GASTVORTRAG

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No Consent. Robert Koch and German Colonial Science in Africa

At the turn of the twentieth century, trypanosomiasis, or “sleeping sickness” as it is more commonly known, started to appear across Africa. A parasitic disease-causing apathy, slow movement, speech disorders, physical weakness, and death, sleeping sickness raised alarm among European colonizers on the continent who feared that its spread could slow down the African workforce, and subsequently their colonial projects. In 1906, a renowned German scientist traveled to East Africa with his wife and assistants to try to develop a cure. With the help of colonial authorities, he devised and built a so-called “concentration camp” for inflicted East Africans and started to “treat” them with Atoxyl – a reagent containing arsenic – even though it was known to cause pain, blindness, and even death. That scientist’s name was Robert Koch. Best known for his research on cholera and tuberculosis, Koch is one of the founders of modern microbiology, and one of the most renowned scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He received the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1905 for his research on tuberculosis and gained international acclaim for his discoveries. His four postulates, used to establish a causative relationship between a microbe and a disease, are taught in high school biology lessons to this day, solidifying young students’ understanding of disease, infection, and environment. After arriving in East Africa, Koch established the Bugula sleeping sickness research camp and started “treatment” up to 1,000 people a day with Atoxyl and other untested reagents. Koch’s experiments in the Bugula camp set the standard for combating sleeping sickness in British and German African colonies. Not only did Atoxyl establish itself as the standard drug in the treatment of sleeping sickness, but Koch’s proposal to establish many more “concentration camps” – the name he himself gave to these facilities – to isolate the sick from the healthy and continue human experimentations, were taken to heart by German authorities. By the time Koch left the continent in October 1907, three further concentration camps had been established in
German East Africa, and five such institutions were founded in the German West African colonies, in present-day Togo and Cameroon.

Edna Bonhomme is a historian of science and writer based in Berlin, Germany. She earned her PhD in the history of science from Princeton University and a Master of Public Health from Columbia University. Her practices trouble how people perceive modern plagues and how they try to escape from them. As a researcher, she answers this question by using textual archives and oral histories to unpack the variant notions of sickness and health as well as the modalities of care that shape the possibility for repair. She has written for Aljazeera, The Guardian, The Nation, The New Republic, ISIS History of Science Journal, and the Journal for North African Studies. Her first manuscript, “Tending to our Wounds,” will be published with Haymarket Books in 2022. The book explores the global history of restitution and reparations for the African diaspora. Edna is writing her second book, “Captive Contagions,” which will be published with One Signal Press, which examines the role that captivity has played during epidemics.

Zum Gastvortrag ergeht herzliche Einladung