



PLACES OF MEMORY
IN HAMBURG

The Bismarck Monument

Historic Museums Foundation Hamburg

The Bismarck Monument in the Alter Elbpark in Hamburg was erected in honour of the first chancellor of the German Reich, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898). Immediately after his death, a committee composed of members of Hamburg's upper class, including senators, bankers, merchants, shipowners, architects, and museum directors, campaigned for a monument in the city. It was constructed in 1906 at the enormous height of thirty-four metres. It was and still is the largest of all the monuments to Bismarck.

Between 1939 and 1941, a bunker with capacity for nine hundred people was built in the cavity of the monument's circular building. It was adorned with unusual wall and ceiling paintings with quotes from the Bismarck era, his family coat of arms, and nationalistic and Nazi ornaments (the Prussian and Imperial Eagles).

From a sociopolitical perspective, the monument demands an in-depth reappraisal in light of the current debate on the country's colonial history. Not only did Otto von Bismarck host the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 that divided the African continent among the European colonial powers, but the shipowners and merchants who sponsored the monument were largely from the milieu that profited from colonial exploitation.

Today, the monument is viewed by many as an expression of an authoritarian and colonial tradition. A reframing of the monument—which can be seen from far in the distance—is necessary given its positioning, usage, and meaning, which involve complex references to colonialism, National Socialism, discrimination, and long-overlooked questions of social justice. The process of critically engaging with the monument and its artistic contextualization was triggered following protests from civil society and the academic community against the uncritical, costly restoration of the monument, which also failed to address Hamburg's colonial past.

In 2021, numerous workshops with international experts were held to discuss potential approaches to the monument. These were followed by an international open competition in 2013 that invited artists and architects to develop ideas of how to contextualize the site. The idea was for the perception of the structure—as representative of hundreds of other Bismarck memorials across Germany—to be disrupted to highlight its strained relationship to the principles of democracy, discourse, and plurality in an open society. This intervention signalled the need to further develop the culture of remembrance in Germany.



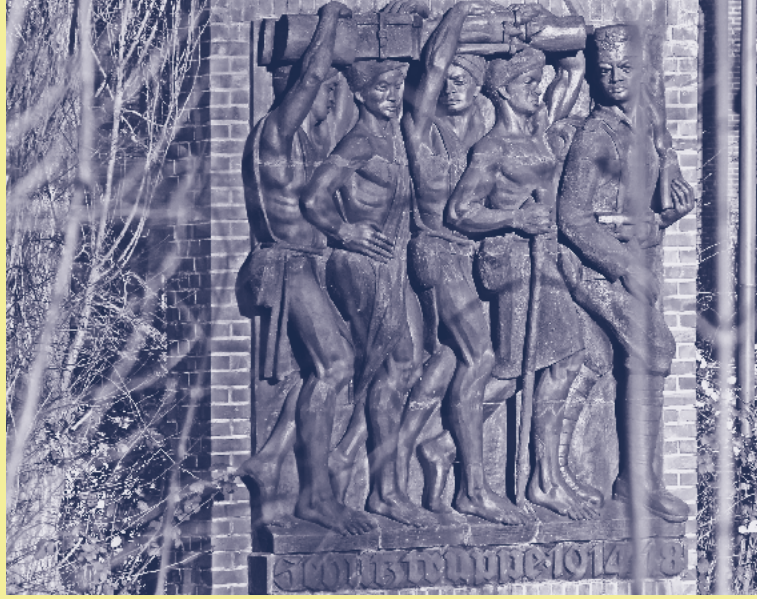
After closely engaging with the competition entries, the jury concluded that the task, in all its complexity and facets, could not be fulfilled by one single artistic intervention. In a subsequent procedural step, it recommended shifting the emphasis toward education and social discourse in order to facilitate the urgently needed contextualization of the site.

‘Tanzania Park’ in Jenfeld

Salon International e.V.

‘Tanzania Park’ is a prime example of the difficulties Hamburg faces in dealing with its colonial past. In the Jenfeld district of Hamburg, two listed historic buildings—the German East Africa War Memorial (incorrectly known as the ‘Askari Reliefs’) and the Schutztruppen Memorial of Honour—stand behind a fence in close proximity to the former site of the Lettow-Vorbeck barracks. The buildings’ facades display seven colonial portrait reliefs. The two reliefs erected during the Nazi period that once flanked the entrance to the barracks honour Germany’s colonial past and celebrate the supposed ‘loyalty of the Askari’. The term ‘Askari’ refers to African soldiers who served in the German ‘Protection Force’, in this case in the colony of German East Africa. This is closely linked to the myth surrounding General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who is romanticized here as an undefeated colonial war hero. In 2003, the ensemble of historic monuments was dismantled without authorization and re-erected in the newly created Tanzania Park. Following two decades of ongoing debate over Hamburg’s handling of its colonial past, and despite massive criticism, the ensemble, with its problematic visual language, still stands close to its original site.

Together with locals from the surrounding area, the participative project on Tanzania Park searches for colonial traces and asks: How can a neighbourhood deal with its colonial heritage? What aspects of history does the park conceal? The project is open-ended and intends to give space and voice to as many perspectives as possible, promoting collective learning, discussion, and reflection on the future of the district of Jenfeld.



The name ‘Tanzania Park’ raises a number of critical questions, especially with regard to its genesis and those who participated in it. The fact that it was chosen without the involvement of Tanzanian partners or members of the Tanzanian diaspora in Germany is cause for justified concern. Furthermore, the name carries a colonial representational connotation and can be considered insulting. Despite these concerns and criticism, the name ‘Tanzania Park’ continues to be used in this context in order to highlight its significance in the current debate and to promote a public discussion on the need for a sensitive and respectful naming policy. Furthermore, the name is used colloquially in the district. For the sake of simplicity and to emphasize the project’s processual character, the project coordinator Salon International e. V. continues to use the term.

Baakenhafen

Jan Kawlath

Baakenhafen is a central site of remembrance for German colonial history in Hamburg. As a port basin and logistics hub from which major German shipping companies operating routes to Africa departed—notably the Woermann Line and the German East Africa Line—it occupied a key position within the colonial infrastructure of the German Empire. It also served as the central port for the colonial war against the Ovaherero, Nama, and Damara and the genocide perpetrated against them between 1904 and 1908, as nearly all white German colonial soldiers were deployed from here to their military engagements.

Baakenhafen thus connected not only the colonies but brought the colonial war back to the metropolis of Hamburg. Approximately 23,000 white colonial soldiers fought on the German side in this war, all of whom were transported by ship from Germany. With only a few exceptions, these troops travelled via Baakenhafen. There were over 290 troop transports during the colonial war, over ninety percent of which either departed from or returned to Baakenhafen. In addition, the vast majority of military supplies and equipment—including over 11,000 horses—were shipped from this port. These historical events and structures show the site's central importance as a 'colonial war logistics hub' for both Germany's and Hamburg's colonial history.



In addition to its military-logistic importance, Baakenhafen was also a site of colonial staging, where colonial soldiers were celebrated as war heroes and noble warriors. Although the port was located in a restricted area, on certain occasions thousands of people with special entry tickets gathered to greet the soldiers or bid them farewell. Representatives from the military, government, and business glorified these missions in speeches that framed them in a racist and colonial world-view. Hamburg's newspapers adopted this romanticized perspective, contributing to the interpretation of the war as a necessary 'civilizing mission'. All soldiers received so-called gift parcels from the Hamburg Senate and were entertained with food and drink. The celebrations at Baakenhafen were events in which large crowds, alongside official representatives, enthusiastically celebrated the soldiers and their military deployment.



An event that clearly demonstrated the support of the Hamburg Senate and the shipping companies was the return of Commander-in-Chief Lothar von Trotha in December 1905. Although he had failed in the eyes of the emperor and military leadership because he had not achieved a definitive victory, the highest representatives from Hamburg's politics, business, and military attended his reception at Baakenhafen. Mayor Johann Burchard and shipowner Adolph Woermann greeted him personally. Neither the lack of interest from Berlin nor the recent publication of his notorious 'extermination orders' in German newspapers prevented the representatives from greeting him with gift parcels and a handshake.

Today, Baakenhafen is central to social engagement with Hamburg's colonial heritage and the colonial war against the Ovaherero, Nama, and Damara, as the city functioned both as a logistics hub and as a site of colonial stagings. Perhaps more than any other location in Germany, it offers an opportunity to understand the colonial war and genocide as part of Namibian and German history. The site's history sheds light on the attitudes of political, business, and civil-society actors in the colonial metropolis of Hamburg toward the war and genocide. This understanding enables a public debate about what this history means for our society today, and how it should be remembered at the site.

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd

