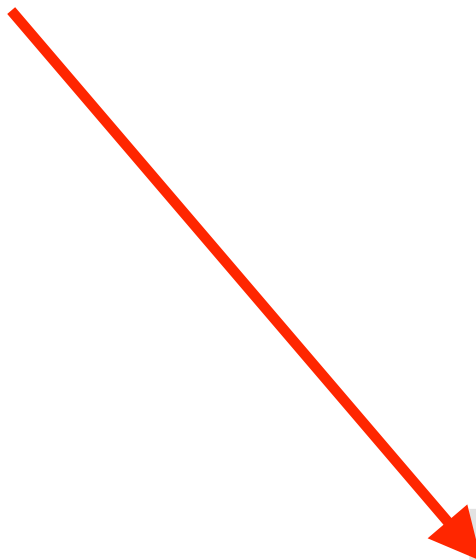


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German Empire

In the history of colonialism, Germany's empire has received far less attention than the overseas empires of Great Britain and France. There are several reasons for this, including the relative

GERMAN EMPIRE



brevity of Germany's colonial project, the comparatively small amount of territory involved, the marginal economic importance of the German colonies, and Germany's early loss of its colonies following defeat in World War I. Yet Germany's colonial empire is significant to both modern European history and the colonial histories of Africa and Asia. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the histories of modern Germany and its former colonies without also understanding the German colonial period.

German liberals began discussing the acquisition of colonies as early as 1848, and the idea of colonialism reemerged in the 1860s as a subject of interest to certain German constituencies, such as industrialists and the Prussian military establishment. It was not until after German unification in 1871, however, that colonialist agitation reached a higher pitch in domestic politics. The development of the colonialist movement after 1871 was due to the convergent interests of several groups, including commercial and industrial representatives, tropical trading interests, and German emigrationists.

In the 1860s and 1870s, several organizations were founded to promote German colonial interests. These early examples became models for the later *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft*, formed in 1887 by the members of two existing colonial organizations. This organization, which remained the most vocal and steadfast advocate of colonialism throughout the imperial period, lasted until the Third Reich, when it was subsumed under the national socialist organizational apparatus. Carl Peters, one of the group's initial leaders and perhaps the most notorious figure in German colonial history, played a formative role in the ideological development of the German colonialist movement as a propagandist, but he also played an active role in the actual territorial acquisition of Germany's East Africa colonies. He and several like-minded associates undertook a series of treaty-signing expeditions in 1884 that led directly to the German possession of Tanganyika. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had staunchly opposed colonial expansion until 1884, but for a combination of domestic and foreign policy reasons that have been much debated by historians, he changed his mind in 1884, setting Germany on its path to formal colonialism.

Chancellor Bismarck officially declared a protectorate over portions of southwest Africa in 1884. The establishment of protectorates over the West African areas that later became known as Togo and Cameroon followed later that year. In February 1885, Bismarck also declared a protectorate over mainland East Africa, and he later placed its administration under the newly created German East Africa Company. In each case, the establishment of protectorates over these territories followed the signing of individual "treaties" with local African leaders. These treaties were of dubious character, since the African leaders who signed them generally had no authority to grant land concessions to the Germans and certainly could not have known what the German legal concepts in the treaties involved. Nevertheless, these pieces of paper served as the foundation for German colonial rule over these four disparate regions of Africa.

In the Pacific, Germany acquired northeastern New Guinea in 1884 and added the Mariana Islands, Caroline Islands, and Palau Islands to German New Guinea in 1899. It also occupied and leased the Chinese city of Qingdao and its hinterland in 1897 and annexed the islands of Savaii and Upolu as German Samoa in 1900. This annexation rounded out Germany's possessions for the remainder of its tenure as a colonial power. The Pacific islands remained the most economically unimportant in the German colonial constellation, though they did feature in political debates in the Reichstag over the citizenship rights of the "mixed-race" offspring of German men and Asian women.

In November 1884, Bismarck hosted the Berlin Conference, at which the Great Powers of Europe decided how best to proceed with the colonial occupation of Africa while at the same time avoiding potentially disastrous conflicts among themselves. Although Bismarck achieved his goal of preventing a major European conflagration over the colonies, the doctrine of "effective occupation" that emerged from the conference committed Germany to a more expensive colonial project than he had planned for.

Between 1884 and 1907, Germany attempted to fulfill its effective occupation requirements in its various African colonies by fighting a series of wars of "pacification" and launching "punitive ex-

peditions" against numerous peoples who opposed the German presence and the economic, social, and political changes the colonial regime demanded. German colonialists also attempted to set up the fundamental economic and political elements necessary to effectively administer the colonies and to encourage more settlers. German military commitments to securing colonial territories culminated in two major rebellions in two separate colonies—German South West Africa and German East Africa—that began in 1904 and 1905, respectively. In German South West Africa, first the Herero and then the Nama rose in open and coordinated rebellion against the Germans, and they met with some initial successes. However, after German reinforcements arrived in the summer of 1904, they defeated the Herero at Waterberg Mountain, surrounded them there, and drove the remaining force into the Omaheke Desert, where most of them died of thirst and starvation. In October 1904, Gen. Lothar von Trotha, the German commander, issued his infamous "extermination order," in which he ordered that all Herero were to be shot regardless of combatant status. In the end, about 80 percent of the Herero and 50 percent of the Nama died either in the war itself or in its aftermath, when those who survived were confined in disease-ridden concentration camps on the coast or used as forced laborers. In East Africa, the Maji Maji Rebellion, which mainly involved the southern portion of the colony, broke out in 1905. As in South West Africa, the military suppression of this rebellion required the use of reinforcements. The main part of the uprising was put down by April 1906. Up to 100,000 Africans died in the conflict, and the famine and disease that followed it unleashed massive starvation in the southern region. Although relatively few Germans died in these conflicts, the expenses incurred and the publicity surrounding the alleged atrocities committed by German troops provoked much domestic discussion about Germany's colonial project.

These military activities, the brutal treatment of the subject African populations involved, and a series of colonial scandals caused by official misconduct on the part of colonial military officers and administrators provoked substantial debate and crisis in the Reichstag, raising questions about colonial policy and parliamentary oversight. The

turmoil eventually resulted in Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow's dissolution of the Reichstag and the election of the "Bülow bloc"—which included all political parties except the Catholic center and the Social Democrats—based on a patriotic, pro-colonialist platform. Between 1907 and 1914, German colonial administrators and governors sought to develop the colonies so that they would be self-sufficient and economically productive for Germany. By 1913, however, the colonies still required subsidies in order to function, and profits from trade in the colonies were negligible.

In 1914, World War I erupted, and the German colonies came under attack by Allied forces almost immediately after war was declared in Europe in August 1914. Togo and the Pacific possessions fell to Allied occupation in late 1914, but South West Africa and Cameroon were not conquered until 1915 and 1916, respectively. In German East Africa, a legendary force led by Gen. Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck held out against a harried multinational Allied force until after the European armistice in 1918. At Versailles, Germany petitioned to have its colonies returned to it, but the Allies argued that Germany was not fit to continue to administer colonies. Accordingly, its colonies were taken and divided among the Allies as mandates of the League of Nations. For Germany's former colonies, the mandate period entailed learning how to live under new colonial administrations and the different practices of a new set of colonial practitioners. Although Germany's formal period of colonialism had now come to an ignoble end, the colonies remained a prominent feature in German politics during the Weimar and Nazi eras, when they became symbols of the perceived wrongs done to Germany during World War I and at Versailles.

Michelle Moyd

See also Bismarck, Otto von; Cameroon; Conference of Berlin; Herero Revolt; League of Nations; Maji Maji; Papua and New Guinea; South West Africa; Tanganyika; World War I

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Penny M. Sonnenburg
Assistant Editor

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