

## ‘They Handle Negroes Just Like Us’: German Colonialism in Cameroon in the Eyes of Poles (1885–1914)

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This paper explores the Polish opinion about German colonialism in Africa in connection with the perception of Prussian rule ‘at home’. In late Imperial Germany, Prussian Poles tended to look at the German ventures in Africa with a very critical eye. Their interest in Cameroonian issues was due to the fact that both Poles and Cameroonians were facing the same difficulties at the same time, namely German attempts to eliminate local languages in schools and to take control of the lands. By establishing a link between Polish and Cameroonian suffering, Polish patriots wanted to make Poles aware of their political, economic and cultural subjection within a global context. In a certain way, this counter-hegemonic narration was supposed to deprovincialise the ‘Polish issue’ and make it part of the broader struggle against German imperial power. The Poles, however, did not support independence for Cameroon. They used the Cameroonian issues mainly polemically in order to advance their own cause in imperial Germany.

After the partitions of Poland conducted by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg Austria at the end of the eighteenth century, the western parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth came under German control. Initially, Prussian rulers did not think in terms of modern colonialism. But for legitimising the conquest of the Polish territories, they developed, from the mid-nineteenth century on, their own brand of colonial discourse presenting Germans as cultural missionaries (*Kulturträger*), who supposedly brought culture to Central and Eastern Europe. Applying cultural racism to the Slavs, German nationalists commonly considered Poland as a primitive, empty space inhabited by a population destined to remain uncivilised without the aid of external intervention. According to them, Poles could be raised to the higher level of German civilisation only if they gave up their language and culture.<sup>1</sup> That is why, during most of the nineteenth century, the

Kingdom of Prussia and later the German Empire imposed a number of Germanisation policies and measures in the Polish-speaking provinces.

From the mid-1880s, Germany started to acquire colonies in Africa and Asia. As we will see below, many Prussian Poles interpreted this conquest as the geographical enlargement of a colonial-type rule of which they had been the first victims. Prussian Poles could follow the progress of German colonial expansion overseas through various information sources. In late Imperial Germany, the Polish press and the Polish Circle (*Koło Polskie*), representing the Polish-speaking minority in the Reichstag, played a significant role in introducing colonial issues into Polish public debate.<sup>2</sup> Located in Central Africa, German Cameroon was one of the colonies that interested Polish public opinion the most.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1880s, a Polish explorer, Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński (1861–1896), travelled to Cameroon. Officially it was an exploratory expedition, but unofficially he was looking for a place where a Polish colony could be founded. Szolc-Rogoziński signed an agreement with a British representative, who was to provide protection for his settlement. Meanwhile, Gustav Nachtigal (1834–1885), the plenipotentiary of the German Empire, signed a treaty with Kings Bell and Akwa of Duala establishing German rule over the country. On 14 July 1884, Cameroon became a protectorate of the Reich. From this point on, Prussian Poles tended to look at the German ventures in Africa with a very critical eye. Their interest in Cameroonian issues was due to the fact that the two ‘colonised’ peoples were facing the same problems at the same time: German attempts to eliminate local languages from schools and to take control of the lands. Yet, there were significant differences between the Polish territories and the German overseas colonies. Poles had political representation, access to the press, the right to bring issues before the courts, and the right to form political organisations, while Africans did not. By investigating the Polish perception of the Cameroonian issues, this paper aims to shed new light on Polish colonial entanglement at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### School Policy and the Germanisation of Culture

In Cameroon, the pre-colonial period was a time of multi-lingualism. English, Pidgin English and some indigenous languages such as Duala, Bali, Ewondo, Bulu and others were used as vehicles of communication in schools, languages of the administration, and for evangelisation and trade. When the German protectorate of Cameroon was established, local languages and dialects were taught in the schools founded by the English Baptists and the American Presbyterians.<sup>4</sup> Language conflict soon set in with the start of German rule.<sup>5</sup> In 1887, the first German education officer, Theodor Christaller, opened a government school in Duala. Four more German schools were inaugurated over the years. A few months after Germany had taken over the administration of Cameroon, the *Goniec Wielkopolski* (*Greater Poland Courier*), which represented the voice of Poznań’s landed gentry, ironically commented on the introduction of German language education, as it had happened already in the non-German speaking parts of the German Empire:

Rejoice, Polish children! Not only are you learning ‘Normalwörter’, not only are you learning to sing ‘Ich bin ein Preusse’; today, apart from Lithuanians, Poles, Moravians, Sorbs, French, Walloons, Dutch and Danes, even small Negroes [murzynkowie] are turned to this pedagogy; because you need to know that Negroes from Cameroon are already our fellow citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that there were actually no Dutch or Walloon minorities in the German Empire, the newspaper raised a real and urgent issue. Since the unification of Germany and the proclamation of the German empire in 1871, schools had become an important instrument in the programme of ethnic homogenisation. In 1887, a major legislative step in the Germanisation of Prussian Poles was taken when the Culture Minister, Gustav von Gossler (1838–1902), decreed that Polish-language lessons would be banned from the eastern provinces of Prussia.

In Cameroon, the situation was very different, at least at the beginning of German rule. On his arrival in Cameroon in 1887, Christaller started to learn the Duala language, creating a German–Duala dictionary. Even though German officials were actively trying to promote the spread of the German language in the Prussian East, the Governor of Cameroon, Julius von Soden (1846–1921), welcomed Christaller’s work with indigenous languages. This liberal language policy captivated the Poles, who were fighting against coercive attempts at their Germanisation. In 1889, the proclerical Upper Silesian newspaper *Katolik* (*The Catholic*) praised Christaller’s teaching methods using local languages:

There are in Germany such teachers who stuffed their heads with the belief that the school may educate and raise well Polish children with the help of a foreign language. Let those teachers go to study with Mr. Christaller in Cameroon. This gentleman concluded that teaching Cameroonians in German or English brings nothing and for this reason he learned the language of his pupils and used it to achieve the goals that the school has set for itself. The testimony of this German teacher should be shown to everyone who thinks differently from him and we would be glad to see Upper Silesia’s school authorities using in Upper Silesian schools the same methods as those used in Cameroon, which means making teachers teach our children in our native, Polish language.<sup>7</sup>

Those hopes were partially fulfilled after the appointment of Leo von Caprivi (1831–1899) as chancellor in 1890, a period characterised by a mood of reconciliation on the part of the Prussian government towards the Polish population. In order to satisfy religious objections, the government took notice of the voices that stressed the importance of Polish children being able to read Polish hymnals and catechisms. In 1894, the Prussian Culture Minister reintroduced Polish language lessons to the curriculum in Poznan on a voluntary basis.

Caprivi’s school concessions provoked various national-political critiques. The Pan-German League, the Eastern Marches Association and the All-German Language Association attacked the government for tolerating the resurgence of the Polish national movement in Eastern Prussia. In 1892, Caprivi lost the support of the National Liberals and Progressives on an educational bill providing denominational board schools, a failed attempt to re-integrate the Catholic Centre Party after the

*Kulturkampf*. He finally had to resign as Chancellor. When the Hohenlohe government came to power in late October 1894, it unleashed a series of measures to promote the German language among Prussian Poles, for instance by providing bonuses to teachers whose pupils scored well in German tests. Meanwhile, Jesko von Puttkamer (1855–1917) was appointed Governor of Cameroon. Metropolitan interest groups immediately put pressure on him for the spread of the German language in the colony. The head of the Pallottine missionaries in Cameroon, Mgr. Vieter (1853–1914), considered educating Cameroonians in the German way of life as a debt he owed his country. In 1897, the use of indigenous languages in schools was banned. Three years later, a Protectorate Act limited their use to evangelisation. With the administration's subsidies to mission schools, English was supplanted by German, which became the predominant language of instruction.

This development came together with a tightening of the language policy in the Polish-speaking provinces in Prussia. Facing difficulties in achieving the desired level of German practice at school, the government opted in 1900 to eliminate the use of Polish in favour of German as the medium of instruction in religion classes. This measure unleashed a wave of protests among the Polish population of Poznań. In the years 1901–1904, strikes by Polish children and their parents took place in the city of Września. As pupils refused to accept new German textbooks and to participate in class activities, teachers responded with detentions and corporal punishment. Adults involved in the protests were put on trial for public disturbance, trespassing, and similar crimes. Use of the Polish language was banned in schools and the police were charged with enforcing student attendance.

The Września strike inspired another large strike by Polish students in West Prussia in 1906–1907. It gained international attention and brought the Polish fight for their native language and culture into the world spotlight. Around this time, the struggle over bilingual education in the Polish-speaking provinces became increasingly politicised. In 1908, the head of the German governmental school in Victoria in Cameroon, Emil Sembritzki, wrote a paper comparing German school policy in Cameroon and Poznań. According to him, the government should have applied the same measures to the Poles as had been taken in Cameroon. He quoted a letter he claimed to have received from an African student: 'Landgrave, stay tough! What goes on in Cameroon must be possible also in Prussia. May the government not waver to maintain the claim of German as language of religious instruction in all Prussian schools.'<sup>8</sup> Sembritzki also praised the patriotism and loyalty of Germanised Cameroonians, as opposed to the rebellious spirit of the Poles in Poznań. Around the same time, a German teacher from Schubin wrote in the *Posener Lehrerzeitung* (*The Poznań Teacher's Journal*) that most of his colleagues preferred to educate 'savages' rather than 'little Polish rebels'.<sup>9</sup>

The Polish press reacted violently to Sembritzki's paper. Because he had a Polish sounding name, the author was called a 'renegade' by the *Gazeta Toruńska* (*The Toruń Gazette*), a newspaper strongly engaged in the struggle against the Germanisation of the Polish-speaking provinces. Questioning the quality of the German school system, the article quoted a book published by the German writer and traveller

Karl Böttcher, *Germania im Ausland (Germania abroad)*, which was very critical of the results of German colonial education policy: ‘Visiting German colonies, [Böttcher] noticed that the natives are familiar with the following words from the language of Goethe and Schiller: Schweinhund, Vorwärts, Bier, besoffen, fauler Kopf, Verboten, Polizei and Rindvieh. Anyway, it’s a meagre loot’.<sup>10</sup> Quoting these vulgar and coarse words was a way to deride German culture and its claim to take part in the ‘civilising mission’ of the white race.

On the other hand, many Poles resisting Germanisation claimed that, as Christian Europeans, they were not the proper target of cultural colonialism. An anonymous letter sent to the *Posener Lehrerzeitung* encouraged German teachers still working in the Polish-speaking provinces to move to Africa:

You are worthless as teachers in Poznan, because the Polish realities are for you a terra incognita, in Poznan as in Galicia. In Cameroon among Negroes, you will find your place as zealous careerists and cultural missionaries, but here in Poznan, you will only get hate and contempt. Out there in Cameroon you will do a good deed; in addition, you will be better paid. [...] In all friendship, N. (Ref. 9).

Since the opening of the first German schools in Cameroon, the government offered salary incentives and free housing for teachers who agreed to settle in the colony. By encouraging this movement, Polish nationalists were not distancing themselves from the European colonial project, but rather trying to redirect it to Africa.

### **Forced Expropriation and the Dispossession of Land**

The second issue regularly covered by the Polish press about Cameroon was the land problem. It came mostly during the last years of German rule, when the colonial authorities decided to relocate the natives from Duala to newly built quarters on the outskirts of the city, officially in order to prevent speculation in land and to improve health conditions for the Europeans. In 1910, they started to plan the removal of the entire Duala population – some 20,000 people – from their homes near the Wouri River to new inland settlements.<sup>11</sup> It affected most of the Duala clans, who formed a united front behind Rudolf Duala Manga Bell (1873–1914). Born as the eldest son of Manga Ndumbe Bell (1851–1908), king of the Bell lineage of the Duala people, Manga Bell was quite wealthy and educated, raised both in African and European ways. After succeeding his father in 1908, he generally supported the German colonial authorities. Yet, when the expropriation plan commenced, a protracted struggle started. At first, Manga Bell and the other Duala chiefs pressured the Germans through letters and petitions, but these complaints were ignored or rebutted.

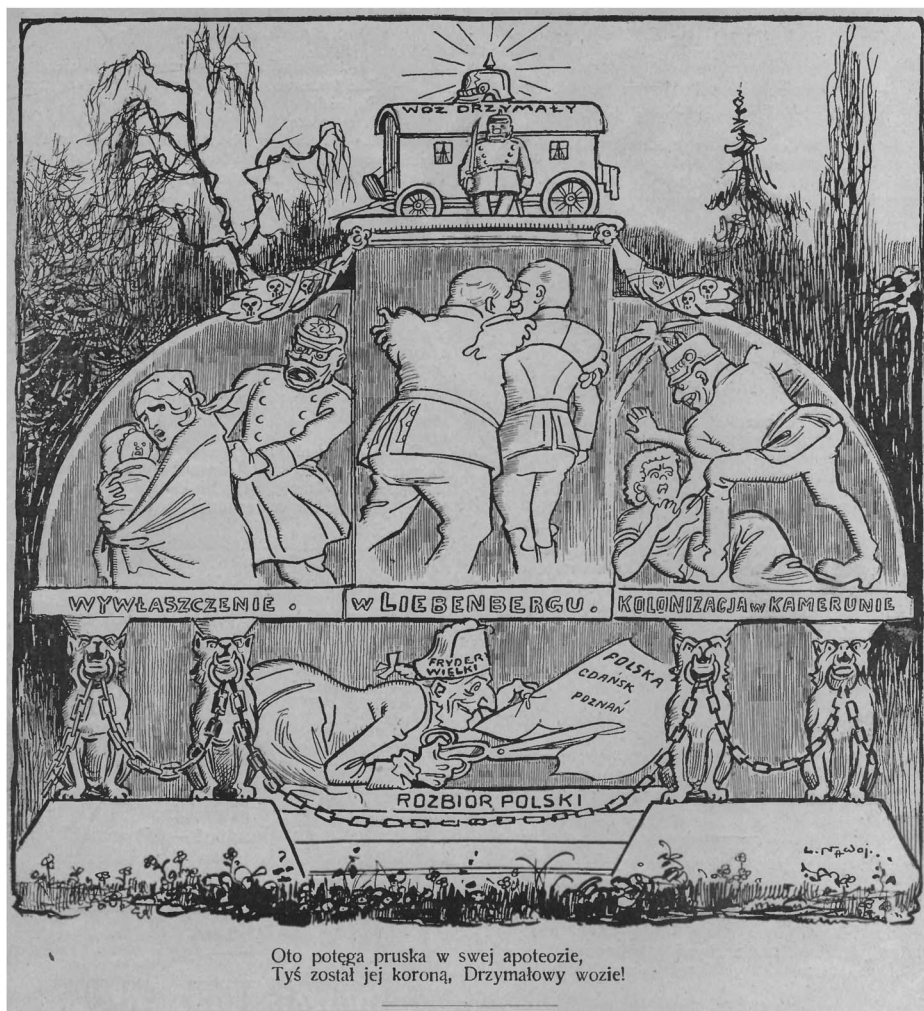
The Polish nationalistic press covered these events and systematically took the side of the Cameroonians. In 1912, *Polak (The Pole)*, a newspaper edited by the Upper Silesian Polish national activist and press magnate Adam Napieralski (1861–1928), published an article entitled ‘The Expropriators in Africa’, which denounced the unfairness of the expropriation plan: ‘as you can see, the government, concerned about Germanization, removes not only Poles, but also Negroes from their

homeland'.<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, for more than two decades Prussian Poles had already been facing a policy of dispossession based on ethnic discrimination. In 1885, the Prussian government initiated the mass expulsion of ethnic Poles and Jews holding Russian and Austrian citizenship. More than 30,000 people were driven towards the eastern border under the control of gendarmes. In addition, Bismarck's government decided to support a new wave of settlement by German colonists. In 1886, a Prussian Settlement Commission was created to increase land ownership by Germans in Poznan and Western Prussia. Its goals were the financial weakening of Polish landowners and ensuring the Germanisation of rural areas.

The Commission's activity on the land market gradually resulted in a 'battle for soil' (*Kampf um Boden*), with Poles running their own settlement societies. Ultimately, the efforts to Germanise the eastern borderlands strengthened the Polish nationalist movement. Numerous initiatives by Polish enterprises, banks and associations led to a decreasing availability of purchasable Polish-owned land. From 1902, the Commission was only rarely able to acquire land from Poles. As a reaction, the Prussian Government sought to restrict Poles acquiring land. From 1904, any new settlement required a building permit, but these were routinely denied to Poles by local officials. This policy faced international criticism and opposition from liberal groups concerned about property rights. Nonetheless, after relentless agitation from nationalist groups, the Prussian Diet passed an Expropriation Law in 1908 which permitted the confiscation of Polish estates on behalf of the Settlement Commission.

One year later, the Polish satirical magazine *Mucha* (*The Fly*) published a cartoon summarising the key elements of 'Prussian power' in the form of a monument. It presented Poles and Cameroonians as the victims of a brutal and abject system of domination (cf. Figure 1).

The monument was made up of various levels. At the bottom, a caricature of Frederick the Great holding a huge pair of scissors recalled the partitions of Poland that took place towards the end of the eighteenth century and resulted in erasing the sovereign Polish State from the map. This event was presented as the basis of Prussian power and hegemony, but also as its first crime. The next level presented a series of scandals which had more recently attracted public attention in Germany and abroad. On the left, a Prussian soldier, recognisable by his spiked helmet, is molesting a Polish woman with her child. The scene was a reminder of the major step taken by the Prussian government with the Expropriation Law of 1908, which sacrificed basic legal principles such as the protection of private property and the equality of all citizens for the sake of the Germanisation policy. In the centre, the picture of two men kissing referred to the Eulenburg affair (1907–1909), a controversy regarding accusations of homosexual conduct among prominent members of Kaiser Wilhelm II's entourage, involving the Graf von Moltke and the Prince of Eulenburg-Hertefeld, owner of the Liebenberg estate. Representing the 'colonisation in Cameroon' with a Prussian soldier stabbing an African woman with his bayonet, the scene on the right recalled the notorious abuse of power by German officials in Cameroon. During Puttkamer's governorship (1895–1906) numerous scandals and atrocities occurred, such as the routine flogging and murder of natives, regardless of gender or age.



**Figure 1.** ‘The Power of Prussia in its apotheosis’ (1909).<sup>13</sup>

At the top of the monument the cartoonist drew ‘Drzymała’s wagon’. As the two lines underneath explain, it was supposed to represent the ‘crown of Prussian power’:

That is the Prussian power in its apotheosis

You became its crown, you Drzymała’s wagon!

This wagon was a former circus caravan used as a dwelling by the Polish peasant Michał Drzymała (1857–1937) after he was denied permission to build a house on his own land. At the time, the Prussian authorities considered any place of residence a house if it stayed in one place for more than 24 hours. To get around the law, Drzymała moved the wagon a short distance each day and for several years in the courts tenaciously defied all attempts to remove him. He gained notoriety when his case was described by Polish and European newspapers, making fun of the Prussian

state. In short, the cartoon ironically destroyed the idea of 'Prussian progress' by showing different contributions to regression in the history of the development of humankind, i.e. the moral decadence of the Prussians and their return to barbarity.

During these years, acts of violence committed by the Germans in their colonies were regularly reported in the Polish press. The articles often underlined the gap between Prussian civilising discourse and the brutal reality of colonial oppression and exploitation. In connection with the conviction of three German merchants for murder and cruelty against the natives, a newspaper based in Lwów sarcastically depicted the horrible crimes committed by 'Prussian civilising agents' in Cameroon.<sup>14</sup> In March 1914, the *Kurier Śląski* (*The Silesian Post*) denounced 'German lawlessness and abuse against the Negro population' in an article entitled 'They handle Negroes just like us'. According to the author, the Germans oppressed 'Negroes' in an 'inhuman manner', because they 'don't consider them as human'.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning of that year, the Reichstag was debating the expropriation plan. The most important division within the assembly lay between unequivocal supporters of the project and those who accepted it but with some reservations. The latter group included both members of the Catholic Centre Party and members of the revisionist wing of the Social Democrats, thus leaving only a small minority in real opposition. In fact, the Polish Circle was the only group, alongside the Socio-Democrats, which didn't join the wave of condemnations that occurred after the Duala chiefs protested against the land seizures.

On 9 March 1914, Franciszek Morawski-Dzierżykraj (1868–1938), a Polish member of the Reichstag, denounced the lack of democratic rights in Cameroon. According to him, the situation had been much better for the colonised under British rule. As a representative of a nation that itself suffered expropriation, he expressed his solidarity with the oppressed Cameroonians:

Gentlemen, the Blacks cannot defend themselves. There are no Black Members of Parliament here [...]. There can be no one. They don't have any newspapers, they don't have any telegraph agencies. It is a poor population, which is granted to you by the ruling white race. Gentlemen, we know how hard it is sometimes to enlighten the public opinion of a nation in the very close situation of another one. Especially our parliamentary group knows exactly how difficult it is to make the German people really aware of the conditions that prevail for instance among us, though we have all the written and spoken resources to do it. Indeed, the information about the Blacks is necessarily one-sided, because it is always only given by the white race.<sup>16</sup>

Since Manga Bell did not get permission to send envoys to Germany to plead their case, the Duala had no means of making their voices heard. In secret, Manga Bell had sent his secretary Adolf Ngoso Din to Germany to hire a lawyer for the Duala and pursue the matter in court and to bring the complaints of the Duala directly to the attention of the Reichstag. In this he had the support of prominent German citizens, notably the journalist Helmut von Gerlach (1866–1935) and the lawyer David Halpert (1863–1917). For Morawski-Dzierżykraj, Prussian Poles had a moral obligation to defend the Cameroonian cause in Germany, and furthermore to denounce colonial crimes committed by European nations:



I just want to remind how the Spaniards behaved in South America, especially in Peru, in which way they set up culture among the poor Indians. I remind you what terrible, horrifying things have occurred in recent times in the Belgian Congo. And last but not least, Gentlemen, please allow me to say: here, we are the ones who sympathize the most and we are very suspicious of reports saying that the Blacks are not treated badly. If 15 miles from Berlin a high-level civilized Nation is handled that way [Laughs on the right], as we know it all too well [very true! from the Poles], then, we think it must be nice in a country where the natives cannot even defend themselves in speech and writing. [Applause from the Poles.]<sup>16</sup>

According to Morawski-Dzierżykraj, the missionaries were the only reliable source of information about Cameroon. There were some Poles among them, for instance Alojzy Majewski (1869–1947), a former chaplain from Bischofsburg (Biskupiec) who joined the Pallottine Mission to Cameroon in 1902. Moreover, some local missionaries opposed the expropriation plan. Compelled to follow their converts, they would have lost buildings and other capital investments in Duala.

Morawski-Dzierżykraj wanted the Duala land problem to be known by the public at large. A few days after his speech, he published an article in the *Kurier Poznański* (*The Poznań Post*) about the ‘Scandalous situation in Cameroon’, which described Manga Bell’s cause in detail and taunted the ‘pioneers of German culture’.<sup>17</sup> Since 1906 and its involvement in the school strikes, the newspaper had enjoyed a growing audience among the Polish population of the eastern borderlands as a platform for the Polish national movement. In order to mobilise their own people to commitment and action, the Polish patriots painted the Duala as a heroic nation bravely fighting the powerful German Empire. In the *Kuryer Śląski*, Manga Bell appeared as an example to follow and as a symbol for the fight against Germanisation both in Poland and in Cameroon:

Being a valiant patriot and a guardian for his countrymen, he began to reign as the chief, recognized by the German Government, after returning to the country. He was not ashamed of his origin, did not disown the language of his fathers and even adopted the national name Duala Manga; in Europe he is known as Rudolf Bell. Knowing the German language and being educated, he defended his people at every point, in every case. What a beautiful example this Blackman gives to the thousands of sons of the Polish People, who have been Germanised in German schools, forgetting about their parents, their relatives, and their people, and are even fighting against the national movement [...]<sup>15</sup>

At this time, Polish nationalists fearfully watched the voluntary Germanisation of thousands of Polish workers who, in moving from the countryside to the Upper Silesian industrial districts, took on the German language along with city ways. The paper portrayed Manga Bell as opposed to acculturation but in fact his rule was to a large extent European in character. At the beginning of his reign, Manga Bell’s relations with the Germans were largely positive, and he was viewed as a good collaborator. His real conflict with German colonial power began later, in 1910, with the expropriation plan. The racist motivations of the project were obvious and deeply wounding to the aspirations of western acculturation of a large portion of the Duala population. In the spring of 1914, Manga Bell turned to other European governments

for aid and sent representatives to the leaders of other Cameroonian peoples for support. Suspected of organising the overthrow of German rule, he was arrested and charged with high treason. Requests for his life to be spared came from missionaries, but the Governor rejected their pleas. After a summary trial, Manga Bell and his secretary Adolf Ngoso Din were hanged on 8 August 1914.

### Conclusion

What do Polish publications on German Cameroon tell us about Polish society's attitude towards colonialism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? By challenging German imperialist ventures and calling for solidarity with the Africans, Prussian Poles may appear, at first glance, as supporters of the Cameroonian cause and prominent leaders of the anti-colonial struggle on European soil. Their condemnation of colonialism, combined with their sympathy for its persecuted victims, was drawn from their own Polish collective sufferings and the experience of a people living under foreign occupation. During the nineteenth century, Poles had embraced the attitude of the victim, of the oppressed nation consumed by rapacious neighbours. The old slogan 'For our freedom and yours', commonly associated with Polish soldiers fighting in various independence movements all over the world, made it easy to justify the support granted to the Cameroonians in the Polish media. By describing people facing the same difficulties in a very distant country, Polish patriots wanted to make Poles aware of their political, economic and cultural subjection within a global context. In a certain way, this counter-hegemonic narration was supposed to deprovincialise the 'Polish issue' and make it a part of the broader struggle against German imperial power.

Yet, their sympathy for the Africans did not amount to identification with them. In none of the quotes above is there a claim that Cameroon should be independent. Prussian Poles disagreed with the way the Germans carried out their civilising mission in Africa, but at the same time they complained of being treated like 'Africans', i.e. like 'savages'. In his speech to the Reichstag, Morawski-Dzierzykraj spoke of the Poles as 'a high-level civilised Nation' and presented the Cameroonians simply as 'natives'. In most Polish newspapers they were called 'Negroes' and pictured as primitive people, not as possible active partners or brothers in arms. Paradoxically, the gestures of solidarity with the colonised were accompanied by Polish colonial desires. Having many opportunities to participate in empire-building in Africa and Asia, Prussian Poles were deeply convinced that, as white Christians, they had to contribute to the European 'civilising mission' overseas.<sup>18</sup> After 1884, the Cameroonian issue seems to have been mainly used polemically in order to advance their own cause in imperial Germany.

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