

Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation

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The title of Britta Schilling's fine monograph, *Postcolonial Germany*, refers to a phenomenon that has given rise to a relatively new but vital field of study. While historians have, in one way or another, always been working on the roughly 30 years of German colonialism (1884–1914/19), a 'boom' (1) of scholarship in this field only occurred following the emergence of postcolonial German studies, which gained momentum in the late 1990s. Schilling's study thus builds on lively recent discussion and research on German colonialism and postcoloniality both in the Anglophone and German context. Simultaneously, the author leaves the beaten path many times. Unlike earlier works in the field of German postcolonial studies she proposes, for instance, a periodization 'which transcends the conventional breaks marked by the Nazi takeover and the end of the Second World War' (p. 9). She also joins the very few scholars who do *not* reiterate the catch-phrase of a 'colonial' or 'postcolonial amnesia' (2) that allegedly 'affected the cultural memory' in Germany – an amnesia that for some 'began after World War II and lasted well into the 1960s' (3) while for others it continues roughly to the centenary in 2004 of the colonial wars against the Herero and Nama peoples.(4) Schilling thus not only covers the entire 'post-colonial' time (in a chronological sense) 'from the loss of the colonies to the present day' (p. 2), she also maintains that there was never such a period of forgetting in Germany (p. 10).

This thoroughly researched and contextualized study draws on a wide range of sources from the *Afrikabücher* (Africa books, an umbrella term for books on the German colonies from travel accounts to colonial novels) and schoolbooks of 1935–45 to 'hitherto unexplored files from the archives in the East and West German Foreign Offices' (p. 10) which keep records, among other things, of German state gifts on the occasion of the independence of former colonized countries. Schilling also uses 'untapped texts and photographs discovered through a close reading of colonial publications' and last but not least a collection of oral interviews with first, second and third generation descendants of people involved in German colonialism (p. 10). 'The resulting story of German "postcolonialism"', as the author puts it in her introduction, 'moves, in broad terms, from a time of remembering, re-visualizing, and re-enacting what was lost, through a time of trying to forget, to a time of not being able to forget' (p. 10).

When Schilling designates the 'end of colonialism' to be 'the beginning of memory culture' (p. 2), this refers to the second major concern of her monograph, namely memory studies. This field is another booming

area, and has been for even longer, with its roots in the early 20th century and a second phase that lasts to this day which began in early 1980s with Pierre Nora's project *Les lieux de mémoire*. At present the German field is dominated by the theories of Jan and Aleida Assmann on whose work Schilling also relies heavily (p. 7 and *passim*). While both postcolonial studies and memory studies are prospering, an interdisciplinary confluence of those two fields is still a relatively new endeavour (5) which deserves particular attention.

Situating her study in the field of memory studies, Schilling modifies Jan Assmann's concept of communicative and cultural memory into 'private' and 'public' memory. Furthermore, to an extent she only loosely borrows from Assmann's concepts of memory, as her claim in the first chapter that 'as a medium, the *Afrikabuch* combines both the 'communicative' and the 'cultural' memory' (p. 15) reveals. In contrast, Assmann takes great care in distinguishing those two realms; for him, a book is clearly situated *beyond* the point where 'living communication crystallized in the forms of objectivized culture' (6) and becomes part of the cultural memory as 'evident in symbols such as texts, images, rituals, landmarks and other "lieux de mémoire"' (7). This, however, is not to suggest that Schilling should have schematically followed these particular concepts of memory. On the contrary, the way the author creatively uses these concepts often generates interesting ideas about relevant mnemonic processes – as, for instance, about a certain way to impart the lost *Heimat* abroad in the *Afrikabücher* of 1915–25 as well as about its effects: 'Every time someone read over the words listing material losses, they also reconstructed this lost world and committed it to memory' (p. 34). Likewise, one may very well rethink, as Schillings seems to suggest, the transition from telling and reiterating stories in settler colonies to the turning of these stories into the more permanent form of a book to the function of such a book in the context of both cultural and communicative memory. In other instances, Schilling is in line with main tenets of contemporary memory studies such as the selectivity and perspectivity of both individual and cultural memory. (8) Chapter one, for instance, discusses how the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles, the loss of the colonies and, for some, the deprivation of their *Heimat* (home) abroad shaped the memory of colonialism, confirming one of memory studies' central ideas that 'it is not the historical 'authenticity' or 'truth' of memory but, rather, its usability that finally shapes its form and effect' (9): 'every time *Afrikabücher* were read, every time children and adults leafed through the illustrated pages or gazed at the colourful covers, the memory of the German colonial past was 'recharged' through the cultural framework of the present, and the memory of colonialism kept alive' (p. 40).

The time frame of this study from the end of German colonial rule to the present provides ample opportunity to trace the changes and shifts of actual memory contents and the way in which 'the Germans have negotiated their colonial legacy over a time span of almost one hundred years' (p. 195). As the discussion in the second chapter of the Weimar time and its relevant colonial performances shows, this period was still characterized by 'the former colonialists' hegemony over the memory of colonialism' (p. 67), while the merging of colonial and Nazi ideology in the following era, as the author discusses on the basis of schoolbooks of 1935–45, generated profound shifts in memory politics. On the one hand, the Nazis 'celebrated the memory of colonialism in very similar ways as right-wing colonialist groups had done in the 1920s and early 1930s', on the other 'new initiatives provoked subtle but significant changes' (p. 72). The author points particularly to a re-evaluation of colonial violence, to an enhancement of the status of notorious actors such as Carl Peters, and to the Nazi 'interpretation of the First World War in Africa as a "race war"' (p. 72) in line with overall Nazi ideology and politics.

Chapter four on the period of 1949–68 is certainly impressive, as it discusses the state gifts the FRG and the GDR handed to the former colonies at independence on the basis of 'hitherto unexplored files' (p. 10). Against the backdrop of the Cold War and the Hallstein Doctrine, the chapter also provides an in-depth analysis of the GDR's awkward position as a state that, on the one hand, insisted on its anti-imperialist stance, and on the other hand sought to establish relations with the fledgling African states by building on the latter's positive memory of German colonialism as opposed to the British and French colonial rule.

Unfortunately, this chapter quickly jumps from the end of the Nazi era to the beginning of the time of independence in Africa – while the author could have actually made use of scholarship on the late 1940s and 1950s that would have fully supported her argument. Disregarded also by the field of postcolonial German

studies, Rosemarie Lester had already in the early 1980s showed (in her investigation of magazines of this early post-war period) that there was a lively discussion on 'our former *Schutzgebiete*' in the West German tabloid press.⁽¹⁰⁾ Beyond that, more reputable news magazines of the post-war era such as *Der Spiegel* contained special sections called 'Colonies' or 'Colonial politics', whilst articles dealing with countries like Togo, Cameroon, South West and South East Africa or Samoa and the Caroline Islands hardly ever failed to mention the former German 'owners' of these colonies, often reminding their readers in detail of the German colonial history of these countries.⁽¹¹⁾

Chapter five on the period of 1968–90 traces another major shift in the memory of colonialism. In the 1960s increasing political awareness put German colonialism in the perspective of the wider field of Western imperialism which led to a general negative valuation of colonialism. Interestingly, as Schilling argues, when West German students tore down the traces of colonial history, as in the case of the now famous Hamburg *Denkmalsturz*, in a way they also helped to make them disappear. 'Germany's colonial memory in public space was thus laid to rest in 1968' (p. 197), or rather, since there were certainly anti-colonial initiatives after 1968, colonial memory 'moved from the monumental to the local' (p. 135). This would, in parts, explain how the hypothesis of a '(post)colonial amnesia' could emerge in the first place. However, as always in these contexts, it depends on *where* one looks. It may very well be that Britta Schilling's splendid findings will in the future be complemented by other findings so that the overall impression of a '(post)colonial abstinence' ⁽¹²⁾ in the years after 1968 and into the 1990s becomes even more complex. Around the centenary of the Congo Conference in 1984, for instance, there was at prime time on German TV a documentary on this event and its background.⁽¹³⁾ Early in the following year, to mention another example, German TV provided its audience with a three-part filmic adaptation of Uwe Timm's novel *Morenga*, based on the war in former German South West Africa, and prefaced this two days earlier by broadcasting a documentary on 'Resistance in German South West Africa'.⁽¹⁴⁾

Schilling's sixth chapter builds on her 'unique collection of oral interviews' (p. 10) which she conducted with first, second and third generation members of families involved in German colonialism. Particularly interesting in this chapter on the 'Family heirloom: private memories of colonialism' is 'the interaction between elements of private, family memory and public memory of German colonialism' (p. 157), that is, the description and discussion of how the respective framework of a given cultural memory influenced individual and family memory. Opening up this 'door' into the family memory of colonialism might be another prolific field of future studies — a field that could include all contents of communicative/private memory that are not publicly visible and thus nor part of a cultural/public memory. The memory work, for instance, of visitors to websites such as *Deutsche Schutzgebiete*, *freiburg-postkolonial.de*, *Leipzig postkolonial*, *Berlin Postkolonial*, *afrika-hamburg.de* or *Köln Postkolonial* ⁽¹⁵⁾ would be highly interesting in this regard, although it is certainly beyond the grasp of the usual tools of historians or scholars of memory studies.

The fact that private or group memory (communicative memory), as Schilling's chapter six also shows, may very well be different from cultural or public memory, conjures up a weak point in the field of memory studies which is not explicitly addressed but often implicitly touched upon in Schilling's study: the contested relation between communicative and cultural (private and public) memory. Historians like Jeffrey Olick, Alon Confino, Wulf Kansteiner, and others recently criticized the fact that 'the threshold between the individual and the collective is often crossed without any adjustments in method'.⁽¹⁶⁾ Although private and public memories are, as Schilling rightly points out, certainly 'woven together' (p. 195), critics insist that blurring these two concepts without reflection is not acceptable, in particular when it is based on a 'subtle but decisive confusion of the difference between "collected memory" and "collective memory"'.⁽¹⁷⁾ 'There is too often a facile mode of doing cultural history, whereby one picks a historical event or a vehicle of memory, analyzes its representation or how people perceived it over time, and draws conclusions about "memory" (or "collective memory")'.⁽¹⁸⁾ In these cases, representations of an individual's memory as manifest for instance in a written text are taken to be expressions of the wider cultural memory of an imagined collective. This, however, can only lead to speculation and these 'insights into past and present historical cultures cannot be linked conclusively to specific social collectives and their historical

consciousness'.⁽¹⁹⁾ One could easily find statements in Schilling's study to which these criticisms apply (see for instance: 'The way in which *Afrikabücher* portrayed life in the colonies before and during the war determined the collective memory of that period during the 1920s and, to a large degree, beyond' (p. 22f)).

However, to accuse Schilling's brilliant study of neglecting to address or even solve this critical issue at the intersection of memory studies and postcolonial studies would mean to ask for a different kind of book. Her in-depth study is a most valuable contribution to the development of the vital field of the memory of German colonialism and will doubtless trigger further research.

Notes

1. S. Conrad, 'Review of Eckert, Andreas: *Kolonialismus* (Frankfurt/M., 2006)', *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 6 March 2007 <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2007-1-154> [2]> [accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For an overview see M. Albrecht, '(Post-)colonial amnesia? German debates on colonialism and decolonization in the post-war era', in *German Colonialism and National Identity*, eds. M. Perraudin and J. Zimmerer (New York, NY, 2010). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. Zantop, 'Race, gender, and postcolonial amnesia', in *Women in German Yearbook 17. Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture*, eds. P. Herminghouse and S. Zantop (Lincoln, NE, 2001), p. 4. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See the announcement on H-Net of the conference *War, Genocide and Memory. German Colonialism and National Identity* of 2006 <<http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=152016>> [3] [accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For a recent conference see for instance *Das Gedächtnis des Kolonialismus in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* in June 2014 at the University of Bremen <<http://www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/inputs/tagungen.aspx>> [4] [accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. Assmann, 'Collective memory and cultural identity [1988]', *New German Critique*, 65 (1995), 128. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. J. Assmann, 'Globalization, universalism, and the erosion of cultural memory', in *Memory in a Global Age*, eds. A. Assmann and S. Conrad (New York, NY, 2010), p. 122; in an earlier text (see footnote 6) he speaks of 'texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities, or even landscapes' (p. 128). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. A. Erll, 'Cultural memory studies: an introduction', in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. A. Erll and A. Nünning (Berlin, New York, NY, 2010), p. 5. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. V. Nünning, 'Fictions of collective memory', in *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* (Vol. 21: Literature, Literary History, and Cultural Memory, ed. H. Grabes) eds. W. Fluck, H. Grabes, J. Schlaeger, and B. Thomas (Tübingen, 2005), p. 327. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. R. K. Lester, 'Trivialneger'. *Das Bild des Schwarzen im westdeutschen Illustriertenroman* (Stuttgart, 1982), in particular pp. 191–200. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. M. Albrecht, 'Europa ist nicht die Welt'. *(Post)Kolonialismus in Literatur und Geschichte der westdeutschen Nachkriegszeit* (Bielefeld, 2008), p. 40; see also chapter two of this study: '(Post-)Koloniale Amnesie? Zur deutschen Kolonialismuskritik' (pp. 34–138). [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. M. Albrecht, 'Europa ist nicht die Welt' (see footnote 11), p. 266f. [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. See for instance the announcement in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* of 15 November 1984: '20.15 Uhr. ARD. Unser Afrika wird 100 (Sendung von Christian Herrendörfer und Carl-Heinz Caspari aus Anlaß des 100. Jahrestages der Berliner Kongo-Konferenz, auf der die Europäer Afrika aufteilten)' <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-65917589.html> [5]> [accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. The film was aired on 13, 17 and 20 March 1985; cf. H. Schulze, 'Wie Wespen. Der anspruchsvolle WDR-Dreiteiler Morenga handelt vom deutschen Kolonialismus in Südafrika', *Der Spiegel*, 11 March 1985, 2048 <<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13512274.html> [6]> [accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Cf. deutsche-schutzgebiete.de/, freiburg-postkolonial.de, leipzig-postkolonial.de, berlin-postkolonial.de, afrika-hamburg.de, kopfwelten.org/kp/, [all accessed 2 August 2014]. [Back to \(15\)](#)

16. W. Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory: a methodological critique of collective memory studies', *History and Theory*, 41, 2 (2002), 185.[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. W. Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory', 187, summarizing the main theses of J. Olick, 'Collective memory: the two cultures', *Sociological Theory*, 17, 3 (1999).[Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. A. Confino: 'Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method', *The American Historical Review*, 102, 5 (1997), 1388.[Back to \(18\)](#)
 19. W. Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory', 179.[Back to \(19\)](#)
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