



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 5th May 2018



untitled | 2018 | Ana Vidigal

POST-COLONIAL GHOSTS ON THE LOOSE IN EUROPE

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

The 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Lys fell on April 9, 2018. The presidents of Portugal and France as well as the Prime Minister António Costa took part in the celebrations and the television and the newspapers marked the event emphatically. Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa stressed the significance of the human sacrifice involved, and the need to recognise it; Emmanuel Macron described the Portuguese military cemetery of Richebourg as a “symbol not of nationalist rancour but of European friendship and solidarity,” designating the “shared past” as a space of public memory for future generations. Along the same lines, António Costa underlined during the closing ceremony that “a hundred years later, we celebrate peace and reconciliation between European peoples and our desire to build a common future together.” An exhibition opened, *Roots*, focussed on the descendants of the Portuguese soldiers buried in Richebourg and on very different memories of this familial, national and European history.



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The exhibition called on us to re-interrogate this conjoined past in its organic relation to the present in Portugal, in France and in Europe.

In European history, 1918 marks the end of the war and with it the disintegration of three great empires - Germanic, Austro-Hungarian and Russian - and the emergence of nine states - Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. The redrawing of this part of the map of Europe shows us fractures and frontiers drawn in vast territories, once shaped by an intra-European imperial vocation; now liberated, in several senses, by nationalism. The utopias, new identities, social transformations and creativity which emerged in those places determined their political and cultural life as national futures were forged. A tense dialogue began with the great themes of the 20th century: Western-style democracy, communism and the beginnings of what would be called nationalist fascism. Meanwhile, nationalism was taking its first steps in other parts of the world, notably in Asia and Africa, where troops from territories controlled by overseas European imperialism had fought in the Great War and in Europe.

But it was only after World War II that this movement for emancipation and decolonization properly reached the southern hemisphere and began the disintegration of those Western European maritime empires of the United Kingdom, France, Holland, Belgium and Portugal. In 1947, with Europe under rubble and under pressure from nationalist movements, the British recognized the independence of India and Palestine; in 1949, the Dutch left Indonesia, the French began the war in Indochina and, throughout the southern hemisphere, struggles, meetings, conflicts, demands and wars of liberation unfolded.

The point is that the processes of decolonization that developed in those years were a major phenomenon not only in the history of post-war Europe, but also of the twentieth century more broadly, provoking ruptures of immediate and planetary consequence. From a global point of view, European, Asian, African and world geopolitics were remade in the post-World War II period as Soviet and American power and new nations established themselves, and as the power of the old European metropolises declined. This remodelling, which had been imposed by events, did not at first go much beyond independence treaties and cartographic revision. The large numbers of people who arrived in Europe with direct experience of colonialism, however, brought the distant reality of lost empire closer. They - ex-colonizers, ex-colonized, ex-combatants of the colonial wars - traumatically disrupted the



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European narrative. These populations made Europe's imperial essence visible. They, and the burden of history that they carried, would become part of the European multicultural societies that, unnoticed by some, were emerging.

Analysing their legacy today, in the form of their "descendants" and as another culture, requires us to register the public and private colonial violence in the history of twentieth century violence. This public and private colonial violence was inherent to the foundational tensions of both post-World War II and post-decolonisation Europe. It has structural consequences in both the south and the north.

To think of post-colonial Europe therefore requires us to recognize that what most defined Europe was its imperial vocation in its many declinations. Decolonization was not only a southern movement that affected the formerly colonised countries. It was also a movement that got at and gets at the roots of the colonizing continent of Europe. Europe also must be decolonized. That is, Europe needs to reread the past and the imperial language in which this past has been narrated to better understand the present and to think about the future; to produce other narratives and to construct a meaningful vision of community.

This past emerges through the consenting, dissonant or silenced memories of later generations, who interrogate it from their own present and their own diverse subject-positions. But it is a history made legible more by the passing of time than by political will. The main objective of the European research project, *Memoirs - Children of Empire and European Post-Memories*, underway at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, with funding from the European Research Council, is to take up this *European community* politically and to analyse its impact through the memories later generations have inherited and through the culture it has produced. <http://memoirs.ces.uc.pt/>

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CONTESTED MEMORIES:
THE “AFRICAN QUARTER”
IN BERLIN



Afrikanische Straße | Berlin | 2018

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António Sousa Ribeiro

German colonial experience, as is well-known, was relatively short: the defeat of the *Reich* in 1918 brought about its abrupt end, since the several punitive measures set up by the Treaty of Versailles included the obligation for Germany to surrender all colonial territories in its possession. This goes a long way to explain why, contrary to the Holocaust, the history of German colonialism – although it was similarly marked by forms of extreme violence, culminating in the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in 1904-1906 in so-called German South-West Africa – is today largely absent from German public memory, having, concomitantly, been long subalternized by German historic research.

In the last two decades, this subalternization has given place to extensive research work that has given the question of Germany’s colonial past, in its many implications, the role it deserves within historiographical knowledge. This extensive academic effort, however, has been scarcely successful



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in bringing the topic to general public awareness – no doubt, the reluctance of public institutions to thematize this chapter of German history in an adequate way bears an important part of the burden of responsibility for this state of affairs. In 2016, a parliamentary initiative demanding an official recognition of responsibility for the Herero and Nama genocide was rejected by the majority of the members of Parliament. The report set up by the Bundestag’s “Scientific Office”, an advisory board with the function of providing advice on matters scheduled for parliamentary debate, came to the conclusion, under the strictly juridical perspective that only norms already in place at the time of the events may be applicable, that the actions of the German army did not violate international law. The bottom-line of the argument is the sophistry that, in 1906, the German army could not have committed genocide for the simple reason that the concept of genocide did not yet exist nor had it been incorporated in international law at the time. While the report recognizes that, at the beginning of the 20th century, regardless of juridical norms, individuals benefited already from “rudimentary protection”, derived from the “norms of humanity and civilization”, it goes on to argue in a definitive way that “the legal conscience of the community of international law at the time excluded from these minimum criteria the indigenous peoples, that, in its eyes, were ‘uncivilized’”.

Although not having the import of an official position, this type of argument is well representative of a form of denial, which, in several aspects, remains constitutive of the way European countries position themselves towards their colonial past. Significantly, the list of bibliographic references appended to the report omits several important titles, most prominently the work of Jürgen Zimmerer, who, in several studies published since the beginning of the millennium and collected in 2011 in the volume *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz (From Windhuk to Auschwitz)* has established, in a convincing way, the connection between the genocidal practices put to the test in German South-West Africa and the Holocaust.

Against this background, the recent news concerning the change of denomination of several streets in the “Afrikanisches Viertel” (African Quarter) of the Berlin district of Wedding, an important site of colonial memory in Germany’s capital city, bears a special, even exemplary significance. The intervention culminates several years of pressure on the part of various organizations rallied in the initiative “Postcolonial Berlin”. Apart from other references, the most offensive feature in the toponymy of the “African Quarter” for postcolonial memory lies in the way it celebrates the names of several leading protagonists of the establishment of German colonial rule in different regions of Africa. Among them,



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the presence of Carl Peters is particularly shocking. Peters was the self-proclaimed founder of the colony of German Eastern Africa and one of the main German colonial entrepreneurs (in 1884, he was the founder of the Society for German Colonization). He is the utmost example of the most brutal colonialist *habitus* – in connection with German anti-Semite and nationalist organizations, he based his intervention in Africa on the most profound racism, the defense and implementation of forced labour, the violent expropriation of indigenous land. Not by chance, he would later be acclaimed in Germany as one of the spiritual fathers of National-Socialism. His sinister role earned him the Swahili nickname of “mkono wa damu”, the “man with blood-stained hands”. Since the 80s, the name of Carl Peters, present in many streets across Germany since the period of National-Socialism, has been gradually removed, amidst some level of controversy. Finally, the time for Berlin has arrived. The work of the past few decades on the memory of the Holocaust and, in particular, the construction and preservation of that memory in the urban public space of many German cities has been exemplary in several aspects. Perhaps, even if at a slow pace, conditions for overcoming colonial amnesia are similarly being built up.

There was no general consensus around the Berlin initiative – both the Christian-Democratic Party and Alliance for Germany were opposed. Among the opponents, the main argument did not refrain from resorting to the worn-out idea, common in similar contexts, that “history cannot be changed” and that the replacement of street names corresponds to an unacceptable attempt to “rewrite history” on the part of sinister left-wing forces. Yes, history cannot be changed, but historical knowledge can and must be permanently enriched and revised, namely when such a knowledge was based on silence and the forgetting of violence and inflicted suffering and was no more than the expression of a position of power. And, more importantly, in this case, as in several other similar cases, it is not simply about history, but about memory, and public memory, i.e. the collective decision-making on that which is to be celebrated and remembered, and how it should be remembered. The long overdue breakthrough of postcolonial memory leading to the ultimate success of the Berlin initiative clearly reveals the extent to which the struggle for memory is always a key moment in the construction of the contemporary and the future-building of democratic societies.

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Horizon 2020
European Union funding
for Research & Innovation

