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WAR
AND COLONIES
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CONFERENCE PAPER • DR RAINER BENDICK



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The Rediscovered War - German Historiography and Warfare in the Colonies

Abstract

This presentation analyses the steps in which German historiography dealt with warfare in German colonies and describes the current trends of research in Germany.

Although warfare in the colonies was not at the centre of WWI, the German population knew about it from the beginning of the war. This warfare was said to be part of the worldwide defence against the alleged Entente's attack on Germany's position as a great and global power. At that time, the myth of the "loyal Askari" (African soldiers who fought under German command) was constructed, which became the main argument for rejecting the terms of the Treaty of Versailles as a "colonial lie of guilt" ("koloniale Schuldlüge") after 1919. Consequently, in the inter-war period any reference to warfare in German colonies was nothing but an attempt to refute the legality of the transfer of the German colonies to the "advanced nations" of the Entente, as decreed in the peace treaty.

After 1945, in West Germany, the debate about warfare in the colonies remained either largely confined inside the apologetic patterns of interpretation of the inter-war period or was completely ignored due to general scepticism towards military and war history. In East Germany, however, this debate was denationalised in the context of Marxist-Leninist ideology as a part of the imperialistic war of the capitalist powers.

Since the 1990s the hitherto dominant perspective of diplomacy and political history in WWI studies has been replaced by a culture-oriented approach focussing on warfare in German colonies. Research is now primarily concerned with the effects of the war on the indigenous population.

Profile

Rainer Bendick teaches History and French at the Abendgymnasium Sophie Scholl in Osnabrück, Germany. He studied History and French in Freiburg, Berlin and Rennes (France). After a PhD on the portrayal of WWI in French and German History textbooks, he wrote several articles on the perceptions of WWI in educational circles and on the teaching of History in France and Germany. He is the co-editor of the Franco-German History Textbook.