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Schnee, Heinrich

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Schnee, Albert Hermann *Heinrich*
Colonial governor
Born 04 February 1871 in Neuwaldensleben, Germany
Died 23 June 1949 in Berlin, Germany

Heinrich Schnee was the governor of German East Africa between 1912 and 1919. During the war, he remained with the German colonial troops under the command of Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck until their surrender in November 1918. In the interwar years, Schnee was one of the most energetic and prominent activists for colonial revisionism.

Table of Contents

- [1 Background and Early Career](#)
- [2 Service in German East Africa during the War](#)
- [3 Activism during the Weimar Republic](#)
- [4 Later Life](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Background and Early Career

Heinrich Schnee (1871-1949) was born into a middle-class Protestant family in the Prussian Province of Saxony. After leaving school, he served in the Prussian army, becoming a reserve officer before studying law in Heidelberg, Kiel, and Berlin (Dr. jur. 1893). In 1897, he joined the Seminar for Oriental Languages in Berlin to learn Swahili. After graduating, Schnee took the unusual career decision of joining the colonial department of the German foreign office. In 1898, he was

appointed magistrate, district commissioner, and deputy-governor in German New Guinea, and, in 1900, district commissioner and deputy of Governor Wilhelm Solf (1862-1936) in Samoa. In 1901, he married a New Zealand-born British woman, Ada Woodhill (1873-1969), before returning to the foreign office in Berlin in 1904. After serving briefly at the embassy in London, he quickly rose through the ranks to become head of the political and administrative division of the newly established Imperial Colonial Office in 1911.

Service in German East Africa during the War

In 1912 Wilhelm Solf, the new secretary of state for the colonies, supported the appointment of Schnee as governor of German East Africa. As the second civilian and first non-aristocrat in this post, Schnee followed what contemporaries regarded as a “science-based” and “modern” approach to colonial administration with an emphasis on economic development and profit.

In August 1914, Schnee was disinclined to turn German East Africa into an active theatre of war, as, like the majority of the civilian colonial administration and many German colonials, he feared the impact that an armed conflict between European colonial powers could have on the colony. Beyond any damaging effects on the economy and fiscal stability, he was alarmed by the prospect that the African population might use such a conflict as a pretext for an uprising against European rule, and by the long-term consequences this would have for European colonialism in Africa. Based on his interpretation of the General Act of the Berlin Conference from 1885 (“Congo Treaty”), he pushed for the neutrality of German East Africa and the surrounding British and Belgian colonies by declaring the harbours of Dar es Salaam and Tanga as open ports. The half-heartedness of this approach, which lacked effective backing from Berlin, was further undermined by the actions of Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck (1870-1964), the commander of the colonial forces, who ordered attacks on British border posts, and by the bombardment of Dar es Salaam by British warships on 5 August 1914.

In the weeks after the beginning of hostilities, Lettow-Vorbeck and his nominal superior Schnee were locked in a conflict about the mobilisation of German reservists, the extent of recruitment of African labourers for military service, and the division of power between civilian and military authority. Schnee’s position was permanently weakened after the success of the German forces under Lettow-Vorbeck in repelling a British-Indian expeditionary force in the Battle of Tanga on 4 November 1914. In the following months, especially after the concentrated attack on the colony by Allied troops in March 1916, the power of decision-making shifted from Schnee and the civilian administration to Lettow-Vorbeck and the military. While remaining *de jure* head of the colony, Schnee saw his power seized by Lettow-Vorbeck and the senior officers, not only in military matters but also on issues relating to civilian policy. After the sweeping occupation of the most important areas of the colony by Allied troops by autumn 1916, Schnee, together with his administrative staff, withdrew from the wartime capital, Tabora, under the protection of the Schutztruppe. For the remaining two years of the war, Schnee stayed with Lettow-Vorbeck and the progressively waning German troops during their retreat into the southeast of German East Africa and subsequently into Portuguese East Africa in late

1917. This continuation of the campaign and refusal to surrender resulted in unprecedented exploitation of the African population and the ruthless destruction of infrastructure and agricultural land, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians in subsequent years. Governor Schnee was one of the remaining 150 Europeans of the *Schutztruppe* when Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered to the British forces on 25 November 1918.

Activism during the Weimar Republic

Schnee returned to Germany in early 1919 and led, together with Lettow-Vorbeck and Max Looff (1874-1954), the commander of the light cruiser “Königsberg”, a jubilee parade of the members of the *Schutztruppe* in Berlin on 2 March 1919. Schnee and his wife Ada were quick to publish memoirs on their war experience,^[1] but their impact was overshadowed by Lettow-Vorbeck’s enormously successful books. In 1920, Schnee was able to publish the “*Deutsches Koloniallexikon*” a three-volume encyclopaedia that he had completed just prior to the outbreak of war.^[2] In the following years, Schnee established himself as the leading publicist and activist for the colonial revisionist movement in the Weimar Republic, and agitated for an end of the Allied control of the former German colonies as League of Nation mandates and their return to German rule. He vehemently rejected the argument that Germany had “failed” as a colonising power, stressing the alleged bond between German colonisers and African colonised, which manifested itself in the “loyalty” of the African civilian population and the *askari* during the war. With “*Die koloniale Schuldfrage*”, Schnee, in 1924, wrote the key text for Weimar colonial revisionism, which was frequently reprinted until 1940 and translated into four languages.^[3]

Later Life

Like many colonial revisionists, Schnee welcomed the Nazi government in 1933, as he anticipated a more forceful policy towards a full or partial return of the German colonies. He joined the NSDAP and remained a member of the *Reichstag* between 1933 and 1945. Yet, with the dissolution of independent associations by the Nazis, Schnee not only lost most of his positions, but also any influence on Nazi colonial policy. He continued to publish regularly on colonial matters until 1945. Schnee died in 1949 in a car accident in Berlin and his memoirs were published posthumously in 1964.^[4]

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Section Editor: [Mark Jones](#)

Notes

1. † Schnee, Heinrich: Deutsch-Ostafrika im Weltkriege. Wie wir lebten und kämpften, Leipzig 1919; Schnee, Ada: Meine Erlebnisse während der Kriegszeit in Deutsch-Ostafrika, Leipzig 1918.
2. † Schnee, Heinrich: Deutsches Koloniallexikon, Leipzig 1920.
3. † Schnee, Heinrich: Die koloniale Schuldlüge, Berlin 1924. For the English version: Schnee, Heinrich (with an introduction by William Harbutt Dawson): German colonization, past and future. The truth about the German colonies, London 1926.
4. † Schnee, Heinrich: Als letzter Gouverneur in Deutsch-Ostafrika. Erinnerungen, Heidelberg 1964.

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