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## Article

# (Post-)Colonial Business History and the Coloniality of the Firm: The Case of the Woermann Group, 1884-1945

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KIM SEBASTIAN TODZI

# (Post-)Colonial Business History and the Coloniality of the Firm

The Case of the Woermann Group, 1884–1945

**ABSTRACT:** By providing a working definition of an expatriate colonial business, this article examines the role of the Woermann group's integration into and support of colonialism through trade, plantations, and logistics. Focusing on its activities in Cameroon and the pivotal role of the Woermann Linie during the Herero and Nama genocide in German South West Africa, it illustrates the company's entanglement with German colonial rule. Even after the end of Germany's colonial overseas empire, colonial influences persisted in the company's structure and practices, emphasizing the enduring impact of coloniality on business operations.

**Keywords:** colonialism, business, trade, shipping, Cameroon, Namibia, genocide, capitalism, German colonialism

**JEL Codes:** N47, N73, N77, N83, N87

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

What is a colonial business? And what can it tell us about the social and economic history of colonialism on the one hand and the role of companies in the global economy on the other? In the following, I will approach the question of when and to what extent private companies can be characterized as colonial businesses using the German business network Woermann group as a case study.<sup>2</sup> While the question of what defines a colonial business may seem straightforward, it is in fact complex. We must first examine what makes a business colonial. Is it adapting to colonial systems or profiting from them? To address this, I will propose a working definition of expatriate colonial businesses and develop a typology to categorize different forms of colonial enterprise. Building on this framework, I will assess the degree to which the Woermann group can be classified as a colonial business and how a definition can be useful in shaping the emerging field of (post-)colonial business history at the intersection of social history, economic history, business history, and colonial history.<sup>3</sup>

1 I would like to thank Nina Kleinöder for valuable discussions and support, Julian zur Lage for helpful suggestions, the anonymous reviewers for their feedback, Arne Meinecke for assistance with the formal revision and Sharon Howe for proof-reading this article.

2 For a detailed examination of the Woermann group's role and impact, see: Todzi (2023).

3 See the DFG-funded network "(Post-)Colonial Business History (PCBH)", established in 2024, which

Moreover, I will use this example to refine the concept of the coloniality of the firm.<sup>4</sup> The term *coloniality of the firm* emphasizes that businesses were not merely passive economic actors but active agents of colonialism, shaping and benefiting from the systemic exploitation of resources and labor. Recognizing this interconnectedness allows for a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of global capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This perspective enables us to analyze not only the specific characteristics that define a colonial business but also how such businesses actively reproduced and maintained the inequalities and power dynamics of colonial rule. Considering how colonial businesses operated within and shaped the structures of colonial and post-colonial economies will thus give us a much clearer picture of how the coloniality of the firm worked. By examining the Woermann group through this lens, we can better understand how its practices contributed to the broader economic and social fabric of colonialism.

The case of the Woermann group offers a unique perspective on these dynamics and raises questions about the interdependencies between business practices, colonial rule, and global economic development. Essentially, it comprised several independent companies that were united under one roof thanks to the unity of capital and management. The core of the group was the trading business C. Woermann, founded in 1837. As a private trading business, C. Woermann initially operated in South and Central America, then in Southeast Asia and Australia, and in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century also in West Africa. By building its own trading fleet, the trading business evolved into a shipping company. From 1885 onwards, Adolph Woermann, who had taken over the management of C. Woermann in 1880, systematically expanded the family business into a conglomerate. The Woermann group included, among other entities, the parent company C. Woermann, the Woermann Linie (founded in 1885), the Kamerun Land- und Plantagensgesellschaft (1885), the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie (1890), and the trading firm Woermann, Brock & Co. (established in 1894 as the Damara & Namaqua Trading Company). This diversity of different business forms and sectors makes the group an exemplary subject for the study of (post-)colonial business history. Both the individual companies and the group as a whole can be analyzed in order to explore whether they can be classified as colonial businesses, and if so, identify the decisive factors that contribute to this classification.

In the following sections, I will define what constitutes a colonial business and propose a typology to categorize the various forms of colonial enterprise. Building on this framework, I will examine the specific case of the Woermann group to demonstrate how these concepts are reflected in real-world scenarios.

aims to foster connections between colonial history, global history and business history, and to establish the field in the German-speaking world: <https://pcbh.hypotheses.org/>.

4 See e.g.: Kleinöder/Todzi (2024); Mollan (2019). For the concept of “coloniality”, see: Quijano (2000); Quijano (2007); Mignolo (2007).

## 2. Expatriate Colonial Business – Working Definition and Typology

The definition of colonial businesses faces a similar problem to the definition of colonialism itself: it is a “phenomenon of colossal ambiguity”.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, despite this observation, it is useful for a social and economic analysis to present a working definition via which a colonial business can be characterized. Many historical studies within the field of (post-)colonial business history are micro-histories, focusing on one or a small number of companies. Angelika Epple has described the analysis of companies within global history as a “microhistorical turn”.<sup>6</sup> However, even from the perspective of historiography, it is highly beneficial to establish theoretical foundations upon which (post-)colonial business history can build and operate. One of these foundations is the definition of a colonial business.

A working definition of expatriate colonial businesses essentially encompasses four to five characteristics: the location and control of the business, the place of business activity, the use of colonial structures, and the function of the business in maintaining the colonial order. Accordingly, a colonial business can be defined as a business that has its headquarters in the imperial metropolis – or can historically claim its origin there – and that is predominantly operated in the interest of owners who reside in or originate from the colonial power. The business activities take place in one or more colonies, and the business profits significantly from the political, military, and economic structures of colonial rule. The coloniality of a business is characterized by its implicit or explicit role in maintaining and reinforcing the colonial order through economic practices.

A certain limitation of this definition lies in its exclusive focus on expatriate colonial companies. Indigenous companies and entrepreneurs – a category of businesses that has been insufficiently researched in the German context and without which colonial economies would not have functioned – are excluded from this framework.<sup>7</sup> This does not imply that indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs cannot also be considered colonial enterprises. What matters in this case is the extent to which they contribute to the establishment and maintenance of the colonial order – a complex and inherently ambivalent endeavor. A distinction between these categories of colonial businesses is essential, however, because the aim of this working definition is not to encompass all economic actors operating within colonial economies, but rather to gain insights into a specific type of company on the basis of its distinctive characteristics. More specifically, this working definition applies to one type of colonial enterprise, namely the expatriate colonial business.

To date, the literature has only briefly systematized expatriate colonial businesses. A. G. Hopkins, in his influential contribution, differentiates businesses based on their sectoral affiliation: export production (mines and agriculture), trade (direct import and export), and services (shipping and banking).<sup>8</sup> Referring to the German colony

<sup>5</sup> Osterhammel (2009), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Epple (2014), p. 416.

<sup>7</sup> See Tristan Oestermann's article in this special issue.

<sup>8</sup> Hopkins (1976), p. 30.

of Cameroon, Karin Hausen proposed a typology based on interest congruences and oppositions, differentiating between “trading businesses”, “plantation companies”, and “concessionary companies”.<sup>9</sup> A similar typology is proposed by Nina Kleinöder regarding businesses in German colonies.<sup>10</sup> She differentiates between “chartered companies and concessionary companies”, “agricultural production”, and “trade”. These typologies already capture significant distinguishing criteria, but they should be expanded to apply to other colonial experiences as well.

Based on these typologies and expanded by the working definition, types of colonial businesses can be distinguished in terms of their fields of activity, organizational structure, relative closeness to colonial authorities, and significance in maintaining colonial rule. First, *chartered companies* were the prototypes of colonial businesses, as they operated under royal or governmental charters that granted them significant privileges, such as trade monopolies and territorial rights. These companies – such as the East India Company – played a crucial role by combining economic and political functions, often establishing administrative and even military structures to protect their interests. Related to chartered companies, but emerging at a later stage, were *concessionary companies*, which obtained exclusive rights to exploit specific resources through contracts with colonial governments. Although these companies were critical for resource extraction, their powers were more limited than those of chartered companies. Another important category includes *agribusinesses*, particularly *plantation companies*, which focused on the cultivation of cash crops. Though usually privately owned, their operations relied heavily on colonial structures for land allocation and labor, often building on expropriation and utilizing coercive labor practices. *Infrastructure companies* were instrumental in developing essential transportation networks, such as railways, roads and ports, which facilitated the movement of goods and people. Their close collaboration with colonial administrations highlighted their importance within the colonial economy. Finally, *trade and logistics companies* functioned as intermediaries connecting colonies with imperial powers. Unlike chartered or concessionary companies, these firms operated in a more open and competitive market, typically without monopoly privileges. They were crucial as intermediaries, connecting local economies with global markets.

The term *hybrid colonial business* refers to companies from one of these categories that strategically balance both engagement with and distance from colonial authorities. These enterprises interact closely with colonial structures to support resource extraction, trade, and infrastructure development, thereby playing a critical role in upholding colonial rule. At the same time, they could face conflicts with state colonial policy, as economic interests do not always align with ideological agreement. They might maintain a degree of autonomy by integrating local practices and adapting to the local environment. Their significance lies in their ability to both reinforce and occasionally circumvent the colonial framework, reflecting the complex dynamics within colonial economies.

9 Hausen (1970).

10 Kleinöder [forthcoming 2025].

### 3. Colonial Business Before the German Colonial Empire

Businesses needed neither formal colonial rule nor to be part of an imperial nation to establish themselves as colonial enterprises. Before Germany became a formal colonial power in 1884, some businesses had already found their place within colonial networks. C. Woermann is a prime example of how a trading business could transform into a colonial business. To understand this evolution, it is necessary to examine how Woermann became integrated into existing colonial systems and leveraged the influence of different imperial powers. This experience offered Woermann insights that later helped it to navigate its relationships and interaction with German colonial authorities.

C. Woermann began its foray into trade with West Africa in 1849 with a voyage of the ship “Constance” to the West African coast. Together with his partner C. Goedelt, Carl Woermann established a permanent trading post in Monrovia, Liberia, a year later.<sup>11</sup> Branches then followed in Gabon from 1862, and from 1868 in what is now Cameroon.<sup>12</sup>

Although Germany only became a formal colonial power in 1884, C. Woermann was already developing into a colonial business during this phase. This was primarily due to the utilization of colonial structures and the role of Woermann in the French colonial empire. While the establishment of a branch in the Gabon estuary was primarily motivated by economic factors, as C. Woermann hoped for a profitable rubber trade there,<sup>13</sup> the expansion of the business into the interior was only possible using the colonial infrastructure of France. Until the end of the 1860s, various groups of African middlemen dominated the entire export trade of the Ogowe on the Gabon coast. The Orungu dominated trade in Cap Lopez and the Nkomi in Fernan-Vaz: along with the Mpongwe in the Gabon estuary, these were the most important trading contacts for Woermann.

European traders were eager, however, to penetrate further into the interior and bypass the middlemen on the coast. The British trading house Hatton & Cookson had already opened a trading station on the Yombé, a navigable river in the Ogowe Delta, in the early 1860s, and its representative R. B. N. Walker went on to equip an expedition to the Galwa in Lambaréné in 1866 which took the arduous route through the Remboué Valley. In 1867, a French expedition forced access to Lambaréné. The Galwa living in Lambaréné and their king, Nkombe, were interested in establishing direct trade relations with European merchants. Following Hatton & Cookson, invitations were sent by the Galwa to the Liverpool-based company John Holt and C. Woermann.<sup>14</sup> At the

11 Hieke (1937).

12 For the beginnings in Gabon, see the correspondence between Carl Woermann and Woermann’s agent Heinz Brehmer in the C. Woermann Company Archive. Johannes Thormählen served as C. Woermann’s general agent in Cameroon from 1868 to 1873. In 1874, he and another former C. Woermann employee, Wilhelm Jantzen, founded their own company, Jantzen & Thormählen. Johannes Voss initially worked as an agent for C. Woermann but later, in 1874, joined Jantzen & Thormählen. Both Thormählen and Voss wrote reports about their time in Cameroon. Unfortunately, Johannes Thormählen’s memoirs have not been preserved. However, excerpts from them can be found in Max Esser’s travelogue: Esser (1898), pp. 41–44. Voss (1893), pp. 1–16. Cf. also Todzi (2023).

13 C. Woermann Company Archive, Woermann to Brehmer, Hamburg, March 20, 1862.

14 Merlet (1990), p. 18.



beginning of 1871, Woermann's representative Emil Schulze set out with an expedition of 140 men to Lambaréné.<sup>15</sup> In Adolina Longo (near Lambaréné), Schulze negotiated with King Nkombe of the Galwa. After two days of negotiation, Schulze reports, they reached an agreement on a contract that allowed C. Woermann to trade with the Galwa and receive King Nkombe's protection, as well as to jointly resolve disputes between representatives of C. Woermann and the Galwa.

C. Woermann not only profited from the increasing presence of France, which expanded its colonial claims further into the interior from the 1870s onward, but also became increasingly dependent on it. The extension of French colonial infrastructure and governance created new opportunities for trade and logistics, while simultaneously binding businesses like C. Woermann to the colonial administration's policies, networks, and economic structures. At the same time, the expansion of trade along the Ogowe supported France's imperial ambitions. Schulze relied on a mix of cooperation and confrontation for the company's economic expansion. He paid the Orungu, who controlled access to the Ogowe via Fernan Vaz, a fee that allowed him to trade with the Galwa. When another group of Orungu prohibited Schulze from passing through their territory, a violent confrontation ensued, resulting in the deaths of five Orungu.<sup>16</sup>

Adding to the expansion of the trade area was another, equally important factor: the vertical backward integration of C. Woermann in the 1870s. In 1878, Woermann commissioned botanist Hermann Soyaux to establish a coffee plantation in Gabon.<sup>17</sup> Soyaux began clearing the forest in 1878 and employed about a hundred workers on the plantation by 1880.<sup>18</sup> Although the French colonial administration supported the plantation by lowering import tariffs on machinery, food, etc., the attempt failed. After a year, the plantation incurred costs of 150,000 marks and another 250,000 marks the following year.<sup>19</sup> The plantation remained in the company's possession, but it was an economic failure.

However, this experiment had long-term consequences, notably for the strategic direction of C. Woermann and the relationship of the business to formal colonial rule. These are partly explained by the aforementioned typology of colonial businesses. Venturing into another, agricultural sector led to increased capital commitment. While trade capital is fluid and can be relatively easily withdrawn from certain regions in politically unfavorable situations, capital invested in plantations is tied up for an extended period without generating direct returns. It takes a relatively long time for some crops to become harvestable. The establishment of plantations is thus strongly oriented towards a distant – and uncertain – future. This high risk that companies have to take makes it appear even more sensible from a business perspective to engage in risk management through political cooperation with a colonial power.

15 Schulze (1874).

16 Nassau (1914), p. 189.

17 Soyaux (1888).

18 Beilage der "Berliner Börsen-Zeitung", Nr. 610, in: Berliner Börsenzeitung, 1.12.1880.

19 Böhner (1935), p. 115.

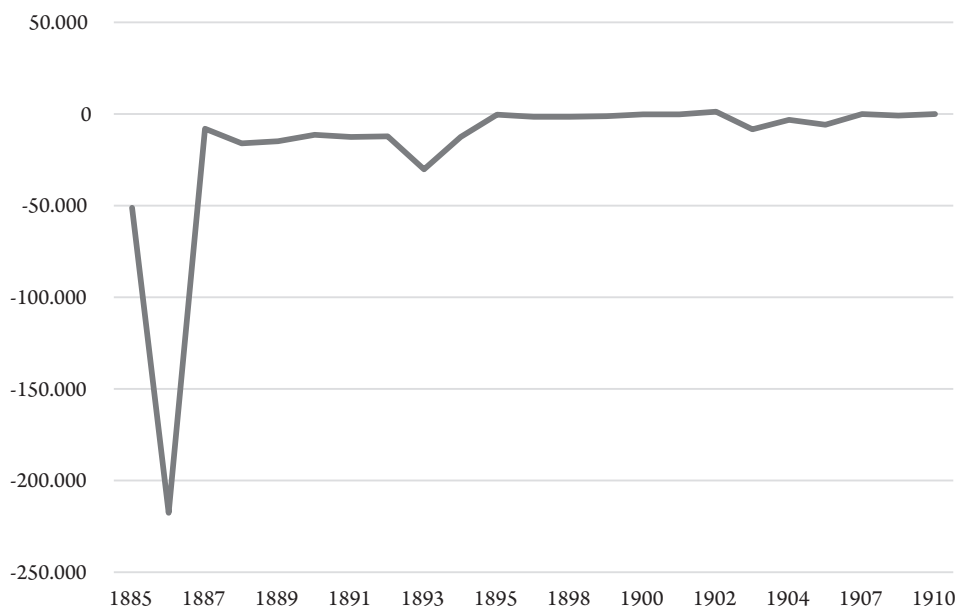


Fig. 1: Profit of the Sibange Plantation (Marks)

Source: C. Woermann Company Archive, Balance Sheets, 1884–1914.

Despite this observation, the characterization of C. Woermann as a colonial business before 1884 is only partially accurate. The company was still primarily a transcontinental and transnational trading business investing and operating in the territory of a foreign colonial power – and beyond. C. Woermann was more akin to a multinational enterprise (MNE) or a free-standing company (FSC) of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries than to a classic colonial business.<sup>20</sup> The capital invested in the Sibange plantation was relatively small. Even though trade in Gabon was supported by the French government, Woermann's business activities overall were not dependent on colonial policy. The colonial impetus of C. Woermann before the establishment of the German colonial empire lays in its economic expansion utilizing French colonial power. Here, extra-economic factors – namely the threat and use of military force – became key to the growing success of the business. It was the desire to bypass African middlemen that helped to shape the colonial annexation of Cameroon.

#### 4. Colonial Annexations as Public-Private Partnerships

The establishment of a permanent branch in Cameroon in 1868 became a turning point and a significant milestone, not only in the establishment of the German colonial empire but also in the accelerating transformation of C. Woermann into a colonial busi-

<sup>20</sup> Jones (2022); Wilkins (1988); Wilkins/Schröter (1998).



ness. Here, the two factors that had already been evident in Gabon came fully to bear. First, Woermann pursued a strategy aimed at bypassing the middlemen along the coast from 1884 onward. Second, it sought to create conditions through colonial annexations that would allow for the establishment of a plantation economy.

As it became evident in the early 1880s that Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was no longer opposed to colonial expansion, Adolph Woermann, who took over management of the business after the death of his father Carl in 1880, seized the opportunity and lobbied for an active role of the German Empire in Africa. After preliminary talks with representatives of the Foreign Office, he drafted a concept for the future of German trade in Africa as an exposé for the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce in which he advocated the “acquisition of a piece of territory in West Africa for the establishment of a trading colony”.<sup>21</sup> Woermann gave the colonial ambitions of bourgeois circles a concrete political direction that went beyond the pursuit of mere “colonial fantasies”.<sup>22</sup> Based on his exposé, the famous memorandum of the Chamber of Commerce was created, which provided Bismarck with sufficient reasons for his shift in colonial policy.<sup>23</sup>

In the memorandum of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce dated July 6, 1883, the above-mentioned factors of bypassing the middlemen and establishing a plantation economy are explicitly mentioned. The merchants of the Chamber of Commerce argued that the “acquisition” of Cameroon would be particularly recommended “because it was excellently suited to the establishment of plantations”.<sup>24</sup> However, the memorandum noted that

plantation agriculture was not possible where planters faced the arbitrariness and greed of uncivilized chiefs and were left without rights, fearing that the fruits of long-standing labor and the significant capital required to make previously uncultivated land arable would occasionally be destroyed by an attack from the natives. Therefore, plantation agriculture could only be undertaken where the rule of a civilized nation provided the necessary protection.<sup>25</sup>

The colonial annexation of Cameroon became a significant milestone for C. Woermann as a colonial business. Within a year, the demand from the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce to acquire colonies in West Africa became a reality. This resulted in a notable entanglement of political and economic actors and interests.

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had long opposed any possible colonial expansion of the German Empire. Much has been speculated about the motives for his shift in policy in the early 1880s, and the reasons for this change remain controversial in research. However, there is widespread agreement that a monocausal explanation is insufficient and that it was a combination of domestic and foreign policy considerations that led

21 Bundesarchiv (BArch), R1001/4188, Memorandum by Adolph Woermann, Hamburg, March 1, 1883, pp. 82–85.

22 Cf. Zantop (1997).

23 Todzi (2021).

24 Handelskammer Hamburg (1885), p. 237.

25 Ibid.

Bismarck to support the formal colonial expansion of the German Empire.<sup>26</sup> There is also a consensus on the assumption that Bismarck's shift was partly driven by economic motives. A crucial concern was to enable the expansion deemed necessary from an economic perspective through the promotion of exports.<sup>27</sup> In the few cases where Bismarck spoke positively about colonial possessions, he did so with reference to the economic benefits of colonies.

Nonetheless, Bismarck regarded colonies as unnecessary burdens. He feared that they would incite internal European conflicts and that the German Empire would not be able to defend them in the event of war. In his view, only a few entrepreneurs would ultimately benefit, while the state would bear the costs – a concern that would prove justified. Consequently, entrepreneurs should pursue the expected benefits of expansion through their private initiative; the German Empire should only assist with naval bases, not through formal rule. If support was to be given at all, Bismarck only wanted to support chartered companies that would take over the administration of the territories to be colonized themselves.<sup>28</sup>

For this reason, Woermann camouflaged his rejection of chartered companies. Although he had distanced himself significantly from the establishment of chartered companies just a few years earlier, he suggested at a meeting with government representatives in October 1883 that the territory to be acquired in Cameroon “should initially pass into German private ownership and later be placed under the protection of the emperor”.<sup>29</sup>

However, this concession was little more than political mimicry. Woermann vehemently rejected the establishment of a chartered company in Cameroon. As the owner of the largest German business in the West African market, he had every reason to do so: above all, it would have created competition and could have led to harsh consequences elsewhere. Woermann was concerned about his company's access to the markets of other colonies, and preferred an economically liberal colonial policy that conflicted with large concessionary and chartered companies and their corresponding monopoly rights.<sup>30</sup>

On this point, Woermann only partially yielded to Bismarck's pressure. The “protection treaties” in Cameroon were a consequence of this situation. Eventually, in July 1884, representatives of the two German businesses C. Woermann and Jantzen & Thormählen negotiated with representatives of the Duala over the transfer of sovereignty rights. At the same time, the German traders negotiated the private purchase of land. C. Woermann and Jantzen & Thormählen interpreted the contractual relationships between their companies, the Duala, and the German Empire in such a way that, while sovereign-

26 Lappenküper (2011); Zimmerer (2015).

27 Wehler (1969).

28 BArch N 2306/1, Memorandum of the meeting of Hamburg merchants with Otto von Bismarck on September 25, 1884 in Friedrichsruh, drafted by Johannes Thormählen.

29 BArch R1001/4191, Memorandum of the meeting of the members of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce interested in trade with West Africa with Dr. Krauel in Hamburg on October 31, 1883, drafted on November 7, 1883, fol. 142.

30 BArch R1001/6974, Minutes of the “Kolonialrat” (Colonial Council) meeting dated June 13, 1899, fol. 20.

ty rights were transferred to the German Empire, the two companies “acquired private ownership of all the land to which the contracts refer, insofar as it is not inhabited or cultivated by natives or in the possession of Europeans”.<sup>31</sup> However, the status of these purchases and the land titles acquired by the German businesses remained disputed even within the German Empire. After an agreement between the African authorities and the German merchants was reached and the contracts were signed, the German merchants transferred the sovereignty rights they had acquired to the German imperial commissioner for West Africa, who on July 14, 1884, proclaimed the annexation of Cameroon in an official act.<sup>32</sup>

Even in the following years, the conflict over responsibility for the administration of the territory persisted. Bismarck pressed the Bremen and Hamburg companies to establish a “syndicate for West Africa,” which he believed should take on the role of a chartered company. However, Woermann rejected this proposal. The syndicate for West Africa assumed only an advisory function and was dissolved in 1886.<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Building a Colonial Economy

C. Woermann remained a hybrid colonial business. Adolph Woermann’s economic interests prevented him from founding a prototypical colonial business with a chartered company. While Woermann paved the way for formal colonial rule, the business – despite the political closeness of its senior director – remained at a certain distance from the colonial state. This changed little with the evolution of the plantation economy and Woermann’s investments in concessionary companies in Cameroon.

As early as 1885, Woermann founded the “Kamerun Land- und Plantagengesellschaft” (Cameroon Land and Plantation Company, KLPG), the first plantation company in Cameroon.<sup>34</sup> The KLPG was a colonial business *per se*. It only came into being after the foundation of the German colony of Cameroon and it relied on government support for the recruitment of workers. In its first annual report, the KLPG’s supervisory board already announced that the “labor issue” – i. e. the difficulty of organizing cheap labor – was the central problem for the company going forward:

31 BArch R1001/3199, Adolph Woermann and Jantzen & Thormählen to the Foreign Office, Hamburg, January 21, 1886, fol. 4 f.; BArch R1001/4447, Eduard Woermann to Privy Councilor Meyer, Hamburg, April 18, 1914, fol. 87–89.

32 Ardener (1968).

33 For more on this, see: Todzi (2023), pp. 160–166.

34 Among the limited partners of the company were Wilhelm Oechelhäuser, Ferdinand Scipio, the director of Deutsche Bank Georg von Siemens, as well as the firm Ohlendorff. The “Kamerun Land- und Plantagengesellschaft” had a capital of 280,000 marks, of which 50,000 marks were contributed in the form of land ownership by C. Woermann and Jantzen & Thormählen. See Staatsarchiv Hamburg (StaHH) 231–3\_B 13441, Handelsregister Kamerun Land und Plantagen Gesellschaft Woermann, Thormählen & Co 1885–1886; BArch R 1001/3426, fol. 5. For more on the history of the KLPG, see Todzi (2023), pp. 214–225.

We [...] believe [...] that a complete and satisfactory solution to this issue can only be achieved with the help of the government, and it may be advisable, as the prosperity of the company partially depends on it, to encourage the government to address this issue more closely [...].<sup>35</sup>

By 1892, the majority of workers on its Bimbia plantation came from Liberia and the Gold Coast, but mistreatment by European overseers threatened to deplete this source of labor. Consequently, the company turned to forced recruitment of prisoners of war, employing 230 Mabea and Batanga individuals captured during “punitive expeditions” in 1893. In the company’s 1894 annual report, the board expressed hope that the “labor issue [...] is well on the way to being resolved”, as the colonial government had transferred 105 “Yaundes freely recruited by Lieutenant Dominik on relatively favorable terms”.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the government, in response to an inquiry from the plantation manager, had “promised the recruitment of about 100 Mabea”.<sup>37</sup> The degree of voluntariness among these “free workers” likely varied significantly; however, in instances where recruitment occurred directly after military campaigns, it can be assumed to have been minimal. The question of free voluntary labor is particularly notable in the case of child “recruitment”. In a complaint to the government, one plantation manager for example lamented the fact that, of the 188 workers transferred to his plantation as part of the colonial government’s labor allocation, 41 were children. The manager’s issue with this situation was not that minors were involved at all, but rather that the KLPG had to pay the full bounty of 10 marks for the children instead of just half as originally stipulated – a vivid illustration of the cynicism of colonial forced labor.<sup>38</sup>

The KLPG became the first plantation company in Cameroon to operate profitably, distributing a five percent return totaling 25,000 marks in 1897.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the founders of the shareholding company, C. Woermann and Jantzen & Thormählen, received profit-based bonuses. However, from 1903 onward, the KLPG began to incur losses, which had reached 350,000 marks by early 1905.<sup>40</sup> After May 1905, shareholders debated whether it was viable to continue the business under the existing conditions. Among the options considered was increasing the share capital from 600,000 to 1 million marks, but this idea was abandoned, as the increase would have been almost entirely consumed by the debts. Consequently, the decision was taken to sell the plantations to C. Woermann. The purchase agreement was signed in 1906.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, the decision to sell the company to C. Woermann reflected the attempt to stabilize the plantation’s future within the group, possibly in the hopes of long-term profitability. Nevertheless, the operation remained a financial burden for C. Woermann. Even though the KLPG was a colonial business – relying on expropriated land and forced labor provided by the

35 ANY FA1/468, Report of the Supervisory Board, Hamburg, August 15, 1892, fol. 6.

36 ANY FA1/468, Report of the Supervisory Board, Hamburg, December 31, 1893, fol. 16.

37 Ibid.

38 ANY FA1/186, Friederici to Puttkamer, Kriegsschiffhafen July 9, 1901, fol. 15 f.

39 BArch R1001/3427, Balance Sheet of the KLPG, Hamburg, June 30, 1897, fol. 133.

40 BArch R1001/3429, Woermann to the shareholders of the KLPG, Hamburg, May 1905, fol. 5.

41 ANY FA1/468, Sales contract between the KLPG and C. Woermann, Hamburg, July 6, 1906, fol. 96 f.

colonial state – its importance within the Woermann business group remained relatively marginal compared to other business sectors.

Investments in concessionary companies were an even clearer indication of a developing colonial conglomerate. The concession system, designed to increase the extraction of resources while reducing state investment, fundamentally altered the economic landscape of colonies in Central Africa. All major colonial powers granted concessions to private companies in Africa. As a model introduced to ensure efficient exploitation, these concession policies mirrored the practices seen in places such as the Dutch East Indies and the Congo Free State, which became notorious for its brutal exploitation methods.<sup>42</sup> Adolph Woermann's involvement with the two major private companies that were granted concessions in Cameroon, the Gesellschaft Süd Kamerun (GSK) and the Gesellschaft Nordwest Kamerun (GNK), exemplified the practice of strategic investment in this colonial business model.<sup>43</sup> Initially, Woermann viewed cooperation with other investors and foreign entrepreneurs, particularly Belgians, as pragmatic – a necessary measure given the existing economic challenges in southeastern Cameroon.<sup>44</sup> However, he was also aware of the potential conflicts that concession assignments could pose for trade. As the realities of his involvement with the GNK and GSK became apparent, including their unprofitability and clashes with his own trading interests, Woermann made the decision to withdraw from these enterprises.

Woermann's initial support for concessionary companies was tempered by his growing concern over monopolistic practices that could stifle competition. This reflected a broader tension within colonial economies where the interests of different groups, such as trading firms versus plantation companies and concessionary companies, clashed over issues including labor regulations and market access.<sup>45</sup> With the "Inwertsetzung" ("valorization") of the colony from 1895 onward, increasingly open conflicts emerged between various economic interest groups, particularly over the role of the colonial state in regulating and controlling the labor market. The Woermann group initially adopted an ambiguous position due to the differing economic interests it represented. However, given C. Woermann's economic dependence on both labor recruitment for rubber and palm kernel trading and the independent activities of African producers and traders, the company eventually favored a more economically liberal order in the labor market.<sup>46</sup>

Even at the height of colonial capitalism in Cameroon, the Woermann group as a whole remained a hybrid colonial business, with investments in plantation and concessionary companies being the clearest instances of its colonial dimension. Woermann's business operations were headquartered in Hamburg and its investments were predominantly conducted in the interest of its owners residing in Germany. The place of business activity for Woermann was only partially in the German colony of Cameroon, where it

42 Frankema/Buelens (2013).

43 Ballhaus (1968); Oestermann (2022), pp. 257–391.

44 BArch R1001/6974, Minutes of the "Kolonialrat" (Colonial Council) meeting dated June 13, 1899, fol. 20.

45 Hausen (1970).

46 BArch R1001/3232, C. Woermann to Wilhelm Solf, Hamburg, July 19, 1913, fol. 67 f.

engaged in plantation agriculture and participated in concessionary companies. These investments not only sought profit but also relied heavily on the political, military, and economic structures established by colonial rule. For example, the concessionary companies were granted monopolies that enabled them to exploit resources and labor under colonial conditions. Furthermore, through these business activities, the Woermann group significantly contributed to the maintenance and strengthening of the colonial order. By investing in plantations and engaging with concessionary companies, Adolph Woermann was not only profiting from but also reinforcing the economic structures that supported colonial governance, thereby highlighting the interconnectedness of his business ventures with the broader objectives of colonialism. Thus, Woermann's investments exemplify the characteristics of a colonial business in that they were rooted in the imperial metropolis, operated within the colonies, benefited from colonial structures and contributed to the continuity of the colonial system.

Nonetheless, the characterization of the Woermann group as a colonial business applies only marginally to the overall conglomerate, as the distinctly colonial enterprises – namely, the concessionary companies and plantations – accounted for only a small share of the total revenues and investments of the group. While these ventures were indeed directly tied to the colonial economy and exhibited the characteristics of colonial businesses, their financial impact on the conglomerate was limited. The majority of Woermann's business activities and profits were generated through trade and shipping, which operated across various regions and often outside the colonial framework. As such, while the concessionary companies and plantations were an important aspect of Woermann's operations in Cameroon, they did not dominate or define the business group as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. Logistics of Empire

The most significant change that allowed the Woermann group to participate even more in the global imperial order and became fundamental to the coloniality of the Woermann group was the foundation of the Woermann Linie in 1885 and the gradual shift from a trading to a logistics business.

C. Woermann had begun offering shipping services back in the 1850s. When it first offered liner services to West Africa in 1882, this was already achieved in collaboration with the German state: Adolph Woermann managed to introduce the service while concluding a contract with the Reichspost (imperial postal authority) for mail delivery to West Africa, so that on April 1, 1882, the "Aline Woermann" became the first mail steamer of the line to Liberia, Lagos, Cameroon, and Ambriz, Angola. Woermann emphasized

47 Todzi (2023), p. 257.



that the status of a mail steamer line “provided extraordinary assistance in the competition with the English shipping lines”.<sup>48</sup>

The colonial expansion of the German Empire in 1884 changed the situation of this liner service fundamentally. Even before the colonial annexations, there was a significant increase in trade between Hamburg and West Africa, and the expectation that this trend would continue was not unfounded. Direct imports amounted to 1.3 million marks in 1870, rising within a decade to 6.7 million marks. The trade reached a preliminary peak in 1884 at 13.3 million marks, having increased tenfold within 14 years.<sup>49</sup> It was quite plausible that this trend would continue, and Adolph Woermann himself held out hope that the German colonies would become a decisive engine of growth. However, it quickly became clear that the slow-paced expansion of the C. Woermann shipping company could not keep up with developments – especially when it came to the transformation from sail to steam. As a consequence of this change, the Woermann Linie was hived off in 1885. Additional capital was needed for the construction and purchase of new steamships and for the expansion of the line – far more capital than the Woermann family business could contribute on its own. In the spring of 1885, the management decided to establish a new stock corporation and outsource the shipping business. On June 15, 1885, the Woermann Linie was founded.<sup>50</sup>

The establishment of the Woermann Linie marked the effective beginning of a family-run corporate structure. The founders aimed for a close interrelationship between the trading house and the shipping company. This was evident from the fact not only that C. Woermann retained the majority of the shares but also that board members of the shipping line had to be partners of the company. The relationship between the two businesses was contractually defined so that C. Woermann managed and organized the Woermann Linie, equipped the ships, provided their offices, and kept the books, while receiving in return 1 % of the gross freight income and a flat sum of 1,250 marks for each voyage.<sup>51</sup>

The Woermann Linie became the epitome of the German Empire’s colonial maritime logistics. Its significance as a central transoceanic link between the German Empire and its West African colonies was reinforced by the fact that it remained the only German shipping company to offer permanent liner services in the region until 1906. The number of ships increased from the initial five steamers totaling 7,400 GRT in 1885 to 15 steamers totaling 26,400 GRT in 1895, to 36 steamers totaling 75,000 GRT in 1904. While the owners of C. Woermann were somewhat reluctant to invest in the German colonies themselves, investments in the shipping business saw a massive increase. Around 1900,

48 Probefahrt des Stahl-Schrauben-Dampfers “Eduard Bohlen”, in: *Afrika-Post. Organ für deutsche Interessen in Afrika*, 1.12.1889.

49 Harding (1986), pp. 363–391.

50 StaHH 231-3 B 22821, commercial register entry of June 23, 1885. For more on the history of the shipping lines Woermann-Linie and Deutsch Ost-Afrika-Linie, see: Todzi (2023), pp. 326–408.

51 Statut für die Afrikanische Dampfschiffs-Actien-Gesellschaft (Woermann-Linie) (1885).



more of C. Woermann's capital was tied up in the Woermann Linie than in all the other (sub-)companies of the family group combined.<sup>52</sup>

The Woermann Linie benefited particularly from transimperial economic interconnections. The majority of the cargo handled by the Woermann Linie came from regions outside the German colonies in West Africa. In 1913, of a total of 881,000 tons transported by the Woermann Linie, only about 331,000 tons – 38 % – were transshipped in Togo, Cameroon, and German South West Africa. The rest – about 550,000 tons – came from areas outside the German colonies, primarily from the British colonies of Gold Coast and Nigeria.<sup>53</sup>

This transimperial entanglement led to contracts with the Congo Free State, the private colony of Belgian King Leopold II. In the 1890s, the Woermann Linie established a Belgian subsidiary to conduct subsidized voyages to the Congo State. Having formed a syndicate with the British shipping line African Steamship Company in 1891 to run monthly voyages between Belgium and the Congo, the Woermann Linie then founded its subsidiary, the Société Maritime du Congo (SMC), in Antwerp in 1895, following the African Steamship Company's establishment of the Compagnie Belge Maritime du Congo (CBMC).<sup>54</sup> This British-German-Belgian syndicate concluded a contract with the administration of the Congo Free State under which both companies were to ensure biweekly voyages under the Belgian flag between Antwerp and the Congo in return for subsidies. Initially, the syndicate owned three steamers, of which the CBMC contributed two and the SMC one, the "Eduard Bohlen".<sup>55</sup> Soon the number increased to a total of six ships, two of which belonged to the Woermann Linie. Despite the subsidies, the SMC proved a failure. The volume of freight and passenger traffic was too low for the biweekly transports. From 1900 onward, the SMC only contributed one steamer to the joint service; it then withdrew completely in 1901 and was eventually liquidated. It was almost ten years before the Woermann group would re-enter the market, after the transformation of the Congo Free State into a Belgian colony. In this regard, the Woermann group was a hybrid colonial business that profited from the extractive colonial economy in Africa and, in special cases, maintained a particular closeness to the colonial authorities of other colonial powers besides the Germans.

Nonetheless, German colonial rule in West Africa indirectly supported the Woermann Linie by countering British competition. The significantly larger British shipping company Elder Dempster quickly recognized that competing with the Woermann Linie would be a futile endeavor, as the German government would likely foster an alternative German competitor, should the Woermann Linie encounter an existential threat. In this context, the government began subsidizing the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie from 1890 onward, emphasizing the need for a German shipping line to facilitate trade between the German Empire and its colonies. In 1895, Elder Dempster and the Woermann Linie

52 C. Woermann GmbH & Co. KG, balance sheet 1903.

53 Czimmer (1994), p. 14.

54 Davies (1978), p. 65.

55 Taggenbrock (1895), p. 185.

formed a cartel known as the West African Shipping Conference,<sup>56</sup> allowing the Woermann Linie to expand under the protection of the British company, shielded from additional competition.

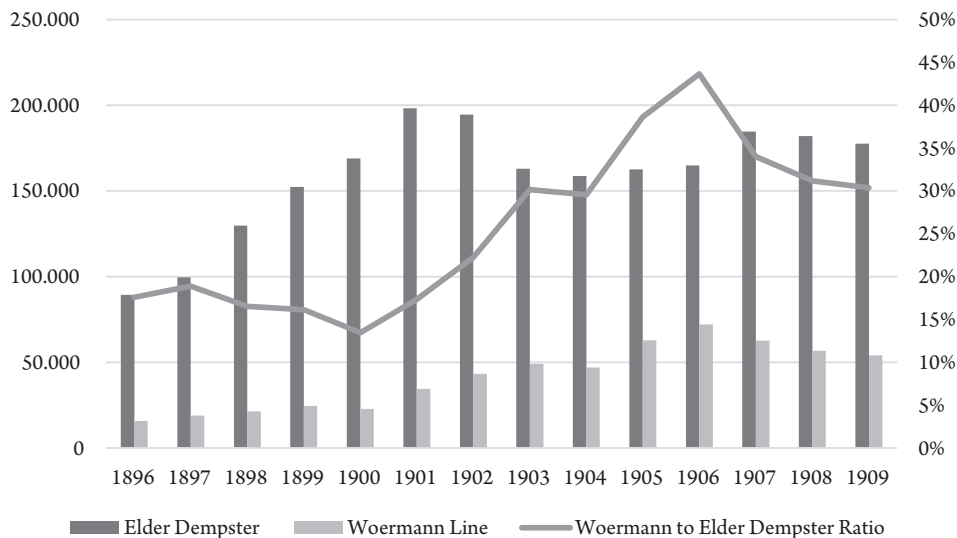


Fig. 2: Comparison of the Fleet Size of the Woermann Linie and Elder Dempster (Net Register Tons)

Source: Davies (2001), p. 413, table 13.

The logistics of the Woermann Linie played a significant political role in the German colonial empire. The German government insisted that, for symbolic reasons, there should always be a German shipping line servicing routes to the German colonies. The state subsidies granted to both the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie and the Woermann Linie (for voyages to German South West Africa) highlighted their political importance. However, it is noteworthy that their business operations were not limited to German colonies, and these colonies accounted for only a small portion of the overall freight. The Woermann Linie's role as a colonial business derived only partially from German colonial rule. Its characterization hinges more importantly on the fact that it was established during the height of imperialism, facilitating trade between Africa and Europe at a time when most West African territories – except for Liberia – were already under colonial control.

<sup>56</sup> Davies (1978), p. 44.

## 7. Enablers of Genocide

A decisive reason for characterizing the Woermann Linie as a colonial business is its role in the colonial war in German South West Africa from 1904 to 1907. In this war, the Woermann Linie and its management became enablers of genocide.<sup>57</sup> When the war against the Herero began in January 1904, the Woermann group had already invested heavily in German South West Africa. As early as 1891, the Woermann Linie had established regular shipping services between the German Empire and German South West Africa. Through various business connections, Woermann increasingly invested capital in South West Africa, notably in the Damara and Namaqua Trading Company, which was later renamed Woermann, Brock and Co. and which still exists as a supermarket chain and wholesaler in Namibia today.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to Cameroon, where C. Woermann was established long before colonial annexations, Woermann's economic activities in German South West Africa only began with the establishment of German colonial rule. Woermann and the German colonial government developed a mutual dependency. Without the German colonial empire, Woermann could not have operated his businesses in South West Africa, and conversely, the colonial government needed the shipping company to keep the colony supplied. According to contracts with the colonial administration, the Woermann Linie had the right to transport all supplies for the colonial army and the colonial authorities on its ships, including horses, weapons, equipment, and provisions.

The shipping company became the most important logistics provider for the war. It is notable that the Woermann Linie was initially unprepared for the extent of the required transports. By mid-1906, at least 19,000 soldiers and officers of the "Schutztruppe" (the colonial army) had been shipped.<sup>59</sup> The vast majority was transported on ships of the Woermann Linie and the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie, which belonged to the Woermann group. The Woermann Linie dedicated a large part of its energy to war logistics and engaged far beyond the contractually agreed level to ensure the smooth operation of the transports. It massively expanded its fleet, purchasing or building a total of 11 ships worth about 18 million marks from mid-1904 to early 1905.<sup>60</sup>

Due to the contracts between the Woermann Linie and the Colonial Department of the Foreign Office, the Woermann Linie held a monopoly on the unloading of all government goods in Swakopmund. However, the unloading conditions in Swakopmund were challenging. In December 1903, the Swakop River changed its course and washed large masses of sand into the sea, especially where a new harbor, the Mole, had been under construction since 1898. Completed in February 1903, the Mole subsequently silted

<sup>57</sup> On the genocide, see: Zimmerer/Zeller (2008).

<sup>58</sup> Woermann, Brock & Co.

<sup>59</sup> Kawlath (2017), p. 13; Sanitäts-Bericht über die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Südwestafrika während des Herero- und Hottentotten Aufstandes für die Zeit vom 1. Januar 1904 bis 31. März 1907. Bearbeitet im Kommando der Schutztruppen im Reichs-Kolonialamt. Berlin 1909, p. 169.; Schwabe (1907), p. 445, attachment 2.

<sup>60</sup> Woermann-Linie (1906).

up, rendering it unusable for months. The strong swell in front of the port not only made the approach difficult but also turned “unloading the steamers into an almost hopeless task at times”.<sup>61</sup>

Adolph Woermann made troop transports a top priority and developed a public-private partnership between the Woermann Linie and the military. In late July 1904, he traveled to South West Africa to assess the landing situation in Swakopmund himself and to plan the next steps. There, he discussed the future landing organization with representatives of the Schutztruppe, the navy, and the military administration. To “facilitate the landing business through as uniform a cooperation of the parties as possible”, it was agreed that one person from both the military and the Woermann Linie would head up the landing operation and take responsibility for it.<sup>62</sup> Notably, the landing officer received the authority to issue directives to the employees of the Woermann Linie. This arrangement exemplifies the close intertwining of economic interests with the structures of colonial power. The Woermann Linie was not merely one logistical service provider among others: it was actively involved at critical junctures in the war logistics. This demonstrates that the business relinquished a proportion of its operational autonomy in favor of colonial interests. Consequently, the Woermann Linie cannot be regarded as a neutral economic actor; rather, it constituted an integral component of the colonial power apparatus and its structures.

This direct integration into the logic of colonial repression also provided special access to the resources of the colonial state. The Woermann Linie was the largest applicant to the labor provision scheme (“*Arbeitergesellung*”) in the Swakopmund district. In January 1905, the transfer of 200 forced laborers was pending.<sup>63</sup> By April 1905, 115 captive forced laborers were working for the Woermann Linie in Swakopmund.<sup>64</sup> Nearly one in ten of the approximately 1,200 employees in Swakopmund were forced laborers. These laborers were to take on “menial work in the landing operations”, which had previously been carried out by Ovambo and Herero contract workers.<sup>65</sup> As few Europeans were willing to take over this work, the Woermann Linie turned to Krumen – seafarers from Liberia – for these tasks.<sup>66</sup> Both Krumen and European workers were significantly more expensive than the previously employed Ovambo and Herero, however. From the outset of the war, the Woermann Linie had pushed to “obtain captive natives to free all Krumen for boat work at the old landing site”.<sup>67</sup> Thus, most Herero forced laborers were engaged in unloading and transporting goods from the customs office to the Woermann Linie’s storage facilities, where they sorted and stacked the goods.

61 Landungsverhältnisse in Swakopmund, in: Neue Hamburgische Börsen-Halle, 26.09.1904.

62 BArch R1001/1865a, Minutes of a meeting between Adolph Woermann, Major Lequis, Captain Lieutenant Connemann, and Dr. Müller, Swakopmund, August 22, 1904, fol. 37.

63 National Archives of Namibia (NAN) BWI 406 E. V.8.spec. Vol. I, February 1, 1906 – March 31, 1906, overview of the prisoners located in the rear area with the inventory as of January 25, 1905, fol. 76.

64 Rhenish Missionary Society (RMG), report by Heinrich Vedder on the situation of Africans in Swakopmund, Swakopmund, March 27, 1905, fol. 63.

65 Woermann-Linie (1906), p. 24.

66 For a recent work on the Krumen, see: Gunn (2021).

67 Woermann-Linie (1906), p. 24.

The living conditions for the Africans forcibly employed by the Woermann Linie were characterized by meager nutrition, hard labor, and physical punishment. And conditions here were worse than at other private companies. The arduous landing work in the cold water of the Atlantic led to illness and deaths. Of the 115 Herero employed by the Woermann Linie in Swakopmund in April 1905, six died within a single month.<sup>68</sup> This corresponds to a mortality rate of 5.2 %. Despite better accommodation and care compared to the government camp (where the mortality rate was 14.1 %),<sup>69</sup> the death toll among laborers in the Woermann Linie concentration camp was, shockingly still significantly higher than that of the horses transported from Hamburg to Swakopmund, which was only 0.6 %.<sup>70</sup>

## 8. (Post-)Colonial Labor and Colonial Continuities

To assess the degree to which Woermann was a colonial business, we need to go beyond an exploration of its relationship with the German colonial empire. Applying the concept of coloniality of the firm to Woermann post 1919 reveals how colonialism was embedded in its structure.

One aspect of this coloniality was the inherent racism of colonial labor relations. Racism was a formative aspect of the “rule of colonial difference”<sup>71</sup> and it is particularly in the racially stratified labor regime that a continued coloniality of the firm can be found. Labor conditions of African employees, as well as their relationships with European supervisors and workers, varied greatly within the Woermann company. Three interdependent factors influenced the specific working conditions of Europeans and Africans alike. The first of these was the type of business, and consequently the type of activity. Work in the Hamburg office differed from work at the Hamburg port, work on the ships differed from work in the trading posts, and this in turn differed from work on a plantation. The second was the employee’s position within the company hierarchy: it made a difference whether they were managing an independent “bush trading post”, operating far from the control and direct oversight of the general agent, or working as an assistant in a main trading post, or carrying out other subordinate tasks. The third factor was whether they were perceived as Black or White, as African or European, and classified within a racist framework.

Woermann’s corporate hierarchy reflected the colonial order. The main representatives of the Woermann company – agents and captains – were exclusively white Europeans. Africans were confined to subordinate positions. This was reflected not only in the organizational structure of the company, but also in its social and cultural context.

68 Rhenish Missionary Society (RMG), report by Heinrich Vedder on the situation of Africans in Swakopmund, Swakopmund, March 27, 1905, fol. 63.

69 Cf. Kreienbaum (2015), pp. 223 f.

70 Of the 11,065 horses transported by the Woermann Line, 66 died during the voyage. Woermann-Linie (1906), p. 56, Annex 2.

71 Chatterjee (1993), p. 10.

German employees of C. Woermann in Africa formed a colonial diaspora community which developed a *colonial habitus* with own norms, values and culture.<sup>72</sup> The white merchants' community separated them from the colonized and created a sense of belonging through representational practices, mutual visits, and joint activities. The ubiquitous hospitality "bound Europeans together in an order of generalized reciprocity".<sup>73</sup> These social practices were about both inclusion and exclusion – inclusion in the society of colonizers and exclusion of the colonized from that community.

Some of these structures and practices persisted beyond the end of the German colonial Empire.<sup>74</sup> In the Gold Coast, for example, where C. Woermann established itself shortly after the First World War, labor relations reflected pre-existing colonial structures.<sup>75</sup> German merchants embedded themselves within the white merchant diaspora of the British colony, reintegrating themselves into a colonial hierarchy without being part of a formal colonial power. Rather than being hired individually, African workers were recruited and hired as part of an ethnic group. This practice was consistent with employers' preferences for ethnically homogeneous groups of workers. Ewe and Ga-Adangbe people were recruited to work in the shops; Mfantsefo people were recruited to work as "boys" in the household; and Liberian Krumen worked in the port warehouses.<sup>76</sup> Some of these communities, such as the Krumen, capitalized on opportunities that enabled them not only to secure higher wages but also to increase their agency. This ethnic concentration sometimes also resulted in the development of a heightened solidarity within labor groups.<sup>77</sup> However, efforts to organize workers into ethnically homogeneous groups were rooted in colonial practices of racial hierarchy and segregation. These measures served to reinforce the dichotomy between colonizers and colonized, while at the same time introducing internal stratifications within the latter group.

In addition to racist practices on the ground, colonial continuities and postcolonial echoes can be identified in the company C. Woermann even after the end of the German colonial empire. After the First World War, C. Woermann restarted its West African business in Spanish Guinea and in the British colony of the Gold Coast. Here, C. Woermann profited from the growth of an export-oriented economy, driven by cocoa plantations that were operated by African entrepreneurs.<sup>78</sup> By 1938, all of C. Woermann's overseas assets were located in West Africa, half of them on the Gold Coast.<sup>79</sup> In the mid-1920s, C. Woermann sought to revive its plantation operations in the British mandate territory of the former German colony of Cameroon, which had been divided up between Britain and France. The company was part of a network of plantation business-

72 For the theory of the "habitus", see: Bourdieu (1977).

73 von Trotha (1994), p. 210.

74 For C. Woermann after 1919, see: Todzi (2024).

75 Kleinöder (2022).

76 Bavendamm (1987a), p. 134.

77 Roger Waldinger described processes of ethnic niching in respect to migrant communities: Waldinger (1994), pp. 3–30.

78 Ross (2014).

79 Bavendamm (1987), p. 72.



es that collectively repurchased the plantations they had formerly operated at Mount Cameroon in an auction from the British authorities.<sup>80</sup> Yet despite initial confidence, the endeavor ultimately failed – in sharp contrast to the company’s successful revival of trading activities in the region.<sup>81</sup>

Another notable aspect of the continuing coloniality of the firm was Woermann’s connection to the imperialist project of the National Socialist regime. Adolph Woermann’s son, Kurt Woermann, promoted an expansionist colonial ethos blended with elements of National Socialist ideology. Likely a member of the NSDAP since 1929, he championed an imperialist agenda that combined overseas colonial ambitions with the National Socialist vision of settlement policy and the implementation of compulsory labor.<sup>82</sup> Kurt Woermann aligned himself with a group of young Hamburg entrepreneurs including Emil Helfferich and Franz Heinrich Witthoefft – both former colonial merchants – who sought to forge links with National Socialism during the Weimar Republic.<sup>83</sup> Woermann, Helfferich, and Witthoefft signed the “Industrielleneingabe”, a petition signed by 19 business and industrial representatives on November 19, 1932 urging President Paul von Hindenburg to appoint Adolf Hitler as Chancellor.<sup>84</sup> After the Nazis seized power in 1933, Woermann sought to advance his amalgamation of National Socialist settlement ideology and colonial expansionism through the colonial revisionist movement. However, while colonial revisionism remained a part of official Nazi ideology, it was never translated into practical policy. Instead, imperial ambitions shifted to the East.

With the onset of Second World War, Eastern Europe emerged as a new colonial space for companies previously focused on overseas trade, due to the Allied blockade that cut off German shipping routes to Africa. Many colonial firms faced uncertainty, with goods that were meant to be exported overseas piling up in Hamburg’s warehouses. In September 1939, Woermann recommended that these goods should be sold in Poland.<sup>85</sup> By spring 1940, he saw opportunities for establishing branches in the General Government, the zone of occupation established after the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany. Seeking loans to fund permanent operations, Woermann opened a trading post in Krasnystaw with the broader objective of developing a network of outposts modelled on those the company had previously established in Africa.<sup>86</sup>

Even after the dissolution of the German colonial empire, the coloniality of the firm persisted. Following the First World War, C. Woermann resumed its operations in and through the colonies of foreign powers, thereby re-establishing itself as a company that supported and benefited from global colonial trade. However, the firm also became an

80 Goodridge (1996); Authaler (2018).

81 Todzi (2024).

82 Deutschland und Kolonialpolitik: Tagung des Deutschen Kolonialvereins in Cuxhaven, in: *Hamburgerischer Correspondent*, 27.9.1930.

83 Matheis (2023).

84 Michalka/Niedhart (1980), pp. 340–342.

85 Matheis (2023), p. 141.

86 Ibid., p. 166; Linne (1997).



instrument of the imperialistic expansion policies of the Nazi regime, participating in the exploitation of Eastern Poland. This persistent engagement with colonial and imperial endeavors shows that a colonial mindset and practices remained deeply embedded within the company's operations, reflecting exploitative economic frameworks that transcended the colonial ethos of the German Empire.

## 9. Conclusion: Woermann and the Coloniality of the Firm

Applying the concept of coloniality to the Woermann group reveals how businesses – both individual companies and the enterprise sector as a whole – were not only economic beneficiaries of colonial rule but also actively reproduced and sustained its underlying power dynamics. Reassessing the Woermann group through the lens of the working definition and typology of expatriate colonial businesses highlights its nature as a hybrid colonial enterprise. This is already evident from its structure.

Founded in 1837, the Hamburg-based trading company C. Woermann has long resembled a multinational enterprise or a free-standing company in terms of its global activities, a characteristic it has retained to this day. Headquartered then as now in Hamburg, it was specifically designed to trade globally, and from the 1860s onward with a special focus on West Africa. The coloniality of the trading firm C. Woermann can be attributed to two significant factors. Firstly, as the nucleus of the family conglomerate, it served as the power center from which decisions were made and economic and political strategies were formulated and implemented. Particularly after Adolph Woermann took over management in 1880, C. Woermann became a vehicle for his pro-colonial policies. Without the company's influence under his direction, the colonial annexation of Cameroon might not have occurred. Adolph Woermann not only advocated publicly for this and advised the German government accordingly, but also took practical steps to prepare for the annexations by leveraging the economic networks of his company as a foundation for the "protection treaties". In this respect, C. Woermann played an instrumental role in establishing formal colonial rule. Another mark of the company's coloniality was its institutional investments in purely colonial enterprises such as the KLPG. Thus, C. Woermann operated not only as a trading firm but also as a hub and launching pad for many other colonial businesses.

Some elements of the Woermann group also met the definition of a colonial business in a stricter sense, such as the KLPG/Bimbia plantation or Woermann's investments in concessionary companies. The group's role extended well beyond its establishment as a colonial enterprise focused exclusively on a German colony. In the case of the KLPG, it not only benefited from the business-friendly policies of the colonial government, which ensured access to vital production factors such as land and labor, but also became a key player in the development of a colonial economy. As a plantation company, the KLPG demonstrated the viability of the plantation economy at Mount Cameroon by achieving profitability in its early years. Although it faced a crisis after the turn of the century, the success of those initial years provided a proof of concept for the potential

of a plantation economy in Cameroon. The economic networks that emerged subsequently led to the establishment of numerous plantation enterprises, which became a significant sector within the colonial economy.

Investments in concessionary companies like the GSK and the GNK also contributed significantly to the political economy of colonial rule. These companies were supposed to “develop” regions in exchange for the trading monopolies granted by the government. From a colonial policy perspective, they were conceived as instruments of economic policy. However, they largely failed to fulfill this purpose. Nonetheless, an important aspect of their role was their capacity to attract additional capital. As large joint-stock companies, they provided an accessible entry point for new investors, thereby enhancing foreign direct investment in the colonies.

The outstanding significance of the Woermann group in terms of its coloniality stems from its infrastructural role in transcontinental shipping. However, this significance cannot be understood solely in structural terms, it was shaped by historical events. In essence, logistics providers such as the Woermann Linie acted primarily as intermediaries. While they served a function within the colonial empire, that function was not inherently colonial, as it was part of cross-border economic processes that were influenced but not strictly determined by the prevailing political power dynamics. The logistics division of the Woermann group, specifically the Woermann Linie and the Deutsche Ost-Afrika Linie, was structured in a manner similar to MNEs. With branches in regions such as Liberia, the Gold Coast, and German South West Africa, the company focused on international shipping services with foreign direct investment as an important dimension of its global operations. However, the most significant foreign direct investments took place during the colonial war in German South West Africa in the context of the repression of anti-colonial resistance and the ensuing genocide.

In this way, due to specific events and the economically pivotal role it had already assumed, the shipping company transformed into an instrumental entity of colonial rule. This fact – especially evident in the Woermann Linie’s involvement in sustaining the colonial order through troop transports and landing logistics in Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht, coupled with its close collaboration with colonial and military authorities – elevated the company’s status beyond that of a mere logistics provider. It became an integral part of colonial governance, thereby establishing a significant dimension of the coloniality of the Woermann group.

Analyzing the Woermann group as a colonial business offers profound insights into the intricate web of colonial economic structures and their socio-political ramifications. This case study reveals that the Woermann group was not merely a passive participant within the colonial economy; rather, it was an active player that shaped and reinforced the dynamics of colonialism. The Woermann group’s strategies and practices both benefited the business and bolstered the interests of the German colonial government while simultaneously entrenching the social and economic inequalities that characterized colonial rule. The case of the Woermann group highlights the interdependence between businesses and state structures, illustrating how firms utilized political support and legal frameworks, a characteristic that remains pertinent to modern MNEs. Moreover, the

lobbying efforts of the Woermann group to influence colonial policies demonstrate the importance of political engagement for firms looking to advance their interests.

From the empirical analysis of the present case study, we can derive several general questions and gain insights that go beyond the individual case. Businesses like the Woermann group benefited from access to markets and resources in the colonies that were granted to them by the respective colonial powers. This allowed them to extract raw materials at low cost, while cheap or even forced labor further reduced production costs. Colonial governments not only subsidized infrastructure development, including ports, railways, and communication systems, enabling businesses to operate more efficiently and profitably, but also offered operational support, including military and legal protection. However, it remains open to question whether companies merely accepted and adapted to these colonial structures or whether an inherent coloniality can be inferred from their operations, organizational structures and networks. The present case study cannot provide a definitive answer to this question. Instead, comprehensive and comparative research is needed that examines firms across different sectors, regions, and political systems. This broader investigation would allow a more nuanced understanding of how coloniality manifested itself within corporate frameworks and how businesses were interwoven with the political and economic landscapes of their time. Such analyses could reveal patterns, similarities, and differences in the way coloniality influenced business practices and relationships in diverse contexts and hence contribute to a more sophisticated appreciation of (post-)colonial business history.

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