

## German Colonialism. A Short History

**Review Number:**

1268

**Publish date:**

Wednesday, 20 June, 2012

**Author:**

Sebastian Conrad

**ISBN:**

9781107008144

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£45.00

**Pages:**

246pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Simon Constantine

This is an excellent overview of German colonialism, constructed with some skill from the scholarship on the colonies, and shaped also by the wider debate on European colonialism and its legacies. It is the best survey of the subject in English to date, and will be welcomed by students and scholars alike. The breadth of the discussion marks this book out as a particularly valuable addition to the existing literature, and distinguishes it from other textbooks on the topic such as Horst Gründer's, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, now in its fifth edition, and, more recently, Winfried Speitkamp, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* and Gisela Graichen and Horst Gründer, *Deutsche Kolonien. Traum und Trauma*, although these remain useful texts.<sup>(1)</sup>

It is, above all, an extremely wide-ranging synthesis. While its focus is upon the relatively short history of Germany's relationship with its protectorates (1884–1919), the author also draws on a looser definition of 'German colonialism' to bring in discussion of the 'pre-colonial fantasies and projects' associated with these and other overseas territories, and German interaction with other European colonial possessions. He is also concerned with the relationship between overseas conquest and policy at home, drawing our attention to the quasi-colonial policies adopted by German governments towards Polish speakers inside *Reich* borders, but also, in another example, to the overlapping agendas of Protestant missionaries overseas and the so-called 'Inner Mission' in Germany, in particular their efforts to reform both 'naturally work-averse' African subjects and those deemed 'workshy' at home. This willingness to examine linkages between the immediate area under observation and developments elsewhere is consistent with the transnational and comparative approach Conrad has adopted in his own research on Germany and Japan, and is one of the things which makes the book such an interesting read. The final chapter here, on the ways in which Germany's colonial

past has been remembered, also reflects both the author's expertise, and the current (though now well-established) interest in commemoration and memory.

First published as *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* in 2008, *German Colonialism* is actually much improved in its new, English form. Unlike the original stripped-down German edition, it is now referenced, and there is also both a fuller and annotated bibliography, and (like Gründer's book) it now contains a proper index – a significant improvement on the short list of place names in the Beck edition. The text, expertly translated by Sorcha O'Hagan throughout, has also been re-worked and extended in several places. It now includes, for example, an additional opening section flagging up those aspects of German colonialism which distinguished it from that of its European rivals, and also those which were significant given Germany's subsequent history of violent conquest in the 20th century, (a subject tackled in greater depth in chapter ten, where the author examines the extent to which it is accurate and helpful to view colonial conquest as a precursor to Nazism). The overview of the individual colonial territorial possessions provided in chapter four has also been extended, now containing additional, useful biographical information on key figures, and further information on the history of these territories before and after the period of German control.

The English edition also benefits from the addition of maps, and a large number of illustrations. These provide a fascinating and often shocking visual accompaniment to the text. They include cartoons from contemporary German satirical publications, along with pictures and photographs which record, amongst other things, visual symbols of oppression like the identification tags worn by Africans in German South West Africa after 1907, or which otherwise illustrate the pitiless nature of much of German conquest. One photograph shows workers in Togo harnessed to cotton wagons in place of draft animals, which, Conrad tells us, were difficult to keep alive in the climate here. Another photograph, taken in the Omaheke desert in 1905, which captures the stares of a group of emaciated Herero, also stands out, as does a contemporary illustration of German soldiers packing the skulls of 'hanged' and 'fallen' Herero women into crates, prior to their transportation back to Germany for the research of phrenologists.

The inclusion of such images reflects Conrad's concern to give proper weight to the violence which underpinned colonialism. This was, of course, chiefly apparent in the three major colonial wars which Germans prosecuted: The Boxer Rebellion in China, where German troops perpetrated numerous massacres, the genocide in German South-West Africa (1904–7), thought to have reduced the Herero population from 80,000 to 15,000, and the Nama from 20,000 to about half that number, and the Maji Maji war (1905–8), the suppression of rebellions in East Africa that developed from a religious awakening, partly based on a cult worship of water (*Maji* in Swahili). Estimates put the number of African dead at as many as 300,000 here, most a result of the famine caused by the destruction of fields in the war.

As the author makes clear, however, the periods before these catastrophes were scarcely peaceful. Some 63 'penal expeditions' were launched between 1891 and 1897 to suppress non-compliant Africans in the interior of colonies, and violence was also very much present in everyday colonial relations, evident, in particular, in the ubiquitous recourse to corporal punishment as a medium of discipline. Africans were beaten for a range of offences, and for as little as showing disobedience towards their masters, or for breaking contract – which including leaving work without permission or failing to arrive when required. The threat and regular use of violence was, therefore, also central to the colonial economy, and specifically, to German attempts to secure a reliable labour supply.

In chapter six Conrad looks at the colonial economy in greater depth, here again emphasising the destructive nature of German policy, and the conflict it generated. Where German efforts went into growing crops on plantations for export, fertile land was seized without regard to existing patterns of landownership. In Cameroon, for example, local Duala were moved to make way for cocoa plantations, 'a process of violent dispossession which resulted in massive resistance'. Plantations also required large workforces, and, as local populations proved unwilling, administrations could only meet the demand for labour by introducing various forms of compulsion, including taxes designed to drive natives to wage labour, and stricter contractual regulations. Both were a major source of unrest everywhere, and have been identified as a chief cause of the uprising in East Africa. Here, and especially in Germany's pacific colonies, Samoa and New Guinea,

indentured workers from Asia were also imported to try and solve the issue of labour supply, although the brutal treatment meted out to these people meant it became increasingly difficult to recruit such workers, and the practice was eventually discontinued. As Conrad reminds us, exploitation of this kind made some firms and their shareholders a great deal of money, but, partly because of the cost of suppressing rebellion, 'for the German state, the colonial empire was a loss maker'.

Conrad shows that economic policy had 'drastic effects on local societies'. Equally, however, he also points out that many native inhabitants continued to live their lives with little or no involvement in the colonial market economy. It seems this was a reflection of the limited presence of German business in these territories, and indeed of the limited reach of the colonial administrations themselves. Especially in the interior of the colonies, away from the major coastal settlements, control could only be exerted at isolated points. As late as 1903, he tells us, there were only 30 stations and military posts across the vast territory of German East Africa, and, in many cases, personnel here were 'almost helpless' to direct events in the areas around them. In many areas, therefore, German 'rule' required the cooperation of local and regional power holders, or, in its weakest form, such as in northern Cameroon, more closely resembled a form of co-existence with existing local rule.

As previous reviewers have noted [\(2\)](#), *German Colonialism* illustrates the value of a variety of theoretical approaches in illuminating aspects of colonial history. For instance, Conrad draws on Stuart Hall's term 'double inscription' to investigate both the colonial re-ordering of life in Africa and the Pacific, and the different ways the colonial encounter shaped the society of Wilhelmine Germany. Here the author draws our attention to the immense popularity of ethnographic spectacles, such as the *Völkerschauen* ('people shows') organised by Carl Hagenbeck, who began importing native people for display alongside animals in zoos, partly to compensate for the diminished profits to be made from exotic animals alone. At the Colonial exhibition in 1896, which attracted some seven million visitors, over a hundred African people were exhibited in this way. With reference to Chatterjee's 'rule of colonial difference', and in a particularly clear and concise way, he also explores the various 'policies of differentiation' employed by colonizers to 'uphold, and guarantee the line between colonizer and colonized', something that was crucial to the preservation of the distinction between civilized Europeans on the one hand, and 'backward' colonized peoples on the other, a dichotomy that remained fundamental to the colonial project as a whole. In this context Conrad highlights the introduction of separate legal codes for Europeans and colonized peoples, and also the allocation of separate living space, the latter endeavour most fully realised in Qingdao in the German Colony of Kiaochow in China. Here, after wiping nine existing settlements from the map, the German administration built a model, planned city, which reflected the social order envisaged in the colony: Europeans were given residence in the heart of the city, while the Chinese population were designated living areas on its periphery.

Conrad suggests that efforts to underscore distinction were partly driven by fears that the line between colonizer and colonized could become blurred, both because the civilizing mission itself, through conversion and re-education, entailed a partial Europeanization of subject populations, and because colonizers themselves might, in contemporary parlance, become 'Kaffirized', or 'go native'. As one might expect, marriages between German men and native women were identified as a major problem, and in fact (unique to the German case) in German South West Africa, German East Africa, and Samoa, they were eventually banned, although 'prohibition' was interpreted in different ways in each colony. In German South West Africa it was implemented in a strict fashion, and even applied retrospectively. In Samoa, by contrast, mixed couples could apply on the basis of language proficiency to be recognized as culturally German, and, generally speaking, in the Pacific territories, living with native women was widely accepted. In New Guinea, the Governor himself, Albert Hahl, married and had a child with his Tolai wife.

From Conrad's final chapter on memory, we can gather that German society has not yet acquired a proper understanding of its colonial past. He points to a general lack of critical reflection, apparent in the decision to construct an 'African Village' (complete with real people) in Augsburg zoo in 2005 – a throwback to the *Völkerschauen* of the colonial era – and to the retention of street names associated with notorious colonial

figures (such as Petersallee in Hamburg), in a country where, because of re-naming under and after Nazism, or, in the East, under and after Nazism *and* Communism, these have often been changed. As the author makes clear, a wider acceptance of the brutal nature of German colonial conquest has also been hindered because the German government continues to refuse to issue a formal apology for the genocide of the Herero, and to pay reparations to their descendents.

## Notes

1. Horst Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien* (Paderborn, fp. 1985); Winfried Speitkamp, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 2005); Gisela Graichen and Horst Gründer, *Deutsche Kolonien. Traum und Trauma* (Leipzig, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Silke Hensel, 'Review of Sebastian Conrad, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte*', *H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews* (February 2009) <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24208> [2]> [accessed 1 June 2012].[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

### Other reviews:

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n03/richard-j-evans/gruesomeness-is-my-policy> [3]

Africa is a Country

<http://africasacountry.com/2012/04/10/germanys-namibian-legacy/> [4]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1268>

### Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/20905>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24208>

[3] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n03/richard-j-evans/gruesomeness-is-my-policy>

[4] <http://africasacountry.com/2012/04/10/germanys-namibian-legacy/>