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978-1-107-40047-4 - German Colonialism: A Short History

Sebastian Conrad

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The German colonial empire lasted a mere thirty years, and is thus one of the most short-lived of all modern ‘colonialisms’. Consequently, it has not occupied centre-stage in most accounts and overviews of German history. The colonial experience was deemed marginal and insignificant, compared both to the long histories of the British and French empires, and also to the towering impact, on German history and beyond, of subsequent events: the First World War, the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism, the Third *Reich* and the Holocaust. In recent years, however, interest in Germany’s colonial past has made a remarkable comeback, both in academia and in the wider public sphere, and this mainly for three reasons.

Firstly, Germany’s colonial project may have lasted only three decades, but it was a significant and integral part of the period of high imperialism before the First World War. For anyone interested in a comparative and global perspective on modern empires, the German example is in many ways an instructive and illuminating case. Germany was a colonial late-comer. Only after unification in 1871, which replaced the thirty-eight sovereign German states with a unified nation-state under the leadership of Prussia and Chancellor Bismarck, did the acquisition of colonies emerge as a realistic political project. Powerful pressure groups as well as reckless colonial pioneers in Africa forced Bismarck, to some extent against his will, into government support for the occupation of the first colonial territories in 1884. In the autumn of that year, Bismarck invited the European powers to the Berlin Conference: this in many ways formalized the scramble for African possessions. In 1884/85, Germany acquired large territories in Africa in today’s Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, and

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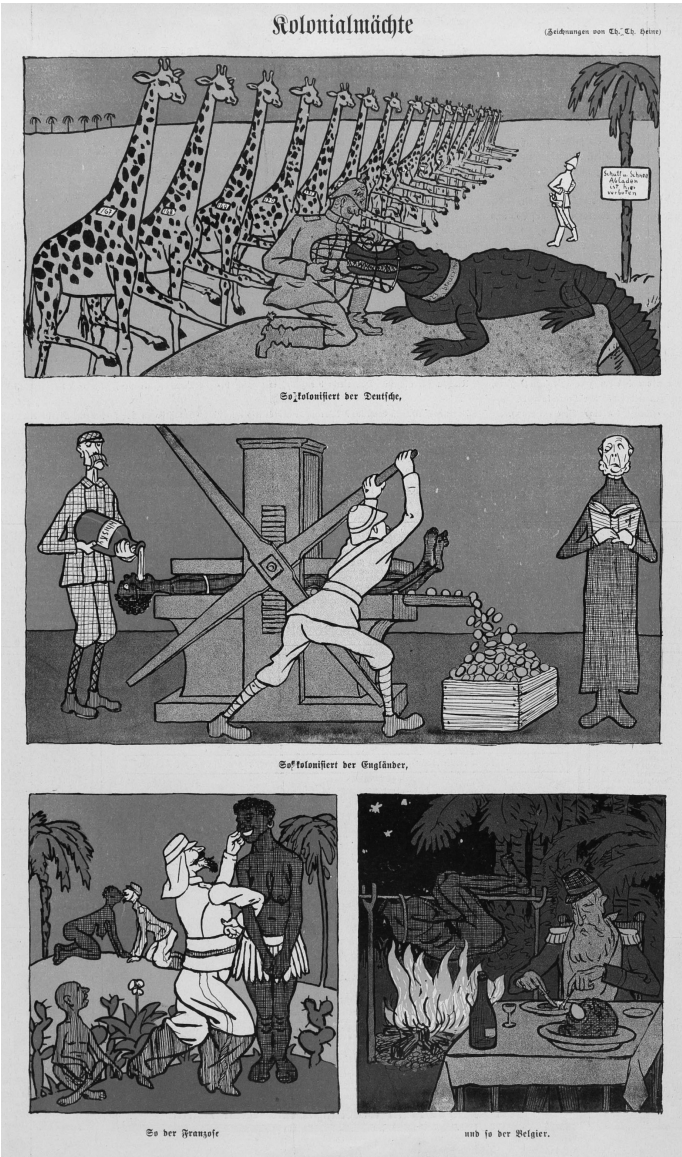


Illustration 1 In the late nineteenth century, colonial discourse was premised on the assumption of marked differences between the politics of colonizing nations. The image

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Tanzania. In the late 1890s, smaller possessions in East Asia (Shandong province in China) and the Pacific (Samoa, New Guinea, and a number of Pacific Islands) were added. After those of Britain, France, and the Netherlands, this was the fourth largest colonial empire at the time.

In its basic structures, the German empire resembled the other empires of the time. It was built on ideological foundations that were shared by the other imperial powers, namely the civilizing mission promising modernization to the colonized populations under the tutelage of the colonizers. German colonialism also shared the general assumption that the world was ordered along racial lines, and belief in colonies as an outward proof of the power of the nation-state. As elsewhere, the colonial project was driven by the calculations of economic benefit, by the attempt to export social conflicts abroad, and by the expectation of creating large settler communities and thus of establishing 'New Germanies' overseas. German colonialism, in other words, was part and parcel of the larger European colonial project (see Illustration 1). This was not so much a matter of parallel developments, but rather of close interactions and shared vocabularies. More than that, European colonial powers closely collaborated with each other; while popular sentiments and *raison d'état* may have produced a rhetoric of national differences, German and British colonial officers on the ground agreed and cooperated on a variety of issues.

Beyond these commonalities and shared characteristics, however, historians have also suggested ways in which German colonialism may have been unique. They point, for example, at the degree of racial

Caption for Illustration 1 (cont.)

of Germany as a peaceful colonizer, for example, was part of the propaganda of colonial lobby groups and pitted against the allegedly less benevolent French and English. In this critical drawing in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* (in 1904), Thomas Theodor Heine (1867–1948) drew on national stereotypes to portray the colonizing efforts of the great powers. The Germans (top) are shown to fetishize law, order, and discipline (the sign on the palm tree reads: 'No tipping or dumping of snow'); the English (middle) corrupt the African population with whisky and a dose of Christianity while the real purpose is economic exploitation; the French (bottom left) are depicted as sexually engaging with the colonized, an allusion to the politics of assimilation pursued in the French colonies; and the Belgians are lambasted for their brutal reign in the Congo.

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segregation, a feature found in all colonial systems but leading to legal prohibitions of intermarriage only in the German empire. Another case in point is the relative violence of Germany's colonial wars as manifest in the genocidal strategies of warfare against the Herero and Nama in 1904. Also, the contemporary claim that Germany's colonial policy, as also the Japanese, was more 'modern' as it was built on a scientific approach and the systematic study of territories and populations, would lend itself to comparative analyses. In short, for comparative and global historians, German colonialism offers a rich and revealing case study.

Secondly, colonialism also had a more significant role to play within German history than has long been assumed. Colonial interactions left their imprint on German society, and the impact of the colonial experience continued after the formal end of the empire. On the one hand, as recent scholarship has amply shown, colonialism was not confined to the colonized territories. Rather, it reached deep into metropolitan society and penetrated Germany in a variety of ways. Colonialism left its imprint on the debates of the *Reichstag* and on the press; on the realm of representation, from the huge colonial exhibition in 1896 to the arts and popular culture; on the structure of trade and migration regimes; and on the order of knowledge, as many disciplines, including anthropology and geography, were deeply implicated in the colonial project. Moreover, key ideological notions that would continue to be influential beyond the end of empire, such as *Lebensraum* and race, emerged and developed in the context of colonialism.

On the other hand, colonialism was not limited to the period of formal territorial rule that ended with the treaty of Versailles in 1919. This is mainly true for the colonies that continued to be shaped, and hampered, by decisions and paths taken in colonial times. But it also applies to Germany. The Nazi empire in eastern Europe, for example, needs to be placed within a history of German colonialism broadly defined. And a vibrant scholarly debate has dwelt on the question to what extent the origins of the genocidal politics of the Nazis must be located in the brutal colonial wars in Africa.

Thirdly, the colonial past is still very much with us. Indeed, it is almost ubiquitous, and not just in the former colonies. The legacy of colonialism is equally evident in the metropolises, and colonial issues

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continue to be central to present-day political conflicts. In Europe, reminders of the colonial era are everywhere, from the ban on the *hijab* in French schools and apologies for slavery in Britain to debates on Dutch ‘excesses’ in Indonesia. In 2005, the French parliament decided that schools must make a deliberate effort to emphasize the ‘positive aspects’ of colonial rule. Simultaneously, uncritical interpretations of colonialism presented in Japanese schoolbooks were provoking violent demonstrations in Beijing and Seoul. The claim for reparations launched by the Herero of Namibia against the Federal Republic of Germany brought the colonial past onto the agenda in German society, too. Across Germany, debates are under way about whether streets with names referring to certain inglorious episodes from the German colonial era should be renamed.

The current interest in colonialism, both in the media and in politics, needs to be closely correlated to the present-day processes of globalization. The issue of possible links between colonialism and current global integration is the subject of intense debate. Phrases such as ‘neo-imperialism’ and ‘colonization of the mind’ have become commonplace. Since 9/11 and the debate about an American empire, the question of how colonialism and imperialism should be viewed, in both political and moral terms, has been the subject of ongoing discussion.

The heightened interest in German colonial history must also be seen in this context. It is important to recognize that with this renewed attention, the perspective on the colonial past has been transformed. The issues that we are facing today have also changed the way in which we look at the colonial era. This is true for public discourse, but it also applies to historians and historiography. In the next section, I will present a short historiographical overview in order to reveal the extent to which priorities and areas of interest have changed since the German colonial empire officially came to an end in 1919. It is possible to identify a number of different phases that differ considerably in terms of the issues and questions investigated and also in terms of the methodological approaches taken. To generalize somewhat, we can identify three main strands: a politically revisionist strand during the 1920s, a reaction to the end of the colonial empire; a highly critical social history perspective in the late 1960s and 1970s, in the context of decolonization; and finally post-colonial

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historiography from the 1990s onward, shaped by present-day globalization.

TRENDS IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE COLONIAL ERA

After the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred Germany's overseas holdings to the mandate powers, most German historians, like the majority of the German population, were dismayed at the loss of the colonies. In fact, opinion about colonialism was probably more united during the Weimar Republic era than before the First World War; there was consensus across the political spectrum on the necessity to recover the colonial territories for Germany. This was a debate conducted primarily in the political arena and the press, and historians contributed only marginally to the discussions. The most important publications on the issue were written by veterans of the colonial service. An example is the *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*, put together by the former Governor of German East Africa, Heinrich Schnee.¹ The purpose of works such as these was primarily to thwart the Versailles dictum of German colonial crimes, and the charge that Germans had ruled their colonies in a violent, 'uncivilized' manner. Heinrich Schnee tried to play down such accusations by referring to them as the 'colonial guilt lie' (*Kolonialschuldlüge*) (see Illustration 2). Most of the works published in the 1920s can thus be read as part of an attempt to draw attention to the achievements of German colonial rule, in order to support the argument for a return of the colonies to German ownership. One of the consequences of this revisionist concern was that little attention was paid to contemporary international research, mainly in English, on German colonialism.²

Germans began to examine the colonial era in a critical light only in the late 1960s. For several decades, little attention had been paid to the issue. But the global process of decolonization and public interest in campaigns for national independence in the Third World brought the colonial past back to the forefront of public attention. This reassessment of German colonialism drew some of its force from the

¹ Heinrich Schnee (ed.), *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*, 3 vols., Leipzig (Quelle & Meyer) 1920.

² Most notably Mary E. Townsend, *The Rise and Fall of Germany's Colonial Empire 1884–1918*, New York (Macmillan) 1930.

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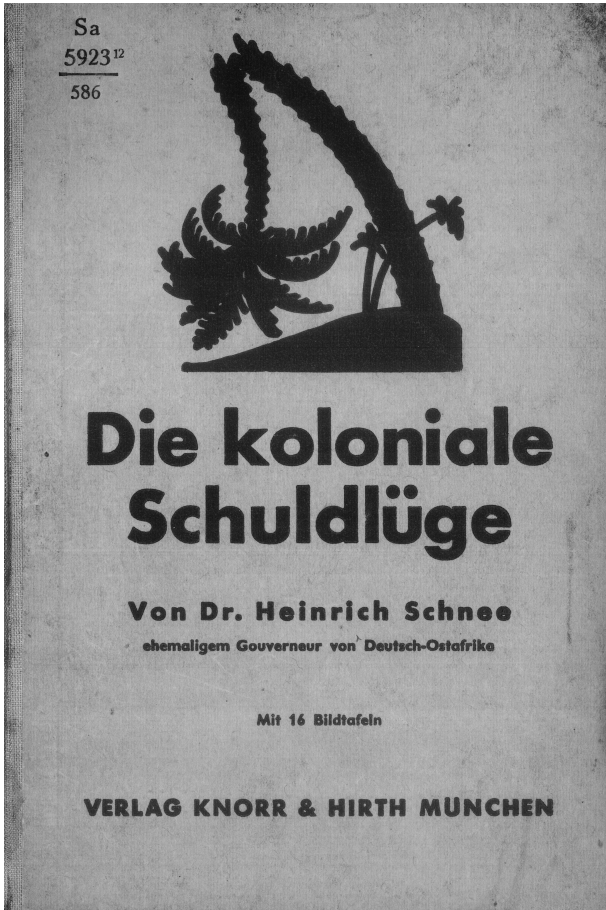


Illustration 2 In 1924, Heinrich Schnee, the last governor of German East Africa, published his account of the *Kolonialschuld* (colonial guilt lie). The book was intended to counter the verdict of the Allied powers, formulated during the peace treaty negotiations in Versailles, that 'Germany's failure in the field of colonial civilization . . . has become all too apparent to leave thirteen to fourteen million natives again to the fate from which the war had liberated them.' The Allied position relied heavily on the debates conducted in the *Reichstag* before 1914, led by such critical voices as Matthias Erzberger and Gustav Noske. Schnee's book was intended to prove the Allied accusations wrong by demonstrating that colonial rule by other European powers was much less benevolent than Germany's. As one of the major civilized nations, Germany had the right, as Schnee saw it, to continue participating in the colonizing project.

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nascent criticisms of the traditions of German historiography that were seen as implicated in German nationalism and imperialism.³ Another impulse was the challenge by historians in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) who in the 1970s developed a perspective critical of imperialism that their West German colleagues could not completely ignore. Publications by American historians were another factor. And in Tanzania (formerly German East Africa), source material still in storage in Dar es Salaam was accessed to create some important studies about the colonial era, written mainly from the point of view of the new post-colonial state.

While earlier research had concentrated on foreign policy and military conflicts, historians were now focusing their attention on social history. Many of the issues that had been of interest to earlier generations were put aside, for example the question of why Bismarck seemed to change his mind in 1884 about whether Germany should acquire colonies. Instead, the focus was on social, political and economic development. Many important studies were written during this period on the social history of the colonial movement, on the role of political parties and associations, on economic imperialism, on the missions and educational systems, and on state rule and local resistance. The evident interest in local opposition and resistance was, in part, the result of an explicitly anti-imperialist approach inspired by contemporary groups and movements focused on the Third World.

This new perspective increasingly produced historical work that drew not only on colonial archives but also on a wider knowledge of African history. German East Africa, in particular, was the subject of many studies of administration and resistance, economic development and exploitation. The periods of German rule in Cameroon and German South-West Africa (in the case of the latter, focusing on the Herero war) were also the subject of considerable study. Given the background of 1960s and 1970s decolonization, the majority of these writings focused on Africa. By contrast, the German presence in the Pacific islands and in China received very little attention.

³ This refers mainly to the so-called Fischer controversy. For a good overview, see Georg G. Iggers, 'Introduction', in: Iggers (ed.), *The Social History of Politics: Critical Perspectives in West German Historical Writing since 1945*, Leamington Spa (Berg) 1985, 1–48; Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800*, Providence (Berghahn) 1997, 56–76.

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Much of the research during this period was shaped by a sense of empathy with the colonized and an interest in native 'agency'. Yet most of these authors still implicitly saw the colonial encounter as a one-way street. They assumed that the most important decisions were taken in Germany and that the most important factors affecting German expansion and rule were to be found in Berlin. Thus viewed, colonialism remained a largely European affair. One good example of this tendency is Hans-Ulrich Wehler's influential study *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*. In this work, Wehler argued that colonialism should be read as social imperialism. The objective of the colonial project, he suggested, was not merely to secure access to resources needed for the expansion of the German economy, but rather, 'by means of mastering extremely difficult tasks, to make Bismarck's charismatic system of rule seem even more successful'.⁴ Foreign expansion (overseas), according to this interpretation, was used to win over oppositional groups, primarily the working class, to a new national project, thus distracting them from pressing social and material conflicts at home. By pushing internal problems overseas in this way, the glory of empire had become a 'counter-utopia' (*Gegenutopie*), one that facilitated the political integration and social disciplining of the lower classes.

Wehler was thus using colonial policy to discuss the social conflicts and antagonisms of Wilhelmine society; his focus was, ultimately, not on Togo or on Cameroon but on the structural problems of the *Kaiserreich*. This perspective was typical of much of the research of the 1970s. Colonial policy and colonial politics were a sub-division of German or European politics, albeit 'via an African detour'.⁵ The famous figure of Bismarck pointing to a map of Europe – 'That is *my* map of Africa' – remained the model for German interpretations of colonialism, and most historians seemed to have internalized this Prussian mental map. Although many of the studies were purportedly located in the colonies, their main concern was often the ongoing

⁴ Quote from Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. III: 1849–1914, Munich (C. H. Beck) 1995, 986. See also Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, Cologne (Kiepenheuer & Witsch) 1969.

⁵ Quoted from Klaus Hildebrand, *Deutsche Außenpolitik 1871–1918*, Munich (Oldenbourg) 1989, 16. Unlike Wehler's, however, Hildebrand's perspective is more traditional and focuses not on internal class conflicts, but rather on the European system of foreign policy.

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structural deficits of German society. The use of terms such as 'militarism', 'imperialism' and 'class interests' allowed the history of colonialism to be subsumed into the grand narrative of the German *Sonderweg* and Germany's failure to attain modernity.

Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, the popularity of colonialism as an object of inquiry declined again. The anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Left had lost much of its power and colonial history was not high on the academic agenda. The German overseas empire was regarded as only a minor, ephemeral part of German history. The Nazi era and the Holocaust had firmly taken centre-place in national remembrance, and one consequence was that the colonial experience was pushed into the background. And because there had been very little migration from the former colonies to Germany, there were no influential groups within the German population who could demand that attention be paid to the country's colonial past.

It was only in the 1990s that colonial history re-emerged as a major concern, primarily as a result of globalization and an interest in the pre-history of present-day global interlinkages. In academia, this interest coincided with the rise of post-colonial studies as a major trend in the humanities. These approaches emphasized the role of colonial discourses and colonial forms of knowledge, but also the repercussions of the colonial encounter; they pointed out that colonialism had left its mark on Europe and not just on the colonized regions themselves. While research in the 1970s had largely focused on social history, many of the more recent studies have been inspired by trends in cultural history. As such, the interpretation of the colonial era was once again an integral part of the paradigm change in historiography.

Although a wide variety of approaches have been taken, it is possible to identify four major strands in recent scholarly work on colonialism. The first is an investigation into colonial discourses and questions of representation. Taking post-colonial studies and the call for a 'decolonization of the mind' as a starting-point, many recent works have focused on reconstructing the rhetorical and discursive patterns that structured the colonial project. Objects of inquiry have included ethnographic shows and panoramas, colonial patterns in popular culture and literature, and the language used by those