

State Secretary for the Colonies Wilhelm Solf Visits Togo (October 1913)

Abstract

Wilhelm Solf (1862-1936) was a career diplomat and colonial administrator who spoke several Asian and European languages and had joined the German foreign service in 1888. In 1900 he was appointed governor of the newly established colony of German Samoa, a post he held until 1911, when he became Colonial Secretary, overseeing the administration of all German colonies. In this capacity he made official visits to Germany's African colonies. This short film was most likely commissioned by the Colonial Office and shows Solf and his wife on their visit to Togo, or Togoland, as the colony was officially called (today divided between Togo and Ghana). Situated between the colonies of the British Gold Coast and French Dahomey, this relatively small area of West African territory had been claimed as a "protectorate" for Germany by Gustav Nachtigal in 1884, becoming its first African colony. Hoping to turn it into a profitable "model colony," German colonizers focused on agricultural development and exploitation of the land, establishing plantations of cash crops such as cacao and cotton worked by African laborers. As in all European colonies in Africa, working conditions were harsh and exploitative. In the film, we see Solf arriving by boat, presumably in Lomé, the seat of the colonial governor and the colony's main port on the Gulf of Guinea. He is welcomed by German colonial officials and officers in uniform and their wives. Starched white uniforms (and white dresses for the ladies) were ubiquitous across all European colonies in Africa (and elsewhere): the white fabric was thought to be cooler (as it reflected the sun), but it also set the Europeans apart, and served as a symbol of power, since stark white clothing needed near-constant cleaning in the African climate—work done by indigenous laborers. Meanwhile, African soldiers who have been recruited for the "protection troops" [Schutztruppe] parade in front of Solf and the other officials. Note the African soldiers' bare feet. Solf then tours several plantations and villages by rickshaw, carriage, and railroad. (Note also the bicycles used by Europeans.) African villagers are filmed performing traditional dances for the visitors, confirming contemporary European views of "exotic" and "savage" Africans.

As Colonial Secretary Solf also visited several British colonies in Africa since he hoped to improve Germany's increasingly strained relations with Britain by pursuing a policy of Anglo-German cooperation in colonial matters. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, the former German colony of Togoland was divided between France and Great Britain under a United Nations mandate.

Source

Source: Staatssekretär Dr. Solf besucht im Oktober 1913 Togo, 1913. Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv
Filmwerk ID: 5186. <https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/5186/641873>

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