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# German Colonialism in Africa and the Pacific, 1884-1914

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# German Colonialism in Africa and the Pacific, 1884-1914<sup>†</sup>

Felix Meier zu Selhausen<sup>‡</sup>

## 1. Introduction

"As long as I am Chancellor, we will not engage in colonial politics"<sup>1</sup> declared Otto von Bismarck in 1881. Three years later, his veto gave way to *Torschlusspanik* (the fear that time to act is running out), which was felt by growing national movements within parliament—following political unification—and by Hanseatic trading firms eager to expand Germany's global power and commercial relations through the acquisition of overseas colonies (Loeb 1900; Pogge von Strandmann 1969). In 1884, Germany hosted the formalization of Africa's partition at the Berlin Conference, where it secured the fourth largest overseas colonial empire, encompassing territories in Africa, China and the Southern Pacific. Bismarck did not intend to establish colonies per se but protectorates (*Schutzgebiete*), administered by chartered trading firms with limited state support (Conrad 2012, 22-23), declaring to the Reichstag in 1884 that: "I do not wish to found provinces but protect commercial establishment in their own development [...]. We hope that the tree will flourish in proportion to the activity of the gardener, but if it does not, the whole responsibility rests with him and not with the Empire, which will lose nothing." Attempts at running the colonies as commercial ventures quickly failed. German trading firms had not the will, experience, nor the resources to open up and govern the vast hinterlands (Henderson 1945), confining their attention to shipping and trading. Moreover, no single German colony was located next to another, which limited opportunities for infrastructural or trade synergies. This led to the idea of linking the scattered colonies into a contiguous region, called "Mittelafrika" (Mambo 1991).

Germany's entry to the imperialistic scramble was late and sudden, curbed by its attention to domestic affairs, lacking military infrastructure to acquire foreign territory, and fearing the financial burden of colonial rule (Van der Linden 2016, 175-176). Compared to the long-standing and long-lasting globally expansive imperial ambitions of other European powers, the mere 30 years of German colonial rule (c. 1884-1914) were brief, violent and geographically limited. World War I not only caused the loss of millions of lives, but it also resulted in the confiscation of almost three million square kilometres of German colonial land by the Allied Forces. These were formally transferred to League of Nations mandates in 1919 through the Treaty of Versailles, marking the end of German colonialism or its "place in the sun"<sup>2</sup> as declared by state secretary von Bülow in the Reichstag in 1897. Due to its short-lived character, a long-term comparative view of German colonialism has not featured as prominently in most accounts of European imperialism or even of German history. The rupture of the World Wars has partly obscured collective memory of its colonial entanglements and legacies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific (Conrad 2012; Schilling 2014; Melber 2024). Recently, the impact of German colonialism received wider public attention, particularly in relation to German colonial commercial interests (Todzi 2023), the role of the Kaiser in German colonialism (Fitzpatrick 2022), and a wider political reappraisal of Germany's colonial past, including reparations

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from German: "So lange ich Reichskanzler bin, treiben wir keine Kolonialpolitik".

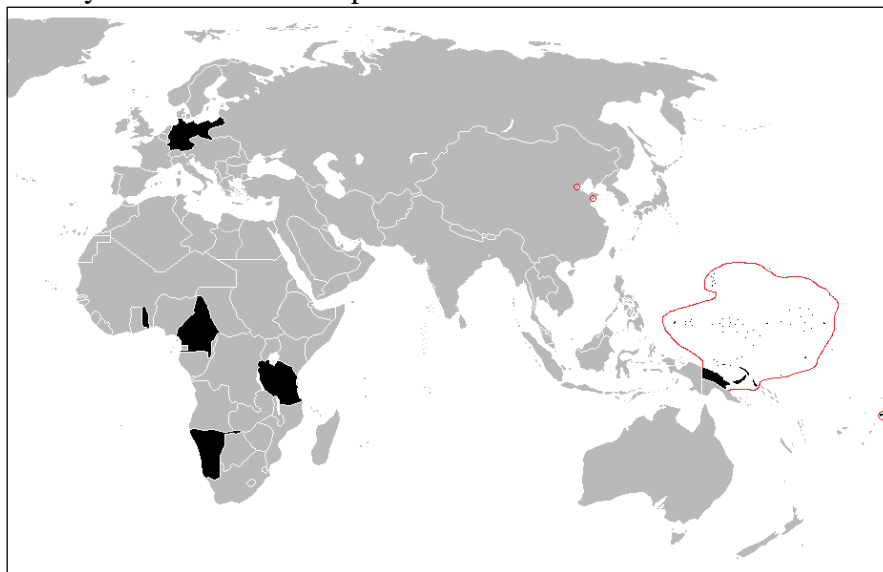
<sup>2</sup> Translated from German: "Platz an der Sonne".

linked to German genocidal warfare in Namibia and pseudo-scientific ethnographic collections of skulls and artefacts. This does not mean that historians and economists have not explored Germany's colonial past. In fact, after opening of the German colonial archives post-World War II a wave of studies emerged that led the historian Lewis Henry Gann (1975, 213) to claim that "more ink has been spilt per square mile of colonial territory under German sway than over any other part of colonial Africa." Yet, the revival of African economic history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, powered by quantitative methods and new sources, has paid little attention to German colonialism (Frederick et al. 2024). One notable exception is the work of scholars who have exploited the natural experiment created by the post-World War I redistribution of German colonies to examine the long-term effects of British versus French colonial rule on education and labor outcomes (Cogneau and Moradi 2014; Dupraz 2019).

This chapter provides an overview of the economic history of German colonialism. It adopts a comparative approach across German colonies and situates German colonial developments within the broader colonial African context. The chapter examines the formation of German colonies (Section 2), trade patterns (Section 3), fiscal capacity building (Section 4), and the development of formal education (Section 5).

## 2. The German colonial empire

**Figure 1:** Germany and its colonial empire in 1914



Source: [Wikimedia](#).

### *Cameroon*

German trading firms, interested in buying palm oil for European industries, expanded along the West African coast in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century during the transition phase from the slave trade to legitimate commerce. In particular, the Hamburg trading house of Carl Woermann (Todzi 2023, 104) expanded in 1862 to Libreville (Gabon) and opened the first German trading post at the port of Douala in 1864 on the Cameroon coast where they purchased palm oil from Duala traders. To break the Duala's trade monopoly, German trading firms called for inland expansion (Gann 1975). The German Empire annexed Cameroon with an approximate population of 3.5 million in 1884 through a number of bilateral treaties signed between the chiefs of Douala and Gustav Nachtigal on behalf of Bismarck. In 1900, German presence

remained largely confined to the coast and its immediate hinterland, with only 524 Europeans residing there. Control over the vast north-east territory remained sparse where local potentates of the Adamawa kingdom remained in power. Due to its tropical disease ecology Cameroon was never considered a potential settler colony. Cameroon was the largest plantation colony of palm oil/kernel and cocoa in West Africa, frequently using forced labour and violent land alienation. In 1912, about 12,000 Cameroonians worked on plantations (Conrad 2012, 89). During World War I, Cameroon was invaded by British and French armies and divided into two administrative regions in 1916. Because the British were interested in other German colonies, they allowed the French to obtain “most of the spoils” in Cameroon (Gifford and Louis 1967). Soon after World War I, the plantations in British Cameroon were sold back to their former German owners and attracted substantial inflows of wage labour migrants from Nigeria and French Cameroon (Le Vine 1964).

### *Togo*

Christian missionaries of the Bremen Mission had been active in Togo among the Ewe since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Jedwab et al. 2022). In 1884, German emissary Gustav Nachtigal signed a treaty with chief Mlapa III that placed Togo under German administrative control. With two central railway lines built only after 1904 and a minor German population of 372 in 1900 (see Figure 2) and no military presence control was limited to the 50 kilometres long coast. Togo ran a free-trade policy and specialized in the export of palm oil and kernels, produced by Togolese farmers who sold their produce to merchants at coastal Lomé (Conrad 2012). Missionary expansion into the northern Muslim parts was restricted to avoid conflict and the colonial administration pursued indirect rule. Contrary to German East and South-West Africa there were no local uprisings. Given the comparatively low military and administrative expenditures and income from customs duties Togo was the only colony jointly with Samoa that barely required any financial assistance from the metropolis (Gründer 2023, 143). In 1914, the German administration was expelled and Togo split lengthwise into a British and French mandated territory (Cogneau and Moradi 2014).

### *German South-West Africa*

South-West Africa became Germany’s only settler colony in 1884. By 1910, c. 24,000 Germans had migrated to German colonies. More than half of those settled in South-West Africa. Since 90% of German migrants chose the U.S., German hopes of controlling mass oversea migration to their own colonies remained unfulfilled (Gründer 2023, 297-280). Germany’s colonies never developed much attraction due to limited commercial opportunity and tropical health ecology. In South-West Africa barely one percent of the territory was suitable for crop cultivation while large parts could be used for cattle, goat, and sheep breeding (Denzel 2017, 148). The north was indirectly ruled through traditional elites while colonial authorities administered the south. The rising influx of German settlers, increasing fourfold between 1900 and 1910 (Table 1), exacerbated tensions with the African population. The Herero successfully resisted disenfranchisement, land seizure by German settlers, and racial discrimination, maintaining control over a large portion of the colony. The economic situation changed with the rinderpest epidemic of 1897-98. While the German colonial army supported German cattle farmers vaccinating their herds, the livestock of the Herero were severely decimated, forcing many to sell their cattle and land to the German settlers or take up wage labour to repay their debts to German traders (Gann 1975; Zollmann 2020, 115).

In 1904, led by Samuel Maharero and Henrik Wittboi, the Herero and Nama respectively rose up in a series of defeats of the German military. Kaiser Wilhelm II, dissatisfied with the high costs of fierce resistance to German settler encroachment and affronted honour, replaced the commander-in-chief with general Lothar von Trotha and sent a *Schutztruppe* consisting of 14,000 soldiers who responded with a series of genocidal reprisals, including extermination orders once military annihilation proved unsuccessful (Kuss 2017). Ultimately the Herero were driven into the Omaheke desert where they perished miserably after German soldiers occupied watering holes. It was not until late 1904 that Kaiser Wilhelm II intervened and rescinded von Trotha's racial extermination order (Fitzpatrick 2022). Still, between 1904 and 1907 severe resistance in the form of guerilla wars continued under the Nama chief Hendrik Witbooi and thousands of Nama and Herero died in battle and in concentration camps under forced labour and poor nutrition (Zeller 2003, 76-77; Kreienbaum 2019). The 1911 census revealed the genocidal character of the campaign. Of about an estimated 130,000 Herero, Nama and Khoekhoe in 1904, less than 30% were estimated to have survived (Union of South Africa 1918, 62), exacerbating the colony's chronic labour shortage (see Figure A2). This became an obstacle for the expansion of the mining industry and railway building once diamonds were discovered in 1908. Demand for labour was ultimately met by workers from the Cape Colony and temporary mining migrants from northern Ovamboland, which remained largely unaffected by the uprisings (Clarence-Smith and Moorsom 1977, 107). Moreover, Herero and Nama were banned from owning land and livestock and thus were forced to working on the German farms, mines and railway construction.

### *German East Africa*

One day after the Berlin Conference had ended, Bismarck declared a protectorate over the mainland opposite Zanzibar where German explorer Carl Peters had obtained 'treaties' (*Schutzverträge*) with local headmen. In 1886, an Anglo-German agreement partitioned the East African territory into British Kenya and German East Africa comprising present-day Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi (see Figure 1), home to 7.75 million inhabitants and three times the size of Germany. The German government intending to keep costs at bay placed the governing of the East Africa in the hands of the German East African Company until 1891 (Laub 1900) after which the colony of *Deutsch-Ostafrika* was founded. Interior Ruanda-Urundi was governed through indigenous kingdom elites and heavily influenced by Catholic missionaries, which limited trade and restricted labor migration to coastal plantations, isolating the region from the broader colonial economy (de Haas 2019). The German empire consolidated colonial rule only after major African resistance including three colonial wars—the so-called “Arab rising” on the Swahili coast (1888–89), the Hehe War led by chief Mkwawa (1892–96), and the Maji Maji<sup>3</sup> war in 1905–1907 in the south. These were caused by local resistance against German forced labour on roads as well as cotton and sisal plantations, and brutal methods in the collection of hut tax obligations (Gründer 2023; Iliffe 2009, 21). The ‘Maji Maji’ mass-organised rebellion across south-east German East Africa was among the most lethal anti-colonial uprising in early colonial Africa, killing between 75,000 and 300,000 Africans overwhelmingly due to the subsequent famine in 1907 caused by German scorched earth strategies (Iliffe 2009, 20; Becker 2004). In August 1914, the British blockade cut German East African trade off from the German Reich, leaving it without supplies (Henderson

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Maji’ was a medicine, connected to a water cult, which was administered to the resistance fighters in the belief of maji’s immunity powers against European weapons (Becker 2004).

1943). By the end of 1916, the British and Belgian troops had ousted the Germans who evacuated via Portuguese Mozambique in November 1917. In 1919, German East Africa was split through a League of Nations mandate, in which Britain took over the Tanganyika and Belgium Ruanda-Urundi until independence in 1961/62.

### *New Guinea and Samoa*

The Pacific island economies of New Guinea and Samoa were the last to be annexed despite longstanding trade activities in cotton going back to the 1850s by Hamburg and Bremen trade firms (Firth 1973). By the 1880s, copra (dried coconut kernels) replaced cotton as main export crop driven by growing European and North American demand. In 1899, Germany annexed the western part of New Guinea, the world's second-largest island, including the Caroline, Marianas and Marshall Islands with an estimated population of c. 300,000. The US occupied the eastern part of New Guinea. Germany acquired Samoa's eastern islands in 1899 with a population of c. 40,000 while Western Samoa was ceded by the US in an international treaty (Conrad 2012, 54-55). While European coconut plantations expanded, Samoans remaining by far the largest producers of copra throughout colonial times (Droessler 2018). European presence never exceeded 500 in Samoa (Table 1). In contrast to the violent clashes in Germany's African colonies, there was no outbreak of force (but maltreatment of plantation workers). In 1914, Samoa and New Guinea were occupied by troops from New Zealand and Australia/Japan respectively, and after the Versailles Treaty placed under a League of Nations mandate.

### *Kiaochow*

In 1898, after the German Reich took possession of Kiaochow Bay consisting of 515 square kilometres in the Chinese province of Shantung China ceded the rights of sovereignty to Germany for 99 years (Laub 1900). Like British Hong Kong, Kiaochow was entirely set up as trading colony. It was hoped that Kiaochow would develop into a thriving marketplace for trading German manufacturing products with China. This promise remained unfulfilled. By World War I only 8% of trade through Kiaochow came from Germany while the vast majority originated from Japan. Nevertheless, the port of Tsingtao became the most important transshipment point for German trade with China, which made up 80 million Mark in 1897 while total trade with its African protectorates made up 32 million Mark. This shows how atypical this area was, so that it appears reasonable to largely exclude it from further discussions of the development of German colonies in this chapter.

**Table 1:** Local and foreign population in German colonies, 1910

	Local	European	German (%)
South-West Africa*	60,636	12,935	79%
East Africa*	2,948,747	3,756	72%
Togo	1,000,000	372	91%
Cameroon	2,301,329	1,284	88%
New Guinea	317,000	1,254	<i>na</i>
Samoa	33,487	473	62%
Kiaochow	161,000	3,896	98%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,822,199</b>	<b>23,970</b>	

*Note:* \* Includes European/German military and police staff. *Source:* Reichs-Kolonialamt (1911, 2-28).

Table 2 places German colonial Africa in comparative colonial empire perspective of sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South Africa. In 1910, German colonial Africa covered with 8.8 million estimated inhabitants - less than 10% of sub-Saharan Africa's population, 12% of the land size (c. 4.5 times the size of Germany itself) and making up 12% of sub-Saharan Africa's total export value behind France (26%) and Britain (52%). Expressed in per capita terms, the export values of Germany's African colonies were higher than those of British Africa and on par with those of French West Africa. This goes against narratives of German Africa's bottom-line unprofitability of natural resource-scarce and scattered territories where "It was hardly to be expected that much business could be done with the inhabitants of the fever-ridden jungles of West Africa, the deserts of South-West Africa, or the lonely islands of the Pacific" (Henderson 1938, 14).

**Table 2: German Africa in comparative colonial African perspective, 1910**

	No. colonies	Pop. (m)	Size (m. km <sup>2</sup> )	Caloric suitability (m)	Exports (GBP)	Exports/Suitability	Exports p.c. (GBP)	Export share	Rails (km)
France	14	19.6	7.8	6,888	8.7	0.0013	0.45	26%	1,563
Britain	13	45.1	5.7	9,144	17.2	0.0019	0.38	52%	9,173
<b>Germany</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>3,669</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>0.0011</b>	<b>0.46</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>3,457</b>
Portugal	3	7.2	2.1	4,608	2.3	0.0005	0.32	7%	1,861
Belgium	2	11.5	2.3	4,165	2.6	0.0006	0.23	8%	885

*Sources:* Population estimates (Frankema and Jerven 2014) and Statistisches Reichsamt (1912, 451); export values (Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen 2025); caloric suitability index (Galor and Özak 2015); railroad length in 1911 (Jedwab and Moradi 2016) and Statistisches Reichsamt (1912, 451).

*Notes:* Sub-Sahara excludes South Africa. Export figures exclude South Africa and North Africa but include the island colonies Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion, Seychelles and Zanzibar. Agricultural suitability refers to the total average caloric suitability of each empire.

Caloric suitability captures the potential agricultural output (measured in calories) based on crops that were available for cultivation after the Columbian exchange (Galor and Özak 2016). When expressing the export value per total average caloric soil suitability it suggests that Britain had the best conversion rate of turning agricultural potential into export output, followed by France, and Germany, while Portuguese and Belgian colonies had the lowest. Clearly, this is a rough comparison that does not consider whether suitable agricultural land was commercially accessible via railways and rivers. Moreover, relative to the size of each territory, Britain and Germany invested comparatively more into railroad construction to connect the cash crop plantations and mines to the coast. However, 55% of rail kilometres were constructed alone in South-West Africa (see Figure 2). Overall, Table 2 conveys that although Germany joined the scramble relatively late, it appears to have been still early enough to secure some economic gains.

### 3. Trade

The Hanseatic merchant houses of Hamburg and Bremen had long been expanding their share of West African trade during the 1860s (Todzi 2023), setting up trading posts along the coast of Liberia, Cameroon and Togo. Despite rapid progress, in 1881 British West African trade was four times the size the German African trade (Henderson 1938). Germany hoped to use the colonies as a population vent (*Lebensraum*) when during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany witnessed rapid population growth, urbanization and industrial depression causing emigration to the United States (Conrad 2012, 27). The German colonies, however, failed to attract emigrants, proving unsuitable for large-scale white settlement due to the unhealthy

tropical climate, the lack of long-distance communication, and local resistance. Once it became evident that the colonies were not drawing German settlers, attention shifted to their commercial potential and their role in supplying raw materials to German industries. (Henderson 1938).

### 3.1 Exports

Table 3 presents the export share of each German colony. It excludes Kiaochow, which was mainly a trading port, like British Hong Kong, – not a colony. During the two decades the colonial empire’s total export value nominally increased thirteen-fold from 12 million Marks in 1892 to 155 million Marks in 1913. The Pacific islands of New Guinea’s and Samoa’s joint export share made up around 18% in the 1900s. However, the lion’s share of total exports originated from three of its four African colonies. Given the extremely dry climate in South-West Africa, barely one percent of the territory was suitable for crop cultivation, total exports from the German colonies were dominated by German East Africa, Cameroon and Togo up to 1909 when South-West Africa experienced its diamond boom. This led to a notable rise in the colony’s German empire export share of more than one-third of total exports leading to a six-fold increase in total export value between 1905 and 1913. However, Table 3 also indicates that the 1904-1908 military campaign in South-West Africa significantly disrupted its exports in 1905.

**Table 3: Share of exports of German colonial possessions (%), 1892-1913**

Region	1892	1895	1900	1905	1910	1913
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>82.0</b>	<b>84.2</b>	<b>82.0</b>	<b>93.2</b>
East Africa	43.3	31.0	24.9	35.7	20.6	23.0
Togo	20.0	29.0	17.7	14.2	7.2	5.9
South-West Africa	1.5	1.2	5.3	0.8	34.4	45.5
Cameroon	35.3	38.9	34.1	33.5	19.8	18.9
<b>South Pacific</b>			<b>18.0</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>18.0</b>	<b>6.8</b>
New Guinea			10.6	8.5	14.5	3.3
Samoa			7.3	7.3	3.5	3.5
Total (1000 Mark)	12,090	10,395	17,242	27,836	100,842	154,644
Exports to Germany (%)	36.4	31.7	37.7	63.9	49.7	34.2
Share of German imports (%)	0.16	0.13	0.48	0.74	0.73	<i>na</i>

*Notes:* Export values in African prices. No data for New Guinea in year 1913 – 1912 used instead. South-West Africa export values from Walfish Bay, Lüderitz Bay and Swakopmund used for 1891 and 1894. South-West Africa 1892 represents 1893 due to missing data. Kiaochow is excluded.

*Sources:* Statistisches Reichsamtsamt (1894, 1897, 1902, 1907, 1912, 1915); Fitzner 1896; Mayer (1913, 174); Schnee (1920, 34).

Over 100 steamships, most operated by the Woermann trading firm (Schinzinger 1984, 147-48), facilitated overseas trade with the colonies. However, Table 3 also indicates that only a third of exports were destined to Hamburg or Bremen (see Figure A1), with the majority of goods from German colonies shipped to other destinations (e.g. Britain, Cape Colony, Zanzibar and Australia). In comparison, Britain and its overseas dominions and protectorates imported 60% from their colonial possessions during the 1900s. Moreover, German imports from its own colonies made up a tiny fraction - on average 0.6% of total German imports. In comparison, African exports to Germany excluding its own colonies amounted to 4% (Gründer 2023, 282). In British West Africa, Germany was the most important non-British importer, making up 32% of total British West African exports in 1910. Thus, it’s not surprising that in 1910, tropical agricultural commodities from the German empire only supplied a small portion of German



industrial demand: 13.6% of rubber, 6% of palm kernels, 8% of copra, 8.1% of wax, 2.4% of cocoa, 2.1% of oils/fats, and 0.3% of cotton (Henderson 1938; Firth 1973; Schinzing 1984, 127). The majority of raw material imports originated outside German colonies. For example in 1912, 83% of cotton and 89% of copper was imported from the U.S., and 89% of palm oil/kernel came from British West Africa (Schinzing 1984, 127). Germany's colonial imports were minor, but exports from its colonies grew, yielding substantial profits for Hamburg and Bremen export-crop trading firms and untaxed mining corporations during the short-lived diamond boom (Press 2021; Todzi 2023, 479-481).

The export shares shown in Table 3 mask two important facts. First, although the Pacific island colonies had some of the lowest export values in the German Empire between 1900 and 1913, their average *per capita* exports, reported in Table 4, were significantly higher than those of any other German colony—exceeding a ratio of 11:1 in the case of New Guinea and 58:1 for Samoa! Between 1900 and 1905, Samoa's per capita exports were 450 times higher than the average German African colony. The comparatively densely populated copra-exporting islands were naturally covered with coconut trees, meaning that the island colonies had a far larger land size under export crop cultivation than any other German colony. Second, although Togo's total exports were half the value of those from East Africa and Cameroon between 1892 and 1913, its per capita exports were consistently higher—by a ratio of 3:1. A comparison of per capita exports of German African colonies to British East and West African colonies in 1910 reveals that the German colonies were not far behind, as already suggested in Table 2. For example, German East Africa exported more per capita than the Protectorate of Kenya-Uganda (0.15) while both Cameroon and Togo's per capita exports were almost twice as high than palm-oil/kernel exporting Nigeria (0.23) but half of the cocoa-rich Gold Coast (0.89) and palm-kernel exporting Sierra Leone (0.8) (Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen 2025).

**Table 4:** Exports per capita in German Africa and Pacific (current Mark), 1892-1913

	Total (1000 Mark)	S-W Africa	East Africa	Cameroon	Togo	New Guinea	Samoa
1892	12,090	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.21		
1895	10,395	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.22		
1900	17,242	0.23	0.04	0.09	0.21	5.14	38.36
1905	27,836	0.05	0.10	0.14	0.26	6.65	61.48
1910	100,842	7.41	0.21	0.32	0.46	41.19	107.09
1913	154,644	14.33	0.36	0.47	0.57	14.50	161.79

Source: Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen (2025), Statistisches Reichsamt (various).

Table 5 presents the ten most important export commodities from German colonies in both Africa and the Pacific from 1892 to 1913, excluding Kiaochow. It conveys five major trends. First, palm oil and kernels from Cameroon and Togo were the key commodities of the 1890s in both value and volumes, used for the lubrication of machines (e.g. railways), as ingredient in soap production, and in food processing. Second, ivory from East Africa and Cameroon, the second most valuable export commodity in 1892, gradually declined in relative value and quantity after 1900. Third, natural rubber exports from Cameroon and East Africa, highly demanded in the automotive and bicycle industries, became the most valuable German colonial export crop, quadrupling its export volume between 1900 and 1913 with the majority coming from Cameroon which registered 5.6 million rubber trees on plantations in 1911 (Schinzing 1984, 56). By 1913, Cameroon exported one fifth of total African rubber until world market prices of rubber plunged after 1913 (Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen 2025). German and British trading companies sent European and African employees into the interior to buy rubber where companies established factories for buying and storing rubber. The rubber boom

depended on a vast "trust" credit system, in which European trading firms supplied advances (along with imported goods) to Cameroonian traders. These traders oversaw the collection and long-distance transport of rubber from local producers, relying on 20,000–30,000 porters in the rainforest (Austen 1999; Gründer 2023, 162).

**Table 5:** Major export commodities from German colonies (%), 1892-1912

	1892	1895	1900	1905	1910	1912
Palm oil/kernel	38.0	46.7	29.1	11.5	8.0	8.9
Ivory	26.4	19.0	9.9	6.5	1.4	0.7
Rubber	16.5	21.0	20.9	26.3	18.3	17.5
Copra	0.8	1.9	15.1	18.3	9.1	9.6
Cocoa		1.0	1.7	4.7	3.2	4.5
Hides and skins			1.2	5.4	3.0	3.6
Phosphates/guano			3.5	0.0	9.4	4.1
Sisal hemp				3.2	3.0	6.1
Diamonds					26.7	25.1
Copper ores					5.7	5.4
Other	18.2	10.5	18.6	24.1	12.3	9.6
Total (mil. Mark)	12.1	10.5	17.2	27.8	100.8	120.9

*Note:* Kiaochow excluded.

*Sources:* Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen (2025); Statistisches Reichsamt (various).

Fourth, after 1900, copra (used in soap and candle production) grown on plantations in New Guinea and Samoa became the second most valuable export commodity of the German colonial empire. Samoans owned three times the land on which coconuts grew of European copra plantations, remaining the largest producers of copra throughout colonial times (Droessler 2018). Samoans also formed copra cooperatives to circumvent Euro-American trade monopolies. German colonial attempts to compel Samoans into wage work on foreign plantations failed, as abundant subsistence farming not only provided social insurance during crises but also became the basis for anti-colonial resistance. Samoans only engaged occasionally in plantation wage labour to purchase imported goods or pay government taxes and mission church donations. The German governor Solf avoided confrontation, opting for a strategy of accommodation and recruited laborers from New Guinea and China to work on Samoa's copra, cocoa, and rubber plantations run by the *Deutsche Handels- und Plantagensgesellschaft der Südseeinseln*.

Fifth, in 1908 diamond deposits were discovered by a South African railway worker on the new line in the Namib desert, near Lüderitz (Kolmanskop). This prompted a diamond rush, boosting South-West Africa's thus-far disappointing export performance, largely based on ostrich feathers, cattle, and especially seabird guano used as fertilizer on Cape Colony's vineyards (Sitters and Crawford 2003). Table 5 shows that by 1910 diamonds had become by far the most lucrative export commodity, generating the highest private-sector profits of any of the German colonies. The German government staked out a forbidden diamond zone (*Sperrgebiet*) granting sole mining rights to the German diamond corporation and set up its own diamond consortium. However, the severe labour scarcity caused by the genocidal campaign against the Herero and Nama and their consequential unwillingness to work in German wage labour left diamond businesses without sufficient labour to extract the diamond wealth (Press 2021, 113-115). German miners from the Ruhr were not interested in relocating to Africa. Instead, thousands of migrant workers from the Cape Colony and Ovamboland in the north of South-West Africa, unaffected by the genocide, came to work for wages under poor conditions, in the diamond sector. Ovambo kings taxed the migrant workers' diamond

wages on their seasonal harvest return (Press 2021, 117-118). In the five years leading up to World War I, South-West Africa became Africa's major producer of diamonds alongside British South Africa, exporting c. 5.2 million carats worth 52 million Marks (Figure 2) in 1909-1913, equivalent to c. 20% of British South African diamond volumes (Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen 2025). Most diamonds were sold to an expanding US mass-market for diamond engagement rings (Press 2021, 97, 101). World War I ended Germany's mineral bonanza when in 1915 South African forces marched in. Table 5 also indicates that after 1900, several other export commodities gained ground, including sisal hemp from German East Africa, cocoa from Cameroon, with 7.8 million planted cocoa trees in 1912 (Schinzinger 1984, 56), and Togo, as well as cotton from German East Africa and Togo (Sunseri 2012).

### 3.2 Imports

Table 6 shows that between 1892 and 1913 the nominal import value increased 22 times. At the same time, German exports into its own colonies made up about one-third of total German colonial imports, which made up only 0.6% of total German exports. German colonies did not absorb large quantities of manufactured commodities "made in Germany". In fact, German exports to Africa, excluding its own colonies, were even three times as high in value.

**Table 6:** Share of total value of imports by German colonies (%), 1892-1913

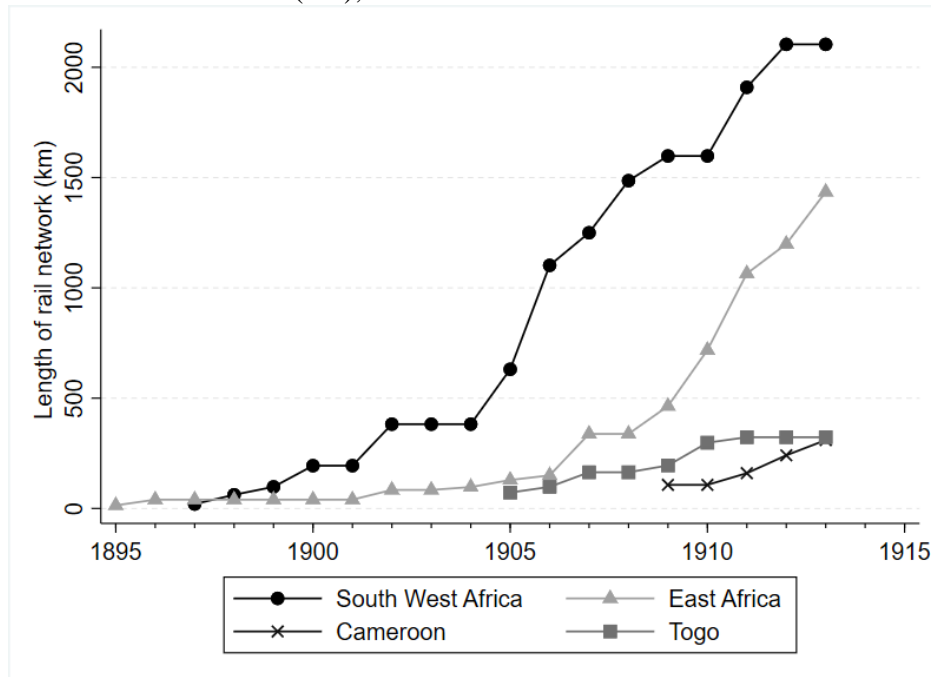
	1892	1895	1900	1905	1910	1913
Textiles	35.4	31.7	22.1	32.8	29.5	31.3
Spirits and beer	9.0	13.6	7.7	4.4	3.0	2.0
Food	7.8	16.5	10.8	9.1	11.7	10.7
Money	6.3	2.7	2.5	2.4	2.4	3.1
Machines and vehicles	4.2	0.0	0.7	1.5	2.7	5.4
Construction material	3.6	6.8	8.7	2.1	3.3	4.2
Guns and gunpowder	3.2	1.2	2.4	0.9	1.1	0.7
Ironware and rails	2.0	3.9	12.6	9.3	12.8	10.1
Tobacco and cigarettes	1.0	3.5	2.5	1.8	1.6	2.6
Coal and petroleum	0.8	0.9	0.6	1.8	3.7	3.0
Medicine and soap	0.5	0.3	1.1	0.5	0.5	0.4
Other	26.2	18.9	28.3	33.4	27.5	26.6
Total (1000 Marks)	12,603	15,619	40,936	138,970	198,292	278,168
Imports from Germany (%)	42.1	28.8	62.3	31.4	28.0	na
Share of German exports (%)	0.10	0.08	0.10	0.24	0.54	na

Source: Statistisches Reichsamt (various); Henderson (1938, 16); Frankema and Meier zu Selhausen (2025).

Table 6 also presents the major import commodities shipped to the German colonies between 1892-1912, excluding Kiaochow. During the two decades the nominal import values increased twelve-fold. The majority of imports were absorbed by the settler colony of South-West Africa after 1905. It shows that most import commodities were textiles, representing about one-third of total imports over the colonial era that dominated West African import markets since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century together with spirits and salt (Todzi 2023, 104). In German East Africa in 1895, half of all imports still came from India, while only a quarter came from Germany (Henderson, 1938), as East Africans had been importing cotton cloth and garments from Indian merchants for centuries. During the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spirits and arms (guns and gunpowder) were among the primary imports in the German West African colonies. However, after 1900, as railway, bridge, harbor, and settler expansion accelerated, capital-intensive goods such as ironware, construction materials, and vehicles/machines became more

dominant. During the final decade of German rule, Figure 2 illustrates that investments in railroad construction to facilitate transport from mines and plantations to the ports accelerated significantly, expanding from 466 kilometres of rails built in 1903 to 4,176 kilometres by 1913 (Jedwab and Moradi 2016). Food, in particular rice, salt, fish and dairy products represented 10% of imports that were largely absorbed by a growing German settler population in South-West Africa. Medicine and hygiene related commodities were minor import commodities composing 0.5% and tobacco about 2% of total imports. The rise of construction material (wood, iron sheets) 1895-1900 was largely South-West Africa corresponding with the expansion of German settlers.

**Figure 2:** Railroad construction (km), 1895-1913



Source: Deutsches Kolonialamt (1915, 459).

#### 4. Financing the German colonial state

How much did Germany pay for its colonial empire and how fiscally extractive the colonial state? There was no universal taxation system across German colonies on the local population. Each colony experimented according to its varying local economic conditions and financial requirements. However, there are a number of similarities across colonies. Table 7 presents the source composition of colonial taxation in German colonies in 1911. The four African colonies comprised the bulk of total colonial fiscal revenue. Figure 3 shows that in 1900 imperial subsidies represented the financial backbone of the colonial state. Less than 20% of revenue was raised within the colonies. This was not colonialism on the cheap. Import and export duties were the most important sources of colonial revenue, which were levied at coastal points of entry/exit, which made them relatively easy to enforce. These made up two-third of locally raised revenue in 1900 and half in 1911 (Table 7), which was comparable to British and French African colonies (Frankema and van Waijenburg 2014; Cogneau et al. 2021). The average duty over import commodities (Table 7) from German colonies was c. 10-15% (Fitzner 1896, 264; Schinzing 1984, 103). Port and railway fees were also important and trading firms had to pay corporate taxes, so that the burden of taxation fell largely on European manufacturers exporting

to German Africa and only partly on the local population who could afford consume imported European commodities, in particular textiles.

Direct taxes contributed only marginally. In East Africa to secure local labour the colonial government introduced a hut tax were to force Africans to seek waged employment on German plantations, often far away from their household farms. The levying of the hut tax and introduction of a village quota on cotton-cultivation triggered local opposition to colonial rule and contributed to the Maji-Maji rebellion that erupted in 1905-1907, which led to 200,000 African casualties (Sunseri 2012).

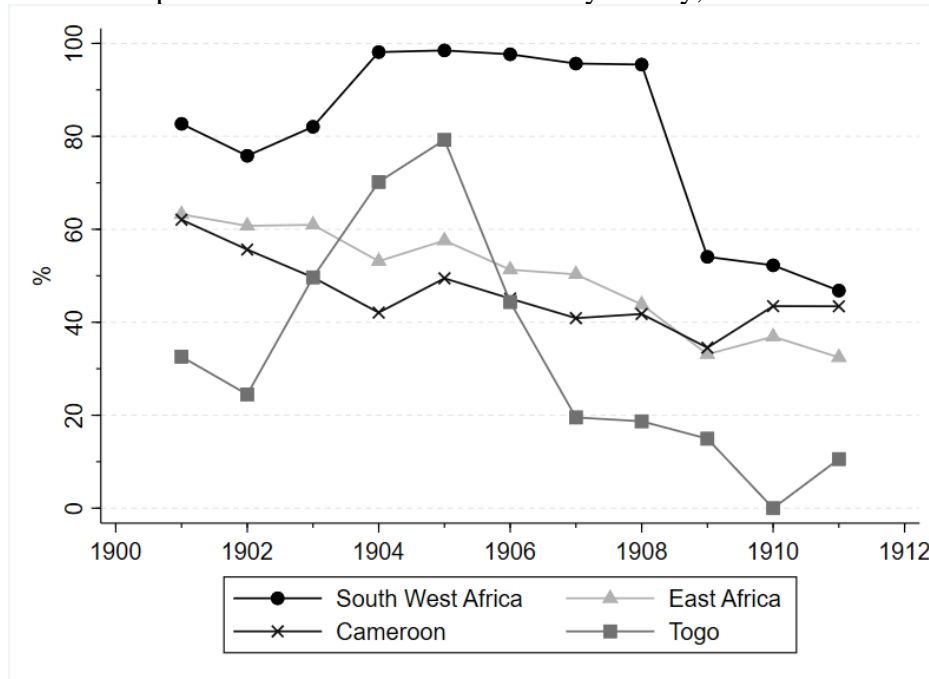
**Table 7:** Composition of tax revenues, 1911 (in current 1000 Marks)

	South-West Africa	East Africa	Cameroon	Togo	New Guinea	Samoa	Palau, Karolinen, Marianen
<i>Local revenue</i>	18,613	9,865	5,249	2,876	865	827	514
Direct taxes	447	3,730	1,246	484	138	299	116
Customs duties	11,014	3,350	3,250	1,506	601	445	205
Other taxes, fees	1,258	1,415	753	265	126	83	193
Minerals	2,661						
Railway and ports	3,233	964		621			
<i>Imperial subsidies</i>	11,416	3,543	2,322	-	615	-	144
<b>Total revenue</b>	<b>34,998</b>	<b>14,605</b>	<b>9,281</b>	<b>3,216</b>	<b>1,480</b>	<b>932</b>	<b>703</b>
<b>Total revenue p. c.</b>	<b>150.7</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>27.8</b>	<i>na</i>

*Source:* Reichs-Kolonialamt 1911, 251-257. Savings from previous years not included.

Figure 2 makes it clear that German colonies continued to operate on a net loss during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The bulk of colonial expenditures was financed through large transfers from the metropole, borne by German taxpayers. While Togo remained mostly self-sufficient colony, in South-West Africa, locally raised revenues made up barely 10% of public expenditures which were further dwarfed when German imperial subsidies surged to finance the military campaign against Herero and Nama (1904-1908) and railroad expansion. During this period South-West Africa received about 15 times as much in subsidies than East Africa and 43 times than Cameroon, thus becoming heavy financial burden for Germany. Following the 1908 genocide, declining military expenditures and the mining of diamonds and copper boosted customs revenues from mineral exports, resulting in a surge in locally raised funds that covered half of the colonial budget. During the last five years of German colonial rule, diamonds and a small population propelled Namibia's gross public revenue per capita to the highest in colonial Africa (excluding South Africa) until the end of the German colonial era in 1914, which never made up the severe losses it had incurred in the previous two decades. The scale of costs associated with the colonies triggered political opposition in the German Reichstag (Schinzinger 1984, 107; Gründer 2023, 77).

**Figure 3:** Share of imperial subsidies in total revenue by colony, 1901-1911



Source: Statistisches Reichsamt (1902-1912).

Table 7 shows that by 1911 the colonies were in a better financial position to pay local expenditures, lowering the German imperial subsidies to 30%. However, the trading colonies of Togo and Samoa remained the only ones that were self-sustaining, partly due to the low administrative costs (wages and pensions) associated with Germany's limited presence (see Table 1). While customs duties still contributed half of total locally raised revenues, the increased contribution of direct taxes and railway and port fees, corporate taxes as well as South-West African mineral taxes added up to a more diversified colonial revenue inflow. In 1907, Togo offset its stagnating customs revenue - caused by slowed growth in palm oil and kernel production - by imposing a head tax equivalent to 12 days of labor (6 Marks) in cash, collected by local chiefs (Gründer 2023, 143). In Cameroon, a 30-day labour tax was introduced but was reduced to 10 days after World War I when France took control (Dupraz 2019).

## 5. Missionary origins of formal education

Christian missions benefited from the opening up of colonies. The German authorities did not restrict any missionary denomination but prohibited their expansion into Islamic regions, where missionaries faced strong opposition (Cogneau and Moradi 2014). By 1909, 1,133 European missionaries (47% female) and 2,009 local catechists staffed 372 main stations and 1,703 out-stations in German colonies with a total congregation of c. 159,000 (Fitzner 1911). By World War I, Christian missions claimed to have converted approximately 208,000 “souls”, two-thirds of whom were Catholic (Conrad 2012, 114). However, local demand for Christian conversion was not necessarily religious but associated with local demand for formal schooling (Meier zu Selhausen 2019).

Table 8 presents key indicators of formal education in each German colony in 1911. It shows that the German colonial state almost entirely relied on Christian mission schools that provided the bulk of schooling. Government schools, open to both Christian and non-Christians (taught

only in German), made up less than 5% of primary school enrolment. Although missions had considerable freedom in running their schools, the colonial government subsidized mission schools (grant-in-aid) following regular inspection and examination to establish progress made in the teaching of German (Vischer 1915). Table 8 also shows that 95-100% of students enrolled in mission schools. Mission schools of both Protestant and Catholic denominations were run overwhelmingly by local teachers and catechists who taught reading and writing and spread the gospel in the local vernacular (Hölzl 2016). In Togo, Cameroon, and Samoa European teachers constituted barely 7% of the total number of primary school teachers. Also, in Tanzania, out of 1,412 teachers 85% were African. Demand for education was highest in Samoa, where per capita enrolment in 1911 was five times greater than in New Guinea and South-West Africa. German investment in education surpassed French spendings. For example, in French West Africa only 400 primary schools serviced 22,000 pupils in 1920 compared to 14,000 pupils in German Togo in 1913, and 41,000 in Cameroon alone (Oloruntimehin 1974).

**Table 8: Primary school development in German colonies, 1911**

	Schools	Enrolment	Enrolment per capita	Enrolled in Mission schools (%)	Girls enrolled (%)	Teachers	Local teachers (%)
Togo	315	13,347	0.02	97.5	17.1	431	92.3
Cameroon	480	32,056	0.01	97.3	8.1	653	93.6
S-W Africa	89	4,269	0.06	100.0	39.0	167	60.5
East Africa	953	64,484	0.01	94.6	35.0	1,412	85.0
New Guinea	402	18,974	0.06				
Samoa	329	9,878	0.29	99.7		542	92.6
Kiaocho	39	1,470	0.01				

*Source:* Vischer (1915); Schlunk (1914, 8-38.). Population estimates (Frankema and Jerven 2014), except for South-West Africa, New Guinea, Samoa and Kiaocho for which I used the colonial population estimates from Statistisches Reichsamt (1911, 281). Table A1 provides further details.

The *Africanization* of the mission was a crucial prerequisite for the expansion of formal education and rising enrolment rates across the German empire witnessed pre-World War I. As such the educational system in German colonies was comparable to missionary *laissez-faire* and anti-denominational discrimination practiced in British colonial Africa where mission schools were almost exclusively responsible for the supply of primary education (Frankema 2012). Curricula at mission schools comprised four years focusing on religion, the local vernacular in the first years and German once reading and writing skills in the vernacular had attained satisfactory levels (Cohen 1993). Also, a number of mission schools for boys trained workshop artisans, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, printers and shoemakers. Parents chose to send their offspring to mission schools as literacy skills and mission affiliation were deemed beneficial to upward occupational mobility and the earning of skill premiums (Vernon-Jackson 1968, 53, 200). A small number of government (high) schools were intended to train a local elite to serve as clerks, interpreters and tax-collectors (Schinzinger 1984, 90). But also, mission schools offered new opportunities of social mobility through occupations as teacher, interpreter, nurse, clerk or carpenter in trading firms, plantations, mission school and to serve as lower colonial administration personnel (VandenPloeg 1977; Seimu and Komba 2024).

Using post-independence census literacy data on c. 58,000 individuals and a cohort approach, Table 9 reports that in Cameroon, Togo and Tanzania approximately 5% of those who were born during the first phase of German colonial rule (1880-1894) were literate at the time of the census compared to around 10% for the later 1895-1909 cohorts. Togo had the highest literacy

rates among the 1895-1909 cohort reflecting a relatively large number of mission schools, which resulted in Togo achieving the highest school enrolment rate in West Africa by 1914 (Gründer 2023, 140).

**Table 9:** Literacy by birth cohort and sample size, 1880-1909

	Cameroon	N	Togo	N	East Africa	N
1880-1894	8.4	2,853	4.9	263	5.8	4,450
1895-1909	9.2	24,580	12.5	522	8.2	25,333
Men (1880-1909)	13.8	12,785	23.2	324	14.1	14,079
Women (1880-1909)	4.7	13,795	0.7	461	2.3	15,704

*Notes:* Numbers are restricted to individuals born in each colony. The 1976 census of Cameroon did not provide literacy data but years of education which was used to code literacy: years of education = 0 = illiterate and years of education > 0 = literate for Cameroon. Data for South-West Africa are not available.

*Source:* Population census Cameroon (1976, 1987), Togo (1960, 1970), Tanzania (1988, 2002), accessed via IPUMS International.

Table 8 indicated that boys benefited disproportionately from the emerging educational opportunities in those colonies for which sex-disaggregated data is available for 1911. For example, in Togo one in six enrolled in primary schools were girls, in Cameroon only one in 12 pupils were female, while in German East Africa and South-West Africa girls comprised about one in three students. Correspondingly, Table 9 documents large gender gaps in literacy among the African population born during the German colonial period. Baten et al. (2021) have shown that by 1910 on average men had attained half a year of education more than women among the Tanzanian population and half a year more in Cameroon. Both Baumert (2022, p. 219) and Montgomery (2017) identify a positive relationship between the presence of pre-World War I missions in Cameroon and East Africa, respectively, and present-day educational attainment—an effect largely driven by increased schooling among women.

World War I influenced global Christian expansion. Pre-World War I, the 1,413 German missionaries comprised about 7% of the total Western Protestant missionary workforce (Pierard 1998). After World War I, German missionaries were expelled and their mission stations closed until non-German missionary societies continued in their footsteps. After the division of Cameroon and Togo into a British and French colonial sphere, educational attainment and quality began to diverge at the border due to differing policies towards missionary schools that persist to the present-day (Cogneau and Moradi 2014; Dupraz 2019). For German East Africa and Cameroon, Montgomery (2017) and Baumert (2022) report positive long-term link between Catholic and Protestant mission locations in 1914 and present-day educational attainment.

## Conclusion

In recent years, German colonialism has received growing public attention - a history long overshadowed by the World Wars. Due to its short-lived character, a long-term comparative view of German colonialism has not featured prominently in most accounts of European imperialism. This chapter traced the 30-year expansion of German colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific, with a focus on the development of foreign trade, fiscal capacity, and education.



Although one of the motivations for acquiring colonies was the promise of substantial financial rewards, Germany barely profited economically from its colonies, with the exception of the Hanseatic trading firms, thus vindicating von Bismarck's initial skepticism about colonial ventures. The colonies never fulfilled their hopes serving as German population vent or supplier of tropical agricultural commodities to satisfy German industrial demand. Instead, trade with its own colonies accounted for only a negligible share of German foreign commerce, while colonial expenditures consistently exceeded fiscal revenues. Although Germany was a latecomer to colonialism, it came to possess the third-largest colonial empire in sub-Saharan Africa, with economic potential comparable to that of the British and French. In the final years of Germany's colonial empire, revenues were increasingly raised locally, and plantations, railroads, and trade were expanding—largely due to diamond discoveries in South-West Africa and the rubber boom. In this sense, German colonialism ended just as the colonies were becoming more self-sustaining and economically viable.

The consequences and legacies of German colonialism varied across colonies. German rule transformed local societies through: (i) plantation economies that appropriated fertile land and relied on forced labor to cultivate tropical export crops (Cameroon and partly East Africa); (ii) trading economies in which local farmers produced crops for export with limited German investment (Togo, New Guinea and Samoa); and (iii) settler colonialism, where German settlers—facing strong local resistance—violently dispossessed the population in South-West Africa, culminating in the first genocide of the 20th century.

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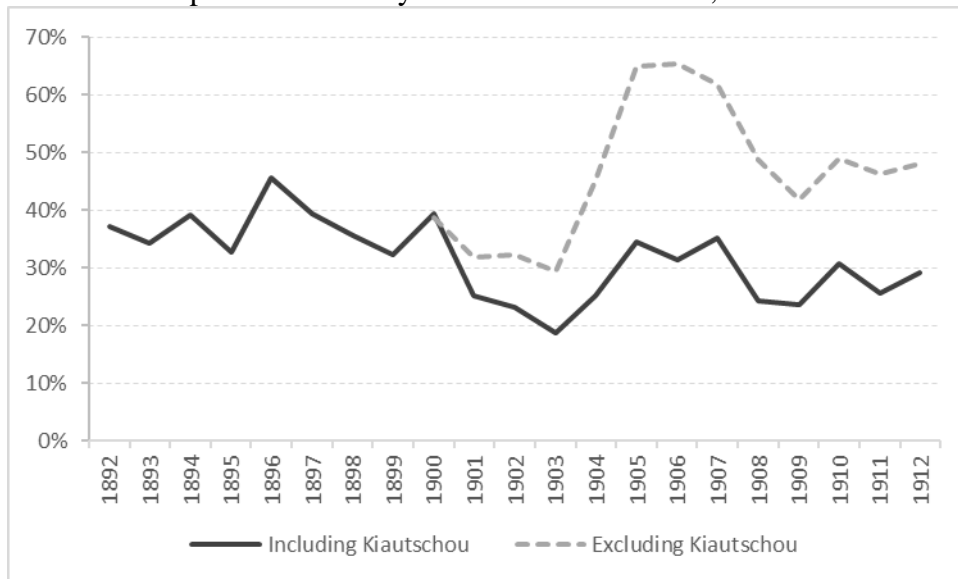
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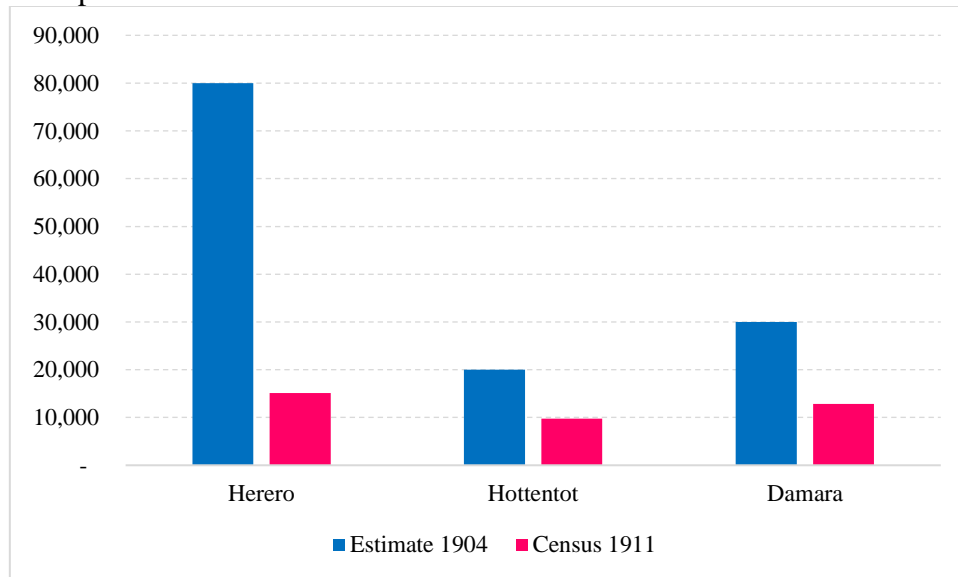
## APPENDIX

**Figure 1A:** Share of exports to Germany from German colonies, 1892-1912



Source: Calculated from Schnee (1920). *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*, II pp. 34-35.

**Figure A2:** Population decline in South West Africa between 1904 and 1911



Source: Union of South Africa (1918). *Report on the Natives of South West Africa and their treatment by Germany*. Windhuk, p. 62.

**Table A1: Missions, missionary staff and mission school enrolment, 1909**

	Main stations	Out-stations	European staff		Native staff		Members	Schools	No. enrolled	Boys (%)
			Male	Female	No.	%				
Togo	15	268	70	28	300	75%	9,559	108	9,127	85%
Cameroon	30	326	114	74	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	18,716	380	17,435	<i>na</i>
S.-W. Africa	46	28	109	68	132	43%	13,659	69	5,083	<i>na</i>
East Africa	153	404	362	190	983	64%	44,074	664	37,206	64%
New Guinea	86	282	206	126	325	49%	32,288	336	12,741	<i>na</i>
Samoa	29	275	50	19	348	83%	37,393	234	9,386	53%
Kiaochow	13	120	21	24	41	48%	3,100	42	469	<i>na</i>

*Note:* Male missionaries include European ordained and unordained missionary workers; Female missionaries include missionary wives and unmarried female staff and sisters.

*Source:* Derived from Paetel, Hermann (1910). *Deutsches Kolonial-Handbuch 1910*. Berlin: Deutsche Buch- u. Kunstdruckerein GmbH.