

Call for Papers

48th Academic Symposium of the Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte e.V.

«Companies and the colonial past»

9th and 10th October 2025

place: tba (Germany)

Companies operate in a globalized world, and they did operate in a globalizing world 150 years ago – a world very much shaped by colonialism and imperialism. The age of colonialism is over, yet its impact is not. The legacy of colonialism and its challenges is fundamental to the current state of the world.

German colonial history has become a vital field in recent years, not only in terms of academic research and debates, but also in terms of public discussions and politics. Calls for the restitution of artwork and museum objects acquired in colonial contexts, as well as calls for reparations and compensation for slavery and colonial crimes have led to the development of legal stances, policies, and pertinent practices. Academic debates on the relation between colonial violence and the Holocaust, or on the concept of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin signal an ongoing struggle with and for a culture of remembrance. In a similar vein, somewhat more tangibly, there are demands for the re-naming of streets and the removal of statues, and controversies regarding colonial stereotypes in the naming and branding of consumer products. Companies are presented with a growing challenge by the need to navigate and engage with these issues, and not only those companies which are aware of a colonial past of their own.

At the same time, we are observing a growing interest in economic issues and approaches such as the New History of Capitalism or the concept of global commodity chains, which also explicitly address German colonial contexts. As far as Business History is concerned, especially British, Dutch, Belgian, and lately German colonialism have come under scrutiny with researchers detailing and investigating the involvement of private business actors in colonialism – and corporate legacies that remain until today. Correspondingly, some companies have begun to open their archives and engage proactively in the debate and in exploring their history, as the best way forward to deal with the implications of it.

The symposium intends to act as a forum for ongoing academic research and to facilitate a dialogue with representatives from companies and other relevant stakeholders. It will thus address both thematic issues as well as methodological questions related to German companies and their colonial pasts. Colonial past is understood here in the broadest possible sense, referring to companies operating in any colonial context from the age of imperialism to the period of decolonization and beyond.

Possible topics of interest include, but are not limited to:

- In what way have individual companies utilized and shaped colonial situations?
- To what extent were colonial investments driven by politics and/or business?
- How were colonial endeavors and specific projects financed? What role did banks play?
- What were the financial results of colonial investments?

- Can foreign direct investments in colonies be mapped, either of specific companies or industries, or in specific colonized regions?
- How can the relationship between business and the state be characterized, both in colonial capitals and in (post-)colonial states? Which role did lobbying and trade associations play (e.g. taxation, subsidies)?
- How have companies dealt with the transfer of colonies to other colonial powers (such as the former German colonies after 1914/1918), and with the decolonization of countries they operated in?
- What impact did colonial business have on local business / colonial trade have on local markets?
- How were labor relations organized, which practices can be observed?
- How were colonial products marketed, and colonial imagery and connotations used in marketing?

Equally of interest are methodological contributions, dealing with challenges, for example in terms of sources and access to archives, and questions such as:

- What approaches and possibilities does corporate history offer for an examination of the colonial past of companies?
- Which approaches and methods can be adapted from colonial, postcolonial and global history?
- Which sources can be used? What role does oral history play?
- In recent years, the entanglement of companies into National Socialism has become a public concern and a focus of historical research. Are there lessons to be drawn regarding companies' colonial pasts?
- How can results be presented and discussed publicly (best practice examples from companies, museums, artists, etc.)?

The conference is scheduled for 9th and 10th October 2025. We invite scholars of all career stages and contributions from the fields of economic, financial, legal, and business history, labor, global, and colonial history, as well as practical examples from the fields of corporate communication/archives, museums and other stakeholders in remembrance culture to contribute their insights and research.

The costs for travel and accommodation will be covered. A publication of the results is intended.

Please submit proposals for papers together with a short abstract (max. 3,500 characters) and **a short CV** to Dr. Andrea Schneider-Braunberger (ahschneider@unternehmensgeschichte.de) **by 20th January 2025**.

The Symposium is organized by Prof. Dr. Alexander Engel, Dr. Marie Huber, Prof. Dr. Nina Kleinöder, Dr. Martin Müller, and Prof. Dr. Joachim Scholtyseck.

Please direct any questions to nina.kleinoeder@uni-bamberg.de