

Conference Report, American Historical Association Meeting, 2006
CGCEH Session 4: Education and Empire in Imperial Germany

"Colonized Classrooms: Introducing German Students to the Empire, 1884-1914"
Jeff Bowersox, University of Toronto

"Living in the Perfect Metropole: Hamburg, Germany, as Colonial Laboratory, 1908-1919"
Sara Pugach, The Ohio State University - Lima

"Popular Culture, Popular Science, and the Formation of Colonial Knowledge in Everyday Life"
John P. Short, The Cooper Union

As the panel's title suggests, the three papers considered various arenas within which Germans were "educated" about empire. Whether in formal educational institutions, popular culture, or in the urban landscape itself, encountering and thereby learning about the colonial world was an everyday occurrence in the Kaiserreich. Struggles to shape that encounter -- struggles bound up with professional advancement, civic pride, and commercial success -- reveal the importance ascribed to colonialism. In addition, the papers suggested the ambiguities of this colonial education as various "educators" negotiated the fuzzy middle ground between authenticity and entertainment.

Jeff Bowersox opened the panel with an investigation of colonial education in Prussian primary and secondary schools. Beginning in the 1880s, roughly concurrent with Germany's acquisition of its first overseas possessions, the non-European world increasingly became a valued object of instruction in the schools. Over the course of the imperial period this world was progressively exoticized and presented in terms of its potential for exploitation by able colonizers. But this colonial instruction was not introduced at the behest of the organized colonial movement, nor was the Prussian state the driving force. Rather, school geography teachers took up and promoted the themes of empire as they sought legitimation for their discipline from administrators and students.

For these educators, empire had a modern pedagogical value. Lessons on the colonized world combined practical lessons about the rise and fall of nations with exotic references. Simultaneously excited by and fearful of the potential of popular exoticism to engage students' imaginations, these school geographers pursued a limited, sanitized exoticism. Only after they had established the worth of this "educational exoticism" around the turn of the century did the organized colonial movement begin to involve itself directly in teaching Germany's youth.

For Sara Pugach, the city of Hamburg itself served as a site for colonial education. In their efforts to found an independent *Kolonialinstitut* to rival Berlin's *Seminar für orientalische Sprachen*, Hamburg's civic leaders argued their city was the "perfect metropole," the ideal location for studying colonial phenomena. The already existing Department of African Languages had already proven its value as an experimental arena for studying Africans in a tightly controlled environment. Outside the classroom, tropical goods and colonial peoples passed through Hamburg's port on a daily basis. No other German city, certainly not the landlocked imperial capital, could offer such frequent, practical encounters with the colonial world.

When the *Kolonialinstitut* was opened in 1908, it further buttressed Hamburg's claim to be Germany's chief colonial laboratory, a place where Germans could learn about their distant "protectorates" without

having to endure the harshness or dangers found abroad. Certainly for educational purposes, this sanitized microcosm of the colonial environment -- much like the sanitized colonial encounter found in Prussian geography instruction -- was "better than the real thing."

From Bowersox's and Pugach's examinations of empire within formal institutions, John P. Short's paper moved into the realm of popular colonialism. The strange case of Captain Köster's traveling Naval and Colonial Exhibition offered an opportunity to explore the "threads of instruction, amusement, and profit" intertwined within such colonial spectacles. Exhibiting in Augsburg, Köster tried to avoid paying a local entertainment tax by claiming that his was more an educational show than a public amusement. The deciding judge disagreed about his priorities but never formally clarified whether the show had an educational content. Indeed, reviews praised the "Captain" for convincingly illustrating the importance of German colonial efforts.

Köster's traveling exhibition inhabited a gray zone between entertainment and education. He reached the working classes and the rural poor of Bavaria, groups normally disdained by the bourgeois colonial movement, through a sensationalist "colportage colonialism" that paid lip service to academic authenticity. Köster thus represented an "alternate world of colonialism" to that constructed by the middle class colonial enthusiast, academic, or administrator. The very people who supported and filled Hamburg's *Kolonialinstitut*, who imagined Hamburg as a sanitized colonial laboratory, anxiously condemned the spectacular, irrational encounter found in the sphere of popular colonialism.

But these rival forms of colonialisms did not exist in isolation from each other. While bourgeois critics condemned the titillating fairground wonders of a Captain Köster, they simultaneously imitated those forms to make their formal colonial education more effective. Thus Köster's efforts to meld his obvious profit-seeking with an edifying educational experience, to combine the popular colonialism of the exhibition with the authoritative colonial knowledge of the academy, tied him to Prussian geography teachers seeking to use empire to make their instruction more engaging. Colonial education always existed in an uneasy tension with colonial entertainment.

These three papers thus illustrated the ambiguous and fractured nature of "colonialism" in the Kaiserreich. At the same time they also revealed colonialism's prominence within German society, perhaps a factor of its many different faces.

Unfortunately, the panel's commentator was forced to withdraw on short notice, but the discussion was no less lively and wide-ranging as a result. Roger Chickering (Georgetown University) asked the participants to clarify the type of world that Germans were being "educated" about and why the panelists referred to it generally as "colonial." Was the non-European world perceived as an undifferentiated whole? Bowersox and Pugach noted that in the formal institutions there was room within broader interpretive frameworks for some recognition of distinctions -- as long as they did not overturn basic hierarchies of civilization that placed Europeans (and their descendants around the globe) at the top. Referring to the "simulacrum that is empire," Short pointed out that in the realm of popular colonialism homogeneity and conflation of the non-European world as a whole was the order of the day. Kris Manjapra (Harvard University) pointed to an area that deserves more attention when he asked about how non-Western peoples perceived ideas coming out of Germany.

The session ended with an engaged discussion about the place of German colonialism within European colonialism more broadly. Questions were raised about the uniqueness of German colonial efforts. Deborah Neill (York University) pointed out that differences among different types of colonies -- settlement versus purely economic colonies, for example -- were more revealing than general "national"

differences. The panelists agreed: whether in the realm of metropolitan colonial fantasies or the practice of colonial rule, colonialism very much was a transnational phenomenon. Europeans and North Americans borrowed and adapted extensively from one other. While some national peculiarities of course should be recognized, no empire developed in total isolation.

All in all, the session reaffirmed the importance of empire for understanding modern Germany and confirmed that there is plenty of interest in how this project is pursued.

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