

**Review:** Felix Axster, *Koloniales Spektakel in 9x14. Bildpostkarten im deutschen Kaiserreich*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2013.

The German variant of modern colonialism long remained in the shadow of the much larger and longer lasting French and British Empires. The situation, however, has changed substantially in the last 10 years or so with German researchers often employing postcolonial approaches to place German colonialism in the wider narrative of European expansion in the late 19th century, while also looking at the consequences for Germany itself. The question remains, however, whether the postcolonial approaches which have been so fruitful for Great Britain or France can transfer so easily to Germany with its – in comparison – rather restricted and short history of colonialism. Such concerns could be countered with reference to the powerful colonial fantasies at play in Germany – from the extremely popular exotic novels of Karl May to the many consumer goods which often neither had nor needed a direct connection to the German colonies.

Against this backdrop an examination of the interplay of mass media and colonialism seems appropriate. Felix Axster's dissertation, published under the title *Koloniales Spektakel in 9x14*, analyzes the medium of picture postcards. These postcards saw their heyday in Imperial Germany. Axster correctly starts from the assumption that the rise of postcards and the rise of German colonialism coincided. Building on this insight the

book makes two major points: Firstly, the enormous popularity of colonialism may deliver new insights into the 'postcard culture' around 1900 – that is the interplay of production and perception, of distributing and collecting postcards. Secondly, the widespread and multifaceted postcard may serve as a medium to better understand the daily presence and relevance of colonialism beyond the narrow political dimensions. Despite the upsurge in the volume of historical studies on the rise of mass media in Imperial Germany postcards have been confined somewhat to the shadows. This is particularly regrettable as postcards as items of consumption and collection may deliver information on historical interactions for which there are no other sources.

Axster analyses the medium postcard in four chapters. Firstly, he describes the rise of the postcard as part of the transformation of the postal service itself, but in particular as an essential part and sign of the breakthrough of mass culture around 1900. The second chapter deals with postcards from the colonial war in the German colony South West Africa, today's Namibia, as part of a serial order. The hundreds of thousands of postcards sent from the front during the Herero uprising transported consciously and unconsciously messages from the war. Axster sees in the interplay between the illustrations of the colonies displayed on the postcards and the textual comments on the cards with their serial pattern an influential mode of production of knowledge about the colonies. At the same time he describes picture postcards as a mode of visual appropriation of the colonies, meant to

confirm the earlier territorial acquisition. Finally, Axster argues that the postcards, with their asymmetric representation of the superior colonizers and the visually and to a certain extent also textually humiliated colonial subjects validated the German war effort in South West Africa. The fundamentally racist connotation of the postcards, Axster holds, is not contradicted by the 'playing with disorder', dealt with in the third chapter. This chapter looks in particular at the crossing of the line in the sexual sense dealt with on postcards. For contemporaries, any intimate contact between colonizers and colonial subjects was seen thus. Here aspects of scandalizing – not necessarily connected to concrete cases - played an important role. Axster interprets the prominence of the sexual genre as an expression of a deeply rooted fear of transgressing the norms. The last chapter eventually looks at postcard collecting routines, i.e. at what contemporaries referred to as "Sammelsport". The discourses of various associations are the main sources here. For the collectors' associations the topics 'colonies' and 'colonialism' played a central role and were integrated into their exaggerated mission to make the world accessible as well as the peculiar intermingling of cosmopolitanism and nationalism which characterized these associations.

All in all, the book with its introductory chapter and the chapters which follow and act like sample material of a far wider topic, provides an illuminating outline of a phenomenon so far largely neglected. At the same time the interpretative potential of this volume remains more restricted than it could have

been and would have been desirable. The embedding of the phenomenon in question in the wider media history of imperial Germany remains rather superficial. Interactions between postcards and other media are hardly dealt with. Through the constant use of a critical language of analysis Axster seeks to portray a historical situation which was characterized by colonial violence. Thus he deliberately highlights this situation of violence throughout the text.

Justified and understandable as this is, it does not always make the study more accessible. While the 'thick' description of single postcards and the scrupulous reading of the postcards is convincing for many of the single examples, the scope of the sample on the whole remains limited. Moreover, those postcards looked at in detail are rather heterogeneous and among the differences is the fact that some of them were printed but never sold and thus could not serve to spread colonial stereotypes or could only do so in a very limited way. Thus it seems questionable to assume that the establishment of a colonial order in the minds of Germans was centrally directed or even strategic. In his introduction Axster himself describes the assumption of a centrally steered colonial discourse as not fully reflecting the real situation. The dynamic of visualizing of the colonies, and the volume demonstrates very well, was rather a product of the very interplay of commerce and politics, of entertainment and colonial propaganda.

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