

H-Net Reviews

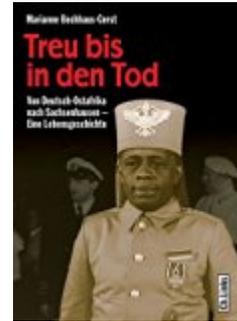
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst. *Treu bis in den Tod: Von Deutsch-Ostafrika nach Sachsenhausen. Eine Lebensgeschichte*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2007. 207 pp. Photographs, illustrations, map, bibliography, index. EUR 24.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86153-451-8.

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Commissioned by Benita Blessing



A Personal Journey for Two

My original title for this review was “Surviving as He Knew How”: Much of this story focused on Mahjub (bin) Adam Mohamed or Bayume Mohamed Hussein, a man whose life was closely connected with German history from the period of colonialism through the first years of World War II. Yet, his biography only constituted part of the story, for this book is really about Mahjub and Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, the author. Indeed, she began her introduction by writing, “This book belongs to those that tell almost as much about the author as the person it is essentially about” (p. 9). Bechhaus-Gerst even dedicated the book in part to Mahjub.

Her story and the writing of Mahjub’s began more than a decade ago when she stumbled across a document in the German Federal Archive, which at that time was located in Potsdam. Through further research she learned that the man “Husen” in the document, a man accused of *Rasenschande* (the Nazi term for sexual relations between non-Aryans and Germans) but ultimately not prosecuted, was actually an individual from the former colony of German East Africa (today Tanzania) and was not a German. Because of the dearth of literature on Africans in Germany, she began to devote much of her time and energy to this topic. Though occasionally distracted along the way with other related projects, she continued to research the life of Mahjub in an attempt to fill the holes in his life story.

This book is a result of that journey. But it is more

than the life story of Mahjub and Bechhaus-Gerst’s quest to bring greater recognition to a group that suffered under the Third Reich. It is also in part the story of German colonialism and the Third Reich. Of course, the literature on the Third Reich is extensive, and that on German colonialism grows considerably with each passing year. However, this tale is different, because it is primarily told through the experiences of a man who was born in Africa and ultimately came to see Germany as his home and future. Thus, it is a story of these two important periods in German history, periods that are joined by their racist ideology, as experienced by one who was not considered part of the “master race,” even though he felt himself to be German.

While this book covers the colonial period through the Third Reich, and even ventures into post-1945 Germany, the main focus is on the years 1933 through 1944. These were the years that Mahjub spent in Germany. Yet, despite this focus, Bechhaus-Gerst still uses the lives of Mahjub and his father, both of whom served the Germans either prior to or during World War I in military capacities, to explore larger themes in German colonialism. During this period, the author focuses on the origins and history of the Askari, African soldiers serving in East Africa, and the legend of the “Faithful Askari,” including the role of this myth in the interwar and National Socialist periods. Similarly, in addition to sharing Mahjub’s life with us during his years in Nazi Germany, Bechhaus-Gerst uses his story to provide the reader with insights

into the lives and experiences of Africans living in Germany, in particular “German Africans,” during the Third Reich. Hence, the reader learns more about German colonial revisionism and employment opportunities for them, either as the “exotic” (in the German Africa Shows or in films, for example) or as language assistants in German academic institutions. Further, his story and the lives of other “German Africans” offer additional insights into the functioning and racial politics of Nazi Germany. Finally, the author explores the place of African victims of the Third Reich in post-1945 Germany, a perspective not yet adopted by the Federal Republic. Throughout her narrative, Bechhaus-Gerst notes the continuation of racist thoughts and attitudes directed towards individuals of African descent.

In writing about the life of Mahjub, Bechhaus-Gerst goes to great lengths to fill in much of the missing narrative. In order to do so, she makes extensive use of archival materials as well as selected, appropriate secondary literature. Several times in the book, though, she has to resort to making conjectures on the reasons behind certain actions or behaviors due to the lack of any paper trail. In these situations, she does a good job of exploring most of the possibilities, but in a small number of instances it appears that not all are taken into account. The few times this appears to happen, one can almost sense the author’s affinity for the subject, even though the primary tone of the book assumes a scholarly neutrality. Nev-

ertheless, on these few occasions, one can almost read through the lines that she is rooting or even making excuses for him. This usually comes through in her analysis, which is often more strongly present when positive details of his character are presented than possible negative traits. The latter are admittedly mentioned, but often not beyond what is stated. This posture is corrected to a large degree when she points out many of his deficiencies near the end of the book.

Overall, though, despite the potential for a discernable subjectivity in the telling of Mahjub’s life story, Bechhaus-Gerst does remarkably well in presenting the information in essentially an unbiased fashion. She relies mainly on primary sources, though she does avail herself of secondary material. However, because of the intended audience, namely a non-academic one, Bechhaus-Gerst does not fully situate his life in the extant literature on German colonialism and racism or Nazi Germany.

Nonetheless, even though intended for a non-scholarly audience, this book contains useful and interesting information for those unfamiliar with the Afro-German experience in Germany, especially during the Third Reich. Indeed, it adds to the growing literature on that experience, which is often neglected in general histories of that era. Hence, even those familiar with the history of Nazi Germany will also most likely find that the story of Mahjub contributes to their deeper understanding of this period.

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