

Press release by the “No Humboldt 21!” alliance (AfricAvenir International, AFROTAK TV cyberNomads, Artefakte / Anti-Humboldt, Berlin Postkolonial, global, Initiative of Black People in Germany - ISD, Central Committee of the African Community in Germany)

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Germany must repatriate human remains and war spoils from Cameroon, Togo, Tanzania and Rwanda

Berlin. After the refusal by the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (SPK) to take part in a panel discussion or radio interview on the controversial Humboldt Forum with African and Black experts, the alliance “No Humboldt 21!” presented concrete evidence of skulls and skeletons in the storage facilities of the National Museums in Berlin as well as war spoils from all former German colonies in Africa.

The international “No Humboldt 21!” campaign, which is backed by more than 80 civil society organisations, informed the embassies of the countries affected namely Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania and Rwanda, and the public that the so-called skull collection of the “Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde” (today Ethnological Museum Berlin) has the remains of at least five people from Cameroon, 17 from Togo and 36 from Tanzania – including the immediate victims of colonial wars and executions. In reference to Rwanda, sources indicate that hundreds of skulls have been sent to Berlin.

The 58 skulls and skeletons have been accounted for in www.smb-digital.de with S (for “Schädel” = skulls) numbers and represent just the tip of the iceberg. The collection, from 1885-1922 alone, compiled by the Ethnological Museum Berlin for anthropology of “race” research purposes, still includes the remains of around 5,300 people from all over the world. Apart from that, federally owned institutions also house around 3,500 skulls and skeletons from the Rudolf Virchow collection in the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which Berlin’s Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory (Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte) still makes available, subject to charge, for research purposes.

The alliance also pointed out that entire collections of objects are referred to as war spoils (“Kriegsbeute”) in the Museum of Ethnology’s files. Thus, the storage facilities of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation house not only 500 statues seized by British colonial troops in 1897 from the royal palace in Benin (present-day Nigeria). The museum’s cellars also contain the ethnographical collection stolen from the commander of police troops in Togo, Massow, booty from the military doctor Fülleboom in Tanzania and a whole series of declared “trophies of war” from the notorious colonial officer, Hans Dominik, in Cameroon.

In reference to the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums and the current UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the alliance “No Humboldt 21!” declares: “We categorically reject the cost-intensive, central exhibit of foreign cultural treasures which, according to the Minister for Culture Monika Grütters will allow Germany to present itself as ‘one of the world’s most important cultural nations’. We firmly denounce this brazen self-exaltation through the use of objects, seized in the colonial era, now intended to be shown in the palace of former Prussian colonial rulers. Germany must instead at long last promote provenance research, and repatriate the obviously stolen cultural objects immediately as well as offer the human remains to their original communities.”

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