

# Kolonialismus begegnen.

Dezentrale Perspektiven auf die Berliner Stadtgeschichte.

Online-Portal: [www.kolonialismus-begegnen.de](http://www.kolonialismus-begegnen.de)

## Hererostein Flavia Cahn

Hidden in the Columbiadamm cemetery in Neukölln sits a large red granite stone with an inscription<sup>[1]</sup> dedicated to 7 German colonial soldiers who fought and died between 1904 and 1907 in German South-West Africa, today's Namibia and a German colony from 1884 to 1915. The stone, referred to as Afrikastein and later Hererostein, commemorates the 'heroic death' of these individuals: lieutenants Richard von Rosenberg and Bodo von Ditfurth, grenadier Johann Hovel, and fusiliers Johan Orphel, Franz Dallmann, Johann Fausser, and Karl Kliebisch. The inscription ends by dedicating the stone to the memory of these 'heroes'. Before its residence Neukölln, the stone was originally erected in 1907 on Urbanstraße in Kreuzberg, on the site of the Kaiser-Franz-Garde-Grenadier-Regiments Nr. 2 military barracks. Today, the old Officers' Casino on Urbanstraße 21 is the only trace left of the barracks, together with a soldier memorial at the corner of Urban- and Baerwaldstraße. The Hererostein resided at this location for over 60 years before it was eventually relocated to Neukölln in 1973 due to construction work in the area.

At this time and under the initiative of the Afrika-Kameradschaft Berlin and the Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz-und Überseetruppen, the stone underwent renovations and was decorated with various colonial emblems which were etched directly into the stone. These include the insignia of the Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz-und-Überseetruppen, which is made up of a Schutztruppenhut, the hat worn by German colonial soldiers in Africa, with the colors of the German imperial flag, as well as the Deutsche Afrika-Korps coat of arms, which features a palm tree and the iron cross. The Traditionsverband was founded in 1956 and acts as an umbrella organisation for all the regional veteran's associations made up of former colonial soldiers, yet traces its roots back to the very first association for former Schutztruppen serving in Africa founded in 1896.<sup>[2]</sup> The Deutsche Afrika-Korps, on the other hand, was the German expeditionary force which fought in North Africa between 1941 and 1943 as part of the North African campaign of WWII. Both organizations are known for strong pro-colonial and colonial-revisionist views, and worked in partnership to ensure the Hererostein would continue to be displayed in Berlin.<sup>[3]</sup> Their collaboration re-dedicated the Hererostein to all German soldiers who died in Africa.<sup>[4]</sup>

Decades later, growing dissatisfaction with the colonial tone and one-sidedness of the memorial gave rise to local initiatives to update the Hererostein. In 2004, Councillor Marcus Albrecht filed a petition to install a plaque in memory of the victims of German colonialism in Namibia. This was finally fulfilled in 2009 when an additional plaque was laid at the foot of the Hererostein, extending the commemoration to include the fates of the colonized, not only the colonizers. The plaque is made of black stone and takes the shape of Namibia. It bears the following inscription<sup>[5]</sup> in white lettering: In memory of the victims of German colonial rule in Namibia 1884-1915 / in particular the colonial war of 1904-1907 / The Borough Assembly and the District Office of Berlin

ORT

Kaserne des Kaiser-Franz-Garde-Grenadier-Regiments Nr. 2, Blücherstr. 47/48 (nach 1900 inoffiziell Urbanstr. 10-19(21) ausgewiesen)

HEUTE

Urbanstr. 15

[1] The inscription reads in English: Of the 41 members of the regiment who voluntarily took part in the campaign in South-West Africa from January 1904 to March 1907, [the following] died a heroic death

Lieutenant: Richard von Rosenberg, Bodo von Ditfurth, Grenadier: Johann Hovel i Comp., Fusilier: Johann Orphel 10 „, Franz Dallmann 12“, Johann Fausser 12 „, Karl Kliebisch 12“. The officer corps honors the memory of the heroes with this stone

[2] Traditionsverband ehemaliger Schutz-und Überseetruppen e.V.: Online: [www.traditionsverband.de](http://www.traditionsverband.de). (Zugriff: 14.02.2021).

[3] Zeller, Joachim: Decolonization of the Public Space? (Post)Colonial Culture of Remembrance in Germany. In: Lindner, Ulrike/Möhring, Maren/Stein, Mark/Stroh, Silke (Hg.): Hybrid Cultures – Nervous States. Britain and Germany in a (Post)Colonial World. Amsterdam & New York: 2010. Rodopi. S. 65-88. Hier: S. 77.

[4] Zeller, Joachim: Kolonialdenkmäler Berlin. In: van der Heyden, Ulrich/Zeller, Joachim (Hg.): Kolonialmetropole Berlin. Eine Spurensuche. Berlin: 2002. Berlin Edition. S. 161-181. Hier: S. 168.

[5] In German the inscription reads: Zum Gedenken an die Opfer der deutschen Kolonialherrschaft in Namibia 1884-1915 / insbesondere des Kolonialkrieges von 1904-1907 / Die Bezirksverordnetenversammlung und das Bezirksamt Neukölln von Berlin / Nur wer die Vergangenheit kennt hat eine Zukunft / Wilhelm von Humbolt.

Neukölln. The inscription ends with a quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt: Only those who know the past have a future. Today the Hererostein is a composite memorial made up of these two sides of history.

From the onset of German colonial occupation in Namibia, the local populations of Herero, Nama and San resented and resisted German rule. Colonial settlers threatened the Herero cattle herding way of life by seizing Herero land to build their settlements, increasingly demanding more territory for railway construction. Plans to intern Herero groups on reservations in order to steal more land presented an even greater threat to Herero survival.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition to this, German control over the local economy created systems of financial dependency which left the Herero owing large debts to white traders. German traders stole Herero cattle as a form of ‘debt collection’, robbing the Herero of the cornerstone of their culture and subsistence and leaving them impoverished. Beyond economic oppression, the racism and racist violence intrinsic to colonialism, such as rape, caused local Namibian populations to suffer greatly. Dehumanized and valued only as a cheap labour source, Herero resentment against German occupation eventually broke out into an open rebellion on 11. January 1904 in the area of Okahandja, central Namibia. Under the leadership of Chief Samuel Maherero, Herero warriors attacked farms, settlements, post offices, trains, and other symbols of German oppression, killing 123 Germans.<sup>[7]</sup>

In response to this, German military reinforcements poured into the region during the summer of 1904 under the newly-assumed leadership of Lothar von Trotha, notorious for his ruthless and brutal military record in Deutsch Ost-Afrika as well as in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) in China. The German colonial army massacred the Herero at the Battle of Waterberg on 11. August 1904, technically securing a military victory over the rebelling tribe. Not satisfied, von Trotha ordered his troops to pursue the surviving Herero who fled into the Omaheke desert.<sup>[8]</sup> It is in this period following the Battle of Waterberg that some of the most atrocious crimes against the Herero and Nama were committed. Survivors of the massacre were blocked from returning to their lands and instead forced deeper into the desert where many died of exhaustion or were attacked by German soldiers. German forces occupied and poisoned sources of water, causing thousands to die of dehydration.<sup>[9]</sup> Later in the course of von Trotha’s campaign, once the Nama had joined the uprising in 1905 under the leadership of Chief Hendrik Witbooi, Herero survivors and Nama captives were imprisoned in concentration camps where they endured extremely harsh forced labour conditions designed to work them to death. The death rate at the camps, the most well-known of which was on Shark Island, is thought to have been around 50%..<sup>[10]</sup> These tactics were part of von Trotha’s extermination order or Vernichtungsbefehl, a written order which would later become invaluable evidence for building a case to prove the crimes committed to the Herero following the Battle of Waterberg amounted to genocide. By the time the concentration camps had closed in 1908, the Herero had lost 50-75% of their population, the Nama 50%.<sup>[11]</sup> The death toll is contested but experts estimate between 60-100,000 deaths.<sup>[12]</sup>

It was the systematic killing, the targeting specific ethnic groups and the intention to eradicate them entirely, which legally defines the actions undertaken by the German colonial army between 1904 and 1907 as a genocide.<sup>[13]</sup> That the Herero and Nama genocide be defined as such has been hotly contested ground for decades despite official classification as the first genocide of the 20th century by the UN Whitaker Report in 1985.<sup>[14]</sup> At an event in 2004 commemorating the centenary of the Battle of Waterberg, German Development Minister Wieczorek-Zeul acknowledged for the first time that the crimes that took place under German leadership were a genocide and apologized<sup>[15]</sup>, but an official recognition from the German government only came in 2015.<sup>[16]</sup> This pronounced hesitancy to acknowledge the Herero and Nama genocide for so long is linked to the fear of legal consequences, in particular the moral and legal obligation to pay reparations to Herero and Nama groups in Namibia today. In Berlin, this conflict

[6] Bridgman, Jon: The Revolt of the Hereros. Berkeley & Los Angeles, California: 1981. University of California Press.

[7] Förster, Larissa: Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften. Wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 gedenken. Frankfurt am Main & New York: 2010. Campus Verlag. S. 41.

[8] Sarkin, Jeremy: Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Westport, CT: 2009. Praeger Security International.

[9] Vgl. Sarkin 2009.

[10] Conrad, Andreas: Ein schwarzes Kapitel. Der Tagesspiegel, 10. Januar 2004.

[11] Vgl. Conrad 2004.

[12] Vgl. Sarkin 2009.

[13] Vgl. Sarkin 2009.

[14] Whitaker Report: United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on Human Rights Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Thirty-eighth Session, Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda, E/Cn.4/Sub.2/1985/6-July 2, 1985. Review of further developments in fields with which the subcommission has been concerned: Revised and updated report on the question of the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. Prepared by Mr. B. Whitaker. 1985.

[15] Deutsche Welle: Germany Asks for Namibians’ ‚Forgiveness‘. Deutsche Welle, 14. August 2004.

[16] Tejas, Aditya: German Official Says Namibia Herero Killings Were ‚Genocide‘ And Part Of ‚Race War‘. International Business Times, 7. September 2015.

[17] Wendt, Johannes: Der Afrikastein. Verstaubtes Gedenken an deutsche Kolonialzeiten in Namibia. 28.06.2008. epo – Entwicklungspolitik Online. Online: [https://www.epo.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3986:der-afrikastein-verstaubtes-gedenken-an-deutsche-kolonialzeiten-in-namibia&catid=69&Itemid=100244](https://www.epo.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3986:der-afrikastein-verstaubtes-gedenken-an-deutsche-kolonialzeiten-in-namibia&catid=69&Itemid=100244) (Zugriff:28.05.2021).

of definition is also reflected in the story of the Hererostein memorial, provoking us to ask how we remember the events that occurred between 1904-1907 today.

The text inscribed on the plaque added to the Hererostein in 2009 was jointly consulted on by the Foreign Office, Senate Chancellery, Namibian Embassy, and the Neukölln District Assembly. Approval of the text was contingent on the word 'genocide' not being used (Wendt, 2008).<sup>[17]</sup> The term 'colonial war' (Kolonialkrieg) was used instead. This has been interpreted by important groups representing the African diaspora and people of color in Berlin as euphemizing and trivializing the historical facts, ultimately denying the country's colonial past (Afrika-Rat et al 2009).<sup>[18]</sup> Knowledge of Germany's colonial history, in particular these very dark chapters, is missing from collective memory of German society (Zeller 2010: 65). Even those few traces of colonial history that are more visible in Berlin's urban landscape often go unrecognized or ignored, such as the streets named after colonial officers whose records have been wiped clean by systematic forgetting<sup>[19]</sup>, or as Kößler calls it, a 'consensus of silence' ("Konsens des Beschweigens").<sup>[20]</sup> Colonial amnesia of this kind has the monumental effect of rendering certain histories invisible and fails to create an inclusive society. Choosing language which obscures the reality of a genocide prevents accountability and is an obstacle to working for a decolonized future.

Recent years have seen the curtain of colonial amnesia lifting slightly in Berlin. The founding of anticolonial groups such as Berlin Postcolonial and AfricAvenir and their important work, as well as the fierce discussion over the Humboldt Forum and accompanying issues of provenance and restitution have brought issues of decolonization into public discourse.<sup>[21]</sup> Essential to unpacking the colonial past is to critically re-evaluate what the Hererostein stands for and what role it can play in Berlin's urban landscape. Firstly, the original intention behind installing the memorial, the groups who supported its renovation, and the abundance of colonial symbolism add up to an over-emphasis on the perpetrator perspective. The supplementary plaque with its inadequate wording only goes part of the way to standing up against this celebration of German colonialism. Beyond this, the memorial lacks appropriate contextualization and historicization. Proper contextualization of the Hererostein itself could help to rededicate the memorial from a celebration of colonialism to a commemoration of the suffering it caused, interrupting the stone's original intention and transforming it into a symbol of taking responsibility for the past.<sup>[22]</sup> This would also be a chance to acknowledge the ongoing effects of colonial structures in Berlin today, from continued racial inequality in Namibia to racism and discrimination in Germany.<sup>[23]</sup> The hidden location of the memorial is an additional problem. Israel Kaunatjike, a Herero living in Berlin, has campaigned for the Hererostein be moved to a more central location, either near the Bundestag or to Wilhelmstraße, where it could join other small memorials commemorating the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.<sup>[24]</sup> Hidden in Neukölln and out of public view, with no signposting or other indication of its presence, the story of colonialism's victims continues to be silenced. Addressing all these factors can help in acknowledging and taking responsibility for colonial crimes and move us a step closer to a decolonized society.

Today the Hererostein can be found, after much searching, just past the other war memorials and military graves in the shadow of the Sehittik Mosque. In mid-November after Memorial Day (Volkstrauertag), fresh flowers lay around the Namibia-shaped plaque; small red plastic votive candles stand at the base of the stone. The Hererostein is still a contested monument as a maker and keeper of memory. Using unequivocal language to call a genocide exactly that, providing context to the memorial and the history it commemorates, and selecting a more public location are all improvements which would help the Hererostein to unlock its potential as an anti-colonial focus point. However, all these actions must be undertaken in consensus, close partnership, and under the leadership of groups which represent and advocate for the African

[18] Afrika-Rat/Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag (BER)/Berlin Postkolonial/Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD Bund)/p.art.ners berlin-windhoek/Solidaritätsdienst-International (SODI)/Werkstatt der Kulturen: Verhamlosung von Völkermord. Neukölln plant Gedenkstein, der nicht für die Versöhnung mit Namibia geeignet ist. Gemeinsame Pressemitteilung. 2. Oktober 2009.

[19] Speitkamp, Winfried: Kolonialdenkmäler. In: Zimmerer, Jürgen (Hg.): Kein Platz an der Sonne. Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte. Frankfurt a.M. & New York: 2013. Campus Verlag, S. 409-423. Hier: S. 417.

[20] Kößler, Reinhart: Zweierlei Amnesie und die komplexe postkoloniale Lage Namibias. In: Die Friedens-Warte, Vol. 86, ½, 2011. S. 73-99. Hier: S. 75.

[21] Pape, Elise: Postcolonial debates in Germany – An Overview. In: African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie, Vol. 21, 2. 2017. S. 2-14. Hier: S.7-10.

[22] Vgl. Speitkamp 2013: S. 420.

[23] Form, Wolfgang/Meisel, Hana/Schwank, Joke: Gedenken an den Völkermord an den Herero und Nama? Gedenkstättenrundbrief 198, 1. August 2020. S. 20-25.

[24] Habermalz, Christiane: Koloniales Nicht-Gedenken in Deutschland. Deutschlandfunk. 16. February 2018.

diaspora in Berlin. In this way, the Hererostein could go on to have a transformative influence on our memory practices in regards to German colonialism and the Herero and Nama genocide, serving as a reminder of the past, a symbol of responsibility, and a commitment to continue to work towards decolonization.

**Zitierangaben:**

Flavia Cahn: Hererostein. In: Kolonialismus begegnen. Dezentrale Perspektiven auf die Berliner Stadtgeschichte. URL: <https://kolonialismus-begegnen.de/geschichten/hererostein/> (16.07.2021)