

# German Overseas Islands

Colonial history of the German Empire  
in eight island stories



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# Preface

In general, it is assumed that German colonialism started in 1888 with the Conference of Berlin, held at the instigation of Chancellor Bismarck. However, before 1888, attempts had already been made by the predecessors of the German Empire to acquire overseas territories. In 1683, the Duchy of Brandenburg captured an old Portuguese fort on the island of Arguin, off the coast of present-day Mauritania. The Brandenburgers managed to hold this fort until 1721 and used it for the trade in Arabic gum, ivory, gold, wood and slaves. The Brandenburgers transported about twenty thousand slaves to the Caribbean, to the slave plantations of Spain, England, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and to their own slave plantations, which were of limited size. Besides Arguin, the Brandenburgers founded Fort Gross Friedrichsburg on the African Gold Coast, in present-day Princes Town in Ghana, where the English, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Danes and Swedes also founded dozens of forts and trading posts. Between 1683 and 1685, the Brandenburgers built three more forts, with which they controlled a coastal strip of about thirty kilometers, for trading gold and timber, and off course slaves.

However, it was more profitable to have their own slave plantations and therefore the Brandenburgers tried to gain a foothold in the Caribbean. The island of Saint Thomas was owned by the Danish West India and Guinea Company, but the Danes leased the Brandenburgers a small part of the island for a period of 99 years. The Brandenburgisch Afrikanische Compagnie was given an area to lease near the capital Charlotte Amalié and some smaller areas in the west, Krum Bay and Bordeaux Estates. It was not much. The Danes kept the most fertile lands for themselves. In 1686, the first Brandenburg ship from Gross Friedrichsburg reached Saint Thomas and delivered 450 slaves. The Brandenburg African

Company had finally created the much-desired triangular trade, following the example of the companies of the larger countries: shipping goods to Africa, buying slaves with the proceeds, transporting the slaves to their own plantations in the Caribbean and transporting the proceeds of the slave plantations to Europe. No one cared about the slaves. They were considered a means of production.

The German Empire was founded in 1871. Like all Atlantic European countries, it sought colonial territories. However, much of the world had already been divided among the ruling colonial powers. Africa, however, had only been colonized in its peripheral areas. Much of the continent, in European eyes, was still a vast blank space. Therefore, Bismarck organized in 1884 the Conference of Berlin. The Berlin Conference did not directly reach agreements on the division of Africa, but it did serve as the prelude to further negotiations.

As a result of the Conference of Berlin, the German Empire acquired four territories in Africa: Togo, Cameroun, German East Africa and German South-West Africa. The German colonies in Africa were initially private projects, but Otto von Bismarck nationalized them. The combined land area was 2.6 million square kilometers, with about twelve million inhabitants. With that, the German Empire was suddenly colonial power number three of the world, in terms of territory, after Great Britain and France and number four in terms of population, after Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Besides oppressing the Africans, no one knew what to do with the areas. All the African colonies were loss-making.

The Comoros and the southwest of Madagascar almost fell into the hands of the German Empire. The Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft established in the 1880s some trading posts on these islands and bought large tracts of land. The Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft was prepared to hand over these areas to the German Empire, but due to the hesitant attitude of the government, these areas were lost before they were conquered.

Kaiser Wilhelm II tried to found a German colony on the northern, uninhabited Bear Island, which is located between

Norway and the Spitsbergen Archipelago in the Barentsz Sea. This attempt, however, failed due to the actions of an overzealous compatriot.

The division of Africa among seven European countries did not put an end to the European colonization of the world. The Pacific was, in European eyes, the last blank continent of the world. This time the United States also took part in the division. Soon after the Conference of Berlin the thousands of islands in the biggest ocean of the world were divided between Great Britain, France, the German Empire and the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, the German Empire acquired the following territories in the Pacific: the Marshall Islands, Kaiser-Wilhelmsland (German New Guinea), the Bismarck Archipelago (German New Guinea), Nauru, the Carolines, the Marianas, Palau and the greater part of the Samoa Archipelago. The smaller part of the archipelago went to the United States. In addition, the German Empire received a concession in the Chinese Bay area of Kiautschou, in northern China. The severely weakened Chinese Empire was not colonized in the same way as Africa and the Pacific were colonized, but all its major harbor cities fell prey to England, France, Portugal, Russia, Japan and the United States. The city of Tientsin was even divided in concessions among eight countries, including Italy, Belgium and the Austrian Hungarian Empire.

The German presence in Africa and the Pacific did not last long. At the outbreak of World War I, most territories were conquered by the European Allies, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Only a few forts in German South-West Africa offered resistance until the end of World War I. Japan conquered most German territories in the Pacific: the Marshall Islands, the Carolines, the Marianas, and Palau, as well as the Bay area of Kiautschou and controlled much of the northwestern Pacific after World War I. Australia conquered Kaiser Wilhelmsland, the Bismarck Archipelago and Nauru. Samoa was occupied by New Zealand. With that, the short lived overseas German colonialism ended.



# Bear Island

*The German colony in the Far North that never came to be*

Island: Bear Island, Bjørnøya

Country: Norway

Status: Svalbard district

Surface area: 178 km<sup>2</sup>

Population: uninhabited

Location: Arctic Ocean

Colonizer: Great Britain, Russia, German Empire, Norway

In the sixteenth century, knowledge of the Arctic was based on the mysterious *Inventio Fortunata*. Around the year 1360, a Franciscan monk from Oxford made six voyages to the northwestern part of the Atlantic Ocean by order of King Edward III of England. In the Arctic region there was a land consisting of four large islands that lay in a circle around the North Pole and together formed an inland sea. At the North Pole was a black rock with a circumference of 33 German sea miles and a height to the sky: the Rupus Nigra.<sup>1</sup> Between the islands, water from the surrounding ocean flowed in so fast that a great maelstrom formed on the inland sea, sucking ships toward the Rupus Nigra, after which they disappeared into the depths of the earth. On one of the four islands lived the Screlingers, mysterious creatures of only four feet tall.

The original *Inventio Fortunata* was lost in the fourteenth century. A summary came into possession of the Dutchman Jacobus Cnoyen. According to Cnoyen, in 1364, a ship had reached the inland sea and had returned despite the maelstrom. Eight crew members later reported to the King of Norway in Bergen. Jacobus Cnoyen met one of the eight

survivors and, based on his experiences, made a summary of the *Inventio Fortunata*. However, his *Itinerarium*, like the original, was lost. The only thing we now know about the *Inventio Fortunata* comes from a letter written by the Flemish cartographer Gerard Mercator in 1577 to the English geographer and mathematician John Dee. Mercator used the *Inventio Fortunata* on his 1569 world map to fill in the Arctic: four islands symmetrically enclose the North Pole. He was not the first to use the *Inventio Fortunata*. In 1508, Johannes Ruysch published his world map *Universalior cogniti orbis tabula* and also filled in the Arctic with four islands. In 1492, the German Martin Behaim produced the 'Erdapfel,' the very first globe, commissioned by his hometown of Nuremberg; without America, without Australia, but with the North Pole, which he also circled with four symmetrical islands. Behaim, too, must have been aware of the *Inventio Fortunata*.

The Flemish cartographer, geographer, preacher and later administrator of the Dutch East India Company, Petrus Plancius, created a world map in 1590 that was basically a copy of the Mercator map. Two years later he came up with his own world map. The Arctic area was also based on the *Inventio Fortunata*. Petrus Plancius, like many other scientists, was convinced that the *Rupus Nigra* was magnetic and that it provided the earth's magnetic field.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the world was cartographically fairly accurate as a result of the many Spanish and Portuguese voyages of discovery. However, the Arctic remained uncharted territory and the *Inventio Fortunata* was still the only source from which cartographers could draw. Petrus Plancius, unlike many of his contemporaries, was convinced that the Arctic was ice-free in the summer. The sun shining twenty-four hours a day melted the ice and if there was ice at all in the Far North, it came from the great Russian rivers. At the North Pole it would be as cold as halfway Norway.

At the end of the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal were the dominant colonial powers. In 1494, with the Treaty of Tordesillas, they divided the non-European trading world