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On Site. Colonial Labour, Business and the Construction of the Swakopmund Jetty, c. 1911–1915

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ABSTRACT



The Swakopmund jetty was one of only two entry points to the colony of German South West Africa (GSWA) located on the Atlantic coast. It was first built as a silted-up mole at the turn of the century and then as a provisional wooden jetty during the colonial war of 1904–1908. This article focuses on the post-war building of the iron jetty in Swakopmund that was constructed in a private enterprise from 1911 into the First World War. It draws on new material from the construction site bureau and sheds light on the diversity of the labourers who worked on the jetty. It focuses on the recruitment, wages, working conditions and control of labour on the construction site by tracing the networks between the metropolis and the colony of GSWA, its engineers, foremen and craftsmen, as well as African labour migration such as Cape, Ovambo and Herero workers and local day labourers. With the focus on sources held in corporate archives, it claims to take the challenges to business in this new colonial context into account, revealing especially the limitations of recruitment and the agency of Ovambo and Cape workers in a labour market in transition after the colonial war.

KEYWORDS

German South West Africa; labour history; business history; infrastructure; port/harbour

Introduction¹

‘There is no longer anything going on in Swakopmund,’² a dock worker in the German colony of German South West Africa (GSWA) reported in 1909. At the turn of the century, the construction of landing facilities had helped to boost business in GSWA and Swakopmund became a central transshipment point. A first mole, which soon silted up, was constructed from 1895, but was hastily replaced by a provisional wooden jetty with the outbreak of the colonial war (1904–1908).³ When Cape worker Zacharias Lewala discovered the first diamond in the desert sand near Lüderitzbucht in 1908,⁴ this led to a shift in

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focus to Lüderitzbucht, as the dock worker above noted.⁵ Lewala hat discovered what was then the world's second-largest diamond deposit in the desert of GSWA, which was intensively mined after 1908. As a result, gemstone prospectors, 'adventurers', and mining companies were drawn primarily to Lüderitzbucht, leading initially to a loss of importance for the harbour of Swakopmund. However, Swakopmund remained a central location until the First World War, not least because of the railway connection to Windhoek and the *OMEG (Otavi Minen- und Eisenbahngesellschaft)*, one of the largest colonial employers in the region. Moreover, Swakopmund remained one of only two entry points to GSWA located on the Atlantic coast. This was the reason why landing operations for bulk cargo transport to the colony expanded even further from 1911. The aim was to connect the settlement colony to the world market with both imports and exports. In this context, Swakopmund developed into a central harbour town and increasingly also into one of the social centres of the colony.⁶

The continuous attempts to extend the Swakopmund landing facilities from 1895 onwards underscore the central role of the infrastructural development of the colony.⁷ Colonial officials, both in Berlin and in the colony, hoped to make the colony profitable as soon as possible, preferably by the discovery of rich mineral deposits such as diamonds, gold and copper. Although after their discovery in 1908 diamonds appeared to promise the greatest commercial advantage, it was in fact mainly the Windhoek connection and *OMEG* that proved to be central for the town in the long run.

With regard to the landing facilities in Swakopmund three phases can be distinguished. After two construction phases under public-sector management from 1895 – once on the part of the colonial administration and once the military – there was then a transition to a private company (*Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund*, hereinafter *BLS*) which in the form of a consortium involving the companies *Grün & Bilfinger (G&B)* and *Benrather Brückenbau AG (Flender)* was commissioned with the construction from 1911 onwards. While the construction of the Swakopmund mole and the wooden jetty have been well researched,⁸ this article draws together details of the third phase involving the private sector and the wider context in which it took place. This still represents a research gap that has been overlooked by previous scholarship.⁹

The nexus of German colonial history and business history has recently enjoyed more scholarly attention and offers promising new perspectives to which this article seeks to contribute. Studies by Michael Rösser, Mona Rudolph and Kim S. Todzi have hinted at the role of private businesses in German colonisation from a more complex perspective, beyond the focus on financial losses of public investments that has been prioritised in earlier studies.¹⁰ Here, microstudies of business activity in colonial contexts have already offered valuable insights into the relationship between the state and

business in German colonialism, for example in examining the role companies played in the colonisation and control of territories, the impact they had on local population and to what extent they were aligned or in conflict with public colonial policies in their own interest. However, this aspect has largely been overlooked in the scholarly literature in general, and in the case of Swakopmund in particular. In this instance, the key question remains of what made the business activities distinctively colonial. In my article I seek to explore this question in depth.¹¹

This article also contributes to the labour history of German colonialism. Recent studies by William B. Lyon and Mona Rudolph have taken up debates on the dynamics of the labour market of GSWA.¹² Besides the business implications, the Swakopmund jetty project can be read as a part of what Lyon has characterised as the central ‘labour corridors’ in GSWA, where workers were recruited and employed as migrant labourers. The case of the Swakopmund jetty further demonstrates how especially Ovambo and Cape workers were involved in these infrastructural construction sites and how the colonial economy in form of a private construction company relied on these labour dynamics – especially under the changing conditions after the colonial war.¹³ From the perspective of the construction consortium, German, other European and African workers were equally crucial for the progress of construction, and as will be shown in the following, the entire work process was highly specialised and organised along clear divisions of labour.

With regard to sources, the paper draws on new and recently discovered material from the construction site office in Swakopmund at the Sam Cohen Library (Swakopmund, Namibia) that comprise records of the construction site’s administration, such as the rich material of correspondence with the colonial administration in Swakopmund, Windhoek and Berlin, as well as between the company’s head office in Mannheim and the construction site; technical reports; accounts; lists of workers; correspondence with recruitment agencies; workers’ record books, etc. Additional sources have been used from the corporate archives of Bilfinger (a successor company to *Grün & Bilfinger*) in Mannheim for contracts and material from the company’s directory, as well as the Colonial Office’s (*Reichskolonialamt*) records in Berlin and in Windhoek (National Archives of Namibia) for the general correspondence between the company and state administrations. This broad base of primary material not only allows a close reading of the colonial every day on site, but also offers a distinct look at the private construction company’s approach to and challenges in entering colonial markets. While the existing research not only primarily focused on the construction of the early mole and the wooden jetty, these contributions are also dominated by the official (imperial) perspective on construction work and labour force.

Overall, this article pursues several interrelated objectives. First, it aims at bridging the labour and business perspectives of recent historiography and it

claims that the phase in which the iron jetty was built by a private company was distinctly different to that of the two previous attempts by the public sector. Second, it demonstrates the economic rationality (opportunities of colonial markets as well as risk of failure, economic losses etc.) of an internationalising company at the turn of the century and sheds light on the challenges these companies faced on the colonial labour market. Third, I argue that in contrast to the colonial administration's involvement in public railway construction, private recruitment companies played a central role, especially where direct recruitment from the colonial state remained absent. Examining private business perspectives reveals the complex manoeuvring between pressure, control and incentives that were necessary to keep the construction site running and complete it on time. It thus aims at refining the existing literature in the complexity of labour relations between skilled and unskilled labour as well as the instruments which companies used in order to fight labour shortages – beyond coercion alone.

Following a short introduction of the construction context in Swakopmund, the article focuses on practices of recruitment, the development of wages and working conditions. It concludes with the analysis of individual agency, conflicts and the challenges of controlling labour on site.

Landing in Swakopmund

Landing in Swakopmund was difficult. Geographically problematic, Swakopmund was constantly affected by severe sanding due to its desert location, repeated fog and, above all, a strong Atlantic surf. The practice was to transfer passengers and goods from ships lying in the roadstead, some of which had to be swum ashore, mainly by the expensive labour of the people known as *Krumen*. These were migrant workers from West Africa, traditionally experienced and with a history of maritime activity, yet even they grew reluctant to continue this hard and dangerous work in Swakopmund's icy Atlantic waters, especially after repeated accidents.¹⁴ A new crane on the wooden jetty provided some temporary relief after the turn of the century, but was not a long-term solution.¹⁵

After 1908 Swakopmund can best be described as a place in transition, and it was subject to a great deal of mobility. It played two significant roles for the colony of GSWA, first and foremost as a settler colony and secondly as a hub for the transshipment of goods – not least heavy goods including materials for the construction of the railway and the development of the colony. Additionally, Swakopmund was coming to be known as a resort and seaside town due to its coastal climate. This resulted in an upswing in the growing settlement, especially around the harbour and in relation to the activities of *OMEG*. It functioned as an entry point and supply hub for German settlers arriving by sea at the turn of the century. However, this changed with the

discovery of diamonds in Lüderitzbucht, which led to a (temporary) economic downturn in Swakopmund, especially in the hospitality and service industries, due to migration to the diamond fields. From 1908, not only in Lüderitzbucht, but also in the district of Swakopmund, '[m]erchants, innkeepers and craftsmen travelled in droves to the newly discovered fields.'¹⁶ But the fields turned out to be less profitable than had been hoped, and many speculators and 'adventurers' gambled away their money there. This led to a decline in social life, with both workers and craftsmen leaving town.¹⁷ In contrast to the town's temporary downturn, however, the wooden jetty was still heavily used for passengers and cargo alike, and was even raised and reinforced for the purpose of supplying the whole colony.¹⁸ While there were local ups and downs in economic expectations connected to the diamond fields, there was also an increase in infrastructural development to support the economic upswing of the colony as a whole. Overall, we see a rising economic significance of GSWA after the colonial war that lasted from 1904 to 1908.

Central to this economic expansion were plans to build a large iron jetty for mass transportation. The first plans to extend the existing jetty in Swakopmund, including those drafted by private companies, were drawn up as early as 1906,¹⁹ with the initial tender and start of construction following in 1911–1912. The contract was awarded to the consortium consisting of *Grün & Bilfinger (G&B)* and *Benrather Brückenbau AG Flender (Flender)*. A 600-metre-long jetty was planned, extending into the Atlantic Ocean and equipped with four electric cranes. It was to be made of iron to counteract the long-term effects of sand, waves and salt water and was to be more than twice as long as the existing wooden jetty. The calculated construction costs totalled 3.5 million German marks, and for the implementation phase, the two partners founded their own construction company in Mannheim (the *Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund*, hereinafter *BLS*).²⁰ For both companies, it was one of the first major contracts outside the German Empire. The division of tasks within the consortium between underground works and superstructural engineering was reflected in the permanent presence of two engineers from the two companies on the construction site, Richard Riesenkamp (*Flender*) and Carl Wick, and later, Mathäus Richter (*G&B*).²¹

Practices of Labour Recruitment

The construction phase required a wide range of different tasks and skills, from hard manual work on shore and transporting heavy materials to specialist works of carpentry, drilling, electrical engineering and general machine operation. The engineers thus oversaw a network of local workers, managing supervisors, craftsmen, day labourers and contract workers. The composition of this network was already reflected in the works on the earlier mole. The leading inspector of the mole construction in Swakopmund, Friedrich Wilhelm

Ortloff,²² had already given insights on the project at a lecture to the German Colonial Society (*Deutsche Kolonial-Gesellschaft*) in 1901, where he described his experiences on site, primarily stressing the difficult mix of people in the labour force. Ortloff was heavily reliant on approximately 20 core staff he had worked with before, but he also described the additional recruitment of about 160 people from Cape Town and from Germany, Russia, Finland, Sweden and Britain. He elaborated on the difficulty of controlling these people: ‘it was not like construction works in Germany.’ He hinted at one of the central problems that persisted throughout the years as a result of the general labour shortage in the colony, namely the difficulty of recruiting workers and the differences in the labour market of GSWA compared to Germany. According to William B. Lyon’s recent (2024) interpretation of Ortloff’s nationalist view on ‘dubious characters’ from South Africa, Ortloff nevertheless could not just dismiss people, because ‘you didn’t hire people within half a day like you do here.’²³ Interestingly, Ortloff also hinted at more trouble controlling the hired Europeans than the African labourers on site. Adopting common racial hierarchies and stereotypes, he spoke of the Africans as ‘willing’ workers; he preferred them as labourers, sometimes quite contrary to colonial expectations and the public racist agenda: ‘I place them above the whites I got from Cape Town; it sounds harsh, but I have to say it.’²⁴ A preference for ‘willingness’ and control is clearly visible in the records of recruitment and employment on site, but racial hierarchies are also clear: *Black* Africans were neither equally treated nor given the same tasks and working conditions as *white* workers.

Already in the first phase of the construction of the Swakopmund mole, there are thus hints of differences in groups of workers and types of qualification. Labour on infrastructural construction sites in general has been thoroughly studied in relation to questions of mass labour and coercion in German colonialism, especially in regard to railway track building. But there was also a group of skilled labourers on these sites that were of special interest to the construction companies.²⁵

European Labour Recruitment

In managerial and technical positions and as on other construction sites of *G&B* such as Lomé, Togo, the contract between the consortium and the Colonial Office in Berlin already stipulated a racist hierarchy.²⁶ Moreover, it provided for the clear exclusion of imperial competitors. According to the contract, the technical management and all posts with a supervisory function had to be filled by the company with ‘Reich Germans’ (*Reichsdeutsche*) only: ‘Craftsmen and labourers are – apart from the natives – to be employed as far as possible from the German Empire; in any case, preference is to be given to Germans from the Empire among equally suitable applicants.’²⁷ In contrast to railway construction

contracts, however, no provision was made by the colonial administration – that is, the governorate or the port authority in Swakopmund – to generally provide for or assist in the recruitment of a (mass) workforce. Instead, the consortium seems to have been responsible for recruiting all its workers. Typically, the colonial administration would provide for (mass) labour on construction sites, a regulation that can be found in most contracts between the construction companies and the Colonial Office.²⁸ In addition, the consortium was also responsible for all other expenses for the (German) employees, including special insurance, travel expenses, etc.²⁹ From the constructor's perspective the general goal was thus to reduce reliance on European labour due to high costs. A further challenge exacerbating the demand for labour was the secondment of the company's own staff to leading positions, which was supported by incentives and extra wages. This differed from the recruitment by the public authorities at the earlier mole, where evidence shows that incentives such as promises of land in the settler colony were used. With the private construction of the iron jetty, however, skilled and qualified workers were to be seconded by *G&B* and *Flender* for a temporary stay only; these were specialists sent out to the colony to ensure construction proceeded smoothly. Right from the beginning of the construction works, they thus sent, along with the overseeing engineers, six of their own assembly operators³⁰ and carpenters³¹ to the African construction site. If we look at the German workforce alone, a total number of around 30 skilled workers were employed on the site, ranging from senior engineers and foremen to craftsmen such as fitters, turners, mechanics and carpenters, sent primarily as employees of the company from the German Empire.³²

The evaluation of the insurance documents for individual accident and liability insurance, which was taken out for posted employees, provides interesting insights, showing that a total of 12 fitters, drilling foremen and labourers were insured. According to these documents, the employed cohort was very homogeneous, all aged between 25 and 35 years, and some of them, as foremen and supervisors, with a certain amount of professional experience already. The registration of an eighteen-year-old bricklayer seems to have been an exception.³³ German workers on the construction site were mostly skilled and highly mobile, attracted by the chance to gain international experience and monetary incentives. Moreover, the interconnections between workers and the largely parallel development of several construction sites, such as in Lomé and Swakopmund, was also favourable for the company. It proves and highlights the transcolonial structure that characterised construction sites in different colonies that belonged to the same companies, resulting not least from the mobility of specialised personnel who were already present in the colonies. This meant that managers such as *G&B*'s company representative Dahlinger in Lomé, for example, could easily be transferred to Swakopmund in July 1912 to check the conditions and provide a first-hand report to the management in Mannheim.³⁴

At the same time, job application documents in the construction bureau's collection show that not only a (European) labour shortage was at play in Swakopmund, but that a pool of workers was already available in the colonial settlement. However, this did not necessarily fit with the companies' changing needs. The construction site became a magnet for craftsmen and skilled workers who were already living in the colony and looking for work. Numerous applications provide evidence of people who tried to progress from day labourer to craftsman status – but they did not always possess the right qualifications, and the company could only draw on this existing pool of workers to a limited extent. The two categories most often in demand, and hired whenever they were available, were locksmiths and machinists.³⁵

Ovambo, Herero and Cape Worker Recruitment

The Swakopmund jetty was not a 'German jetty', but rather a structure primarily built by African labour.³⁶ To complete construction, the company hired at least 80 additional workers, mainly Africans. As with the work on the mole and the wooden jetty before it, the workers on the construction site were primarily Ovambo, many recruited from the Otavi railway, Herero and especially Cape workers from South Africa.³⁷ Their contracts generally varied in length between six and nine months.³⁸ As the governorate was not responsible for recruitment, the new construction companies in the colony had to understand the often fluid dynamics of the local colonial labour market, for example which and how many workers were available, what prices and wages were currently standard and what organisation and agency fees (monetary as well as organisational costs) were to be taken into account. Here, the constant labour shortage was an ongoing challenge for the companies, and competition for African labour was sometimes even stronger than among European workers.³⁹ Training on the job and professional experience were crucial in order to keep the work flowing seamlessly and on time. The company's motives thus ranged from low costs (wages) on the one hand, to reducing staff turnover on the other. Workers on the construction site were not easily interchangeable.

The recruitment of labour for the iron jetty construction was unsystematic and relied largely on the company's own initiative. In this respect, the company's recruitment practices fit well with Jürgen Zimmerer's thesis of a liberal colonial labour market that operated according to rules of supply and demand that prevailed after the end of the war against the Herero and Nama.⁴⁰ After 1908, a large number of Herero prisoners of war were conscripted for forced labour, while others were able to choose a colonial employer. Nevertheless, they usually worked 'mostly in order to earn enough money to travel back home.'⁴¹ After their coercion and exploitation in infrastructure works during wartime, the (mostly) Herero workers were now employed as

contract labourers on the construction site. The district office in Swakopmund reported in 1909/10 accordingly:

The relationship between the Herero and their white employers has continued to improve significantly. Active and passive resistance to the work required occurs rarely and is in most cases due to misunderstandings or mistreatment by the employers.⁴²

As will be explained later, however, this should not obscure the fact that Herero and Ovambo workers were still at the bottom of the hierarchy on the construction site, in terms of both working conditions and pay.

In addition, the Ovambo played an increasingly important role in the colony in general, and in infrastructure construction in particular. While the mole and especially the construction and operation of the wooden jetty were carried out with the forced labour of Herero and Nama, as well as Kru workers, for the new project increasingly Ovambo were 'at the center of the labor force [...] building the post-genocide economy and infrastructure of the German colony.'⁴³ The increased recruitment of Ovambo people can be read as one consequence of the genocide in which large numbers of Herero and Nama were murdered. This recruitment was organised via recruitment centres in the north, where workers of the northern Ovamboland were checked, equipped and transferred to the south of the colony. Their reasons for selling their manpower and entering the capitalist labour market included their experience of pressures relating to the food supply and droughts, but also "modernity", desiring various western goods, as well as social pressures.⁴⁴

As the number of colonial employers increased, and with the heavy losses of the Herero and Nama War leading to an acute labour shortage, African migrant workers now had access to a comparatively broad range of employment opportunities and potential employers. This meant that the workers had choices about where to go. For Ovambo workers, one incentive seemed to have been the '[c]omparatively high wages at diamond mines.'⁴⁵ Sometimes they also used these contracts as stepping-stones to the south, where they could move on to infrastructure construction sites. Interestingly, Swakopmund seems to have become an alternative destination for at least some of the Ovambo workers, offering them a way to escape from the significantly worse working conditions on the diamond fields.⁴⁶ In February 1913, the Swakopmund district office reported to the harbour authority that workers from Ovamboland in the north of the colony were not fleeing the mine, 'but wanted to go to Swakopmund and look for work there.'⁴⁷ Here the new flexibility of the labour market was at play, where workers could, to some extent, exercise their freedom to negotiate with regard to their choice of employer, working conditions and pay.⁴⁸ It also shows that Ovambo workers became a central pillar of the construction industry from 1908 onwards, including at the Swakopmund jetty.

Moreover, earlier employment networks built by the German colonial administration and the military helped to facilitate the recruitment of South African Cape workers. Since 1904 this group had played a crucial role in colonial infrastructure projects, especially railway construction. The German colony functioned as an attractive alternative labour market in comparison with difficult prospects in South Africa. Recruitment in colonial South Africa was offered and organised by professional agencies, providing a functional network and the experience needed to provide standardised contracts, travel and return options.⁴⁹ A recent statistical review demonstrates that Cape worker employment in GSWA peaked in 1911 and was closely aligned with railway construction.⁵⁰ Moreover, we see a rising migration of South African workers to the diamond mines commencing when the demand for railway workers declined once construction was finished.⁵¹ This shift is also clearly visible at the construction site in Swakopmund, commencing precisely at this turning point in 1911/12 and in direct competition to the railway projects – which became a particular problem for *BLS*, which found itself dealing with a growing strain and competition on the labour market. In total, there is substantiated evidence of around 40 Cape workers at the Swakopmund jetty.

Over the whole period of construction, however, it became more and more difficult to hire Cape workers based on the wages, contracts and labour conditions. Apart from the work on offer at the flourishing diamond fields, Cape workers could also choose to go to British Walvis Bay.⁵² In 1913, at the peak of this development, the leading engineer Richard Wick decided to travel to Cape Town to try to recruit workers directly. Although he managed to recruit 25 workers with twelve-month contracts, he noted that ‘the various difficulties reported [...] with regard to the recruitment of people for Swakopmund do indeed exist.’⁵³ Direct attempts such as this were uncommon outside established recruiting networks, and largely unsuccessful.

Overall, these developments indicate how the company was faced with the dynamics of a highly mobile labour market. In addition to the around 20 German craftsmen and highly skilled labourers there are further indications of at least two European day labourers, as well as at least 80 Herero, Ovambo and Cape workers, who made up about half of this group, across the construction period.⁵⁴ Extant lists, photographs and correspondence do not hint at the employment of women on the construction site, as mentioned in the construction and operation of the wooden jetty for example.⁵⁵ However, the employment of women cannot be ruled out. They were certainly present around the construction site infrastructure in matters of supply and service.

The majority of documented workers were African, most of whom, but not all, were unskilled. This meant that the company was unable to adhere to its own policy on the local labour market, which was to completely replace expensive European labour with local (trained) workers. It demonstrates that companies in the colonies depended on African labour, also for specialised work such

as jetty construction. It also shows that labour in the colonies was a commodity that could be provided over long distances, as the construction of the port facilities had to take place at a specific location.

Recruitment Systems

The reliable, long-term provision of labour was a problem for the company throughout the entire construction period. Turnover was continuously high and there never seemed to be enough workers on the construction site. Unlike railway construction (e.g. *Lenz* or *Koppel*), this labour market was not centrally steered by the colonial administration. It was primarily controlled by private-sector middlemen and highly influenced by the agency of individual workers, especially regarding wage levels and working conditions.⁵⁶ The construction company occasionally tried to circumvent these structures to its own advantage, in order to recruit workers directly from neighbouring companies. For example, the construction management asked the locally based *Woermann-Linie* for help with recruitment.⁵⁷ At the same time, the colonial authorities were well aware of the problems of fluctuation and flight, especially of Cape workers. They sought to compensate this by intensifying their own recruitment of Ovambo.⁵⁸

The most important mediators and business partners for the construction company were private recruiters. They were at the heart of the organisation of the colonial labour market, especially since colonial-state intervention and recruitment subsided after the colonial war and recruitment was primarily in private hands. Private recruitment services in GSWA ('*Werbebüros*') generally offered the local recruitment of labourers, plus the organisation of the return journey including provisions and equipment. The companies, in return, covered the commission, wages, accommodation and meals on site.⁵⁹ In the case of the Cape workers, Carl Wick reported from Cape Town that these fees could easily rise to 20 marks.⁶⁰ These high fees also reflect imperial competition for labour and demonstrate that regional labour markets did not operate solely within colonial borders. As Ulrike Lindner has highlighted, the British authorities deliberately kept their fees high in order to make a profit and at the same time prevent the German colonies from gaining an advantage through transcolonial labour migration.⁶¹

Already before the construction work at the Swakopmund jetty commenced, recruitment enterprises reached out to the construction company in order to offer their services. As early as September 1911 the company of *Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery* from Cape Town offered their services, because the construction company would 'surely need workers from the Cape Colony.' As an advertisement, they used testimonials from *Woermann* and *Lenz*, where they were major providers of 'thousands' of workers for the railway project.⁶² This can be read as a sign of existing recruitment networks locally,

regionally, and in transcolonial perspectives, but also as evidence of strong competition in this field. Recruiters heard rumours and instantly offered their services. These were functioning networks that new companies who were entering these new markets, like *G&B* and *Flender*, obviously appreciated and immediately used. Moreover, the case is proof that it paid to advertise – *Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery* became the major supplier of Cape workers to the construction site in the next years.⁶³

These recruiters from Cape Town proved to be crucial in supplying labour to the colonial construction sites.⁶⁴ However, the *BLS* also used additional channels of recruitment and recruiters in order to cover their constant need for labour. This included the services of established ‘facilitators’ (*Vermittler*), not only for Cape workers through *Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery*, but also local recruiters such as *Ludwig Hölzer* or *Rudolf Siebert*, especially for Ovambo recruitment.⁶⁵ *Rudolf Siebert* himself, for instance, was a former employee of the Imperial Harbour Construction Office during the construction of the mole and was well connected and familiar with local contexts and needs in the construction process.⁶⁶ Work as a recruiter was financially lucrative, which led German settlers to abandon their original professions in the colony and take up employment in this business.

An interesting case from 1911 is that of one F.A.G. Quandt. He first applied as a worker and professional recruiter on the construction site but was not offered employment. He had learned from earlier experience, and, foreseeing the need for constant labour recruitment, initially offered his services on a permanent basis.⁶⁷ In response to the rejection, and only a few days later, he again offered his services but this time as an independent recruiter for Ovambo, Herero and Cape workers.⁶⁸ The CV that he enclosed is evidence that local companies such as large construction companies employed their own permanent staff to recruit and manage labourers. It also gives insights into Quandt’s professional trajectory, highlighting his participation in the Boer War, which commenced with a longer stay in South Africa with commissioner duties, diverse public supervisory functions and an active role in the battles ‘to suppress the uprisings’.⁶⁹ He later became a professional recruiter with *Bachstein-Koppel* at the railway construction site, where he was responsible for recruiting and supervising the growing workforce. Most interestingly, the employer’s reference from *Bachstein-Koppel* confirms his knowledge of South African conditions and his helpful mediation in matters relating to ‘wage differences’ and ‘workers’ strikes’ in particular.⁷⁰ Early in 1911, he had left the company, joined the management of a forwarding company in Swakopmund and finally, based on his former experiences and qualifications, set up his own recruitment business. Later the same year, he was apparently taking the opportunity to apply for a permanent position at a German construction company again.⁷¹

The sources do not provide further information about his future role in the construction project, but it is a telling example of the fluidity of employment

histories and the opportunities these construction sites offered for affiliated businesses and local entrepreneurs. Moreover, it clearly shows how undefined the job of ‘recruiters’ actually was. However, even new enterprises without much experience in the field, such as the *BLS*, seemed rather to use established and probably recommended services. They also maintained intensive communication with experienced local companies, which illustrates how deeply the firm was embedded in local networks and how dependent it was on the exchange of information with other actors and enterprises. When attempts to hire workers via the *Werberebureaus* were not sufficient, they turned to personal relations and local business networks, such as the *Woermann-Linie* or the affiliated *Damara – und Namaqua-Handelsgesellschaft* for help.⁷² The engineers at the new construction company soon learned that colonial labour recruitment and the colonial labour market in general worked differently from capitalised labour markets in Germany. They quickly adapted to local and regional networks of labour recruitment, following guidance and recommendations by fellow business partners on the spot.

In sum, the jetty construction thus differed markedly from other infrastructural projects in GSWA at this time. It was a private undertaking, including the use of only private recruitment of labour. It thus relied heavily on interregional recruitment systems, rather than colonial-state-organised support. It is an example of what Zimmerer (2001) has described as a shift to a semi-controlled labour market after the colonial war, and it even went beyond semi-control; the ‘facilitators’ themselves developed into central economic actors and held positions as gatekeepers and agents of labour recruitment. The sources also give evidence as to how effective these gatekeeping positions were, especially with private companies like *BLS*: when the construction company tried without success to circumvent these structures, for example by travelling to Cape Town independently, the leading engineers learned about their limitations and experienced the pressure to adapt to these powerful local and regional structures and standards. This operating system meant that there were limits to the enterprise’s ability to manoeuvre in the local colonial labour market; it offered workers agency and flexibility that also had consequences for the company’s strategy on wages and the shape of working conditions on site.

Wages and Working Conditions

The construction site to the south of the old mole and wooden jetty included not only the planned location of the new iron jetty, but also extensive site facilities, including the boiler house, a tool shed, a foreman’s hut, a blacksmith’s forge, worker accommodation, a corrugated iron hut, a workshop, a staff toilet, a cooling tower, a crane operator’s hut and the bathhouse and laundry.⁷³ These facilities were located to the south of the construction area and the site was provided to the company by the colonial administration (Figure 1).⁷⁴



Figure 1. Storage and accommodation of the construction site with Swakopmund in the background.

Source: UA Bilfinger, Swakopmund F 10-1. © Unternehmensarchiv Bilfinger. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

The social order of the settlement not only hints at the life and working conditions, but also represents the manifold tasks that were to be accomplished on site. There were not only engineers and unskilled workers, but also laundry workers, mechanics, machinists, crane operators etc. Moreover, the sources reveal the spatial and hierarchical order in work and life. There was not only a clear segregation of tasks and instruction, but also hierarchical distinctions, for example of engineers with their own housing, separate housing for African workers, described as ‘native housing’ (‘Eingeborenenhaus’), as well as toilets ‘for whites’.⁷⁵ Here, the intersection of race and class in the daily hierarchical orders of the construction site becomes visible. It differed from what would have typically been a German worker’s former experiences with industrial relations and construction sites in the German Empire.

The racial and nationalistic hierarchy on site was in part based on the contract between the Colonial Office in Berlin and the construction company. As explained above, management functions were only to be performed by employees of the consortium’s two companies and sent out from Germany.⁷⁶ In addition, craftsmen and skilled workers were expected to be recruited locally to some extent, as well as day labourers and unskilled workers on a contractual basis. Although economic reasons meant that the employment of European labourers was generally kept low at the construction site due to the high wage costs involved, it is clear that overseer positions would have been the task of the experienced staff employed directly by the construction company. The explicit mention of Germans in relation to the technical management and all supervisory functions in the contract is likely to be the result of the intervention of the Colonial Office, organising this site along colonial policy lines. Moreover, the preference for Germans as opposed to other European workers can be read as a clear nationalist approach in the imperial competition, also demonstrated in the practice of awarding contracts to German companies and stipulating the use of German materials only.⁷⁷

Engineers working for the construction companies were usually employed on a permanent contract and received a salary in Germany, to which bonuses were added for their work in the colony. Their stay was usually

dependent on the length of the construction period, even though periods of home leave were granted.⁷⁸ In addition, they received the above-mentioned special economic and social privileges locally, such as the provision of their own housing and bureau on site.

Mechanics, machinists and craftsmen who were permanent employees of the German companies were also seconded to the project and received a monthly salary of 400–500 marks. They were supervised locally by the site management, and largely independently of the central administration in Mannheim. Their salaries were apparently not only dependent on the type or difficulty of the work, but were calculated on the same basis as in the company in Germany, namely according to length of service.⁷⁹

Conflicts could arise between the employees of the consortium's two companies. Not only were they entrusted with different activities in underground work and superstructural engineering respectively, but they were also employed by different companies which followed different rules for wage increases and generally also used different salary scales. In March 1914, for example, the supervisor Schmid complained to his employers at *G&B* in Mannheim that the supervisors at *Flender* had been granted higher monthly salaries of 500 marks, even though, he claimed, they were employed to do much easier work compared to the hard drilling of the groundworks. He therefore demanded a rise in salary, which he argued was justified based on his night work and extra hours.⁸⁰ However, the question was referred back to the local site management, who rejected the request on the grounds of Schmid's length of service.⁸¹ The leading engineers tended to be rather cautious here, as they feared that if wage increases were approved individually, especially as a result of peer comparison on the construction site, a spiral of general wage increases could be set in motion that would increase the project's overall costs.⁸²

In contrast to these wage levels, the average wages of the Ovambo, Herero and Cape workers employed on the construction site, who mainly performed semi – or unskilled tasks, were significantly lower. A report by the Swakopmund district office in 1909/10 estimated the general average wage of male Ovambo and Herero workers in the district at approximately 15–30 marks a month, with board and lodging usually provided. Cape workers were significantly better remunerated with 40–50 marks a month.⁸³ There is a reference to the employment of a Herero called 'Hans' at the construction site in 1912, whose monthly wage is given as 50 marks.⁸⁴ Here we find a rise in wages and, based on the records, it seems that this higher wage was based on Hans' length of employment and/or skill.⁸⁵ While he was obviously skilled, however, Hans' employment relationship was highly precarious. He could be dismissed at any time without notice, and he was not provided with board or lodging by his employer.⁸⁶ This is an important detail, since the discussion of real wages must also take extra local expenses into account. Local prices for board and lodging often rose as immigration and wages increased, which

could lead to only moderate real wages in the end.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the historical sources for the construction of the jetty in Swakopmund indicate on the whole that during the construction period some wages, primarily of the Cape workers, did rise to between 105 and 125 marks per month (including food and lodging), and that the pay for extra hours increased from 40 to 50 Pfennig.⁸⁸

For a further contextualisation of these numbers, the wages can be compared to those paid during the state-funded construction of the mole a few years earlier. Here, fortunately longer data series from 1902 to 1907 on the development of wages have been recorded; between 1902 and 1907, depending on demand at the construction site, the wages of ‘indigenous workers’ varied between 10 and 15 marks, while for some, apparently those with longer periods of employment and/or experience and skills, this could rise to 25 marks. There were also wage increases over time, for some skilled workers up to 50 marks. This is a clear sign that there was room for development and promotion, especially as an incentive for the worker to sign a follow-up contract, which helped to maintain a stable, and to some extent trained and/or skilled, workforce.⁸⁹

To put this in context, in 1913 skilled workers in the metal industry in Germany, for example, earned 66 Pfennig an hour and unskilled workers about 43 Pfennig an hour on average; this could add up to 100 marks per month for unskilled and around 150 marks per month for skilled workers.⁹⁰ At the Swakopmund construction site, German staff were thus comparatively highly remunerated, not only in comparison to other workers on site, but also in comparison to their fellow workers in Germany. Incentives obviously came into play in order to attract skilled workers to colonial construction sites.⁹¹ In contrast, the income of African workers, if classified as unskilled labour and compared to unskilled workers in the German Empire, was significantly lower, not only in comparison to both the other workers on site but also to their counterparts in Germany. These findings underline the companies’ initial and ongoing interest in keeping the number of expensive European staff as low as possible and to profit from comparably cheap African labour – and thus their interest in keeping wages low throughout the construction period.

Overall, contracts for African workers were based on a standard term of nine months, and included the organisation of return transport. For the Ovambo, whose journey usually took them to Namutoni in the north of the colony, this included the provision of meals for six days. The recruiter *Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery* had already made an offer to *BLS* in 1911 to broker nine-month contracts in South Africa at three pounds per month based on nine working hours per day. There was extra pay for long hours and working on Sundays (40 Pf./hour extra) plus free travel, food and accommodation, given in the form of weekly provisions.⁹² This is largely identical with what can be found in the following years and is similar to the average working hours of their colleagues in Germany.⁹³

However, recruiting Cape workers became increasingly difficult from 1912 onwards. The construction company aimed to limit workforce turnover by

offering longer contracts for one year in order to keep costs for recruitment and transport, but also for training and induction, to a minimum. Yet this went beyond the established standards and as early as 1911, the representatives of *Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery* had already warned the construction company against deviating from established principles when attempting to remain competitive in the local and regional labour markets.⁹⁴ Whether due to ignorance or an over-estimation of their own position, the consortium nevertheless again and again asked the recruitment agency for long contract duration – although ultimately unsuccessfully.⁹⁵

Generally, there is limited information on the working conditions on site. Nevertheless, sources speak of constant night shifts and extra hours that the supervisors justified by referring to the tight schedule, as well as recurring interruptions due to natural as well as technical problems on site such as heavy seas, fog, broken drills, lost material etc.⁹⁶ This resulted in a constant fluctuation in work, with times of high pressure alternating with phases of boredom and a lack of occupation, usually filled with maintenance works such as cleaning or painting. These circumstances seemed to have put a constant strain on the mood, physical condition and relationships of the workers.⁹⁷

Moreover, both the drilling and the superstructural works were physically demanding and dangerous. Photographs from the construction site give insights into working conditions, where for example carpenters and labourers are seen to be carrying out construction works above a rolling sea without any further safety equipment (figure 2). Working conditions were generally shaped by cold winds and water at the Atlantic shore, the extreme difference between nocturnal and diurnal temperatures, fog, mist and high humidity, roaring seas and spraying salt water mixed with the burning sun and the sand of the desert. The heavy work had involved difficult physical activity such as balancing on wet and slippery iron beams.

The unaccustomed risks at the colonial construction site are also reflected in the insurance policies for German workers. The insurance cover in the colony was handled differently from cover in Germany: the standard old-age and disability insurance did not apply in the colonies, unless workers were explicitly sent there as existing employees of the companies. The companies themselves were apparently not entirely sure about the legal situation and therefore encouraged their own employees to continue to take out their own cover, sending insurance stamps for this purpose to the site, which the employees then had to purchase from their wages in Swakopmund.⁹⁸ In addition, accident and liability insurance was arranged for each of the German workers for their stay in the colony, with additional cover of 5,000 marks in the event of death and 15,000 marks in the event of invalidity. In principle, it was assumed that the German employees were exposed to a higher risk on the construction site and the company wanted to protect itself against any claims.⁹⁹ However, this cover did not apply for all workers on site and they were affected by health and safety issues in different



Figure 2. Carpenters attach the pipe tension ('Rohrspannung') in heavy seas, July 1912.

Source: UA Bilfinger, Swakopmund F 10-1. © Unternehmensarchiv Bilfinger. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

ways. In the case of the drilling supervisor Scharf, who fell and hurt his chest, and the electrician Eich, who after an accident remained in hospital and was only temporarily unable to work, both were taken care of in the local hospital and at least Eich's accident was reported to the insurance company.¹⁰⁰ Both most likely returned to the construction work afterwards. In the case of the English day labourer Holt the situation was different. Although he was an experienced and well-known employee who had been living locally for four or five years, he was dismissed after his finger was crushed and he was unable to work. The case illuminates the different hierarchies and layers of discrimination on site: due to his nationality and his status as a day labourer he was neither covered by any general insurance nor protected against the loss of his job, in contrast to the privileged other European, and particularly German, workers. The company agreed to cover his medical treatment, but not his sick leave. The case was finally handed over from the city administration to the district office in Swakopmund, as it could be considered an important precedent. Even if the behaviour of the company was in line with the law, it was still important from the administration's point of view to clarify how to proceed in such cases and not to simply leave the individuals to the poorhouse. A statement by the officials is also of interest:

[A]t a company like the one building the bridge on behalf of the colonial governorate, minor injuries like Holt's happen every day. There is undoubtedly undue hardship if,

because of such accidents, a worker can be summarily put on the street, especially since the company must be aware that it is impossible for the person concerned to find work elsewhere and must foresee that he will have to fall back on public assistance.¹⁰¹

The colonial administration was less concerned with Holt's personal fate than with the general fear that the company might rely on the public safety net and therefore act 'recklessly' in similar cases in the future.¹⁰² Most workers on the construction site were constantly exposed to the risk of death and injury, not only through direct accident, but also through the loss of ability to work and employment in the long term.¹⁰³ In the most severe cases, injury could end in death. There was at least one fatal accident involving a Cape worker in 1912, who fell from the drilling scaffolding and drowned in the sea.¹⁰⁴ It is one of the recorded examples that shows 'how worker-organised transport to GSWA work sites could result in unpredictable and sometimes deadly outcomes'.¹⁰⁵

In sum, working conditions, wages, and industrial relations were subject to racial as well as activity and job distinctions on site, influenced by a mix of colonial ideology and the economic interests of the company. With the high turnover and mobility of the labour market, not only the recruitment, but also the retention of workers became a central issue for the company, especially if they could not bypass the local standard nine-month contract, for example. This was also a clear sign of agency on the part of the workers and shows that the companies did not have unlimited access to labour, even if they had imagined otherwise when concluding the initial contract with the Colonial Office. Workers were able to exert bargaining powers in regard to wages, contract duration and working conditions. Moreover, the working conditions and the company's reputation also affected the future recruitment of labourers, as potential new workers could be hesitant to sign contracts with the company if they had heard about dangerous or unfavourable conditions.¹⁰⁶

For the site management it was therefore crucial to find a balance between incentive and control, since it was not only a question of how to recruit a labour force, but also how to keep workers busy and productive on site in order to meet the completion date. In this respect, the crucial question was how to control labour.

Controlling Labour: Conflict and Agency

Although evidence on everyday life on site is scarce, questions of power and control become visible through recorded conflicts and questions about the suspension of employees. Under the pressure of the local labour market, dismissal represented the company's last resort. Generally, the main question of control was how to regulate, meaning how to prevent, migration to other construction sites or companies. With increasing competition from other colonial

infrastructure projects, for example in railway construction, the start of construction work on the jetty was viewed critically by local companies who perceived the new project in terms of competition for labour. As early as October 1911, the locally based *OMEG* expressed its concern to the port authority in Swakopmund that ‘craftsmen and labourers from our company will report there for work.’ In an effort to control the labour market and thus also to regulate wages informally, *OMEG* had concluded agreements with *Bachstein-Koppel*, the *Woermann-Linie*, *Lenz & Co.* and the colonial railway administration to at least consult with each other beforehand ‘whether the tradesmen are dispensable and we can get replacements in good time.’ A similar agreement was now also concluded with a view to the new jetty construction.¹⁰⁷ With such measures, the participating companies developed a set of instruments to reduce the uncertainties of the colonial labour market and tried in particular to control the fluctuation and individual agency of local workers.

Conflicts arose primarily around competition and also around the negotiation of working conditions. For European and especially German workers the sources document conflicts about wages and night shifts as in the example of Schmid above.¹⁰⁸ There were also repeated accusations of misappropriation and theft from the construction site. In September 1912, a mechanic was dismissed after about 18 months for embezzlement¹⁰⁹ and there were also police investigations into suspected theft.¹¹⁰ Additionally, there were conflicts between the fitter Merk and his superiors, as he threatened to report them to the Colonial Office for fraud.¹¹¹ We also find constant hints of wage seizure, whereby the company became the executor of an imperial justice.¹¹² These incidents must have put regular strain on labour relations on site. They were fuelled by personal disputes between workers that could end in fights and might have been triggered by the consumption of alcohol.¹¹³ All these were cases for local negotiation, challenging the company to control labour so as to maintain productivity and a productive atmosphere on the construction site. At the same time, some of the violations were so serious that they could lead to legal prosecution and dismissal or even expulsion from the colony, for example in one case of the sale of alcohol.¹¹⁴ They demonstrate the constant balancing act that the construction site managers had to adopt in manoeuvring around enforcement, incentives and control of their precious workforce, with dismissal as last resort. In this context, the continuity of the workforce and the ability to maintain a reliable staff of skilled workers was fundamental to the progress of the construction work; thus, the decision on whether to keep or dismiss an employee was not always an easy one for the site management, which had to consider not only how to replace, but also issues of how to manage their return home and other logistical issues. Some offences were punishable under criminal law, but in the majority of cases, the employment relationship remained unaffected, probably in the economic interest of the company.¹¹⁵ Although rare, there are

also examples of dismissals such as the case of a machinist who was deemed by managers to be unsuitable and even a potential threat to operations after severely damaging a locomobile on site.¹¹⁶

Traces of conflicts with and among African workers, mostly Cape workers, also appear in the sources. In contrast to those involving European workers, these cases tended to lead to dismissal. The response from management was generally harsher, including corporal punishment, and attempted to suppress any kind of protest on site.¹¹⁷ The most common causes were disputes over working conditions and deviations from what the Cape Colony workers in particular were accustomed to. In cases involving African workers, the local police was responsible for prosecution and punishment, which usually took the form of corporal punishment.¹¹⁸ This is documented in several cases during the construction of the iron jetty, including a case in which the construction management accused the worker of absenteeism, 'due to disobedience and insolence towards his superiors and incitement of the other Cape boys ("Capjungens") employed in our company' or 'due to a fight on the construction site.'¹¹⁹

In addition to the police punishment – usually a flogging with 15 lashes – the company reacted in such cases by dismissing the workers and sending them back to Cape Town. They wanted to avoid any further 'incitement' on the construction site.¹²⁰ For example, in 1912 there was a dispute about the payment for night work, with which the Cape workers hoped to improve their working conditions. The management reacted with harshness and the dismissal of the supposed ringleaders to quell the conflict and prevent further demands: 'And it was always Williams who held back the boys from work at the last minute and even demanded to be paid for the days they did not work. We had Williams punished and sent back.'¹²¹ This incident is a clear sign that the Cape workers were aware of their central position in the tight labour market and repeatedly and assertively tried to negotiate their working conditions before departure or later on site. Others left the construction site of their own accord, either for personal reasons or in protest at poor treatment and thus setting clear limits on the extent of exploitation.¹²² The recruitment agency in Cape Town reacted in a similarly strict manner to the construction company and reported back that, in the event of similar incidents, workers should be sent back immediately if they 'tried to get special privileges [...] so that we can then have them punished here for breach of contract.'¹²³ On the whole, the construction management responded by dismissing and returning African workers in order to suppress any form of protest on the construction site. Further unrest among the workforce was to be avoided at all costs and punishments were mostly outsourced to the local police authority.

At the same time, reports of violence on site could also turn against the company's interests. Engineer Carl Wick's report, based on his local enquiries in Cape Town in 1913, confirms that recruitment was difficult not so much because of the wages but because of the long contract term and, especially,

the deterrent effect of working conditions at the construction site. The fact that the working conditions were so widely known was said to be due less to the general organisation of the workers, for example in colonial South African labour associations, and more to individual information obtained from returnees. It was explicitly stated in this context that the work to be done on the Swakopmund jetty construction was particularly dangerous or that ‘corporal punishment was very often used.’¹²⁴ This is also a clear indication of the important role that word-of-mouth recommendations or warnings played in recruiting and deterring workers respectively, including the decision to reject contracts.

In sum, the company, namely the site management, clearly constantly had to balance measures of control, concessions and incentives in order to maintain a productive and adequate labour force to ensure construction progress and meet contractual completion deadlines. In the end, however, they lost control entirely, not only of their labour force, but of the construction site in general. Soon after the beginning of the First World War in 1914, South African troops damaged and confiscated items from the site, before the South African administration took it over. Construction work stopped immediately, workers fled the site, and the engineers only returned in order to sell material and construction equipment to the *OMEG* and the local *Kronen* brewery. In this way, they tried to secure cash and some monetary replacement for the cancelled payments from the German Empire, after all links had been severed.¹²⁵ The jetty was never finished as a landing place, but was partly demolished and later turned into a tourist attraction, as it remains today.

Conclusion

Despite the difficult geographical situation, Swakopmund developed into a central landing point and hub for the colonial infrastructure of GSWA after the turn of the century. The construction of an iron jetty by a private company played a central role in this development from 1911 onwards. This article has identified the challenges encountered by a construction company in terms of labour recruitment and control in a colonial environment. From the beginning of the construction work, the company faced a severe labour shortage that could not be overcome in the construction period from 1911 to 1915. A previously neglected business perspective reveals the logics and agenda of the construction company, and it thus takes its place in the network of actors in colonial infrastructure building who could, but not always had to, align with the public-sector colonial policies.

Using new empirical material from the construction site’s management records, this case study has three main contributions to offer. First, it reveals insights into the availability and practical employment of different groups of workers, from European to African, from skilled to unskilled labourers. It

thereby showed how heterogeneous the labour force was and how this challenged the management of the construction site. Moreover, it illustrated who worked under what conditions and what the workers accomplished. On the one hand, this was highly dependent on their personal position in relation to racism and nationalism in the colonial system. On the other, the sources also highlight spaces for individual negotiation and development, based on the scarcity of skills and limited availability that could out-compete or at least balance the economic motives of the company with other policies.

Second, the risk of a high turnover of labour on the construction site put the construction management under constant pressure, which they tried to combat with monetary incentives and longer contracts on the one hand, and control and pressure on the other. In this specific labour market, the company not only had to assert itself against competitors from Lüderitzbucht and Walvis Bay, but also relied heavily on external actors, in particular recruiters and recruiting agencies from GSWA or Cape Town, and was not free to recruit staff in a completely open market. Added to this was the risk of unforeseeable, premature termination of the employment relationship due to workers no longer turning up or fleeing, sabotage or moves to other construction sites. Labour control thus became a central task of site management, not only to recruit sufficient manpower, but also to keep people employed on the construction site. From this perspective, there was more tolerance towards German employees and, due to the potential consequences of confrontation, a greater willingness to retain workers and to turn a blind eye. This was offset by a harsher approach including physical violence towards African workers, especially Cape workers, in order to immediately suppress any form of protest and conflict.

Third, the paper demonstrates that local and regional recruitment networks were well-developed and new players, like private construction companies, had to integrate into this system. The paper argues that diverse private-sector recruitment entrepreneurs – on whom both workers and employers depended – played a particularly important role. They can therefore be understood as key brokers for or even gatekeepers of colonial labour recruitment, representing a promising field for future research. Against this background, the article also contributes to the discussion of the changing labour market in GSWA after the colonial war. The case study of a private undertaking emphasises that the local labour market after the war was not only *semi-controlled* in Swakopmund, but highly fluid and in the hands of recruiters and workers from different places; the labour market in GSWA was in transition, shaped by powerful private transcolonial networks of recruitment that operated beyond the reach of the colonial state and to which the construction company had to adapt. The business history of the Swakopmund jetty thus contributes to ongoing research in colonial labour history and refines the existing scholarly literature on how labour was locally mediated, but was negotiated within broader

frameworks of recruitment and migration systems in southern Africa, and across colonial borders.

From a business perspective, the company was walking a fine line between control, force and incentives in order to fight labour turnover. It had to manoeuvre in a new and specific colonial environment, and simultaneously benefited from its advantages such as access to relatively cheap labour – a finding one could read as one major characteristic of the colonial nature of this project, not least in contrast to other international construction sites that they were operating at the same time.

Notes

1. Translation was supported by AI, but revised extensively by Emily Richards. The development of this paper was part of the DFG sponsored network (*Post-)Colonial Business History (PCBH)*, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) – Project Number 527592545.
2. Brockmann, *Briefe*, 9.
3. Butzer, “Gestaltung von Hafengebäuden,” 58–62.
4. Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 385–90.
5. Brockmann, *Briefe*, 9.
6. See for a contemporary description Brockmann, *Briefe*; Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 42–58.
7. For an overview on the rich literature on colonialism and infrastructure see most recently Aselmeyer/Kleinöder, “Colonial Transactions.”
8. Most recently Kalb, *Environing Empire*; Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung* and Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*.
9. Rödel, *Landungsbrücke*, is an exception, but with a focus on technical developments.
10. Schinzinger and Zapp, “*Wirtschaftliche Bedeutung*”; Barth, *Hochfinanz*; In a most recent overview Kleinöder/Todzi, “Reassessing.”
11. As recent examples in German colonialism see Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*; Todzi, “(Post-)Colonial Business History”; Rösser, *Prisms*; Rudolph, *Diamanten*; Kleinöder, “Bridging.”
12. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*; Rudolph, *Diamanten*.
13. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 45–49, 92–113.
15. National Archives of Namibia (hereafter NAN), BSW122/UA21/5, Annual report 1910/11.
16. NAN, BSW122/UA21/4, Annual report 1909/10 (translation).
17. NAN, BSW122/UA21/5, Annual report 1910/11.
18. NAN, BSW122/UA21/4, Annual report 1909/10.
19. NAN, HBS 5/2/4, Final Report Harbour Swakomund, ca. 1906, 13.
20. Corporate Archives [Unternehmensarchiv] of Bilfinger (hereafter UA Bilfinger), A 830, 1911/12 construction contract between the consortium G&B and Flender AG/Benrath bridge construction company and the state treasury of the South West African protectorate with cost estimate (copy).
21. Rödel, *Landungsbrücke*, 81, 86; Federal Archives [Bundesarchiv] (hereafter BArch), R 151/1755, Report on the construction of the new Swakomund landing stage, personnel, June 1912, 26.

22. For more details on Ortloff and the mole see Kalb, *Environing Empire*, 87–88 and Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 50.
23. All citations Ortloff, *Landungsverhältnisse*, 37 (translation); Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 51–2.
24. Ortloff, *Landungsverhältnisse*, 37 (translation). A similar observation can be found from the Woermann-Linie, see Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 399.
25. See recently Yekani, *Koloniale Arbeit*; Rösser, *Prism*; Kleinöder, “Skilled Labor” and Aselmeyer, *Shadow Line*.
26. UA Bilfinger, BB 2001, Construction contract between the consortium G&B and MAN and the state treasury of the Togo protectorate, November 1991, § 11; For the Lomé jetty see Kleinöder, “Skilled Labor”.
27. UA Bilfinger, A 830, 1911/12 construction contract between the consortium G&B and Flender AG/Benrath bridge construction company and the state treasury of the South West African protectorate with cost estimate (copy), § 11 (translation). See also Kleinöder, “Security.”
28. For practices of these particular contracts see Rösser, “Von Afrika nach Eurasien.”
29. UA Bilfinger, A 830, 1911/12 construction contract between the G&B consortium and Flender AG/Benrath bridge construction company and the state treasury of the South West African protectorate with cost estimate (copy), § 11.
30. Scientific Society Swakopmund (hereafter SSS), 2004.13.2, correspondence between Benrath and Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 29.12.1911; 3.1.1912 and 4.1.1912.
31. SSS 2004.13.2, Grün & Bilfinger to construction site, 4.1.1912.
32. Compiled by the author based on SSS, 2004.13.1–19; 33 and 14.8–33, construction company for the Swakopmund jetty.
33. SSS, 2004.14.14, Insurance policies and notifications from ‘Zurich’, on general accident and liability insurance, 1911–1913. For similar results for the recruitment of public railway construction personnel see Beese, *Experten*.
34. UA Bilfinger, A 4442, Vol. I, Minutes of the meeting of the Directorate, 8.7.1912.
For the high mobility of skilled personnel like engineers in the colonial contexts see similar results in the British case, Andersen, *British Engineers*.
35. SSS, 2004.14.13, Job applications at the Swakopmund jetty, 1910–1913.
36. On the invisibility of African labourers at the wooden jetty, see Kalb, *Environing Empire*, 192 and 197.
37. SSS, 2004.13.10 (IV), Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to port authority, 28.5.1914. On the number and context of the Cape workers in DSWA, see, among the first, Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 391–408; Beinart, “Jamani”; in the context of railroad construction Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 213–19; on the diamond fields Rudolph, *Diamanten* and Press, *Blood and Diamonds*.
38. SSS, 2004.13.11, Quandt to construction company for the Jetty Swakopmund, 9.11.1911; 2004.14.11, Rudolf Siebert transport list, 13.12.1912.
39. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 177; most recently for DSWA, among others Rudolph, *Diamanten*; Lyon, *Forged in Genocide* and Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco*.
40. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 176–77.
41. *Ibid.*, 183 (translation). For their fate as coerced workers at the port in the war see recently Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 105–9 and Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*, 375–81.
42. NAN, BSW122/UA21/5, Annual report 1909/10.
43. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 132.
44. *Ibid.*, 139.

45. Ibid., 151.
46. See in detail recently for the diamond fields Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 162–73 and Rudolph, *Diamanten*, 71–123.
47. SSS, 2004.13.10 (IV), Report District Office Swakopmund to Port Authority, 27.2.1913 (translation).
48. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 176.
49. Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 377–85.
50. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 213; Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 282.
51. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 212.
52. SSS, 2004.14.9, Swakopmund jetty construction company to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913.
See for Walvis Bay Schürmann, *Der graue Unterstrom*, 81–141.
53. SSS, 2004.14.9, Correspondence Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913 (translation).
54. Own count according to SSS, 2004.13.1-14.33, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 1911–1914; this is also confirmed by the calculation for the construction of a canteen, 2004.14.18, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, Mannheim administrative office to the construction site, 19.6.1913.
55. See Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 106–7.
56. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 176–242; regarding the increasing regulation of Ovambo migration from 1908, see Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 146.
57. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913; Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Woermann-Linie Swakopmund, 9.7.1912.
58. BArch, R 151/1755, Report from Port Authority to the Colonial Governorate in Windhoek, 12.12.1912, 64.
59. For recruitment practices, especially in the north of GSWA Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 132–201; Rudolph, *Diamanten*, 74–102.
60. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Administration Mannheim, 27.11.1913.
61. Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*, 377–402.
62. All citations SSS, 2004.14.9., Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, Cape Town to Gruen & Bilfinger Mannheim, 19.9.1911 (translation).
63. SSS, 2004.14.9, Correspondence Cape Workers, 1911–1913.
64. For the practices of these recruiters, e.g. Siebert, see Rudolph, *Diamanten*, 82–9.
65. SSS, 2004.13.10 (IV), Report District Office Swakopmund to Port Authority, 27.2.1913; 2004.14.11, Correspondence with Werbebureau Rudolf Siebert, 1912–1914.
66. Rudolph, *Empire through Lives* (forthcoming); BArch 1002/1643, Personnel file Rudolf Siebert, 1901–1903. I thank Mona Rudolph for this helpful information.
67. SSS, 2004.13.11, Quandt to Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 6.11.1911.
68. SSS, 2004.13.11, Quandt to Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 9.11.1911.
69. SSS, 2004.14.13, Reference for F.A.G. Quandt from Bachstein-Koppel in Windhoek, 17.3.1911 (translation).
70. Ibid.
71. SSS, 2004.14.13, Quandt to Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 6.11.1911.
72. E.g. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Woermann-Linie Swakopmund, 9.7.1912. For more information on Woerman in

- Swakopmund and the Damara- und Namaqua-Handelsgesellschaft see Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*, 364–85.
73. SSS, 2004.13.1, Inventory List, May 1916.
 74. UA Bilfinger, 830, 1911/12 construction contract between the consortium G&B and Flender AG/Benrath bridge construction company and the state treasury of the South West African protectorate with cost estimate (copy), § 15.
 75. SSS, 2004.13.1, Inventory List, May 1916.
 76. UA Bilfinger, 380 1911/12 construction contract between the consortium G&B and Flender AG/Benrath bridge construction company and the state treasury of the South West African protectorate with cost estimate (copy).
 77. Kleinöder, “A Place in the Sun.”
 78. E.g. SSS, 2004.13.2, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund Mannheim to Construction Site, 27.2.1914; for the similar case of the Gutehoffnungshütte in Cameroon see Kleinöder, “Skilled Labor” and “Bridging.”
 79. SSS 2004.13.6, Xaver Schmid to Grün & Bilfinger, 6.3.1914.
 80. Ibid.
 81. SSS.2004.13.6, Response, 3.4.1914.
 82. SSS, 2004. 13.2, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund Mannheim to construction site, 22.4.1912.
 83. NAN BSW122/UA21/4, Annual report 1909/10.
 84. The sources do not give evidence whether this was a self-chosen or given name by his employers. SSS, 2004.13.33, Record Book Herero Hans.
 85. Ibid.
 86. Ibid.
 87. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 53–4.
 88. SSS, 2004.14.9, Riesenkamp and Wick to Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, 4.12.1914; Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, Cape Town to Gruen & Bilfinger Swakopmund, 6.12.1911; 2004.13.33, Record Books Nicolaas Boyes, Ismael Fagir, Samodin Johnson.
 89. NAN, HBS 20/7/5, Wages of the workers, 1902–1907.
 90. Based on 9 h work per day and 26 days/month. The given wages are average earning that can only give a general orientation, cf. Ritter and Tenfelde, *Arbeiter*, 488.
 91. This aligns with findings from Sebastian Beese on the remuneration of public engineers in colonial railroad construction with comparatively high remuneration and extra allowances for the colonial construction site. Similar findings have been pointed out for the British case. Beese *Experten*, 162–91. Unfortunately the precise income of the engineers Riesenkamp, Wick and Richter is not documented in the sources.
 92. SSS, 2004.14.9., Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, Cape Town to Grün & Bilfinger Mannheim, 19.9.1911, an example for weekly food provisions is also included.
 93. Ritter and Tenfelde estimate average working hours between 9 and 10 h. Ritter and Tenfelde, *Arbeiter*, 364–65.
 94. SSS, 2004.14.9, Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, Cape Town to Grün & Bilfinger Swakopmund, 28.11.1911.
 95. SSS, 2004.14.9, Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery to Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 1.4.1913.
 96. E.g. SSS 2004.13.6, Xaver Schmid to Grün & Bilfinger, 6.3.1914; SSS, 2004.13.3, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 10.4.1912.
 97. Ibid.
 98. SSS, 2004.13.2, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund Mannheim to construction site, 12.4.1912.

99. SSS, 2004.14.14, Insurance policies and correspondence with Zürich Insurance, accident and liability insurance, 1911–13.
100. SSS, 2004. 13.10 (IV), Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Port Authority, 25.3.1914; 2004.13.2, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund Mannheim to construction site, 3.1.1914.
101. SSS, 2004.14.12, City Council Swakopmund to District Office Swakopmund, 5.9.1912 (translation).
102. Ibid.
103. SSS, 2004.13.33, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913.
104. BArch R 151/1755, Port Authority to Colonial Governorate in Windhoek, 12.12.1912, 64.
105. Lyon, *Forged in Genocide*, 214.
106. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913.
107. All quotations taken from SSS, 2004.13.10, Otavi Minen- und Eisenbahngesellschaft to Port Authority Swakopmund, 9.10.1911 (translation).
108. SSS 2004.13.6, Xaver Schmid to Grün & Bilfinger, 6.3.1914.
109. SSS, 2004.13.2, Correspondence Benrath with construction company for the Jetty Swakopmund, 4.1.1912; 2004.14.12, Letter from the construction management to lawyer Gumprecht, 21.9.1912.
110. SSS, 2004.14.12, Bauunternehmung für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to District Office Swakopmund (Criminal Investigation Office), 14.8.1912.
111. SSS, 2004.13.10 (III), Pohl to Port Authority, 26.8.1912.
112. E.g. SSS, 2004.13.2, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund Mannheim to construction site, 3.7.1914. More in SSS 2004.14.10.
113. Evidence for physical fights among the German workers on site e.g. SSS, 2004.14.4, Bauleitung Swakopmund to administrative office Mannheim, 26.2.1914. See Rösser for alcohol at German railway construction in East Africa, Rösser, “Absolute Anarchy.”
114. E.g. SSS, 2004.13.10 (IV), Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 14.2.1914.
115. See, for example, SSS, 2004.13.1.4, attachment of earnings, 20.5.1914; 2004.14.14, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 26.2.1914 and 2004.12.25, Mannheim administrative office to Swakopmund, 8.9.1913; 2004.13.10 (IV), Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 14.2.1914.
116. SSS, 2004.14.11, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 24.2.1914 and 27.3.1914.
117. E.g. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Swakopmund police authority, 1.8.1912; Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, 24.8.1912.
118. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Swakopmund police authority, 26.1.1912 and 1.8.1912.
119. Ibid. (translation).
120. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, 24.8.1912 (translation).
121. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, 24.8.1912 (translation).
122. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery, 24.8.1912; Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to district office (police authority), 29.8.1912.

123. SSS, 2004.14.9, Poppe, Schunhoff & Guttery to Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund, 24.8.1912 (translation).
124. SSS, 2004.14.9, Bauunternehmen für die Landungsbrücke Swakopmund to Mannheim administrative office, 27.11.1913 (translation).
125. NAN, ADM 234/SWAKOP97, Interview Riesenkamp by the South African authorities, c. 1918.

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