Writing German Colonial History Today: 
Renewed Issues and Perspectives

Conference held in Paris, in partnership with the German Historical Institute, 
the 23rd and 24th of May 2024.

Organising committee:
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Brief statement:

On the 14th of August 2004, Germany presented for the first time its formal apologies for the massacres committed by colonial troops in German South-West Africa (nowadays Namibia) between 1904 and 1908. Since then, numerous publications have tried to better understand the inner-workings of German colonial administrations in its overseas empire in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Ocean as well as in Germany itself.¹ One of the intentions of the early research on German colonialism was to interrogate the “structural connections” between the genocide of the Herero and Nama people and the Holocaust, arguing that the former genocide, carried out under the Kaiserreich, stimulated an acceleration of German military state culture and a bureaucratisation process which paved the way to the Holocaust.² Meanwhile these connections came under criticism for not adequately considering the differences between German colonialism (and specifically the genocide in Namibia) and the Holocaust. Researchers from within and outside of Germany began to work on projects concerning specific colonies and colonial settings, actors and their agency, economic exploitation and infrastructures.³

Transnational and global history approaches strongly influenced these works and deepened the interest in colonial and imperial history in German academia. Beyond a national framework,

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¹ Steinmetz, 2007; Conrad, 2008.
² Zimmerer, 2004; Madley, 2005.
³ Kundrus, 2006; Gouaffo, 2007; Habermas, 2016.
histories of the German empire have attempted to play with scales and analyse how agents, goods and knowledge linked to German colonialism travelled beyond the borders of empire. Finally, the study of postcolonial Germany has started questioning Germany’s postcolonial ideologies after the loss of its colonies in 1919 with the Versailles Treaty in the era of *Kolonialrevisionismus* of the Weimar Republic and into the societies of the two German states after the Second World War. Moreover, studies have exposed the impact and influence of German colonialism in former colonies.

Among the many possible topics and themes, we would like to propose the following set of issues that could be developed further during the conference:

- **The chronological and geographical limits of the German empire.** A number of works have addressed German colonialism beyond its chronological limits, generally set between 1884 and 1919. In this sense, contributions covering the exploration of European imperial territories by German agents in the Early-Modern period as well as the practises, discourses and representations of German colonialism post-1919 in this section can be used to redefine the traditional chronological or geographical limits of the German empire. Researchers have emphasised for some time how the implications of colonialism differed between the colonies, but more recently also between regions and cities within Germany itself. Where and when was the German empire created? What type of memories survived after the Versailles Treaty in 1919? How did colonialism shape and impact the different colonies and specific regions in Germany?

- **The transimperial dimensions of German colonialism.** A renewed interest in transimperial connections between the different colonial empires has encouraged researchers to further denationalise imperial and colonial histories. Contributions focusing on the interaction between German imperial agents within the colonial territories and Europe are welcome to deepen our understanding of imperial solidarities, rivalries or pragmatic cooperation. To what extent was the German empire different from (or similar to) other European empires in the 19th century? In what way did German colonial agents and institutions interact, compete and cooperate with agents of other imperial powers?

- **The agency of indigenous actors and German colonial rule.** Several studies have highlighted how German colonialism drew on a variety of actors during the exploration, conquest and economic extraction of the imperial territories. At the same time various individuals and groups resisted colonial rule in organised or spontaneous actions. Yet, it remains difficult to

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4 Conrad and Osterhammel, 2004; Azamede, 2010; Lindner, 2011; Lahti, 2021.
5 Biwa, 2012; Shilling, 2014.
6 Bauche, 2017; Bechhaus-Gerst and Zeller, 2018; Mark Thiesen et al., 2021.
7 Glasman, 2014; Moyd, 2014; Muschalek, 2019; Froment, 2022.
8 Nyada, 2014; Richter, 2014.
fully understand the role of indigenous “intermediaries” and resistance groups within the German colonial state. How did local actors benefit from, or resist, the implementation of German colonial administrations? To what extent are they affected (or not) by practises of German colonial law and order?

- **Economy and labour.** Numerous works have examined how German firms took part in the colonial enterprise. Raw materials like coconuts, coffee, cacao or rubber were essential features of turn-of-the-century European markets and have led researchers to analyse how German imperialism and globalisation worked hand in hand. In this sense, the latest research has focused on specific case studies to challenge the idea that European ideals of works were successfully “diffused” from the metropole to the colonies, highlighting instead acts of resistance and manipulation from indigenous actors on the ground. So to what extent can German or European models of forced labour be challenged in particular colonial settings? How did German firms take part in shaping colonial or postcolonial economic policies?

- **Postcolonial Germany.** The second half of the 20th century has often been described as a period of “colonial amnesia” in both East and West Germany, although the colonial past never fully disappeared from academic or public arenas. Specific memory cultures formed within Germany and colonial discourses lived on in economic and international relations, development aid, tourism etc. At the same time German societies experienced the decolonization period of the 1950s and 1960s from the viewpoint of an outsider. The past twenty years mark a return and firm establishment of various debates most notably the commemoration of the Herero and Nama genocide and the restitution of looted art from ethnological museums in the public sphere. How did colonial and anticolonial discourses shape German societies in the era after empire? How was colonialism remembered and/or ignored?

In all, this conference gives the opportunity to take a look at past and current research output on German colonialism. It will also present this topic to a francophone public, thus following a set of conferences and publications, which have already started a French and German conversation on the reception of German colonial history in France. German colonial territories in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Ocean will be equally considered, the idea being not to solely consider the Herero and Nama genocide, which remains—notably in France—the main entry point in German colonial history. Lastly, beyond a French and German framework, the intention of this conference will be to confront German colonialism to the latest development in the field of European colonial and

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10 Zimmerman, 2010; Oestermann, 2022.
11 Repussard and Mombert, 2006; De Gemeaux, 2010; Metzger, 2011; Repussard, 2015; Daheur and Scheele, 2017; de Gemeaux and Repussard, 2017; Metzger, 2017; de Gemeaux, 2022.
imperial history (colonial, transimperial and postcolonial studies).

The conference will be held on Thursday the 23rd and Friday and the 24th of May 2024 in Paris, in partnership with the German Historical Institute. To participate, we kindly ask you to send us an abstract, comprising a title and a short text, presenting the content of your paper with a maximum of 300 words (or 2 000 characters), as well as a short biographical statement (or a CV). Papers can be submitted in French, German and English. The files have to be sent to the organising committee at the following address (german.colonialism@gmail.com) before the 15th of July 2023. This email address can also be used to answer any queries about this event.

Travel and/or accommodation costs for those without institutional funding will be covered depending on the remaining budget available. We especially encourage early-career researchers and researchers from the Global South to send us applications. A publication of a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal based on the presented papers is intended.

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