

Secondary Publication



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Reassessing Germany's Colonial Economies : Actors, Dynamics and Legacies : An Introduction

Date of secondary publication: 03.12.2025

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-111989x

Primary publication

Kleinöder, Nina; Todzi, Kim Sebastian (2025): Reassessing Germany's Colonial Economies : Actors, Dynamics and Legacies : An Introduction, in: VSWG: Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Wiesbaden: Steiner, vol. 112, no. 2, pp. 148–157, doi: 10.25162/vswg-2025-0005

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EINLEITUNG

VIERTELJAHRSSCHRIFT FÜR SOZIAL- UND WIRTSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE 112, 2025/2, 148–157
 DOI 10.25162/VSWG-2025-0005, (CC-BY 4.0)

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Reassessing Germany's Colonial Economies: Actors, Dynamics and Legacies

An Introduction

1. Introduction

Economic motives were central to the beginning of German colonial policy. In June 1884, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck made the following declaration to the German Reichstag on the question of German colonial expansion:

Our intention is not to establish provinces but rather to defend the free development of commercial enterprises, by which I mean the most advanced, including those that acquire sovereignty – a commercial sovereignty whereby the enterprise ultimately remains in a dependent relationship with the German Empire and stays under its patronage – and protect them against attacks from their immediate neighbors and from oppression and damage wrought by other European powers.¹

In Bismarck's view, these “most advanced” enterprises were key to the foundation of Germany's colonial empire. At the same time, they were enterprises and entrepreneurs who, by the end of the 19th century, were not merely pushing for unconditional global free trade, but calling increasingly for the empire to protect their economic interests in places such as the African West coast, for example, or arguing more or less openly for the economic advantages of a formal German colonization (Hübbe-Schleiden, Woermann, *inter alia*).² Yet despite booming interest in colonial history over the last twenty years, this economic cornerstone of German colonialism has long been sidelined by the research community.

Following the production of a large body of work in the 1960s and 1970s,³ including groundbreaking works on the economic history of colonialism, German colonial historiography from the late 1990s onward was nourished primarily by the perspectives of global history and postcolonial studies. Much of the work produced around this time was influenced by the cultural turn in the humanities. It explored, for example, “Co-

- 1 German Reichstag Session Reports. Legislative Period V, Session IV, Volume 2, Berlin 1884, p. 1062 [translation].
- 2 Cf. Bade (1975); Gründer (2022); Todzi (2021).
- 3 Cf. e.g. Drechsler (1966); Bley (1968); Hausen (1970); Wirz (1972); Stoecker (1977).

lonial Fantasies” or cultural manifestations of colonialism.⁴ More recently, numerous studies have begun to focus once again on the social and economic history of German colonialism, placing more emphasis on the materialistic foundations of German colonial rule and its consequences.⁵ With this in mind, we organized a panel at the German Historikertag in Leipzig in September 2023 in order to bring together current research strands.⁶ Some of the results are presented in this volume. Although the panel successfully assembled a range of exciting contributions to this dynamic field, the selection presented here represents only part of the discussions. Which papers could ultimately be included in this volume depended on various factors, including differing timelines and editorial processes. The chapters featured here, therefore, highlight specific aspects of the themes explored at the event, with a particular focus on the roles of companies, entrepreneurs, and labor in the colonies.

2. State of Research, Topics and Recent Approaches

After a long phase of culture-focused studies, scholars of German colonial history are now returning to economic themes; similarly, economic and business history scholars are once again addressing colonial contexts, prompted not least by the dynamic of the new history of capitalism, recent perspectives on global value chains and questions of global entanglements more generally, such as the concept of multinational enterprises (Jones, Wilkins, inter alia) or emerging markets (e. g. Harvard Business School).⁷

This topic is especially prominent in the dynamic field of global labor history, which has lately contributed numerous publications on German colonial rule and labor relations and offers insights into the practical organization of labor in colonial contexts. Inspired by concepts such as *agency* and *Eigen-Sinn* or self-will,⁸ these studies focus on labor relations in order to shed light on the balance of power and authority under German colonization while also explicitly addressing the individual agency of the various players including, not least, the colonized people. They broaden the perspective to encompass other forms of labor beside European contract labor, taking into account forced labor

4 Kundrus (2003); Langbehn (2012); Zantop (1997).

5 Kleinöder/Todzi (2024). See also approaches centring on commodity chains, “commodity frontiers” and colonial/imperial entanglements, especially in global history, e. g. Beckert (2015); Linneweh-Kaçmaz (2024); Rudolph (2025); Commodity Frontiers. Arenas in Global History (ed. By Sven Beckert et al.), *Journal of Global History* 16 (2021).

6 Mathias Hack, conference report: HT 2023: German imperialism revisited, in: H-Soz-Kult, 09.12.2023, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-140453> [05.02.2025].

7 E. g. Wilkins (1970, 1974); Jones (2005, 2013); da Silva Lopes/Lubinski/Tworek (2021); Austin/Dávila/Jones (2017); Beckert/Rockman (2016); Beckert/Desan (2018); for a critical approach to commodity chains, global value chains and business history, see Hesse/Neveling (2019).

8 Lüdtkke (1993).

and informal types of labor as well as recruitment, education, training, and the mobility of the workforce in colonial and imperial contexts.⁹

A further and in some respects closely connected dynamic field that is emerging is that of infrastructure and logistics, particularly in relation to colonial railway construction, but also more generally to logistics and port connections as well as roads, contracting, electrification and so on. Based on “tools of empire”¹⁰ and the narrative of “railway imperialism”¹¹, a broad field of research has become established in recent years dedicated to the study of colonial “development” beyond the aspect of military and political authority and control and focusing also and especially on German colonies.¹²

By contrast – and following the trend of earlier studies – the wider implications of colonialism in terms of its embedment in and effects on the national economy are still relatively under-researched. Building on some instructive initial studies by Francesca Schinzingler in the 1980s¹³ and notably Boris Barth (including cases beyond the bounds of formal colonialism, such as South America and especially Brazil),¹⁴ scholars have recently begun to take a fresh look at the interrelationship of the state and business sector, outside the context of political agitation,¹⁵ a notable example being the role of Deutsche Bank and others as funders of German expansion.¹⁶ New in this respect is the perspective on the role of taxation, which serves to highlight not just German fiscal policy but also practices of domination and rule of German colonialists.¹⁷ Contextualized within the so-called “first wave of globalization”, the reach and positioning of the German colonial economy are also considered, for example by broadening the circle of protagonists beyond the limits of direct foreign trade relations, for example.¹⁸ Following the shift to a global historical perspective, issues of ethical consumption and moral conflict are now also being explored in the context of colonial trade and economic activity.¹⁹ At the same

9 Cf. in recent years e.g. Haschemi Yekani (2019); Rösser (2024); Oestermann (2022); Lyon (2024); Rudolph (2025); Kreienbaum (2019); Kleinöder (2022c); Press (2021).

10 Headrick (1981).

11 Davis/Wilburn/Robinson (1991).

12 Cf. Decker/Aselmeyer (2019): SHOT Panel “Railway Imperialism Reconsidered: Colonialism, Infrastructure, and Power”, Milan; e.g. Rösser (2024); Greiner (2022); Todzi (2023); Kleinöder (2020, 2022c); Kalb (2022); J. Decker (2020); Beese (2021); Drengk (2022); van der Straeten/Hasenöhl (2016).

13 Cf. Schinzingler (1995, 1984); Schinzingler/Zapp (1979).

14 Cf. Barth (1999, 1995).

15 Cf. Kleinöder (2020); Todzi (2021).

16 Cf. e.g. recently in the abstract, but without specific new studies Plumpe/Nützenadel/Schenk (2020), pp. 79–164.

17 Cf. Döllefeld (2024), as well as the current project “Die Konturen des Kolonialstaats. Steuer- und Haushaltspolitik in den deutschen Kolonien (1884–1914)” (Marc Buggeln, University of Flensburg), URL: <https://www.uni-flensburg.de/ices/projekte/history-of-interconnectedness-migration-integration/die-konturen-des-kolonialstaats-steuer-und-haushaltspolitik-in-den-deutschen-kolonien-1884-1914> [15.01.2024].

18 Cf. also new database and reflections on the globalization of foreign trade under the German Empire published by Hungerland/Lampe (2021). On the topic of suppliers, construction firms, etc., see Kleinöder (2020, 2022a).

19 Lentz (2020); Todzi (2022).

time, scholars are looking outside the colonial metropolises of Berlin and Hamburg to places such as the Rhineland or the southwest of Germany.²⁰

Such research focuses not least on how colonial revisionism and the German colonial economy beyond formal colonialism continued to resonate after the rupture caused by the First World War. Topics include continuities with colonial actors in the post-war period,²¹ the relationship between colonialism and national socialism,²² or the conditions and implications of integration into a colonial world order prior to the formal colonial period of the German Empire, as in the study of European regions as “slavery hinterlands.”²³ Colonial legacies are examined not least as reflected through entrepreneurial activity after 1945, and increasingly in conjunction with it.²⁴

At the same time, interest in colonial issues is also growing among (German) business history scholars.²⁵ Such discussions recently gave rise to the DFG network (*Post-Colonial Business History (PCBH)*),²⁶ whose aim is to facilitate an exchange on methodology and theory and a broadening of perspective in terms of the overlap between two distinct research fields and approaches: on the one hand, (global) historical approaches to imperial and post-imperial entanglements, and on the other, business history, or the history of organized business and business activity more generally. This network highlights dynamics that are becoming increasingly prominent within the various research fields in the German-speaking world and addresses the international trend reflected in the growing number of English-language studies in the intersection between the two fields.²⁷ In this way, it supports the attempt to research and systematize the links between economic and colonial history, taking into account the dynamic and complex nature of the connections between European and non-European areas and analyzing the mutual interactions of businesses within these contexts.²⁸

3. Aim, Scope and Contribution

The essays in this volume are intended to stimulate a more connected approach to the study of colonial history, global history and economic history within this research field. To this end, the role of various actors and their interactions within the colonial economic system are analyzed. The picture that emerges shows that German colonialism in-

20 Cf. e.g. Bechhaus-Gerst/Michels/Fechner (2022); Gißibl/Niederau (2021).

21 Cf. e.g. Authaler (2018); Kleinöder (2022b); Todzi (2024).

22 Cf. e.g. Zimmerer (2023); Gordon/O’Sullivan (2022); Matheis (2024).

23 Brahm/Rosenhaft (2016).

24 Cf. e.g. Lubinski (2023); Faust (2020); Kleinschmidt/Ziegler (2018).

25 Cf. e.g. Linneweh-Kaçmaz (2024); S. Decker (2022); Lubinski (2023); Faust (2021).

26 Cf. PCBH Network at GEPRIS <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/527592545?language=en>; PCBH Network Blog <https://pcbh.hypotheses.org/> [24.01.2025].

27 Hopkins (2020, 2024); Austin (2017); Roy (2018); S. Decker (2022); Gardner/Roy (2020) (including in new edition).

28 On this aspect, see e.g. contributions by network members such as Linneweh-Kaçmaz (2024); Oestermann (2022); Rösser (2024); Rudolph (2025); Todzi (2023).

volved not only exploitation, oppression and even destruction, but also complex interactions and negotiation processes between Africans and Europeans according to their respective aims and strategies.

The main emphasis in this special issue is on the business history perspective. In this respect, these essays are a contribution toward overcoming the “monolithic concepts” of businesses as actors that have dominated German colonial historiography to date:²⁹ Here, businesses are understood as diverse organizational units that not only differed from each other but were also in many cases more internally heterogeneous than they appear from the outside. The present essays represent a step toward opening the black box of the business and analyze its multilayered meanings in colonial contexts.

Geographically speaking, the papers focus on a representative selection of different types of colonies.³⁰ German South West Africa is an example of a settlement colony, characterized chiefly by the acquisition and settlement of land by Europeans. Cameroon, on the other hand, was an exploitation colony, dominated by economic exploitation in the form of plantation management and trade.³¹ Considering these two specific cases allows a better understanding of the general dynamics of German colonialism and an analysis of the various consequences of settler and exploitation colonialism.

In terms of timeline, the focus is on the period of German formal colonial rule from 1884–1919, with some references to the years preceding and following it. In this way, attention is drawn to the formal dimension of German colonialism, as well as to issues such as cooperation and conflict between various state and private actors within these specific colonial situations.

In the first paper, Kim Todzi presents a programmatic refinement within the field of (post-)colonial business history. The growing research impetus and increasing number of case studies and accessed sources have made it both possible and necessary to take a more nuanced approach to business activity in colonial contexts. The proposed working definition of expatriate colonial businesses as firms that exhibit a specific set of characteristics – including the seat of control and business activities, the beneficiaries of colonial structures, and active contributors to the establishment and maintenance of the colonial order – opens up a broader range of empirical contexts. According to Todzi, businesses functioned as products and producers of political-economic and hence also colonial relations. By adopting a long-term perspective on the development of the Wermann group from pre-colonial times into the post-war period, it is possible to extend our understanding of German colonial history beyond the limits of formal colonial rule by a nation state, as exemplified by the continuity of the group’s business activity in these contexts.

In the second paper, Nina Kleinöder examines the role of the Gutehoffnungshütte (GHH) within German colonialism, notably in the context of bridge building in Cameroon. Drawing on company archive material, her essay shows how the GHH, a key play-

29 Kleinöder/Todzi (2024).

30 Cf. Osterhammel/Jansen (2012), pp. 15–18.

31 Cf. in the abstract, Conrad (2012), pp. 28–34.

er of German industrialization in the mining and mechanical engineering sector whose activities included operating its own mines and steel mills as well as turning their output into steam engines, bridge components or rails, also played a significant role in colonial contexts. Kleinöder considers the GHH's strategic expectations with regard to colonial markets and explains how the company actively helped to shape colonial relations by using knowledge transfer and technical adaptations to local conditions to strengthen its position in this market. The case study of bridge building along Cameroon's Central Railway shows how research into the reach of Germany's colonial economy can be extended beyond the narrow consideration of macroeconomic profit and loss accounts by means of concrete business examples. Ultimately, these colonial enterprises were part of a wider internationalization strategy on the part of the GHH.

In the third paper, Tristan Oestermann examines the role of African traders as economic intermediaries in Cameroon's rubber trade during the German colonial period. Oestermann argues that colonial rule opened up new opportunities for profit and social advancement that were exploited by some African (sub-)entrepreneurs. Drawing on biographical examples, Oestermann demonstrates how these traders used their positions to maximize profits, often by means of violence, fraud and deception. Oestermann emphasizes that the rise of African traders highlights the limits of colonial rule and shows how Africans influenced the development of colonial capitalism, often acting contrary to the colonial power's agenda. His essay thus underlines the complexity of the colonial economy, in which African actors were not just victims, but also active participants.

This volume as a whole, then, is intended as an opening gambit, and constitutes an attempt to bring together the latest research in this field within the German context. It has a deliberately interdisciplinary focus, with the aim of linking together the different sub-disciplines and perspectives of historical scholarship – in this case global (labor) history, colonial history and business history – and spark a dialogue between them. Furthermore, it shows how studying businesses and business activity can offer a very practical way of analyzing imperial metropolises and colonial periphery within a single analytical field as per Cooper and Stoler, uncovering instances of mutual interaction, and placing greater emphasis on the “coloniality” of the imperial economy.³² As such, its aim is not least to provide impetus for future research in the field of social and economic history in order to make the explicitly colonial dimension more central to our understanding of the German Empire, foreign trade in the 19th and 20th centuries, and issues around the first wave of globalization.

Translation by Sharon Howe

32 Kleinöder/Todzi (2024); Stoler/Cooper (1997).

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