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From Lüderitz Bay to the Hindu Kush

The debate on German colonialism

Between 1500 and 1920, the majority of people and regions were under European control – at least nominally. This did not only mean the military/administrative acquisition of land, but the shaping of social life and the exploitation of labour and mineral resources. Six hundred million colonized people – that is, two-fifths of the world's population – were ruled by Europe. Six weeks after Europe was liberated from National Socialism, 51 countries signed the United Nations Charter; however, most of the globe still consisted of dependent countries. It was not until around 1960 that a global liberation from colonial power began – which does not mean that colonial structures do not still exist. You can still cross the African continent using the two colonial languages French and English, for example.

The ever-inquisitive Freiburg magazine »iz3w« - in full »blätter des informationszentrums 3. welt« - recently devoted two issues to the mostly forgotten topic of »German colonialism«, opening up a wide spectrum for debate that is carried on in book reviews, notice of events and topical reports (Society for Legalization, anti-colonial hip-hop in Senegal, etc.). These two issues are intended to throw light on the state of the colonialism debate in Germany.

Post/Colonial

How can German Chancellor Schroeder, for example, claim that Germany is particularly suitable for missions in Africa, as it - in contrast to Belgium, France, Great Britain and Portugal - has no colonial past? On his only trip to Africa to date – he travels to the growth market China every year – he gave former German colonies a wide berth. Such historical amnesia is extraordinary, especially when Germany's interests are again being defended by a protecting power in the Hindu Kush. There is even talk in British government circles of the necessity for neo-colonial interventions on the African continent. The debates about the colonies and their liberation did not begin on a large scale until the sixties. They put the spotlight on those countries that still acted as colonial powers. The solidarity groups of anti-imperialist liberation movements supported the remote struggles. Only the 100th anniversary of the Berlin »Congo Conference« in 1984 triggered the odd congress, changes in street names, or attacks on monuments. Nowadays, the post-colonial discourse is the done thing. Here in Germany, however, it is mostly restricted to academic circles. In contrast with North America or the former British Empire, talking about hybridity and crimes seldom refers to Germany's own colonial past.

The pressure to reappraise European colonial history came after much struggle by the »the damned of this earth«. As opposed to the empires Great Britain and France, there are fewer descendants from the countries colonized by the former Reich living in Germany. So it is also no coincidence that, in the country of »late colonialism«, a revision of colonial history has only now come onto the agenda. At the »Anticolonial Africa Conference« in Berlin planned for 11 to 15 November, conceived as a critical

replay of the historical Congo Conference of 1884/85, the call for »apologies and reparations« will be urged especially by people from the formerly German, and later French, colony of Cameroon.

1884 ff.

After the Belgian king Léopold II had claimed the Congo as his private property, he had the seat of government, Brussels, rebuilt on a massive scale using wealth taken from the colony. The so-called Berlin »Congo Conference« was convened in 1884 to legalize overseas possessions, among other things. In the course of the negotiations, which dragged on until 1885, the European community of states divided up the African continent – in the complete absence of the people living in Africa. As a consequence of the Berlin Congo Conference, the African continent was also explored, mapped, formed into nation-states, administrated under foreign rule, exploited and ravaged. As one example, one hundred years ago German colonial troops carried out a genocide of the Nama and Herero peoples in what is today Namibia. The central authority for this was situated in the imperial capital, Berlin, which, a latecomer on the scene, inscribed itself with its colonial politics into the power structure of the other imperial states of Europe.

Even before the Berlin conference, German West Africa (today's Namibia) was acquired by deceitful means when in 1884 the Bremen merchant Adolf Lüderitz took the geographical mile instead of the English mile as the basis for calculation. The Nama people thought they had sold 32 square kilometres of coastland, only to find they had been relieved of 148 square kilometres. The German »Schutztruppe« (protection force) that arrived later soon occupied the entire country. The resistance of the Herero under the leadership of Samuel Maharero led to open and devastating battles, as a result of which the Herero were driven into the *Kaukaveld* and thus to their deaths. The Nama leader, Hendrik Witbooi, on the other hand, held out longer against the colonial troops by using guerrilla tactics. The survivors were taken to concentration camps – a term introduced officially for the first time – in which prisoners were deliberately worked to death or allowed to die of exposure on the icy-cold coast.

Addressing a Namibian remembrance celebration at the Waterberg in summer 2004, the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie-Wieczorek-Zeul, spoke of the genocide carried out by German colonial troops, and asked for forgiveness »in a Christian sense«. Such speeches are carefully worked on for a long time to avoid any »compensation-relevant statements« (German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in Windhoek in 2003). At the third UN Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001, African states demanded reparations for 400 years of slavery and colonialism as well as for the slave trade to be recognized as being a crime against humanity. In the same year, the Herero People's Reparation Corporation filed a suit to the tune of two billion dollars against both Deutsche Bank and Deutsche Afrika Linie (the successor to the shipping company Woermann) in the USA, because international law is legally enforceable there. The successful suit launched by former Nazi slave labourers had acted as a model here, and brought the Herero issue to the attention of a wider public.¹

In iz3w, a wide-ranging debate takes place on the continuity of German colonial history up to the

Shoa. Birthe Kundrus from the Hamburg Institute for Social Research discusses the limits to equating Auschwitz with Lüderitz Bay: »Although both systems of thought [colonial racism/anti-Semitism aiming at annihilation] culminated in an ethnic/national understanding of nation based on the idea of racial homogeneity, in the German empire this was neither official state doctrine nor a political practice, in contrast with National Socialism.«

German Colonies

The occupation of the barren colonial country in the south-west of Africa was followed by that of Togo, Cameroon and German East Africa (Tanzania, Zanzibar, Rwanda, Burundi) as well as of the Chinese province Shandong and parts of what is today Papua-New Guinea. Between 1884 and 1919, 25,000 Germans ruled over 12 million colonized people in »protectorates« six times as large as the German Reich. The acquisition of land was marked by national elements; Kilimanjaro was renamed Kaiser-Wilhelm-Spitze and became the highest mountain in Germany. The colonial operations met with broad assent in the society of the German Reich. The genocide was completely public, and soldiers sent home postcards showing concentration camps and execution scenes. On the domestic political front, the criticism of the colonial wars expressed by the SPD and Centre Party was turned aside by the conservatives and turned into a reactionary watershed.

There were many who made a successful military career for themselves in the colonies. Lothar von Trotha, who replaced the comparatively moderate Theodor Leutwein as governor in German South West Africa in 1904 and gave his notorious annihilation order, earlier served under the »Weltmarschall«, von Waldersee, who put down the revolt of the I-ho t'uan in China, commonly known as the »Boxer Rebellion«, in brutal fashion. Franz von Epp was involved in the suppression of the »Boxer Rebellion«, fought as an officer in German South West Africa, as a general in the First World War, destroyed the Munich soviet republic with the »Freikorps Epp«, was the president of the Kolonialkriegerbund (Colonial Servicemen's Association), a NSDAP member of parliament from 1930, was then put in charge of the Kolonialpolitisches Amt (Department of Colonial Politics), and finally became »Colonial Minister« in a country that had not possessed any colonies for over twenty years. With regard to the German Reich's continuing aspirations to be a big power, the annexed colonies were still influential even after 1919.

Germany's defeat in the First World War and the Versailles Treaty meant that it had to hand over its »place in the sun« to other colonial powers (Great Britain, Belgium, France, New Zealand, Japan). But in German South West Africa, which was taken over by Great Britain, the German settlers were able to remain for economic reasons. Their descendants lived under the South African apartheid system until Namibia was given its independence in 1990. Former East Germany gave important support to the liberation army of the SWAPO – another forgotten chapter of post-colonial history.

Black East Germany

According to the cultural studies expert Peggy Piesche, in the seventies »Africa« was for East Germany the »symbol of the battlefield of a proletarian Internationalism« and was present as a topos

in films, children's books and television reports. The continent was seen »as a mystic conglomerate of learning people and societies in need of construction«. Owing to a lack of black actors, the makeup was applied even more thickly: »The ambivalent representation of black issues is also expressed in the fact that slavery, repression and servitude are contrasted with orientalist stereotypes from a >Thousand and One Nights<.« On the news, the damned of this earth were revolutionary objects, on the screen they were extras, servants, villains, water carriers or »fan-waving children, who were presented in skilful alternation with the trained monkeys«.

Maji-Maji War

The death of over a quarter of a million people in German East Africa has been overshadowed by the focus on the genocide in German South West Africa. Since 1884, Carl Peters, the representative of the »Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation« (Society for German Colonisation) and later a commissioner at Mt. Kilimanjaro, had covered the coastal region with a contract network made up of »safe conducts« bought on the cheap. Following the suppression of the »Arab revolt« in 1888/89 – in which Arab traders had defended themselves against the growing German competition – a colonial administration was put in place. Until 1905, there were over 60 large punitive expeditions and campaigns of suppression. A hut tax was introduced, and certain dances and hunting were banned.

The Maji-Maji uprising was at first a peasant revolt against forced labour on the cotton fields. The religious movement named after the prophet Maji, transcending affiliations to clans and groups, began to attack the colonizers in July 1905, and a decentralized guerrilla war soon resulted. The colonial army reacted with a scorched-earth policy: »Only hunger and want can produce the final subjugation«, said Captain Wangenheim. This rather unpopular colonial war only awoke wider interest in Germany when General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck took the First World War all the way to Africa, fighting against the apparently superior English forces with a group of Askari.

The fact that this »war with genocidal consequences« is largely ignored in Europe probably has to do with the comparatively small number of German casualties. Fifteen German soldiers died, along with 389 local soldiers and 66 bearers. The German »Schutztruppe« consisted mostly of Askari (black mercenaries) and a few white officers. The 249,530 people who died are mostly left unmentioned in German history books, but they are not forgotten in present-day Tanzania. Their anti-colonial resistance is seen as an important part of the national identity. In common memory, the 120 different ethnic groups of Tanganyika were joined together as one nation, as only unified were they able to drive out the German colonial army. 2

Tanzania Park

Overseas trade rapidly turned Hamburg into a colonial metropolis. The »Askari Relief« in remembrance of the mercenaries from Tanzania and Sudan who put their heads on the block for the East African colonial army was put up here by the Wehrmacht in 1939. It shows African people in formation marching after a German colonial soldier in »a romantic safari atmosphere« (Verena Uka). From 1964, 300 former Askari received a German pension in the capital Dar-es-Salaam alone. General Lettow-Vorbeck died in the same year.

In the Lettow-Vorbeck barracks in Hamburg, which were abandoned in 1999, a »Tanzania Park« is now to be built. It is to include the »Askari Relief«, a »colonial army memorial« and the Tanzanian national pavilion from EXPO 2000. One main reason for placing the »Askari Relief« within the walls of the barracks is to protect it from graffiti attacks like those carried out on the soldiers' memorial near Dammtor station. Hamburg's cultural authorities have temporarily put the controversial terracotta soldiers into storage in their monument workshop.

Colonial Memorials

The »Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany«, opened in 1993 under Kohl, ignores all victims of German colonial politics. The »African Stone« at the Berlin garrison cemetery is one of the few remaining colonial memorials in the former capital of the Reich. It is meant to keep awake neo-colonial memories of the regions still seen as having been lost. Former East Germany was one of the main countries to remove these monuments completely. In Hamburg in 1968, students toppled from their pedestals the statues of the colonial administrators Hermann von Wissmann and Hans Dominik standing in front of the university. In the colonies, on the other hand, the memorials marked the definition of the hegemonic space. The monuments put up by the rulers occupied the territory in a symbolic sense as well. In Windhoek there is still an equestrian statue, at the Waterberg the German military cemetery, and Swakopmund the navy monument. These are used by German descendants of the colonial army for »maintaining traditions«. However, street names have been »Africanized«, new monuments have been put up to commemorate colonial wars of liberation, and the national calendar of remembrance has been modified. »Certain elements have been adapted to develop autonomous forms of remembrance rituals, thus deliberately undermining the sole right to interpretation claimed by the German – and later South African – colonial rulers«, writes the author Joachim Zeller about the popular, carnivalesque imitation of the parades and uniforms of the colonial army.

Women in the Colonies

Women's associations in the Reich almost all supported German colonial politics. As missionaries, settlers or nurses, women were part of colonial occupations. And they help avoid »racial mixing«, as the rape of African women was called. »The colonial administration worked with the Women's Association, founded in 1907, in the German Colonial Society and came up with programmes to encourage German women to settle«, writes Anette Diedrich. »When German women entered the colonial movement, the ideology of reproduction based on racist concepts gained in strength.« In 1905, a »mixed-marriage regulation« turned into a »mixed-marriage ban« that was unique in Europe: »The debates on mixed marriage were a field of experiment for the establishment of a middle-class order structured according to racist principles.« The emancipation of the white women »beyond the social and economic problems of the industrial society >at home<« was carried out on the backs of the colonized peoples. At the same time, the white woman in need of defence had to act as an argument in favour of genocide for the colonial forces.

A European Story

In view of the two iz3w issues, one naturally has to ask where the European sense of superiority with regard to moral issues of imperialism comes from. It does not detract from the criticism of US policies of intervention if Europe's colonial policies also come more into the limelight.³ At present, on the anti-American ticket, a European army is being set up that is to be stationed of all places in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren – exactly where King Léopold's horrific Congo Museum is situated. In his book »Der Auftritt. Deutschlands Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne« (The Entrance. Germany's Return to the World Stage.), Gregor Schoellgen also writes of »the formulation of independent European security interests«. Chancellor Schroeder had started off with the declaration of wanting to strengthen »Germany's self-confidence.« The first act towards this was the NATO war against Serbia. The French Minister of Defence called the EU missions »Concordia« in Macedonia and »Artémis« in Congo important stages on the way to a European defence system. »Ten years ago, a Europe with defence potential was a myth. Five years ago it was a topic for speeches. Today it is a reality«, says the minister, quoted in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper of 15 September 2004.

One hundred and twenty years ago Europe drew together at the round table in Berlin in the subjugation of Africa. It is true that the First World War was continued on the African continent, where Germany and Great Britain fought one another, for example. But as soon as it was a matter of putting down rebellions in the colonies, the arch-enemies worked together. There was European agreement that the African peoples did not have to receive the protection of the Hague convention in the case of a war. The rules of civilization, in whose name the continent was taken over, did not apply to them. A history of the European colonial agreement – whatever different concrete manifestations it took on – has yet to be written.

iz3w, No. 275, March 2004: Nicht vergeben, nicht vergessen. Deutscher Kolonialismus I

iz3w, No. 276, April/May 2004: Eine verklärte Geschichte. Deutscher Kolonialismus II

The topic of »German colonialism« has not been exhausted in these two issues; further articles are to follow in the coming numbers.

Anticolonial Africa Conference: www.africa-anticolonial.org

Hamburg postkolonial. Eine Veranstaltungsreihe zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte (Post-colonial Hamburg: A programme of events dealing with German colonial history): www.hamburg-postkolonial.de

Translation: Timothy Jones

¹ In Namibia itself the conflict »occurred not so much on the scale of the whole society as between German-speaking Namibians and the Herero«, writes historian Susanne Kuss. »No Namibian government has ever taken notice of the resistance of Herero and other ethnic peoples against the German colonial forces,« Kuiama Riruako, the chief of the Herero, is quoted as saying. The Herero and the Nama peoples still hold their remembrance celebrations separately.

2 Susanne Kuss corrects this heroic picture: »On the whole, scholars have come to the conclusion that the nationalistic interpretation of history does not go at all far enough, and has simply ignored conflict-breeding aspects like ethnic particularism, local politics, gender problems and slavery«

3 In the review section, three recent publications about »left-wing anti-Americanism« are discussed.