The life and works of no other German colonial politician have been the subject of so much speculation as those of Bernhard Dernburg (1865–1937). Not least among the reasons for this was the leading role he played in shaping colonial policy in William II’s German Empire from 1906 to 1910, first as deputy, then as acting director of the colonial department of the Foreign Office and, from May 17th 1907, as Secretary of State of the Imperial Colonial Office.

Hartmut Bartmuß presents a brief biographical outline of the best known German colonial politician. Besides retracing political and private developments and activities, the author also examines the personality of a politician who did not consider it beneath himself to conduct inspections of colonial regions in Africa personally in order to get his own impression of the effects of the German Empire colonial politics for which he was responsible. Based on practical experience gained in Africa, and also in English colonies and in the U.S.A., he successfully reformed the German colonial administration.

However, Bartmuß’ publication is not a definitive analysis and appreciation of Dernburg’s political life and work. The author’s accomplished journalistic style tends to veil some of the work’s shortcomings. Yet it still shows that it is time to adopt far more stringent academic methodology in examining the life of this remarkable liberal politician, with his traditional Jewish background on his father’s side and a Protestant vicarage on his mother’s. This is particularly true for the period when Dernburg was in charge of German colonial politics. For such an undertaking research will have to extend beyond the websites and popular telecasts, on which Bartmuß often relies, and include relevant archives and specialist literature.

Without doubt, journalist and pastor Bartmuß deserves credit for seeking to render the work of this colonial politician “understandable in the context of its time” to a broader public, an intention expressed on the cover of the publication. But he could not explain sufficiently why he came to consider Dernburg as “representative of the colonial power of the German Empire who was intent on being balanced”. Conducting the colonial politics of a European state in a territory with a completely different culture to one’s own invariably means unilaterally taking advantage of the differences in the levels of economic and social development for profit and as such primarily multiplying the motherland’s profit through the exploitation of the indigenous populations in the colonies. Dernburg had reservations about the use of brute force and forced labour because he was unconvinced that they really represented the best means of exploiting colonies and maximizing profits for Germany. These were, however, almost revolutionary ideas.
which with the end of the First World War, the Versailles Treaty and the abrupt end these events brought to German colonial rule, had run their course.

As a member of the German Parliament until 1930 he had a number of political functions – among others he was one of those responsible for implementing the Versailles Treaty – thereafter he was mostly involved in banking and finance. When the Nazis seized power he advised younger people to emigrate. However this was not an option for him. He died in Berlin in 1937 before the Nazis could take his freedom and his life.

Another book about a German of Jewish origin, who was involved in the colonial politics of his country, appears in the commendable series “Jewish Miniatures” by Berlin publishers Hentrich & Hentrich. This shows the extent to which Jewish people were represented in almost all spheres of political and economic life in Germany and also in the German colonies and in colonial politics and the colonial economy, before the Nazis began their campaign of expulsion and murder. This topic has yet to be the explicit subject of scientific research. Both publications presented here can only be regarded as a first step.

The second book to be presented here is dedicated to Regierungsbäumeister (government architect) Joseph Bendix (1874-1904) from Westphalia. At the end of September 1903 he arrived at Swakopmund to help with the building of the Otavi Mining and Railroad Company railway track to Tsumeb. His involvement in this project was of short duration, as in January 1904, when the Herero rose against the German ‘Protection Force’ Reserve Lieutenant Joseph Bendix was called to arms at the Schutztruppe. On March 13th, 1904 he was in a detachment which was scouting near Ovikioko. The unit was attacked and almost completely wiped out. Joseph Bendix too fell in the battle. That is the story of his actual involvement with Namibia.

Hartmut Bartmann goes on to outline how his family fared, the handling of his inheritance, his obituaries and the path his family’s life in Germany took until after World War II. The publication also mentions Jewish life in the late German South West Africa in a cursory way. Most important sources are the files stored in the National Archive in Windhoek about Josef (there written with “f”) Bendix and further archive material.

Both publications presented here are not to be considered as academic works in the strict sense, but as an attempt to present to a larger audience the lives of two characters of Jewish origin who were connected in one way or another with German colonial politics. At the same time it is pointed out that more research into the history of everyday colonial life is necessary. Both works should serve to stimulate such activity.

Ulrich van der Heyden
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin / University of South Africa, Pretoria