

Polarised Public Perceptions of German Colonialism

Visitor Comments at the DHM *German Colonialism* Exhibition

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In 2016–2017 the German Historical Museum (Deutsches Historisches Museum; DHM) held its exhibition *German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present*. One of the museum's most-attended exhibitions to date (with 135,845 visitors),¹ it opened at a time in Germany when the country's colonial past and postcolonial continuities were gaining wider public recognition. *German Colonialism* looked at the long-neglected history of colonial occupation, exploitation and violence in the former German colonies, and drew both high praise and stark criticism from visitors and the press. This varying reception is evident in the 1,842 comments made in the exhibition's visitor books. These express often polarised views about this history and how it is exhibited.² Indeed, *German Colonialism* divided the visitors' opinions to an extent that members of the museum's staff had rarely witnessed.³

German Colonialism was the first major exhibition at the DHM on the topic. Of the Museum's more than 200 temporary exhibitions over the previous two decades, only two had addressed colonialism: *Namibia—Germany: A Shared History* (2004–2005) and *Tsingtao—A Chapter of German Colonial History in China 1897–1914* (1998). The Museum's permanent exhibition, established in 2006 and since refurbished, contained only a small section on German colonialism. This had been criticised by activists and scholars for its Eurocentrism as well as for 'marginalising and simultaneously de-contextualising the significance of the colonial agenda in Germany's history' (Wegener 2018: 192; author's translation). In marginalising colonialism within German history, the museum was not alone. Until recently, giving attention to German colonialism was largely the preserve of specialised historians and persevering activists (see Förster 2019: 80; and Gross/Konitzer 2020: 341–46). German school curricula generally give only cursory or no attention to the topic (Kerber 2005: 92), although this is now beginning to change (Hille 2020). This has left a large gap in many Germans' knowledge of their country's history, as visitors themselves often acknowledged in the *German Colonialism*'s visitor books.

In this chapter, I examine the reception of *German Colonialism*, especially as evident in the visitor books. Thus far, little research on the public perception of German colonialism has been published. While those who choose to attend an exhibition on this topic—and the

share who leave written comments—cannot necessarily be seen as representative of a broader German public, the entries nevertheless provide an insight into a range of often markedly different understandings of, and opinions about, the colonial past and Germany's treatment of this history.⁴

The *German Colonialism* exhibition

In late 2014, as debates over German colonial heritage were intensifying, staff members at the DHM saw a prime opportunity to respond with the largest-scale exhibition on German colonialism to date (Schröder 2016). The result was an exhibition that divided the critics. Some hailed it as highly educational and reflecting the *Zeitgeist* (Ewert 2017), observing that it 'benefitted from the general political situation in Germany' which made the exhibition more 'politically charged' (Hitz 2016). Others accused it of being 'overtly moralistic' (Kilb 2016 and Speicher 2016) and of 'keeping visitors on a short leash' in terms of their individual assessment of the historical reprehensibility on display (Fanizadeh 2016).

German Colonialism was located on the basement level of the museum's modern I.M. Pei building, and covered a wide range of topics within just 1,000 m² of floorspace. A 'Prologue' introduced the German colonial past and was expanded in seven subsequent sections, and an eighth section focused on the 'Post-colonial Present'. The 'Prologue' consisted of a length of wall panels with small-print text summarising the history of 18th-century Prussian exploitation in parts of today's Ghana, and later colonial expansion in East and West Africa and in Oceanic and Chinese territories under Emperor Wilhelm II and the unified German Reich's first chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. The final sentence of the text panels pointed out that, despite the fact that numerous objects were collected in colonised regions, the perspectives of the colonised are largely absent (Hartmann 2016: 251).

Accordingly, *German Colonialism* primarily exhibited mostly German artefacts from colonial contexts. The majority of the approximately 500 objects on display was from the DHM's own collection, with most others coming from other German institutions. Objects included advertising materials for imported goods from the colonies, missionaries' educational materials, letters home, and clothing, as well as scientific research equipment. The few objects that were not from Germany included the famous Nama-leader, Hendrik Witbooi's bible (which has since been repatriated). Two so-called *colon* carvings, from 'Nigeria or Cameroon' (DHM 2016: 30–31) and West Africa, respectively—the former portrayed a pale, thin Christian missionary cloaked in black from head to toe; the latter, a condescending-looking colonial officer with long, exaggerated features—were also on display. These showed colonised peoples as active subjects and contributed towards illustrating several complex 'micro-stories' of the colonial past (Hartmann 2016: 262).⁵

The exhibition was loosely chronological but also delved into particular themes in order to explore these in more depth and sometimes in order to indicate continuities across time. Themes included the prevalent racism among Christian missionary groups, the many brutal 'punitive expeditions' against colonised peoples and 'the first genocide of

the 20th century' against the Herero and Nama in today's Namibia (Zimmerer 2016: 138). The exhibition also addressed the varying strategies that German governments employed in dealing with their colonial past in both East and West Germany.⁶ The final section, 'Post-colonial Present', gave an overview of colonial-racist continuities in German society, such as street names with colonial backgrounds, and racist words and phrases still in use today. 'Post-colonial Present' was located such that visitors had to walk through it as they moved between other sections. This, the curators planned, would also help visitors to perceive continuities between the past and the present.⁷ Unfortunately, as will be discussed further below, this layout contributed to many visitors perceiving the exhibition as 'disorganised'⁸ and 'chaotic'.⁹ Before turning to these and further results of an analysis of the comments in the visitor books, however, I first describe how the analysis was conducted.

Analysing visitor books

Visitor books can be seen as collections of the visiting public's views about an exhibition, offering diverse insights on its content and the responses it evoked. Visitors may choose to write in the books for a myriad of reasons: Some may see visitor books as vehicles for communicating with a museum's staff, for instance to address curators, guides and sometimes the service staff with general impressions, praise or complaints. Others might perceive their entry simply as a record of their visit, a documentation of their presence in the exhibition space. In *German Colonialism's* books, for instance, numerous comments were written by school classes visiting the exhibition and leaving page-filling 'I was here'-entries with few—if any—references to the exhibition.¹⁰

Depending on the sentiment expressed, as well as on the information the commenters choose to share, writing in the visitor book can also be highly significant to those leaving their 'mark': 'As an African-American and member of the diaspora, it was gratifying & appalling to see the display. [...] In Hotep (peace) and solidarity with Africans the world over. [...] Houston, TX'¹¹ By including specific information about oneself like one's age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, even one's academic degree, a visitor might attain a sense of visibility—and in doing so, a sense of empowerment—within the hegemonic space of the museum. This visibility is of particular significance when one looks at the great number of visitors who can't or choose not to write in the visitor book.

Bearing in mind the multiple factors that could conceivably keep a visitor from writing in a visitor book, the analysis of the comments by those who *do* leave a response is still a compelling method of gauging exhibition reception.¹² Visitor books can be analysed in a 'relatively informal and open' (Macdonald 2005: 124) manner. In these cases, entries in visitor books might serve the function of supplementing observant participation or interviews to create an overall impression of an exhibition's reception.

Others have used the visitor book as a source for quantitative analysis. This type of analysis has in some cases been developed specifically for, and with, museum staff aiming to utilise visitor feedback to improve museum management (Miglietta et al. 2012). In other cases, such as museum audience analyst Andrew Pekarik's approach of coding, categorising and counting, a quantitative analysis of visitor comments was used to explore

visitors' reactions to specific issues addressed in an exhibition (Pekarik 1997: 59). In the case of *German Colonialism's* visitor books, I employed a quantitative method similar to Pekarik's, whereby the coding, categorising and counting of entries in the visitor books was supplemented with qualitative data gathered through observant participation, interviews and media analysis.

My approach to the *German Colonialism* visitor books with additionally gathered data allowed me to contextualise visitor comments in a larger framework. Nevertheless, my insights gained through visitor book analysis must be viewed circumspectly, as it cannot be known to what extent these comments reflect a wider public. Since only 1,842 of the total 135,845 visitors (a mere 1.3%) left a comment in the books, the collection of views and opinions certainly can't be seen as equivalent to a general index of exhibition reception. Crucially, the visitor book may have been used especially by those visitors who felt particularly strongly about the exhibition or the topic of colonialism. Therefore, the sample of opinions and views may suggest a more polarised perception than is reflective of the general public.

***German Colonialism's* visitor books: methodology**

In most cases, comments within the visitor books entailed carefully articulated and thought-out formulations of sentiments, though some entries indicate a more superficial engagement with the subject matter of the exhibition. Based on how directly the *German Colonialism* visitor book entries referenced the exhibition's contents and themes or did not do so, I categorised comments broadly as either 'engaged' or 'not very engaged'. The comments placed firmly in the category 'engaged' were those with references to the exhibition's content, or those which made general statements addressing colonial heritage (i.e. 'Reparations Now!').¹³ While I saw the aforementioned entries by school classes that stated little more than names and dates (and sometimes a bit of profanity) as clearly belonging to the 'not very engaged' category, I ended up excluding from this category many other one-liners that could have easily been deemed 'less engaged'. One-liners were simple Thank You's and unelaborated praise such as 'Great exhibition'¹⁴ or 'Sehr interessante Ausstellung [...]!'¹⁵

In addition to this, I placed each comment in the categories 'praising' and 'critical' in order to gauge the overall reception of the exhibition as recorded in the visitor books. Doing this made those comments from which I inferred a critical reaction to, or acclaim for the exhibition visible and quantifiable. This was not always an easy task, as comments could not be consistently identified as belonging in just one—at times, in any—of these major categories. The praising comments in the visitor book were comparatively easy to identify and count, though the categorisation of comments as either 'praising' or 'critical' required some careful deliberation in certain cases: a quote about 'half-truths being the worst lies'¹⁶ attributed to Churchill could have been directed at the curators and their choice of content—or may well have been left in contemplation of the erstwhile propaganda tactics of colonial officials in the early 20th century. Though this type of comment is one reason that several visitor book entries are in none of the major categories, the

selection of the broad terms 'engagement' and 'praise/criticism' enabled me to code and count nearly all of the visitors' entries within this system.

The result of this subjective analytical approach was a quantitative representation of the divided public reception of the DHM's exhibition. The close reading of the comments in the course of categorising and counting them individually allowed me to attach further codes to the entries and thus identify several themes within the books. In the following, I discuss three of these themes that are echoed in (or are relevant to) discussions on German colonial heritage beyond a visitor book's pages: the reflection of Germany's colonial remembrance practices; the curators' alleged bias; and the occurrences of passionate visitor interaction.

German Colonialism's visitor books: results

Of the 1,842 entries, a total of 1,082 showed characteristics of an 'engaged' visitor, such as references to specific exhibition content, a formulation of an opinion about the exhibition (or colonialism *per se*), or an emotional response. 687 of all comments were 'praising', while 376 were 'critical'. 242 comments were critical of certain aspects while praising others, in which the critique primarily took place in the form of complaints about specific design details like lighting or font sizes. A total of 491 entries (most of which fell into the 'not very engaged' category) fit neither in the 'praising' nor the 'critical' classifications. 47 entries were written in alphabets that I could not read (Japanese, Korean, Cyrillic, etc.) and therefore were not factored into any of the four major categories.

Of the 687 appreciative comments, 224 were written by non-German speakers, who spanned forty-four different countries and five continents.¹⁷ Only thirteen 'critical' remarks were written by non-German visitors, constituting only about one-thirtieth of all 'critical' entries. This contrast may indicate how the museum-as-host is afforded respect and/or gratitude by non-German commenters—most of whom described themselves as tourists—who might already feel distinctly like 'guests' in the country.¹⁸ The contrast between the proportions of positive versus negative comments by non-German visitors may also reflect a greater distance to the subject matter of the exhibition—a 'guilt-free' objectivity not available when the atrocities on display are of one's own difficult heritage.

Twenty-two entries—by visitors from the UK, Belgium, France, the USA, Australia and Russia—noted the need for similar exhibitions on their own countries' colonial pasts:

'As a French [person, H.M.], thank you for this lesson. We must take an example.'¹⁹

'Excellent! V. thought-provoking + unflinchingly self-critical. Wish the Brits could do something similar! [Name] (A Brit in Berlin)'²⁰

'[...] The honesty in the interpretation of the past is refreshing. I wish we could be so forthcoming/open/honest in Australia about our colonial past + its impact on our indigenous people. [...]'²¹

Many of the 'praising' comments from non-German visitors referred to the exhibition's 'honesty' and 'courage', as well as their perception of Germany, as a whole, being admirably capable of examining its own contentious heritage. Among the 'critical' comments from non-German visitors, just two expressed disapproval of the 'negative' portrayal of German colonialism, with one anonymous visitor calling for Germans to reverse the country's past and its 'help' in former colonies' 'development';²² and one Belgian commenter complaining about the 'condescending' tone of the texts, specifically their 'ad nauseam [...] repetition'²³ of anti-racist content.

Themes such as the 'appropriateness' of the exhibition at a particular time in Germany or mentions of particular exhibits became apparent through a more detailed reading and subsequent coding of the previously broadly categorised visitor books entries. Codes I used included 'school curricula', 'politically correct', 'sarcastic' and 'racist'. The following three themes that I identified in the visitors' comments do not necessarily represent the most-addressed topics but nevertheless depict visitors' sentiments that were written often and in various formulations throughout the books' 567 pages. For instance, the 'appropriateness' of an exhibition on German colonialism was the focus in a wide range of 'critical' and 'praising' comments, indicating, among other things, a divided public perception of the need for colonial remembrance in present-day Germany.

The visitor book on the topic of colonial remembrance in Germany

The need for and appropriateness of a more in-depth reflection of the German colonial past and its postcolonial continuities was addressed in various forms of wording.²⁴ This included comments about the exhibition as a timely and 'overdue' contribution to colonial remembrance:

'The contents of this exhibition are long overdue! Effects of colonialism are becoming more visible day by day. [...]'²⁵

'[...] For a long time, colonialism did not seem to be a topic of critical historical reappraisal. Fortunately, this has changed in recent years. This exhibition makes a very important contribution to this. [...]'²⁶

Several visitors drew a connection between the need for a wider recognition of Germany's colonial heritage and the current German political climate, referring to the popularity of far-right political views, the growing prevalence of racist attacks and nationalist ideology:

'[...] In times of increasing racism in our society, this critical and honest confrontation of history is more important than ever! [peace symbol]'²⁷

'[...] Many thanks for the courage to show an exhibition like this, especially in times of increasing racism and the AfD! This should shatter their world view! [...]'²⁸

'It's so important to remember the past in times of growing populism and nationalism. [...]'²⁹

On the other hand, the visitor books also offered some insight into the thought processes of visitors who were seemingly sympathetic to populist and nationalist views similar to those peddled by the far-right party AfD (Alternative for Germany). The social anthropologist Jonathan Bach has described the difficulty of some Germans to accept the remembrance of colonial-era evils alongside National-Socialist and GDR-era evils with explicit reference to the right-wing AfD's opposition to the process (Bach 2019). The visitor book mirrored certain talking points of this far-right party, even including multiple uses of the term 'Schuldkultur' ('culture of guilt'), which they use in reference to the extensive memory work that has gone into remembrance of the Holocaust, and to complain about current German generations having to still bear senses of guilt for the past. Several visitors staunchly opposed the exhibition's negative appraisal of the German colonial past, complaining that Germany has had to deal with a great 'burden' of historical evils as it is:

'Unfortunately, the exhibition is partly one-sided. The British and others would certainly frame their history on this topic differently, more positively from their point of view. Why do we always have to present our history in a negative light? [...]'³⁰

'[...] One-sided, the typical German self-flagellation! Germany was not one of the 'great' colonial powers. [...] It's called the past because it is in the past. [...] Since my birth in 1945 I have been made to feel guilty as a member of a 'perpetrator nation'. [...]'³¹

Beyond this, numerous comments by visitors who expressed discomfort with the growing recognition of colonialism accused the curatorial team of a 'biased' approach to the history. While several used terms such as 'one-sided' or 'leftist', twenty-one visitors referred to the exhibition as being 'pro-GDR':

'[...] The exhibition is biased: FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] = unreflective. GDR [German Democratic Republic] = grasped this part of history. [...]'³²

Another attribute of many visitors' comments about the exhibition's 'one-sidedness' was the claim that it was also 'politically correct'. In the following, I will give a more detailed look at these instances and the implications of such accusations.

The visitor book on 'political correctness' and a 'biased' exhibition

Visitors' opinions of *German Colonialism* were often coloured by their impressions of the museum's or the curatorial team's perceived 'bias', which they shared in often vehemently expressed entries. Accusations of bias were attached to a variety of issues, first and foremost the exhibition's perceived positioning regarding anti-colonialism. Criticism was levelled against the exhibition makers for being both too anti-colonial, as well as for not distancing themselves *enough* from the colonial 'ethos'.³³ Some, for instance, stated in rather broad terms that the portrayal of the exploitative and inhumane facets of colonialism weren't highlighted enough.³⁴ A handful of visitors perceived a specific, identity-based bias within the curatorial team: a 'white', 'voyeuristic' gaze. This was criticised, for instance, as an indication of Germans' 'unwillingness to confront' their colonial legacy:

'A very white perspective. Very uncritical. [...] All in all, this is a voyeuristic reproduction of colonial-racist conditions & resembles part of a German unwillingness to confront our structures & our own positionality.'³⁵

By contrast, a common point of criticism was the curators' 'one-sided' ('einseitig') approach to the topic, leading to a far too 'negative' portrayal of colonialism, as well as a 'vilification' of Germans:

'Extremely one-sided and biased presentation in the interest of an ideological anti-colonialism. This sort of one-sidedness does not belong in a public institution!'³⁶

'In my opinion, this exhibition contains and conveys too much 'German-hatred'. What a shame! Objectivity looks different.'³⁷

Numerous visitors deemed the curators' work to be pandering to a 'left-leaning mainstream' which aimed to 'propagandistically' over-emphasise the evils of the German colonial past as well as its problematic postcolonial continuities.³⁸ This criticism was often marked by either sarcasm or reference to 'politically correct' language throughout the exhibition:

'Much is correct [...] BUT overall a leftist view of history dominates, which makes the exhibition a politically correct exhibition [...]'³⁹

In general, the term 'political correctness' describes the avoidance of discriminatory speech and the use of agreed-upon self-designations of groups, in order to not further marginalise those historically disenfranchised. Over the last years, *accusations* of 'political correctness' have begun to allude to an 'oversensitivity' or 'squeamishness' of individuals who promote non-discriminatory and inclusive language (Hayn 2010: 338–39). In some instances, even the slightest suggestion to stop using discriminatory language is decried as 'threatening one's freedom of speech' (ibid.).⁴⁰ Researchers have asserted that those who tend to accuse something of being 'PC' are most often not directly affected by derogatory phrases or terms (ibid.: 340), and therefore can't easily empathise with those affected by hegemonic speech. In an ironic turn, these 'hegemonic speakers' will often claim authority in the evaluation of various words' hurtfulness or prejudice, enabled precisely by their supposed un-affectedness and 'rationality' (ibid.: 340–41).

Interestingly, the visitor book showed some ambiguity around the term 'political correctness', which was not used solely in a negative manner (as accusation), but also as a praiseworthy attribute of the exhibition.⁴¹ However, an aversion to the 'politically correct' as a suspected threat to freedom of speech, as well as the tendency to link 'PC-ness' with the curators' 'emotionality' and 'consternation' was evident in numerous visitor book entries:

'The exhibition is unfortunately all-out 'politically correct'. Despite the justified criticism of colonialism, it would have been good to treat this historical phenomenon in a more nuanced way and with less of the fake consternation. [...] Dr. [initials]'⁴²

In several instances, visitors criticised the curators' careful treatment of problematic language in exhibition texts *without* attaching the label of 'political correctness'. For example, various comments expressed frustration with the curators' treatment of racist German heritage and their use of anti-discriminatory formulations (such as the 'Gender-Sternchen', i.e. 'Besucher*in', to include women and non-binary persons in historic narratives).⁴³ The two entries below show a similar backlash to what could be called an alleged 'reverse racism'⁴⁴ encountered in the exhibition, by which the commenters felt offended:

'[...] If we're called 'palefaces' or 'long-nosed', we aren't offended either. [Signature]
[...]'⁴⁵

'I'm taking my evil white husband home with me now.'⁴⁶

In addition to these types of responses to the portrayal of German colonial history's close entanglement with white supremacy, dozens of visitors wrote offensive comments in the visitor books, employing racist stereotypes as well as slurs in their entries. It was noticeable, however, that such comments were always 'answered' by other visitors with anti-racist views. As the following, final, theme demonstrates, visitor interaction in the books mirrors the overall polarisation of opinions expressed throughout the books' pages as well as in person: in a sense, the recurrent interactivity in the comments is a microcosm of the divided perception of German colonialism in general.

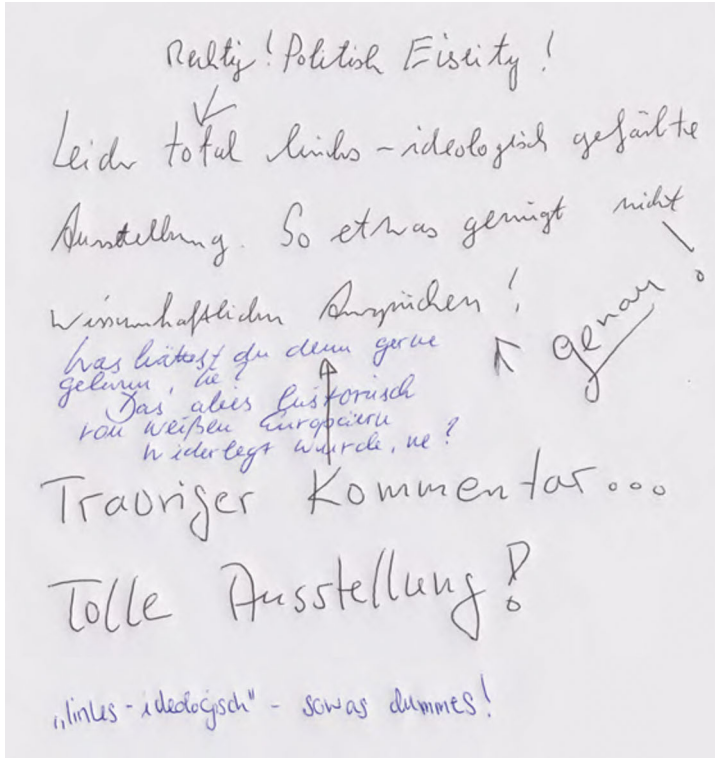
The visitor book as a space of visitor interaction

My methodological approach employed participant observation and interviews in addition to visitor book analysis. This enabled me to hear and observe several in-person visitor interactions concerning specific topics addressed in the exhibition. Over the course of my fieldwork these interactions occurred numerous times at the ends of guided tours, where (sometimes long) disputes about issues like the changing of colonial-racist street names took place among members of the tour group. Particular exhibits that dealt with extreme colonial violence or the enduring effects of German colonialism, such as everyday racism, also sparked debate among some visitors.

The visitor books also showed similar visitor interaction. Indeed, one DHM staff member said that the amount was 'unprecedented', with an unusual level of detailed reference to previous comments.⁴⁷ Two visitors even remarked that the book was the 'best part of the exhibition',⁴⁸ and one comment likened the exhibition and its visitor book to a 'öffentlicher Verhandlungsort' ('public space of negotiation').⁴⁹ This echoes descriptions in previous research of visitor books 'as a kind of virtual public sphere, something like an Internet message board' (Reid 2005: 8; quoted in Macdonald 2005: 123). In the case of *German Colonialism's* visitor books this is especially apt, with the placement of responses on pages looking like social media interfaces, with some replies to previous entries written in the margins of already-full pages, while others were squeezed in between two entries. But some were visually unlike such interfaces, written at oblique angles

squeezed around the original comment. This was often the case with statements that elicited multiple responses on one page:

5.1 A full page of the visitor book showing lively interaction by commenters.



‘Unfortunately, this is a totally left-ideologically coloured exhibition. Something like this does not meet scientific standards!’⁵⁰

‘Correct! Politically one-sided!’⁵¹

‘exactly!’⁵²

‘What would you like to have seen, huh? That everything was historically disproved by white Europeans, right?’⁵³

‘Sad comment... Great exhibition!’⁵⁴

“‘left-ideological’—such nonsense!’⁵⁵

Particularly controversial comments, for instance those containing the reproduction of racist stereotypes and the use of racist epithets, were often crossed out and rendered barely legible. One such message that included an offensive, white supremacist viewpoint and the use of the German N-word, was ‘censored’ in this way. Additionally, three separate visitors condemned the racist visitor on the same page, calling the original com-

menter a 'Nazi' and a 'Nazi pig', and remarking on the sad circumstance that the exhibition apparently 'hadn't deepened every visitor's understanding' of Germany's racist past and present.⁵⁶

Attempted communication in the visitor book was not limited to interaction between visitors, but also took place in the form of addressing the museum or the curatorial team. As *German Colonialism* refrained from naming any of the exhibition's curators within the exhibition hall—a widespread convention of exhibition-making (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006: 39)—the authors of the displayed content were unknown to most visitors. Nevertheless, numerous entries directly addressed the museum and the (unknown) curators of *German Colonialism* in messages that also sum up the polarised visitor reception. This took the form of praise and thanks for their diligent work, corrections of, or additions to, specific exhibition texts as well as criticism in an array of intensity and crudeness:

'[...] A very special thanks to [the guides, H.M.] and the curators for [their presentation of, H.M.] this long-repressed topic!'⁵⁷

'[...] Thank you to the exhibition makers. Keep going! [Signature]'⁵⁸

'[...] Important opportunities were missed to show colonial continuities, which could have been seamlessly connected to the existing exhibits, for example, in the context of advertising for products such as coffee. [...]'⁵⁹

'[...] The curators obviously had no interest in a differentiated look at colonialism. What a pity! Opportunity wasted. [Name]'⁶⁰

'[...] The 'easy' language option is degrading, propagandistic and in many parts simply wrong!!! The German Historical Museum should be ashamed, the organisers of this exhibition should be ashamed!'⁶¹

In the context of *German Colonialism*, addressing the museum actually made a difference in specific cases: while some museums let 'visitor books pile up and gather dust' (Macdonald 2005: 131) in storage rooms without making use of the collected material, staff at the DHM did make use of the comments at least once. After a noticeable proportion of complaints were made about the inscrutable structure of the exhibition, a change was made to exhibition signage. However, I am unaware of the DHM undertaking any systematic examination of the *German Colonialism* visitor books after the exhibition closed. This is an unfortunate circumstance, since the books offer such a prime opportunity for exploring visitor reception, which a handful of commenters astutely noted and communicated to the envisioned recipients of the books' comments:

'[...] The entries in this visitor book are also very fascinating! Maybe towards the end of the exhibition you could say/write something about the disputes and criticisms? [...]'⁶²

'Rarely was a visitor book so meaningful & interesting! Please evaluate! [...]'⁶³

Needless to say, I agree.

Conclusion

The visitor books from the DHM's special exhibition *German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present* offer a lens into diverse understandings and assessments of the exhibition and of German colonialism itself. The analysis of the collected 1,842 entries was fascinating—at times tedious, at times baffling, even infuriating—work. The fervour evident in many comments, as well as the passionate interactivity within the pages demonstrate just how strongly a large proportion of the commenters felt about the exhibition and the developments around colonial remembrance in Germany.

The exhibition, which opened in late 2016, came at a time when Germany's contentious colonial legacy was gaining wider public recognition. In preceding years, it had become increasingly apparent that the country had suffered from 'amnesia, neglect, and misguided thinking' (Bach 2019: 63), which had led to a lack of public remembering of colonialism. One contributing factor in this is certainly the near absence of German colonialism in school curricula, leading to a gap in knowledge that a single large-scale exhibition like *German Colonialism* cannot easily amend. Nevertheless, following decades of the Museum's own scant attention to German colonial history in the DHM's permanent and temporary exhibitions, *German Colonialism* perhaps marked a turning-point not only for the museum but in public culture more broadly. In the years since the exhibition closed, it has remained in the *Zeitgeist*, finding mention in news articles about postcolonial matters such as current reporting on street renaming initiatives (Thewalt 2020), or in renewed calls for reparations to the descendants of the Herero and Nama (Maihofer 2018).

As numerous comments in the visitor books noted, Germany is not the sole former colonial power that has inadequately (or ineffectively) faced its past and its postcolonial present. As Matthew Stanard has written with regard to the European context, '[...] European countries are only now coming to terms with the fact that they have not come to terms with decolonization' (Stanard 2019: 23). This absence of understanding of the past is now being challenged by more and more Europeans who are eager to see meaningful and lasting changes to neo-colonial and Eurocentric presentations of colonialist histories. However, this chapter also shows clearly that there is a divided perception about the necessity for a reappraisal of the German colonial past, in addition to a divided opinion about which methods should be employed in doing so. For example, the analysed comments show that one hinderance to reappraisal could be an opposition to the use of exclusively non-discriminating language, which was often criticised in the books with the use of the dog whistle term 'political correctness'. Comments such as those admonishing the exhibition's 'bias' or 'PC-ness', along with all the other critical entries in the books—especially those addressing the museum or the curators directly—can be seen as an attempt at participating in the public discourse on German colonialism. For that matter, every entry indicating a level of engagement with the exhibition's content can be read as a form of active participation in these debates, in addition to representing a visitor's partaking in one 'ritual' of the museum visit (Macdonald 2005: 125). Of course, it is necessary to reflect on

the possibility of missing voices in the pages of exhibitions' visitor books. In general, the contents of a visitor book represent a limited sample of visitors' responses and certainly can't be straightforwardly interpreted as equivalent to a general public's exhibition reception. Since the choice to write in the book may have resulted from particularly strong feelings about the exhibition (or the topic of colonialism), the sample of opinions and views may suggest a more polarised perception than is reflective of the total number of visitors. Nevertheless, what is recorded in visitor books does provide an indication of the views of some members of the general public, indicating certain tendencies, concerns, interests and modes of expression.

Beyond what this research says about contemporary debates around Germany's reappraisal of its colonial heritage, this chapter's insights may be relevant for future conceptualisations of exhibitions on colonialism. One insight could be the necessity to bring an understanding—mentioned in the exhibition prologue's crucial final sentence—about the absent perspectives of those formerly colonised to the forefront of future exhibitions with a decolonising agenda. This is merely one aspect of any decolonial curatorial practice that reflects on the hosting institution's entanglements with colonial collecting agendas. Furthermore, the high level of interactivity between the pages of the visitor books, as well as the many comments which demonstrate some visitors' substantial knowledge of the exhibition's topic, highlight a readiness of museumgoers to share their expertise, or to enter into 'dialogue' with other visitors' statements. A method of anticipating and engaging with lively interactivity could be to use participatory interactive modules in the exhibition space (i.e. opinion polls, or publicly shared and rearrangeable comment cards) that are continually augmented with each visitor's mark left in the space.

Future exhibitions on this topic may elicit a different overall reception due to the fact that even within these few past years the debate on colonial heritage has gained further momentum, and understanding of this difficult heritage is more widespread. When that time comes, I hope that there will be books or other media for visitors to record their views and, moreover, that these will be analysed, and their insights drawn upon. Through more extensive visitor research, including visitor book analysis, the German museum landscape's exhibition projects of the near future that look at Germany's colonial heritage could help build a deeper knowledge of the public's perception of this past and its enduring consequences.

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Notes

- 1 See Stiftung DHM (2019): 23.
- 2 I received written permission to publish my analysis of *German Colonialism's* visitor books from a DHM staff member. I gained access to these fascinating visitor books with the help and support of Larissa Förster while she was a research fellow and I was a student assistant at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage.
- 3 A museum staff member noted this in an interview from 20 August 2019.
- 4 As an example of these diverse views, social anthropologist Jonathan Bach's 2019 essay *Colonial Pasts in Germany's Present* shows the differing opinions on the past and future treatment of German colonial heritage within German parliament.
- 5 One such story unfolded from the black and white photograph of King Njoya of Bamum (today in Cameroon), shown in a Prussian-style uniform which he fashioned in order to benefit diplomatically from assimilating his appearance to the German colonial officials. King Njoya's efforts, however, were not rewarded by the German colonisers, who consistently reciprocated gifts and offerings with inferior return gifts (Hartmann 2016: 253).
- 6 As the curators' display showed, the West German state had not extensively addressed—and certainly not problematised—German colonial heritage, whereas this past played a prominent role in East German history education and was seen as a clear precursor of Fascism and National Socialism. For more, see Gross/Konitzer (2020: 335).
- 7 I learned this from a museum staff member in an interview from 20 August 2019.
- 8 Visitor book entry 327 (p. 109): 'Wichtig, leider sehr ungeordnet.' Signed by a male visitor from Copenhagen.
- 9 Visitor book entry 440 (p. 146): '[...] Interessant, wenn auch wirr.[...]' Unsigned and undated.
- 10 Remarkably often, groups of pupils also left their Instagram and Snapchat account names, asking for 'followers' and 'likes' on their social media pages.
- 11 Visitor book entry 174 (p.54): Dated 28 October 2016, signed by a female visitor from Houston, Texas. Original emphasis.
- 12 Writing in visitor books can pose difficulties as it requires literacy and the ability to put pen to page. Further, a visitor may not be interested in the 'ritual' of closing an exhibition visit by leaving a response, or perhaps a visitor may feel overwhelmed by a given subject, and deem their opinion comparatively ineffectual. Beyond this, the decision not to leave a comment might not be a 'decision' at all: some visitors might want to write a response, but simply cannot locate the book, or haven't the time to stand in queue behind others already occupying it.
- 13 Visitor book entry 48 (p. 15). Undated and unsigned.
- 14 Visitor book entry 420 (p. 138). Undated and signed by group.
- 15 Visitor book entry 660 (p. 223). Undated and signed by a German visitor.
- 16 Visitor book entry 367 (p. 123): 'Es gibt keine schlimmere Lüge als die Halbwahrheit; W. Churchill' Undated and unsigned. I deemed the content 'critical' due to the con-

text of the surrounding entries with similar criticism of the museum and the curators.

- 17 Many commenters noted their (non-German) nationalities, which were all over the map: Great Britain, Mexico, USA, New Zealand-Aotearoa, Brazil, Italy, Finland, France, Namibia, Greece and many more. Most of these entries were in English or in a mixture of English and another language.
- 18 On the culturally different understandings of the visitor book and its purpose, see Ina Ross' 2017 analysis of the visitor book in the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum in Bhopal (Ross 2017: 104).
- 19 Visitor book entry 1078 (p. 345): 'En tant que francais, je vous remercie pour cette lecon. Nous devons en prendre exemple.' Undated and unsigned.
- 20 Visitor book entry 1086 (p. 349). Undated and signed by a female visitor from Great Britain.
- 21 Visitor book entry 1705 (p. 510). Undated and signed by a male visitor from Australia.
- 22 Visitor book entry 318 (p. 107). Dated 11 November 2016 and unsigned.
- 23 Visitor book entry 289 (p. 98). Dated 8 November 2016 and signed by male Belgian visitor.
- 24 Though the specific term 'continuities' (or a German direct translation) was used by only one visitor (entry 201, p.61), the repeated use of 'immer noch' (meaning 'still' or 'ongoing') demonstrates how important the notion of the enduring consequences of colonialism were to individual visitors.
- 25 Visitor book entry 1661 (p. 494): 'Die Inhalte dieser Ausstellung sind längst überfällig! Auswirkungen des Kolonialismus werden heute Tag für Tag deutlicher sichtbar. [...]' Dated 17 April 2017 and signed by a female German visitor.
- 26 Visitor book entry 1793 (p. 542): '[...] Kolonialismus schien für lange Zeit kein Thema der kritischen historischen Aufarbeitung zu sein. Das hat sich in den letzten Jahren glücklicherweise verändert. Diese Ausstellung leistet dazu einen ganz wichtigen Beitrag. [...]' Undated and signed by a prominent German politician.
- 27 Visitor book entry 177 (p. 55): '[...] In Zeiten, in denen Rassismus sich wieder vermehrt durch unsere Gesellschaft zieht ist ein kritischer Blick und eine ehrliche Auseinandersetzung mit der Geschichte wichtiger denn je! [Peace-Symbol]' Dated 29 October 2016 and unsigned.
- 28 Visitor book entry 168 (p. 52): '[...] Ich danke für den Mut eine solche Ausstellung gerade in Zeiten des immer stärker werdenen Rassismus und der AFD zu machen! Es müsste deren Weltbild zerlegen! [...]' Dated 27 October 2016 and signed by a female museologist.
- 29 Visitor book entry 1717 (p. 518): 'So wichtig in Zeiten aufstrebenden Populismus und Nationalismus an die Vergangenheit zu erinnern. [...]' Dated 22 April 2017 and unsigned.
- 30 Visitor book entry 714 (p. 236): 'Die Ausstellung ist leider zum Teil einseitig. Die Briten u. a. würden ihre Geschichte zu diesem Thema gewiß anders, aus deren Sicht positiver, gestalten. Warum müssen wir unsere Geschichte immer nur negativ darstellen? [...]' Dated 31 December 2016 and initialled.
- 31 Visitor book entry 1451 (p. 426): '[...] Einseitig, die typische deutsche Selbstgeißelung! D war keine der 'großen' Kolonialmächte. [...] Die Vergangenheit heißt so weil sie

- nun mal vergangen ist. [...] Seit meiner Geburt 1945 muß ich mich als Angehöriger eines 'Tätervolkes' schuldig fühlen. [...]’ Dated 27 March 2017 and signed by a male German visitor from Berlin.
- 32 Visitor book entry 146 (p. 44): ‘[...] Die Ausstellung ist tendenziös [sic]: BRD= unreflektiert. DDR= haben diesen Teil der Geschichte begriffen. [...]’ Dated 23 October 2016 and signed.
 - 33 cf. Visitor book entry 337 (p. 113): ‘Sehr ärgerlich: Unstrukturiert, verwirrend, ohne klare Aussage, einige Texterläuterungen sind erschreckend wenig distanziert vom DEUTSCHEN KOLONIALISMUS-ETHOS der damaligen Zeit! Wer hat das konzipiert?’ Undated and signed.
 - 34 cf. Visitor book entry 695 (p. 230): ‘[...] Und auch die von den Deutschen verübten Gräueltaten hätten deutlicher herausgestellt werden müssen [...]’ Dated 30 December 2016 and signed by female German visitor.
 - 35 Visitor book entry 1813 (p. 551): ‘Eine sehr weiße Perspektive. Sehr unkritisch. [...] Alles in allem eine voyeuristische Reproduktion von kolonial-rassistischen Verhältnisse [sic] & reiht sich in den deutschen Unwillen ein, die eigenen Strukturen & Positionierung zu hinterfragen.’ Undated and unsigned.
 - 36 Visitor book entry 29 (p. 10): ‘Äußerst einseitige, tendenziöse und propagandistische Präsentation im Sinne eines ideologischen Anti-Kolonialismus. Solche Einseitigkeiten gehören nicht in ein öffentliches Museum!’ Undated and unsigned. Original emphasis.
 - 37 Visitor book entry 1261 (p. 368): ‘Aus meiner Sicht leider eine Ausstellung, die zu viel ‘Deutschenhass’ enthält und vermitteln soll. Schade! Objektivität geht anders.’ Dated 08 March 2017 and signed on behalf of a family.
 - 38 Visitor book entry 1416 (p. 416): ‘Desinformative Ausstellung, völlig einseitig beleuchtet. Keinerlei Differenzierung und Einordnung in den historischen Kontext. Man kommt sich vor wie in einer linksradikalen Propagandaausstellung. Abstoßend. Leider.’ Undated and unsigned.
 - 39 Visitor book entry 671 (p. 224): ‘Vieles ist richtig [...] ABER insgesamt dominiert eine Linke Geschichtsauffassung, was die Ausstellung zu einer politisch korrekten Ausstellung macht [...]!’ Dated 29 December 2016 and signed.
 - 40 Criticism of this kind was not levelled against *German Colonialism* in the press, though recent exhibitions on the topic of colonial entanglements have faced this ‘PC’-critique in the media coverage: ethnologist and curator Julia Binter, for instance, was criticised for her employment of ‘politically correct’ speech in the 2017 exhibition ‘Der Blind Fleck’. Her ‘refusal to spell out contentious work titles as recorded in the museum’s archive, including, for example, the N-word,’ was ‘just the beginning of a more sweeping postcolonial ‘censorship’, claimed [...] Germany’s leading liberal newspaper *Die Zeit*’ (Binter 2019: 591). The author of the review asserted that this supposed censorship ‘starts with a few innocent “****”, but it leads to an anti-hegemonic obligation of peace’ (Rauterberg 2017).
 - 41 See the visitor book entry 1398 (p. 410): ‘Hervorragende Ausstellung, insbesondere der inklusive Ansatz und die weitgehende politische Korrektheit sind beispielgebend. [Signature]’ Dated 23 March 2017 and signed.

- 42 Visitor book entry 81 (p. 25): 'Die Ausstellung ist leider [...] uneingeschränkt 'politisch korrekt' ausgerichtet. Bei aller Berechtigter Kritik am Kolonialismus wäre es gut gewesen, dieses historische Phänomen differenzierter und ohne ständige Betroffenenheits-Attitüde zu behandeln.' Undated, initialled by a Swiss visitor with a doctorate.
- 43 The curators included a disclaimer about their approach to racist language near the beginning of the exhibition, for instance the capitalisation of 'Black', or their use of unaltered historical source texts that contained racial epithets.
- 44 See Roussell et al. (2017): 'Given the systemic nature of racism, reverse racism cannot occur [...]' (2–3). Though the concept of 'reverse racism' has long been dismantled, complaints about 'racism' against white people are often made in the course of debates regarding white supremacist heritage.
- 45 Visitor book entry 222 (p. 66): '[...] Wenn man uns 'Bleichgesichter' oder 'Langnasen' nennt, sind wir doch auch nicht beleidigt. [Signature] [...]' Dated 03 November 2016 and signed by a male German visitor from Berlin.
- 46 Visitor book entry 672 (p. 224): 'Nehme jetzt meinen bösen weissen [sic] Mann mit nach Hause.' Undated and unsigned.
- 47 This is from an interview with a DHM staff member from 20 August 2019.
- 48 See visitor book entries 1313 (p. 384): 'Dieses Buch ist das Beste an der Ausstellung!' and 1320 (p. 385): 'Dieses Buch ist das beste an der ganzen Ausstellung! [heart symbols]'. Both undated and unsigned. Of course, there is '[...] no independent access to, or guarantee of, sincerity' (Macdonald 2005: 122), and it is possible that the comments were sarcastic criticisms of the exhibition.
- 49 Visitor book entry 707 (p. 234): '[...] Ich habe das Gefühl in einem öffentlichen Verhandlungsort zu sein, nicht nur weil sie sehr besucht wird, sondern weil sie so viele Gefühle und Gedanken wachruft—siehe Besucherbuch. Manche rassistische Kommentare hier zeigen, dass diese Ausstellung nötig ist [...]' Undated and signed.
- 50 Visitor book entry 381 (p. 126): 'Leider total links-ideologisch gefärbte Ausstellung. So etwas genügt nicht wissenschaftlichen Ansprüchen!' Undated and unsigned.
- 51 Visitor book entry 382 (p. 126): '← richtig! Politisch einseitig!' Undated and unsigned.
- 52 Visitor book entry 383 (p. 126): '← genau!' Undated and unsigned.
- 53 Visitor book entry 384 (p. 126): 'Was hättest du denn gerne gesehen, he? Dass alles historisch von weißen Europäern widerlegt wurde, ne?' Undated and unsigned.
- 54 Visitor book entry 385 (p. 126): 'Trauriger Kommentar... Tolle Ausstellung!' Undated and unsigned.
- 55 Visitor book entry 386 (p. 126): "'links-ideologisch"—sowas dummes!' Undated and unsigned.
- 56 See the visitor book entry 286 (p. 96): 'Danke für die Ausstellung, auch wenn diese nicht allen zum besseren Blick auf die Geschichte verhilft. [Signature]' Dated 07 November 2016 and signed by visitor with a doctorate.
- 57 Visitor books entry 1102 (p. 354): '[...] Ein ganz besonderer Dank an Sie und die Kuratoren zu diesem lange verdrängten Thema!' Dated 19 February 2017 and unsigned.
- 58 Visitor book entry 430 (p. 142): '[...] Danke an die Ausstellungsmacher. Machen Sie weiter! [Signatur]' Dated November 22, 2016.

- 59 Visitor book entry 968 (p. 315): '[...] [Es] wurden wichtige Chancen verpasst, koloniale Kontinuitäten aufzuzeigen, was bspw. im Kontext von Werbung für Produkte wie Kaffee nahtlos an die vorhandenen Exponate hätte anschließen können. [...]' Undated and signed by visitor from Berlin.
- 60 Visitor book entry 891 (p. 285): '[...] Die Kuratoren haben offenbar kein Interesse an einen differenzierten Bild des Kolonialismus gehabt. Schade! Chance vertan.[...]' Dated 1 January 2017 and signed by a male German visitor.
- 61 Visitor book 1447 (p. 425): '[...] Die 'einfache Sprache' ist entmündigend, propagandistisch und in vielen Teilen schlicht falsch!! Das Deutsche Historische Museum sollte sich schämen, die Konzeptoren dieser Ausstellung sollten sich schämen!' Undated and unsigned.
- 62 Visitor book entry 1523 (p. 452): '[...] Auch sehr faszinierend sind Einträge in diesem Gästebuch! Vielleicht könnte man gegen Ende der Ausstellung etwas zu den Auseinandersetzungen und Kritiken sagen/schreiben? [...]' Undated and signed by a German female visitor.
- 63 Visitor book entry 514 (p. 175): 'Selten war ein Besucherbuch so vielsagend u. interessant! Bitte auswerten! [...]' Undated and signed.

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