In the last decade historiography on the colonial past of European metropolises has become a dynamic field of research. Despite of Germany’s relatively short era as a colonial power the intensity of the colonial impact on different sectors of society becomes more and more evident, from the 18th century up to the Second World War and even beyond. Focussing on academia, we are still rather at the beginning of research on colonial effects. As we presume and partly already know on the basis of previous research in the field, there was a strong colonial impact on ideas no less than on academic practices, disciplinary configurations and institutional formations.

Jens Ruppenthal’s dissertation contributes especially – but not exclusively – to the latter aspect, examining the history of the Hamburg Colonial Institute, which existed between 1908 to 1919. As there has been barely any in depth research on the Hamburg Colonial Institute so far, Ruppenthal fills a gap with his study. Temporally limited in its existence, however the Colonial Institute in Hamburg played an important role as an institutional forerunner of the Hamburg University (which was founded not until the end of the First World War in 1919) and of the Hamburgisches Welt-Wirtschafts-Archiv.

At first, Ruppenthal gives a broader overview on the formation of colonial staff in Germany up to the era of Kolonialdirektor Bernhard Dernburg and focuses on the connection between colonialism and higher education, with cross references to other European countries. Designated in 1907, the aim of the former banker and ‘restructuring specialist’ Bernhard Dernburg was to rise efficiency in the colonial administration after critics in the Reichstag, denouncing loss of control, corruption, lobbyists and inhumanity in Germany’s colonies. A strategy to react by Dernburg was to propagate a “scientific colonialism” (“Kolonisieren ist eine Wissenschaft und Technik”). But Ruppenthal underlines that this was rather an emulation of concepts than a new idea, as for instance this trend came up some years earlier in the United Kingdom.

Ruppenthal characterizes Hamburg’s “imperial landscape” following the approach of “imperial cities” of Driver and Gilbert, comparing Hamburg to Berlin, Bremen and Glasgow, the latter commercial harbour cities like Hamburg, politically in the shadows of the capitals. Regrettably, this comparison remains on a rather general level. The author then displays the situation of higher education in Hamburg, which was already expanding in the form of specialised institutes before the foundation of the Colonial Institute, but in lack of an university.

The last subchapters of chapter three and chapter four show clearly, that Ruppenthal sails virtuously round the dangers of an isolated case study. He does not consider the creation of the Hamburg Colonial Institute as a national project only, but also discusses it in local contexts. He moreover resists approaching the object only functionally (which would have been easy but short-sighted as Ruppenthal’s results reveal). Reflecting on the creation and the design of the Colonial Institute he examines different local interests in the capital and in the city of Hamburg. Dernburgs strategy was already sketched. In Hamburg, the interest of the chairman of the supervisory school authority (Oberschulbehörde), Werner von Melle, was to step foreword in his plans to create a university for Hamburg. However, the city’s Parliament (Hamburgische Bürgerschaft) did not approve of Melle’s plan, hence the creation of the Colonial Institute was necessary. The Colonial Institute was to carry out the administrative functions of the universities.

1 See e.g.: Benedikt Stuchtey (Hgg.), Science across the European Empires, 1800-1950, Oxford 2005; Les sciences sociales en situation coloniale (= Revue d’histoire des sciences humaines 10 (2004)).
schaft), dominated by commercial interests, notoriously had impeded these plans. Nevertheless, as the author argues, it proved to be open for and interested in the creation of an Institute of Applied Colonial Sciences.

In the rivalry among Berlin and Hamburg as possible locations of the new Colonial Institute Hamburg finally won the competition, mainly, as Ruppenthal shows, on the basis of a financial argument. Von Melle had collected a considerable sum by private donors and established a foundation (Hamburgische Wissenschaftliche Stiftung) with the genuine aim of creating an university, but also willing to financially contribute to a Colonial Institute. The lion’s share came from Alfred Beit, a German-British entrepreneur in South African diamond mining. Regrettably the role of the politician and lawyer Johannes Semler in this illuminating story remains nebulous.

In the last chapter Ruppenthal takes a look at the curriculum, school enrolment and at the main disciplines, personalities and research interests at the Colonial Institute. It was earlier said, that Melle and also the ethnologist Georg Thilenius, whose driving force in the creation of the Institute was barely known, saw the Colonial Institute foremost apparently in the function as a university fore-runner. Ruppenthal also shows, that there were active propagandists of colonial expansion and racism among the professorate, such as for example the geographer Siegfried Passetge.

As Ruppenthal made clear in chapter 3, the range of action for the institute was rather bordered as it stood under the control of von Melle and also due to existing conflicts with Berlin as well as with colonial governors. In addition, the interest of students and of companies in the Institute was low. Thus, the main impact of the Colonial Institute can be seen in the area of institutionalisation – for example the first chair in African languages was founded in the context of the Institute – and in the area of research or field study practices. Here one would have wished for a deeper investigation by the author.

Ruppenthal’s study lacks an appropriate conclusion, as well as an index. However, this could be positively interpreted as an animation to read the book in a whole. As a reviewer, I sincerely enjoyed reading it, and I recommend its study, as it is full of original insights, and interesting results. It moreover convinces on the basis of its archival richness and its analytical sharpness.

Footnotes: