

PRESS SERVICE

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COLONIALISM IN THE BERLIN GLOBAL EXHIBITION

Colonialism is a major cross-sectional topic in nearly all the rooms of the BERLIN GLOBAL exhibition. Attention is not limited to Germany's official colonial rule from 1884 to 1919. Instead, the curators start from the premise that global interconnections – the exhibition's main focus with Berlin as an example – developed under colonial conditions from the start of European expansion. As such, colonialism influenced Berlin's relationships with the world both before 1884 and after 1919. The aftereffects of this "colonial globality" (Sebastian Conrad) extend beyond formal decolonialisation in the mid-20th century and on into the present. They include economic and political inequality and dependency relationships between the global south and north. The colonial legacy also still shapes the thoughts and perceptions of many *white* Europeans. A striking example of this is the ongoing phenomenon of racism deriving in part from colonial mindsets of previous centuries. Inspired by postcolonial theoretical approaches, BERLIN GLOBAL's treatment of colonialism therefore also critically examines hegemony and racism. Along with attention to German colonialism, it explores power and thought patterns that continue in the present.

The exhibition thereby helps implement the plank in the State of Berlin's 2016 coalition government platform (Social Democratic, Left and Green parties) calling for "examination of Berlin's colonial past as the capital of the German empire" (p. 124). It also addresses the special historical responsibility of locating the exhibition in the partially reconstructed palace of the Hohenzollerns, or in other words the former Prussian and German colonial rulers. BERLIN GLOBAL has drawn on input from a wide range of Berlin's residents to incorporate multiple perspectives and facets in its examination of colonialism and the repercussions thereof.

Its different topic-based rooms address colonialism and its effects as follows:

Thinking the World

The introductory room in the BERLIN GLOBAL exhibition features a work of urban art by How and Nosm. Covering all four walls, it depicts the history of European world views and exploitation since the early modern age. Incorporating portraits of the Humboldt brothers and the history of science in Berlin, the mural also addresses the exhibition's location in the Humboldt Forum. Berlin's research traditions and museum collections were inextricably linked with German and European colonialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the objects displayed in the Humboldt Forum are a result of this tradition. One example would be the Benin Bronzes in the Ethnological Museum, which appear in the mural and have figured for years now in debates on the provenance and restitution of African objects in European museums. The mural thereby also raises uncomfortable questions about how to deal with the colonial legacy of European museum collections.

Revolution

The "Revolution" room contains a large mural by Hanaa El Degham that depicts causes and consequences of current revolutions. This Egyptian-born artist invited activists to write texts about "revolutions" on blank walls in the room. Some of these texts address connections between colonialism and revolutions, for example in Latin America and North Africa. The images that El Degham painted on the basis of these texts include references to postcolonial conditions that prepared the ground for revolutions. Her mural also touches on the reconstructed Berlin Palace, which was the seat of the Prussian and German colonial rulers.

Boundaries

The "Boundaries" room uses individual objects to illustrate borders that enclosed, divided or emerged from Berlin in the past. One evokes the Africa Conference of 1884-85 at which representatives of European colonial powers divided up the African continent. A colonial map shows how Europeans struck deals among themselves about Africa "behind closed doors". The map was used in 1911 for negotiations between French and German colonial powers about new borders in central Africa. France ceded territory to Germany – marked on the map with a blue pen – which enlarged the latter's colony of Cameroon. Maps of this type were instrumental in colonial rule.

Despite what the map suggests, however, *white* Europeans were not able to exert power everywhere. They were repeatedly confronted with resistance by African populations, including in the German colony of Cameroon.

The "Boundaries" room also highlights borders or limitations present in Berlin today. Interactive media stations developed with students from the "City and Border" seminar at the Humboldt Universität reveal various forms of everyday and structural racism. Their content includes experts from NGOs talking about how racism is denied and how racial profiling is a key part of the problem. Another chapter of this media station shows limitations confronting illegalised people, for example in their access to healthcare.

Entertainment

Two displays in the "Entertainment" room make reference to the history of colonialism. The kaiserpanorama is shown as a source of images in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which also served to inculcate a "colonial view" of the world beyond Europe. One example is a series of images from the colony Germany established in China in 1897. The exotification of "foreign" countries and people is also reflected in the *Entertain Berlin* film by Jermain Raffington, in which four Black Germans talk about how racism has affected them in the entertainment industry. Born in 1925, Theodor Wonja Michael had to appear in ethnological expositions as a child. Marie Nejar, who was born in 1930, talks about her performances as a child actor in Nazi entertainment films. Langston Uibel (born in 1998) and Aminata Belli (in 1992) take a younger generation's perspective in describing the racism they too face. They also talk about how society has changed in dealing with racism, and describe the spaces they have carved out for themselves in the entertainment industry.

War

The "War" room contains the most comprehensive treatment of the history of colonialism. It covers three German colonial wars – the Boxer War of 1900-1901, the war in German South West Africa in 1904-1908 culminating in genocide against the Herero and Nama, and the Maji Maji War in what is now Tanzania in 1905-1908 –

in addition to the First and Second World Wars and German military missions in other countries since 1990. A Chinese vase from the Museum of Asian Art stands for the many works of art that landed in Berlin's museums as a result of colonial wars. Another display looks at attempts to reverse the loss of German colonies made from 1919 to 1945 and even to some extent after that.

Until very recently an official German military song book still contained works with a romantic view of colonialism. A revisionist take was also and especially fuelled by the notion of "loyal Askaris", as African

auxiliary soldiers in German colonial units were called. The Askari myth is refuted by the life of Mahjub bin Adam Mohamed Hussein, who fought for the German empire as an African child soldier in the First World War, came to Berlin in the late 1920s, worked as an extra and minor actor in various German colonial films, and was murdered in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1944. The "War" room also exposes lines of connection from German colonialism to Nazi policies of annihilation. One display illustrates colonial dimensions of the First World War with audio material from a Berlin archive (part of a Humboldt Universität collection in the Humboldt Forum). At the Wünsdorf prisoner-of-war camp, linguists made recordings of colonial soldiers who had fought in the British and French armies and been captured by German forces. And finally, the room features Philip Kojo Metz's *SORRYFORNOTHING*. This work of art addresses the invisibility of Germany's colonial past in the country's culture of remembrance, and calls upon political leaders and the public to take a new look at colonialism.

Fashion

Among the topics highlighted in this room are colonial and postcolonial interconnections in the textile and garment industries from the 18th century to today.

The room shows how the European textile industry was connected in many ways with the trade in enslaved Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, textile companies in Berlin used dyes produced on Caribbean plantations owned by *white* Europeans where enslaved people from Africa were forced to work under brutal conditions.

From around 1680 to 1720, Brandenburg-Prussia participated directly as a colonial power in the trade of enslaved Africans and their economic exploitation. As the European cotton industry grew, so too did its demand for raw cotton. As a consequence, *white* plantation owners in South America and the Caribbean produced ever more cotton. This in turn was linked with the enslavement of ever more people from Africa who had to work on the plantations.

Displays with contemporary reference trace the paths taken by many articles of clothing on the global market today: from garment factories in low-wage Asian countries to shops in Berlin, and then from disposal in industrial countries to resale in various countries of the global south.

Interconnection

The central part of the "Interconnection" room uses audio portraits to illustrate connections between diverse individuals in Berlin and very different parts of the world.

These narratives are always embedded in historical and political context. Postcolonial dimensions in the lives of Berlin's residents appear for example in biographies with connections to India, Algeria, Ghana or Namibia.

BERLIN GLOBAL – A coproduction of Kulturprojekte Berlin and the Stadtmuseum Berlin

The BERLIN GLOBAL exhibition opened on July 20 on the first floor above ground of the Humboldt Forum. On around 4,000 square metres of space, it explores the complex web of relations between Berlin and the world. Immersive installations and atmospheric presentations lead visitors into theme-based rooms that reflect the many sides of the city.

The BERLIN GLOBAL exhibition at the Humboldt Forum is a coproduction of Kulturprojekte Berlin and the Stadtmuseum Berlin. Its design and contents were developed by a team led by Paul Spies, Chief Curator for the State of Berlin at the Humboldt Forum and Director of the Stadtmuseum Berlin. Kulturprojekte Berlin is responsible for the overall production, communications and – together with the Stadtmuseum Berlin – displays which are universally accessible and inclusive.

Major actors at the Humboldt Forum include the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), Kulturprojekte Berlin, the Stadtmuseum Berlin and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, under the direction of the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss.

More information

www.berlin-global-ausstellung.de

www.humboldtforum.org

www.kulturprojekte.berlin

www.stadtmuseum.de

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