

Collectible Colonialism: Fantasy in the Everyday Weimar Republic

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From 1884, Germany established the third-largest colonial Empire through overseas and domestic acquisitions, such as German Samoa, German East Africa and Nauru. Germany considered itself to be a belated imperial power in comparison to Britain and France, and so these colonies were used to emphasise the Empire's power and influence on the world stage. Germany was stripped of its colonies after losing the First World War, and the rise of far-right politics in the 1920s was accompanied with a desire for these colonies to be restored to Germany. Memory of German colonialism today is often overshadowed by collective engagement with the Holocaust, so the exploitation of colonised people and territories, including the genocide in Namibia, has not been widely acknowledged.

However, the orthodox understanding of German colonialism as a short-lived and thus marginal phenomenon has allowed for German responsibility to be divorced from the live impact of colonialism in the former colonised states. This externalisation of colonialism as an 'exclusively extra-European' phenomenon of no significance to the German state promotes a historical viewpoint that dismisses the importance of the colonial project to conceptions of German identity since the 1840s (Naranch 2014: 10). In response, this comparative analysis of colonial fantasy in Weimar-era postage stamps and emergency bank notes (*Notgeld*) examines material culture to stress the entrenchment of imperial fantasies within the fabric of German culture and the bilateral impact of the colonial project. Under this view, colonialism remains a live issue in Germany because of its role in shaping domestic national fantasies, and should be directly engaged with publicly.

In this paper, I aim to show that 1) a study of German colonial attitudes is essential to understand German cultural history, 2) material culture is a fruitful method through which to do so as it locates colonial fantasies in the everyday interactions of Germans, forcing an acknowledgement of Germany's colonial past and 3) the differences between postage stamps and *Notgeld* reveal the important and disparate ways in which colonialism was understood and mobilised after the forced loss of overseas colonies.

Stamps

From 1884 to 1919, the German Empire (*Deutsches Kaiserreich*) colonised territories in Africa and Asia Pacific under the Emperor's 1896 foreign policy (*Weltpolitik*). Colonisation was perceived as stabilising Germany's geopolitical security in competition with rival empires and protecting Germany's social, moral and aesthetic concerns. Moreover, the attainment of popular legitimacy as a nascent government was predicated on colonial success, because from the 1840s, the colonial imaginary was deployed by intellectuals in describing what the future unified government should do (Eley 2015: 31). Therefore, national belonging was shaped by both the internal and external politics of the new state, highlighting Germany's active relationship to its empire.

The centrality of overseas expansion to the Empire's identity is evident in the 'Kaiseryacht SMY Hohenzollern' series of stamps. The only original postage stamps of the *Kaiserreich's* overseas colonial possessions, they were in circulation from 1900 to 1915. The stamps bear the image of the Kaiser's yacht, SMY Hohenzollern II, functioning as a sign of grandeur, intimidation and the incoming arrival of settlers (Spenneman 2002d). Moreover, the ship, recalling themes of discovery and power, represents a journey, mirroring how the power of colonial fantasy has endured through time.

The scrolls were blank on the key plate so that they could be engraved with the different names of the colonies. This is visually apparent in the cramped typeface of 'Deutsch-Südwestafrika' (Figure 1) in comparison to the decorated Samoan scroll (Figure 2). This standardised design demonstrates how colonies were generalised into a singularity with the expectation that vastly different experiences across the world could be standardised in line with the needs of German colonial administration.



Figure 1



Figure 2

This generalisation renders clear how stamps create and embed images of colonies that the colonial administration wishes to project in the minds of both the coloniser and the colonised, highlighting how the colonial project was as important to the nation state as it was in the actual feat of overseas possession (Newman 1989). The government also used stamps as propagandistic media, reinforcing the importance of a material cultural study. Two separate designs of the Yacht stamps were issued; the more expensive version in landscape had the ship and text printed in contrasting colours with scrolls of different lengths (Figure 3). Furthermore, stamps were used as mediums for actual advertisement, which included coupons for stationery and alcohol (Figure 4). The post office continued to sell these stamps to dealers and collectors until after World War I, indicating an awareness of the centrality of these designs not only in shaping public opinion, but in commemorating and fixing a certain view of history (Spenneman 2002c). This demonstrates how ideological norms are entrenched in the mundane.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Before the Yacht issue was released, regular Imperial stamps known as *Vorläufer* were used in the colonies, their cancellation marks the only sign of usage in the different colonies (Figures 5 and 6). This generalisation, achieved through overprinting, is significant for two reasons. First, the overprinting draws attention to the stamps' materiality, and the contingent messages they carry. The objects can be grafted with opposing messages in a form of 'symbolic accretion' (Alderman and Dwyer 2009: 53). Second, in this context, Germany is taken as the default within the administration, and the colonial experience as an afterthought that can be expressed in a cancellation mark. This perpetuates the notion to the average citizen that colonising nation and its ideologies are the world's centre, with the colonies in the peripheries of concern. This does not reflect the close link that colonial fantasies had to the formation of German identity.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Overprinting continued upon surrender of the colonies, when confiscated German colonial stamps were redenominated for Allied wartime use (Figure 7). The effect of the wartime loss on German identity, which had long been tied to military success, was profound, as exemplified by the proliferation of the ‘stab in the back’ myth by far-right circles. Many Germans feared reverse colonisation given the French occupational presence along the Rhine by French colonial troops, exemplifying how Germany identified itself with groups victimised by the colonial powers of Britain and France. This was potentially motivated by Germany attempting to cover its own violent traditions and justify its failures in the war, which had also led to a loss of domestic territory and economic precarity (Pinkert 2002: 14).

Revanchism, the desire to recoup territorial losses, became a popular collective, nationalistic desire that distracted from the realities of post-war life and responded to feelings of socio-political vulnerability, mirroring pre-imperial fantasies where the collective imagination served to bolster and legitimise domestic power in times of crisis (van Hoesen 2015: 305). Given the low opinion of the Weimar government, people turned to other causes. The popularity of colonial revisionism reached the institution, exemplified by the Colonial Institute in Hamburg hosting university programmes and the German Colonial Society’s 30,000 members by 1926 (Figure 8) (Townsend 1928: 65).



Figure 7

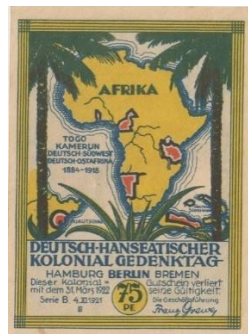


Figure 8

To this end, revanchists produced propaganda stamps for private collection, known as cinderellas. One 1920 series depicted colonies and European territory lost in the Treaty of Versailles (Figure 9). In German, collecting non-postal stamps is known as *Erinnophilie*. Etymologically this comes from *Erinnerung*, the German term for remembrance, reminder or memento. Thus, the commemorative element of cinderellas is stressed. The desire for empire in the formation of a collective identity points to the importance of colonial fantasy in German cultural history, necessitating a confrontation of Germany’s colonial past by current Germans today.



Figure 9

These cinderellas overlaid the yacht imagery, in black for mourning, with a lowered Imperial war ensign, the *Reichskriegsflagge* (Figures 10-12). This palimpsest is particularly representative of the ongoing colonial, imperialistic and nationalistic fantasy throughout German history. The black and white colour scheme, Iron Cross and eagle were incorporated from Prussian symbolism, as Wilhelm I wanted to avoid the black, red and gold colours associated with pan-Germanism. The flag recalls Prussian and Imperial naval strength as well as the flag of the State of the Teutonic order, a crusader state that colonised much of northern Europe. Weimar-era nationalists such as the Freikorps used the flag to protest the Republic. The continuation of this flag in the expansionist, imperialist dream has persisted today, as the *Reichskriegsflagge* is still used today by far-right groups. The morphing of the colonial fantasy shows the impact of the colonial loss on the national psyche and demonstrates particular symbolism has been appropriated for various causes because of the ideologies they recall.



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

In 1921, another set of cinderellas was privately produced, overprinting sayings such as '*Ohne Kolonien ist Deutschland nicht lebensfähig*' ['Germany is not viable without colonies'] on Weimar-era stamps (Figures 13, 15, 17). Drawing on Germany's tradition of defining itself through nature, the figures in the background are images of blacksmiths, farmers and miners (Figures 14, 16, 18). These occupations reflect the significance of domestic self-sufficiency during the financially challenged

Weimar period. The emphasis on these traditional occupations recall the notion of *Heimat*, a movement concerned with a return to a romanticised safe, secure Germany in the face of industrialisation and modernisation. Thus, these stamps reflect an ‘amnesiac impulse’ to move towards a spatial and temporal idyll (Willett 1989: 127). These cinderellas demonstrate how the dream of restitution of German colonies was rooted in a warped memory of imperial glory and desire for economic strength.



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

Notgeld

Notgeld, a substitute community currency, was both part of the financial system and a commodified symbol of its failure (Maynes 2019: 679). Initially issued by towns and villages to alleviate the shortage of small change during wartime emergency, they became a profitable scheme that earned issuing bodies a great surplus because of their collectable value. Artists embraced the unreliable in making *Notgeld*'s materiality visible through highly colourful artistic designs that affirmed local identity (Maynes 2019: 681). The creative designs point at functions other than currency – the notes exploited the necessary circulation of money in order to promote ideologies or products. Thus, not

only is *Notgeld* valuable as a mass material artefact reflecting post-war printing culture, but it also reflects the local patriotic fantasies of the time.

In this 1920 set, renditions of colonial buildings, landscapes and German officers and local people are featured (Figures 19-22). The emphasis on the local landscape and colonial buildings mingling localises and foregrounds the German in the ‘foreign’. This framing of the colonial lands as something intrinsically German is furthermore interesting when the importance of buildings, statues and street names in decolonial debates today as multi-layered sites of memory is considered. The contrast between colonial officers and indigenous peoples represents the so-called ‘civilising’ process, synthesised through false memories to facilitate a hegemonic narrative of superiority - a key tool of the colonial agenda (Barrett 2011: 3). The identity that this set generates of white Germans as superior reflects a historically and culturally specific assumption that has been generalised as part of what it means to be human. Thus, artistic depictions in ubiquitous objects such as *Notgeld* play a central role in articulating ideals to and of the public. This is particularly notable during this time as due to changing systems of class, the shared symbolism and representations that defined identity came to be national as opposed to class-based, reinforcing the importance of the colonial fantasy to German identity.

Furthermore, spatial representations like buildings imply other cultures as temporally distant, located in less advanced times (Macdonald 2003: 3). Three temporal narratives can be said to be at play in these artworks: the idea of ongoing national progress, represented by the Weimar revisionist movement striving to regain their former standing, the nation at the final stage of triumphant achievement in the idealisation of imperial glory, and the immemorial through the objectification of local culture (Handler 1988: 14). Presenting the local landscape as permanent naturalises them, but specifically as property or part of the land that is ‘available’ to conquer. This exhibition-like gaze reinforces Western self-identity as owners and the Western perception of the world as objective. For example, Figures 19-22 use stereotypical images of indigenous peoples, contrasting with the authoritative stance of the German officer in Swakopmund (Figure 19). Swakopmund was the site of a concentration camp for Herero people during the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples, which was not admitted by the German government until 2015, but the *Notgeld*, which would have been seen by people who had never travelled overseas, emphasises the ‘orderly’ German architecture.



Figure 19

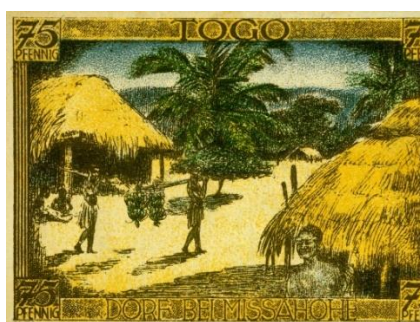


Figure 20

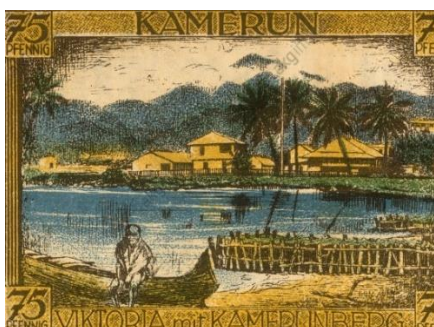


Figure 21



Figure 22

This is further exemplified in a two-part series issued in April 1922, from Neustadt in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Figures 23-25). The illustrations of local goods such as bananas, ivory and cacao beans on the front of these notes foreground the economic exploitation of colonialism. Moreover, the quotations such as *„O, Vaterland, verzage nicht, auf dunkle Nacht folgt Licht!“* [‘O Fatherland, do not lose heart, after a dark night comes light!’], *„Wann wird der Retter kommen diesem Lande?“* [‘When will the saviour come to this land?’] and *„Deutsches Volk, du konntest fallen, !aber sinken kannst du nicht!“* [‘German people, you can fall but you cannot sink!’] can be attributed both to the German relationship with the colonies, or to the shameful German identity after the war – further emphasising how German victimhood allowed for a divorce from responsibility. However, these are not contemporary quotes – the quotations are lyrics from 1813, written by a soldier Theodor Körner about the German uprising against Napoleon. Like the 1921 cinderellas, where quotations were grafted onto the stamps, the repurposing of wartime lyrics for a revanchist purpose reflects the fluid, palimpsestic practices of the revisionists. Moreover, central to Weimar revisionist fantasies was the exceptionalist argument that German colonial administration played progressive roles in economic and religious modernisation. Seeing the colonial past as a culturing weapon led to the establishment of the colonial past not as one of genocide, but as an imaginative tool used to construct a sense of identity. Therefore, this study counters such assumptions by revealing how such mechanisms were used to overwrite the significance of overseas colonies to German identity, and thus responsibility.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

Thus, it is clear that Weimar revisionist fantasies led to a particularly nostalgic sense of colonialism in the collective imagination, because of the victimising sense of a forced loss which added to the perceived notion of colonial ‘benefit’, rather than collective responsibility.

Transnational memory

Material culture constructs a sense of belonging to a national heritage, commodifying the dominant identity. Thus, an analysis of material culture is particularly useful to decolonisation debates because how identity is imagined in historical artefacts illuminates how we present ourselves today.

For example, this paper reveals the disparate ways in which colonialism was desired: as a generalised emblem of military and administrative strength and as an exotic escape from post-war reality that emphasised German superiority and victimhood. Whereas the palimpsestic element of the official stamps was incidental, community-based private stamps and *Notgeld* were explicitly conscious of their own materiality, with the idea of the nation explored through nature and architecture. Material objects disclose how concepts of nationalism can be legitimised in the banal and mundane – a warning for today. Therefore, the colonial project can be understood as being composed of a fantasy that has long outlived its period.

Therefore, these artefacts must be considered in light of their collectible function. Both artefacts were collected at the time, even forged due to demand (Spenneman 2002a, 2002c). Explicitly fixed with a price yet quickly rendered useless, in tension with their ever-rising value as an extremely prized collectible, these artefacts continue to shape our worldviews. The continued preoccupation of collectors and dedicated societies, then and now, attests to the significance of colonial fantasy in German history, no matter how distorted it may now be.

The commodification of colonial nostalgia is not only pertinent in collectors’ circles, but in the practices of the German government over time. This is apparent in the 1934 issuing of a special *Kolonialgedenkjahr* series depicting key figures in the colonial movement, such as Carl Peters. Designing these objects for collection, and collection practices themselves, treat these objects as historical artefacts, which often become divorced from their historical context over time. This could potentially lead to an amnesiac or misinformed relationship to Germany’s colonial past – ironic given that these objects have a clear function of remembering past histories. This estrangement from the past also avoids the responsibility a connection to the past entails.

Contrastingly, a distancing from the colonial past is impossible for the formerly colonised nations. For example, the Republic of the Marshall Islands has released a number of issues commemorating the

role of the different colonial postal services during their long colonisation period, including that of the German colonial period (Spenneman 2002b). This includes a 1984 First Day Cover featuring the Marshall Islands 5 Mark stamp from the Yacht series. Foregrounded is a contemporary Marshallese stamp featuring a boat, which significantly juxtaposes the colonial image of incoming settlers with a traditional Marshallese boat, recalling the significance of Marshallese navigation by sea (Figure 26). Moreover, a First Day Cover from 1989, designed for the centenary of the German *Reichspost* in the Marshall Islands, incorporates recognisable features from the Yacht issue, such as the scrolls, colour and border, with a new sketch of a Yacht (Figure 27). In the new design, the Yacht is no longer the central feature drawn at an imposing angle on rough waters. Contrastingly, the less intimidating ship appears still on the calm waters, a reflection of the German colonial period being part of their past, memorialised but not forgotten. This could be said to subvert the original function of these stamps as evidence of Germany's administrative control over the Marshall Islands, reclaiming the relationship to the German colonisation through redesigning the recognisable symbol as a smaller, static image. It also points to continual contemporary engagement with its colonial past in a way that is absent from German discourse.



Figure 26



Figure 27

This asymmetry is evident in other former colonised nations' stamps, such as Papua New Guinea's stamp on stamps set from 1973 that superimpose former stamps in its varied colonial history onto contemporary stamps (Figure 28). Through this palimpsest, the Yacht stamp returned to circulation – but visually contained within the Papua New Guinean stamp, demonstrating how the German colonisation period is viewed as part of their history (Figure 29). This is particularly interesting given that the confiscation of Germany's colonies brought an end to German overseas dominions but not to the colonised existence of Papua New Guineans or the Marshallese, who were colonised by further powers.



Figure 28



Figure 29

Certain histories become part of our vocabulary through synthesising narratives into an artificial coherency, which encourage self-identification with national pride. It is through their social control that they also master the social process of forgetting. However, just as the stamps and *Notgeld* can render histories part of the normative social order, transnational postcolonial approaches to stamps by former colonised nations demonstrate its subversive denaturalising power. This reinforces how the mundane is essential in perpetuating the ‘mental map’ people have of their environment (Roberts 2006: 1). Moreover, the formal possession of German colonies must be examined within a broader context of other imperial practices, such as the circulation of European epistemologies, that persist today. Therefore, not only does examining the varied facets of everyday material culture highlight the pervasiveness of the colonial project beyond settler colonialism in the public space, it demands acknowledgement from Germans today.

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Figures

Figure 1:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:D-S%C3%BCdwestafrika_1901_15.jpg

Figure 2:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:D-Samoa_1900_7.jpg

Figure 3:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D-Ostafrika_1919_39_II_A.jpg?uselang=ru

Figure 4:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:SMY_Hohenzollern_on_stamps_of_German_South-West_Africa?uselang=ru#/media/File:GermanSouthwestAfrica10pf1906hohenzollern-coupon.jpg

Figure 5:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1898_China_20Pfg_Mi4L.jpg

Figure 6:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Stamps_of_Germany_for_China#/media/File:1905_DP_in_China_0.5_dollar_Mi34A.jpg

Figure 7:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Togo80pfHohenzollern1914occupationfrangl.jpg>

Figure 8:

<https://www.bmimages.com/preview.asp?image=01598339001&itemw=4&itemf=0002&itemstep=1&itemx=15>

Figure 9:

<https://www.stampsogermany.com/content/lost-territories-017807~148x.jpg>

Figure 10:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colonial_revisionism_of_Germany#/media/File:Lostnewguinea.jpg

Figure 11:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colonial_revisionism_of_Germany#/media/File:Losttogo.jpg

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colonial_revisionism_of_Germany#/media/File:LostKarolinen-sheet.jpg

Figure 13:

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Figure 14:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:1921_stamps_of_the_Weimar_Republic#/media/File:DR_1921_189_Landwirtschaftliche_Arbeiter.jpg

Figure 15:

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Figure 16:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:1921_stamps_of_the_Weimar_Republic#/media/File:DR_1921_187_Bergm%C3%A4nner.jpg

Figure 17:

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Figure 18:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:1921_stamps_of_the_Weimar_Republic#/media/File:DR_1921_186_Schmie_de-Arbeiter.jpg

Figure 19:

<https://www.akg-images.de/archive/-2UMDHUQJS3FM.html>

Figure 20:

<https://www.akg-images.de/CS.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NVVVVV#/SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NV98EL&POPUPPN=28&POPUPIID=2UMDHUQJSSJJ>

Figure 21:

<https://www.akg-images.de/CS.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NVVVVV#/SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NV98EL&POPUPPN=12&POPUPIID=2UMDHUQJSANY>

Figure 22:

<https://www.akg-images.de/CS.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NVVVVV#/SearchResult&VBID=2UMESQ50NV98EL&POPUPPN=7&POPUPIID=2UMDHUQJA0MG>

Figure 23:

<https://www.ma-shops.com/antiksm/item.php?id=1243>

Figure 24:

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Figure 25:

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Figures 26 and 27:

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Figure 28:

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Figure 29:

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