

**Workshop series "Recontextualising Bismarck"**

**Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg - Ministry of Culture and Media, Department for Museums**

**Workshop 1/2021 (17.06.2021)**

**„Bismarck. Bismarck? Who is actually being honoured here? Different perspectives on the political figure Otto von Bismarck“**

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**The Bismarck Monument in the Old Elbe Park: An Indicator of the Reappraisal of Colonial Heritage in Hamburg Kim Sebastian Todzi (Project Network "Research Centre 'Hamburg's (Post)Colonial Heritage/Hamburg and Early Globalisation", University of Hamburg)**

The future of the Bismarck Monument in Hamburg and the discussion going along with it are an indicator of how serious Germany in general and Hamburg in particular is about coming to terms with its colonial heritage. I want to divide the following keynote into three different sections: First, why is Bismarck's relationship to colonialism being discussed? Secondly, what is the dispute about monuments about? And thirdly: why all this now, 115 years after the erection of the Bismarck Monument?

**Why Bismarck?**

Germany's tallest colonial monument is in Hamburg. A colonial monument, that many do not recognise as such and which is nevertheless, or precisely for that reason, at the centre of the debate in Hamburg. It is the monument at the harbour, erected in 1906, which shows Otto von Bismarck as a Roland figure. Even if it is not obvious at first glance, many of the initiators and donors of the monument who were active in the colonial economy, such as Max Schinckel, Ludwig Lippert or Adolph Woermann, honoured Bismarck not only as the "founder" of the German Empire, but also of the German colonial empire.

For a long time, scholarly controversy and also public debate revolved around the question of why Bismarck, in a "U-turn" in 1884, suddenly changed his opinion about colonialism and supported the colonial expansion of the German Empire. This debate ultimately peaked with the question: What significance did colonialism have for Bismarck? Yet this is not the decisive aspect at all, but rather what did Bismarck mean for colonialism. Instead of reducing the significance of Bismarck as a colonial politician to his individual motives, we must look at the structural consequences of his actions.

Bismarck was not only politically responsible for the German Empire becoming a colonial empire in 1884, with all the grave consequences resulting from this decision. His colonial legacy also extends to the Berlin Conference, which he convened in November 1884 - incidentally also for political motives that went beyond colonial ideas of order. This conference had drastic effects on the division of Africa among the European colonial powers, with consequences that still reach today.

However, this double significance of Bismarck for the global history of colonialism is only slowly re-emerging in the awareness of a larger part of the German population. The fact that these voids in the collective memory are now slowly being filled leads to tensions in the self-

image and to a renewed debate about the evaluation of the monument, its statement and its future in Hamburg.

### **What is the dispute regarding monuments about?**

Monuments that stand in public space are not politically neutral. They are statements about who and what we honour or admonish as a society. The decision to erect them and maintain them is a form of domination over public space. Monuments and statues are also historical sources, but they continue to exist and inhabit the present, not just the past, which means that they have to be evaluated with the standards of value that we apply today.

It goes without saying that our understanding of history, our values and thus the people and events we want to honour can change over time, and it is not ahistorical to reflect these changes in the public space. This is a normal historical development.

Moreover, removing a statue does not mean erasing history either. On the contrary, statues themselves can be acts of historical erasure. They tell only one part of the story, the honoured and pleasing part. Another part is, as political scientist Kien Nghi Ha puts it, de-memorised.

### **Why are we discussing this now?**

The Black Lives Matter protests that took place around the world as a result of the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 led to the overthrowing of monuments in several places, re-instigated the discussion about racist and colonial monuments, and created an impetus through which the question of the future of the Bismarck Monument was also raised anew. We see in the debate about the Bismarck Monument a current local manifestation of the global debate about the material legacy of colonialism and the ideology of 'White Supremacy'. But 2020 was only a culmination of a much longer development.

The discussion about colonial monuments began much earlier. Monument storms have been part of a decolonising practice for at least 60 years, be it in Algeria, where various monuments to the French colonial power were destroyed in 1962, or in Hamburg, where students of the University of Hamburg toppled the statues of colonial officers Hermann von Wissmann and Hans Dominik in front of the university's main building in 1967 and 1968. The debate about colonial monuments intensified in Hamburg since the 2000s, when the discussion about the "Askari reliefs" in the so-called "Tanzania Park" brought the future of colonial monuments into the focus of the wider public. In Germany, many colonial places of remembrance are still under the spell of colonial amnesia. Isn't it an interesting coincidence of events that in the same year that students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa toppled the monument to British colonial entrepreneur and imperialist Cecil Rhodes', it was decided in Hamburg to renovate the Bismarck monument and the surrounding Alter Elbpark at a cost of 13 million euros?

While statues of imperialists such as Cecil Rhodes, slave traders such as Heinrich Carl von Schimmelmann - to whom a monument was dedicated in Hamburg-Wandsbek in 2006 which was removed only two years later - or colonial officers such as Hermann von Wissmann are clearly classified as part of the colonial heritage, certain, colonial nuances of other historical persons that are being honoured in public space are only slowly being uncovered. Currently discussed examples are - besides Bismarck's importance for the partition of Africa - Churchill's role during the Mau Mau war in Kenya or the famine in Bengal during the Second World War. You see, it is no coincidence that the discussion about the Bismarck Monument unfolds at a time of more intensive engagement with the colonial heritage in Hamburg and beyond. This moment coincides with the debates about the Humboldt Forum, about colonial looted art and currently with the debate about coming to terms with the genocide of the Herero and Nama in Namibia.

All these are signs that we are in a "saddle time" in which not only the geopolitical coordinates are shifting, not only the relationship of states and regions to each other - as can

be seen by the examples of Brexit, the Trump administration or the rise of China - but also questions of belonging, of identity and demographic change are being renegotiated and connected to those questions: Who do we remember? How do we remember? Who is allowed not only to have a say, but really to have a say? In other words: whose memory counts? In this way, the debate about the Bismarck Monument becomes a yardstick for the question of how serious Germany in general, and Hamburg in particular, is about coming to terms with its colonial heritage.

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