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Woman on the Edge of Time

Frieda Schmidt and the Great War in East Africa

This article investigates the impact of World War I and its aftermath on *white*¹ German women living in the German East African colony. I explore what happens when the colonial order, colonial imaginations and fantasies fall apart, and in which way the transitional period of German (post)colonialism between 1913 and 1919 influenced or changed gender, class and RACE relations and constructions.² Since my investigation focuses on the experience and perspective of only one woman, Frieda Schmidt (1890 – 1986), the answers given might not be representative, but her accounts may serve as a sort of microstudy that represents an approach to an underresearched topic. We still do not know much about the lives of ordinary, civilian *white* people, especially about women, during the period indicated and about how these lives were affected by the war. This academic void is difficult to fill because of the scarcity of written records. It seems all the more necessary to work with any material we can find in the archives that has not yet been considered. My main perspective is that of an Africanist specializing in the history of German-African encounters in the (former) German colonies on the African continent as well as in Germany. Although I approach the archival material with rather traditional tools of historical research such as critical textual analysis, my theoretical and methodological background can be found mainly in postcolonial and critical whiteness theories and postcolonial discourse analysis.

1 I use *white* in italics to emphasize its being a marked socio-political category and to make it more vulnerable. I use capital letters for RACE and its derivatives to indicate that I am not referring to a biological category “race” but to racialized groups, conceptions, social, political and economic categories and constructions of inequality as well as mostly asymmetrical forms of power. Lower cases with quotation marks are found when I refer to fantasies of biological purity of “race.”

2 Shortly after the beginning of World War I the Germans started to lose their African colonies Togo, Cameroon, and German Southwest Africa one by one to the European enemy nations who were better equipped for an overseas war. Only German East Africa was defended until the war ended. With the Peace Treaty of Versailles of 1919 it became evident that Germany would not be regaining control over their former territories. Thus, although people might not have been aware of it at the time, the period between 1913 and 1919 was a transitional period between colonialism and – temporal – postcolonialism for Germany.