
Originally a PhD thesis at Heidelberg University, this analytical stock-take of scholarly work on German colonial history in the two German states from 1945 to 1985 is an impressive collection and overview. It documents the nature of and trends in discourses related mainly (though not exclusively) to the controversial treatment of what is, to a large extent, nowadays recognized as genocidal warfare during the years 1904 to 1908 in what was then German South West Africa. It offers manifold insights into the relative complexity of the subject and its treatment through a variety of approaches and lenses. This is laudable and merits recognition.

Bürger combines the four main chapters of her work with an ambitious introductory chapter I (pp. 9-45). She claims to offer the first detailed assessment of the historiography of colonial Namibia, recapitulating the roots of this history of science and knowledge to contextualize the current scholarly debate(s). At the same time, she wants to explore if and how a history of former colonies with reference to the theoretical notions of Postcolonial Studies could be (re-) written (p. 11). Especially with regard to the narrative of the colonial genocide, she suggests, one must ask how texts in the two German states handle traditional patterns of thought instead of — if only subconsciously — perpetuating these.

She also seeks to explore whether the mindset in the decade after WWII and beyond can indeed be characterized as colonial amnesia (pp. 16f.).

Chapter II (pp. 47-91) is aptly sub-titled “between amnesia and continuity”. It recapitulates the dominant (West) German colonial-apologetic narratives of the 1950s and concludes that these reaffirmed uncritically the deeply entrenched perceptions devoid of any (self-)critical investigation or exploration. This insight causes her to wonder if and how such culturally normative premises of claimed knowledge could have been challenged during the 1960s (p. 91).

Chapter III (pp. 93-156) traces the colonial-critical knowledge production in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). She includes — as in all chapters — references to popular writings and fiction, which at times had an even greater impact on the public discourse. Unfortunately, in the context of the GDR, she fails to acknowledge Dietmar Beetz, who within six years published three widely read books on the subject for younger people.1

Bürger suggests that the perspectives of the GDR historians, of whom Horst Drechsler rightly receives the most space and recognition, also entered the trap of reproducing central colonial modes of thinking by implying that the history of Namibia only started with German colonialism (p. 118). This is surprising, since it directly contradicts her earlier summary of the work by

1 These were Späher der Witbooi Krieger (1978), Oberhauptling der Herero (1983) and Labyrinth im Kaokoveld (1984).
Heinrich Loth, who in his study of 1963 maintains (documented through a direct quote) that the German colonial conquest was by no means the beginning of South West African history, not even in the sense of a new beginning (p. 117) — only to claim a paragraph later (with reference to exactly the same quote of Loth), that the narrative perspectives of Loth and Drechsler would suggest exactly that (ibid.). She also maintains that the “Marxist” (!) SWAPO accepted the genocide as the meaningful founding myth (p. 153) and concludes that the introduction of socialist terminologies and value judgements did not create fundamentally new narratives (p. 155).

Chapter IV (pp. 157-208) then turns to the controversies in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), succinctly sub-titled as “knowledge in generational conflict”. She gives, again correctly, the impact of Helmut Bley’s published doctoral dissertation as much credit as that of Horst Drechsler’s work. The friction Bley’s pioneering study provoked within the political establishment is also documented. Bürger, however, misses an opportunity to illustrate in more detail the similarities and, even more so, the differences in the analytical approach and emphasis of the two historians, who published their theses at almost the same time. Both their studies had a lasting impact, giving them the aura of pioneers. While the importance of Hannah Arendt’s theory for Bley is at least acknowledged, the seminal work of Peter Schmitt-Egner — who in his own right applied Arendt’s theory on German colonialism in Namibia a few years later — receives only one uncommented reference in a footnote (p. 204) and is missing completely from the bibliography.2 As already suggested by the sub-title of this chapter, Bürger concludes that in contrast to the GDR, the engagement with Germany’s colonial history in the FRG was to a large extent influenced by the generational affinity and shift. Though not mentioned in detail, the emerging international solidarity with the anticolonial movements in Southern Africa and the growing demands to engage with the Nazi-era were from the second half of the 1960s most certainly a contributing factor in the following years to the shift in perceptions of and perspectives on the German colonial past.

Chapter V (pp. 209-264) uses as its main reference point the centenary of the Berlin Conference in 1984 to explore further what the sub-title calls “the search for the binding narrative” — only to conclude, that the diversity of (potentially antagonistic) positions persisted. Despite changing political and social frameworks, competing interpretations continued to exist. Bürger shows that colonial-apologetic efforts supported directly or indirectly by institutionalized historical studies essentially aimed to dismiss or systematically re-write the continuity and genocide theses (p. 264). The academic debates of the 1980s confirmed that the

enduring colonial-revisionist networks continued to influence the public discourse (p. 276). This insight contradicts in tendency her proposition elsewhere that colonial amnesia was and is no longer prevalent.\(^3\)

As difficult to understand is the logic of Bürger’s claim that the emerging colonial-critical works in the FRG were directly relational and in ideological affinity to the research results presented in the GDR. While these were often acknowledged and used as an important source (especially with regard to the archival material they presented), in most cases there was certainly no political congruence and the suggestion (if only unintentional) in tendency discredit the efforts by those in the FRG. The authors Helga and Ludwig Helbig, whose “Mythos Deutsch-Südwest” of 1984 is used as the most prominent example, were anything but close to what could be dubbed as a “GDR mindset”. Using similar or the same words to categorize acts or events (such as the reference to von Trotha as “butcher”), certainly does not mean as suggested (p. 220) that they were inspired by GDR authors without acknowledging them.

Many more such minor flaws and sloppy mistakes do suggest occasional anomalies in the ambitious agenda, which indicate that the knowledge base was not as intimate and profound as it seems at first glance: Hillebrecht and Melber are no historians; Wolfgang Werner is Namibian born and bred and not West German; Tilman Dedering was originally a West German historian (now naturalized South African); the published MA thesis by Hubrich/Melber is anything but educational material; the *Lernbuch Namibia* was a completely separate book and had nothing to do with *Our Namibia*, except that it was produced within the same project; Nangolo Mbumba (today’s Vice President of Namibia) was never affiliated to Kassel University but at the time of the project at Bremen University the Deputy Secretary for Education and Culture of SWAPO; and calling Drechsler the “inventor of the colonial genocide thesis” (p. 31) is not only a strange choice of words but also utterly wrong.\(^4\) Many more such minor though nevertheless disturbing examples of inexact expressions, slips and factual mistakes have been bemoaned in another detailed review. That ended with the wish for a thoroughly revised and corrected second edition for the simple reason, that despite all weaknesses this remains an important work.\(^5\)

As observed by Bürger at the beginning (p. 42) and in conclusion (p. 278), postcolonial theory has since the late 1990s strongly advocated a fundamental change in the perspectives and methods of narratives to critically deconstruct colonial formations of knowledge and history. As a consequence, it

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\(^3\) See critically on this also the review by Markus Hedrich, *H-Soz-Kult*, 14 March 2018 <www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-27351>.

\(^4\) Not only the studies by Hannah Arendt precede Drechsler’s work, but Raphael Lemkin, who created the term genocide, already made reference to German South West Africa as example for his arguments.

is doubted whether colonial discourses have been adequately transcended or abandoned even in anti-colonial Western counter narratives and their norms of presentation. Academic writing remains largely (and often uncritically) confined to the standardized modes anchored in the Western traditions, often without being aware of or self-critically reflecting on these limitations. Bürger asks whether other forms of narratives should be explored rather than the much more radical ones tested so far. This is a noble and necessary reflection. Notwithstanding this insight, however, her study, understandably, is limited of her individual socialization and the mindset moulded by and based on her own experiences and perspectives. Transcending these and looking at the world through the eyes of others is not only a huge challenge, it borders on a mission impossible. Eagerness to comply with such a shift of perspectives might even risk becoming patronizing or paternalistic again by claiming to speak on behalf of those who continue to remain either silent or unheard. It is rather comforting, that Bürger did not try to do this but remained within the limitations of a Western analytical tradition by taking stock of what Germans from different societies and ideological positions contributed to the subject.

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