

Briefly Noted

A MONUMENT UNDER LOCK AND KEY: SEEKING GERMANY'S COLONIAL LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE

I was in Paris during the spring of 2007 when I came across an article about the reinstallation in Hamburg of a pair of massive terracotta relief sculptures of African “Askari” soldiers. These sculptures were the work of the colonial artist Walter von Ruckteschell. I had seen Ruckteschell’s painting of Mount Kilimanjaro, labeled “the highest mountain in the German Empire,” at the Berlin Historical Museum.¹ Fearing that the Askari reliefs might soon be taken down like so many other German colonial monuments (see Zeller 8), I decided to travel to Hamburg immediately to see them.

Hamburg was the de facto capital of the German colonial empire. Hamburg University grew out of the *Kolonialinstitut*, which at the time was the only university devoted entirely to the study of colonialism and the training of colonial officials (see Ruppenthal). In the eighteenth century, Hamburg was the German city most involved in the transatlantic slave trade; in the nineteenth century it was at the center of German colonial trade. The city on the Elbe also has an extensive collection of colonial monuments. Perhaps the most famous incident in Hamburg’s colonial history is the toppling of the statue of Hermann von Wissmann, explorer and governor of German East Africa, by radical students in 1967 (see Steinmetz and Hell; figure 1).

In 2004, Hamburg-based artist Jokinen reinstalled the Wissmann statue in a “representative urban space in the Port of Hamburg” along with photos documenting “the many occasions when the monument had been erected and toppled during the last 100 years” (Jokinen, “Colonial monuments”; figure 2).

In 2006, Hamburg’s Wandsbek district unveiled a bust of Heinrich Carl Schimmelmann, “one of the biggest slave traders of the eighteenth century,” whose West Indian plantations had used as many as 1,000 slaves (see Jokinen, *Schimmelmann* 4). The Schimmelmann



FIGURE 1. Students in Hamburg trying to pull down the statue of Hermann von Wissmann, August 8, 1967. Photo courtesy of Hamburger Abendblatt.

bust became the object of repeated political and artistic protests and was quickly removed by city officials (see *Wandsbektransformation*).

Ruckteschell had completed the Askari sculptures in 1938 in his Dachau studio. In 1939, he installed them at the barracks in the Jenfeld section of Wandsbek. The 1939 ceremony celebrated the naming of the barracks after General Lettow-Vorbeck and commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the colonial army for German East Africa and German Southwest



FIGURE 2. Reinstallation of Wissmann statue, Hamburg, 2004. Photo from *Wandsbektransformance: die Gegenwart des Kolonialen*, 2008.

Africa. Ruckteschell's monuments were originally called "Honorary memorial to the Colonial Army" (*Schutztruppenehrenmal*) and are now known as the "Askari reliefs."

Lettow-Vorbeck, a hero of Weimar-era colonial propagandists, had established his reputation in military expeditions against the Chinese Boxers and the Namibian Herero and Nama. He led a guerrilla campaign in East Africa during the First World War that held out against a much larger British-led force until 1918. Ruckteschell had accompanied him during this campaign, producing many drawings and paintings of East African people and landscapes. Lettow-Vorbeck continued to agitate for German colonialism throughout the Nazi period and died shortly after visiting “his” Askari soldiers in Dar es Salaam in 1953 (Schulte-Varendorff 125).

From 1938 until the closing of the Lettow-Vorbeck barracks in 1992, generations of soldiers had walked past the Askari monuments, which stood on either side of the main entrance. Other imperial traces inside the barracks include a “Trotha House,” embellished with a bas-relief portrait of the notorious general, and a stele memorializing troops who fell in colonial wars. In 2002, the Askari monuments were re-erected in a part of the barracks’ grounds that was now referred to as “Tanzania Park” and described as a tribute to international understanding between Germany and that postcolonial African nation. Protests against this distortion of colonial history led to the installation of explanatory plaques in German, English, and Swahili (see Möhle).

I arrived in Hamburg on a blustery February weekday and went straight to the Lettow-Vorbeck barracks (figure 3). The gate was locked. It was raining. I was no longer sure whether this trip was a good idea.

I walked around Jensfeld until I finally ran into someone who directed me to the *Rathaus* of the Wandsbek District. I took a tram there and was told by a receptionist to see a local official from the Christian Democratic Party who was coordinating meetings about the fate of the monuments with a group of concerned citizens. The helpful official provided me with information on the controversy around the sculptures and explained that the keys to the “Tanzania Park” were in the possession of a local architect who belonged to the citizens’ group. The official offered to call the architect, Jens Rohwedder, on the telephone. I listened while the official explained my plight: I was an American who had come all the way to Hamburg to see the monuments. Wouldn’t it be possible to see them today? I then took another tram to meet the architect, who picked me up in his car at the last station. The architect invited me into his house, where I was able to dry off. It turned out that I had actually read an article he had written on colonial urbanism.

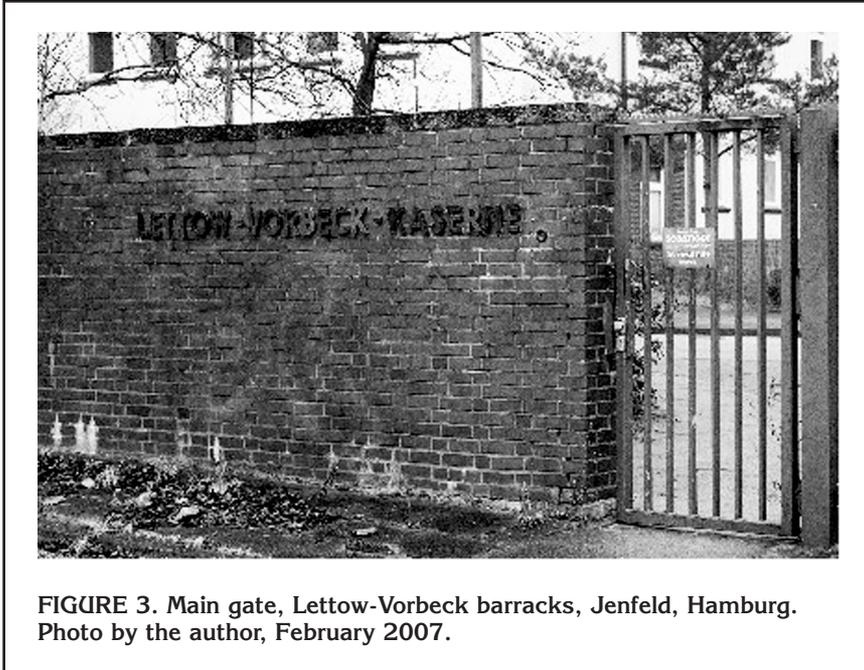


FIGURE 3. Main gate, Lettow-Vorbeck barracks, Jenfeld, Hamburg. Photo by the author, February 2007.

After a while the rain stopped and we drove to the barracks. As the architect opened the gates it began to rain again. I was able to catch a glimpse of the monuments and take a few photographs before the light faded (figures 4 and 5).

The monuments' style is a kind of neotraditionalist expressionism. The plaque in front of them reads:

The entrance areas of the barracks was [sic] flanked by the two "Askari reliefs" until 1999. Each of the ceramic reliefs created in 1938 by Walter von Ruckteschell shows two groups of five figures. One of these comprises four African porters following an Askari soldier; the other shows four Askari soldiers behind a German colonial army serviceman.

The terracotta reliefs recall the campaign of the German colonial troops under General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck during the first World War, in the colony of German East Africa. The campaign was conducted between 1914 and 1918, with about half a million people, most of them African civilians, killed directly and indirectly by acts of war. It was viewed as an example of German "heroism" in the years following 1918.

The reliefs were set up in order to cultivate the popular legend of the loyalty of African soldiers to the German colonial army, and to legitimise



FIGURE 4. Askari reliefs by Walter von Ruckteschell, 1939. Photo by the author, February 2007.

[sic] the call for return of the former German colonies.

The barracks and the small “Tanzania Park” with the Askari sculptures are still under lock and key.

GEORGE STEINMETZ

NOTE

1. In the current exhibit at that museum this label is no longer displayed.



FIGURE 5. Askari reliefs by Walter von Ruckteschell, 1939. Photo by the author, February 2007.

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