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Placing German
Colonialism in the City:
Berlin Postkolonial's Tour
in the African Quarter

by
CHRISTIAN JACOBS
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After decades of neglecting Germany's history of colonial rule and ambitions, the German public – from the national to the local level – finds itself increasingly often exposed to the challenge of dealing with its (post) colonial past and present. In Berlin and beyond, activists and some critical historians have confronted hesitant and quite often ignorant institutions, politicians, or citizens with the need to begin working through this aspect of Germany's history. They have pointed to wider implications and continuities beyond the time period between 1884 - the year of the Berlin Conference as an important moment for the division of the African continent between European imperial interest - and 1919 - when the German Empire was forced to give up its colonies - not only overseas but also within Germany itself. The comparative brevity and sudden abortion of this era of formal colonial rule abroad have frequently been used as arguments to diminish its historical relevance, especially compared to Nazi rule and the Holocaust as the central turning point of Germany's history in the twentieth century.¹

One of the most striking examples of underexposed colonial connections in Berlin's cityscape is the so-called Afrikanisches Viertel, the African Quarter (Figure 1); just

a few subway stops away from the apparently more central sites of Berlin's (colonial) history, such as the Reichstag or the world-renowned Museum Island opposite to which the historical city palace is currently being reconstructed. *Berlin Postkolonial*, an association established by activists from Germany and former German colonies in 2007, organizes guided tours through this neighborhood of unassuming housing blocks in the former working-class district of Wedding.

The Afrikanisches Viertel owes its name to its street signs – all related to former German colonies or colonialists in Africa. The streets were designated prior to the First World War when Carl Hagenbeck planned to build a zoo in the nearby Volkspark Rehberge. Similar to his zoological garden in Hamburg, Hagenbeck wanted to display both animals and humans from the German colonies. Exhibiting “exotic” humans as uncivilized was a common practice in Europe at the time, helping to legitimize colonial empires in the metropolises.² While Hagenbeck's plans were not realized due to the First World War, the street names selected during the planning process remained in place.

On the tour through the neighborhood, the activists of Berlin Postkolonial stop at specific streets and explain the historical background of their names. This way, the tour can recount Germany's colonial past

1 For the recent debates on German colonialism and its legacy see: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* no. 40-42 (2019) “Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte,” 30 September 2019; Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

2 Anna Dreesbach, “Colonial Exhibitions, ‘Völkerschauen’ and the Display of the ‘Other,’” *European History Online* (Mainz, 2012), <https://d-nb.info/1043575553/34>.



FIGURE 1
Map of the African Quarter.
Courtesy of Kyle Riffe.

and address prevailing structures of colonial ideology within German society. Moreover, the tour guides explain the efforts Berlin Postkolonial has made in the last decade to change Germany's politics of memory, not least by pushing for the street names to be changed. Thus, the tour is a good opportunity to discuss the role of civil society activists in promoting debates about the colonial past in Germany.

SWAKOPMUND TO LÜDERITZ: THE HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STREET NAMES

The tour starts at the subway station Afrikanische Straße, right next to Swakopmunder Straße. Swakopmund, today a port in Namibia, used to be one of the main entry points in Germany's most important settler colony. With the help of legal tricks and discriminatory laws German settlers acquired more

and more land, leading to conflict with indigenous peoples under increasing economic and social pressure. In 1904, both the Herero and Nama people started a rebellion attacking German settlements, in reaction to which the German government sent General Lothar von Trotha with additional troops to crush the revolt. The German strategy was aimed at exterminating the Herero and Nama: Forced into the desert, thousands died of thirst while those who survived were imprisoned in concentration camps where every second prisoner died.

Even though generals had officially articulated the extermination of the Herero and Nama people as the goal of the campaign, no German government acknowledged the events as genocide until 2015. Today, Germany has still not officially apologized to the victims. While Herero and Nama representatives have pushed the Federal Republic to do so for a long time, the matter has become a topic of debate within the German wider public only in the last decades, as part of a larger trend of rediscovering the German colonial past.³

From Swakopmunder Straße the tour of *Berlin Postkolonial* turns into Togostraße, walking down to the square Nachtigalplatz. It is named after the colonial scientist Gustav

Nachtigal who was appointed special commissioner of the German Empire in West Africa in 1884. In the next two years, he integrated Togoland, Lüderitzland (later German South West Africa) and Cameroon into the German Empire as protectorates. Thus, Nachtigal's mission marked the beginning of the official German presence in Africa and he was portrayed as a heroic founding figure in the German public. In order to mark a departure from this glorification of the German presence in Africa, *Berlin Postkolonial* has urged the district council to rename Nachtigalplatz.

The square is crossed by Petersallee which has officially been named after Hans Peters, a German politician and member of a resistance group during the Third Reich, since 1986. However, the street was originally dedicated to *Carl Peters* who acquired 12,000 square kilometers of land in East Africa in 1884, signing treaties with African chiefs who did not share the colonialists' understanding that such treaties legitimized direct colonial rule. The lands were declared German East Africa and Peters was appointed to rule the colony as the imperial commissioner. Peters' notorious brutality and cruelty was later scandalized by members of the *Reichstag*, leading to his dismissal. Even though the street is officially named after another Peters nowadays, *Berlin Postkolonial* has argued that this solution is inadequate in the environment of the Afrikanisches Viertel. This tendency

3 For the current position of the German Foreign Office see: Auswärtiges Amt, "Addressing Germany's and Namibia's Past and Looking for the Future," 1 July 2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/afrika/-/1991702>.



FIGURE 2
Flag of the German
Colonial Office hoisted
in Volkspark Rehberge,
Berlin 2019. Photo:
Hauke Jacobs.

to incidentally
deny the
colonial
character of the
Afrikanisches

Viertel by introducing a decontextualized street name is echoed in the one street named after the Second World War, *Ghanastraße*, celebrating independence in a neighborhood set up to serve the opposite purpose.

Next, the tour turns to walk through the “Togo” garden colony (*Kleingartenkolonie*) that was until recently called “Dauerkolonie Togo” – a ‘permanent colony’. In both the garden allotments “Togo” and the nearby gardens in Volkspark Rehberge the open glorification of German colonialism is strikingly common: signs label gardens as German protectorates or colonies while some garden owners hoist flags of the German Empire (Figure 2). Walking through the community garden “Togo,” a resident threw a

raw egg from his window at Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, our tour guide (fortunately missing him). Mboro took the opportunity to share that the tours are frequently disturbed by people blocking the few benches available for seating or yelling at the tour groups. It is obvious that a significant portion of local residents do not accept the presence of critical perspectives on the history of ‘their’ district and its links to German colonialism.

After this incident, our tour ended on the other side of the community garden, in Lüderitzstraße. Adolf Lüderitz was a German merchant who in 1883 acquired the first German territories in today’s Namibia – basing his claims to large swathes of territory on the preposterous proposition that German miles were the basis of his contract with Nama Captain Josef-Fredericks II – instead of the much more common (and for Lüderitz inconveniently) shorter English ones.

Berlin Postkolonial has advocated for the renaming of this street as well.

THE AFRICAN QUARTER AS AN EXAMPLE FOR POLITICAL ACTION?

After years of political debate and campaigning in favor of and against taking action,⁴ during which local politicians and societal actors often failed to come to a consensus, the district council finally decided in 2018 to change three of the street names in Afrikanisches Viertel. In the future, Lüderitzstraße will honor Cornelius Frederiks, a Nama chief who fought German colonial troops during the genocide; Nachtigalplatz will be named after the Bell family, which took a leading role in the anti-colonial resistance movement in today's Cameroon; Petersallee will be divided and named after Anna Mungunda, an activist for Namibian independence in the middle of the 20th century, while the other part will commemorate the Maji-Maji war, a major anti-colonial rebellion in the German colonies in East Africa. Long prevailing tendencies to ignore the colonial character of the Afrikanisches Viertel, or to just kick the can down the road, have therefore reached their end in this case. By putting the issue on the political agenda and making an

argument for historical justice, *Berlin Postkolonial* initiated this decision. Most importantly, its persistent activism has kept the question on the agenda for years, showcasing and eventually overcoming political inertia.

The interest in hundreds of these tours offered in the Afrikanisches Viertel also indicates the demand for historical knowledge and reflection within society. However, the frequent harassment by residents equally shows how the debate is rejected by many insisting on keeping their postal address, or simply spouting colonial ideology.

While the patience and persistence of activists has had concrete results in the Afrikanisches Viertel, where three very dubious figures will no longer be publicly honored, it should also be kept in mind that similar campaigns in slightly less clear-cut cases, such as the renaming of *Mohrenstraße* ("Moors' Street") in Berlin's center,⁵ have been in vain so far. Yet, whether it is successful in its concrete demands or not, such activism has surely catalyzed larger trends to establish critical perspectives on Germany's colonial past and elevate it to become a more official concern.

The activities of groups like *Berlin Postkolonial* also show how effective it is to localize and concretize the political objectives of

4 For a theoretically informed treatment of this debate, please see: Susanne Förster et al., "Negotiating German Colonial Heritage in Berlin's Afrikanisches Viertel," *Journal of Heritage Studies* 22 no. 7 (2016): 515-529.

5 "Mohrenstraße" in *Stadt Neu Lesen* (Berlin: Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag, 2016), <http://eineweltstadt.berlin/publikationen/stadtneulesen/mohrenstrasse/>.

memory culture.⁶ In Berlin, the debate over the repatriation of specific objects from museums has picked up speed, further exemplifying this notion. With it, the German debate has moved on from cases of violence and malice personified in Lüderitz, Nachtigal and Peters, presenting the opportunity to discuss more complex and systemic issues of unequal relations or epistemological hierarchization. Here, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of museum collections of colonial artifacts serves as an important test case.

It remains to be seen how successfully activism around these issues reaches the wider public and how it can be influenced and accompanied by the work of academics. With the aforementioned city palace under reconstruction, in which most of Berlin's overseas museum collections will be exhibited, this ongoing debate has already found its symbolic center.⁷

6 Three other locales of less-established post-colonial interest in Berlin, namely the streets named after anti-colonial activists in the former socialist part of the city, the "Thai Park" as a meeting place for Berlin's South East Asian community and the Museum for Natural Studies are discussed in the Podcast series "Decolonization in Action," hosted by Edna Bonhomme and Kristyna Comer of the Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science, <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/research/projects/decolonization-action>.

7 See: Graham Bowley, "A New Museum Opens Old Wounds in Germany," *New York Times*, 12 October, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/design/humboldt-forum-germany.html>; AfricAvenir International e.V., ed., "No Humboldt 21!. Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt-Forum, Berlin 2017"; For the larger debate on restitution see. Felwine Sarr; Bénédicte Savoy: *Restituer le Patrimoine Africain* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2018).