



Kim Sebastian Todzi

Unternehmen Weltaneignung.
Der Woermann-Konzern und der deutsche
Kolonialismus 1837–1916
(Hamburger Beiträge zur Geschichte der
kolonialen Globalisierung, Bd. 2)

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reviewed by

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When I first visited Hamburg, in the summer term 2016, I found myself attending lectures in the »Ringvorlesung ›Hamburg: Deutschlands Tor zur kolonialen Welt. Über den Umgang mit einem schwierigen Erbe«.¹ In 2014, Hamburg's government had resolved to begin officially working through the city's intimate connection to Germany's short-lived, though remarkably consequential, colonial empire. Thus, the »Forschungsstelle ›Hamburgs (post)-koloniales Erbe/ Hamburg und die frühe Globalisierung«, established shortly thereafter, embarked on an ambitious research agenda: not only to unravel the strands of Hamburg's, and by extension Germany's, colonial and post-colonial histories, but also to weave this research into preexisting threads in modern German historiography. The »Ringvorlesung« represented a first public attempt to stake out this research agenda and propose paths forward. One of the lectures that summer concerned »Hamburg und die Gründung des deutschen Kolonialreichs unter Bismarck«, delivered by Kim Sebastian Todzi. In 2023, the same themes, developed from his PhD thesis, appeared as »Unternehmen Weltaneignung. der Woermann-Konzern und der deutsche Kolonialismus 1837-1916«, the first monograph published through the »Forschungsstelle«.²

In this role, »Unternehmen Weltaneignung« is exemplary: a convincingly argued, carefully researched book that uncovers the inner workings of German colonial capitalism. »Unternehmen Weltaneignung« is fundamentally concerned with how private firms interacted with German colonial expansion – and more broadly with the »Wechselwirkung ökonomischer und politischer Sphären im Kolonialismus« (p. 10). To answer these questions, Todzi turns his

¹ Cf. Kim Todzi, Ringvorlesung »Hamburg: Deutschlands Tor zur kolonialen Welt. Über den Umgang mit einem schwierigen Erbe«, 4.2.2016, URL: <https://kolonialismus.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/2016/02/04/ringvorlesung-hamburg-deutschlands-tor-zur-kolonialen-welt-ueber-den-umgang-mit-einem-schwierigen-erbe-20-4-2016-13-7-2016/> [2.7.2025].

² A previous book, an edited volume, appeared in 2021. Cf. Jürgen Zimmerer/Kim Sebastian Todzi (eds.), Hamburg. Tor zur kolonialen Welt. Erinnerungsorte der (post)-kolonialen Globalisierung, Göttingen 2021.

lens on the Woermann Concern – comprising the merchant house C. Woermann and the Woermann shipping line – and the network of family and employees involved with the firm. The Woermann Concern was the dominant firm in Kamerun, a German »Schutzgebiet« centered on the city of Douala at the Wouri river delta. Adolph Woermann, son of the firm's founder, played a decisive role in extending formal German colonial rule into Kamerun. This approach represents what Todzi calls a »micro-historical« study of colonial capitalism and the global economic context in which it occurred (p. 13).

The past two decades have seen a wide-ranging turn to investigate the »Kaiserreich« through its global and colonial entanglements, yet economic and business histories have been relatively lacking in this literature. This is a major analytic oversight, given economic integration was arguably the most thoroughgoing of Imperial Germany's global entanglements. The enduring salience of German exports – and the political contests over the direction of Germany's international economic relations during the Weimar Republic, the Nazi period, and into the Federal Republic – underscores the need to re-examine the global economic and business history of the Wilhelmine period.

»Unternehmen Weltaneignung« provides precisely such a history, arguing for a »nahezu symbiotische Verbindung« between the Woermann Concern and the German colonial government (p. 12). On this reading, Woermann provided a »Motor der imperialen Globalisierung« (p. 13), especially as the firm moved into shipping and logistics operations. This argument unfolds across seven main chapters covering the firm's business from the middle of the nineteenth century; Woermann's first overtures to Berlin and the seizure of »Deutsch-Kamerun« in the 1880s amid the »Scramble for Africa«; colonial capitalism and its operation in the spheres of politics, economics, social structures, as well as physical violence; and Woermann's place in a larger network of »imperial globalization«, especially its logistical support for Germany's genocidal war in Southwest Africa and its use of forced labor in Swakopmund. The book closes with a short chapter that carries the story from 1907 through the formal separation of the firm's shipping line (the »Woermann-Linie«) and its merchant business (the »Handelshaus C. Woermann«) in 1916 and into the Second World War.

»Unternehmen Weltaneignung« builds its argument onto a meticulously researched archival scaffolding. Materials from the Woermann firm provide the central spine. These include balance sheets, correspondence among principals, published materials in scholarly and propagandistic periodicals, and a tranche of letters written by Africans to the firm's representatives. Key to Todzi's analysis is a commitment to a sort of ecumenical methodology: an insistence on pairing traditional business history with social and political histories of economic life; with post-colonial approaches; with the analysis of personal networks, cultural capital, and discursive fields. To this reader that method is a triumph and supplies one of the book's great strengths. Pulling it off required not only substantial archival legwork but also wide reading in other imperial historiographies, as well as the »New History of Capitalism« that has cropped up at North American universities. Yet the book's wide range does not sacrifice close attention to the long tradition of Hamburg's historiography, especially the volumes of self-referential work produced by businessmen and firms themselves.

Adopting perspectives from such wide-ranging approaches necessarily entails tradeoffs. Some readers may wonder exactly how representative Woermann's »symbiotic« relationship with the Imperial German government was. The book understandably attends most closely to Woermann and its relationship to German colonialism, and here it is a resounding success. Yet how did Woermann compare to Hamburg's other merchant houses, shipping firms, banks and insurers? »Unternehmen Weltaneignung« sidesteps broader conclusions about the nature of Germany's imperial ambitions as such, beyond the observation that economic matters figured prominently. The section on Woermann's involvement with the »Deutscher Flottenverein« (Navy League) and naval armament between 1897 and 1900, for example, relies largely on diplomatic histories, and might have engaged with recent scholarship by Erik Grimmer-Solem

and Steven Press on the economic dimensions of German »Weltpolitik«.³ Todzi references Ekkehard Böhm's conclusion that Hamburg's commercial elite expected »Weltpolitik« to yield »an empire of merchants« (p. 348). When those expectations failed to materialize, Böhm figured these merchants as unwitting losers in domestic political maneuvering.⁴ Similar studies, like Lamar Cecil's seminal biography of the shipping titan Albert Ballin, likewise concluded that Ballin's overseas horizons left him unable to properly influence German politics.⁵ Todzi reverses this intuition, showing how Hamburg's merchant elite actively engaged in – and profited from – »Weltpolitik«. Yet theirs was not the only vision of what this amorphous »Überall-dabei-sein-Wollen« (as it was called by the left-liberal politician Eugen Richter) might produce.⁶ Even in Hamburg, support for armament split, with some merchants wanting a blue water battle fleet made stylish by the American imperialist Alfred Thayer Mahan and others preferring the lighter, faster cruisers favored by the *jeune école* of naval theorists.

These criticisms point to the larger set of issues that »Unternehmen Weltaneignung« – and Todzi's impressive methodology – unlocks. There is much in Todzi's approach to emulate, as historians go on to explore new cases, to complement this study of the Woermann Concern. Certainly, the book examines the ambiguities that define public-private business relations, but its main argument, forcefully and convincingly presented, that Woermann grew especially close to German »Kolonialherrschaft« in West Africa, such that the two institutions relied on each other, is compelling and important. The implications for similar histories of private business in the age of imperial globalization are obvious. While other cases might uncover different arrangements between private enterprise and imperial ambitions, »Unternehmen Weltaneignung« successfully centers German colonial capitalism as a problem field that demands further exploration. In this sense, it is a pathbreaking book that should be essential reading for historians of German colonialism, indeed of colonialism in general, and its relationship with globalization.

Zitierempfehlung

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³ Erik Grimmer-Solem, Learning Empire. Globalization and the German Quest for World Status 1875–1919, Cambridge/New York 2019; Steven Press, Blood and Diamonds. Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa, Cambridge, Mass. 2021.

⁴ Ekkehard Böhm, Überseehandel und Flottenbau. Hanseatische Kaufmannschaft und deutsche Seerüstung 1879–1902, Düsseldorf 1972.

⁵ Lamar Cecil, Albert Ballin. Business and Politics in Imperial Germany 1888–1918, Princeton, New Jersey 1967.

⁶ Cit. from Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Bürgerstolz und Weltmachtstreben. Deutschland unter Wilhelm II. 1890 bis 1918, Berlin 1995, p. 309.