

# Germany Rediscovered Its Colonial Past (October 16, 2016)

## Abstract

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A much-publicized exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin sought to draw attention to the forgotten colonial legacy of Imperial Germany, including the genocidal suppression of an uprising by the Herero people.

## Source

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### Exhibition at the DHM: German Colonialism: Continents in Chains

*War and Coconuts: The German Historical Museum in Berlin mounts the largest-ever exhibition on colonial history.*

An officer with an elongated frame proudly presents the medals and braid on his chest. He is leaning on a sword as if it were a third leg. Next to him, a comrade wearing an almost equally ostentatious helmet rides on a very small horse. Where might he be headed, perhaps to battle with windmills? A missionary reminiscent of a black wooden incense smoker has his hands folded smugly across his belly. This is how African artists saw Europeans a hundred years ago, when they set forth to civilize the continent— as a cross between a caricature and a gentleman rider.

The exhibition “German Colonialism” at the German Historical Museum (DHM) begins with a small collection of wooden sculptures. The Museum has already addressed the former German colonies—Tsingtao, German Southwest Africa or Samoa—several times, but never so extensively. The enterprise, which brings together some 500 objects in 1,000 square meters, is not only the largest exhibition on the subject thus far, but also a historico-political intervention. Germany only had colonies from 1884 to 1918, and until recently they were considered a mere footnote to German history.

But now colonial history is returning with a vengeance. Even the latest Tarzan movie refers to the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, where participants decided upon the exploitation of the Congo. African activists are demanding compensation, and Afro-Germans are calling for streets to be renamed, including Mohrenstraße (Moor Street) in Berlin. Ever since the decision was taken to exhibit art from cultures outside Europe at the Humboldt Forum across from the DHM, a discussion has begun about who owns the artefacts brought to Europe and how to present them appropriately.

Was the annihilation of the Herero genocide?

Germany hoped that its colonies would guarantee it a “place in the sun” (Emperor Wilhelm II), but in the meantime a second history has emerged and it shows no signs of going away. Even in current politics. After the Bundestag resolution on Armenia, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on the Germans to account for the crimes against the Herero people. During the 1904 uprising of this pastoral ethnic group in southwest Africa, up to 100,000 people lost their lives. To this day, the German federal government refuses to call it genocide. But the exhibition mounted by Heike Hartmann and Sebastian Gottschalk in cooperation with the Namibian guest curators Memory Biwa and Flower Manase Msuya shows that it was precisely that: genocide.

The postcards that colonial soldiers sent home to Germany depict the military campaign against the Herero as a picturesque adventure. The embarkation of the troops, a flag ceremony at Lüderitz Bay, a church occupied by Herero “after the liberation.” One image shows an African standing in casual

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contrapposto and wearing a military cap; the caption reads: “Samuel Maharero, the cowardly Herero chief.” After the complete rout of his people at the Battle of Waterberg, the rebel succeeded in escaping to present-day Botswana. The German military did not regard Africans as worthy opponents; Wilhelmine military doctrine declared the entire colonized population to be enemies. What the war was really like is evident from the now famous photo of Herero prisoners, which shows them as wretched, shackled, skeletal figures.

### **First it was about profits**

The timeline of the exhibition begins with a “Moor’s Mask” worn by the soldiers of Emperor Charles V at a tournament in 1555, and a drawing of the Brandenburg Prussian colony of Groß Friedrichsburg in modern-day Ghana. The Prussians sold between 10,000 and 30,000 slaves to America from there, and when their economic success came to a standstill, they sold their trading post to the Dutch East India Company. During the Wilhelmine Empire, the coastal fortress became an object of nostalgic glorification, with slogans like “Our future lies on the water.” But first it was about profits. The exploitative concept of colonialism is illuminated by an installation displaying the desk of Heinrich Schnee, governor of German East Africa, standing on a slant. From underneath it, elephant tusks, wooden sculptures, daggers, swords and an elephant foot waste-paper basket spill forward.

Under a faded and darned imperial German flag hanging from a bamboo spear stands a Maxim machine gun. It is reminiscent of the machine gun with which the DHM opened its World War I exhibition two years ago. On the battlefield of Verdun, the weapon acted as a machine of mass murder, while in Africa it served above all as a demonstration of power. Hermann von Wissmann, imperial commissioner and later governor of German East Africa, liked to have a machine gun set up before the assembled local population and used it to destroy the surrounding trees. Fear as an instrument of rule. After all, the Germans did not have sufficient personnel to keep the population under control in the long run, let alone a functional administration.

### **German colonialism extended across four continents**

The curators create relationships between the objects through trenchant arrangements. A desert-yellow uniform with a cap and heavy leather shoes was once worn by an askari. Askaris were the African auxiliary troops of the occupation powers recruited in East Africa, the Sudan and Egypt in 1884. In his bestseller *Heia Safari!*, the commander of the “protectorate force” Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who only laid his weapons down in 1918, coined the myth of “askari loyalty.” “How oft we walked along/ the narrow nigger path/ Harkening to the sound/ of the old familiar song/ of the bearers and askari: “Heia, heia, Safari,” members of the *Bündische Jugend* youth movement sang in the interwar period.

Lettow-Vorbeck’s book stands in a bookcase next to the 1937 tract “German Colonies, a Vital Necessity.” The history of German colonialism extends across four continents and continues into the present. That is why the encyclopedic exhibition is divided into four sub-sections, which sometimes can do no more than outline their topic. Protestant missionaries who bought slaves in order to free them, a failed cotton project in Togo, the disgraceful practice of the “Völkerschauen“ or human zoos in which, for example, “our new compatriots” from Samoa were put on display like animals. The South Seas were an object of longing, where the writer August Engelhardt, familiar from Christian Kracht’s novel *Imperium*, acquired a coconut plantation in 1902 and henceforth propagated “cocovorum,” a diet consisting solely of sunlight and coconuts. The life reformer promised a “carefree future,” but his first followers soon weakened and died.

The exhibition ends with the fragments of a bronze monument erected in honor of the former governor Hermann von Wissmann in Dar es Salaam. Now it lies on the ground, covered in verdigris. Prussian members of the master race, fallen heroes.

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Source: Christian Schröder, “Ausstellung DHM: Deutscher Kolonialismus: Kontinente in Ketten,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 16, 2016.  
<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/ausstellung-dhm-deutscher-kolonialismus-kontinente-in-ketten/14692744.html>

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