

Attitudes towards colonial history and postcolonialism in Germany

Empirical findings

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Abstract

How much do people in Germany know about the colonial era, and how do they perceive contemporary historical culture that addresses this period? Do they consider such engagement relevant? Do they recognise connections between the colonial past and the present? And how, if at all, do they relate the colonial era to other historical events and developments?

These questions are central to the project *Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia* (*Kolonialgeschichte, Geschichtskultur und historisch-politische Bildung in Nordrhein-Westfalen*). This working paper outlines the project's structure, research questions, and methodology. In addition, it presents initial findings from one of its core studies, conducted in collaboration with the polling institute *forsa*. To date, this study constitutes the first nationally representative large-scale survey on this topic in Germany. Reflecting the character of a working report, the paper also discusses methodological challenges encountered during data collection and preliminary analysis.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, German colonial era, historical culture, empirical survey, public opinion

1 Introduction

What do people in Germany know about the colonial era, and how do they perceive the ways in which it is addressed in contemporary historical culture? To what extent do they consider such engagement relevant? Do individuals feel any personal connection to the events and developments of German colonial rule? And if such connections are largely absent, should this be accepted as given, or does it imply an educational and political responsibility to foster greater understanding and, consequently, engagement?

These are among the central questions explored by the project *Colonial History, Historical Culture, and Historical-Political Education in North Rhine-Westphalia* (*Kolonialgeschichte, Geschichtskultur und historisch-politische Bildung in Nordrhein-Westfalen*). This third-party funded project, carried out at the Universities of Aachen and Münster, is supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science and the State Agency for Civic Education in North Rhine-Westphalia.

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This paper first provides an overview of the overall project before turning in greater depth to the empirically grounded subproject based at the University of Münster, which directly addresses the questions outlined above.

Given that the data from the 2,000 interviewees have only recently been collected, this text should be considered a working paper. It discusses the subproject's primary research questions, concepts, methodology, and initial findings from one of the project's main studies – a survey conducted in cooperation with the polling institute forsa. While especially the opinion research institute YouGov has examined and compared public attitudes in several countries towards their respective former colonial powers based on a rather small number of items (Smith, 2020) to date, this study represents the first nationally representative survey on this topic in Germany. Reflecting its status as a work-in-progress report, the paper also considers methodological challenges and unresolved issues encountered during data collection and preliminary analysis.

2 Colonial history, historical culture, and historical-political education

In line with the mandate set out in the coalition agreement of the current state government (CDU Nordrhein-Westfalen & Die Grünen Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022), the project places particular emphasis on the colonial history of what is now the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia at the centre of its four-part research agenda. The first subproject, conducted within the framework of a large-scale critical edition of primary sources, reconstructs the history of colonial events with a specific focus on regional contexts in North Rhine-Westphalia.

A second subproject is devoted to the systematic analysis of contemporary forms of remembrance and engagement with the colonial past in both formal and non-formal contexts in North Rhine-Westphalia. A third develops educational materials, primarily for the non-formal educational sector. The fourth subproject – on which this paper focuses – broadens the project's perspective by extending its scope to Germany as a whole. Through its empirical approach, it also provides a foundation for the development of educational materials.

The central research interest of this subproject lies in the empirical assessment and analysis of attitudes towards the German colonial past and its representation in contemporary historical culture. This investigation is conducted within the framework of an academic survey that encompasses different groups of respondents. In addition to a representative sample of the general population, the survey includes university students of history, school pupils, teachers, and experts working in non-formal education who are professionally connected to the topic of colonial history. A fundamental premise of our approach is the belief that, if made aware of these issues during the survey, respondents will engage in interpretive and evaluative relationships with the German colonial past, as well as with contemporary colonial and decolonial phenomena.

3 Attitudes

This research objective and its underlying proposition require theoretical refinement and the integration of the following key analytical categories: attitudes, knowledge, historical consciousness, and historical culture. Accordingly, we place particular emphasis on the concept of attitudes, which was described decades ago as “the most distinctive and indispensable concept” in the field of social psychology (Allport, 1935, p. 798). However, discussing attitudes towards both historical and contemporary events inevitably involves reference to historical knowledge (Jeismann, 1977, p. 13). Simultaneously, the interview situation reveals the interconnection between historical consciousness and historical culture. To summarise, the processes of interviewing and data analysis are understood as a dense process of potential externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation, and accordingly, as a complex interplay between historical consciousness and historical culture (Handro, 2025; Heuer, 2025; Thünemann, 2018, pp. 144–148; Thünemann, 2023; Zülsdorf-Kersting, 2021, pp. 105–113). The prompts employed in this study ideally elicit processes of externalisation, thereby rendering previously inaccessible, purely mental operations of historical consciousness communicable (Jeismann, 1988, pp. 14–16; Rüsen, 2013, pp. 38–40). The subsequent analysis of knowledge and attitudes is to be understood as an engagement with

the results of this (communicative) process of externalisation. A key objective of the survey is to facilitate the interpretation of articulations (of traces) of individual historical consciousness (Rüsen, 1994).

Coinciding with the widely accepted definition by Geoffrey Haddock and Gregory R. Maio (2008, p. 113), attitudes are commonly understood as an “overall evaluation of a stimulus object”. According to the multi-component model proposed by Mark P. Zanna and John K. Rempel (1988, pp. 315–334), which remains a central framework for modelling attitudes, this global evaluation arises from the interaction of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Concurrently, attitudes exert reciprocal effects on all three of these domains. As with the concept of historical consciousness, attitudes cannot be directly observed. They require expression through what Jörn Rüsen, recognised for his contributions to historical theory, termed ‘practically effective’ behaviour (1994, p. 5).

As posited by Haddock and Maio, the attitudes in question vary in terms of their content, structure, function, as well as their strength. This variance also mediates the other dimensions to a certain degree. The following overview of these dimensions of attitudes is intended to underscore both connections to history didactics (notably in relation to Rüsen’s and Karl-Ernst Jeismann’s theoretical frameworks) and project-specific implications.

Attitude content: In the multi-component model previously referenced, *cognitions* comprise thoughts and beliefs about the attitude object, together with attributes ascribed to it (Haddock & Maio, 2008). These may include the self, other individuals, social groups, abstract entities (such as colonialism), or concrete phenomena including, for instance, an anti-racism protest. The *affective component* encompasses emotions and feelings either pre-existing in relation to the attitude object or caused and elicited by the very act of questioning. The *behavioural component* refers to past or potential behaviours directed towards the object in question.

The association between core definitions of attitudes and core elements of theoretical frameworks in history didactics, such as Rüsen’s dimensions of historical culture, is, in our view, clearly observable. The overlap extends far beyond mere terminological similarities, as evidenced by the cognitive dimension (Rüsen, 2013, pp. 78–85). The behavioural component appears likely to be linked to the political dimension of historical culture. Within the various sub-operations of historical thinking or historical consciousness, affective engagements, for example, emotionally charged affinities or aversions, are always at play. In Jeismann’s distinction between historical causal judgements and historical value judgements, the concept of evaluative assessment of a (historical or historically relevant) object is given particular emphasis (Jeismann, 2000, pp. 65–66; Thünemann & Jansen, 2022, pp. 73–75).

In relation to the present research project and the survey data under consideration, it can be said that the participants’ responses may be interpreted, at least partly, as articulations of their engagement with historical ‘facts’, as well as causal and value judgements, especially as these are embedded within the prompts given. This does not necessarily imply that participants engage in historical reasoning from a scientific perspective. Rather, Jeismann’s and Rüsen’s theoretical frameworks offer conceptual tools to integrate phenomena affiliated to historical culture and their perception in a nuanced and differentiated manner into the survey design. If items reflecting historical value judgements – e.g., in Likert-scale statements – were excluded, the survey would be just as incomplete as it would be without items addressing historical orientation and motivation in Rüsen’s sense (2013, pp. 41–43).

Attitude structure, function, and strength: These dimensions represent essential features beyond the scope of attitude content. In terms of structure, a distinction can be made between unidimensional and bidimensional perspectives. The former describes cases in which beliefs, emotions, and behavioural tendencies align consistently in either a positive or negative direction towards the attitude object. Conversely, bidimensional attitudes contain both positive and negative responses to the same object – a phenomenon frequently referred to as attitudinal ambivalence. Such ambivalent attitudes are of particular significance for this research project. Discrepancies between expressed beliefs (e.g., “contemporary colonialism must be overcome”) and observable behaviour (e.g., the use of racist language) may be equally informative.¹

Attitude functions concern the underlying needs or purposes fulfilled by particular attitudes or their expression. Commonly distinguished functions include the knowledge function (organising information into evaluative categories), the utilitarian function (maximising benefit or utility), the social-adjustive function (e.g., facilitating group belonging or acceptance), the ego-defensive function (protecting self-esteem), and the value-expressive function (expressing central

1 Refer to Kleinschmidt (2021, p. 5) on the question of whether macro-level attitudes (such as the dismantling of colonial structures) may come into conflict with micro-level attitudes (such as manifestations of everyday racism).

personal values). While more detailed questionnaires or qualitative interviews may be required to identify such functions with greater precision, analysing them can assist in refining the conceptualisation of individual historical sense-making. In summary, we consider these functions of attitudes particularly relevant, as the subjects of colonial history and postcolonialism raise questions of positioning and positionality with an intensity rarely matched by other historical or societal issues.

While analyses of attitude structure offer insights into the consistency or inconsistency of attitudes, and functional analyses explore their aims and roles, the investigation of attitude strength sheds light on their temporal stability, resistance to external influence, and potential behavioural consequences. Attitude strength also tends to correlate positively with knowledge about the attitude object. However, it is important to note that knowledge acquisition itself may be strongly mediated by pre-existing attitudes. The connection between knowledge and attitudes – particularly in the context of engaging with colonial history and its contemporary societal discussion, which we conceive as an interpretive challenge – will be discussed in greater depth later on.

The issue of appropriate measurement instruments is closely linked to questions regarding attitudinal strength and its variance. Among the most well-established and widely used measures is the Likert scale, which relies on the aggregation and averaging of item responses. The Likert format presupposes explicit attitude measurement, requiring respondents to provide direct statements of their evaluations, opinions, or stances with regard to the respective attitude object. In contrast to more inferential or indirect methods (e.g., the semantic differential), it facilitates the modelling of self-reported attitudes with greater clarity.

4 Methodological design and preliminary findings

Accordingly, Likert scales – primarily five-point bipolar Likert scales in our case – constitute the core of the extensively pre-tested questionnaire instrument. The survey was conducted among a sample of 2,000 individuals aged 18 and above residing in Germany. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire (valid cases only). The polling institute *forsa* ensured the intended representativeness of the study by implementing appropriate sampling procedures and applying statistical weighting factors (*iterative proportional fitting*).

The 60 items – four of which were open-ended questions – were developed by the project team and reviewed by a group of experts from academia and civil society.² These items can be categorised into the following analytical dimensions: perceived relevance and interest; personal affectedness; historical interpretive and explanatory patterns; contemporary perceptions of the impact of colonial structures; and political implications. It is evident that these dimensions are interrelated, and, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation.

At this early stage, with only the raw data at hand, a comprehensive analysis cannot yet be presented. Moreover, the study has yet to be embedded within the broader academic research discourse. Nevertheless, an initial descriptive-analytical review of the data yields insightful preliminary observations. Some of these will be outlined concisely in the following section. The presentation is confined to four noteworthy observations or findings, each of which integrates a range of individual results.

4.1 General awareness of Germany's colonial past and interest in the topic

A substantial proportion of German citizens (91%) are aware that Germany once held colonies. This knowledge is somewhat less prevalent among respondents who have received lower levels of formal education. However, both interest in and engagement with the topic of German colonialism and (post)colonialism remain generally low. A mere 12% of the participants report being very or strongly interested in the subject, while 41% indicate a moderate level of interest. Almost half of the respondents (46%) report little or no interest at all. Supporters of the Left Party (*Die Linke*) are slightly more likely than the general population to express a strong interest (23%).

2 We are grateful to numerous experts for their support and constructive, thoughtful feedback. We would like to extend special thanks to Philipp Erdmann, Johannes Meyer-Hamme, and Sahra Rausch for their contributions to a multi-day methodological workshop within the project; to Bebero Lehmann, Rahab Njeri, Serge Palasie, and Gifty Wiafe for serving as members of the advisory board of an exhibition project linked to our surveys; and to Merisa Duranović, Linus Hüsken, Andreas Johannes, and Sebastian Lange for their dedicated and valuable work as student and/or research assistants on the project. We sincerely thank all of them.

While the initial items of the questionnaire were designed to evaluate prior interest and points of contact with Germany's colonial past and its contemporary societal engagement, they also reveal a pattern: a significant proportion of respondents appear to become aware of the scope and relevance of the topic only through the process of engaging with the questionnaire. As the survey progresses, interest appears to increase, or is at least stimulated, as respondents encounter the complexity and multidimensionality of the subject. This interpretation is supported by the responses to the final, open-ended item, which invited the participants to share any concluding thoughts on the topic of "Germany's colonial past and how it is addressed today". Many respondents acknowledged that it was only through the questionnaire that they could gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue's scope and significance.

4.2 (Foundational?) Historical knowledge

In order to ascertain the extent to which German citizens possess at least basic factual knowledge about Germany's colonial past, a set of knowledge-based multiple-choice questions was included in the survey.

A large majority of respondents (82%) accurately identified Africa as the geographical focus of the former German colonial empire. However, considerable knowledge gaps became evident with more specific questions. For instance, less than a third (31%) of respondents could correctly identify the decade in which the German Empire began acquiring its colonies (Correct answer: 1884; Incorrect options: 1792, 1815, 1902, 1929). Furthermore, only 13% correctly identified Lothar von Trotha as the key figure responsible for the genocide of the (Ova)Herero and Nama in present-day Namibia, as opposed to Kaiser Wilhelm I [sic], Adolf Lüderitz, Otto von Bismarck, or Hermann Göring. One-third (33%) provided an incorrect answer, while 55% left the question unanswered. In a similar vein, inconsistent levels of knowledge were observed in responses to questions on, for instance, the restitution debate and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Beyond the findings themselves – namely, that basic historical knowledge in this field is not widely disseminated – the implications of these gaps present a methodological challenge in questionnaire design that is not uncommon. At both the early and later stages of the questionnaire, knowledge-based items led to disproportionately high dropout rates. Without seeking to overinterpret, we nonetheless regard this as a finding to be taken seriously. Consequently, the knowledge questions underwent a process of revision and simplification through extensive rounds of pretesting and refinement. Ultimately, the number of such items was reduced, and their placement was shifted to roughly the second quarter of the questionnaire.

While individuals' attitudes towards historical topics are, of course, valid regardless of their ability to answer factual questions correctly, there is no doubt that a basic level of historical knowledge could be advantageous, especially when forming more complex historical value judgments.

4.3 Abstract and concrete forms of responsibility

In addressing the question of historical responsibility, which is deliberately distinguished in the questionnaire from the notion of historical guilt, a noteworthy pattern emerges. At an abstract level, statements calling for expressions of responsibility – which we consider initially rather symbolic – receive moderate to moderately high levels of agreement. These include, for example, proposals to establish a National Day of Remembrance for the victims of German colonialism or to erect a memorial in their honour.

In contrast, the respondents expressed considerably more reluctance when it comes to acknowledging present-day responsibility or supporting concrete political measures in relation to Germany's former colonies. Nearly half of all respondents (48%) believe that the Federal Republic of Germany should not be held responsible for the current challenges faced by the regions of former German colonies. Slightly more than one-third (34%) support the proposal that Germany should take greater responsibility in addressing those problems, such as through increased development cooperation. Even fewer respondents support financial compensation for crimes committed during the colonial period (20%) or the easing of immigration for people from former colonies (14%).

4.4 How should we approach racially charged terminology?

Departing from the predominant use of Likert scales and the limited number of open-ended items included due to time constraints, a small set of questionnaire items presented respondents with specific “cases” or controversies related to the survey’s topic and invited them to take a position on these issues.

Such a case concerns the contemporary handling of racially charged terminology in children’s literature. One notable example is the term “Negerkönig” in the German translation of Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking* (*Pippi Langstrumpf: Pippi in Taka-Tuka-Land*), as well as place names like “Mohren-Apotheke” (literally: “Moor Pharmacy”). Only a small share of respondents (7%) support changing such terms. By contrast, 38% advocate retaining them without restriction, while 33% support retaining them, albeit with the incorporation of a historical contextualisation. A further 15% of the respondents expressed the opinion that such decisions should depend on the specific circumstances of each case.

This item is of particular interest, as it reveals significant demographic and ideological divisions within Germany – along East-West lines, political orientation (left–right), age, gender, and educational background. Older respondents are significantly more likely than younger ones to support the unconditional retention of such terminology. This tendency is also more pronounced among men compared to women. Furthermore, respondents from the so-called “new federal states” (eastern Germany) express significantly greater support for this unconditional retention than those from the western states. Finally, individuals with lower levels of formal education are more inclined to favour such retention than those with higher educational attainment (e.g., A-levels or higher). Among supporters of political parties, those identifying with the right-wing extremist AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) are most in favour of keeping terms that are now widely perceived as racist (70%), whereas 13% of Green Party voters (*Die Grünen*) expressed the same opinion.

Using a serial approach, this population survey instrument is also being applied (in a modified and group-specific form) to pupils in history education, students preparing to become history teachers, and practising history teachers in North Rhine-Westphalia. Among respondents from eight universities where those future history teachers were surveyed, not a single person chose the option of retaining such terms without modification. On average, the student respondents whose data have been collected thus far favour retention with historical explanation (27%), support changing the terms (31%) or argue that the issue should be considered on a case-by-case basis (43%).

5 Perspectives

The findings presented in this succinct project report represent only a small part of the collected survey data and the variables derived from them. Nevertheless, two key points have already been highlighted: first, even an initial descriptive-analytical examination reveals significant potential and leads to results that are, in our view, worthy of further discussion. Second, the application of inferential and multivariate statistical methods – specifically correlation, regression, factor analysis and segmentation – will be required to further explore the data’s potential for insight. These methods are expected to enable a more detailed understanding of the discursive complexity inherent in how colonial history is currently dealt with in German society.

Additionally, the results of the *forsa* survey will be compared with those from other strands of our mixed-methods research design. As previously stated, we are currently (as of June 2025) conducting additional surveys in schools and universities in North Rhine-Westphalia. These include a questionnaire similar to the one used in the *forsa* study, as well as follow-up interviews across all participant groups. A distinctive feature of our research design is that respondents at a later stage are also asked to reflect on selected results from the *forsa* study that were partially presented in this paper.

As a fifth strand of data collection, alongside the representative population survey and the surveys of students, teachers and university students, qualitative interviews with experts from academia and civil society are being conducted. These expert interviews serve to interpret and contextualise all of our earlier findings.

When comparing our results (specifically those based on items developed for the *forsa* instrument) with existing international survey data, several connections become apparent. To illustrate, in 2024, the opinion polling institute *YouGov* conducted a survey in the United Kingdom as well as in regions of the former British Empire. This survey included seven items, asking for example about pride or shame in relation to the colonial past; whether people would have supported the continued existence of colonial rule in a counterfactual scenario; whether respondents believe that life in former colonies is better today than it was during colonial rule; or in what way the history of the British Empire should be taught in schools (Smith, 2025). These questions allow for a meaningful comparison with our current representative dataset, which similarly addresses these aspects and partially extends them by including qualitative data.

But even beyond comparisons and the application of complex statistical methods, it is the descriptive evaluation of our own data that already highlights some important areas for further discussion: Two items on the Likert-scale stood out with particularly high levels of agreement. More than one third of respondents (36%) agreed with the statement: “After more than 100 years, we need to draw a line under the memory of Germany’s colonial past.” The following statement was endorsed with even greater conviction: “I feel that this topic is often used today to make us feel guilty” (43%).

Interestingly, these two items were also frequently mentioned in respondents’ open-ended final comments, in which they were invited to share any further thoughts on the survey and its topic. Numerous respondents emphasised statements such as: “I am not right-wing at all”, “I don’t want to be put in the right-wing corner” or “I am very critical of our history”. Many of these responses, which notably reflect complex and bidimensional attitudes, continued with a “but”. The combination of these two quantitative items, together with the related qualitative comments, underscores the necessity and significance of a more sensitive and non-prejudiced public dialogue. From a didactic perspective, they point to a great need for social discussion and to historical teaching and learning opportunities that should be urgently exploited.

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Review

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval was not sought for our study, as the research was based on an anonymous and voluntary survey of adult participants. The study was conducted in cooperation with *forsa*, a recognised professional research and survey institute and in accordance with applicable ethical standards and data protection regulations. No personally identifiable or sensitive personal data were collected, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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