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German Prisoners of War in Japan
During the First World War: Letters from the Colonial Frontline

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In 1914, approximately 4500–4800 German men were transported to Prisoner of War (POW) camps in Japan following the occupation of the German colony in China. They were the only European POWs held captive by an Asian Great Power, making this a unique colonial case study. This is the first essay to analyse how German POWs in Japan perceived of and narrated their experiences in their letters, with particular focus on the recurring themes of patriotism, nationalism, and cultural-racial constructs. I will analyse the ways in which the POWs used these socio-cultural concepts to make sense of their circumstances and maintain a link to the German diaspora and metropolis.

**KEYWORDS** WW1, Japan, Germany, POW, nationalism, racism

**Introduction**

In 1914, approximately 4500–4900 German men were transported to Prisoner of War (POW) camps in Japan following the occupation of the German colony at Qingdao in China. They remained imprisoned in Japan until the end of the war. The Great War German POWs in Japan are rarely mentioned in the historiography, and have usually been dismissed with a brief discussion of the ‘generally good conditions’ in the Japanese POW camps. For example, Bauer (1999: 49) argued that apart from rare occurrences of hardship, the German POWs in Japan had overall satisfactory accommodation, and were supplied with food and medical care. Aside from a very few largely descriptive studies on camp conditions (see for example Burdick & Moessner, 1984; Krebs, 1999), the question of how these POWs experienced their imprisonment has largely escaped historiographical attention outside Japan.

Similarly, while concepts of Empire and race have recently been discussed in a growing volume of historiographical works relating to the First World War (see...
for example Koller, 2001; Fogarty, 2008; Das, 2011; Barkhof, 2014; Liebau, et al. 2014), many of these works focus on the use of colonial troops in both European and colonial theatres of war. The case of the German POWs in Japan is notably absent from most of these studies (for a brief discussion of the racial dimension see Murphy, 2014). Yet, in the case of Qingdao, many contemporaries perceived of the war and occupation as a ‘race war’ whereby Germany as a ‘white’ Great Power was defeated by an Asian ‘yellow’ Great Power (for the contemporary Japanese discourse on ‘race war’ and the ‘white peril’ see Dickinson, 1999). As the Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (German Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv); BArch RM3/6865) wrote on 30 September 1915,

Qingdao [Tsingtao] is not only a loss for Germany, but for all Europeans, yes for the whole White Race.[...] The capture of Qingdao meant [...] a moral victory of the Japanese over the Europeans, and also particularly a victory of the yellow race against the white race.

While colonial troops and ‘native soldiers’ were also employed elsewhere during the war, these were part of Western Imperial or Dominion forces, that is they were for example ‘British’ or ‘French’ (colonial) troops. In contrast, Japan was the only non-White Asian Great Power involved in conquering and occupying German territory, and subsequently interning German soldiers and civilians. Given this distinctive aspect of the war in the Pacific, it is somewhat surprising that this racial-cultural dimension has so far not been applied to Germany’s war in the Pacific. Indeed, the themes and language of racism and nationalism in POW correspondence during the First World War have barely been explored at all.

These circumstances meant that the German POWs in Japan were imprisoned in a unique colonial space. This article will analyse how this colonial space was expressed in POW correspondence and their narratives of POW camp life and their captors. In particular, I will focus on the usage of dichotomous colonially inspired cultural-racial terminology and language, which could range from mere allusions to cultural differences, to employing racial stereotypes illustrating the perceived dualities of German superiority and Japanese inferiority in terms of Kultur (in the German sense of civilization), race and national standing. As the analysis will show, the chosen style and idiom often reflected the purpose of the letter, whereby it soon becomes apparent that cultural-racial concepts were often linked to patriotism and an effort to connect the colonial space of the POW camp to the war effort at home. The analysis will also highlight some of the reasons why some POWs utilized notions of ‘German superiority’ in the wake of their defeat and subsequent imprisonment.

The analysis is based on German POW letters from Japan that are held in the German Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv, BArch) in Berlin and Freiburg, largely in the files of the German Imperial Naval Office (Reichsmarineamt), German Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt) and the German Colonial Office (Reichskolonialamt). Although the sample is limited (since the bulk of camp correspondence is held
In 1897, as part of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Weltpolitik, the German Empire leased Jiaozhou Bay in the Shandong Province of China. However, the colony was short-lived. After the outbreak of the First World War, Japan, who was allied to Britain, declared war on Germany on 23 August 1914. In response, and due to the fact that barely 2000 German troops were stationed at Qingdao, German volunteers (mostly civilians and members of the reserve army) from all over China considered it their patriotic duty to help defend the colony. In the end the total number of around 4500–4900 Germans were faced by a much larger Japanese force (around 25 000–30 000) assisted by a small contingent of around 2000 British troops. From 29 October 1914 onwards Qingdao was under siege, and was forced to surrender on 7 November 1914. After the fall of Qingdao, the German soldiers and civilian volunteers who had defended Qingdao were transported as POWs to Japan to spend the rest of the war in around 15 POW camps. An inspection report from 1918 lists 4627 POWs (BArch RM3/6875), numbers in other sources vary slightly. Initially, the POWs were housed in temporary accommodation, including temples, empty schools, and other public buildings. As the war progressed, the Japanese government replaced some accommodations with new purpose-built camps, for example the ones at Bando and Narashino, or the new barracks at Shizuoka Camp II or Kurume camp. Kurume, a temple complex, was the camp to take the first incoming German POWs and remained one of the largest throughout the war.

The POW correspondence provides rich primary source material that illuminates their perception of various aspects of camp life. Ordinarily, most camps, not just in Japan, restricted the number of letters and postcards a POW could send each month. The correspondence generated by the POWs served a variety of purposes, whereby the aim and function of each letter was reflected in its content, and in the language and terminology used (usually within the confines of censorship, although some letters held in the archives bypassed the censor). While some of these functions are generic to POW mail, others reflect the particular colonial space of the Japanese POW camp, and often use cultural-racial concepts and language to express this.

Cultural-racial terminology and constructs gained increasing importance in discourses on imperialism and nationalism in the German Empire after 1871 (Dietrich, 2007: 229). As Steinmetz (2007: 217) pointed out, many contemporary Germans (and indeed many Europeans) defined race in ‘biological or genetic terms’ by the late nineteenth century. This biological race concept was then often supplemented by socio-cultural ideas of a perceived German or European life style based on notions of ‘civilization’ including language and cultural skills (Dietrich, 2007: 179). This ‘race model’ was used by some (although by no means everyone) to legitimize colonialization, and to hierarchically structure colonial societies (Dietrich,
2007: 176). For many European imperialists, ‘colonialism’ and ‘nationalism’ belonged together since they were necessary for a nation to achieve world power status (Walgenbach, 2005: 161). In Germany, the national collective was often understood as a hybrid of race and nation, as expressed in the romanticized and often mythicized term ‘Volk’ (the people) that was linked to the German concept of Heimat (homeland). As such, as Walgenbach (2005: 166) explains, in Germany, a völkisch (national) race concept had developed that understood the national Volk in terms of semi-biological and highly exclusive ‘blood ties’ that found expression in the German jus sanguinis definition of citizenship. As Wildenthal (2001: 10) points out, ‘the words national or cultural were often substituted for racial’. Kundrus (2003: 288) adds that in the German Empire and its constructions of national identity, concepts of nation, culture, race, and class were often amalgamated to create the duality of sameness and difference. Especially in the German colonies, German culture became an integral part of the construction of a white colonial identity, whereby this ‘German identity’ became crucial in demonstrating German power and superiority vis-à-vis the colonized and other colonizing powers (Dietrich, 2007: 187). The idea of ‘race’ and of ‘being white’ as visual features of distinction became central to the identity of many colonial Germans (Dietrich, 2007: 231), who often continued to identify themselves as part of the global German nation and the German Volk tied to the distant Heimat.

Such notions of belonging, as well as concepts of imperial-racial hierarchy, continued to influence understandings of the colonial space at war, and as such often found expression in POW correspondence. Some POWs tried to bridge the enormous geographic separation from the metropolis by stressing their continued ties to Volk and Heimat, and a desire to be part of this ‘time of greatness’ and the national ‘grand, unified collective’ (Rose, 2003: 7). Wilhelm Köberlein, a POW in Japan, wrote in 1915 that the POWs lamented that they had to sit uselessly in their prison during this kostbare Zeit (precious time) without being able to partake in the war in Europe: ‘[only] through German newspapers do we get an idea, here in the far East of Asia, of the unity and enthusiasm of the German people in this uplifting time’ (Mettenleiter, 2001: 44). Indeed, one of the purposes of POW letters was to relate the POW’s own war experiences in Qingdao in an effort to demonstrate that they, too, were still part of the unified patriotic entity of the German Empire despite their remote colonial location. Patriotic combat narratives are frequent in POW letters written in the immediate aftermath of surrender and imprisonment, when the POWs wanted to recount their experience to family and friends. At the same time, some POWs felt the need to explain and justify their actions and subsequent POW status in order to alleviate feelings of guilt or shame at having surrendered rather than making ‘the ultimate sacrifice for the fatherland’ by dying for their country.

In the case of Qingdao, the POWs often justified their surrender by referring to the numerical superiority of the enemy and thus hopelessness of the situation. Based on common pre-war notions of German identity and superiority, as outlined above,
Japanese numerical superiority was hereby often juxtaposed by German moral superiority as expressed in bravery and patriotic commitment. The narrative of the exceptionally ‘brave and heroic’ German soldier hero (Frevert, 2008: 70) was hereby further enhanced by the fact that many of those taken POW at Qingdao were civilians who had volunteered to defend the colony. POW Bruno made the point of telling his parents ‘I volunteered to defend the Prinz Heinrich Mountains, [and] was lucky to be chosen, so many had volunteered! Our position fell after a fierce battle …’ (BArch RM3/6860). A letter written from Tientsin on 30 November 1914 praised the Germans, soldiers, and volunteers alike, who ‘fought like lions’ and refused to surrender. The same letter claimed there had been a group of 12 Germans who managed to rout 300 Japanese soldiers (BArch RM3/6861). A letter from Marugame camp, dated 1 December 1915, claimed that the ‘Japanese had three times as many dead as the German Garrison was strong’ (BArch RM3/6861). The Ostasiatischer Lloyd (a German newspaper published in China and widely read in Southeast Asia) wrote in November 1914 that the German fighters in Qingdao, ‘far away from the main theatre of war, and robbed of the opportunity to fight at the front,’ nevertheless showed the world what only ‘German heroic bravery’ could do (BArch RM3/6861). These examples illustrate that individual bravery was directly rooted in and linked to national superiority, and by extension the idea of the German Kulturkrieg (war of civilization) — whereby Germany’s perceived superior civilization resulted in its mission to usher ‘in a new age of European civilization’ (Kewley Draskau, 2012: 208). As POW Ernst wrote to his parents, ‘Germany will win... Germany is justified, Germany has the morale. No other nation is so able to march ahead of all other nations and finally secure the peace of the world in a fair and just manner... Germany is the teacher who will lead the world to perfection’ (BArch RM3/6861).

Yet at the same time, narratives of battle and danger were often accompanied by reassurances. A POW wrote from Himeji Camp in November 1914 that his position during the battle was one of the most dangerous as ‘it was hailing grenades and shrapnel... [considering this] it was almost a miracle that we had hardly any losses and... I want to assure you again that I survived Tsingtao without a scratch’ (BArch RM3/6860). Reassurance was indeed a key function of war time and POW correspondence in general. Barker (1974) noted that complaining letters were overall few and far between in the two world wars as prisoners were trying to give a rosy picture in their letters home. Similarly, Wilkinson (2014) found that First World War German POWs in Britain often tried to downplay negative media reports of their treatment in an effort to reassure family and friends. This was no different for the German POWs in Japan. POW Ernst’s letter to his parents from Kumamoto camp in November 1914 exemplifies the anxiety that must have been felt by many POWs:

I did my very best to let you know my whereabouts and that I am in good health. I hope you were not left in the dark for too long, I know from own
experience how terrible the feeling is to have no news from one’s dearest …
[during the battle] I suffered most dreadfully in the knowledge that you must have been afraid for me (BArch RM3/6861).

Similarly, Alwin wrote to his family in March 1915 from Matsuyama Camp ‘I want to assure you that my health is excellent. I have gained [weight] … the fresh air and simple hearty food very much agree with me’ (BArch RM3/6863). However, the colonial setting of the war in China, and subsequent imprisonment in Japan, also prompted some POWs to re-assure their families that they were doing well despite the cultural differences encountered. Since the purpose was reassurance, the allusions to cultural differences were often kept light while emphasizing positive aspects: ‘You don’t have to worry about my health,’ wrote an unknown POW from Kurume POW camp in October 1914 to his parents (BArch RM 3 6860), ‘they treat us well in this respect … we have our own kitchen cooking European style food, and I have never been this fat before!’ POW Ernst concluded his letter to his parents by stating that ‘our treatment is in accordance to the Japanese people’s ideas of our culture and needs. We are being treated decently and with consideration’ (BArch RM3/6861). It is clear that some POWs assumed that the colonial space of their camps and the ‘otherness’ of their captors might cause anxiety at home, which the POWs were keen to alleviate.

However, often in combination with growing feelings of bitterness, disillusion, and depression as a result of ongoing imprisonment, some POWs resorted to negative stereotypes and expressions of cultural-racial Japanese inferiority when describing their captors and circumstances. This is particularly noticeable in POW letters of complaint, which could relate to a vast variety of issues including for example inadequate accommodation, lack of exercise space, and monotonous schedules. For example, a POW from Shizuoka camp wrote a letter in 1915 complaining about the incompetence of the resident doctor, the poor sanitary facilities, which he stated were too close to the bedrooms and the kitchen, the unsuitable sleeping arrangements, the lack of heating, the abundance of fleas and rats as well as the punishments of prisoners (BArch R9208/236).

While on the face of it, the purpose of these letters was to raise awareness of perceived mistreatment and bad conditions, complaints — similar to the above discussed combat narratives — were also often expressions of a more deep seated desire to belong to the national wartime community and the patriotic frontline spirit. Deprived of further combat engagement, at least some POWs, as Jennifer Kewley Draskau points out, ‘aspired to share in the glory through the exaggeration of their own hardships’ and felt a ‘need to be perceived as casualties of war’:

Denied the practicing of masculine warrior arts, guilt-ridden at being ‘sidelined’ sequestered in shameful safety far from the horror and glory of the front, isolated and insulated from the theatre of war and its atrocities, they sought other means to fulfil warrior norms which celebrated the ability to endure hardship. The sense of guilt fostered an inclination to self-dramatisation and an
exaggeration of the inconveniences of camp life, through a need to see intern-
ment as a test of character analogous to, although not on par with, life in the
trenches. (2012: 219)

As such, some POWs may have felt the need to point out their continued suffering
for the distant fatherland by highlighting and complaining about the conditions in
the camp (Pöppinghege, 2006: 170+279). Incensed by the ‘common erroneous
assumption of the good treatment in Japan’, a letter from Shizuoka camp dated
November 1916 urged the recipient to spread the word about the ‘real situation’
in Japan (BArch RM3/6871). An uncensored letter from Matsuyama camp dated
1916 by Hauptmann M. stated that the camp was ‘terrible. [From Germany] we
often hear the words “the Japanese treat their POWs well”. That is not true in
the case of Matsuyama. They [the Japanese] harass us wherever they can…’ (BArch
RM3/6868). A key function of these letters therefore was to raise awareness, and
alert the media and the government to the perceived suffering and thus to the con-
tinued existence of these POWs, some of whom felt side-lined and forgotten at the
other end of the world, especially since the German contemporary media often
reported that the POWs in Japan were sitting out the war in cosy imprisonment.
These reports were often based on the initial letters of reassurance. An unknown
newspaper stated in November 1914 that Japan ‘eager to demonstrate Kultur’ (in
the German sense of civilization), have created better POW conditions than could
be found in the POW camps of ‘all our other enemies’ (BArch RM3/6860). In
addition, in 1916 the German government agreed with the press that no ‘Yellow
Peril’ propaganda or otherwise negative reports about Japan were to be published
to protect the German plans to conclude a Special Peace with Japan (Raucke,

Complaining about hardships endured in the camps thus could be aimed to prove
that the POWs were also still ‘doing their bit’ and therefore should find recognition
as valid and valued members of the national community. It was therefore important
to some POWs not only to stress their suffering, but also to narrate this with refer-
cence to the German national community. In the case of the German POWs in Japan,
the sense of German moral superiority, which had found expression in tales of
bravery in the combat narratives, was now often expressed by framing complaints
with reference to various aspects of perceived Japanese inferiority whereby cultural,
racial, and national stereotypes were often used interchangeably in reflection of
common German colonial concepts as discussed above.

Racial stereotypes and patterns of description were common place as Mehnert’s
analysis of contemporary lexica shows. For example, the popular Meyer’s Konver-
sationslexicon (1906) described ‘the Chinese’ as patient, diligent, and modest, but
also warns of the ‘Chinese Slyness’ in reflection of the general nineteenth century
belief that ‘the Chinese’ were deceitful, sly, and cruel (Mehnert, 1995: 22–23).
Often, positive traits were considered to be ‘not oriental’ while negative attributes
such as slyness and deceitfulness were commonly described as ‘typically oriental
or Asian’ (Mathias-Pauer, 1984: 119). This generalization of ‘Asian’ character traits is also reflected in some POWs’ letters. For example a POW wrote from Oita camp in December 1915 complaining that the POW had to suffer ‘Asian meanness’ and are treated as ‘Chinese Kulis’ (slaves) (BArch RM3/6866). Another POW letter from Fukuoka camp (1916) stated that the Japanese guards treated the POWs ‘typically Asiatic: mean, revengeful harassing and full of a petty desire to treat the officers the same as the ordinary ranks’ (BArch R9208/236). It is interesting to note that while the letter writer generalized the Japanese by attributing to them certain ‘typically Asiatic’ character features, at the same time he rejects and revolts against the idea that the Japanese in turn should treat their German POWs the same — as ‘kulis’ and regardless of rank, which was in breach of standard POW practice at the time. Individual experience thus often fostered or confirmed both self-identity as well as generalizations. In the combat narratives, individual bravery confirmed understandings of national German superiority, while in the POW camps, in these cases, the individual experience of Japan could foster beliefs in national, cultural and racial Japanese ‘inferiority’ based on observed negative ‘Asiatic’ character traits.

We can furthermore note in these letters an interesting reflection on Great Power dynamics that relate to Japan’s strive to be recognized and respected as an equal Great Power. While during the Boxer Rebellion German officers in China had often called the Japanese soldiers ‘small yellow monkeys’ (Mehnert, 1995: 57), after 1905 and Japan’s victory over Russia, Japanese troops’ iron discipline and fighting morale were often praised as were the ‘chivalrous virtues’ of the Japanese, even if this praise was occasionally mixed with various suspicious of a growing Japanese ‘Yellow Peril’, as well as a general attitude among the German government that Japan was viewed as a ‘second rate Great Power’ (Mehnert, 1995: 57–58). The German Kaiser was a prominent proponent of Yellow Peril although his views were not necessarily endorsed (Raucke, 1988: 113). Such perceptions of Great Power hierarchies are reflected in some letters of complaint, which alluded to and often criticize the common pre-war idea that the Japanese had acquired or possessed ‘Kultur’ (meaning civilization), which had already been doubted by some pre-war German critics who felt that this was but a thin facade which continued to hide ‘Orientalism and Backwardness’ (Mathias-Pauer, 1984: 120). For instance, a POW lamented that ‘the Japanese relish every opportunity to be able to order a European around’, denouncing the ‘Ritterlichkeit’ (chivalry) that the Europeans had previously so often praised the Japanese for (BArch RM3/6866). Indeed, a POW letter written by Lieutenant von B at Kurume (BArch R9208/236) dated October 1915 called the Japanese guards ‘yellow Kulturbastarde’ meaning people devoid of civilization. A POW from Kurume camp wrote in June 1915 that since the fall of Qingdao, the ‘arrogance, megalomania and the petty revengefulness of the Japanese knows no limits’ (BArch RM3/6864). The language of many of these letters of complaint echoed earlier descriptions of Japanese soldiers, and often featured demeaning expressions such as ‘yellow ones’, ‘Japse’ or ‘monkeys’.
Therefore, the individual experience of self-devaluation from soldier, and as such a useful member of the national community, to prisoner of war, may have contributed to exaggerations of perceived enemy inferiority on racial-cultural grounds. Re-imagining the reality of imprisonment by degrading the enemy on a national level, which in turn served to raise Germany’s ‘superiority’ despite her defeat in battle, enabled some POWs to re-interpret their own situation from being an ‘inferior captive’ to being ‘morally superior’ as a German national as this letter illustrates:

... even if we don’t encounter the country and its people in the normal sense, we still gained a deep insight into the dark sides of the Japanese character. It is unbelievable, how much arrogance, brutality, impudence and dog-like cowardice can be found among the military, officers and ordinary ranks alike. Rare exceptions confirm the rule. [...] There would be no better lesson for them than to take part in a real war [the main theatre of war in Europe] where we would meet them in equal numbers. [...] Then the Yellows would learn with great fear who really is the strongest nation on earth. [...] The Japanese have managed, with their arrogance and harassment, to plant an undying hatred for Japan in every POW [...] The hour of revenge will come; did you consider that, you inflated [arrogant] monkeys?? (BArch R9208/236)

The letter writer combines racial language to stress the negative ‘Asiatic’ characteristics of his captors to bring across the same message often found in the battle narratives, namely that in the case of Qingdao Germany had only been defeated due to the enemy’s numerical strength and not due to their moral, cultural or racial superiority. Therefore, in the eyes of this POW, both Germany’s national as well as his own individual cultural-racial superiority remain intact; his interpretation of the experience has enabled him to continue to cast himself as the master of this colonial space.

Conclusions

From reading their surviving correspondence, it is immediately apparent that many German POWs in First World War Japan re-imagined their situation through enhanced patriotism and a belief in innate German superiority. While reliance on patriotism is a common coping mechanism, in Japan this gained added significance due to the geographical and cultural distance from the German Empire, as well as due to the unique circumstances of war, defeat and imprisonment in Japan. This situation posed a unique challenge to the comparatively widespread contemporary German belief in their own cultural-imperial as well as racial superiority. It resulted in many POWs re-imagining themselves not only though patriotism, but also through racialized claims. Walgenbach (2005: 171) has argued that the ‘internally fragmented’ and ‘colonially not yet established’ German Empire used ‘race consciousness’ to compensate for ‘fragile national identity’ and to create Imperial
German patriotism. I would argue that the German POWs used concepts of racial-national superiority much for the same purposes. Furthermore, by defining themselves as part of the national-racial German Volk, the POWs were able to take part in Germany’s battle for survival. Their creed for German culture became an expression of national solidarity with the Heimat and the fighting troops at the front (Pöppinghege, 2006: 253–4). As such, race and nation intertwined with and aided their search for belonging behind the wire. The colonial pioneer had to become the soldier hero who defended ‘German soil’ abroad, and was now suffering in the POW camps for the fatherland like their comrades at home. Conceptualizing imprisonment in this way enabled many POWs to perceive of and narrate their experience in ways that tried to assuage their guilt at being captured, and the more general trauma of imprisonment at the other side of the world, far away from the Empire and the Front.

While POWs in general suffered from ‘imprisonment guilt’ and the related (part imagined; part real) social condemnation this accrued, some POWs in Japan seemed to have felt this keenly since their conditions of imprisonment were described by many contemporaries — and subsequently many modern historians — as ‘exemplary’ in comparison to the POW camps in Britain, Russia, France and Germany (Jones, 2011). While it is true that the conditions in the Japanese camps were comparatively good, albeit with considerable differences between camps and over time, it must be noted that some of the affected POWs disagreed with this ‘myth of the cosy imprisonment’ (Krebs, 1999). It can be argued that at least for some of the POWs this protest against their conditions was vital in demonstrating that they, too, were suffering for the fatherland, and were still loyal members of the national diaspora despite their distant imprisonment, which, on the face of it, had excluded them from Germany’s Grosse Zeit.

In the aftermath of the war, with Qingdao occupied by Japan, many former Qingdao Germans had lost their work and had no employment to return to in Germany. Their situation was made worse by the fact the Imperial German Empire they had known had perished. Until their release in late 1919 and early 1920, the POW in Japan continued to live in a colonial space that otherwise to all intend and purposes had ceased to exist. Indeed, as the Imperial Naval Office (BArch RM3/6875) wrote in November 1918, many Germans who were made civilian internees or POWs in the colonies might prefer to delay their return to Germany due to the drastically changed political and economic circumstances there. Although it was recognized that many people had been rendered (near) destitute by the war and the loss of the colonies (BArch R2/50306), the new Weimar Republic struggled to provide financial support to returning colonial Germans since the government was overburdened by political instability, economic crisis and the sheer number of returned soldiers and POWs. One unnamed POW wrote to the Imperial Army Minister complaining that returnees were only being given the equivalent of 2 months’ pay rather than the promised year’s recompense, and protested that this was not enough ‘for someone to build a new existence after returning from five years in a
POW camp and having lost everything’ (BArch R2/50306). Financial hardship added to the disillusionment and disappointment with the Fatherland that was felt by many returning POW, which seemed to stand in stark contrast to their patriotism during the war. The Emperor who had urged them to defend Qingdao for ‘Empire, Nation and Heimat’ was gone. While many returning soldiers and POWs faced a crisis of identity on their return, this was often worse for colonial Germans who had not been to Germany for some time. For many of them their ‘home’ had been the German colony. Particularly galling was the lack of the expected ‘heroes’ welcome or any national appreciation for the suffering of POWs in defence of their country. ‘We were promised the thanks of the Fatherland’, wrote an unnamed Qingdao German POW to the Frankfurter Zeitung on 6 October 1920, ‘for the small band of heroes, who bravely took up a hopeless fight against an enemy ten times our numbers’. Instead, he wrote, the former Qingdao fighters are left with ‘disappointment and bitterness’ as their treatment has been ‘unsatisfactory, bureaucratic, slow’. Promised funds had not been paid and no military awards had been issued. ‘We volunteered to defend the colony, to do our patriotic duty’, he complained, ‘and this is the thanks we get’ (BArch R2/50306).

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