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### **Hamburg's colonial merchants knew well how to form their own Bismarck**

Leading to the question of this second Bismarck Workshop – what makes the monument so difficult to handle – I would like to start with Hamburg's history as one of the main European colonial metropolises and with its visible heritage in urban space. Here we find numerous colonial monuments, street names, representations, and colonial infrastructures. In our Work Group Hamburg Postkolonial<sup>1)</sup> we research the city space and invite to educational and art projects, exhibitions, postcolonial city tours, among others.

In 2014, Hamburg started a city-wide decolonization program. However, a kind of colonial amnesia, if not aphasia, still prevails among decision makers. Even today new colonial ciphers are being created in urban space. So the City Development has churned out several colonial names for new streets and even buildings. Housing projects were started in historicising architecture styles as well, for example a copy of the historic Thörl<sup>2)</sup> silo for palm and coconut oil on Harburg's Castle Island. The silo building was torn down in 2010 and now rebuilt as an exclusive apartment house. At the same time industrial landmarks and further *lieux de mémoire* referring to the city's colonial history have been demolished, so the significant HOBUM<sup>3)</sup> chimney in

Harburg. And despite of civil society protests, even the historic Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie port hall was removed. The yard in Baakenhafen, mainly run by Adolph Woermann's shipping company, was located opposite of the former Afrika Terminal at Petersenkai. Here General Lothar von Trotha had sent off his colonial troops („Schutztruppe“) to the war against the Ovaherero and Nama in „German South West Africa“ (today Namibia) where they committed a genocide. No plaque commemorates the historic background of the place, instead, a children's playground was built there. The neighbouring urban square was recently inaugurated in honour of Amerigo Vespucci, the notorious conqueror of the American continent and human trafficker.

There has been critic, indeed, on how the city deals with its colonial sites. Among others, there are decolonizing concepts neither for the national-socialistic colonial memorial ensemble „Deutsch-Ostafrika-Kriegerdenkmal 1914-1918“<sup>4)</sup> in Hamburg-Jenfeld nor in the St. Michaelis church for the commemorative plaque honouring German soldiers in colonial wars in Namibia and China. Despite our efforts since ten years now, not a single colonial street has been renamed yet. Currently the city aims, however, to develop guidelines for future renamings.

Now the Bismarck monument is being restored for nine million Euros. In the hollow plinth the martial *völkisch* wall paintings will be preserved, the costs amount to 32.000 Euros. Meanwhile, the Monument Protection Office has failed to answer the question why these highly problematic nazi era murals should be considered worth of conservation and how they shall be presented to the public. This has led to protests in the civil society, and last year NGOs called for a moratorium and participative debate, unfortunately without success.

For this panel, I was asked to give an example for the fate of a colonial monument. I would like to remind of the Schimmelmann monument affair in Hamburg-Wandsbek. In 2006, the district politicians and officials together with the Hamburg Ministry for Culture erected a new bust honouring Heinrich Carl Schimmelmann, a main transatlantic slave trader in the Caribbean and sugar plantation owner in the Danish Westindies. Right from the beginning, the Hamburg based Black Community and civil society initiatives protested against the monument. In our project *wandsbek-transformance. The Colonial in the Present*<sup>5)</sup> we artists worked on Schimmelmann's numerous vestiges in urban space. The scandal was reported by the germany-wide and international press. After two years of protest the decision makers decided to clandestinely remove the bust. Now there is a telling void space, that would perfectly be suited to a memorial in commemoration of the African people who were enslaved by Schimmelmann. In Schimmelmann's documents we have found more than 60 of their names and some biographical hints. Further research is needed.

How can we decolonize Wandsbek? Is it sufficient to remove just one monument when at the same time the surrounding city space is full of Schimmelmann's representations, buildings and infrastructures? When district politicians and local history books highlight Schimmelmann as a „philanthropist“? How do we succeed in changing the four street names that still honour the slave trader while even the corridors in the district government building are proudly decorated with reminiscences of Schimmelmann's Wandsbek castle? Generally speaking, how can we decolonize piece by piece when further vestiges in public space do praise the colonial narrative?

Accordingly, is it possible to deconstruct the huge Bismarck monument, when still two more Bismarck memorials exist in Hamburg? Where we find a Bismarckstraße, Bismarck statues on building facades, busts honouring Bismarck as well as Bismarck foundlings, a Bismarck oak, a Bismarck school and a Bismarck Museum? Indeed, how can we deconstruct the persistent myths of the Bismarck narrative as a whole?

In the current debate much eurocentric knowledge about Bismarck is being reproduced. Bismarck's postcolonial aspects have not yet been much researched in Germany. And obviously little is known about how Bismarck's memorial in the Alte Elbpark was initiated, donated and erected by a small lobbyist group of privileged colonial merchants, bankers and shipping company owners.<sup>6)</sup> With their gigantomaniac statue, they expressed their gratitude for the colonies (see Bismarck's Berlin Africa Conference 1884/85) and for financial support from Berlin for Hamburg's port extension.<sup>7)</sup> In 1906, the monument was inaugurated in prominent presence of the Alldeutscher Verband, trailblazer of the expansionist, nationalistic, racist and antisemitic movement both in the German Reich and the association's strong agitation group in Hamburg. To the inauguration event only few stakeholders were officially invited, among them the 76 Prussian Hanseatic Infantry Regiment as well. The later nazi block monument of the 76 Regiment with its depiction of marching soldiers and the warlike slogan „Germany must survive even if we die“ stands at Dammtor in Hamburg. In the following decades the huge Bismarck statue became a favourite meeting point for far-right ceremonies, and even today the Bismarck myth lives on in right-wing circles.

Meanwhile, some citizens have rushed into counter memorial proposals for the Bismarck statue but these ideas do not seem to have found appropriate answers yet to the rather complex historic, ethic and art theoretical questions. And even though the city of Hamburg spends millions of Euros for restoration, no financial resources have been considered for an educational concept so far. In the hollow plinth space an exhibition is planned. For this, we definitely need a change of perspectives. History shall be narrated with views of the people who became victims of Bismarck's antidemocratic, pangermanic and imperial policy and of those who fought against it –

be it in Altona, Hamburg, Germany or in Bismarck's European wars as well as in his colonial wars in Africa and the Pacific.

In our city space, we are surrounded by weird monuments that depict men with or without horses. They transport persistent myths of „heroic“ statesmen, imperialists and warriors. In our democratic and diverse society, and with our today's understanding of the imperial and genocidal wars and catastrophes in and outside Europe, such honouring memorials are definitely outmoded. Commemoration cultures are always contemporary, and we find iconoclasm throughout history. Having said this, I do agree with the statement of Professor David Simo of the Yaounde University/Cameroon who gave his presentation in the first Bismarck Monument Workshop<sup>8)</sup>. In his view, we should not necessarily remove the Bismarck monument. Today the majority of the citizens of Hamburg does not regard it as an honouring memorial any more but rather a historical document. Erasure would lead to historic amnesia. With art and participative works-in-progress and step by step, the monument can be transformed into its own counter memorial. And beyond all questions of monument preservation, direct art interventions into the memorial itself should be made possible as well.

Monuments out of „everlasting“ materials are a very Western form of commemoration. Even today, such memorials are being initiated, solemnly inaugurated – and then often left behind, neglected and forgotten. They tend to become dead corners more than lively spaces for public discourse on commemoration cultures. In the former colonized countries, however, in many cases memory is embedded in body performances. In the then Danish Westindies for example, important historic events are annually performed by the descendants of the enslaved Africans thus visualizing transgenerational narratives and heritage. In Ghana/West Africa flags depict past community events. In festivities, dancers move the flags, and with them, local history is commemorated. The collective performances help to overcome the colonial trauma.

In my view, the Hamburg Bismarck monument needs powerful and empowering counter images. They should be process-oriented, performative and participative.

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1) [www.hamburg-postkolonial.de](http://www.hamburg-postkolonial.de).

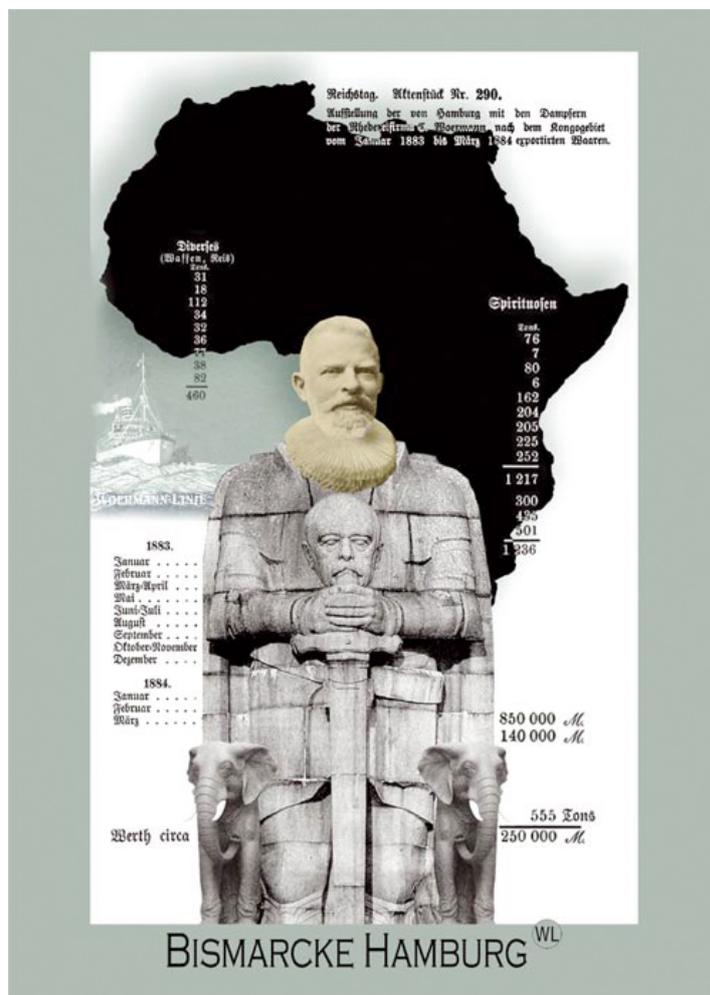
2) Friedrich Thörl Vereinigte Harburger Oelfabriken.

3) HOBUM, Harburger Oelwerke Brinckman & Mergell.

4) German East Africa War Memorial 1914-1918, often falsely labeled as „Askari-Reliefs“ or „Askari- Denkmal“, thus suggesting that the memorial would honour the Askari, African soldiers recruited by the German colonial troops.

5) [www.wandsbektransformance.de](http://www.wandsbektransformance.de) (in German with an English summary; 8/15/2021).

- 6) See the biographies of the Bismarck monument initiators and donators:  
[www.afrika-hamburg.de/PDF/bismarckgrossspender.pdf](http://www.afrika-hamburg.de/PDF/bismarckgrossspender.pdf) (in German; 8/15/2021).
- 7) See position paper „Dekolonisierung des öffentlichen Raums. Das Hamburger Bismarck-Denkmal ist auch ein Kolonialdenkmal“ by the initiative *Decolonize Bismarck*,  
<http://www.afrika-hamburg.de/PDF/hamburgbismarckdekolonial.pdf> (in German; 15.8.2021)
- 8) First Bismarck Workshop „Bismarck. Bismarck? Wer wird hier eigentlich geehrt?“/  
 “Bismarck. Bismarck? Who is actually being honoured here?“, 6/17/2021,  
<https://www.hamburg.de/bkm/koloniales-erbe/15177680/bismarck-denkmal-workshop-1>  
 (in German). „Is it then necessary to physically remove or even destroy the most visible signs [...], such as the Bismarck monument in Hamburg? I fear that by doing so, one would rather make the conspicuous witnesses and evidence of this interconnectedness disappear from view and encourage their forgetting. I think that one should rather integrate these props into a new artistic and discursive narrative.“, in: Simo, David: „Monuments in local, national and global narratives“,  
<https://www.hamburg.de/contentblob/15235668/65c38157979460595fc6794f01434d62/data/engl-workshop1-david-simo.pdf> (in English; 8/15/2021)  
<https://www.hamburg.de/contentblob/15235698/cafb9db71137267cafb4027923840d4e9/data/deutsch-workshop1-david-simo.pdf> (auf Deutsch; 15.8.2021).



Colonial merchants in Hamburg – headed by their strong lobbyist Adolph Woermann – were influential enough to form their own Bismarck. They knew well how to secure financial support of the German Reich for their private interests in colonial trade, especially in Africa. (Memorial montage: H. Jokinen, 2010)