

Decolonize Göttingen – Down with the Southwest-Africa monument!

Abstract

The “Southwest-Africa monument” in Göttingen has recently been covered in red and green paint. The war memorial was erected in 1910 to commemorate soldiers from Göttingen who died during the violent suppression of the uprising of the Herero and Nama (1904-1908) in present day Namibia against German colonial rule. The inscription in the stone block romanticizes the atrocities committed by the German army in a war which is now officially termed a genocide; and the monument thereby contributes to a racist culture of remembrance. Since the 1970s, the monument has repeatedly been the subject of political controversy, over the course of which activists demanded its removal or resignation. The city of Göttingen, however, has always argued in favor of keeping the monument and even installed a Perspex disc to protect its inscription from further damage.

In support of the global protests against a culture of remembrance that glorifies colonialism and racism and its proponents, we demand that the city of Göttingen immediately removes the war monument and to genuinely address the issue of the city’s (post)colonial heritage.

Tear down this shit! Stop racism!

The violent death of George Floyd, a 46 year old black man killed by four white police officers in Minneapolis, United States of America, and the massive protests against police violence and racism that followed were accompanied by a worldwide movement to tear down monuments and statues honoring racist persons or events. In Great Britain, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was toppled over and thrown into the harbor basin, in Belgium, the statues of Leopold II were covered in red paint and in the Netherlands, the monument that commemorated Van Heutsz, former governor of the Dutch East-Indies, was supplemented with an anti-racist message.¹

In Germany, too, the efforts to confront society with its colonial past and postcolonial present have increased. The battles against inappropriate street names and places of remembrance which romanticize colonialism and colonialists have been fought for years with great vehemence. In the light of the ongoing protests, however, we demand more than information boards and symbolic gestures of reconciliation!

The Southwest-Africa monument and Göttingen’s colonial past

“Tear down this shit” is the programmatic title of an interactive website on which monuments and places honoring colonial crimes and criminals can be marked.² For Göttingen, there are two entries thus far: For one, there is the Blumenbach institute, named after the German scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who coined the term “Caucasian” to describe European populations in the early 19th century. Blumenbach’s works in comparative anatomy and anthropology have been highly influential throughout Europe and contributed significantly to the emergence of a scientific racism. His classification of human “varieties” has been widely used until the publication of Darwin’s works. Blumenbach’s research was of particular impor-

1 <https://taz.de/Black-Lives-Matter-Protest-in-England!/5692293/>; <https://taz.de/Black-Lives-Matter-Protest-in-Belgien!/5688000/>; <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/gemeente-doet-aangifte-wegens-bekladding-monument-indie-nederland~b6ee1662/>.

2 <https://www.tearthisdown.com/de/>.

tance in establishing the practice of delineating different human “races” through the measuring of their skulls.³ Although he did not agree with ordering the “races” by their relative value, his description of the humans of the “Caucasian” type as the oldest and most beautiful of human “races” laid the foundation for more explicitly hierarchical theories of racial difference. Currently, the Basisgruppe Umweltwissenschaften from Göttingen University raises the issue of the institute’s racist and colonial past. They demand the renaming of the Johann-Friedrich-Blumenbach institute and an active reappraisal of the historic responsibility of German biology, anthropology and psychology in normalizing these misanthropic narratives.⁴

The second entry on the website marks a war memorial. It commemorates four soldiers of the 2nd Kurhessische Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 82, who were killed during the violent suppression of the uprising of the Herero and Nama against German colonial rule in “German Southwest-Africa”, present day Namibia, between 1904 and 1908.

Although there already exists a number of texts and publications concerning the origin and reception of the controversial memorial⁵, not many people living in Göttingen are even aware of the existence of the massive stone block standing tall at the juncture of Geismar Landstraße and Friedländer Weg. It was erected in 1910 and was one of the first colonial memorials in Germany. This is no coincidence.

Although Göttingen only had around 30.000 inhabitants in 1900, the excitement about Germany’s imperial endeavors was palpable in the city dominated by the educated bourgeoisie and student culture. At the university, academics of all disciplines taught about the advantages and legitimacy of German colonial expansion. Colonial products like coffee and chocolate were in high demand and a colonial exhibition hosted in Göttingen in 1909 was a financial success, with revenues amounting to 11.000 Marks. Men and women from the Göttingen bourgeoisie were active in local branches of the German colonial society and Christian church communities from the entire region supported the missions in their endeavor to convert the ‘heathens’.⁶

In 1904, while the people of the Herero and Nama rose up against the brutal deprivation of their means of livelihood, the local newspaper in Göttingen published several calls to enlist for the war against the rebels. From the Göttingen regiment, around 100 soldiers volunteered to participate in the war efforts, 42 of which actually fought in the war that is nowadays officially recognized as a genocide. In the brutal fighting that ensued, between approximately 60.000 to 80.000 Herero and Nama lost their lives. In the aftermath of the war, the San community became the victim of what was then called “bushmen hunting”. With the explicit permission of their superiors, German soldiers mercilessly killed members of this tribe when they came across them during their patrols.⁷ On the other side, 676 German soldiers died and another 689 succumbed to diseases.⁸ In honor of the four dead Göttingen soldiers, the local regi-

3 Blumenbach’s collection of skulls is still kept today in the center for anatomy at Göttingen University medical institute.

4 The full article of the Basisgruppe Umweltwissenschaften can be accessed on their Facebook page: tinyurl.com/BgUwStatuen. Last accessed on 30.06.2020.

5 An overview over the history of the monument and current opinions are delivered by an article in the Göttinger Tageblatt, published on 30.06.2020 with the title: „Zersägt, zertrümmert und ergänzt – das Südwestafrika-Denkmal in Göttingen“, in which the Wissmann memorial in Bad Lauterberg is also mentioned.

<https://www.goettinger-tageblatt.de/Die-Region/Goettingen/Suedwestafrika-Denkmal-in-Goettingen-sorgt-fuer-Kontroversen>.

6 Exhibition „Göttingen – a colonial metropolis?“ at Göttingen University (March-April 2017), Project seminar conducted by Prof. Dr. Rebekka Habermas/Karolin Wetjen, Seminar für Mittlere und Neuere Geschichte.

7 Casper W. Erichsen, “What the Elders Used to Say”. Namibian Perspectives on the Last Decade of German Colonial Rule, Windhoek 2008, S. 7.

ment built a memorial in 1910, to which a bronze eagle was added in 1913. The inscription on a marble board on the front side facing the road reads:

*“For the emperor and the empire died in Southwest-Africa 1904-1910 from the 2. Kurhess. Inf. Regt. Nr.82: Sergt. Groß, 12. Komp. – Gefr. Roßplesch, 3. Komp. – Reiter Burghardt, 2. Komp. In eternal memory, dedicated in gratefulness and sorrow from the officers, sergeants and comrades of the 2n Kurhessische Inf.-Regt. 82.”*⁹

The controversy around Göttingen’s (post-)colonial heritage

The city of Göttingen's fondness for this monument lasts until the present day. In the songs, publications and festivities of the regiment, the participation of the Göttingen regiment in the genocide was glorified in the years after the erection of the monument and the individual soldiers were honored as “fighters for Germany’s colonial possessions.” In a memorandum of 1937, it is proudly stated that the bronze eagle “is watching with spread wings over our unique Africa memorial and is waiting for the day when the ‘people without space’ will finally reclaim this land for settlement and resources.”¹⁰ In the 1920s and 1930s, during the high time of German colonial revisionism and in conjunction with the fascist ideology, the affirmative embrace of the imperial monolith is not very surprising. The subsequent justification and vindication of the racist monument by Göttingen politicians until the present day, however, raises a lot of questions.

Since protests against the monument started in the 1970s, the city administration never got tired of expressing its refusal to engage critically with its colonial past in any way. After the theft of the bronze eagle and the marble plate by the communist student association of Lower Saxony, the city was quick to replace the latter. The replica not only contained the original, war glorifying, inscription, but also the following addition:

*“The bonze eagle and the marble plate have been stolen by unknown persons on 07.04.1978.”*¹¹

The proposal of the “Grüne Alternative Liste”¹² to build a memorial for victims of German colonialism in the former colony Southwest-Africa in November 1989 did not find a majority in the city’s Culture Committee. A memorial board set up on 15th January 2006 by the “Göttingen coalition against colonialism”, which criticized the honorable commemoration of mass murders, was removed by the city authorities only five days later.¹³ The protests, however, did not stop. In January 2007, unknown persons vandalized the memory plate replica of 1981. Instead of taking up the opportunity to finally get rid of the memorial, the city reacted by installing a Perspex disc to protect it from further damage.

Because the protests would not stop, the city authorities were eager to criminalize them. In April 2007, the site of the memorial was provided with a small information board for the first time. During its inauguration, a telling incident happened: Since those responsible for the

8 Jürgen Zimmerer/Joachim Zeller (Hg.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Bonn 2016.

9 <https://denkmale.goettingen.de/denkmale/sued-west-afrika-denkmal.html>.

10 Ernst Dieterichs, *Festschrift zum 4. Regiments-Appell des ehemaligen 2. Kurhessischen Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 82 und zur Feier der Wiederaufrichtung des Infanterie-Regiments 82, Göttingen 1937*, S. 17. Ebda., S. 14-18.

11 https://denkmale.goettingen.de/pics/medien/1_1441384600/suedwestafrika.pdf.

12 Predecessor of the Green Party.

13 The text of the memorial board can be read here <https://www.goest.de/kriegsdenkmal.htm#kriegsdenkmal>.

damaging of the old memory plate were still unidentified, two police officers in civil clothing attended the ceremony, hoping to catch the perpetrators. Instead, they ended up threatening a press photographer and thereby unveiled their cover.¹⁴ The text on the information board is in line with the city's constant refusal to sincerely reflect on its colonial heritage:

“The memorial was erected in 1910 to commemorate the members of the “protection force” in the former German colony German Southwest-Africa (today’s Namibia), who died during the war against the Herero and Nama (1904-1908). In this war, which has been fought with great ruthlessness by the German Reich, several thousand members of both African communities were killed. The war against the Herero and Nama is considered as one of the greatest atrocities in German colonial history.

The memorial originally consisted of a stone pedestal and memory plate, which was extended by a bronze eagle in 1913. The eagle was stolen in 1978, dismantled, and the head was auctioned in favor of the Zimbabwe Africa National Union (Zanu). In 1999, the eagle’s head was handed over to the Namibia University, where it was exhibited in memory of the oppression of the people of Africa and their resistance.

18.04.07.”¹⁵

Whereas the reference to the war “which has been fought with great ruthlessness” is, of course, desirable, the question remains why “one of the greatest atrocities in German colonial history” even needs to be honored with a memorial. Isn’t it obvious that a war which has caused the death of thousands of people is not a cause for celebration? In Germany, this notion is far from common sense.

Moreover, the shallow and incongruent memory politics of the city are exemplified in the second paragraph of the information board, in which the trajectory of the stolen bronze eagle is reproduced. Despite the police still searching for the people responsible for the second “defilement” of the monument in 2007, the city now prides itself with the transfer of the eagle’s head as a gesture of reconciliation to the University of Namibia. This is particularly ironic taking into account the city's idleness in this matter: After its auctioning through the communist student association the eagle’s head was in private hands until, after some detours, it had ended up in the former colony. This did not deter the city’s political class from presenting itself as the righteous authority when it comes to memory politics.

Ideological continuities and misguided politics of remembrance

This behavior mirrors the overall failure of Göttingen to engage critically with its colonial past. The recent debate in the local newspaper on the occasion of the coloring of the monument, in which, apart from Prof. Regina Bendix, only elderly white men are given a voice, mirrors the general support for the preservation of the status quo in public discourse. The retired professor for historic regional studies, Peter Aufgebauer, emerged as a particularly diligent proponent of monument protection. In an interview with the daily newspaper, he describes the memorial as “part of our identity”, which needs to be analyzed critically but not removed.¹⁶ What he considers as part of “Europe’s cultural heritage” becomes clear a few paragraphs later: Many cultural artefacts and artwork from the former colonies could, in his opinion, only have been preserved through the conservation and restauration efforts of European scientists. This line of argument is known in the social and cultural sciences as the “salvage

14 <https://www.goest.de/kriegsdenkmal.htm>.

15 <https://www.goest.de/kriegsdenkmal.htm>.

16 <https://www.goettinger-tageblatt.de/Die-Region/Goettingen/Suedwestafrika-Denkmal-in-Goettingen-sorgt-fuer-Kontroversen>.

paradigm”: It is Europe’s responsibility to preserve cultural goods from all parts of the world since the societies from which they originate are supposedly not capable of performing this task themselves. Before the background of the restitution debate of the recent years, Aufgebauer’s statement shows how deeply rooted this line of thought still is in European thinking. In the light of his extremely biased views it appears particularly problematic that Aufgebauer was assigned to provide the historic background in a speech during the ceremonial opening of the information board in 2007.

Whereas the historian at least acknowledges that the recent destructions and defilements of historic monuments were sparked by legitimate protests, a journalist of the local newspaper compares the tearing down of statues of racists by the “Black Lives Matter” movement to the Chinese cultural revolution.¹⁷ In his commentary, he suggests that the current “hyper liberal” society is already sensitized for the crimes of the past. This is why, according to him, the dismantling of the stone block would only pave the way for historic ignorance.

Who, however, decides which events and persons are worth commemorating? Who is included in shaping the culture of remembrance, that defines the ways in which we look at the past and informs our understanding of history, and who is not?

In Göttingen, it was always German men from the political and military class who were in charge of how our past is represented in the public sphere. It surely is no coincidence that nowadays it is the same socio-demographic group which fights so committedly for the preservation of these spaces of remembrance. Another prominent case in point is the Bismarck tower. Inaugurated in 1896, when Otto von Bismarck was no longer chancellor but still alive, it was constructed during Germany’s imperial phase, when the chancellor commissioned to place several estates of German merchants abroad under the “protection” of the German Reich. In 1884, parts of today’s Namibia, Togo, Cameroon and New Guinea were put under the empire’s patronage and later transformed into colonies. The Bismarck tower is a popular tourist destination in the Göttingen forest until today.

Other colonial entanglements are even less present in the collective memory of the city. For example, little is known about the existence of the Göttingen prison camp Ebertal, where non-European and colonial soldiers were interned during the First World War. Some of them became subjects for the studies undertaken by scholars from the Göttingen university. One of these soldiers, a Baluchi named Schadad Khan, contracted tuberculosis shortly after his arrival and died in August 1918 in Göttingen.¹⁸ He was buried in the city cemetery, where his tombstone still stands today. However, even back then the memory of colonized people was not held in high regard: The inscription in the tombstone changed his name in eurocentric ignorance to Sher Dil Khan, which makes it almost impossible for his family members and tracing services to find him.

This list could be continued. However, we are not going to endure this racist politics of memory any longer. Göttingen needs to acknowledge its colonial involvements and finally distance itself from war glorifying monuments like the German Southwest-Africa memorial, physically and mentally. We demand the dismantling of the monument and the erection of a memorial site for the victims of colonialism and imperialism.

Tear down this shit! Stop racism!

Basisgruppe Geschichte, Göttingen, 3.7.2020

¹⁷ <https://www.goettinger-tageblatt.de/Die-Region/Goettingen/Suedwestafrika-Denkmal-in-Goettingen-sorgt-fuer-Kontroversen>.

¹⁸ <http://goettingenkolonial.uni-goettingen.de/index.php/kurzbiographien/schadad-khan>.