

An Anti-Colonial Empire? Non-European Perspectives on the Weimar Republic and the German Dream of Empire (1919–1930s)

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ABSTRACT

Der Erste Weltkrieg beseitigte nicht nur Deutschlands Status als Kolonialmacht. Er bewegte auch die deutsche Regierung dazu, mit antikolonialen Bewegungen in der ganzen Welt zu kooperieren, um die Imperien ihrer Kriegsgegner zu destabilisieren. Es nimmt darum nicht Wunder, dass antikoloniale Intellektuelle nach dem Krieg ihre Hoffnungen auf das scheinbar dekolonisierte und potenziell antikoloniale Deutschland setzten. Diese Erwartung gab der Weimarer Republik die Gelegenheit, sich als antikoloniale Macht zu etablieren und gleichzeitig ihren indirekten Einfluss auf die nicht-europäische Welt auszudehnen. Dieser Artikel fragt, warum das Deutschland der Zwischenkriegszeit das Angebot ablehnte, sich als „antikoloniales Imperium“ bei den Siegern von 1919 zu revanchieren. Entgegen gängigen Interpretationen wird dabei gezeigt, dass selbst Revanchisten darauf vertrauten, weiterhin eine europäische Kolonialmacht zu bleiben. Zudem verhinderten rassistische Einbürgerungsgesetze einen praktischen Wandel Deutschlands zur „antikolonialen Metropole“.

Why did Germany not style itself as an anti-colonial power during the Weimar Republic? This article claims that it could have easily done so, since many colonised peoples set their hopes on the first imperial power that was “decolonised,” and occasionally even understood itself as a country colonised by the other Western powers. For almost a century, historians interpreted the decolonisation of Germany by the Treaty of Versailles as a dispossession and deprivation that provoked an ultranationalist and revisionist movement within Germany. Although accurate, this understanding accounts for a Eurocentric, if not a Germanocentric point of view. This article shows that anti-colonial international-

ists and colonised peoples interpreted the German decolonisation in a different way and thought of it as a chance to increase their own agency.

It is the following interpretation of German interwar history that enjoys widespread currency among European historians: After Germany had been deprived of its colonies in the First World War, colonial nostalgia shaped the political culture of the Weimar Republic. Colonial propaganda soared and over a million Germans joined neo-colonial lobby groups. Their fierce opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, which had downgraded the former imperial power, ultimately won the Nazis the votes necessary to establish a new empire that exceeded all others in cruelty and inhumanity.¹ This reading is yet another version of the teleological “Sonderweg” approach that portrays German history as a pre-history of the Nazi empire.² Scrutinizing this linear approach, I show in this article that expectations concerning the colonial role of the Weimar Republic were much more contingent.

Seen from a different angle, including the perspective of the colonised, the story unfolds like this: The war had triggered German desire to engage in anti-colonial struggle and its diplomats established vast networks with the leaders of anti-colonial movements. The most prominent case of encouraging an anti-colonial movement was the so called Hindu-German conspiracy in the First World War: The German government supplied Bengali and Ghadar party nationalists with arms, money, and military expertise to organize a revolt in British India.³ The main plotters were specialists employed by the Foreign Ministry, like the orientalist Max von Oppenheim. Apart from unsettling India, Oppenheim developed schemes to incite Muslims in Africa to launch a jihad against the British and French colonial rulers.⁴ The outcome of these German initiatives was poor, in India because of British vigilance and in Africa because few Africans were interested in completely overthrowing the colonial regime. But German politicians knew that they might learn from failure as much as from success. When the war was over, the contacts with the anti-colonial forces were still fresh and peace facilitated the communication with them.

As late as 1919, the German Foreign Ministry looked for inhabitants from the former colonies who had settled in Germany. They were to be used to disprove the Allies’ allegations that German colonial rule had been particularly violent and uncivilised. Moreover, the Allies feared that Weimar colonial revisionists would smuggle Africans into the

1 On the colonial designs of National Socialists: A. Kum’a N’dumbé III, *Hitler voulait l’Afrique. Le projet du IIIe Reich sur le continent africain*, Paris 1980; K. Hildebrand, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich. Hitler, NSDAP und koloniale Frage*, Munich 1969; K. Linné, *Deutschland jenseits des Äquators? Die NS-Kolonialplanungen für Afrika*, Berlin 2008; C. Metzger, *L’empire colonial français dans la stratégie du troisième Reich*, Brussels 2002.

2 See the pioneering work on the colonial origins of National Socialist policies: J. Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*, Berlin 2011. It is also a major concern of the contributions in Bradley Naranch, Geoff Eley, (eds.) *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, Durham 2015.

3 T.G. Fraser, *Germany and Indian Revolution, 1914–1918*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977) 2, pp. 255–272.

4 R. Habermas, *Debates on Islam in Imperial Germany*, in: David Motadel (ed.), *Islam and the European Empires*, Oxford 2014, p. 249.

former German colonies that had become mandates of the League of Nations, to engineer a revolt. Not without a reason, the French, who received the mandates over Togo and Cameroon, were so terrified of German *agents provocateurs* that they banned all Africans who had lived in Germany after the war from entering their new possessions.⁵ Although the German government had no idea how many Africans from their former colonies actually lived in Germany and found no more than thirty of them, the danger of Afro-German conspirators entering the British and French mandates seemed real.⁶

Indeed, German institutions tried in various ways to use former colonial subjects in order to influence world politics, ignoring the fact that Germany had officially been banned from having a say in matters of global dimension. A powerful colonial lobby created the image of the loyal colonial subjects who had fought for Germany in the war and longed for the return of the ancient masters. In 1924, the Foreign Ministry re-established the colonial department to bring about the restitution of the colonies. Former subjects were supposed to play an important role in denouncing other colonial empires, while substantiating Germany's claims to restitution.⁷ Unlike the French or British parties of the left, German socialists hired speakers such as the Tanzanian Mdachi bin Sharifu, who proclaimed that the colonial project was due to aggressive imperialism and capitalism, and could only be overthrown by a worldwide revolution.⁸

Such initiatives, however, were overshadowed by the aggressive propaganda against the so called "black troops" from Africa that France used in its occupation of the Rhineland. The Rhineland occupation provoked a paradoxical reaction in Germany: Its denunciation in German media was full of racist stereotypes but simultaneously nationalists claimed to be "colonised" by France. Resistance groups formed and claimed to lead an anti-colonial struggle to shake off the French yoke.⁹ The combination of racism and an anti-colonial agenda raised the question whether the Weimar Republic could develop into the first racist but anti-colonial empire in history.

In this contingent historical situation, different German interest groups tried to use the victims of colonial and racist regimes for their own purposes. Some accused the French of exploiting Africans by turning them into soldiers to delegitimize the French occupation. Some fraternized with their former „loyal“ subjects. Others such as the parties of the left gave them the possibility to speak for the first time, although the white masters still prescribed what they should say. But in all cases the "subalterns" were occasionally given the opportunity to speak up. Those subalterns who really spoke for themselves

5 See the case of Kwassi Bruce: CAOM, FM, affaires politiques, carton 613, dossier K.

6 A. Aitken and E. Rosenhaft, *Black Germany: The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community*, Cambridge 2013, p. 68.

7 M. Schubert, *Der schwarze Fremde: das Bild des Schwarzafrikaners in der parlamentarischen und publizistischen Kolonialdiskussion in Deutschland von den 1870er bis in die 1930er Jahre*, Stuttgart 2003, p. 320.

8 L. Wimmelbücker, *Mtoro Bin Mwinyi Bakari (c. 1869–1927): Swahili Lecturer and Author in Germany*, *Dar es Salam* 2009, p. 91.

9 Sandra Maß, *Weißer Helden, Schwarze Krieger: Zur Geschichte Kolonialer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1918–1964*, Cologne 2006; C. Koller, „Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt“: die Diskussion um die Verwendung von Kolonialtruppen in Europa, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 201-341.

surprised the Germans. Many thought about the Germans in a positive way and tried to win them over for common projects. As I show in the first part, they set hopes on a “decolonised” and “anti-colonial” Germany that was imagined as free to choose its political partner with disregard to the latter’s origin or alleged civilisational status. The victims of colonialism and racial discrimination from around the world wished for an anti-colonial Germany. However, instead of being full of joy and pride, the Germans ultimately refused to accept the hand that the colonised offered them. Why they declined the offer of collaboration will be explained in part two.

1. Germanophile Anti-Colonialists

Weimar Germany raised hopes among the colonised and anti-colonialists from all over the world that it would support their anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle. Their expectations were as different as their own experiences with Germany. One of the first and probably most fervent admirer of German permissiveness was the Pan-Africanist W.E.B. du Bois. Despite experiencing a racist and intolerant Germany, he opposed it to his native USA that seemed to him even more racist and intolerant.

Du Bois had become a Germanophile after he had spent two years at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität Berlin from 1892 to 1893.¹⁰ Unlike in the USA, his colour did not prevent him from attending the best universities, and he became familiar with German *Geisteswissenschaften*. He had taken seminars with Gustav Schmoller and Adolph Wagner, while he heard Treitschke (the “fire-eating Pan-German”), Weber and Sering. “Under these teachers”, Du Bois wrote in his autobiography, “I began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one.”¹¹ Despite or perhaps because of the Anti-Semitism, Pan-Germanism and colonial racism in the works of his teachers, Du Bois developed a sense for the global significance of these ideologies. Oblivious to their bigotry, he took pride in the German scholars training him in history, sociology, and economics and teaching him to use their methods in the humanists’ style. In his own words, he “began to unite” his “economics and politics.”¹² Notwithstanding the racist environment of the *Kaiserreich*, Du Bois found white Germans less racist than white Americans, seeing their will to accept him as a student. This experience would lead to Du Bois’ paradoxical linking German academia to anti-racist thinking. In accordance with his highly selective perception of German culture, he did not mention German colonies at all, even though they were omnipresent in the media of the 1890s.

Du Bois’ positive experience in Berlin derived from an alleged German “rehabilitation” of the Africans and influenced his writings on race in the interwar period. When Du Bois argued in the 1920s and 1930s that race was a cultural construct and not an inescapable

10 K. Barkin, W. E. B. Du Bois’ Love Affair with Imperial Germany, in: *German Studies Review* 28 (2005) 2, pp. 285-302.

11 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Oxford 2007, pp. 23-24.

12 Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 24.

biological predisposition that could be identified with scientific methods, he referred predominantly to scholars of German origin. He cited ethnologist Felix von Luschan, who explained in his “Anthropological View of Race” that “the question of the number of human races has quite lost its *raison d’être*, and has become a subject rather of philosophical speculation than of scientific research.” Luschan added that there were no “inferior races” but merely groups who were better adapted to the environment they live in.¹³ To support this argument, Du Bois quoted German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, who agreed that “an unbiased estimate of the anthropological evidence so far brought forward does not permit us to countenance the belief in a racial inferiority which would unfit an individual of the Negro race to take his part in modern civilization.”¹⁴

More importantly and more surprisingly, Du Bois invoked the fathers of German racism and Nazism, Eugen Fischer and Friedrich Ratzel, to substantiate his anti-racist claims. Fischer had published an anthropometric study of the Rehoboth community in German South-West Africa in 1913 that denounced miscegenation and stated the inferiority of “Negro races.”¹⁵ Du Bois however, borrowed a sentence from Fischer in which he claimed that the Rehoboth people, whom racists used as an example of mixing white and black races, were “a strong, healthy, and fruitful people, i.e. they show a common indication of hybrid vigour.”¹⁶ This selective perception of German racists runs like a red thread through Du Bois writings.

In his writings on race, Du Bois deliberately misread the mastermind of German *Lebensraum* ideology, Friedrich Ratzel, and turned him into a castigator of racist and colonialist bias. From Ratzel he borrowed the statement that “there is only one species of man, the variations are numerous, but do not go deep.” Even more so, he made Ratzel the principal authority on African civilisation by invoking his claim that Africans also shaped the history of mankind: “There are those, nevertheless, who would write universal history and leave out Africa. But how, asks Ratzel, can one leave out the land of Egypt and Carthage?” Such attitudes, Du Bois concluded, can often be found in the works of German scholars, such as the anthropologist Leo Frobenius: “And Frobenius declares that in future Africa must more and more be regarded as an integral part of the great movement of world history.”¹⁷

Du Bois went as far as relativizing German anti-Semitism, even when Hitler came to power and institutionalized the racist segregation and discrimination of Jews. As late as 1935, Du Bois observed that “in Germany, Hitler’s renaissance of anti-Semitism is simply a part of the general resentment and suffering in Germany because of the results of the war and of the treaty of Versailles.”¹⁸

13 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Miscegenation*, in: H. Aptheker (ed.), *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses 1887–1961* by W.E.B. Du Bois, Amherst 1985, pp. 90–102: 90.

14 Du Bois, *Miscegenation*, p. 91.

15 E. Fischer, *Die Rehobother Bastards und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen*, Jena 1913.

16 Du Bois, *Miscegenation*, p. 94.

17 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro 1868–1963*, Philadelphia 1915, pp. 9–10.

18 Du Bois, *Miscegenation*, p. 95.

Du Bois' selective perception of German scholarship was to a certain extent strategic because it delivered the proof that even racist theorists admitted the absurdity of racist and colonialist arguments. But it was also a striking misinterpretation of German anthropology, geography, and historiography, sciences that were born in a colonial context and were infested with racism. Nevertheless, Du Bois' readings offered the German scholars in the interwar period the opportunity to reinterpret their intellectual history according to anti-racist and anti-colonial ideas.

Du Bois' understanding of German scholarship would fall on fertile ground among the intellectual fathers of the emancipatory *Négritude* movement in the French empire. Aimé Césaire, who would become the most eloquent critic of European colonial racism, and Léopold Senghor, who glorified the autonomy and power of the black race in his widely-read poetry, claimed that their agenda originated in the anthropological theories of Leo Frobenius. Frobenius was the first scholar of renown to dismiss the idea that Europeans were more civilised than Africans. The complexities of his theory aside, Frobenius claimed that Africans had an equal share in shaping the world's cultural achievements. According to him, their epistemological contribution to rationalism was based on emotion and intuition. The idea of intuitive reason was what brought them in line with German philosophy that also combined romanticism and reason. When Frobenius compartmentalized the world into different civilisations (*Kulturkreise*), one of them was an Afro-German civilisation.¹⁹

According to Senghor, the *Négritude* movement would not have been possible without the German anthropologist: "Frobenius was like a sudden burst of thunder," he wrote, "It is Leo Frobenius more than anyone else who clarified for us words such as emotion, art, myth, Eurafica."²⁰ To the *Négritude* activists, not only Frobenius but also Germany appeared as the conjunction that might connect Europe and Africa, whose inhabitants shared similar values and should meet on equal terms. Like Du Bois, who had invoked Frobenius' theory long before Senghor and Césaire, the pioneers of *Négritude* offered an unfamiliar definition of German intellectual traditions. Their appreciation for German erudition seems to be at odds with the *Sonderweg* interpretation of German history that draws a direct line from German anthropological science to the ideology of the Nazis. Curiously, Senghor and Césaire realized that this tradition could be used as an argument in favour of decolonisation while the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s. Without knowing it, German academic tradition had become an instigator for anti-colonial activism. Du Bois' fascination with German scholarship was not necessarily shared by all Pan-Africanists who took up residence in Germany. In 1930, the Trinidadian grandson of a slave George Padmore, who combined Pan-Africanism and communist internationalism, organized the First International Conference of the Negro Workers in Hamburg. Among

19 R. Sylvain, Leo Frobenius: From Kulturkreis to Kulturmorphologie, in: *Anthropos* 91 (1996), pp. 483-494; S. Adell, *Double Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*, Urbana 1994, p. 32; D. Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, Chicago 2014, p. 215

20 Cited in G. Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars*, Chicago 2005, p. 156.

the participants figured the future president of Kenya, Johnston “Jomo” Kenyatta, and the South African syndicalist and communist T.W. Thibedi. They dismissed Du Bois’ ingratiation as “bourgeois” and opposed it to a program that aligned to the Comintern’s anti-capitalist program. While Du Bois allegedly “betrayed the interests of the Negro Workers,” their most important purpose was to end the “capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression upon the Negro masses” by bringing about “freedom and self-determination of the oppressed nationalities and minorities”.²¹ Padmore’s conference did not put any hope in the German state as an anti-colonial power. But the delegates benefitted from the relative liberalism of the city of Hamburg towards the presence of Africans and Afro-Americans.

After the First World War, Hamburg had become home to a small but significant African community, due to the port city’s close ties with the colonial world it had helped to build. Despite the important role Hamburg played in establishing colonies and promoting racist attitudes, the presence of non-Europeans seemed more natural in Hamburg than anywhere else in Germany. The First International Conference of the Negro Workers had been banned from London but was accepted in Hamburg, a city less concerned about anti-racist activity.

This was also due to Hamburg’s relatively permissive naturalization policy. As early as the 1890s the city had authorized the naturalization of Mandenga Dick, an “assimilated” Cameroonian who lived in Hamburg.²² Following a subsidiarity system of German federalism, colonial subjects had to apply for citizenship in one of the federal states to be granted German citizenship subsequently. The federal state of Hamburg was more likely to grant citizenship than more conservative states within Germany, such as Bavaria, Thuringia, and Württemberg. Occasionally, those states even vetoed the naturalization of Africans who had been declared citizens of Hamburg.²³ That does not mean that Hamburg was more tolerant than other German states; it was less intolerant at best. Only about a dozen Africans had actually been naturalized in Hamburg between the 1890s and the 1930s. But it was certainly a less biased place to start for an African who arrived in Germany or Europe in general.

For Padmore, the city opened up opportunities and he moved to Hamburg in the aftermath of the First International Conference of the Negro Workers. Sponsored by Comintern networks, he established a “Negro Bureau” and published the *Negro Worker*, a periodical that declared class struggle the precondition of the emancipation of the colonised peoples. The *Negro Worker* was meant to appeal to the Afro-German community

21 Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of Witwatersrand, AD 1715, International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ed.), A Report of Proceedings and Decisions of the First International Conference of Negro Workers at Hamburg Germany/July 1930, Hamburg 1930, pp. 5-11.

22 Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Staatsangehörigkeitssachen, 132-1 L_2906, „Gesuch des aus Kamerun gebürtigen Mandenga Dick um Verleihung der Reichsangehörigkeit und um Unterstützung, u. a. bei seiner Bewerbung um eine Stelle als Dolmetscher beim Gouvernement in Kamerun, 1895–1900.“

23 F. El-Tayeb, Schwarze Deutsche und deutscher Rassismus: Oxymoron oder verdrängte Geschichte, Frankfurt 2001, p. 142; R. Aitken and E. Rosenhaft, Black Germany, pp. 72-73.

in Hamburg and African sailors alike. The latter, Padmore reckoned, would spread his words via the shipping lines that bound Hamburg to Africa and Afro-America.

Padmore was a magnet for anti-colonial forces worldwide and provided yet another opportunity for the Germans to use the explosive power of anti-colonial agitation. But neither the German government nor the German socialists, who were responsible for giving colonialism a bad press since Bebel's times, showed any interest in Padmore's project. Yet it was rather his intransigent communist attitude than his anti-colonial rhetoric that gave him a pariah status even among the German left. Dwelling in Hamburg for four years, fascist hooligans destroyed Padmore's Negro Office immediately after Hitler came to power. He was forced to leave Germany and dedicated himself entirely to anti-colonial activity in Paris and London, where his ideas found fertile ground.²⁴

In Hamburg, Pan-Africanists like Padmore encountered an African diaspora that had been well-established. Among the Africans in Hamburg was Alexandre Manga Bell from Cameroon, the son of the Douala leader Rudolph Manga Bell who had been executed by the German colonial administration in 1914 for staging a coup. Alexandre Manga Bell had come to Germany as early as 1902, was raised there, and cut all his ties with his Cameroonian origins. Not able to speak Douala anymore, he was entirely German and even served in the country's army. He married into a cocoa trading family in Hamburg and led an extravagant life in Europe. Among the Douala in Cameroon, however, Alexandre Manga Bell was still considered to be the legal successor to his father as the head of the Douala dynasty.²⁵

His royal blood made Alexandra Manga Bell an ideal candidate to undermine French rule over Cameroon. France had received the former German colony as a mandate from the League of Nations in 1920 and had struggled to gain control over the territory. German propaganda constantly questioned its legitimacy and demanded to let the "natives" determine themselves who should rule them.²⁶ As loyalty was not a priority in Manga Bell's life, he did not blame the German government for executing his father, and was open to collaboration with the Germans. But neither the colonial lobby that wanted to delegitimize French rule in former German colonies nor the allegedly anti-colonial left approached him. And the government in Berlin did not even think about granting former colonial subjects like Manga Bell German citizenship to assure their loyalty.

While the Germans failed to use Manga Bell as an *agent provocateur*, the French government was quick at converting him to a defender of their colonial rule. In January 1919, the new French Governor of Cameroon wrote to Paris that Alexandre Manga Bell should be won over to stabilize French rule. He would be brought to Paris before being sent to

24 C. Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of Afro-Germans, European Blacks, Africans, and African Americans in the Nazi Era*, New York 2003, pp. 76-81; S.D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: race and political culture in 1930s Britain*, Princeton 2009, pp.6-7.

25 *Der Spiegel* 34, 1950, pp.19-22.

26 J. Derrick, 'The "Germanophone" Elite of Douala under the French Mandate', in: *The Journal of African History* 21 (1980) 2, pp. 255-267; F. Wagner, 'Regards croisés sur le Togo. Les enjeux du débat franco-allemand dans l'entre-deux guerres (1919-1939)', in: *Recherche en Anthropologie et en Histoire de l'Afrique* 25 (2007-2008).

Cameroon. The governor of French Cameroon deemed it “absolutely necessary” that “he learns to speak French” but also that “he is broken loose of the mentality that his former masters had taught him during his long stay in Germany.”²⁷ The French contacted him, paid his trip to Paris, gave him free French classes and prepared him to rule their mandate according to French interests. During Manga Bell’s three years in Paris, French intelligence officers tried to find out whether he was a German spy, as they could hardly believe that Berlin had not used his prestige to gain influence in the Cameroons. Although they remained sceptical towards his real intentions, they finally dispatched him to Cameroon. Upon arrival in the mandate, Manga Bell proclaimed himself ‘Prince’ and demanded from the French to return the land possessions that the Germans had expropriated from his father. His insubordination raised once again the concern of his inclination to anti-colonialism. But soon the French government realized that Manga Bell aimed predominantly at financing his lavish lifestyle. After 1945, he became a deputy for Cameroon in the French National Assembly and represented the country in the United Nations, where he ousted the Cameroonian nationalists who demanded independence.²⁸

Unlike German colonial schemers, the French had learned in the interwar period to concede restricted autonomy to their colonial subjects in order to stabilize and legitimize colonial rule. Germans who had the intention to regain the country’s former colonies, could have equally made use of them to unsettle British, French, and Belgian rule in Cameroon, Togo, Ruanda, and Tanzania. Yet, Germans did not pursue this strategy in a consistent way. Even the expressions of loyalty and the appeals for help from Togolese and Cameroonians fell on deaf ears. Serious attempt was made to destabilize the empires of other countries. This is best revealed in the case of Togo.

In 1926 the *Stuttgarter Tagblatt* published a “German cry for help from Togo.”²⁹ A group of Togolese had written a petition in favour of the return of Germany as a colonial power in Togo. The *Stuttgarter Tagblatt* celebrated the “brothers in Togo who are firm and loyal friends of Germany.”³⁰ Indeed, both in Togo and in Cameroon, pro-German individuals had formed lobby groups that openly worked in favour of the return of the German colonial government.

The *Deutscher Togobund* was the most active and important pro-German lobby group. Founded in 1924 by Johannes Agboka who had “served as a forwarding clerk for the German government and was unemployed since Germans had left the country,”³¹ the *Deutscher Togobund* had established its headquarters in Accra in British Gold Coast to avoid persecution by the new French government in Togo. It is hard to estimate its mem-

27 Letter to „Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies” from 31.1.1919, cited in: J. Richard, *The Royal Pretender: Prince Douala Manga Bell in Paris, 1919–1922*, in: *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 14 (1974) 54, pp. 339–358: 342.

28 Richard, *The Royal Pretender*.

29 CAOM, FM, Affaires Politiques, carton 614, *Stuttgarter Tageblatt* dating from 17 March 1926.

30 Ibid.

31 CAOM, Rapport n° 230 du Commissaire de la République française au Togo, du 7 novembre 1929, in: FM, affaires politiques, carton 1038, dossier: Appel adressé à l’Allemagne par des indigènes du Togo 1926; Commissaire de la République française au Togo à Ministre des Colonies, sur les activités du Bund der Deutschen Togoländer, du 10 décembre 1927, in: CAOM, FM, affaires politiques, carton 1038, dossier activités allemandes dans colonies.

bership because most members remained anonymous and registered with false names. French intelligence services agreed that the *Togobund* was only a small group of about ten people in the inner circle.³²

In programmatic circular letters, the *Togobund* demanded that the Togolese should choose their own rulers and be granted a seat in the League of Nations to work for the comeback of the Germans.³³ In the 1930s, two protestant priests, Koffi Paku and A.D. Baeta, appeared publicly as leaders of the *Togobund*. They had close ties with the *Nord-deutsche Mission* in Bremen and merchants from Northern Germany. Koffi Paku claimed that the *Togobund* occasionally received commodity contributions and sometimes even money from Germany.

A French report dating from 1929 suspected the German consul in Gold Coast to have funded the *Togobund*.³⁴ But this support was more an act of charity than a political move, since the leaders of the *Togobund* lived penniless in their Ghanaian exile. It was not until 1936 that the German merchant Robert Riegermann officially joined the *Togobund*; his presence, however, was largely inconsequential.³⁵ The only official German support for the *Togobund* was a radio set sent by the NSDAP Ministry of Propaganda after the *Togobund* had appealed to the Nazis for help in sheer desperation.³⁶

Graduates from German missionary schools, war veterans who had fought for Germany, and downgraded Germanized elites founded similar groups in the Cameroons, notably the *Kamerun Eingeborenen Deutsch Gesinnten Verein*. Most of the Germanophones were Douala. Some Douala, such as Alexandre Manga Bell, had been even trained in Germany. They had left the colony of *Kamerun* for Germany and came back to the mandate of *Cameroun* governed by the French. Quickly they realized that they had been victims of the absurdity of assimilation to the European “culture”: they had assimilated themselves to the wrong Europe, spoke the wrong language, and had created the wrong networks. Both in Cameroon and in Togo, the assimilated Germanophones became regularly Germanophiles. Both the *Togobund* and the *Kamerun Eingeborenen Deutsch Gesinnten Verein* approached Germans for help. But their appeals were mostly in vain and the French fears of agents provocateurs controlled by the German state were mostly unfounded.

For most of the 1920s, Germanophiles invoked the German “threat” whenever they were dissatisfied with French policies, be it with taxation or economic regulations. But in the late 1920s, they grew tired of this strategy and developed a proto-nationalist discontent that could be expressed without making reference to Germany.³⁷ When important chiefs,

32 CAOM, Rapport n° 230 du Commissaire de la République française au Togo, du 7 novembre 1929.

33 D.H. Simatro, *Le Togo Musterkolonie*, Aix-en-Provence 1982, pp. 396-397.

34 CAOM, Rapport n° 230 du Commissaire de la République française au Togo, du 7 novembre 1929.

35 Interviews with Erhardt Koffi Paku, cited in Simatro, *Musterkolonie*, p.436.

36 H. Stoecker, *Germanophilie und Hoffnung auf Hitler in Togo und Kamerun zwischen den Weltkriegen*, in: P. Heine and U. Van der Heyden (eds.), *Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus in Afrika*, Pfaffenweiler 1995, p. 496.

37 Derrick, *The ‘Germanophone’ Elite*.

among them Germanophiles, sent a petition to the French government and the League of Nations in December 1929, they called for self-government under the League of Nations and not for the return of the Germans anymore (although the petition was still written in German).³⁸ The Germans had missed yet another opportunity to undermine the colonial empires of the signatories of the Versailles treaty.

In all these cases, colonised Africans and anti-colonial internationalists set their hopes on Germany, but despite paying lip service to an anti-colonial policy, its representatives failed to intrigue against other colonial powers. This reluctance requires explanation.

2. German Priorities: Colonial Internationalism and the Colour Bar

Why did German colonial revisionists who made concrete plans of destabilising colonial empires not avail themselves of this opportunity? Anti-colonial internationalists, former colonial subjects in Germany, and pro-German lobby groups had different agendas but all of them could have been used in one way or the other to cause turmoil in the former colonies. These forms of anti-colonialism provided German revisionists with the possibility to pursue an international escalation policy, ranging from assistance for pro-German groups to create a new German empire to supporting outright nationalists.

Two reasons can be advanced to explain their reluctance to support non-Europeans. First, the priority of German colonial revisionists was a reintegration into the international community of colonising countries. Despite the defeat in the war and the exclusion from the League of Nations (and therefore from the possibility to receive a mandate over colonised territory), they never lost faith in their comeback as an imperial power. This optimism was due to the long history of German participation in projects of a shared colonial internationalism. Second, and related to Germany's allegiance to the colonising "West," Germans were reluctant to turn cosmopolitan cities like Hamburg or Berlin into anti-colonial metropolises. While the centre of French colonial policy, Paris, paradoxically favoured the development of a critical mass of anti-colonial and anti-racist activity in the wake of the First World War, Hamburg and Berlin did not take the chance to compete with the French capital in this matter.³⁹ Racial prejudice in general and the legacy of an institutionalized colonial racism in particular impeded their role as the heart of anti-colonialism.

a) Internationalist Optimism of Colonial Restitution

Unlike the Pan-German nationalists in the metropole, German colonial experts overseas had traditionally participated in international cooperation with other colonising countries. Starting in the 1870s, the founders and propagandists of a German colonial empire, such as Hermann von Wissmann, Alexander von Danckelmann, and Gustav Nachtigal

38 Ibid., p. 261.

39 M. Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge 2015.

had been trained in the Congo colony, established by the Belgian King Leopold, and in French possessions in North Africa.⁴⁰ Germans joined Leopold's International African Association in the 1870s and in 1884/5 Bismarck hosted the International conference on West-Africa, where Europeans agreed on the rules to partition the African continent.⁴¹ Moreover, Germans were leading the way in the International Colonial Institute that had been founded in 1893 in Brussels and brought together around 150 colonial experts from thirteen colonising countries. German members were particularly active in the Institute before the First World War and had established links with colleagues from Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Great Britain, and Italy. Colonial experts realized that they could learn from each other, and personal friendships developed across colonial borders. Even the German Colonial Minister, Bernhard Dernburg, joined the Institute.⁴² Dernburg travelled to East Africa in 1907 and met British colleagues there, but he was not the only one who undertook extensive expeditions to colonies of other colonial powers.⁴³ The Governor of German East Africa between 1912 and 1919, Heinrich Schnee, was one of those German colonial experts who was in permanent contact with colonial administrators from other countries. His wife Ada was British, and when the First World War started, Schnee let the adjacent British and Belgian colonies know that he preferred a sort of neutrality to avoid a war that would discredit European rule over Africans.⁴⁴ After the First World War, Schnee launched a rather nationalistic and aggressive campaign against the Versailles Treaty, which allegedly blamed Germany for its violent colonial administration and accused it of having failed in its civilising mission. Schnee's seminal pamphlet against the *Koloniale Schuldliüge* (colonial guilt lie) was re-edited twelve times in the interwar period and translated into French, English, Italian, and Spanish.⁴⁵ Schnee himself gave lectures on the topic in several countries, including Great Britain. Not a stranger to colonial circles across the Channel, he managed to make British colonial circles rethink their agenda. Thus, in an ironic turn, the *Schuldliüge* debate inaugurated a transnational dialogue rather than causing serious confrontations over colonial

40 Institut für Länderkunde Leipzig, Archiv: Nachlass Gustav Nachtigal: 1869–1875 Reise in den Sudan und die Sahara: Briefe; A. Thys, L'expansion coloniale belge conférence donnée à Liège le 3 novembre 1905, Brussels 1905, pp. 27–29; A. Danckelmann, Association Internationale du Congo. Mémoire sur les observations météorologiques faites à Vivi (Congo inférieur) et sur la climatologie de la côte sud-ouest d'Afrique en general, Berlin 1884.

41 É. Banning, L'Association Internationale Africaine et le Comité des Hautes Études d'Haut-Congo 1877–1882, Brussels, 1882; S. Förster, W.J. Mommsen, and R. Robinson (eds.), Bismarck, Europe, and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference 1884–1885 and the Onset of Partition, Oxford and New York, 1988.

42 BArch, R 1001 6187 ICI, Nr. 9: Dernburg to Vohsen from 23.3.1907.

43 See Institut Colonial International (ed.), Compte Rendu de la Session tenue en 1913, Paris 1913; U. Lindner, Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika, Frankfurt 2011, pp. 139–159.

44 It is not clear, however, whether he really aimed at neutrality: T. Bühner, Die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika. Koloniale Sicherheitspolitik und transkulturelle Kriegführung, 1885 bis 1918, München 2011.

45 H. Schnee, German colonization past and future the truth about the German colonies, London 1926; La colonización alemana el pasado y el futuro; la verdad sobre las colonias alemanas, Madrid 1928; La question des colonies allemandes, Paris 1928; La colonizzazione germanica il suo passato ed il suo futuro. Versione ital. di Cesare Santoro, Roma 1932.

matters. While Germans like Schnee asserted their nationalist position, the international community engaged in a policy of appeasement – the British government, for example, ordered the blue books that listed the German “atrocities” in its former colonies to be destroyed and banned it from reprinting.⁴⁶

In the long term, clashes over the German colonial dispossession provided the basis for new transnational dialogues. As early as 1919, British historian William Harbutt Dawson joined Schnee’s campaign and tried to convince the British that: “it is to the interest of Great Britain more than of any other country that Germany should be encouraged and even assisted to colonise, and to acquire a rightful ‘place in the sun.’”⁴⁷ Mary Townsend, a lecturer at Columbia University and the first non-German historian of colonial Germany, aligned to the view that “German treatment of the natives has been unjustly indicted.” She prompted the colonial experts of the League of Nations’ Permanent Mandate Commission to acknowledge the facts and to condemn the falsification of militarization and cruelty reproaches.⁴⁸ Both Townsend and Dawson held close ties with the German colonial lobby and had personally met its leading members.

Even in France, colonial administrators such as the future governor of Togo, Robert Cornevin, spoke favorably about the “Germanophilia in Togo, expressed not only by certain old men who still spoke a few words of German and evoked with emotion their youthful memories, but also by intellectuals in the prime of life whose families had taught them to respect the German colonial achievement.”⁴⁹ Therefore, he turned against the idea that the Germans had not fulfilled their civilising mission. International support for Germany’s colonial cause obviously did not restore Germany’s colonial empire. But it raised hopes among the Germans that restitution might be possible in the future.

But more was done to appease the German colonial revisionists. In 1926, Germany was allowed to join the League of Nations, which theoretically opened up the opportunity to receive a colonial mandate. In the same year, German colonial companies that had been based in the Reich’s possessions before the war were readmitted to the former German colonies. They benefitted from the international character of the mandates and participated in the exploitation of their resources.⁵⁰ Finally, the League of Nations employed the most fervent colonial revisionist, Heinrich Schnee. He was sent on a fact-finding mission as far as Manchuria, to know why Japan seized Manchuria from China.⁵¹ Japan had also received former German colonies in Micronesia as a mandate from the League,

46 J. Silvester and J. Gewald, *Words cannot be found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia. An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden 2003.

47 W.H. Dawson, *Problems of the peace*, London 1919, p. 214.

48 Townsend, Schnee and Dawson, *German Colonization*, p. 624; Her pioneering study of German colonialism: M.E. Townsend, *Origins of modern German colonialism, 1871–1885*, New York 1921.

49 R. Cornevin, *The Germans in Africa before 1918*, in: L. H. Gann and P. Duignan, *Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960*, London 1969, pp. 383–419: 384.

50 Derrick, *The ‘Germanophone’ Elite*, p. 260.

51 League of Nations Archive: C.663.M.320.1932.VI, League of Nations, Appeal by the Chinese Government. Report of the Commission of Enquiry; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz: Heinrich Schnee, als Mitglied der Mandschurei-Kommission des Völkerbundes, an seine Frau Ada aus dem Fernen Osten, VI. HA, NI Schnee, H., Nr. 6.

but Schnee remarked in his usual ambiguous way that he was not interested in recovering Germany's former Asian colonies, while he hoped to use the League for the restitution of the African ones.⁵² Far from turning against the League, Schnee wanted to benefit from its neocolonial mandate policies.⁵³

The readmission of Germany into the international community kept the German belief in the country's colonial future alive. Germany's past as an active and respected member of the international community of colonising nations made this dream more likely. Personal friendships had been established, and occasionally other imperial powers even depended on German expertise. The increased necessity to "develop" the colonies economically, for example, was one reason for the readmission of experienced German plantation companies.

Experts such as the German missionary and linguist Diedrich Westermann, who became the director of the International Institute of African Languages and Culture in London in 1926, were in demand for their internationally renowned proficiency in African languages.⁵⁴ Heinrich Schnee, a judge by profession and former governor of German New Guinea, Samoa, and German East Africa, had the international and colonial experience that the League of Nation needed when he was hired to investigate China's role in Manchuria. Germany's commitment to colonial internationalism was one way to participate in the colonial projects of the interwar period. Consequently, although Germany was not a colonising power anymore, the Germans did not break with the solidarity among the colonising countries, which helped to keep the colonised in check. As before the First World War, they did not denounce colonialism *per se*, but only criticised its varieties.

At the same time, German colonial internationalism made an alliance with the colonised peoples and anti-colonial activists unlikely. Although qualified as "uncivilised" themselves by the Allies during and after the First World War, German revisionists did not call the concept of civilisation in question. They firmly believed in the inferiority of the colonised peoples and did not challenge the racist worldview inherent to all colonial projects. As I will show in the next section, the official policy of the Weimar period was in fact slightly more racist than the policy of other European governments.

b) The Colour Bar in the Weimar Republic

While Germany did not annul its membership in the international community of colonising countries, it continued to ban colonised peoples from participating in German public life. One way to accept colonised peoples would have been to give them access to citizenship and the privileges naturalization entailed. Unlike the German empire, which

52 H. Schnee, *Völker und Mächte im Fernen Osten : Eindrücke von der Reise mit der Mandchurei-Kommission*, Berlin 1933.

53 Schnee permanently oscillated between nationalist activity and international engagement. When Hitler came to power, he supported him and used his expertise in international law to justify the cause of the "Auslandsdeutsche" and Hitler's annexation of Eastern European territory.

54 E.W. Smith, Diedrich Westermann, in: *Africa* 26,4 (1956), p. 331.

had been a colonial empire, the Weimar Republic seemed generally more open to extend citizenship rights to a restricted number of former colonial subjects. Once the legal distinction between German citizens in the metropole and German subjects in the colonies had ended, new forms of legal integration were thinkable.

However, the prospect of the restitution of German colonies led the German government to put all reforms on hold. Individuals who had been colonial subjects before the war kept their passports that qualified them as “former inhabitant of the colonial protectorates.” Their civil status was similar to the pre-war period, when they were *Schutzgebietsangehörige* who were protected by the German sovereign but not *Staatsangehörige*, who received full citizenship. One Dualla Misipo, for example, who was allowed to travel from Cameroon to Germany in 1913 on a “Native Travel Passport” (*Eingeborenen-Reisepass*) still used this passport in 1939.⁵⁵

Even the so-called “*Mischlinge*” who were qualified to be of “mixed blood” and had a German mother but an African father were not granted full citizenship. A prohibition of so-called mixed marriages dating from 1905, for instance, explicitly aimed at preventing children of “mixed” parents from becoming German citizens. The German hope that its colonial empire could be re-established led them to keep part of the legislation regarding the “*Mischlinge*.”

The case of Theodor Michael, born to a Cameroonian father and a German mother, illustrates the insecure status of the “*Mischlinge*.” Michael was born in Germany and was a young boy in the interwar period. His mother had apparently died, and as a child Michael worked with his father in circuses and ethnographic exhibitions, until the child protective services gave him into foster care. According to German law, he attended school. But his status as a citizen was unclear. His Cameroonian father officially remained an “inhabitant of the colonial protectorate” throughout the interwar period. The status of his children was unclear until they tried to emigrate to France when the Nazis came to power. They received the information that they were “stateless,” as the former German colonies did not exist anymore and the racist color bar established by the 1935 citizenship laws of the Nazis did not allow them to become German citizens because of their “race.”⁵⁶

Adding to the insecure civil status in the mid-1920s, the aggressive propaganda against the French post-war occupation of the Rhineland with the help of African troops resulted in a surge of violent racism. All over the country, coloured inhabitants lost their jobs and were deprived of the few opportunities to participate in public life that they had before. A majority of the Africans in Germany, many of them from the former colonies, had to accept jobs in ethnological expositions, human zoos, and circuses. There they had to pretend to live a primitive life that they never had seen before.⁵⁷ While inhabitants of the colonies were allowed to attend universities in France and Great Britain under certain

55 Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, p. 70.

56 Th. Michael, *Deutsch sein und Schwarz dazu. Erinnerungen eines Afro-Deutschen*, München 2015, pp. 33-44.

57 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

circumstances, Africans rarely had access to higher education in Germany. Their situation was significantly worse than before the war. Many of them left for France if granted passports by German authorities.

France, despite being a colonial power, had a less restrictive policy of access to citizenship than Germany without colonies. Rogers Brubaker's distinction between an inclusive "civic" nationalism in France and an exclusive "ethnic" nationalism in Germany, otherwise deficient, works quite well in this context. German policies were indeed more racist than the French.⁵⁸ The "assimilated" Senegalese Léopold Senghor recognized and celebrated that, in interwar France, "the absence of a legal color bar meant that black students had access to metropolitan political life."⁵⁹ This general accessibility provided the basis for Paris to develop into an "anti-imperial metropolis" in the 1920s, with most anti-racists and independence leaders gathering there and inspiring each other. Germany, or at least Hamburg and Berlin, failed to play a similar role.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Seen from the perspective of anti-colonial and Panafricanist activists, Germany was not only deprived of its colonies in 1919 but effectively de-colonised. Being a non-colonising country cherished by W.E.B. Du Bois, Leopold Senghor, George Padmore, the *Deutscher Togo Bund*, and the *Kamerun Deutsch Gesinnter Verein* between 1919 and 1930, Germany could have styled itself as the leader of the anti-colonial world. But the German colonial activists believed firmly in a shared European ideal of a common colonial mission. The country's long history as a leader of colonial internationalism led the Weimar government to believe that its former colonies would be restituted after it had served its sentence, the temporary ban from the international community being lifted. Those defined as "Africans" by law (even if they were born in Germany) were therefore treated as racially inferior colonial subjects and refused citizenship. In German imagination, the empire continued to exist well into the interwar period. A racist color bar prevented the colonised from taking part in public life. Internationalism and the color bar led Germany to decline the offer of becoming an anti-colonial empire.

Curiously, this changed slightly when the Nazis came to power. The Nazi leaders were not consistent in treating the inhabitants of the former colonial possessions. They also tried to leave the door open to use them for destabilizing the colonial ideology of British and French empires. Martin Bormann even wrote to the Foreign ministry in 1935 that Hitler did not want "that the former colonial negroes [*Kolonialneger*], a majority of whom had fought for Germany, have troubles finding work and receiving sufficient food. They should not be molested in any way." This protection order did not safeguard all of

58 R. Brubaker *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Cambridge, MA, 1992.

59 G. Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars*, Chicago 2005, p. 155.

60 M. Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge 2015.

the around twelve Africans from former German colonies from racist persecution and assassination.⁶¹ But compared to the mass murder of Jews, the Nazis were less consistent in applying their rigid racist theory of extermination to Africans in Germany. Equally, they stopped respecting the international solidarity among colonising powers. To some extent, their imperial logic also contained anti-colonial elements, which they used to wage war on other Europeans but not to support anti-imperial struggles. A figure no lesser than Aimé Césaire pointed out this paradox in his “Discourse on Colonialism” (1950), noting that only the Nazis destroyed the international solidarity of colonising countries. Condemning Hitler for destroying Europe, but failing to criticize Europe for destroying the colonised peoples, Césaire complained, revealed the hypocrisy of modern Europeans.⁶² The constant reluctance of Germans to engage in anti-colonial struggles proved Césaire right.

61 T. Morlang, *Askari und Fitafta: "Farbige" Söldner in den deutschen Kolonien*, Berlin 2008, p.155.

62 A. Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris 1950.