Imperial expectations and realities

El Dorados, utopias and dystopias

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CHAPTER SIX

Germany’s El Dorado in the Pacific: metropolitan representations and colonial realities, 1884–1914
Holger Droessler

Introduction

On 18 October 1910, the Sokehs had had enough. Fed up with harsh work conditions and regular violence, two hundred workers on the Micronesian island of Pohnpei took up clubs and rifles to fight against their German overseers. The outraged workers set their bosses running and managed to kill the new German district chief who had contributed to the escalating conflict. It was only with a heavily armed navy intervention with over 700 men that the ‘Sokeh Rebellion’, as it became known, was finally suppressed in January 1911. Overall, almost a dozen Sokehs died in combat (fifteen more were later executed), along with seven Germans, four Melanesian police soldiers, and five government workers from the neighbouring Caroline Islands. More than any other episode in the history of colonial resistance in the German Pacific, the events in Pohnpei revealed the dramatic tension between the idealised views of the colonisers and the very real suffering of the colonised.

This chapter explores the changing relationship between metropolitan representations of the German colonies in the Pacific and the violent realities on the ground from the 1880s, when the Pacific emerged as a policy issue in Germany, until the First World War, when Australia and New Zealand took over the Kaiserreich’s faraway possessions. During these decades, the German Pacific appeared as an El Dorado for different groups of Germans: dreamy-eyed utopians, profit-hungry capitalists, paternalist colonial officials, and the exoticism-hungry German public at home. For most of the colonised Pacific Islanders, however, Germany’s ‘El Dorado in the Pacific’ turned out to be hell on earth, prompting them to resist their subjection as much as they could.
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To trace the contours of this German discourse on the Pacific, its effects on colonial policy, and the often clashing realities for the colonised, the remainder of this chapter is divided into four parts. The first three parts focus on different German architects for whom, for different reasons, the Pacific came to appear as an El Dorado. The analysis opens with the often idealising representations by German utopians, moves on to the more mundane but no less optimistic writings of German boosters and administrators, and ends with their combined effects on the overwhelming majority of Germans who never set foot on one of these distant islands. In a fourth and final part, the focus shifts to the experiences of the colonised Pacific Islanders themselves, whose traditional homelands the German colonisers turned into everything but an El Dorado. Finally, evidence for widespread violent and non-violent resistance of colonised Pacific Islanders from Pohnpei and Samoa will help to reveal the limits of approaching colonial history through the eyes of the colonisers. But, first, it is important to analyse precisely these eyes to understand what they saw and how their visions shaped Germany's colonial involvement in the Pacific.

Of (ig)noble savages and cocovores

Throughout the nineteenth century, German images of Pacific Islanders vacillated between fear and fascination. German artists, ethnographers, travellers, and a motley crew of adventurers - some of whom never saw the Pacific with their own eyes - all worked to construct this fundamentally ambivalent image of the Pacific. Pacific Islanders were either 'noble savages', whose pure ways of life, physical beauty, and sexual availability they found attractive, or, by stark contrast, 'ignoble savages' whose uncivilised ways (cannibalism) or all too civilised ways (mimicry) were to be feared and contained. Polynesia, in particular, turned into something like a living museum of European antiquity. The famous Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent the last years of his life in Samoa, for instance, likened his new home to Homer's Lotus islands.

This trope of associating Samoa with European antiquity even spilled over into official correspondence when, writing a decade into formal German colonial rule over the islands, Rear Admiral Erich Gühler idealised the Samoans as the Greeks of the South Seas. In the context of Social Darwinism and the rise of racial anthropology, this purportedly cultural association assumed racial dimensions as well. Adolf Bastian, one of the leading ethnologists of the time, claimed that Pacific Islanders were children of nature, but could be seen as distant 'cousins' of the Caucasian race. Moreover, the sometimes more imagined than real communal lifestyles of some Pacific Islanders became attractive alternatives for artists and cultural critics of a greatly accelerating Germany on its way into industrial modernity and an atomised Gesellschaft.

Hence, the German-speaking lands were inundated by photographs, stereo images, and paintings of indigenous types and natural settings from the Pacific in the second half of the nineteenth century. For the select few visitors who had the privilege of embarking on the months-long trip to the Pacific themselves, a wealth of mass photographs with representations of 'typical' scenes and stock motifs were available for purchase as cartes de visite at the various ports of call. Brought home to Germany, these visual souvenirs then extended the reach of stertotypical imagery about the Pacific and its peoples throughout the metropole.

In representing the German Pacific, the line between art and imitation was sometimes blurred beyond recognition. From the summer of 1908 to the spring of 1910, the first Hamburg South Seas Expedition visited German New Guinea and various other islands in the Pacific and brought home no fewer than 15,000 objects providing material for three dozen weighty scientific volumes published into the 1930s. The expedition's official artist, Hans Vogel, relied heavily on readily available stock photographs in addition to his own photographs as models for his paintings. The second major scientific expedition into the German Pacific a few years later hosted an even more famous artist: Emil Nolde. One of the leading German expressionists at the turn of century, Nolde and his wife Ada stayed in German New Guinea from December 1913 to March 1914. Travelling through the colony, Nolde painted a series of tropical scenes, including lush and intensely colourful landscapes as well as indigenous types in the tradition of the slightly more well-known Paul Gauguin. Nolde's paintings encapsulated the fundamental ambivalence of dominant German visions of the Pacific at the turn of the twentieth century. Torn between fascination with and fear of radical alterity, Nolde, like many of his German contemporaries, saw in these faraway islands under German rule an El Dorado, first and foremost, for creative expression.

The life story of August Engelhardt presents another dominant strand of German engagements with the Pacific. Born in Nuremburg in 1875, Engelhardt immersed himself in life reform movements from an early age. He joined a community of vegetarian nudists in the Harz Mountains in central Germany, but when the police detained its founder on charges of fraud, Engelhardt turned his eyes away from the provincial constraints of his home. In autumn 1902, not even 30 years
old, Engelhardt set out to the Pacific with a plan to start his own community of sun disciples and coconut eaters. In October 1902, he purchased the small island Kabakon off the coast of Neulauenburg (today’s Duke of York Island) from Emma Forsayth, an American-Samoan businesswoman who had settled in German New Guinea. On his newly acquired 200 acres of tropical paradise, Engelhardt built a wooden cabin with porch and settled down with the over 1,200 books he brought along from Germany. Engelhardt’s relations with the roughly forty Islanders who had been living on Kabakon were surprisingly friendly, and some even helped him collect coconuts and other fruit for sale in the main port of Herbertshöhe. Apparently, Engelhardt thought little about the fact that his dream was being built on the lived realities of a Melanesian community. Engelhardt spent most of his day walking around the island naked and followed a strict vegetarian diet, centered on the fruit he held sacred: the coconut. According to Engelhardt, coconuts were God’s fruit since they grew closest to the sun: ‘Naked coconivorism is God’s will’, he wrote, ‘The pure coconut diet makes one immortal and unites one with God.’

After some time as the only white man on the island, Engelhardt began advertising his coconovic colony in the South Seas in German magazines. And, indeed, a first disciple arrived in early 1904 from another island closer to Germany, Helgoland, but died within a mere six weeks, probably of fever. In summer 1904, Engelhardt welcomed a more prominent new member: Max Lützow, one of the most famous German composers and conductors at the time. Two months after his arrival, Lützow wrote an enthusiastic letter back home exalting the natural beauty and paradise-like life in Engelhardt’s coconut colony. According to Lützow, there were no flies or diseases on Kabakon, the ‘natives’ were peaceful (he made sure to emphasise that cannibalism had ceased to be practised on the island), and days were spent sunbathing on the island’s white beaches and jumping into the fairy-tale ocean. ‘We go naked’, the famous musician went on to explain, ‘so the heat does not disturb us. The hustle of culture we do not know, our venture is communistic, every colonist becomes part-owner.’

Lützow’s panegyric descriptions of Engelhardt’s El Dorado in the South Seas set off a formidable boom in metropolitan Germany. A wave of new members arrived in Kabakon, but, in contrast to Engelhardt’s optimistic writings, there were never more than two dozen white people living on the island.

Soon, however, Engelhardt’s El Dorado turned into a nightmare. Lützow and several other new arrivals became sick with fever, and when Lützow tried to reach the government hospital in nearby Herbertshöhe he was caught in a bad storm and drowned. The other disciples left the island soon thereafter. Engelhardt also became ill with scabies and suffered from general weakness (he weighed a mere 86 lbs at a height of 5 ft, 5 in.). With a good dose of luck, he survived in the government hospital thanks to a hearty meat stew provided by the staff. The nutritional monoculture that was central to Engelhardt’s utopian project in the Pacific had finally reached its natural limits.20

When Engelhardt’s confidante and fellow naturalist August Bethmann suddenly died under mysterious circumstances and Engelhardt turned increasingly mad, the German colonial government across the bay made its scepticism about the coconut colony within a colony more explicit and started to warn potential new recruits of the grave dangers they faced. Yet it was not until 1909 that Engelhardt finally decided to abandon his sun order. He opened his plantation to curious tourists from all over the world, who came to see this (barely) living specimen of European flight from the pressures of capitalist modernity. Engelhardt and his emaciated body, thus, came to symbolise the dangers of ‘going native’ and, more generally, the limits of Germany’s Pacific as an El Dorado. Engelhardt’s biting critique of European civilisation with which he tried to recruit followers (‘Europe-poisoning is the name of our suffering!’) had now turned against him, as the visiting tourists observed the results of the self-poisoning of a white man in the tropics.21 The Australian soldiers that occupied German New Guinea during the First World War interned Engelhardt in Rabaul, but he survived to see the end of that cataclysmic war that spelled the end of German colonial rule, not only in the Pacific. Engelhardt finally died in May 1919, most likely of the long-term effects of exhaustion of body and soul.22

The lives of August Engelhardt, Emil Nolde, and Hans Vogel represent prominent examples of German visions of the Pacific as seen through the eyes of [life] artists. On the one hand, brief visitors such as Vogel and Nolde imagined the German Pacific as an El Dorado where violence and death were merely hinted at. Engelhardt’s coconut colony, on the other hand, tried to turn these idealised visions into lived reality, but failed spectacularly.23 As will become clear in the following part, Engelhardt was not so different from other enterprising Germans, who dreamed of the Pacific as an El Dorado for profit-making and social engineering.

**Cash cropping and salvage colonialism**

German traders had been active in the Pacific since the middle of the nineteenth century. Mainly due to companies such as Godfrey & Co., trading coconuts and copra in the South Pacific, German trading
honesia were exporting over 6 million Reichsmark of products by 1879. Yet, overall, Germany's colonies in the Pacific remained marginal to its burgeoning economy until the very end. As late as 1913, trade with the Pacific colonies accounted for less than 0.1 per cent of overall trade volume. In the decade between 1901 and 1911, for instance, German taxpayers supported the Caroline and Marianna Islands with no fewer than 263,000 Reichsmark per year. Only German Samoa, alone among the German colonies, managed to become independent from government subsidies in 1908.

Germany's Pacific colonies were of secondary importance also in military terms, or, at least, little was done to build substantial fortifications against outside attack. German strategists liked to think of a geographic line connecting the only major naval station in Kiaoehow with Apia in Samoa, but, in reality, there were few suitable ports in between. And, regrettably for the German Navy, one of the best ports in the entire South Pacific – Pago Pago on the eastern Samoan island of Tutuila – was taken over by the US Navy. The telegraph, too, took a long time to connect the German colonies in the Pacific. Although the British and American Pacific cables were completed in 1902 and 1903, respectively, German Samoa was not connected to Europe until summer 1914 – just in time to receive the news of world war on the continent [and the imminent end of German colonial rule in the Pacific]. In secret, even the German Admiralty acknowledged the relative strategic insignificance of the Pacific possessions, particularly in light of the intensifying arms race with Great Britain in the Northern Sea.

German interests in the Pacific – and especially in Samoa – thus rested less on economic or military considerations, but more on the power of symbolism and national prestige. Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, for instance, repeatedly declined British offers to swap German claims in Samoa with territorial gains in western Africa or an objectively safer harbour in neighbouring Tonga, pointing to public opinion in Germany. Samoa, Bülow argued in February 1899, had, for the German public at least, 'a certain sentimental value'. This sort of affective attachment to Germany's colonies in the Pacific (and to Samoa, in particular) reached into the highest echelons of the German imperial state. Emperor Wilhelm II was said to be extremely fond of Samoa, while the German Navy had a special connection to Samoa after Samoan soldiers had managed to kill over fifty German marines in 1888.

While Germany's Pacific trade was negligible in absolute as well as relative terms, small but powerful economic players had a vested interest in the colonies. The Hamburg-based Godfrey trading dynasty, for instance, reaped sweet profits from its copra business in the Pacific into the 1870s when global economic depression and increasing competition from other European traders cut into its margins. By the early 1880s, the reconstituted German Trading and Plantation Company of the South Seas [Deutsche Handels- und Plantagengesellschaft der Südsee-Inseln, or DHPG] paid off dividends again and flourished even more after 1900 when the western parts of Samoa came under formal German control. Between 1908 and 1914 alone, the company earned a net profit of 8 million Reichsmark, or roughly the sum of total investment into its plantations up to that point.

The Jaluit Company, also based in Hamburg and active in Micronesia since the 1880s, enjoyed substantial profits from its trading monopoly. Until 1906, company representatives practically ran the German administration on the Marshall Islands. As a consequence, dividends rose steadily from 12 per cent in 1900 to 20 per cent in 1906. Further west, the Bremen-based German South Seas Phosphate Company [Deutsche Südsee-Phosphat-Gesellschaft] ran a lucrative business extracting phosphate from the depths of the Palauan Islands, especially in Angaur. In 1912 alone, the company exported 54,400 tons of phosphate mainly to Germany, Australia, and Japan. Most profitable of all, the Pacific Phosphate Company, a German-British joint venture, started mining phosphate in German-controlled Nauru and the British Gilbert Islands in 1899. The mining business proved to be so successful that the company paid extraordinary dividends, ranging from 30 per cent up to 50 per cent between 1906 and 1911.

Among the major German companies operating in the Pacific at the time, only the German New Guinea Company [Deutsche Neuguinea-Kompagnie, or DNGK], founded in Berlin in 1882, had a more mixed record. After large initial investments (particularly in land for potential settlers), the company suffered heavy losses throughout the 1890s as it became clear that virtually no settler was willing to take the risk to move to the Pacific. In 1898, the company had to be rescued by a government subsidy that included more than 120,000 acres of land as well as 2 million Reichsmark in cash. Only when the company changed its investment strategy from buying land to specialising in the more lucrative trading business in the first years of the twentieth century did profits materialise. In 1912, three decades after its founding and considerable amounts of investment, the company finally paid its first, rather modest, dividend of 5 per cent.

Beyond high dividends for a select few German investors, the Pacific colonies also excited the administrative fantasies of Germany's fledgling colonial service. Officials in the German Pacific pursued a policy of 'salvage colonialism' aimed at preventing the proletarianisation of
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the colonised Pacific Islanders.7 This attempt to halt— or, at least, slow down— the advance of capitalist modernity in the colonies was predicated on a particular vision of the Pacific and its peoples established by a long line of artistic, ethnographic, and travel writings. Drawing on the wide-ranging immersion into the cultures they were sent to administer, German colonial officials used this ethnographical capital to legitimise and realise their visions of the Pacific as an El Dorado for social engineering. The fundamental paradox of this policy of paternalist preservationism of indigenous ways of life was, of course, that the presence of the German colonisers— particularly in the form of missionaries and traders— radically changed the very cultural practices colonial policy set out to protect.

The case of Wilhelm Solf in German Samoa is a good illustration. Partly due to his legal and philological training, Solf identified with the Samoans and styled himself as their benevolent tanâr, or father. In true pastoral mode, he passed various regulations designed to protect Samoan ways of life— including a prohibition on the alienation of native lands— which instead helped to undermine traditional structures of authority within Samoan society and, thus, bolstered German colonial rule over Samoans.8 Since the German colonial states in Samoa as well as in Kiaochow were relatively independent both from local (trade and missionary) and metropolitan interests, German officials in both colonies could afford to realise their visions of native policy relatively unhindered. For colonial officials with sufficient ethnographical capital at their disposal, the colonies, thus, presented a kind of El Dorado in which they could let their visions of a well-ordered society roam freely. In German Kiaochow and Samoa, at least, European colonies became quite literally ‘laboratories of modernity’.9

These fantasies of colonial engineering were, however, challenged by both the colonised themselves and some vocal traders and planters who called for more forceful policies.10 Adventurist capitalists, such as Richard Deeken in Samoa, had their own visions of a more literal El Dorado in the German colonies in the Pacific. Deeken, a young career officer in the German military in Berlin, travelled through the Pacific in 1900 and spent some time in the new colony of Samoa. Upon his return to Germany, he sought to attract capital and fellow settlers to move to Samoa and start cocoa and copra plantations. In his travelogue-cum-commercial advertisement Manua Samoa, published in 1901, Deeken promised easy profits from cultivating cocoa in Samoa with little seed capital.11

Concerned about the influx of small German planters into Samoa and its threat to salvage colonialism, Governor Solf sought to draw Deeken’s credentials into doubt and tried to keep him and his fellow settlers away from the colony. To that purpose, Solf hired Professor Ferdinand Wohltmann, a respected plant expert, to visit Samoa in 1902. Wohltmann duly offered a more pessimistic assessment of the economic opportunities for German settlers in Samoa, noting the high costs for land and labour and the significant competition from the DHPG (which continued to enjoy the support of German officials). Moreover, Wohltmann observed that more than half of the forty-six smaller planters then living in German Samoa were already in need of government aid in 1903.12 For the time being, Solf had defended his vision of a Samoa without proletariat.

Decken, however, did not take long to regroup and fight back. He and other small planters in the colony grew frustrated with the policies of the colonial administration, particularly the prohibition on selling Samoan lands to foreigners and the rather hesitant support for recruiting additional plantation labourers from other Pacific Islands or even China. They increasingly blamed the colonial government for stifling their business plans and founded a planters’ association in January 1903. After repeated lobbying, Deeken’s German Samoa Company [Deutsche Samoa-Gesellschaft, or DSG] combined with other smaller planters hard pressed for labour, and managed to convince the colonial administration to recruit labourers from China. But even with the aid of Chinese labourers toiling on cocoa and copra plantations, the DSG never paid dividends to its shareholders in Germany and had to close down its business under heavy losses in June 1914.13 Deeken’s dream of an El Dorado in German Samoa ultimately founded on the shoals of Solf’s competing vision of a colony free from small settlers.

In the end, promises of an El Dorado in the German Pacific turned out to be overblown. What to many Germans looked golden from afar, turned out to be merely gilded from up close and outright poisonous for most on the receiving end. There were, however, a select few among the colonised that took advantage of the new opportunities German colonial rule brought with it. Emma Forsayth, who sold Engelhardt his island, was a case in point. Born to a Samoan mother and an American father, she relocated to New Guinea in 1879, built up a formidable copra trading business there and also owned large tracts of land. By 1897 the three dozen trading stations of her E. E. Forsayth & Co. made annual profits of 200,000 Reichsmark.14 'Queen Emma', as she became widely known throughout the Pacific, lived a turbulent life and died under mysterious circumstances in a casino in Monte Carlo in 1913.15 Forsayth, however, remained a dazzling exception among the droves of colonised labourers and their disappointed employers.

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Germany's place in the tropical sun

The visions of the German Pacific as an El Dorado for artists, capitalists, and colonial officials—however marred by colonial realities—took strong hold of Germans living in their more temperate Heimat. If Bismarck had been a rather reluctant imperialist, his successors, starting with Bülow, had fewer qualms about claiming a seat at the colonial table for the young and sprightly German Empire. The newly founded Pan-German League and fellow expansionist and nationalist lobby groups pushed for a more aggressive German foreign policy, in general, and an enlargement of the German Navy, in particular, following in the footsteps of the US Navy under Alfred Thayer Mahan. 46

Most Germans, however, generally cared little about events in faraway places (much like their contemporaries in Great Britain, France, and the USA), but that did not mean they did not support the ambitious plans of their leaders. By and large, the German public at the turn of the twentieth century shared an often implicit consensus that their country deserved a place under the tropical sun. Numerous articles in newspapers keeping the public abreast of recent events in the German colonies, as well as lengthier feature articles in travel magazines such as the popular Globus, helped to spread awareness of Germany’s presence in the Pacific. 47

Samoa, again, took centre stage in this burgeoning discourse on the German Pacific as it became generally known as the so-called ‘Pearl of the South Seas’. 48 Countless articles appeared in German newspapers and magazines in the 1890s that hammered home this image. 49 Samoa was presented as the most valuable piece in Germany’s chain of colonial possessions in the Pacific, which stretched from the naval base in Kiaochow through New Guinea via the Caroline and Marshall Islands all the way to Samoa in the centre of the South Pacific. In other words, the German public was offered the appealing picture of an El Dorado in the form of a chain of archipelagic pearls. This image of Samoa as the pearl of the South Seas was so popular at the time that Governor Solf used it to argue for increased subsidies from the German Parliament. Addressing the Reichstag just before the new colonial budget was to pass, Solf said: ‘I can assure you that Samoa is indeed the pearl of the South Seas and in my name and on behalf of my brown charges I would be most grateful to the house if you would not spare on gold for this pearl’s setting.’ 50

No other book helped to establish and popularise this image of the material and symbolic value of Samoa among Germans more than Otto Ehlers’s Samoa – Die Perle der Südsee [Samoa – The Pearl of the South Seas], published in 1895. 51 A travel writer and amateur ethnographer, Ehlers had been voyaging through Samoa and other parts of the Pacific in the 1890s and published his observations to popular acclaim. New editions of the book had to be printed shortly after its first publication. When, after the third edition had been published in 1896, it became known that Ehlers had been killed and eaten by indigenous people in Kaiser-Wilhelms-Land in the preceding autumn, reading about his experiences in this exotic yet dangerous part of the world gained additional (and often macabre) attraction. The basic message Ehlers sought to convey in his book was that Samoa, at the time administered jointly by Germany, Great Britain, and the USA under a so-called tridominium, had to come under exclusive German control to protect its preponderant trade interests. While in Samoa, Ehlers had enjoyed the comforts of being ‘embedded’ with the DHPG, including the privilege of being shipped around on DHPG-owned ships and being hosted on company plantations. In Ehlers’s book, the vision of the German Pacific as a financial El Dorado and as a peaceful paradise for German settlement went hand in hand. ‘A German Samoa’, he wrote, ‘can become a valuable colony for us. The country is as beautiful as paradise, the climate the most pleasant, the soil of inexhaustible fertility and the inhabitants the loveliest of our planet.’ 52

Only a few shadows fell on the edenic garden in the South Pacific, according to Ehlers: the Samoan inhabitants happened to be unreliable, deceitful, and, most enervatingly, rather work-shy. As a consequence, workers had to be recruited from other islands. 53 Ehlers’s image of Samoa as paradise on earth depended on a form of epistemic appropriation that elided his subject position as white, male ‘expert’ on Samoan otherness and, thus, paved the way for the imminent process of formal colonisation by the German state. Not incidentally, this act of forceful appropriation of Samoan culture on the part of Ehlers paralleled the much-feared anthropophagy practised by some of the colonised, but which – alongside similar uncivilised brutalities – had died out in Samoa some time ago, as Ehlers did not fail to mention. 54 In the end, Ehlers’s advertisement for German colonialism in Samoa, presented the faraway islands as an idyllic place where – thanks to German war ships, administration, and an expanding plantation economy – German colonisers (especially men) could make their dreams come true. 55

Yet, the German colonies also came home in a more literal sense. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the exhibition of exotic otherness throughout the global North. Non-white, often colonised peoples, were put on stages in ethnographic shows, behind fences in zoos, or captured on camera for photographic display. 56 As part of this general fascination with showcasing the evolution of humankind with white Euro-American civilisation safely on top, several
groups of Pacific Islanders also visited the German Empire at the turn of the century. Between 1895 and 1911, four different Samoan troupes toured Germany, performing traditional dances, acrobatic feats, and simply showing off their physical beauty. Samoan men were usually presented as natural acrobats and proud warriors, while Samoan women played the roles of elegant beauties and passionate seducers.57

In performing a sanitised version of paradise for the curious German spectators, the Samoan visitors were also living their own El Dorado. Not only did they get to travel thousands of miles from their homelands to a cold yet fascinating land (and returned with loads of European gifts and products), but they also seized on other opportunities that presented themselves while on tour. More than a few Samoan men and women came closer to their German admirers than initially planned, causing public outrage and ultimately leading to a ban on the recruitment of colonial subjects for purposes of exhibition in 1901.58 On the whole, however, the Samoan shows were widely popular in Wilhelmine Germany. For example, tens of thousands visitors came to see the Samoan troupe in the Frankfurt Zoo in summer 1901. Advertisements for the Samoa show described the ‘rocky islands in the South Seas’ as one of the ‘most beautiful places on earth and its inhabitants as one of the most beautiful and most gallant people’.59 In 1911, Samoan chief Tamasese even used his stay in Germany for a diplomatic mission, including a brief meeting with fellow aristocrat William II in Berlin.60 Tamasese’s bold reinterpretation of his visit to Germany points to the ways in which Pacific Islanders resisted the demands of their rulers, the subject of the final part of this chapter.

Resistance from Pacific Islanders

Many Germans perceived their colonial empire in the Pacific as an El Dorado, often with little to no regard for the realities on the ground. But what seemed promising to decision-makers in Hamburg and Berlin did have very real and often dire consequences for Pacific Islanders in Pohnpei or Apia. Put simply, German imperialism in the Pacific was – with very few exceptions – everything but an El Dorado for the colonised peoples. The occurrence of widespread resistance of colonised Pacific Islanders across the German Pacific serves as unmistakable evidence. Pacific Islanders chose from a wide spectrum of resistance strategies, ranging from the use of the so-called ‘weapons of the weak’ (e.g. slow work or pilfering on plantations) to large-scale violent resistance (e.g. in Pohnpei).51

Significantly, these blind spots in the visual archive of German colonialism in the Pacific point to a gap between the idealised representations and the often brutal realities on the ground. The hundreds of photographs of German colonialism in the Pacific that survived into the present do not, for instance, depict the regular corporeal punishment of the colonised, such as Melanesians in German New Guinea or Chinese in German Samoa.62 Neither were the widespread diseases that European settlers contracted in the Pacific recorded in these photographs (malaria was especially prevalent in German New Guinea, for instance), let alone their regular result: death. Judging from the photographic record, at least, Europeans did not seem to have died in the German Pacific.

This silence on the brutal realities in the German colonies in the Pacific stands in stark contrast to the existence of photographs depicting corporeal punishment in the German colonies in Africa.63 Part of the reason for this contrast lies in the medium of photography itself. In a sense, the revolutionary facticity of photography made the representation of a common fact of colonial life virtually impossible: the death of the supposedly virile and racially superior white European settler.64 Pupu, the first Samoan man executed under German rule in May 1901, seemed to have understood photography’s potential for representing colonial violence when as his last wish he requested to be photographed by his German executioners.65 Not surprisingly, the photograph, if it was taken at all, has perished along with Pupu.

Two cases of direct resistance to German colonial rule from Pohnpei and Samoa serve to illustrate the limits of Germany’s El Dorado in the Pacific. The most violent case of indigenous resistance against German colonial rule in the Pacific occurred on Pohnpei. This tiny island in the eastern Caroline Islands came under German control in 1899 when Spain agreed to sell the remainder of its colonial possessions in the Pacific in the wake of the devastating defeat against the USA. One of the ethnic groups living on Pohnpei, the Sokehs, already had a record of violent resistance against the Spanish colonisers when, in 1887, they killed some forty Spanish and Filipino soldiers as a revenge against withheld wages and dishonour against one of their chiefs.66 Similar troubles arose more than two decades later when the new German district chief Gustav Boedde started his term in Pohnpei in April 1910. Boedde had served in the colonial administration in German East Africa before, which made him rather deaf to the wishes of the colonised. He pushed forward with a plan to construct a path around the small island of Dschokadsch (today’s Sokehs Island) just off the coast of Pohnpei’s main island. Under a new regulation, Pohnpeians were mandated to work fifteen days a year to pay for new land taxes, and most workers were used to help build the new path. Work conditions in road construction were generally harsh and German overseers occasionally hit workers to speed up the project.67
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This tense situation escalated in October 1910 when a Sokeh worker by the name of Lahdeleng resisted the German overseer Otto Hollborn, and was punished with ten blows from two Melanesian police soldiers. In the eyes of the race-conscious Sokehs, this added insult to injury, and when fellow Sokehs came to visit Lahdeleng to inspect his wounds, a vocal majority decided to make war against the whites, out of fear that, sooner or later, they might share the same fate. The next morning, the Sokeh workers engaged in construction of the new path took up arms, including clubs and rifles. The German overseers and managers fled into the Catholic Mission and asked for help. Alarmed by a messenger, district chief Boeder arrived in Dschokadsch with a mere six workers from the Mortlock and Truk Islands, and no support from police soldiers, to resolve the dispute with the Sokehs. With a different vision of their future in mind, the Sokehs did not hesitate to open fire against the agents of their exploitation. Boeder was killed by a shot to the head and his secretary Brauckmann was beheaded with a knife.68

In utter shock and determined to take revenge, the new German first-in-command Girschner ordered hundreds of men from other Pohnpeian districts to the capital of Colonia to assist him. The Sokehs let the Germans know that they attacked Boeder because ‘before they were to be treated as pigs, they would rather die’.69 A massive build-up for the planned punitive expedition followed until January 1911, when four heavily armed German warships with 745 men [including 200 Melanesian police soldiers brought in from German New Guinea] commenced their attack on the Sokehs who had entrenched themselves in Dschokadsch. To the surprise of the German forces, who had thought they had planned for all eventualities, most Sokehs managed to escape to the main island unhindered by the German warships. In return, Germans troops resorted to a strategy of scorched earth on the main island, forcing more and more Pohnpeians to surrender. Finally, in February 1911, Sokeh leader Soumadau surrendered to the German forces. Overall, almost a dozen Sokehs had died, along with seven Germans, four Melanesian police soldiers, and five government workers from neighbouring Caroline Islands.70

After pacifying the island under heavy losses, the German authorities decided to organise a show trial to set an example. Fifteen of the Sokeh ringleaders were executed only hours after the trial by a shooting guard, twelve more Sokehs were sentenced to lifelong exile with five years of forced labour, and all other Sokehs involved in the rebellion were exiled to Palau [some 1,800 miles west], where they were forced to remain until the end of German colonial rule in the Pacific in 1914. The suppression of the Sokeh Rebellion in 1910–11, perhaps more than any other instance in the history of colonial resistance in the German Pacific, revealed the gulf between the idealised representations of the colonisers and the brutal realities on the ground. This became evident in the writings of a young German marine who had participated in the fighting in Pohnpei and addressed the preface of his post-Second World War memoirs apparently to his former comrades:

Do you still remember how we pillaged around in the bountiful orchards of Pohnpei, how the wealth of an entire people was squandered and destroyed by you in a matter of days? Because you were with me in the war against the rebels. Do you still know how we marched through the blooming land scorching and burning, with waiting columns of smoke from burning villages as guideposts for the day, as glowing torches for the night?71

Paradise and hell on earth merged into one in this nostalgic retrospective on Germany’s El Dorado in the Pacific.

The second case of indigenous resistance to German colonial rule in the Pacific comes from Samoa. Partly due to the presence of three imperial powers (Germany, Great Britain, and the USA), Samoans had retained a considerable amount of political, economic, and military power at the beginning of German colonial rule in the twentieth century. In 1888, for instance, Samoan troops, led by Chief Mata’afa, inflicted fifty-six casualties on their German enemies and forced them to retreat. Civil war among Samoans, exacerbated by the increasing competition among the three imperial powers, continued to flare up into violence throughout the 1890s. In 1899, Germany, Great Britain, and the USA agreed to split the islands into a western part under German control, an eastern part under US control, and compensations for Great Britain in other colonial areas.72

The first years of German colonial rule passed in relative calm. Then, in 1904, a movement to found a Samoan-owned cooperative company to trade in copra emerged to challenge the German administration. The so-called ‘oloa [Samoan for goods] movement proposed an alternative vision of a commercial El Dorado – made possible by the commercialisation of the Samoan cash crop economy by European traders – based on Samoan ownership and profit-making. Designed to free Samoans from their enslavement by white traders, the leaders of the cooperative company introduced a copra tax among its members. This posed a direct threat to the government monopoly on taxation. Governor Solf cracked down on the movement by arguing that the venture was hopelessly ‘utopian’ and eventually succeeded in splitting the movement, at least for a time. But the organisational groundwork had been put in place for a more concerted and dangerous resistance movement that would resurface only a few years later.73
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In 1908, Lauaki, one of the most charismatic Samoan talking chiefs and a shrewd political schemer who had been the driving force behind the 'oloa movement, threatened war against the Germans. Lauaki and his supporters were protesting against the use of their taxes for purposes unrelated to the public good and Solf’s subtle and quite effective subversion of traditional structures of authority, which threatened the future of the Samoan chief system. Given repeated clashes with the German smallholders around Deeken, Solf suspected that Deeken had probably played a part in inciting this tax rebellion. In a daring, last-minute gamble, Solf managed to outmanoeuvre Lauaki in an oratorical battle, but war still seemed imminent. Disillusioned with his pet project of salvage colonialism, Solf called in the cavalry, or rather the German Navy. In March 1909, SMS Leipzig arrived in Apia from Kiaochow, putting additional pressure on Lauaki and his followers. Lauaki finally surrendered in April 1909 and he and eight of his followers and their families were deported to the Northern Mariana Island of Saipan, thousands of miles away from Samoa. And there they remained until the end of German colonial rule, much like the Sokehs who were to be exiled to Palau only two years later. In a final tragic twist, Lauaki was allowed to return to his Samoan home in 1915, but died just days before reaching more familiar shores.16

In a sense, this punishment by exile that Lauaki and the Sokehs had to endure can be seen as the all too real reverse of the idealised perceptions of the Pacific among the colonisers. Even though the Samoans, as well as the Sokehs, successfully resisted colonial rule for a while, German revenge came in the form of exile to faraway islands with unfamiliar cultures. Thus, the German vision of the Pacific as an El Dorado populated with submissive ‘natives’ turned into a nightmare for those who resisted it.

Conclusion

The case of Germany’s colonies in the Pacific shows that the costs of empire are not easily measured and often distributed in radically unequal ways. While some German investors profited greatly from the trade in exotic products from the Pacific, most Pacific Islanders paid a high price, toiling on plantations and giving their lives in outright violent resistance against their rulers. After Germany lost its colonies in the First World War, colonial revisionists exploited the idealised representations of the German Pacific to prove German superiority in ruling alien races.17 The long tradition of representing the Pacific as paradise on earth continues in present-day academic publications, historical romances (in literature and film), as well as in tourist advertisements.17 In a peculiar German variation of post-colonial melancholia, German public television has produced a multi-part documentary series on German colonial history, Die Deutschen Kolonien [The German Colonies] in 2009.18 Featured in this popular historical documentary, produced by the ‘Godfather’ of German public history Guido Knopp, is a rather large segment on the life of August Engelhardt. No mention, however, is made of the most violent episode in German colonial history in the Pacific, the Sokeh Rebellion in Pohnpei.19 In the battle for viewers, coconuts trumped colonial resistance. Germany’s El Dorado in the Pacific, it seems, has survived into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 Thomas Morlang, Rebellion in der Südsee: Der Aufstand auf Foaape gegen die deutschen Kolonialherren 1910/11, Berlin, 2010, 75-123.
2 Between 1884 and 1890, the German Empire annexed a series of Pacific islands, including the Marshall Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Caroline Islands including Pohnpei, Nauru, north-eastern New Guinea, the northern Solomons Islands, and western Samoa. For an overview, see John A. Moses and Paul M. Kennedy (eds), Germany in the Pacific and Far East, 1870-1914, St Lucia, 1977.
3 El Dorado designates a colonial imaginary that in the minds of many Germans at the turn of the twentieth century associated colonisation in the Pacific (and elsewhere) with beautiful natural settings, pliable ‘natives’, and easy profits. Utopia forms a subset of ideas within this wider imaginary of El Dorado, whose adherents (utopians) actually pursued their projects of individual and social improvement within metropolitain Germany as well as in its colonies. Infrastructure set up by settlers, investors, and government officials made colonised spaces, such as the German colonies in the Pacific, privileged destinations for utopians.
5 The influence of missionaries in the German Pacific on the construction of these images would be another fruitful venue of research.
6 George Stennert, The Devil’s Handwriting Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwestern Africa, Chicago, IL, 2007, 245. The subdivision of Pacific Islanders into Polynesians, Melanesians, and Micronesians was, of course, itself part and parcel of European Oceanism.
8 Cited in Hermann Hcvin, Die Deutsche Reich in der Südsee (1900-1921): Eine Annährung an die Erfahrungen verschiedener Kulturen, Göttingen, 1995, 32.
9 See Adolp Bastian, Einiges aus Samoa und aus Inseln der Südsee: Mit ethno-geographischen Anmerkungen zur Kolonialgeschichte, Berlin, 1889, 55, 76.
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16 Ibid., 452.

17 Ibid., 454.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 453.

20 Ibid., 455.

21 Ibid., 456.

22 Ibid., 457.

23 As did similar plans by US adventurers to set up a 'United Brotherhood of the South Seas' on the unpopulated Solomon Islands, see Hugh Lacy, 'Quixotic and Utopian: American Adventurers in the Southwest Pacific, 1897–1898', Pacific Studies, 54,1–2, 2001, 39–62.

24 Hemenstall, Pacific Islanders, 16.

25 Hiery, Deutsche Reich, 21.

26 Molino, Rebellion in der Südsee, 42.

27 Hiery, Deutsche Reich, 23.


29 Cited in Hiery, Deutsche Reich, 27.

30 Steinmetz, 'Devil's Handwriting', 342.

31 In neighbouring American Samoa, the aptly named El Dorado Oil Works company, headquartered in San Francisco, traded in locally produced copra.


33 Ibid., 25.

34 Hiery, Deutsche Reich, 205.

35 Firth, 'German Firms', 26.

36 Ibid., 207.

37 Steinmetz, Devil’s Handwriting, 317ff.

38 Melcia, Making of Modern Samoa.


40 Hiery even ventures that the German-run copra plantations and phosphate mines could be seen as a kind of El Dorado for Melanesian cultural contact. See Hiery, Deutsche Reich, 175.

41 Richard Decker, Manua Samoa: Samoanische Reiseerlebnisse und Beobachtungen, Oldenburg, 1901.

42 Hemenstall, Pacific Islanders, 89.

43 Firth, 'German Firms', 19.

44 Ibid., 22.


48 Tahiti was the original 'Pearl of the South Seas' since the times of Benjaminville. German colonialists started applying this feminised descriptor of colonial subjection to Samoa in the mid-1880s. See Schwarz, Ozeanische Affekte, 16, 45, 78.


50 On elders, see Dürbeck, Stereotypes Paradoxe, 192–207; Schwarz, Ozeanische Affekte, 77–82.

51 Ehlers, Feile der Südsee, 198.

52 Ibid., 126.

53 Ibid., 128; see also Dürbeck, Stereotypes Paradoxe, 204.

54 Dürbeck, Stereotypes Paradoxe, 207.


59 Thode-Arora, From Samoa with Love, 165.

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62 Flogging remained legal as punishment for Chinese workers in German Samoa and in the rest of the German Pacific until 1912 when Chinese political pressure forced its abolition, at least formally. Corporal punishment for Samoans had been illegal since the beginning of German colonial rule (H Wiery, Deutsche Reich, 121).

64 ibid., 11.
65 Barch Berlin, R1001/4789 ‘Die Rechspflege in Samoa’. 
66 Morlang, Rebellion in der Südsee, 29.
67 Ibid., 75.
68 Ibid., 77.
69 Cited ibid., 84.
70 Ibid., 119f.
72 Meleisea, Making of Modern Samoa, 21-45.
73 Hempenstall, Pacific Islanders, 51-72.
74 Ibid., 72.
76 Over the last few years, German television has seen a resurgence in schmaltzy melodramas set in former German colonies. See Wolfgang Struck, ‘Reenacting Colonialism: Germany and Its Former Colonies in Recent TV Productions’, in Volker Langbahn (ed.), German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory, New York, 2010, 260-77.
77 Switzerland’s Christian Kracht’s award-winning recent novel follows the life of concomer August Engelhardt (Imperium, Cologne, 2012).
79 To be fair, the genocide of the Herero and Nama in German Southwest Africa as well as the bloody suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion in German East Africa is covered in more extensive, if superficial, detail.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A place to speak the ‘language of heaven’?

Patagonia as a land of broken

Welsh promise

Trevor Harris

At the end of April 1865, Reverend Abraham Matthews, 32, of Llwydcoed, Aberdare, Glamorgan, deep in the coal and iron country of South Wales, was among those about to emigrate to a new Welsh colony in Patagonia, Argentina. A meeting was held in the village chapel to bid him farewell. On 29 April a local newspaper, the Merthyr Telegraph, reported that ‘Mr Matthews received, in addition to the good wishes of his friends, an acceptable purse of gold’. Just under a year later, another of the Patagonian colonists, John Jones, wrote from Argentina to his relations back in the old country in the most unambiguous terms: ‘if you wish to become a rich man and live well, make haste to come here.’ The circumstances appeared to be favourable and the stage set for a highly successful colony in a distant promised land.

This optimism, however, was not necessarily well founded. Indeed, Welsh adventures in the far south of Latin America had not had the most auspicious of beginnings. Prior to the arrival of the colonists, there had been contact between Britain and Patagonia as a number of Protestant missionaries attempted to establish settlements there in the early decades of the nineteenth century. But the omens were not good: for example, the schooner Allen Gardner, which carried Welsh missionaries to Tierra del Fuego from Bristol in 1854, met with a violent end, the ship’s company, according to the Cardiff Times, being ‘massacred by the natives’ in 1861.¹

And yet the industrialisation, urbanisation and Anglicisation of Celtic Britain continued to prompt many to seek a better life beyond British shores. Celtic migration – dominated statistically by the Irish diaspora – was, of course, part of a large-scale migration out of Europe, and especially Britain, between the middle of the nineteenth century