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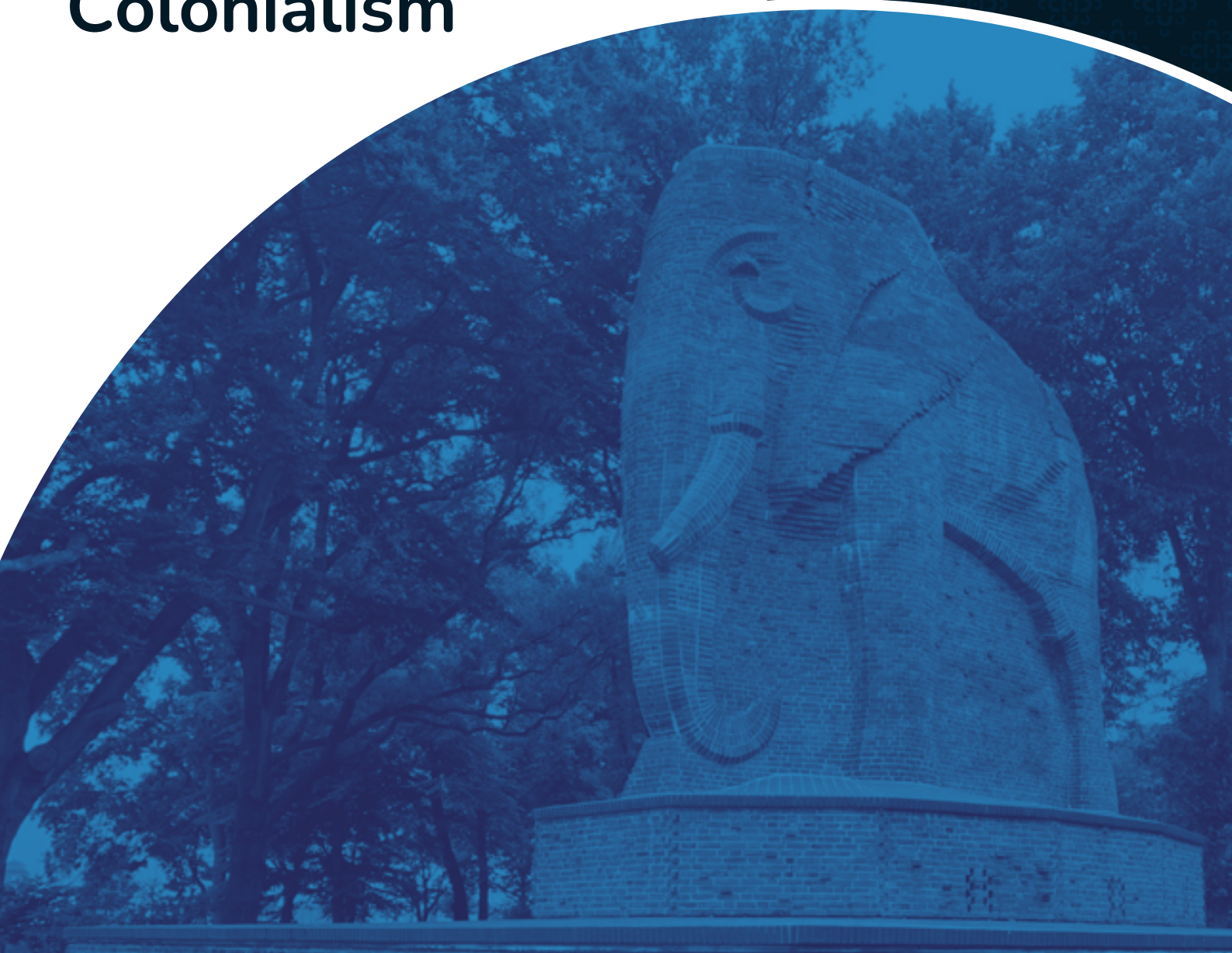
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Bremen's Elefant. Memorialisation Politics and Memory Surrounding German Colonialism



Bremen's *Elefant*.

Memorialisation, Politics, and Memory

Surrounding German Colonialism

Germany

Berklee Baum

Abstract

This microhistory of Bremen's *Elefant* memorial highlights several recurrent themes of memorialisation, politics, and memory. For example, the use of monuments to promote political aims, their adaptability and the influence of global events on the memorialisation of the past, together with the power of physical memorials, in conjunction with civil society, to shape memory. The *Elefant* was dedicated initially as the *Reichskolonialehrendenkmal* (Imperial Colonial Monument) in 1932 to glorify former German colonialism and bolster the neo-colonial movement. In 1990 the *Elefant* was rededicated as the *Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal* (Anti-Colonial Monument), completely reversing the original intentions of the memorial. In 2009, it became the site of the first and still the only free-standing memorial to the Namibian Genocide in Germany. This paper examines why this memorial went through such drastic changes in meaning and how these changes reflect Bremen's residents' shifting opinions and attitudes towards their nation's colonial past.

Introduction

The history of the *Elefant* memorial in Bremen, Germany, presents several themes of the memorialisation process: the use of monuments as a means of promoting specific political aims; the adaptability of memorials; the influence of global events on the memorialisation of the past; and the power of physical memorials, in conjunction with civil society, to shape memory. From its creation as a pro-colonial monument to its rededication as an anti-colonial monument to the addition of a genocide memorial, the history of the *Elefant* highlights diverse and changing viewpoints towards a nation's colonial past.

Background

The *Elefant* as a *Reichskolonialehrendenkmal*

The desire for a colonial monument in Germany pre-dated the First World War but became more politically valuable after the war. Germany's colonies were confiscated in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles,¹ which proved an economic blow to many German port cities, including Bremen. Because of Bremen's strong ties to the colonies, the city became a centre of Germany's neo-colonial movement in the 1920s, evidenced by the many Bremen-based organisations dedicated to taking back Germany's former colonies.² These organisations turned their attention to the memorialisation of German colonial rule. Public lectures, commemorative events, and the creation of new education curricula were all efforts to remind citizens of the benefits of controlling colonies.³ Street names were changed to glorify former colonial leaders and colonies,⁴ and plans for a colonial monument began to form. The proposal for a *Reichskolonialehrendenkmal* (imperial colonial monument) was first put before the state in 1926.⁵ This idea was not without its opponents, and years of heated debates followed the initial proposal. It was initially suggested that the statue built to be in Berlin. Still, the Bremen Colonial Society, which consisted of merchants with trading links to the southern and western parts of Africa, petitioned to have the *Elefant* located in Bremen as a symbol of their lost colonies and their desire to get those colonies back. Even in Bremen, the statue faced opposition, and

¹ "Treaty of Versailles," signed June 28, 1919, *United States Library of Congress*, Part IV Section I.

² Organisations with ties to Bremen that supported the neo-colonial movement include: Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, the Deutsche Kolonialverein, the Verein ehemaliger Afrika- und Chinakrieger, the Kolonialwirtschaftliche Komitee, the Deutsche Kolonialkrieger Bund, the Volksbund Rettet die Ehre, the Bund der Kolonialfreunde, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Eingeborenenkunde, the Frauenbund der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft, the Verein für das Deutschtum in Ausland and the Frauenverein von Roten Kreuz für Deutsche in Übersee.

³ Bremen State Office for Development Co-operation, "Vom Kolonial-Ehrenmal zum Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal," Bremen, 2004: 9.

⁴ Up to this point, Bremen had only one street relating to Germany's colonies and colonial leaders: Lüderitzstrasse. After 1922, many more were added to this list: Leutweinstrasse, Leutweinplatz, Gerhard-Rohlf's-Strasse, Kamerunstrasse, Togostrasse, Togoplatz, Vogelsangstrasse, Waterbergstrasse, Windhukstrasse and Wissmannstrasse.

⁵ A significant aspect of events from this point on is the fact that since the November revolution of 1919, Germany was no longer an explicitly imperialist state under an autocratic monarchy, but a parliamentary democracy.

it was not approved until 1931 after the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP, or Nazi Party) began to gain traction.⁶



Figure 1: 'Bremen's Elefant' Image by Berklee Baum

The 10-metre-high memorial, built next to Bremen's central train station, consists of a red brick elephant standing on a 12-sided base, resting on a rectangular plinth. There are stairs leading down to a semi-underground crypt with a stone altar, which initially displayed a book that listed the names of 1,500 German soldiers who died in the German colonies during the First World War. In its original form, the inscription 'Our Colonies' was displayed at the door to the crypt. The names of Germany's former African colonies were inscribed on the monument's sides.

On the back of the monument were two portraits, one of the Bremen merchant Franz Adolf Lüderitz and another of General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who spoke at the memorial's dedication.⁷ Although these men stood for the glory of colonialization, at the time, their actions embodied dark aspects of Germany's colonial past. Lüderitz is known for being the first German to claim territory in South-West Africa.⁸ He did so in 1883 by swindling Josef Fredriks, Chief of the Bethany people, who were not aware that the German mile (7.4 kilometres) was much longer than the English mile (1.6 kilometres).

⁶ Bremen State Office for Development Co-operation, "Vom Kolonial-Ehrenmal zum Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal" (Bremen, 2004), 1.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ N. O. Oermann, *Mission, Church and State Relations in South West Africa Under German Rule, 1884–1915* (Stuttgart, 1999): 58–60.

Lüderitz took advantage of the situation, staking his claim to fertile land that the Bethany people needed to survive. Lettow-Vorbeck was a perpetrator of the Namibian Genocide, serving as First Adjutant of Lothar von Trotha's⁹ staff and Captain (Company Commander) from 1904 to 1906.¹⁰ There was also a school in Bremen named in his honour during this time and barracks.

The *Kolonialelefant* was dedicated in 1932. The first speaker was Eduard Achelis, Chairman of the Bremen section of the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* (German Colonial Society); his words epitomised how many governmental and local organisations desired people to remember colonialism. In his speech, he stated:¹¹

In this solemn hour dedicated to our colonies, may the whole German people step up and [...] unanimously shout to the world: Away with the events of the past, with lies and slander; we Germans demand our rights. The recognition of necessary living conditions. Immediate return of our own land, honestly acquired and honestly managed, an expensive legacy left to us by our fathers: the German colonies.¹²

For many, the value of *Reichskolonialehrendenkmal* lay not in the memory of the specific German soldiers from the First World War but in the remainder of the sacrifice that went into obtaining and controlling colonial land in Africa and the injustice of that land being taken away. A specific version of colonialism was publicly displayed through the *Kolonialelefant*: colonialism was a worthy venture that brought glory and prosperity. It is also important to note that at the time, this was the only view of German colonialism being publicly memorialized; there were no memorials highlighting the horrors and atrocities committed under German Colonial rule. Thus, the city's actions followed the intentions of the *Kolonialelefant*. The National Socialists of Bremen established the town as the 'Capital of the Colonies' after the statue's dedication,¹³ and in 1938 a convention that brought together all of the German colonial organisations was held in Bremen.¹⁴

The *Kolonialelefant* remained in its original form until the end of the Second World War. In 1945, several changes were made by American military authorities: any sign referring to Germany's former colonies was removed, as were the portraits of Lüderitz and Lettow-Vorbeck. Additionally, the book containing the names of German soldiers who died in the colonies was moved to the Bremen State Archives.¹⁵ All markers of the monument being a colonial memorial were gone, and the no-longer-*Kolonial Elefant*

⁹ General Lothar von Trotha issued the famous extermination order against the Herero, initiating the Namibian Genocide.

¹⁰ R. Gaudi, *African Kaiser: General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck and the Great War in Africa, 1914-1918* (London, 2017), 82.

¹¹ Translation by author.

¹² "Einweihung des deutschen Kolonial-Ehrenmals," July 7, 1932, Ausgabe Nr. 187 Drittes Blatt, Schünemann, Bremen, quoted in G. Eickelberg, *Die Geschichte des Bremer AntiKolonialDenkmals*, Feb. 2012.

¹³ The Plenipotentiary of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen for Federal Affairs, Europe and Development Co-operation, "Co-operation Bremen – Namibia: A Responsibility Posed by History" (Bremen, 1999), 3.

¹⁴ WK Geschichte, "Als Bremen „Stadt der Kolonien“ sein wollte," *WK Geschichte* [Bremen], May 27, 2018.

¹⁵ Bremen Landesamt Für Denkmalpflege, "*Elefant*."

was left alone and largely forgotten for decades. During that time, it began to sustain severe weather damage.

History of Contestation

Support of Namibian Independence in Bremen

In the 1970s and 1980s, Bremen began to take a serious look at its problematic colonial past. Bremen University, established in 1971 after the 1968 student movement in Germany, brought professors and students who questioned the city's actions in the past. In 1980 the Centre for African Studies at Bremen University and the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka, Zambia, founded the Namibia Project, with Professor Manfred Hinz as director. This project aimed to promote education and improve the legal system in Namibia.¹⁶ This programme spread beyond the university, creating connections with political groups across the Bremen area.

As the anti-apartheid movement swept across Europe, citizens in Bremen further analysed how the city had played a part in creating the calamitous situation in South West Africa. In 1989, Bremen joined the Europe-wide campaign 'Cities against Apartheid'.¹⁷ Anti-apartheid activists in Bremen and the Bremen African Archives, and the Overseas Museum supported liberation groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia. At the time, the movements against colonialism and apartheid were yet to gain momentum in Germany. Germany's official policy was cooperation and even friendship with South Africa while ignoring apartheid and the illegal occupation of South West Africa and, in some sense, supporting the occupation due to lobbying by the German minority living in South West Africa. Conservatives and others on the right of the political spectrum denounced the Anti-Apartheid Movement, especially groups supporting Namibian independence, who were perceived as supporters of terrorist groups – or even terrorists themselves (a newspaper article labelled Hinz as such).¹⁸ In Bremen, there was less opposition to anti-apartheid organisations than in other parts of the country, as citizens in the area were predominantly part of the Social Democratic Party of Germany.¹⁹ Anti-apartheid organisations in Bremen began to lead projects aimed at assisting Namibians.

¹⁶ Bremen State Office for Development Co-operation, "Vom Kolonial-Ehrenmal zum Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal," Bremen, 2004, 22.

¹⁷ Bremen Parliament, Entschließung der Stadtbürgerschaft vom 19.9.1989, "Die Stadtbürgerschaft begrüßt die 1986 in Den Haag gestartete europäische Aktion "Städte gegen Apartheid" und schließt sich ihr an," September 19, 1989.

¹⁸ Thomas Gatter (an activist who participated in and led many of the events surrounding the rededication of the *Elefant*), email message to author, April 27, 2021.

¹⁹ Manfred Hinz, interview by Berkle Baum, March 31, 2021.

Confronting the *Elefant*

The efforts aimed at improving the situation in South West Africa were accompanied by activist groups campaigning in Bremen for greater awareness of Germany's colonial past. Activist individuals and organisations wrote educational materials for schools and articles for newspapers and academic journals while also organising awareness campaigns in the city. These decolonisation efforts led to a renewed focus on the *Elefant* statue, whose very existence symbolised Bremen's former support of colonialism.

The idea to change the *Elefant* into an anti-colonial monument began in the mid-1970s with the founding of the Bremen African Archives at the Bremen Overseas Museum (later moved to Bremen University). However, it was not until the late 1980s that activist organisations became involved in concrete plans to change the *Elefant*. These organisations included Bremen Women against Apartheid, Development Cooperation from People to People (later renamed Practical Solidarity from People to People), the Bremen African Archives/Centre for African and Migration Studies, Terre des Hommes, the Namibia Project at Bremen University, and the Bremen Overseas Museum.²⁰ In 1988 the youth organisation IGM Jugend Bremen welded a sign that they placed next to the *Elefant*, which says, 'For human rights, against apartheid'²¹ – an effort that demonstrated a connection between the anti-apartheid movement and the controversial colonial memorial.

Still, not everyone wanted the monument to be changed. There were many debates amongst activists and politicians in Bremen about what to do with the statue. Some wanted it destroyed, ashamed of the colonial legacy it was intended to glorify; others wanted it altered, and others wanted it restored to its original form and intention.²² The activists and Social Democrats within the Bremen state parliament won the argument, and it was decided that the *Elefant* would be altered.

In September 1989, Bremen's parliament issued a resolution amid discussions surrounding the 'Cities against Apartheid' movement. They declared their plans to rededicate the *Elefant* as an *anti-colonial* monument and invited Namibian President Sam Nujoma to the rededication.²³ Some far-right organisations, such as neo-Nazi groups, protested against this decision, while the majority of the general public seemed unconcerned and were not involved on either side.²⁴ However, community businesses did become involved and donated half of the money to repair and rededicate the *Elefant*,

²⁰ Thomas Gatter, email message to author, April 27, 2021; Dr. Henning Scherf (a citizen of Bremen who participated in many of the events surrounding the rededication of the *Elefant* and who was mayor of Bremen from 1995-2005), email message to author, April 27, 2021.

²¹ Translation by author.

²² Manfred Hinz, interview by Berkle Baum, March 31, 2021.

²³ Bremen Parliament, Entschließung der Stadtbürgerschaft vom 19.9.1989, "Die Stadtbürgerschaft begrüßt die 1986 in Den Haag gestartete europäische Aktion "Städte gegen Apartheid" und schließt sich ihr an," September 19, 1989.

²⁴ Manfred Hinz, interview by Berkle Baum, March 31, 2021.

while the other half came from government funding. As part of the rededication and resignification of the *Elefant*, a new plaque was to be unveiled. The wording for this plaque was a combined effort of the community and the government. Gunther Hilliges, an activist who worked for the government and was highly involved in the evolution of the *Elefant*, worked with the Bremen State Archive director and the sponsoring businesses to create the new plaque. These meetings were long, and every word was looked at sceptically. Still, some of the wording on the plaque, especially the section that references Bremen's solidarity with African independence movements, was controversial,²⁵ and some conservative groups were against this statement. In parliament, motions were made against Hinz and Hilliges, asking the government to 'stop the communistic activities' of the two activists.²⁶ However, the Social Democrats had a majority, and the plaque's wording was approved despite their opposition. Namibia gained independence in March 1990, and two months later, the Namibian Freedom Festival in Bremen opened with a rededication of the *Elefant*,²⁷ renaming it the *Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal* (Anti-Colonial Monument).²⁸ Before the ceremony, the *Elefant* was wrapped in fabric 'chains' of racism and colonialism, and during the ceremony, they were cut away.²⁹ The statue remains one of the very few anti-colonial memorials in Germany today.³⁰

Through the rededication process, the *Elefant* was adapted by activists to promote specific political aims: ending apartheid, supporting the Namibian independence movement, and decolonising Bremen. In almost every conceivable way, the original political aims of the statue were reversed entirely. On the day of the rededication, a plaque was unveiled. An inscription embodies the activists' goal in altering the memorial: 'This monument symbolises the responsibility we have inherited from history.'³¹ The plaque gives a history of German colonialism and the monument's problematic creation. Activists in Bremen in the 1980s knew of the atrocities committed by German colonial forces and saw their continuing consequences in the current politics of their former colonies. They decided not only to get involved in and create movements to help rectify injustices in their former colonies but also saw fit to change the memory of colonialism in Bremen by altering a physical memorial.

In 1996, Namibian president Sam Nujoma unveiled another plaque attached to the *Elefant*. It reads, 'In memory of the victims of German colonial rule in Namibia,

²⁵ See appendix for full text.

²⁶ Gunther Hilliges, interview by Berkelee Baum, May 21, 2021.

²⁷ Weser-Kurier, "Steinerne Elefant hat neue Bedeutung," *Weser-Kurier* [Bremen], May 19, 1990.

²⁸ This is a play on words in German; it means Anti-Colonial Monument, but also emphasizes that the observer should think (denk) about anti-colonialism.

²⁹ Bremen State Office for Development Co-operation, "Vom Kolonial-Ehrenmal zum Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal," Bremen, 2004, 1.

³⁰ Die Zeit Online, "Schluss mit Heia Safari," *Die Zeit Online* [Hamburg], July 31, 2019.

³¹ Translation by author, see appendix for full text.

1884-1914.³² This represented another significant alteration in the monument's history: the *Elefant* was initially dedicated to Germans who died in the colonies, but this plaque reversed that intention, dedicating the monument instead to those killed in the colonies by German forces.

The Namibian Genocide Memorial

Thirteen years later, the monument came to play a role in genocide memorialization. From 1904 to 1908, German forces fought a colonial war that escalated into genocide against the Ovaherero (Herero), Nama, Damara, and San nations in present-day Namibia. An extermination order was issued by General Lothar von Trotha in 1904, ordering his men to kill all Herero people, including men, women, and children, even if they were unarmed and had no supplies.³³ According to current estimates, 80% of the Herero and 50% of the Nama people were murdered during this period, amounting to around 100,000 people.³⁴

This genocide was largely ignored for a century, despite international criminal and human rights law developments,³⁵ including that the 1985 United Nations' Whitaker Report classified the massacres as genocide.³⁶ In 2001, the Herero people filed a lawsuit in New York suing Deutsche Bank, which financed the German government during its genocidal campaign.³⁷ This brought international attention to the case of the Namibian Genocide, and Germany was forced to address its crime. In a 2004 speech in Namibia, Germany's Minister for Economic Development and Cooperation, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, labelled Germany's crimes in Namibia as genocide for the first time. Bilateral talks between Namibia and Germany followed (though the term 'genocide' would continue to be debated in Germany³⁸ and was not used officially in the discourse until 2021). Nevertheless, no reparations have been paid,³⁹ and no process of memorialization has begun. This is in stark contrast to the Holocaust, in which Germany has memorialized and paid reparations.

In 2004, on the 100th anniversary of the genocide, Hinz and Thomas Gatter, another activist who played a leading role in Bremen's decolonisation movement and the rededication of the *Elefant*, organised an international three-day congress surrounding

³² Translation by author, see appendix for full text.

³³ Bundesarchiv Potsdam, R 1101/2089, "Ich der große General der Deutschen Soldaten...", handwritten proclamation, 2 Oct. 1904.

³⁴ R. Kossler, *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past* (Windhoek, 2015), 17.

³⁵ J. Sarkin-Hughes, *Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21st Century: The Socio-Legal Context of Claims under International Law by the Herero Against Germany for Genocide in Namibia, 1904-1908* (Westport, 2009), 182.

³⁶ Whitaker, B. C.G. "Special Rapporteur on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," United Nations, 1985: 9.

³⁷ BBC, "German bank accused of genocide," *BBC News*, September 25, 2001.

³⁸ J. Zimmerer and B. Kundrus, "Streitgespräch," *ZEIT Geschichte* [Hamburg], July 23, 2019.

³⁹ On May 28, 2021 Germany officially apologized for the genocide, and announced that they will pay \$1.3 billion over the next 30 years in 'financial aid' (refusing to use the term 'reparations') -- however, this is to be paid to the Namibian government, and not specifically the Herero and Nama nations, sparking controversy; *Namibia Magazin*, 2 (2021): 10 – 11.

Bremen-Namibia cooperation. The topics addressed included the Namibian Genocide and German-Namibian reconciliation. The conference was held in the Bremen Town Hall. It included representatives from both the German and Namibian governments, which was a first-time occurrence, and Herero and Nama representatives. During the discussions, Namibian representatives criticised Germany's lack of memorialisation of the Namibian Genocide and asked how there could be reconciliation without remembrance. At the time, Henning Scherf, the mayor of Bremen, was 'deeply moved' by this reproach and promised at the conference that Bremen would erect a memorial to the genocide.⁴⁰

Over the subsequent five years, many organisations and individuals helped make the memorial a reality.⁴¹ Gatter was chosen as the artist. He had worked on other memorial projects before, albeit mainly about the Shoah and other aspects of the Holocaust, like the persecution of the Sinti and Roma. When interviewed, he mentioned that it was 'natural' that he should adapt his past experiences to 'the realm of anticolonialism.' In preparation for designing the memorial, he read many accounts from those who witnessed the genocide, both Herero and Nama victims and German Schutztruppe soldiers. He also interviewed Namibians whose family members had perished in the genocide. Hinz, who was living in Namibia, and Gatter had long conversations about the memorial. Hinz came up with the idea for the memorial to include stones from the starting point of the genocide, Ohamakari (the Otjiherero name for Waterberg). Hundreds of small stones were to be used, symbolising the victims, and four big stones were to be used, symbolising the values of democracy: the hope of peace, the hope of the future, the hope of forgiveness, and the hope for solidarity and friendship. Gatter sent the designs to Namibian representatives, and once they were officially approved, the project was submitted to the Bremen Senate. Hilliges helped with the acceptance of the design by the Bremen Department of Public Works and Parks.⁴²

Hilliges then found Bremen-based ship owners to help transport the Namibian stones, which he mentioned was a 'wonderful symbol' of changing viewpoints, as it was merchants who were responsible for the original creation of the Elephant and its pro-colonial agenda. The Bremen African Archives were supported by parliamentary groups, the Social Democrats and the Green Party, and students from the school across the street from the *Elefant*⁴³ when they negotiated with the city for a 12-square-metre space for the memorial. The city leased the needed space to Bremen African Archives.

⁴⁰ Thomas Gatter, email message to author, April 27, 2021; Manfred Hinz, interview by Berkleee Baum, March 31, 2021.

⁴¹ Organisations that were involved include the Bremen African Archives; the Centre for Applied Social Studies, Windhoek; 'Der Elefant!' (a newly formed organisation, responsible for the care, information, and events surrounding the Antikolonialdenkmal); and the Senate of Bremen.

⁴² Thomas Gatter, email message to author, April 27, 2021; Manfred Hinz, interview by Berkleee Baum, March 31, 2021.

⁴³ Incidentally, the school has the Elephant as its symbol, and its history and significance frequently figure in school projects and arts lessons.

When the stones arrived from Namibia, Gatter put the monument together, aided by a Bremen roadbuilding company that provided artisans and building materials.⁴⁴



Figure 2: 'Namibian Genocide Memorial' Image by Berkleee Baum

In 2009 the memorial was dedicated in the presence of Peter Katjavivi, then Director of the Namibian Planning Commission, who had been Ambassador to Germany until 2008. Next to the monument, there is a sign with information on the genocide and an explanation of the memorial itself. The term '*Völkermord*' (genocide) is explicitly used. One line on the sign reminds the reader of the memorial's purpose: 'without memory, there is no reconciliation.'⁴⁵ The initiative to create the memorial was sponsored and supported by both community organisations *and* the local government, with very little local opposition. This indicates how local organisations and authorities felt a need to acknowledge historical responsibility, even when there was no broader national movement touching the issue. The memorial was created six years before the German government acknowledged Germany's actions as genocide. 11 August is even officially recognised in Bremen as a day of remembrance. Each year on the same date, Bremen's citizens gather at the memorial to lay flowers and give speeches. These events were initially organised by grassroots organisations, such as those mentioned previously, and the organisation *Der Elefant!*, founded in 2008, but over the past few years, have been taken over by the Bremen government. These ceremonies have remained free of protesters, but some have chosen to protest against the memorial with their absence.

⁴⁴ Archiv Gatter, Akten des Bremer Afrika Archivs, *Das Völkermordmahnmal*, Div. Schriftstücke, 2009.

⁴⁵ Translation by author, see appendix for full text.

For example, Israel Kaunatjike, a Berlin-based Herero activist, is against one specific aspect of the memorial: the stones used as the basis of the memorial were donated by a white German-speaking farmer who denied that what happened in Namibia was indeed a genocide. Kaunatjike feels that this is inappropriate, would like the stones removed, and refuses to attend ceremonies held at the memorial.⁴⁶

Aside from these yearly ceremonies, these memorials have mainly become neglected. The site itself is not well taken care of – there are piles of rubbish surrounding the memorials that are not often cleaned up, and the park they sit in is known as a location for buying and selling drugs. The *Elefant* sits between the grassroots activist organisations that transformed it and added the Namibian Genocide Memorial; and the Bremen government supported these initiatives and, more recently, has taken over the organisation of the annual ceremonies. Thus, it has been challenging to determine who is responsible for the everyday maintenance of the memorial.

Summary and Conclusions

Bremen's *Elefant* has displayed many political messages throughout its lifetime, emphasising the use of physical memorials in promoting specific political aims and the ability of physical memorials to be adapted to current political tides. It was created during a surge of support for the NDSAP in the 1930s as a colonial memorial designed to glorify and memorialise German colonialism (a typical theme of pre-Holocaust colonial memorials), with an agenda to inspire the neo-colonial movement. In 1990, anti-apartheid groups, backed by Social Democrats, instigated movements to turn the *Elefant* into an anti-colonial memorial. This resignification represented a reversal in its political messages, from the far-right to the far-left, emphasising the ability of current events to change the memorialisation of past events. In 1996 Namibian president Sam Nujoma unveiled a plaque dedicating the *Elefant* to the victims of German colonial rule. In 2009, a Namibian Genocide memorial was dedicated in conjunction with the *Elefant*, representing another total reversal from the *Elefant's* original meaning; it went from honouring Colonial Germans to honouring their victims. This was in conjunction with a wave of political efforts to decolonise Bremen.

The rest of Germany did not mirror these memorialisation efforts. Raising the question: out of all the cities in Germany, why was Bremen the one that memorialised the Namibian Genocide? The answer comes in the power of memorials to influence memory. Bremen was one of the centres of the neo-colonial movement in the 1920s, which led to the construction of the *Kolonialelefant*. However, the reversed messages displayed by this monument led to a change in the memory of colonialism in Bremen. This was not

⁴⁶ Israel Kaunatjike, interview by Berklee Baum, September 16, 2021.

the case for other colonial statues in Germany. A handful of other protests in West Germany surrounding colonial statues, such as the 1968 student protest at Hamburg University that included the toppling of the Hermann von Wissmann statue. These anti-colonial protests aimed at statues and other physical glorification of colonialism were rare and consisted of removing memorials, with no anti-colonial memorials to fill the empty spaces. As historian Britta Schilling put these protests were 'more a process of erasure than encounter.'⁴⁷ With no anti-colonial memorials replacing the removed colonial memorials, Germans were not being physically reminded of their colonial past. On the other hand, Bremen was constantly reminded of their past by the *Elefant* and its evolving messages.

This change in the memory of colonialism, from glorifying it to regretting and apologising for it (as opposed to simply forgetting it), primed Bremen for further discussion of Germany's colonial crimes. When additional information on Germany's colonial victims was presented, in the form of a lawsuit against Deutsche Bank and subsequent press coverage of the Namibian Genocide, the *Elefant* provided a focus for what to do next: memorialise. Its existence – and its adaptation to become the *Anti-Kolonial-Denk-Mal* – created a local context for the acknowledgement of colonial crimes. This can be seen because Bremen's Namibian Genocide memorial remains the only free-standing memorial in Germany dedicated to the Namibian Genocide. However, a few other memorials mention the atrocities committed. Still, this is one of only two memorials in Germany that explicitly use the term 'genocide' in the Namibian context. This severe lack of Namibian Genocide memorials stands in stark contrast to the numerous Holocaust memorials across Germany, highlighting a double standard in German memorial culture. While the city-state of Bremen has turned its attention to its dark colonial past, the majority of Germany continues to lie in quiet, and perhaps wilful, amnesia to its colonial crimes.

About the Author

Berklee Baum is a second-year history DPhil at the University of Oxford. Her masters, also at the University of Oxford, focused on Holocaust memory, and her current research analyzes colonial genocide memorialisation.

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⁴⁷ B. Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 138-139, 207.

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Appendix

Namibian Genocide Memorialization in Germany

German text of the plaques at the Antikolonialdenkmal site:

Plaque unveiled at the rededication of the monument, on 18 May 1990:

Das Deutsche Kolonial-Ehrenmahl, ein Werk des Münchener Bildhauers Fritz Behn, wurde 1931 von der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft Bremen errichtet und am 6. Juli 1932 eingeweiht.

Das Ehrenmal war schon damals in Bremen umstritten. An ihm entzündete sich die öffentliche Auseinandersetzung um die Frage nach der Zukunft des Zusammenlebens von Völkern: in kolonialer Unterdrückung oder in einem gleichberechtigten Miteinander.

Über einer Krypta erinnerte der steinerne Elefant an die Gefallenen des 1. Weltkriegs in den ehemals deutschen Kolonien Afrikas. Zugleich war der Elefant Ausdruck Deutschlands kolonialer Vergangenheit wie auch der Forderung, neokolonialer Bremer Kreise nach Rückgabe des ehemals deutschen Kolonialbesitzes.

In der NS-Zeit stand der Elefant im Mittelpunkt von Bestrebungen des nationalsozialistischen Bremen, "Stadt der Kolonien" im "Dritten Reich" zu werden.

Afrikas Probleme sind noch heute mit Kolonialismus, Rassismus und andauernder Ausbeutung eng verbunden.

Afrikas Menschen haben unter grossen Opfern in Befreiungskämpfen erfolgreich Widerstand geleistet.

Weltweit haben sich viele Menschen mit Ihnen solidarisiert. Unsere Gesellschaft hat begonnen, aus dieser Entwicklung zu lernen.

Afrika hat in Bremen neue Freunde gefunden.

Dieses Denkmal ist ein Symbol für die Verantwortung, die uns aus der Geschichte erwächst.

Plaque unveiled on 21 June 1996, by Namibian President Sam Nujoma:

Zum Gedenken an die Opfer der deutschen Kolonialherrschaft in Namibia 1884–1914

S. E. Dr. Sam Nujoma, Präsident der Republik Namibia

Dr. Henning Scherf, Präsident des Senats der Freien Hansestadt Bremen

Eingeweiht 21. Juni 1996

Informational sign at the Namibian Genocide Memorial:

OHAMAKARI

Mahnmal für die Opfer des Völkermords in Namibia

Dieses Mahnmal erinnert an die Opfer des Völkermords von 1904 bis 1908 in der Kolonie Deutsch-Südwestafrika, dem heutigen Namibia. Mit seiner Errichtung löste das Bremer Afrika Archive ein Versprechen aus dem Jahre 2004 ein, das Bremens damaliger Bürgermeister, Dr. Henning Scherf, anlässlich der internationalen Konferenz „Der Herero-Krieg – 100 Jahre danach“ den Opfergruppen Ovaherero/Ovambanderu, Nama und Damara gab.

Die Schlacht am Waterberg und der Völkermord 1904-1908

Nach der Schlacht von Ohamakari (Waterberg) am 11. August 1904 befahl der Kommandeur der deutschen Schutztruppe, Generalleutnant Lothar von Trotha, die Liquidierung der Ovaherero und Ovabanderu. Im anschließenden Vernichtungsfeldzug wurden in der wasserlosen Omaheke rund 65 000 Menschen – Männer, Frauen und Kinder – getötet. Fast das gesamte Vieh der beiden Völker kam ebenfalls um. Nach der Eliminierung der Ovaherero und Ovabanderu forderten deutsche Siedler auch die Vernichtung der Nama, die sich ab Oktober 1904 erhoben. Die Kolonialtruppe setzte die Strategie der verbrannten Erde fort, der über 10 000 Nama und Damara zum Opfer fielen. Unzählige weitere Menschen starben in den Folgejahren an den mörderischen Lebensbedingungen in kolonialen Internierungslagern sowie an den Folgen der Zwangsarbeit.

„Innerhalb der deutschen Grenze wird jeder Herero, mit oder ohne Gewehr, mit oder ohne Vieh, erschossen. Ich nehme keine Weiber und keine Kinder mehr auf, treibe sie zu ihrem Volk zurück oder lasse auf sie schießen.“

(Proklamation von Trothas, 2. Oktober 1904. Bild rechts: Erhängte Ovaherero in der Omaheke, Bild links: Herero-Kinder in Ketten. Gotos in Nationalarchiv, Windhoek).

Das Mahnmal OHAMAKARI

Das Mahnmal wurde von F. Thomas Gatter, Bremen, gestaltet. Farmarbeiter und Jugendliche aus Okakarara am Waterberg waren beim Sammeln der in das

Betonbett des etwa 6 m durchmessenden Rondells eingelassenen Felsbrocken beteiligt. „Die Kreisform teilt sich in eine, sprechende ‘Hälfte – den Raum der Toten – und eine ‚lauschende‘ Hälfte – den Raum der Lebenden. Der Betongrund symbolisiert die Basis der Erinnerung: ohne Erinnerung keine Aussöhnung. 365 kleinere Steine in der ‚sprechenden‘ Hälfte versinnbildlichen die ungezählten Opfer des Völkermords. Die vier aufrechten Felsen in der ‚lauschenden‘ Hälfte stehen für die Grundsteine der Versöhnung, die zu setzen sind, einer für jede der beteiligten Seiten: Deutschland und Namibia als staatliche Partner des Versöhnungsprozesses, die namibischen Opfergruppen und die Nachkommen der deutschen Siedler als Besiegelnde.“

(Aus dem Text des Künstler zum Entwurf)

Tatkräftig unterstützt wurde dieses Mahnmalproject durch des Schwachhauser Verein DerElefant!, Träger des schon 1990 auf Beschluss der Bürgerschaft zum Antikolonial-DenkMal erklärten steinernen Elefanten. Das Mahnmal wurde am 11. August 2009 durch den bremischen Senator für Umwelt, Baum, Verkehr und Europa, Herrn Dr. Reinhard Loske, und den namibischen Minister und Generaldirektor der Planungskommission, Prof. Dr. Peter Katjavivi, eingeweiht.

Gefördert durch Beirat Schwachhausen, Klaus Thesenfitz (Honorarkonsul der Republik Namibia in Bremen), Kreisverband Nordost Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Senator für Umwelt, Bau, Verkehr und Europa, Bremer Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Entwicklungspolitische Beratung Prof Dr Manfred O Hinz, Windhoek, Senatsrat aD Gunther Hilliges, Bremen, Logistik Namibia Harald Schütt, Windhoek. Träger: Bremer Afrika Archiv e.V.

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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