

Das Prachtboot. Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten (Götz Aly)

(„The Splendid Boat: How Germans Stole the Art Treasures of the South Seas“)

Hermann Mückler¹

¹ Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, Universitätsstr. 7, 1010 Vienna, Austria,
Email: hermann.mueckler@univie.ac.at

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Can and should one even write a review of a book that has already been extensively reviewed in all major journals and magazines and that continues to excite people? You can - and must! The political scientist, historian and journalist Götz Aly, who comes from Heidelberg, has succeeded in putting his finger in a wound with his latest book and, due to its popularity, has given a highly sensitive discussion its own twist. The merit of his book is to point out the problematic conditions of the German colonial epoch in Oceania, as seen from today's perspective. But an unfortunate series of generalizations serves to undermine the value of this book as the basis for a factual discussion. First of all: Aly has deliberately ignored the most important scientific principle while at the same time insisting that his work is of a scientific nature: if a matter cannot be conclusively and clearly established, it must be addressed accordingly, and one should refrain from expressing conclusions that have a definitive character. From the available data, one can address possible strands of interpretation and weigh the pros and cons of the probability of individual aspects and formulate one's own assessments; but it must

always be kept in mind that things could have been entirely different. In addition, a necessary distance from the research topic should prevent one from being too “drawn in” and then possibly no longer being able to credibly represent the desired objectivity.

Götz Aly fails to maintain this distance to the topic in many cases. Indeed, he claims to know what actually happened over a hundred years ago in the then young and historically short-lived German colony of German New Guinea. He does this by absolutizing indifferent and neutral formulations from his selectively consulted sources and prefers interpretations that support his own line of reasoning. This would be less problematic if he did not use his own conclusions to formulate allegations against historical-contemporary persons as well as current institutions and colleagues. My comments below on the book – as the opening sentence already suggests – are not generated in a vacuum, but inevitably take up the discussions that have arisen around the book, at least in those areas where they are important for the assessing its merits.

What is the book about? The installation of a large object, an approximate

15-metre-long outrigger boat from the island of Luf, one of the Hermit Islands in the Bismarck Archipelago (now part of Papua New Guinea), which came to Berlin in 1904 along with two masts and a square sail. Its inclusion in the newly opened Humboldt Forum in Berlin was a welcome occasion for Aly to further develop his theory that the vast majority of objects from German colonial times and kept in German museums are basically looted art. Starting from a specific object, whose exact acquisition history cannot be conclusively clarified, Aly launches a wide-ranging attack against those museums and institutions that store and exhibit objects from the German colonial era. This work cannot be viewed separately from a much broader discussion on several subject areas: the current debates about the present and future handling of objects acquired in colonial contexts, questionable object acquisition histories and restitution debates. One has to concede to Aly that his book proceeds with considerable precision, cleverly linking some of these points and connecting them to broader accusations.

Aly has personal connections to the location from which the richly orna-

GÖTZ ALY

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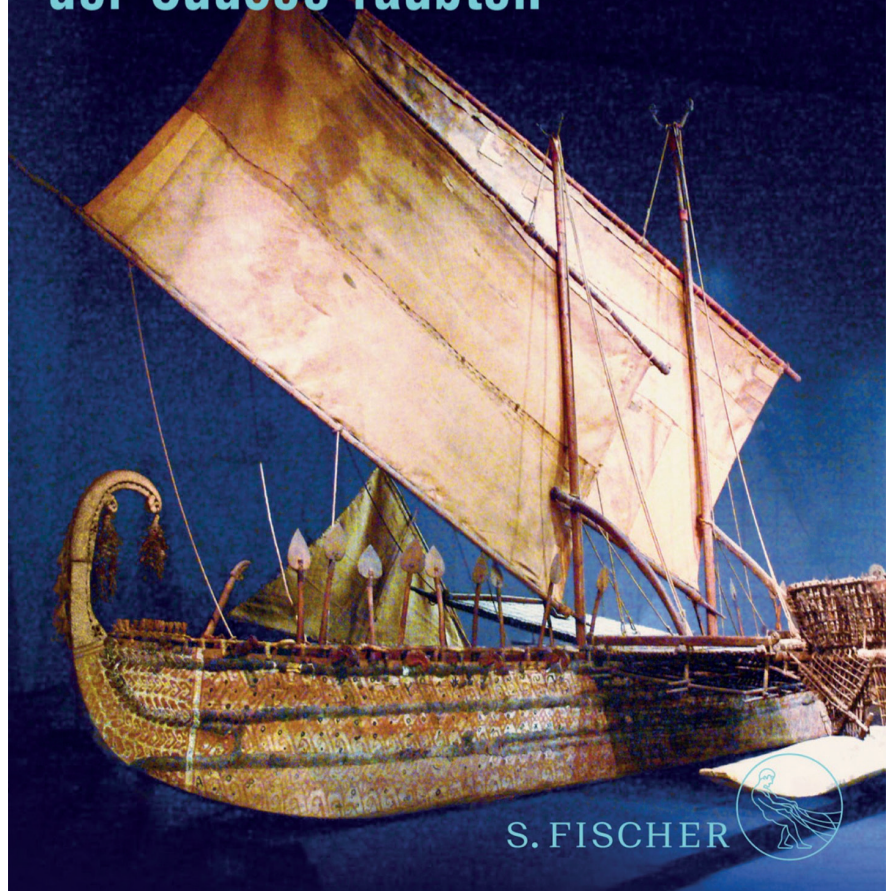


Figure 1: Cover sheet of the book

mented boat originates: as a chaplain on a naval ship in the 1880s, his great-great-uncle Gottlob Johannes Aly witnessed the successive colonial subjugation of the islanders of the Bismarck Archipelago. The island of Siar in this archipelago was even given the name Aly.

After an introduction outlining his intentions, the author begins his book with a description of a massacre of the Luf people carried out by the German Navy around the turn of the year 1882/83. Subsequently, descriptions of other massacres follow one after another, for example one which took place on the island of Aly in 1897. Presumably, this is done to lead the reader towards the conclusions in the first third of the book, that “Germans” (as formulated several times in the book and in the subtitle), pillaging, robbing and massacring through their newly annexed areas, in addition to the human suffering this generated among local populations, also stole their cultural assets on a large scale. In particular, that Eduard Hernsheim, owner of the Hernsheim trading house, violently stole the boat in question a generation later; and in order to bridge the gap to the present, that the Prussian Cultural Heritage Founda-

tion (SPK) stands accused of prominently exhibiting objects of questionable provenance. The starting point for this daring conclusion is Hernsheim’s own written statement, which is open to interpretation, describing how the boat passed into his hands.

Aly enters into the history that led to the massacre of 1882, but rather superficially. A more detailed treatment of that history might not lend itself so readily to his line of argument, which positions Hernsheim as the “bad guy”. In fact, the residents of Luf had executed a station trader

from the Hernsheim trading house, and killed several station residents and destroyed buildings. We know of these and other details largely through the extensive corrections to Aly’s claims introduced by Jakob Anderhandt who has questioned Aly’s version of the events described and the role of Eduard Hernsheim in a review that will be published in November 2021. Anderhandt refutes several of Aly’s key lines of argument. With the author’s express permission, I take the liberty of quoting a short paragraph from his extensive review:

Source: S. Fischer Publishing House.

“Eduard Hernsheim even remained silent when at the end of the year two statements from eyewitnesses confirmed his suspicion that his schooner ‘Elise’, which had been lost since 1878, had also succumbed to an attack in the lagoon off Luf. In this case, the Hermit warriors had captured the ship, murdered the crew, plundered the cargo, dragged the schooner out to sea with their large boats and burned it there. Not even the captain’s wife and her child, who was just a few months old, had been spared by them. Aly’s book tells neither of this tragedy nor of Hernsheim’s decision not to react, which contributed significantly to the de-escalation of the situation on the Hermit Islands.” (Jakob Anderhandt; the full review will appear in November in the journal of the Association for Hamburg History 107, 2021).

None of the massacres should be excused in any way, and what happened during the punitive expeditions is unquestionably terrible, sad and to be rejected. However, these attacks were embedded within a context of violence and counterviolence, where one cannot always distinguish clearly between the “good” and “bad guys”, despite the unequal power relations between Indigenous people and colonial occupants. Hernsheim was evidently known for his rather benevolent way of dealing with the Luf people, even if his motivations were largely economic. In any case, the Luf residents were not as peaceful and non-violent as Aly tries to portray them; in reality they were unpopular and feared by neighboring ethnic groups.

Anderhandt, who lives in Australia, is perhaps the most accomplished expert on the time periods, locations and people involved (especially Eduard Hernsheim). His detailed four-volume work on Eduard and Franz Hernsheim in the South Seas Library that Anderhandt founded is unrivaled. Even Götz Aly can’t help praising him. But Aly’s attitude is markedly different towards other specialist colleagues

who have published material on these topics or on the Pacific region, works which Aly either deliberately ignores or refers to in mocking terms, such as the German historian Hermann Hiery, whose work he characterises as “Euphoric joy in the exotic and based on ethnologically draped voyeurism” (p. 20). In doing so, Aly does not mention that this particular publication of Hiery’s is just the supplementary illustrated volume to a thick book “Die Deutsche Südsee 1884-1914, Ein Handbuch”, which contains numerous and, in some cases, even very critical contributions from multiple perspectives dealing with the short but intensive period of German colonial activities in Oceania. The fact that Hiery, one of the most knowledgeable experts on the German colonial era in Oceania, has also promoted and published critical approaches for many years among others through his double series “Quellen und Forschungen zur Südsee”, is completely ignored by Aly (in the list of references at the end from Aly’s book, Hiery is totally missing, although mentioned in the text).

The suspicion arises that Aly is settling scores with the guild of German historians, with which he does not seem to be on good terms. If he can’t get along with the German historians, then he could have turned to the works of their Anglophone colleagues and other sources, but even here, surprisingly, his use of relevant sources is limited. The repeated focus of his accusations is Hermann Parzinger, the President of the SPK (e.g. on p. 187), whose references to the given legal situation Aly finds “irritating”. However, the actions of the SPK have so far been exclusively within the framework of the legal requirements, so that Mr. Parzinger cannot be accused of any procedural deficiencies, irregularities or errors. The suspicion arises that Aly is deliberately aiming to provoke a reaction from the reading public, towards which end he is prepared to include dramatizations and exaggerations that do not correspond to what we know of the reality of the events.

For example, on p. 73 in the book there is a picture of the dwellings of Luf residents, taken after the massacre. He describes these large, tall buildings, which are recognizable at first glance as having a very complex construction, as “emergency huts”, which is almost frivolous. For Aly, however, there can and must no longer be a highly developed architecture on Luf, to support his argument that the few residents who survived the massacre of 1882 never recovered from it and, so to speak, sank to a simpler, improvised cultural level. However, comparisons with the contemporary architectural traditions of neighboring groups in the same epoch show similarities and clearly refute this assumption.

That Aly is not overly concerned with the residents of Luf is also clear from the fact that he denies them any agency of their own. They are glorified one-sidedly not only as peace-loving people, but also as suppressed in their potential to actively shape and act in that era. Serious specialist science knows about the complex, diverse relationship patterns that played out between colonizers and colonized in the field of tension between dependence, disenfranchisement, oppression and appropriation. In addition to resistance or tolerance, this also included various forms of cooperation and collaboration. Local people were sometimes beneficiaries of colonial developments and were able to profitably “sell” their knowledge to the colonial administrators, who often couldn’t help but work with them. Regrettably, Aly maintains this paternalism, and objectification and incapacitation of the residents of Luf, in his book, though it is precisely what he criticizes in both contemporary authors and colonial actors.

The book is divided into twelve chapters with lurid titles such as “Cheating, stealing and looting” or “Devouring and showing contempt for human beings”. His purpose here is evident: the tension and horror of any German colonial activity in Oceania must be maintained until the end. At the beginning, Aly addresses the opening of the

exhibition of the splendid boat in the Humboldt Forum. He returns to this occasion several times, especially in the last chapter of the book, and suggests that the boat should be returned. On the question of to whom exactly this would be returned, he is silent. One chapter is explicitly devoted to the extraordinarily artistic design of the outrigger boat, the hull of which is almost completely covered with ornaments. Contemporary photographs in the book give a good impression of this sea vessel, which has already been described by contemporary authors as the last of its kind. The core message of the book is based on the statement that the punitive expeditions first destroyed the large boats of the Luf people (there were also smaller ones), and that afterwards they were no longer able to use such boats due to their demographic decimation, with this one exception, which was forcibly torn from them and brought to Berlin. The fact that there was a whole generation between the massacre and the acquisition of the boat should give us pause for thought.

The chapters between this “bracket” of the boat address the subjects of punitive expeditions, the trade in ethnographic objects, the activities of traders, ethnologists, missionaries and colonial officials, as well as the practices of trade between colonizers and locals in what was then the colony of German New Guinea. Aly’s book explicitly addresses the emergence of the subject of ethnology and its close interweaving with colonialism. In doing so, it provides valuable material for further debates on the history of science. Thirty-six images and a map illustrate the work, which is supplemented at the end by short biographies of the protagonists mentioned in the book, numerous endnotes, the specialist literature used and an index of proper names.

In his overall oeuvre, in which, among other things, aspects of the Holocaust were the subject of investigation, Götz Aly arrived at interesting new results, producing demanding and scientifically recognized works, for which he was rightly awarded. In this specific case, however, Aly has abandoned the quiet voice of a balanced, differentiating science in favour of a loud, pointed and exaggerated mode of representation. With this work he is – presumably quite consciously – embarking on a course of confrontation with the scientific community, presumably with an eye towards a lucrative marketing opportunity. In short, the book tends towards journalism, and is only partially scientific, even if it tries to claim that tag. It is aimed at the society of excitement, which is clearly recognizable today and not only on the boulevard, and serves it well. The publisher, S. Fischer, plays along by promising a “real Aly” in the blurb. Not surprisingly, the boulevard has largely praised the book without question, while the specialist scientists have almost universally rejected it.

In the meantime, further elements can be added to the story. In various interviews (e.g. *Die Zeit* Nr. 31, July 28, 2021), Aly insists that his point of view is the right one and tries to secure his position by accusing expert critics (who had shredded Aly’s arguments on several grounds) of playing down colonialism (such as the ethnologist Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, who points out several contradictions in Aly’s remarks; *Die Zeit* No. 29, July 14, 2021). These are unpleasant developments and one can only hope that the SPK will not allow itself to be influenced by such a work, but will instead focus on making the discussion more objective.

As a reviewer, I would like to conclude with a few personal words: I have read this book in full three times

and will not hide the fact that the first time I read about the massacres, I was close to tears when I imagined what had happened to the residents of Luf (and others at the time). Aly’s readable style managed to stir my emotion. The second time I read it, I proceeded analytically, consulted various specialist sources and began to be interested in the various reviews of the book. I noticed inconsistencies, exaggerations and the obscuring of particular aspects. The third time, the lecturing-accusatory style and the generalizations annoyed me; I put the book aside with an uncomfortable feeling at the end. So what is left besides the polarization triggered by the book and the fact that the book is selling well?

Finally, Götz Aly uses his book to refer to the work of the unjustly forgotten Siegfried Lichtenstaedter and his pamphlet “Kultur und Humanität”, in which he described modern colonialism as early as 1897 with a keen eye for the dramatic consequences for the colonized and the double standards of the colonial powers. Aly is to be thanked for having made Lichtenstaedter’s work accessible again under the title “Nilpferdpeitsche und Kultur” (Berlin 2021). This book is well worth reading and should be a must for anyone dealing with colonialism.

Acknowledgements

At this point, I would like to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks to Christopher Ballard for the profound translation free of charge of this book review.

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Corresponding Author: Hermann Mückler [hermann.mueckler@univie.ac.at] is Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Ethno-History at the University of Vienna. His regional focuses are the Pacific Islands as well as Australia. He specialises in peace and conflict studies, colonialism and post-colonialism, geopolitics, history, visual anthropology and material culture. More info: www.hermann-mueckler.com