


VISUAL

LEGAL SIGHTSEEING

## Wilhelmstraße 92, 10117 Berlin: German Memory Culture in the Heart of Empire

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In a city packed to the brim with monuments commemorating Germany's often dark and brutal historical past, visiting Wilhelmstraße 92 in the city centre is a particularly sobering experience. At this location, the Prussian and later German Foreign Ministry was seated from 1870 to 1945. Today only a relatively obscure Eastern German-style apartment complex, it features more than 56 *Stolpersteine* and a 17m tall steel structure remembering victims of the holocaust. Yet, there is also one rather lonely and inconspicuous pillar that is only being sought out by the occasional decolonial city tour memorializing another haunting event that took place on Wilhelmstraße 92: the Berlin Conference from 1884–1885.

15 November 2024 marks the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Berlin Africa Conference, in Germany called the 'Congo Conference', which is largely regarded as the pinnacle of nineteenth century imperialism and colonial exploitation of the African continent. Following the rather ridiculous headline 'Remembering, reconciling. Bearing united responsibility for our future', the pillar summarizes the events of the conference, the exclusion of African participants, and even mentions the Herero and Nama genocide orchestrated by the German empire, whose 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary is also commemorated on 2 October 2024. However, it does not mention the numbers of victims, includes spelling mistakes in the English version, and remains silent over Germany's responsibility for colonial slaughter. It concludes with the sentence 'The result [of the Congo Conference] was an efficient colonization through the mutual acceptance of colonial powers.'

The sad pillar in Wilhelmstraße 92 thus aptly demonstrates the absence of Germany's colonial legacy in the collective memory. Yet, the ghosts of colonialism can be found all over Berlin. Just on the other side of the pillar is the popular metro station 'Mohrenstraße' (named in 1991), featuring a derogatory term for black people. While the Berlin transportation authorities have pledged to rename the station in 2020, nothing has changed until today. The ruins of empire are all around us.