause. In the case of the Americans, the campaigners hoped that race-baiting in the United States would draw their former enemy closer to the German side while driving a wedge between the Allied nations, a strategy that had succeeded in other issues involving the occupation.² As crusaders played upon racialist ideologies prevalent in Europe and in the United States (I use the term racialist to convey the idea that perceived differences among humans are inborn and located in the immutable, physical body), they hinted that the presence of African troops in Germany could foment a race war that threatened the entire world’s white population, thus rendering the campaign not only international, but transnational in strategy.

Although the campaign failed to gain the allegiance of the United States or to fully discredit the French or to reestablish German honour or end the occupation, it did (though not intentionally) reveal the hypocrisy inherent in Europe’s racialist justifications for overseas colonisation, the continuation of previously developed assumptions of racial hierarchies and white superiority well into the supposedly “modern” twentieth century, and it foreshadowed the role of racism in events to come by providing a podium for demagogues such as Adolf Hitler, among others.³ It also highlighted the extent to which the continuation of imperialism’s attendant ideologies impeded post-war reconciliation between nations, since, if not for imperialism, France would have had no colonial troops to send to the Rhineland and Germany no basis for complaint; furthermore, Germans could not

¹ Nelson (1970), Marks (1983) and Reinders (1968) have viewed the campaign in its diplomatic and political context; Lebzelter (1985), Campt, Grosse and Lemke-Muniz de Fario (1998) view the campaign as an attempt to compensate for national anxieties produced by the defeat and occupation; Schüler (1996) explores the international women’s movement’s response to the campaign; and Koller (2001) places the campaign in its European perspective.