

# book review

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## Abdulrazak Gurnah and the afterlives of German colonialism in East Africa

Tom Menger

**Gurnah's Nobel Prize invites us to ponder Germany's colonial past between the Scramble for Africa and the First World War in what is now Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda.**

When Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in October 2021, the jury honoured 'his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism'. With East Africa being central to much of Gurnah's work, German colonialism is a regular presence in his novels, more precisely the colony of German East Africa, the biggest German colony of all, which comprised modern Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda. Although the history of this territory has been thoroughly studied, it still very much stands in the shadow of contemporary public debates on the German genocide perpetrated against the Herero and the Nama, as well as the debate on the continuities between that genocide and the Holocaust.

German East Africa is especially prominent in two of Gurnah's novels: the early *Paradise* (1994) and the recent *Afterlives* (2020). They invoke several themes. The first, perhaps unsurprisingly, is colonial violence. Though such violence is not always in the foreground of Gurnah's books, it is always present. When Gurnah's characters refer to the Mdachi, the Germans and their African soldiers, the askari, they often use terms like merciless, viciousness and ferocity. German colonial rule in East Africa began with violence, when Hermann von Wissmann waged war on the coastal populations from 1889 to 1890, after these had resisted the attempt of the German East Africa Company to run the colony as a private

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is a postdoctoral researcher at *global dis:connect*. He holds a BA in European Studies and a BA and MA in History from the University of Amsterdam. He pursued his PhD at the University of Cologne and was associate PhD at Queen Mary University (2018) and doctoral fellow at the Institute for European History (IEG) in Mainz (2020). In 2021, he defended his doctoral thesis, titled "The Colonial Way of War: Extreme violence in knowledge and practice of colonial warfare in the British, German and Dutch colonial empires, c. 1890-1914."

This text has appeared previously in the [Frankfurter Allgemeine](#) (German) and on [Africa Is a Country](#).



enterprise. The hanging in 1889 of one of the revolt's leaders, Al Bushiri, which the Germans orchestrated as a grand spectacle, recurs as an incisive event in *Afterlives*.

As recent research has made apparent, European perpetrators of colonial violence employed such 'spectacles' of brutal violence as they believed these would send a message to what, in British colonial discourse, was frequently referred to as 'the native mind'. However, the colonial masters seldom stopped to consider what constituted this so-called 'native mind', which they perceived to be monolithic and unchanging. This theme is also evident with Gurnah. While German violence frequently indeed shocks the local population, it remains equally incomprehensible. *Paradise* relates for instance how the Germans 'hanged some people for reasons no one understood'. At times, however, Gurnah's references to such German 'spectacle' of violence also reveal some irony. The over-the-top braggadocio of an askari in *Afterlives*, who boasts that everyone should fear the 'merciless angry bastards' of the *Schutztruppe* colonial force and that its German officers are 'high-handed experts in terror', is unable to make much of an impression on Pascal, an African belonging to a local mission.

Once the Germans had subjugated the coast in 1890, they turned their attention to wresting control of the Arab-dominated caravan trade that ranged from the sea to the Congo. The end of this caravan trade serves as the backdrop for *Paradise*: 'There will be no more journeys now the European dogs are everywhere,' one experienced caravan guide bemoans at some point. But this was

Fig. 01  
German colonial volunteer mounted patrol, 1914. Image via Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA3114, credit Walther Dobbertin CC-BY-SA 3.0 de (Image: Wikimedia)

only the beginning of German conquest. German rule continued to penetrate inland territories until the turn of the twentieth century. The wars that ensued were characterised by especially destructive violence. Indiscriminate targeting of fields, harvests and villages was part of the colonial wars' standard repertoire (not only that of the Germans) to starve the evasive enemies into submission. Weaving in German epithets, Gurnah explains through an askari character: 'That was the way the *schutztruppe* worked. At the slightest sign of resistance, the *schwein* were crushed and their livestock slaughtered and villages burned'.

The most devastating episode in this mode of warfare was the Maji Maji War of 1905-1907, when several ethnicities simultaneously revolted against the forced labour and punitive taxation of colonial rule. The war provides the initial setting for *Afterlives*, even if the East African coast was largely unaffected by fighting and the events thus only appear in the background. Still, Gurnah is unambiguous about the gruesomeness of the war: 'the Germans have killed so many that the country is littered with skulls and bones and the earth is soggy with blood'. Research estimates that the war cost up to 300,000 lives, principally due to the starvation that resulted from the scorched-earth tactics.

When the First World War reached the shores of East Africa, Europeans for the first time battled other Europeans in this region. As Gurnah emphasises, though, the armies that faced off in this theatre were mostly composed of Africans and Indians, who constituted the rank-and-file of colonial forces on both sides. On the German side, the commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who saw himself outnumbered by British, Belgian and Portuguese forces, pursued a guerrilla-like fighting retreat, which he maintained until the war's end. This campaign earned him renown in Germany for decades thereafter. However, the post-war glorification of the commander masked the brutal reality of the retreat, whereby Lettow-Vorbeck's troops ruthlessly confiscated the stores of the local population to feed themselves, and then proceeded to burn everything in their wake to stall their enemies. The result—once again—was desperate hunger. Moreover, tens of thousands of African civilians were conscripted as porters and died of exhaustion. Local populations that resisted faced severe reprisals, as in *Afterlives*, where a corporal executes a village elder with a bullet to the head. The trauma induced by the horrific German retreat is a recurring theme in the book. Current research suggests that several hundred thousand lives were lost in East Africa during the First World War, and many hundreds of thousands more after the Spanish Flu descended on an already emaciated and devastated population.

Reading these novels as but a literary treatment of colonial violence, however, would not do them justice. They also provide a rich view into the lives of colonised people. Gurnah, who himself was born under British colonial rule on the island of Zanzibar,

pays particular attention to the lives of the coastal population and its African, Indian and Arab influences. In this cosmopolitan milieu, Islam, as religion and worldview, and Swahili, the lingua franca, were most often the connective elements. Precisely this worldliness has recently brought this region to the attention of global history, as it shows globalisation as not driven exclusively by Western actors. A dense net of connections across the Indian Ocean, the East African coast, the Horn of Africa, Madagascar, the Comoros, the Arabian Peninsula, and the west coast of India prevailed here centuries before European colonisation. Traders in Zanzibar could activate networks to take out loans in India, and Islamic scholars moved freely between the various poles in this cosmos.

With great sensitivity and sometimes a fairy-tale atmosphere, Gurnah explores this world of caravans and coastal cities, warts and all. Gurnah's characters live their lives in spite of colonialism. They grow up, gather experience, enjoy wealth or suffer poverty, and fall in love. Sometimes the colonial masters are relegated to the background. Thus, these novels tell stories of resilience in which the colonised are not merely victims.

Toward the end of *Afterlives*, Gurnah engages with the question of continuities between German colonialism and Nazism, though in his very own way. It turns out that Ilyas, an askari whose whereabouts after 1918 long remain obscure in the book, relocated to Germany in the 1920s. There he found work as a singer, performing at propaganda events with a revisionist-colonial bent. Due to an affair with a white woman, he was interned in a concentration camp in 1938, where he died in 1942. As unbelievable as it may sound, similar life stories of actual former askari in Germany are recorded. Many Germans of African descent spent the war in concentration camps, but some remained in Germany after the war. They represent a different kind of continuity – that of an enduring black community in Germany.

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## Programm/Programme:

- **Vortrag/Lecture: Monica Juneja (Heidelberg):**  
*Awkward, unstable, creative: Dis:connection as world-making*
- **Empfang/Reception**

## 12 Mai/May 2022

## Veranstaltungsort/Venue

Historisches Kolleg  
Kaulbachstraße 15  
80539 Munich

**18:00 (Einlass/Doors open: 17:30)**

## Anmeldung/ Registration:



<https://tinyurl.com/yaga7grx>

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## Impressum:

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