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Worlds That Were: The Tendaguru Dinosaurs and the Imperial Past in (Post)Colonial Germany

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Abstract

This article examines the many afterlives of the Tendaguru Expedition—a 1909–13 fossil excavation in the colony of German East Africa that unearthed the tallest mounted dinosaur in the world, still on display in Berlin. The long process of dinosaur assembly, which took more than three decades, meant that the Tendaguru project effectively outlived the German empire. Accounts of the expedition alongside the dinosaur exhibitions served as attempts to both theorize prehistoric life and write a history of the empire in terms compatible with the many twentieth-century German regimes that followed. These (re)negotiations of Tendaguru were reckoned with an ever-growing list of lost worlds: the prehistoric, the imperial, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and the postwar Germanies. At stake in these dinosaur stories was not merely the progress of some neutral, apolitical, or abstract paleontological science but rather national pride, international authority, civilizational superiority, and imperial legitimacy.

Keywords: empire; memory; natural history; colonialism; Weimar Republic; Nazi Germany; postwar Germany

In the Lindi Region of Southeastern Tanzania, a dinosaur stands watch over a traffic circle. Constructed in 2023 with the help of the British Council's Cultural Heritage fund, this reptile is a replica, representing the giant lizard excavated in the nearby Tendaguru Formation more than a century prior. While this artificial cast watches as motorists loop this way and that, its fossilized bones observe a parade of schoolchildren, tourists, and museum staff from their perch in the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde. Although one dinosaur is skeletal and the other is made to look like flesh and blood, they are twins in their creation, ostensibly representing an age before the humans who would ultimately construct them. The two dinosaurs, a continent apart, are symbols, too, of a more recent age—that of the German empire.

In the years before this mess of fossils was unearthed, the dinosaur that would come to be known first as *Brachiosaurus brancai* and later as *Giraffatitan brancai*, lay buried in a part of earth with newly imposed borders and administration. The protectorate of German East Africa had been established in 1885, the result of decades of colonial advocacy by a movement that predated even the establishment of a German nation. It was under this nascent colonial regime that hundreds of fossilized animals were unburied, as part of the so-called Tendaguru Expedition, launched in 1909. As the director of the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde, paleontologists involved in the project, and scholars would later claim, the

story of this expedition began when a German engineer “discovered” the fossils of giant dinosaurs in East Africa in 1906.

While the historian Holger Stoecker speculates that the German engineer was actually shown the dinosaurs by a native person who knew of their existence, the tale is commonly told as a story of German discovery.¹ Recognizing their value, so the story goes, the engineer promptly contacted the Berlin Museum, whose director, Wilhelm von Branca, helped to organize and fund a massive excavation effort. By the spring of 1909, the museum had put boots on the ground, sending lead paleontologist Werner Janensch along with an assistant, Edwin Hennig, to supervise excavation efforts. For the next four years, the expedition cycled along with the seasons. During the dry months, which lasted from around May to January, workers descended on the excavation site. Germans wishing to participate came and went, African laborers were hired and dismissed, houses were built and abandoned, and more than 225 tons of fossils were brought from the soil to its surface, packed in crates, and shipped across an ocean. Even Janensch and Hennig themselves left the excavation after three seasons, and in its final official year the expedition was supervised by the geologist and paleontologist Hans Reck, who was joined by his wife, Ina. The final year of the expedition was itself only the beginning of the project; the museum then spent the next thirty-odd years assembling the finds—one of them *Giraffatitan brancai*.²

The incredibly long process of dinosaur assembly meant that the German Tendaguru project effectively outlived its empire. In 1919, Germany had been forced to cede its overseas possessions as part of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. *Giraffatitan brancai*, however, was not mounted until 1937. Before the finds were put on public display, the Germans involved in the project worked tirelessly to keep the expedition alive in the public imagination. During and after the excavation, they wrote and rewrote the story of the expedition as they lived through multiple regimes: the *Kaiserreich*, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the Federal Republic (BRD), and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

As they attempted to piece together the story of prehistoric life, they offered personal histories of the German overseas empire. Their narratives served multiple, shifting aims, addressing ever-changing audiences. The scientists varyingly hoped to raise funds, engage the public, defend against accusations of colonial brutality, prove German intellectual prowess, and claim honorable pasts in the wake of both World Wars. In these retrospective accounts, the dinosaurs served as narrative anchors as colonial scientists reckoned with imperial loss, attempting at once to make sense of the deep past and their own colonial memories, translating both for the broader public. Across the rapid change and persistent upheaval of the twentieth century, the memory of the excavation conjured up an ever-growing list of worlds lost to time: an age before humans, a “primitive” Africa, and the many Germanies. At the same time, the narrators of the expedition were forced to contend with the legacy of a colonial project that had lost its empire nearly as quickly as it was built. And dinosaur bones lay at the center of their imperial memories.

Far from benign or neutral scientific objects, dinosaurs were a medium through which imperial conflict could be played out and academic knowledge could be claimed. This kind of competition was central for the so-called “imperial latecomer,” and many Germans viewed success in the field of imperial science as a means to prove world standing. Indeed, Stoecker has described the end of the nineteenth century as marked by multiple

¹ Holger Stoecker, “Maji-Maji-Krieg und Mineralien: zur Vorgeschichte der Ausgrabung von Dinosaurier-Fossilien am Tendaguru in Deutsch-Ostafrika,” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 32. For “discovery stories” see, for example: Gerhard Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed: The Tendaguru Expeditions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

² Marco Tamborini and Mareike Vennen, “Disruptions and Changing Habits: The Case of the Tendaguru Expedition,” *Museum History Journal* (2017): 183–99, 183.

European and American territorial, anthropologic, and natural historic “scrambles.” The “scramble for Africa” unfolded alongside a “scramble for objects,” a “scramble for skulls,” and a “scramble for art”—efforts which sought to collect objects and information from indigenous groups, often for exhibition in national museums. This was also the age of a veritable “scramble for dinosaurs.”³ The American Bone Wars, also known as the Great Dinosaur Rush, had in the 1870s launched a fierce competition to discover, unearth, display—and claim for oneself and one’s own country—the biggest prehistoric monster. It was this scramble that laid the groundwork for international “dinomania.”⁴ By the time of the Tendaguru Expedition, the largest mounted dinosaur in the world remained American: *Diplodocus carnegii*, a sauropod found in the American West. A dinosaur which, by that point, had been cast, replicated, and put on display in a number of European museums, including the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde.⁵

In addition, the expedition proceeded on the heels of domestic controversy regarding the German colonies, following costly, brutal, controversial and even genocidal wars waged by the Germans against African subjects in East and Southwest Africa.⁶ Moreover, despite massive investment in the overseas empire, the colonies still had, as David Blackbourn has stressed, “embarrassingly little economic significance.”⁷ By the time of the Tendaguru Expedition, the German Empire was in desperate need of a kind of rehabilitation and renewed legitimation both on the ground in the colonies and in domestic imagination, and the giants of Tendaguru held promise.

From its inception, the expedition belonged to a project of colonial promotion. As one paleontologist put it in 1911, “the findings of the Tendaguru Expedition will significantly promote the popularity of our museum and thus, retroactively, national education (*Volksbildung*) ... this must and will also have a retroactive effect on the popularity of our colonies.”⁸ In essence, the scientists involved in the expedition were in the business of imperial knowledge production, and they saw the popularity of the German colonies as an important part of national education—even after the Empire ceased to exist. The excavators imagined that they could at once prove the young German Empire’s ability to compete on the world stage and demonstrate the supposed scientific “benefits” of colonialism. Thus the expedition was framed from the beginning as a “national duty of honor,” an obligation to unearth the “scientific treasures” from the “German soil of Africa.”⁹ Those invested in the expedition claimed it was a colonial project as much as a scientific one, a civilizational effort as much as a paleontological undertaking, a matter of national honor and

³ Holger Stoecker, “Maji-Maji-Krieg und Mineralien,” 26.

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould quoted in *Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments*, ed. Eric Ames (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 186.

⁵ Ilja Nieuwland, “The Colossal Stranger. Andrew Carnegie and *Diplodocus* Intrude European Culture, 1904–1912,” *Endeavor (New Series)* (2010): 61–68.

⁶ In German Southwest Africa, German forces fought a war of extermination against the Herero and Nama people from 1904–8 (the Herero and Nama genocide); in German East Africa, German forces engaged in scorched earth policies to put down an African revolt from 1905–7 (the Maji Maji Rebellion). See, for example: Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); A. Dirk Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

⁷ David Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780–1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 252.

⁸ Museum für Naturkunde Berlin Historische Bild- und Schriftgutsammlung (MfN), Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.4, “Bericht über den Verlauf der Hauptversammlung der Tendaguru-Expedition des königl. geologisch-paleontologischen Instituts und Museums der Universität Berlin,” February 14, 1911.

⁹ Wilhelm von Branca quoted in Ina Heumann, Holger Stoecker, and Mareike Vennen, “Dinosaurier und Provenienz: Konjunkturen des Kolonialen, 1909–2018,” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 256.

intellectual superiority as much as an expansionist enterprise. These pillars underpinning the excavation did not fall along with the German Empire in 1918.

In the wake of the First World War, those invested in the expedition continued to produce memoirs and monographs, popular and scientific articles, and reports to funders, never straying from the imperial foundation on which the project had been built. Across the twentieth century, they professed a devotion to science, claiming to shed light on the prehistoric world, on paleontological method, and on evolutionary theory. In so doing, they invariably betrayed the notion that the natural sciences might be pure, apolitical, or above the broader German colonial project. Asserting authority based on their scientific expertise, they composed tributes to empire, theories of racial division, and arguments against decolonization. Attempting to make sense of their colonial experiences and racial imaginations under rapidly changing circumstances, they centered scientific study in their personal and public defenses of empire. Their stories of dinosaurs were also stories of Germany's colonial past and expansionist dreams in which Germany's lost East African colony came to stand in for the lost prehistoric world itself.

The dinosaurs themselves were key to this construction. As the historian Lukas Rieppel has argued, "dinosaurs simultaneously occupy two widely divergent temporal regimes: they hail from a world in which humans did not exist, and yet they are also a product of human history." Because "dinosaurs are in part creatures of the imagination, they reveal a great deal about the time and place in which they were found, studied, and put on display."¹⁰ Due to the long period of time during which the Tendaguru dinosaurs were found, studied, and put on display, the interpretations of their unburied bones offer windows into multiple times and places. These dinosaurs became representatives of the primeval world and symbols of the lost German Empire, taking on new meaning in the interwar republic, under the ascendant Third Reich and amid its destruction, and across the borders of the two postwar Germanies. The drawing of the inter-German border in 1949 erected a political boundary between *Giraffatitan brancai* and one of its limbs, as well as between the mounted dinosaurs and their excavators. In the postwar order, the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde came under the jurisdiction of the GDR, while the paleontologists involved in the expedition, alongside the leg of the world's tallest dinosaur, ended up in the BRD.

Across time and regimes, in ever-shifting accounts, the dinosaurs were varyingly integrated into a living animal kingdom—themselves limning life—or conceived of as entirely detached from the living world, existing only as bones. In the field (and in the memory of the field), paleontologists imagined themselves to be "waking up" the dinosaurs.¹¹ On display in Germany, however, the dinosaurs were subsumed under a category of "natural monuments" (*Naturdenkmäler*).¹² They became part of the work of nature preservation associated with the Heimat movement in Germany, which, as Thomas Lekan has articulated, used flora and fauna to establish "tactile and perdurable reminders of the primordial homeland" and provide "evidence of national longevity" for the "belated nation."¹³ These *Naturdenkmäler* integrated the colonies into this vision of the German nation. As reminders of a "primordial homeland" from the "German soil of Africa," the Tendaguru exhibition

¹⁰ Lukas Rieppel, *Assembling the Dinosaur: Fossil Hunters, Tycoons, and the Making of a Spectacle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 2.

¹¹ Edwin Hennig, *Am Tendaguru: Leben und Wirken einer deutschen Forschungs-Expedition zur Ausgrabung vorweltlicher Riesensaurier in Deutsch-Ostafrika* (Stuttgart: E. Schweizerbart'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912), 151; Edwin Hennig, *Gewesene Welten: Auf Saurierjagd im ostafrikanischen Busch* (Rüschlikon bei Zürich: Albert Müller, 1955), 8.

¹² MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.4, "Bericht über den Verlauf der Hauptversammlung der Tendaguru-Expedition," February 14, 1911.

¹³ Thomas Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885–1945*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4. For an extended discussion of the Heimat movement, see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

extended the German Heimat to its African colonies, an idea echoed by Hennig in his 1955 memoir and Janensch in a 1912 report to the Society of Friends of Natural Science (*Gesellschaft Naturforschender Freunde*) where they each described German East Africa as a “second Heimat.”¹⁴ In Germany, the dinosaurs retained a sense of monumental wonder, but in the memory of the lost colonies, they were imagined as animals with a sense of life.

This sense of life was made possible by a particular European imagination of Africa, which, in the age of European exploration and colonization, was still imagined to be a “dark continent,” a land of mystical secrets. As John Phillip Short has argued, even colonialists who employed a “discourse of science, progress, and the civilizing mission,” who viewed themselves as “bearers of truth and reason,” objectively “reproduce[d] the monstrous, the fantastic, and the sensational.”¹⁵ The German empire presented itself as modernizing, but also relied on a popular sense of mystery, wonder, and “enchantment.”¹⁶ Far from peripheral, science was a central, integral part of the practice of empire and the legitimation of colonial authority.¹⁷ This scientific mission itself reproduced the notion of the colonies as sites of mystery and enchantment, and scientific publications often fell into the category that Short has dubbed the “ethnographic fantastic.” In their memorializations, those involved in the Tendaguru expedition represented their experience as embodying the project of a scientific empire in a land of enchantment, and the mission took on a kind of religiosity and sacrality in which “Africa” was personified under the aegis of “Mother Earth.”¹⁸ The land was conceived of as capable of speaking and revealing treasures—pieces of its deep past—to worthy scientists.

In various tellings, the dinosaurs were integrated into an imagined African ecology which situated the African landscape and its inhabitants—human, animal, and fossil—as primordial. Africa was conceived of as a land both outside of and before history, where European colonization had started the clock. In public-facing accounts of the excavation, Africa was a wilderness, an Eden, full of danger but full of possibility. The expedition came to be represented as both a story of the deep past and a story of a German expulsion from paradise (as well as that paradise’s subsequent decline). The expedition narratives fed multiple colonial nostalgias—optimistic nostalgias full of hope for colonial return and the recovery of a romanticized German identity, and pessimistic nostalgias that imagined no future empire and wallowed in the irretrievable loss of a particular kind of Germanness for which Africa had become “the true repository.”¹⁹

Even ostensibly scientific reports on the Tendaguru Expedition were not detached from these imaginations of Africa, and projections of the colonial landscape were key to the continuously updated and revised Tendaguru narratives. In the wake of the First World War, the narrators of the expedition fueled the broader colonial revisionist movement in Germany but argued for colonial return in terms of scientific prowess, explaining themselves as uniquely capable of unlocking the mysteries of the prehistoric world held in the

¹⁴ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 80; MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.4, “Sitzungsbericht der Gesellschaft Naturforschender Freunde zu Berlin,” February 27, 1919.

¹⁵ John Phillip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 156.

¹⁶ Short, *Magic Lantern Empire*, 67.

¹⁷ Angela Zimmerman, “Ruling Africa: Science as Sovereignty in the German Colonial Empire and Its Aftermath,” in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, ed. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 95.

¹⁸ For references to “Mother Earth” speaking through a personified Africa, see: MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.4, “Bericht über den Verlauf der Hauptversammlung der Tendaguru-Expedition,” February 14, 1911; Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 22–23; Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 7, 9.

¹⁹ Sean Andrew Wempe, *Revenants of the German Empire: Colonial Germans, Imperialism, and the League of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69.

East African jungle. Under the ascendant Third Reich, German paleontologists returned to Lindi, symbolically reclaiming the site, and the world's largest dinosaur was finally mounted, put on display in a regime reliant on an ideology of racial difference and superiority. This worldview, coupled with anxieties of extinction, formed the bedrock of popular evolutionary theories in Nazi Germany—even those associated with dinosaurs. And in the postwar Germanies, scientists reckoned with the legacies of colonial science in a decolonizing world, wondering how to manage the items and memories collected in an increasingly distant colonial past. In the ever-shifting Tendaguru narratives, the fantasy of an ancient past comingling with the contemporary world remained central, and it seemed possible that in the age of German colonization, dinosaurs might have roamed.

The Excavation in the Age of Empire

In 1908, Carl Hagenbeck launched his own African expedition. It was far from his first; Hagenbeck owned a wildly successful zoo in Hamburg and a traveling circus, and regularly funded expeditions abroad to collect wildlife and people to display in Germany. By the time of this expedition, Hagenbeck was known worldwide, and as Nigel Rothfels has articulated, his name alone could “bring forth images of the wild, exotic, and the animal.”²⁰ But this expedition was different from the others: in 1908, Hagenbeck hoped to catch a dinosaur. That same year, he had opened a new area of his park that featured life-size models of these prehistoric animals. While one of the sculptures on this “Primeval Landscape” was modeled after *Diplodocus carnegii*, none of the models were skeletons or fossils—they were meant to look alive.²¹ Moreover, Hagenbeck had been collecting evidence. He believed, according to a report from a “high-ranking Englishman who had gone out to hunt large game” and “the primitive traditions from the artistic lives of natives,” that in the African interior, “this animal still exists today.”²² Although the mission returned empty-handed, Hagenbeck's investment in dinosaur-hunting did not wane.

In 1911, Hagenbeck wrote multiple letters to the director of the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde, Wilhelm von Brouca, expressing his great enthusiasm for the Tendaguru expedition. “I am very interested in the East African giant dinosaur,” he wrote, offering a donation from his personal funds.²³ He hoped to meet Brouca in person in order to “help develop effective propaganda for the matter.”²⁴ Hagenbeck's personal dinomania may be read, too, as an integration of these prehistoric giants into the imagination of the wild, the exotic, and the animal—alongside the belief that their exhibition would be met with popular engagement, enthusiasm, and profit.

Unlike Hagenbeck, the paleontologist Edwin Hennig was more of a realist—he knew that the Tendaguru Expedition was after bones, not living creatures. But as he expressed in his public accounts, the division between the deep past and present day appeared especially blurry in the African landscape, and the notion of reanimating prehistoric life did not seem entirely impossible. In 1912, Hennig published his first memoir of the expedition, written

²⁰ Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 45.

²¹ Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*, 185.

²² Mareike Vennen, “Auf Dinosaurierjagd: Wissenschaft, Museum und Unterhaltungsindustrie,” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 220.

²³ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 7.3, Brief von Carl Hagenbeck an Wilhelm von Brouca, March 13, 1911.

²⁴ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 7.3, Brief von Carl Hagenbeck an Wilhelm von Brouca, March 13, 1911.

at Branca's request.²⁵ He titled the account *On Tendaguru: Life and Work of a German Research Expedition to Excavate Prehistoric Giant Dinosaurs*, framing it as his obligation "to inform the larger public about... this unique expedition."²⁶ It was, in his words, a national duty to make the "treasure" that was "resting in the German soil of Africa useful to the scientific world."²⁷ But the duty went beyond science: according to Hennig, Africa had revealed to the German colonists a "secret," deep in the "holiness of the jungle [*Urwald*]."²⁸ The jungle (the word for which in German can be translated literally as "primordial forest") held special symbolic significance in the colonies. The scholar Wolfgang Fuhrmann has described it as "a place that people enter in order to look for something" where "due to the contact with the foreign (nature, animals, people) and the successful search, the protagonist returns from the jungle strengthened or purified."²⁹

In this primeval forest, many Germans perceived the living flora and fauna to be of a different time, living reminders of a land before humans that were long gone on the European continent. As Bernhard Gissibl has documented, at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a great deal of concern among Germans regarding their own primordial landscape. Modern Germany's lack of large game was understood to be a "lack of wildness" that at once spurred attempts to "restore the allegedly original German landscape by the reintroduction of species already extinct in Germany" and seemed to prove the notion that "Africans were seemingly unable to master the nature of their continent"—evidenced by the continued existence of Pleistocene fauna.³⁰ In this model, Europeans had already conquered and domesticated their land, and the large game found in Africa "embodied a powerful originality of nature" that legitimated conquest.³¹

This conceptual framework is evident in Hennig's narration of his journey to Tendaguru. Looking down over the treetops, he remarked, "there was a kingdom at our feet! A land of untouched rusticity ... What may be hidden there in terms of native fields and villages, in terms of rich African animal life, the eye has no idea ... nothing, absolutely nothing, emerges from the landscape."³² In this account, Hennig extended the notion of an excavation to include the living landscape; discovery depended on penetration, and in Hennig's memoir, the foreign was also the fantasy. He wrote,

If it were only about fantastic monsters, fairy-tale characters, we certainly wouldn't need to descend into the past of earth's history. Africa with its elephants, hippos, giraffes, pangolins, giant cats, and giant snakes ... often seems like an audacious, otherworldly dream ... It is probably the main attraction of the wonderful African hunt, to roam freely everywhere through such a country and to track down animal life.³³

The practice of hunting, particularly hunting for large game, was tied inextricably to notions of masculinity and honor in Imperial Germany. The right to hunt was a signifier of cultural status in the colonies and was generally reserved for white Europeans. Colonial Germans imagined themselves to engage in more ethical hunting practices than

²⁵ Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 85.

²⁶ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 10.

²⁷ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 8.

²⁸ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 22.

²⁹ Wolfgang Fuhrmann, "Der Urwald" in *Kein Platz an der Sonne: Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013), 58.

³⁰ Bernhard Gissibl, *The Nature of German Imperialism: Conservation and the Politics of Wildlife in Colonial East Africa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 287.

³¹ Gissibl, *The Nature of German Imperialism*, 288.

³² Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 20.

³³ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 60.

native Africans, using this logic to justify the regulation of hunting African game.³⁴ German colonists—in contrast to native Africans, the claim went—killed exotic animals out of necessity rather than bloodlust. Indeed, in Hennig’s account, those involved in the expedition often went hunting to provide meat for the camp.³⁵

The Tendaguru Expedition therefore offered an opportunity to prove one’s honor and manliness through the practice of the hunt, and this chase of living animals was understood to be part of the project from the beginning. In more than one application to join the expedition, hopeful candidates expressed their enthusiasm for both science and hunting.³⁶ Facilitating the expedition, the museum helped to organize hunting licenses for the paleontologists at Tendaguru.³⁷ And in his descriptions of the African “wilderness,” one where fossilized animals seemed not so different from those which still roamed, Hennig characterized the German colonization of East Africa as uncovering a “dreaming miracle” that must be “brought to life from its Sleeping Beauty slumber.”³⁸ Viewed in this light, Hagenbeck’s fantastical dinosaur hunt was, symbolically at least, not all that different from the Museum für Naturkunde’s hunt for dinosaurs—they were each, in their own way, chasing a lost world. Indeed, Hennig titled his second memoir documenting the expedition *Worlds that Were: On the Hunt for Dinosaurs in the East African Bush*. And far from incidental, the size of the hunted animal mattered immensely, as it offered a means to claim hegemony over the African landscape; and when it came to the dinosaurs, a means to claim hegemony over the deep past.

This claimed mastery did not stop with flora and fauna. Hennig’s 1912 account was divided into two sections, one titled “Land and Life” and the other “The Indigenous Population.” Indeed, it is almost surprising how little the dinosaurs appear in a memoir claiming to be dedicated to their excavation. Hennig clearly conceived of the excavation as a study of the African landscape and all its inhabitants rather than a study limited to dinosaurs and other fossils. In this paleontological-ethnographic, pop-science, personal memoir, Hennig wrote of his pleasant surprise at the peacefulness and hard-working nature of natives in the African interior who, prior to German arrival had been “lost in the wilderness.”³⁹ He spoke of a division between the Germans, “cultured people,” and the natives, “children of nature,” in condescending, patriarchal, and dehumanizing terms.⁴⁰ But in a crude way, he conceived of himself as rehabilitating the German imaginary of their African subjects—as he wrote, “if one does not find desirable qualities in the Negro, it is in very, very many cases not the fault of the *object* but of the *seeker*!”⁴¹ Europeans, as he saw it, should be generous in their assessment of Africans who until colonization had lived in a wilderness outside of history: “A cultured person has been instilled with stronger self-control over long generations, which is not given to the child of nature to the same extent.”⁴² Thus Hennig’s dinosaur memoir can also be read as a clear example of what John Phillip Short has described as the “simple, powerful reciprocity between colonial-scientific and popular-Darwinist discourses about race.”⁴³

³⁴ Gissibl, *The Nature of German Imperialism*, 201.

³⁵ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 89.

³⁶ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 1.1, Bewerbungen, 1908–9.

³⁷ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 1.3, Vorbereitungen und Verträge, 1908–12.

³⁸ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 151.

³⁹ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 102.

⁴⁰ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 33.

⁴¹ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 32, my emphasis.

⁴² Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 33.

⁴³ John Phillip Short, “Everyman’s Colonial Library: Imperialism and Working-Class Readers in Leipzig, 1890–1914,” *German History* (2003), 467.

In Hennig's understanding, the arrival of European colonists and the "short period of German rule has already had a revolutionary effect," in which the work of "civilizing" had started the clock of history.⁴⁴ In his understanding, Germans were uniquely suited to "properly" civilize African subjects. In this context, the production of a comprehensive study of indigenous Africans was an urgent project; in spite of rapid changes, the Africa of the past could still be "saved for science."⁴⁵ This pressing scientific study was brought to the fore in Hennig's account, in which he studied African languages, art, family life, beliefs, and lifestyle. Hennig did not conceive of the African porters employed (though massively underpaid) at the excavation as coworkers, but as a population under study. When discussing native workers' drawings of the unearthed bones and their imaginations of what the dinosaurs might have looked like—some of which were especially similar to the paleontologists' sketches—Hennig claimed that the workers were "probably unconsciously influenced by illustrations we had previously seen as well as by further information on our part about certain characteristics of the dinosaurs," rejecting the possibility that they, like the Europeans alongside whom they worked, might have learned from scientific observation rather than simple imitation.⁴⁶

Hennig's study of Africans can be further understood as an attempt to accumulate what George Steinmetz has dubbed "ethnographic capital." The German colonies served as a battleground for a "struggle for supremacy" between the traditional nobility, commercial and industrial capitalists, and middle-class intellectuals (*Bildungsbürger*); these *Bildungsbürger* were able to compete with both old and new elites because of the "orientation of the colonial field to the criterion of ethnographic acuity" and their ability to present themselves as "uniquely possessed of the qualities needed to understand exotic cultures."⁴⁷ Similar battles over status and authority played out throughout other European empires, where the practice of colonial science offered a new route to advance one's status in the metropole. Hennig's attempt to accumulate ethnographic capital alongside a kind of paleontological capital in his memoir indicates a desire to claim ever more colonial and scientific authority.

In his ethnographic interpretation, Hennig viewed the indigenous population as the "talisman without which the path to all the treasures of the soil, the climate, the vegetation, and the animal world remains closed to the European. From a scientific point of view, it itself contains undiscovered treasures which, of course, could easily evaporate under the breath of culture if they are not recovered soon." Equally important, a benevolent civilizational mission could be successful: "from an intellectual and moral point of view, it is a people ... certainly capable of a gradual improvement in its cultural state ... it is by nature a race of rare use."⁴⁸ This notion of the African population as a "race of use" was reproduced in the images circulated in Germany of the African workers on the expedition. The photos of the evacuation work and "porter columns" created what Mareike Vennen has described as a visual motif of a "collective undertaking" in which the European supervisors were set apart from the collective of workers.⁴⁹

This collective itself was also a product of environmental conditions and imperialist logic. In the wake of an outbreak of sleeping sickness spread by tsetse flies, most of the pack animal population in the area had perished. By the time of the excavations, the German

⁴⁴ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 104.

⁴⁵ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 106.

⁴⁶ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 37.

⁴⁷ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 37.

⁴⁸ Hennig, *Am Tendaguru*, 151.

⁴⁹ Mareike Vennen, "Arbeitsbilder, Bilderarbeit, die Herstellung und Zirkulation von Fotografien der Tendaguru-Expedition," in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 62.

paleontologists relied on African workers, treating them as replacements for beasts of burden in lieu of traditional animal porters. The notion of a loyal and peaceful collective was further emphasized by the rhetoric surrounding the expedition which described the harmonious and efficient work undertaken in the German colony, where the valuation of African work played a central role in both the “self-image” of the expedition members and in the “popularization, legitimization, and authorization of the expedition.”⁵⁰ In both visual and narrative mediums, the expedition members promoted a story of the excavation as a civilizing effort, reliant on the labor of the local population, who, along with the landscape and its flora and fauna, were placed under study. This opportunity for scientific observation was, however, brought to an abrupt end by the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent redrawing of Germany’s borders.

Between the World Wars

The First World War thrust the Tendaguru project into a state of limbo. The task of assembling the fossils had been shelved because of the war effort, and the desire expressed by the paleontologists on the mission to continue the excavation in Africa had been made impossible by the Treaty of Versailles, which stripped Germany of its overseas possessions and left East Africa as a League of Nations mandated territory administered by the British. As soon as 1919, however, Werner Janensch drafted a “call for further continuation of the Tendaguru Expedition,” a funding request undersigned by numerous academics and former colonial officials. The excavation had begun the work of uncovering a “unique, miraculous animal world,” Janensch wrote, “however, to continue these excavations, to raise as completely as possible this fossilized living world, there is now a complete lack of means.”⁵¹ This lack of means went far beyond funding: in the Weimar Republic, Germans had lost access to the East African landscape. The Tendaguru Expedition was thus woven into the broader tapestry of interwar colonial nostalgia and longing in the aftermath of catastrophic war.

The immediate postwar period, marked as it was by humiliating German defeat alongside accusations of excessive brutality and imperial guilt from abroad, particularly from the British, also saw the birth of a colonial revisionist movement, which sought to rehabilitate the memory of empire and advocate for its return. In these conditions, interwar calls to fund further excavation at Tendaguru and to assemble the imported fossils employed the language of “extreme urgency,” arguing that the success of the project would provide “evidence of German energy and hard work in the scientific world” and the broader world.⁵² Such language implied Germany ought to be redeemed as a world authority, alike to other powers performing the hard but virtuous labor involved in producing imperial knowledge. In 1925, Edwin Hennig emphasized the urgency of the project through his own outrage at the “culturally destructive effect of the English colonial war of predation” and the accusation that “the most valuable finds were kidnapped by the enemy and apparently hopelessly lost to science.”⁵³ The British, not the Germans, were thus painted as wartime criminals and bandits, bulldozing and barricading a site of immense scientific value.

Indeed, the British Museum, upon the British takeover of the “Tanganyika Territory” mandate, funded their own Tendaguru Expedition at the behest of a British geologist who

⁵⁰ Vennen, “Arbeitsbilder, Bilderarbeit,” 58.

⁵¹ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.1, “Aufruf für weitere Fortsetzung der Tendaguru-Expedition,” 1919.

⁵² Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch), R 4901/1333, Bd.2, “Bewilligung der Restsumme für Ausbeute der Tendaguru-Expedition,” April 30, 1920.

⁵³ Mareike Vennen, “Wer hat den Größten?: zur Verwertung und Verteilung der ersten Tendaguru-Exponate,” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 157.

insisted that the Germans had done shoddy work.⁵⁴ As the Germans scrambled to assemble the fossils they had evacuated from Tanganyika, the British arrived, eager to claim their own skeletons. The British paleontologist F. W. H. Migeod who partook in the excavation effort wrote in 1927 that, “This dinosaur field is by no means worked out. One might say it has only been scratched.”⁵⁵ In spite of a nine-year investment, the British mission failed to uncover any significant finds; the fossils unearthed in the 1920s were boxed up and shipped to the United Kingdom, remaining untouched in those same crates for years.

Still, the perpetual interwar excavation combined with the flurry of German and English publications ensured that Tendaguru remained a focal point in the conflicting imaginations of the German colonial past. As the British declared the Germans unfit colonists, Migeod noted that the Tendaguru site had been abandoned in such a state that “many fine bones lie about at the present day in too advanced a state of decay through exposure to be worth removing.”⁵⁶ As the Germans called the British greedy imperialists and colonial thieves, Hans Reck explained the lack of British finds at Tendaguru as having to do with the British refusal to collaborate with the German paleontologists who had preceded them.⁵⁷ And yet, both sets of imperial scientists used their publications on dinosaurs to offer theories regarding evolution and racial division. In the case of Migeod, he “found the East African Natives somewhat trying,” claiming “from a superficial study of their crania ... it is scarcely possible for the East African natives to rise to the mental level of those in West Africa” (much less that of white Europeans).⁵⁸

While each empire argued about the other’s excesses, German, British, and even American paleontologists wrote about the Tendaguru finds, producing stacks of popular and scientific articles and monographs, declaring dozens of new species of fossil invertebrates, and, in Germany, rapidly assembling bones for public display.⁵⁹ In Germany too, the scientific promise of Tendaguru was linked to hopes for colonial return. Colonial societies joined calls for a German return to Tendaguru, and one of the dinosaurs was named *Dysalotaurus lettowvorbecki* after the famed First World War general and German colonial hero, Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck.⁶⁰ The dinosaurs in the Weimar Republic were thus integrated into the broader movement to restore the German colonies, defined as evidence of German colonial success and international scientific worthiness. Furthermore, the dinosaurs and stories about their excavation served as monuments to imperial loss.

In the wake of this loss, many former colonists turned to their memory, producing a wave of popular memoirs and novels meant to serve as a response to accusations from abroad that Germans were especially brutal and unfit colonists.⁶¹ In 1924, Ina Reck “mourned” her time in Africa by adding to the ever-growing list of colonial memoirs in the form of a personal account of the Tendaguru Expedition.⁶² Her memoir joined the numerous Tendaguru publications produced in the interwar years which attempted to place the expedition at the center of colonial discourse. In the Weimar Republic, the dinosaurs were, in the words

⁵⁴ See The British National Archives, DF 5000, “British Museum (Natural History): Unofficial Archives: British East Africa Expedition, 1924–1931: Correspondence and Papers,” 1924–45.

⁵⁵ F. W. H. Migeod, “The Dinosaurs of Tendaguru,” *Nature* (1927): 322 and “The Dinosaurs of Tendaguru,” *Journal of the Royal African Society* (1927): 340.

⁵⁶ Migeod, “Dinosaurs of Tendaguru,” 325.

⁵⁷ Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 182.

⁵⁸ Migeod, “Dinosaurs of Tendaguru,” 338.

⁵⁹ Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 146–48.

⁶⁰ Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 148.

⁶¹ Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

⁶² As cited by Winfried Mogge in “‘Im deutschen Boden Afrikas’: Wilhelm Branca, die Tendaguru-Expedition und die Kolonialpolitik,” in *Deutsch-Ostafrika*, vol. 57, ed. Stefan Noack, Christine de Gemeaux, and Uwe Puschner (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2019), 141.

of historian Carsten Kretschmann, “stylized into a national monument” even before the largest had been assembled and put on display.⁶³ Indeed, the dinosaurs were only one part of the monumentalization of the Tendaguru Expedition. As Hans Reck wrote of his wife’s memoir, “may this little book also be a stone in the monument to German skill in peace and war ... Let it proclaim to friend and foe alike that Germany must and will regain its place in the sun, its free homeland, and also its free tropical lands.”⁶⁴

Of their “work for German science in a hot, distant, German land,” Hans Reck wrote that his wife’s narrative held particular value.⁶⁵ Her insight, as he understood it, had to do with her gender. While there were dozens of books about German East Africa already in circulation, this one was different because “a woman speaks in this little book.”⁶⁶ Hans Reck framed his wife’s memoir as offering a new perspective on the colonial past and an argument for colonial return in different terms, working on gendered lines. Indeed, German women were understood to have a particular role in the colonial project. Women were considered “cultural mothers” (*Kulturmutter*) who functioned as both “companion and colleague in the civilizing mission in Africa.”⁶⁷ They were understood to possess cultural generative powers essential for “national expansion and the preservation of *Deutschtum* abroad.”⁶⁸ And in her account, Ina Reck took the role of *Kulturmutter* seriously. She marked the cost of the First World War by the fact that,

German women had to leave our country. I say our country ... German East Africa is still our country, made through German work ... inseparable from us, interwoven with the homeland through German blood and German heroism out there. German East! You were loyal to us with your black sons—we will also be loyal to you.⁶⁹

In her account, Ina Reck depicted a peaceful African population that could be “raised,” and Africa as a land where “the contrast between Europeans and natives is interpreted primarily as a contrast between the future and the past.”⁷⁰ Like her husband and the paleontologists before him, she narrated the loss of the German colonies as a loss of primeval nature, a loss of access to an authentic deep past. But her authority did not lie with academic qualifications. “It is beautiful to be alone with oneself and nature; for the Negro, far from coastal civilization, can best be included in the circle of nature,” she wrote, but “I am not an expert (*Fundi*) in this relationship.”⁷¹ Still, she presented her observations with the guise of expertise, writing that their work was to “save these precious finds from Earth’s history for the museums at home” and offering her own ideas about human development.⁷² Watching a pair of “childlike” Africans row a boat, she asked, “has the machinery of time stopped here? ... Does a seed also lie dormant with them ... that will one day lead Africa to its own distinctive culture and the development of its future sons?” Such a development, she wrote,

⁶³ Carsten Kretschmann, “Noch ein Nationaldenkmal?: Die deutsche Tendaguru-Expedition 1909–1913,” in *Insenzierte Wissenschaft*, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011), 192.

⁶⁴ MfN, Materialien aus der Sammelbearbeitung zu Tendaguru, Ina Reck, Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition im Süden von Deutsch-Ostafrika (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer/Ernst Vohsen Verlag, 1924), 11.

⁶⁵ Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition*, 7.

⁶⁶ Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition*, 9.

⁶⁷ Wempe, *Revenants of the German Empire*, 82.

⁶⁸ Diana Miryong Natermann, *Pursuing Whiteness in the Colonies: Private Memories from the Congo Free State and German East Africa (1884–1914)* (Münster: Waxmann, 2018), 35.

⁶⁹ Mogge, “Im deutschen Boden Afrikas,” 143.

⁷⁰ As cited in Kretschmann, “Noch ein Nationaldenkmal?,” 203.

⁷¹ Reck employed the Swahili term “*Fundi*,” equating it to the German “*Fachmann*.” Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition*, 39.

⁷² Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition*, 39.

might take ages, “but nature’s pace doesn’t count seconds. Millennia are its measure.”⁷³ In her account, Ina Reck offered her own Tendaguru theories based on her role as a kind of “mother.” She measured “development” in terms of perpetual “childhood,” where the journey to “culture” might take millennia. Like her German and British colleagues, Ina Reck saw the Tendaguru excavation as a window into the prehistoric world, a means to understand human development, and an opportunity to theorize racial difference.

As Germans and British alike threw money, time, and manpower into the Tendaguru sinkhole, they explained the stakes of the mission. On the line was not merely the progress of some neutral, apolitical, and abstract paleontological science but rather national pride, international authority, civilizational superiority, and imperial legitimacy. In a period of colonial hopelessness and as colonial history was being written and written again, the Tendaguru Expedition served as a locus for a kind of colonial nostalgia which reified the notion of Africa as a primeval wilderness. Africa, it seemed, was a land of open space, and Germans, as an increasingly popular slogan reported, were a *Volk ohne Raum*.

Tendaguru in the Third Reich

If Tendaguru and its dinosaurs along with German pride had been kidnapped by the war, the rise of Hitler in 1933 seemed to offer a means of taking them back. Under the expansionist National Socialist ideology, a German reacquisition of empire seemed imminent.⁷⁴ While Nazi policy was decidedly ambivalent toward its former African colonies, Britta Schilling has noted that “vast amounts of planning went into an imaginary empire,” which in various iterations included plans for a German-controlled *Mittelafrika*, inspiring hope and support for the regime among many former colonists.⁷⁵ While top Nazi officials imagined an empire primarily located in eastern Europe, the regime did not abandon plans for an overseas empire in Africa until well into the Second World War, in 1942. In spite of some tension between imperial nostalgics and Nazi planners when it came to expansionist priorities, former colonists supported the Nazi Regime in large numbers, agreeing, as Shelley Baranowski has noted, with the ideology of “imperial enlargement over stasis, and *Lebensraum* as the route to biological survival.”⁷⁶ Implicit in this concept of *Lebensraum* was an obsession with primordial wilderness, an *Urheimat*. While Nazi ideologues located an authentic, primeval, German landscape in eastern Europe, former colonists continued to long for the wild nature of Africa.⁷⁷ And until well into the Second World War, it seemed possible to “reclaim” both.

Beyond ideology, the rise of the Nazis spelled concrete hope for the Tendaguru expedition, as the young state authorized and funded a number of scientific expeditions abroad, even to the former German colonies. By 1934, Hennig was allowed once again to live “without time,” “back on the trail of the terrifying lizard” in East Africa.⁷⁸ More than twenty years after he had left East Africa, Hennig secured funding for this expedition from the German Foreign Office along with various scientific societies, private donors, and his university.⁷⁹ He reported on this second expedition in *Natur und Volk*, the public-facing journal associated

⁷³ Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition*, 34.

⁷⁴ Willeke Sandler, *Empire in the Heimat: Colonialism and Public Culture in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9.

⁷⁵ Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany*, 71.

⁷⁶ Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism, Bismarck to Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the Nazi *Urheimat* in Eastern Europe, see David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*, 1st American ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 252.

⁷⁸ Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main (ISG FFM), Fonds V176 No.938, “Ein Exemplar von ‘Natur und Volk,’” 1934.

⁷⁹ Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 253.

with the *Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft*, the research organ of the Senckenberg Natural History Museum in Frankfurt. Senckenberg, for its part in funding the original excavation, had in 1920 been given a limb from the largest dinosaur, *Giraffatitan brancai*—a leg that is still on display in the dinosaur hall in Frankfurt.⁸⁰

Still, the 1934 dinosaur expedition, like its British predecessor, failed to find anything of significance. In reports to German readers at home, however, the expedition reclaimed Tendaguru as a national project in which the colonial provenance of the fossils was of central importance.⁸¹ From the “timelessness” of Tanganyika, Hennig reported on the “most bitter pill” of isolation from Germany, especially in the early days of the Nazi regime. “We still have very little news about the great, serious, liberating events in our homeland,” he wrote. This isolation, he claimed, was hard not only for the researchers but, “all colonial Germans out here.”⁸² Hennig wrote of Africa on the same terms as he did in the 1910s—the landscape was alive, and they were living “under the dictatorship of the black continent.”⁸³ There were elephants, hippos, apes, and lions to marvel at, and the column of paleontologists and porters encountered Africans about whom Hennig offered paternalistic ethnographic commentary while also marveling at their capacity to learn from German scientists. “We owe many valuable finds to people we visited only briefly, who then presented us with their gifts after a few days ... A whole new stock of black geologists is emerging. (If only it were always this quick with white students!)”⁸⁴ As in 1912, Hennig maintained that German colonists had a unique capacity to “teach” black Africans, who, in his conception, thrived under German rule and remained loyal to Germany while they suffered under British administration.

Unlike the colonial period, however, the German paleontologists were “entirely cut off from the Heimat” and they “hungered bitterly for a closer connection with the Fatherland.”⁸⁵ While the expedition was meant to revive the Tendaguru excavations, it can also be understood as an effort to revitalize the colonial mission in German consciousness, to emphasize the value of a German East Africa for science but also for national unity and international authority. The primary function of Hennig’s reports in *Natur und Volk* were not explicitly scientific, nor were they specific to the Tendaguru fossils—the mission was symbolic, nationalist, and imperialist. At that time, Tendaguru, along with German colonialism itself, was not an obsolete project, it was alive in a particular imagination of the German future.

While Hennig trekked through Africa, the fossil fragments were slowly but surely pieced together by paleontologists in Germany. In 1938, Werner Janensch triumphantly reported that the “prehistoric giant,” “the largest land animal that once lived on earth,” was now on display in Berlin.⁸⁶ The colossal dinosaur now filling most of the museum’s main atrium, he conceded, was a Frankenstein’s monster, constructed mostly from the skeleton of one animal and the tail of another. But the reconstruction allowed scientists to infer that this species of dinosaur was taller than other known species, including the Americans’ *Diplodocus carnegii*, and that it could grow to be more than a tenth larger than the animal on display in Berlin.⁸⁷ This prehistoric beast, as Janensch noted in his announcements of

⁸⁰ Information on the *Giraffatitan* limb and its display has been provided by the Senckenberg Naturmuseum Frankfurt.

⁸¹ Vennen, “Wer hat den Größten?” 157.

⁸² ISG FFM, Fonds V176 No.938, “Ein Exemplar von ‘Natur und Volk,’” 1934.

⁸³ ISG FFM, Fonds V176 No.938, “Ein Exemplar von ‘Natur und Volk,’” 1934.

⁸⁴ ISG FFM, Fonds V176 No.938, “Ein Exemplar von ‘Natur und Volk,’” 1934.

⁸⁵ ISG FFM, Fonds V176 No.938, “Ein Exemplar von ‘Natur und Volk,’” 1934.

⁸⁶ Werner Janensch, “Vom Urweltriesen Brachiosaurus,” *Aus der Natur* (1938): 114.

⁸⁷ Werner Janensch, “Brachiosaurus, der größte sauropode Dinosaurier aus dem oberen Jura von Deutsch-Ostafrika,” *Forschungen und Fortschritte* (1938): 143.

the creature's exhibition, had been found in German East Africa. Nearly twenty years after German East Africa had ceased to exist in any official capacity, the world's largest dinosaur joined a couple of smaller skeletons from Tendaguru along with multiple partial finds on display. These bones were exhibited as a colonial product, described as if they hailed from a still-German territory rather than an obsolete colony.

In interwar Germany, "German East Africa" was a ubiquitous term, at once denying the defeat and humiliation of the First World War and calling for a colonial restoration. It was this descriptor that Hennig employed to describe the origins of the dinosaurs in his 1938 book, *Prehistoric Life: An Introduction to the Fossil Sciences*. By the time of its publication, Hennig had joined the NSDAP and the SA, holding the rank of Squad Leader (*Scharführer*).⁸⁸ According to *Prehistoric Life*, a text held by the Educator Academy for the Adolf Hitler Schools (the schools meant to train the next generation of Nazi leaders), the work of paleontological science operated in service of a Nazi national project.⁸⁹ In this publication, Hennig wrote that "geology and paleontology are, in the broadest sense, the history of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*)."⁹⁰

Prehistoric Life laid out a theory of evolution, beginning with protozoa and ending with humans, but it sought to do more than simply tell readers about fossil sciences. "I want to offer life, not paper, unfolding and process, not scheme or system," Hennig wrote, "above all, it must not be limited to a certain school class ... it must have an impact on excursions in nature."⁹¹ Hennig described paleontology as a nationalist mode of interacting with nature, one that connected the scientist to the deep past, one that included the former German colonies. In a chapter titled "important German discovery sites," Hennig noted the "fantastic dinosaur giants from German colonial soil ... that are installed in the atrium of the Berlin Natural History Museum."⁹²

After systematizing the animal past, Hennig turned in his tract to the human one, writing that "homo sapiens have quickly displaced homo neanderthalensis ... remarkably, at least in Europe, today's human species appears to us already divided into different races, an indication that the very earliest emergence may be even further back and probably did not take place in Europe," though this division "cannot yet be sufficiently traced; only initial indications are available."⁹³ The failure to uncover the definitive history of racial division was considered by Hennig not to be a shortcoming of scientific approach or theory, but only a matter of time. He concluded: "the development of the human race is not yet finished," and "development ... raises man above the organic coexistence of the earth's planet, allows him to fight his way out of nature's bondage to a rational free will."⁹⁴ In *Prehistoric Life*, the dinosaurs were integrated into an orthogenetic narrative of human evolution, a building block in a theory that rejected the randomness of natural selection, favoring an idea of directional evolution in which organisms evolved toward a progressive goal, approaching a zenith.

In such a narrative, the study of the deep past held the key to understanding yet-unfinished human development, and the newly mounted Tendaguru dinosaur was represented as a success story of German science in service of furthering the German race. In its exhibition and in narrative, *Brachiosaurus brancai* was held up as a source of national

⁸⁸ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Staatsarchiv Sigmaringen, Wü 13 T 2 Nr. 2648/300, "Spruchkammer für den Lehrkörper der Universität in der Säuberungs-Sache des Prof. Dr. Edwin Hennig," July 7, 1948.

⁸⁹ Barbara Feller and Wolfgang Feller, *Die Adolf-Hitler-Schulen: Pädagogische Provinz versus Ideologische Zuchtanstalt* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2001).

⁹⁰ Edwin Hennig, *Leben der Vorzeit: Einführung in die Versteinerungskunde* (Munich, Berlin: J. F. Lehmanns, 1938), V.

⁹¹ Hennig, *Leben der Vorzeit*, VI.

⁹² Hennig, *Leben der Vorzeit*, 36.

⁹³ Hennig, *Leben der Vorzeit*, 138.

⁹⁴ Hennig, *Leben der Vorzeit*, 140–41.

pride with colonial dimensions. It was displayed in the museum under swastika banners and described in epic terms. In a 1938 publication of the journal “From the Heimat: Natural Science Monthly,” the skeleton was a “prehistoric colossus,” “a gift from our beautiful colony German East Africa.”⁹⁵ As war broke out and dragged on, the dinosaur was attributed its own militancy; in 1944, it was a “prehistoric tank.”⁹⁶

The Tendaguru dinosaurs in their monumental display can be further understood as part of a broader Nazi obsession with evolution, extinction, and even resurrection. Dinosaurs, like other disappeared animals, were a mystery and a warning—a source of endless speculation on the downfall of a species. In 1937, the zoologists Lutz and Heinz Heck, directors of the Berlin Zoological Garden and the Hellabrunn Zoo in Munich, respectively, were offered almost unlimited resources by the Nazi regime, both to breed “what they considered quintessentially ‘German’ animals like bears and lynxes,” but also to resurrect “long-dead and half-mythic beasts.”⁹⁷ These beasts did not necessarily resemble the wild nature in the colonies (the Heck brothers dedicated a good deal of time to resurrecting the Aurochs, a bovine species that looks not dissimilar from a non-primeval bull)—but the project was part and parcel of a broader longing for some mythic land before the modern. In her discussion of the Heck brothers’ project, Sandra Swart characterized their effort as an attempt at conquest that encompassed both territory and time, as part of a species restoration project, that, like all species restoration projects, was “not historically or politically neutral,” and could demonstrate “imperialist nostalgia, fetishizing an exotic evocation of the dead past.”⁹⁸ The Tendaguru dinosaurs, too, were an exotic evocation of the dead past(s)—the colonies and the primeval world alike.

Peter Fritzsche has described the ideological universe fostered by the Nazis as defined by “unconditional ideas” in which the German future was imperiled. The nation was conceived of in total terms, where Germans faced “life or death, national survival or annihilation.” In this context, it seemed necessary to “regenerate national life” through eliminating “unworthy” life.⁹⁹ Both *Prehistoric Life* and the Heck restoration projects suggest that we might add another unconditional idea nurtured by Nazi ideology: continued evolution or guaranteed extinction. In this context, extinction could be understood as both an imminent threat and as a problem to be solved, and the carrying out of a race war was wrapped up in scientific study. Scientific advancement in evolutionary fields and species restoration became a matter of national and racial survival, and the project of species restoration was carried out alongside the project of German national restoration in the wake of the First World War.

If we consider the Tendaguru Expedition in the world of Nazi restoration projects, a world in which dinosaurs could, at least metaphorically, “wake up,” one with a primordial “German” landscape just an ocean away, the display of *Brachiosaurus brancai* must also be understood as a political project evoking the deep past. That the dinosaur was mounted during the Third Reich, displayed under Nazi flags, and integrated into a taxonomical discussion of human and animal evolution predicated on the idea of a superior German race is far from incidental. As the anthropologist Brian Noble has argued, dinosaurs always act as “cultural and political beings of multiple natural possibilities.”¹⁰⁰ The story of dinosaurs

⁹⁵ MfN, Pal. Mus. SII, Tendaguru-Expedition 10.4, “Aus der Heimat: Naturwissenschaftlichen Monatsschrift,” May 1938.

⁹⁶ “Vorweltliche Tanks—So schwer wie ein Dutzend Elefanten—Ohne Wasser und mit kleinem Gehirn,” *Zschopauer Tageblatt*, February 29, 1944.

⁹⁷ Sandra Swart, “Zombie Zoology: History and Reanimating Extinct Animals,” in *The Historical Animal*, ed. Susan Nance (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 60.

⁹⁸ Swart, “Zombie Zoology,” 68.

⁹⁹ Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁰⁰ Brian Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs: A Political Anthropology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 5.

is also “the story of us.”¹⁰¹ As told in the Third Reich, the German “us” was defined in terms of a racial community, a *Volkgemeinschaft* reliant on a particular imagination of the origins of human life, a primordial world that German scientists might master in modern times.

Tendaguru in the Postwar Germanies

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the dinosaurs fell out of view. In 1943, the skeletons had been put in the basement of the Berlin museum as bombing of the city escalated, and they were not remounted until 1953—this time under a new regime: the GDR.¹⁰² Under the East German government, the value of the dinosaurs took on new, diplomatic dimensions; in the 1980s, they were loaned to Japan.¹⁰³ Senckenberg, too, the western home of the *Brachiosaurus* leg, had hidden away their collections at the end of the war, reinstating them in 1948. But the Senckenberg Museum was not content to merely reconstruct their exhibitions; once the dust had settled, new borders had been drawn, and new states had been declared, the museum direction deemed it necessary to reconsider “the meaning (*Sinn*) of such a natural history museum in our time.”¹⁰⁴

This reimagination was led by the museum’s director, zoologist and paleontologist Wilhelm Schäfer, who detailed the practical and theoretical work he had attempted beginning in 1961 in a 1974 book titled *Object and Image*. Schäfer imagined the Tendaguru limb as part of a whole, offering an illustration of the amputated leg next to the complete skeleton in Berlin.¹⁰⁵ In the new exhibit, mounted in 1966, the leg was partially encased in a bronze sculpture, modeled on an imagined flesh-and-blood dinosaur.¹⁰⁶ Sculptures, Schäfer theorized, should be used when a fossil wasn’t found in a “biologically and functionally correct form,” and therefore couldn’t be placed as stand-alone specimens in the museum and still tell an “epic story of a distant event.”¹⁰⁷ The viewer, faced with an incomplete or “incorrect” model of a formerly living animal, would be better served by a sculpture, “a monument, a memorial with a claim to impact in appearance and expression.”¹⁰⁸ What’s more, in his documentation of the museum redesign, Schäfer described *Brachiosaurus brancai* as “the largest land animal that has ever lived,” noting its origins as “*Ostafrika* (East Africa)” —rather than Tanzania, which had been unified well before the publication of *Object and Image*.¹⁰⁹

In the GDR, too, the question of modernizing natural history exhibitions was at the fore when the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde reopened its doors in 1953.¹¹⁰ Protesting the “colonial revisionism” rife in the BRD, a geology student urged the museum director to change the description of the dinosaur bones as hailing from “*Deutsch-Ostafrika*”; in 1954,

¹⁰¹ Noble, *Articulating Dinosaurs*, 408.

¹⁰² Ina Heumann and Mareike Vennen, “Fragmentieren: Dinosaurier und Geschichte” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 14.

¹⁰³ Ina Heumann, “Big in Japan: Branchiosaurus Brancai in Tokio, 1984,” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 95–121.

¹⁰⁴ Wilhelm Schäfer, *Objekt und Bild: Beiträge zu einer Lehre vom Museum*, Kleine Senckenberg-Reihe 6 (Stuttgart: Schweizerbart, 1974), 3.

¹⁰⁵ Schäfer, *Objekt und Bild*, 108.

¹⁰⁶ ISG FFM, Fonds V176 No 1259, “Aus dem Bericht der Direktion der Senckenbergischen Naturforschenden Gesellschaft über das Jahr 1966,” 1966.

¹⁰⁷ Schäfer, *Objekt und Bild*, 109.

¹⁰⁸ Schäfer, *Objekt und Bild*, 109.

¹⁰⁹ Schäfer, *Objekt und Bild*, 146.

¹¹⁰ Heumann, Stoecker, and Vennen, “Dinosaurier und Provenienz: Konjunkturen des Kolonien, 1909–2018” in *Dinosaurierfragmente: zur Geschichte der Tendaguru-Expedition und ihrer Objekte, 1906–2018*, ed. Ina Heumann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 264.

the museum's direction agreed, dropping the "Deutsch" and leaving only "Ostafrika," noting that "Tanganyika" was not a recognizable term to the public.¹¹¹ Heumann, Stoecker, and Vennen have argued that the changing of this moniker served as a "depoliticization and dehistoricization" of the finds by separating them from a colonial context in their display.¹¹² And this decontextualization may certainly be understood as an avoidance tactic, evading the discomfiting question of what to do with the colonial past in a decolonizing world.

As many in East and West alike were confronted with this question in postwar Germany—addressing it through critique, romanticization, or evasion—there remained a generation for whom the "Deutsch" could not be separated from the "Ostafrika." Both those interested in making the empire palatable to the public and those invested in some form of restitution, or at least a "coming to terms with" its crimes, urged the public to remember the one-time existence of a *Deutsch-Ostafrika*. Thus, the bones remained, for those with a commitment to a particular memory of the empire, fashioned as monuments with colonial dimensions, memorials meant to inspire an image of a living dinosaur for its beholder, evoking a time when dinosaurs roamed.

Edwin Hennig, for his part in carrying forth a memory of empire, offered a new narrative account of the expedition aimed at a broad public. Hennig, who had been removed from his academic position and censured by the French occupation authorities, used his renewed publication permission under the West German regime to turn back to his experience of the colonial past.¹¹³ In this 1955 retrospective, Hennig placed far less emphasis on science, instead spinning a romanticized tale of the African landscape that seemed even closer to notions of a magical, primordial wilderness than his first account. In the context of global decolonization, however, Hennig separated his experience of the colonial landscape from what he considered to be the reality of contemporary Africa.

In the introduction to his second memoir, Hennig returned to the notion of the dinosaur as a strange "Sleeping Beauty" in which the German arrival "called [it] back to life from a sleep of a hundred million years."¹¹⁴ In the process of the excavation, the "darkness of prehistoric times" slowly revealed itself, and the colonial landscape seemed itself to be prehistoric. "Was not today's life in this ancient tropical country like an echo of the past," Hennig wrote, "The herds of wild horses and antelope ... the big cats, the elephants and rhinos, the wild cattle and monkeys, they had once populated Europe."¹¹⁵ Hennig thus projected again the idea of a primordial landscape onto Africa, a land he imagined to be pre-history. But if the description of wildlife remained overwhelmingly similar to his 1912 account, the discussion of people was marked by a clear divergence.

Hennig titled his 1955 memoir *Worlds that Were*, a notion that he echoed in his introduction where he made explicit that these worlds were both the primeval and the colonial—and in fact, they might have even been the same thing:

The colored world is gradually beginning to eliminate the European foreign body that has invaded ... The wondrous trust and even reverence that was shown to the recognized superior white man turns quickly into repellent otherness. Not only the realm of the giant creatures that we unearthed, but unfortunately also the circumstances under which it could have happened are today "WORLDS THAT WERE!"¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Heumann, Stoecker, and Vennen, "Dinosaurier und Provenienz," 264–65.

¹¹² Heumann, Stoecker, and Vennen, "Dinosaurier und Provenienz," 266.

¹¹³ Gerhard Maier, *African Dinosaurs Unearthed*, 275.

¹¹⁴ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 8.

¹¹⁵ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 10.

In this memoir, Hennig reproduced the Nazi notion of race war, albeit in somewhat inverted terms. He conceived of native people, “a little people of nature” (*Naturvölkchen*) as remaining in their “primitive” state only so long as they remained uncontacted by Europeans.¹¹⁷ In this memoir, in the absence of a benevolent German presence, Hennig conceived of these Africans as having been corrupted under British rule. Hennig described contemporary anticolonial and anti-European sentiment not as a legitimate political position, but rather the result of a “primitive race” having been improperly civilized.

Hennig’s commitment to a hierarchical understanding of race indicates the degree to which he continued to buy into particular strands of Nazi ideology in the wake of the Second World War, and in this vein, his memoir served a second purpose: it offered an emotional balm for the shame of the war and Germany’s reduced international position. He continued to personify Africa, describing it as “holy” and primordial, but he wrote that his “greatest gain” from the expedition was no longer scientific, it was the “healing teaching” offered by “a little bush life.”¹¹⁸ The colonial African landscape and its inhabitants served as an escape—they offered means to evade the question of German shame in the postwar period.

Indeed, this choice to locate his postwar narration in Africa cannot be considered separately from the domestic context. In postwar West Germany, a powerful discourse formed around the memory of the Third Reich, one centered around German victimhood, at the hands of a war that “Hitler started but everyone lost.”¹¹⁹ Hennig’s account mirrored those of many German expelled from the East who framed their forced flight as a loss of homeland and an “expulsion from paradise.”¹²⁰ But this narrative located that paradise in Africa rather than eastern Europe. In her study of the German concept of *Heimat*, Celia Applegate argued that in postwar West Germany, *Heimat* came to represent a “recovery of identity.”¹²¹ In the postwar context, a revived German identity was rebuilt in local terms and “*Heimat* promised healing and health through the peculiar virtues of authentically local experience.”¹²² Indeed, Hennig never let go of this “homeland” as a cornerstone of his identity, key to his narration of his life. As late as 1970, he insisted on referring to East Africa as “our colony” and fashioned the Tendaguru Expedition as central to his life’s story.¹²³ In persistently locating his “second *Heimat*” in Africa and emphasizing the healing nature of the colonial experience, Hennig sought to recover his German identity in an imaginary past where he could define his life in terms of a “cultural duty of pride” rather than in terms of national shame.¹²⁴

In this project, the dinosaurs served as narrative anchors in a story where multiple lost pasts overlapped in the memory of the excavation. Much like the “primitive” African world, the dinosaurs themselves seemed once more to exist only in memory. Moreover, Hennig’s account emphasizes the persistence of a colonial imaginary of Africa dependent on notions of enchantment and sacrality. Far less interested in science than his first account, his postwar memoir reads as the story of a German expulsion from Eden and can be understood as an articulation of an imagined community of German victimhood in the wake of the Second

¹¹⁷ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 80.

¹¹⁸ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 80.

¹¹⁹ Robert G. Moeller, “War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *The American Historical Review* (1996): 1009.

¹²⁰ Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature*, 313.

¹²¹ Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*, 228.

¹²² Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*, 224.

¹²³ BArch, N 1089/20, Korrespondenz zwischen Arnold Brecht und Edwin Hennig, November 4, 1967–April 1, 1970.

¹²⁴ Hennig, *Gewesene Welten*, 8.

World War. In a decolonizing world, the memory of the Tendaguru Expedition and the colonial experience served at once as both redemption and refuge, a locus for German pride and Nazi absolution.

* * * * *

Across German regimes, in both museum and memory, the dinosaurs and their excavation were integrated into various understandings of Germany and Germanness, all of which hinged on notions of the deep past and an imaginary of the African landscape. The Tendaguru Expedition may have been a hunt for dinosaurs, but it was also a study of people and the human past, a study which must be considered alongside the dinosaurs themselves. During the imperial period, the dinosaurs offered German colonial and scholarly legitimation, elevating the German Empire on a world stage. In the interwar period, they embodied the interrupted colonial project, the unjust terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and the legitimacy of a German civilizing mission. Under the Third Reich, the dinosaurs were integrated into an orthogenetic theory of evolution in line with a German racial nation, serving multiple restoration projects. In divided Germany, their display and the memory of the expedition took on new dimensions, confronting the fraught German past—imperial and fascist. In each instance, the colonial African landscape at the moment of German arrival was imagined to be outside of history. The sense of enchantment, magic, mystery, and sacrality in the fantasy of the African continent persisted across regimes, in narratives that claimed to document a scientific mission.

In reunified Germany, the dinosaurs have once more become a focus point in a discussion about the German past. In recent years, they have appeared in the news surrounding debates about colonial restitution.¹²⁵ In the 2010s, the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde undertook its own project researching the provenance of the dinosaurs which culminated in the 2018 publication of the book *Dinosaurierfragmente* (Dinosaur Fragments). The museum additionally introduced new parts of the dinosaur exhibit itself, focused on the history of the excavation and the colonial origins of the fossils, though as Marco Tamborini and Mareike Vennen argue, the new displays do not necessarily contradict the “narrative of the success” of the expedition.¹²⁶

Moreover, the dinosaurs occupy a unique position in a discussion of colonial restitution because, unlike many cultural objects, they are animals. Their exhibition in a museum of natural history breaks down the theoretical barriers between a history of nature and a history of people. In the contemporary exhibit, the main atrium displays both the Tendaguru dinosaurs and various fossils from Germany, all of which represent animals that lived during the same period. In a way, the museum has created its own landscape, one that unites the land of Germany with its former colony through the medium of deep time. The Tendaguru dinosaurs thus serve as looming reminders that natural history is always a human endeavor, and to tell a history of the animal past is also to tell a story about humans—a story that can be mobilized in service of imperial and national aims, one that can be used to define inclusion, exclusion, and even humanity itself.

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¹²⁵ See for example, Philip Oltermann, “Germany Resists Returning Museum Exhibits to Ex-Colonies,” *The Guardian*, May 17, 2018; Daniel Meßner and Richard Hemmer, “Kleine Geschichte des größten Dinoskeletts—Eines geraubten Fossils,” *Spektrum*, December 30, 2020; Angelika Franz, “Dinosaurier-Museum: Rückgabe nach Afrika,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 19, 2021.

¹²⁶ Marco Tamborini and Mareike Vennen, “Disruptions and Changing Habits,” 195.

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