

Landesmuseum Zürich. SCHWEIZERI
SCHES NATIONALMUSEUM. MUSÉE
NATIONAL SUISSE. MUSEO NAZION
ALE SVIZZERO. MUSEUM NAZIUNA
L SVIZZER



Accompanying
Guide
for Teachers

Switzerland's
Global
Entanglements

colonial

National Museum Zurich.

“colonial – Switzerland’s Global Entanglements”

13 September 2024 – 19 January 2025

Contents

Offers for schools	3
Introduction	4
View of the exhibition	5
Floor plan of the exhibition	6
Visiting the exhibition	7
Didactical inputs	10

Imprint

Concept and content

Ashkira Darman
Vera Humbel and Museum Education team

Subject editing

Marina Amstad, Pascale Meyer, Raphael Schwere und
Marilyn Umurungi

Translation and copyediting

Nigel Stephenson

Design

Regula Baumer

Zurich, September 2024

All rights reserved.

© Swiss National Museum

Our thanks go to the Willy G. S. Hirzel Foundation and the Ernst Göhner Foundation for their generous support.



This dossier can be downloaded
online.

Visit to the exhibition

Secondary levels I and II

colonial – Introductory tour

Swiss society has become ever more globally connected since the 16th century. How was Switzerland involved in colonialism? Who took an active role in it and in what role? Viewed from a range of perspectives, eleven spheres of activity offer insights into Switzerland's colonial history.

Guided tour | 1 hour

Secondary levels I and II

colonial – Connect and reflect

The legacy of European colonialism continues to influence the world to this day. What does colonialism have to do with Switzerland and us as a people? What insights do the exhibits offer into the history of exploitation, racism, and resistance? In small groups, students discuss Swiss involvement, contemporary debates, and how colonialism relates to their own lives.

Interactive tour | 1.5 hours

Please note that the exhibition contains images you might find distressing.

Self-led visits

Upon notification, teachers have the opportunity to explore the exhibition with their school class independently. To enhance your experience of the exhibition, you can access an audio guide on your own smartphone via the National Museum app.

Introduction for teachers

Virtual tour of the exhibition with suggestions on working with students at secondary level I and above. Hosted by the exhibition's curator Marilyn Umurungi and Pia Regli of the museum's education service.

This virtual tour will run on Zoom. Upon registering, participants will receive an individual access code.

16.09.2024 | 4:30 pm – 6:00 pm

Information & Registration

Mon – Fri 09.00 – 12.30 | +41 44 218 66 00 | reservationen@nationalmuseum.ch

Introduction

»» **The National Museum Zurich is presenting its first ever comprehensive and multi-perspectival overview of Switzerland's colonial past. It takes the form of an exhibition based on the latest research, and draws on biographies as well as using objects, artworks, photographs and written documents for illustration.**

The exhibition comprises two parts. The first part defines eleven themes, with many examples of how Swiss people, businesses and communities were involved in colonialism from the 16th century. The geographical scope covers North and South America through Africa to Asia. A number of Swiss companies and private individuals participated in the transatlantic slave trade and amassed a fortune from trading in colonial products and exploiting enslaved people. Swiss missionaries travelled the world and left Switzerland to found settlement colonies and cultivate supposedly unpopulated land. Others, driven by poverty or a thirst for adventure, served as mercenaries in European armies, undertook colonial conquests and crushed uprisings by indigenous populations. Back home, science played its part in shaping the perception of people in the colonies, in addition to the letters and reports sent from colonial lands. Scientists at the universities of Zurich and Geneva formulated race theories that gained international credence and helped legitimise the colonial system.

The second part of the exhibition addresses the legacy of colonialism and its impact on present-day Switzerland. It reveals the effects of colonialism that still persist – such as global wealth inequality and environmental issues. The main emphasis, however, is on debates of direct relevance to the Swiss people: for example, should street names or monuments to people who were involved in colonialism be altered or knocked down or is that erasing history? Visitors are invited to join the discussion and leave their thoughts at the exhibition.

Researchers from different disciplines have released publications on Switzerland's colonial entanglements in recent years. Museums have also recognised the significance of the issue, as shown in the exhibitions on display this autumn, for example.

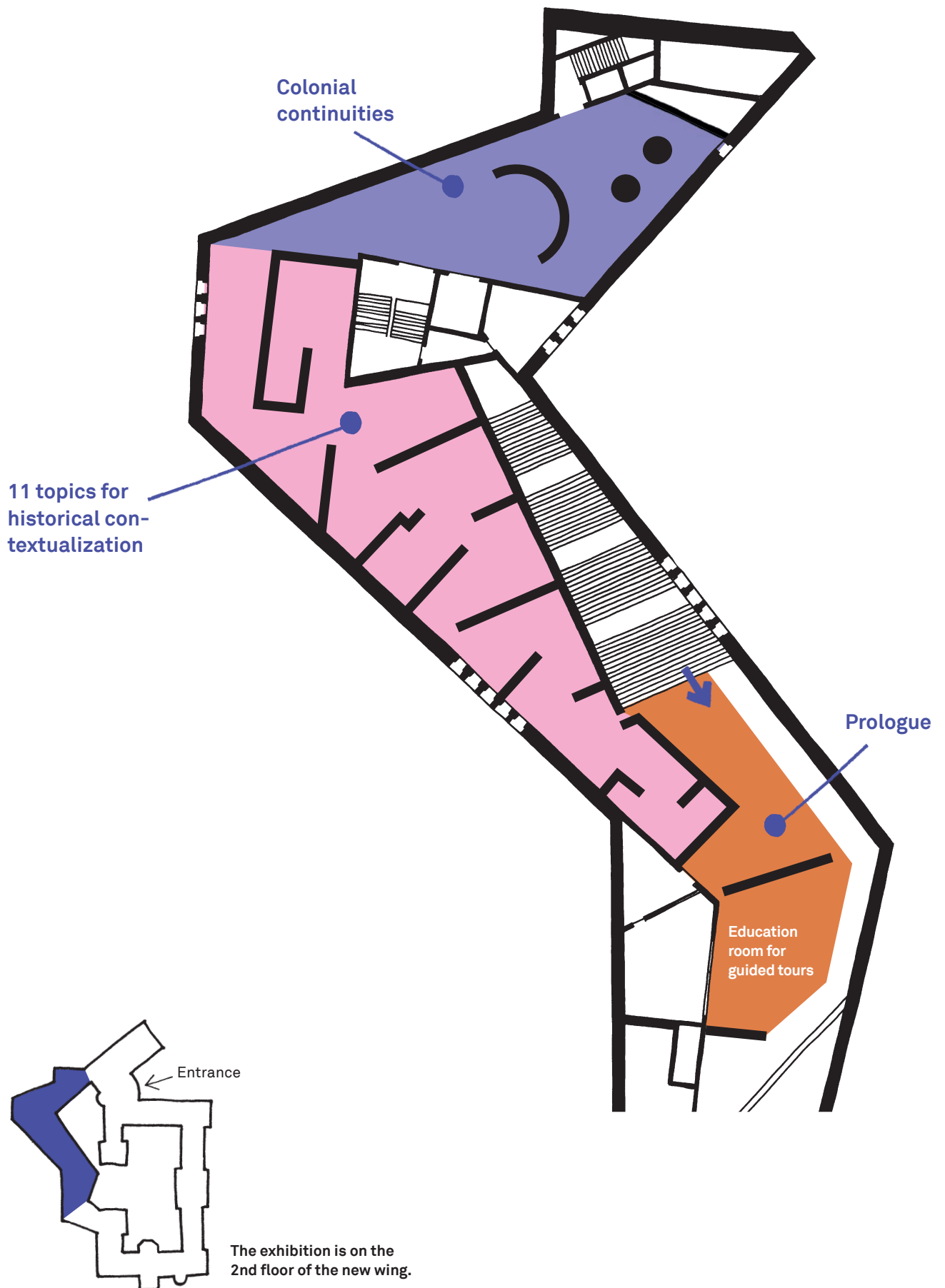
The exhibition at the National Museum Zurich is the first to offer featuring a multi-thematic overview of Switzerland's history of colonial entanglement. It features numerous voices and considers the issue from the perspective of different regions, action areas and positions. Contributions from artists including Denise Bertschi, Sasha Huber, Chris Pappan, Mathias C. Pfund, Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige and Dom Smaz add valuable insights. The exhibition also incorporates extracts from exchanges with the public and with various experts and actors. An international scientific advisory board oversaw the conceptualisation.

Besides a comprehensive educational programme for schools created with historian Ashkira Darman, the exhibition offers an extensive supporting programme with interactive tours, meetings, panel discussions and focus events in cooperation with ETH Zurich and the Historical Dictionary of Switzerland.

View of the exhibition



Floor plan of the exhibition



Visiting the exhibition

Ever since the 16th century, Swiss society has been increasingly globally intertwined. In eleven chapters, the exhibition reveals colonial fields of action in which Swiss men and women were involved. They range from involvement in the slave trade to mercenary service in the colonies to scientific research as a form of exploiting both humans and natural environments.

On the tour through the exhibition, visitors encounter not only Swiss protagonists and institutions based in what today is Switzerland, but also enslaved and colonized people, who put up resistance but whose traces have almost been lost today. The legacy of European colonialism still shapes the world today. In the last part of the exhibition, we call on visitors to engage in the ongoing debates.

European colonialism

European colonialism, lasting from the end of the 15th to the mid-20th century, describes a system and practice of domination based on violence and exploitation which involved European powers on the one side and subjugated, non-European peoples on the other. This foreign supremacy was backed up by local cooperation and combatted by various forms of resistance.

The European colonial powers were driven primarily by economic interest and justified their rule through the claim of alleged superiority that paved the way to a racist world view.

Enslavement

In order to operate plantations in the Caribbean as well as in North and South America, European traders deported over 12 million people from Africa to the colonies between the 16th and 19th century. This was only possible because there already existed an intra-African slave trade.

More than 250 Swiss entrepreneurs and companies were involved in the deportation and trade of roughly 172'000 people. Prerequisite for such a form of exploitation was the dehumanization of enslaved people. The Atlantic slave trade created the conditions under which racism evolved, starting in the 16th century.

Trade

Swiss merchants began trading in so-called colonial wares in the 16th century: among them silk, spices, tobacco, and tea from overseas. Later, textiles became the main currency in the Atlantic triangular trade – a highly lucrative business for the companies involved.

From the mid-19th century, Africa and Southeast Asia served as sales markets for European industrial goods; in return, Europe imported raw materials to drive its industrial production. In Switzerland, a country with few commodities, a few merchant companies benefitted from the development and grew to become the world's largest commodity traders.

Mercenaries

Swiss mercenaries began serving in European colonial armies from the end of the 16th century on which meant they often took part in violent conquests and helped to uphold the colonial order.

Crucial factors that made Swiss men sign up for foreign military service included unemployment and poverty but also fanciful images of manhood promising adventure and heroism. Although actual mercenarism was banned in 1859, serving in a foreign army still remained possible. Thousands of young Swiss men joined the Foreign Legion or the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army and served in colonial Asia and Africa.

Visiting the exhibition

Settler colonies From 1600 onwards, colonial governments founded so-called settler colonies in which European men and women were invited to cultivate allegedly unoccupied lands and engage in trade. In truth, the land was seized from the respective resident Indigenous population.

Although most Swiss emigrants came from poor backgrounds, they, being *white*, benefitted from the existing power relations in the long run and contributed to the forceful eviction of Indigenous populations – above all in North and South America, at times also in Asia and Africa.

Colonial gaze Reports and photographs create stereotype images of the colonies and of colonized people in Switzerland. One such example are the photographs taken by the Swiss aviation pioneer Walter Mittelholzer (1894–1937), who undertook several flights to the African continent between 1927 and 1934 and published successfully about his journeys.

In his photographs, he depicts people from a perspective which we today would describe as stereotype, racist, and exoticizing. This ‘colonial gaze’ is still soundly embedded in Switzerland’s collective memory.

The missions Ever since the 16th century, Swiss missionaries – starting with the Jesuits in Latin America – have attempted to bring Indigenous peoples across the globe into the folds of Christianity. One of the first and largest of the European Protestant mission societies was the *Basel Mission*.

Missionaries built schools and hospitals, often with the help of local rulers. Although they occasionally initiated social change, the relationship with their followers was usually governed by a paternalistic attitude. Back home, the missionaries often painted a picture of inferior cultures in the colonial territories.

Experts From the mid-19th century onward, numerous Swiss experts stood in the service of colonial powers. Geologists searched for oil, engineers designed bridges, civil servants collected taxes. Their expertise served the colonial development and administration of a territory.

Swiss worked in the Congo Free State, among other places, and their knowledge supported the plundering of the land. The engineer Victor Solioz (1857–1921) built a railway line in German Southwest Africa (modern Namibia) to ship minerals. Local resistance against the project was met with brutal violence, culminating in genocide.

Science Swiss scientists took advantage of the colonial patronage to conduct research, for instance, in botany, tropical medicine, or linguistics. Their findings were useful: cartography, ethnographic knowledge, or geological findings helped colonial powers to exploit natural resources and control colonized populations.

Indigenous knowledge was either ignored or appropriated. Colonial researchers ‘discovered’ landmarks along with plant and animal species, albeit all of them long known to the colonized peoples, allowing Swiss scientists to reap in fame and profit without naming the original sources.

Visiting the exhibition

- Exploiting nature** The expansion of colonialism in the 19th century caused far-reaching changes to and the destruction of landscapes along with the respective flora and fauna – with notable effects on the climate.
- Colonies served as seemingly inexhaustible sources of natural resources; the rise of European industrialization increased the demand for them exponentially. Swiss men and women, too, helped to plunder these resources through large-scale plantation farming or big game hunting, as examples from Sumatra and East Africa go to show.
- Racism** Up to the end of 17th century, the alleged superiority of Christian culture was seen as an expression of ‘divine order’. In the course of the Enlightenment, this view was seriously questioned.
- At the turn of the 19th century, scientists in Europe began developing ‘racial theories’; these explained the alleged superiority of the ‘white race’ no longer in religious but in ‘natural’ terms based on bodily features such as hair structure, colour of the eyes, or shape of the skull. The resulting ‘race theories’ provided the legitimization of imperial rule and the exploitation of ‘foreign races’ in the colonies.
- Decolonization** Between 1945 and 2002, 120 former colonies gained independence and became sovereign states. Being a neutral country that had never owned colonies of its own, Switzerland offers its ‘good offices’ and is able to play a key role in peace processes, such as between Algeria and France in 1962.
- In addition, Switzerland has been intent on building sound economic relations with the now independent nations. The Department of Foreign Affairs has focussed its economic policy efforts mainly on developing countries in Africa and Asia.

colonial - Switzerland's Global Entanglements is an exhibition that shows students at school just how much Switzerland was involved in the colonial system over recent centuries and shaped by its global connections — even though it had no colonies of its own. The effects continue to influence day-to-day life even now. Exploring these global connections in the classroom offers the opportunity to look at students' individual experiences and their family's past; by so doing, history lessons acquire relevance for all students.

The significance of the topic in a modern migration society

Debate around the culture of remembrance has been growing in Switzerland in recent years. Among other things, it has shown that Switzerland is now a 'migration society'. This means that migration influences the reality of Swiss society and the experience of each individual in it. The ideas, outlooks, and assessments of history that variously challenge the Swiss frame of reference for the politics of memory and history are correspondingly many and varied. Society's pluralistic character also needs to be reflected in how history is taught.¹ Mark Terkessidis is a scholar of migration who has written about 'diversity' in the classroom. He does not apply the term judgementally; he suggests instead that we cannot now imagine the classroom without it, and that history lessons need to reflect the circumstances.² According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, in 2019 over 50% of those below the age of 15 lived in a household with an immigrant background, and the trend is growing. 'Immigrant background' as a phrase means little to most young children and adolescents as multilingualism or cross-border family life lived in different locations is a fact they take for granted.³

In this context, the following insight into the teaching of history is not surprising: history lessons are successful when they can connect with pupils' personal experiences and can take account of family history and different views of history. This means that family histories from beyond Switzerland's borders need to be shown to be part of Swiss history for it is in Switzerland's global entanglements that the diverse histories of a classroom materialize. Their many histories together make up History, which in turn reveals the conflicts between their individual stories.⁴

The complex nature of Switzerland's colonial entanglements

The question of European colonialism and of Switzerland's involvement, the effects of which continue to be felt down to the present day, is multilayered and complex. Its 500-year history extends across four continents. While many parallels exist, it did vary in the forms it took and how it evolved in different regions at different times. It is important that pupils understand, for instance, that there was no one single form of colonialism. The geographical extent and exercise of colonial rule were influenced by resistance from Indigenous peoples and the regular defeats suffered by the colonial powers.

This process reveals that the construction both of Europeans' self-image and of national identity are most closely linked to the construction of 'the colonial Other'. This constructed 'Other' assigned to people in the colonies demeaned them.

1) Georgi, V., Lücke, M., Meyer-Hamme, J. & Spielhaus, R. (2022). *Neue Perspektiven für die Erinnerungskultur in der Migrationsgesellschaft*. Bielefeld: Transcript. Huber, R. et al. (2023). *Auslageordnung «Erinnerungskultur Stadt Zürich»*. Studie im Auftrag des Präsidialdepartements der Stadt Zürich zur erinnerungskulturellen Situation. Zurich.

2) Terkessidis, M. (2021). *Das postkoloniale Klassenzimmer*. Baustein 23. Schule ohne Rassismus, Schule mit Courage 2021. pp. 6-7, https://www.schule-ohne-rassismus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Baustein_12-WEB.pdf, (last accessed on 29.05.2024).

3) Terkessidis, *Klassenzimmer*, pp. 5-6.

4) Terkessidis, *Klassenzimmer*, p. 8.

The 'Others' were viewed as a homogeneous group, and a hierarchy was created between them and Europeans in a process known as *Othering*. Ways of thinking and mindsets that evolved in the process of *Othering* gave rise to various forms of racist treatment of Black people and People of Colour from the 16th century onwards. Racist ideas and actions accordingly became key elements in the legitimization and perpetuation of European colonialism. On that basis, the class and teacher will be able to reason that different types of racism, as well as other aspects of colonialism, continue to be felt to this day. The after-effects of the violent subjugation of large parts of the world by European colonial powers are still felt in the economic and political disparities that exist between today's *Global North* and *Global South*, for instance, including a Eurocentric worldview in which colonial Europeans' self-image continues to resonate.⁵ This *Othering*, and the various types of racism associated with it, occur widely in the surviving sources as penned by Europeans.

Another factor to be considered is that of the reciprocal influence that colonized territories and colonial powers exerted on each other from the 16th century onwards. As part of the European colonial network, Switzerland was included in that process. Contemporary sources do indicate more of a one-sided influence on the part of the colonial powers, however, and that is the picture presented in history textbooks to this day. To ensure this perspective is not reproduced, multiperspectivity and the representation of agency are vital. In the context of colonialism, agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to act, particularly those who were colonized.

Multiperspectivity

When considering colonial entanglements and how their effects are still felt today, a key aspect is the principle of multiperspectivity. It seeks to prevent a Eurocentric and biased representation of the topic, and enables pupils to recognize its complexity. Multiperspectivity applies on two levels: firstly there is the viewpoint of individuals in the historical past, how they perceived and experienced events; and secondly there is the viewpoint of present-day individuals and how they see history in retrospect.

* 'Swiss' here refers to those people resident within the territory of present-day Switzerland during a given era.

The biographies selected for inclusion in the exhibition serve to present different perspectives that prevailed in the colonies as well as within the Swiss Confederation. Contact between Indigenous people and Swiss men and women* in Indonesia, the Congo, or in North America, for instance, indicates that both sides were participants who pursued their own strategies. This aspect shows that interaction between various groups was not one sided, but was marked by reciprocal actions and decisions, and, moreover, reveals a whole range of viewpoints. Conversely, the biographies reveal that even in the 19th and early in the 20th century, there were many Black Swiss men and women, as well as People of Colour, who were part of Swiss society — a fact that is still insufficiently acknowledged. Their personal circumstances varied enormously: while Pauline Buisson, for instance, practically lived the life of a slave, Alois Wyrsh was the first Person of Colour to be elected a member of the National Council in 1860. The freedom to act that each had varied accordingly. What they all had in common was that they were affected by racism in one way or another. How each coped with that is now impossible to gauge given the surviving sources.

5) Gedenkstätte Neuengamme (2018). *Verflechtungen koloniales und rassistisches Denken und Handeln im Nationalsozialismus Voraussetzungen – Funktionen – Folgen*. Neuengammer Studienhefte 5, 1/2019, Hamburg, p. 8.

Didactical inputs

In the context of the principle of multiperspectivity, sources present a major challenge. Currently available sources overwhelmingly reproduce the European, colonial viewpoint. The limited sources relating to Indigenous populations in the colonies, or those individuals in Switzerland affected by racism, make it challenging to do them justice. What is more, there are generally fewer sources in relation to women, and in terms of Black women and People of Colour, the situation is more acute still. This accounts for why women are underrepresented in the biographies presented here.

It is crucial to draw school pupils' attention to such disparities. They nevertheless offer students a valuable opportunity to reflect on how knowledge of history originates. They can discuss where the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge lie and how to deal with gaps in it.

Another aspect of multiperspectivity is concerned with the interpretation of posterity. The question here is to what extent joint societal memory can offer guidance in the present and in the future.

Relevance to the present

References to the present highlight that historical knowledge about colonial entanglement can modify how we view present-day discourse and media coverage on the subject. Knowledge of the persisting effects of colonialism enables pupils to participate in current debates on history, commemorative culture, or politics. They can join the dots of history and reflect critically on the effects of the past on communal life today.

Examination of complex historical entanglements and their influence on our lives today fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, and heightened historical awareness among pupils and students.

Notes on how to address the topic of racism

In a racially-aware classroom, it is important to consider how racist images and ideas come about. *No to racism* stresses the importance of having a classroom discussion about racism to prevent its automatic reproduction.⁶ Discussing Switzerland's colonial entanglements can therefore be a key move in challenging and dismantling racist notions and patterns of thought.

A classroom discussion about racism requires an empathetic approach, however. Each class is differently constituted. There are pupils who discriminate against others or who experience discrimination themselves. The teacher is familiar with the culture of the class and its composition. If an open and trusting culture already exists within a class, the subject of racism is more easily broached.

Here a few pointers and suggestions for a productive classroom discussion about racism:

- Clarification: there are no 'races'. It is crucial to convey to pupils that there are no biological 'races'. Racism is based on social constructs and prejudices.
- Unconscious racism: students need to understand that racism can often occur unintentionally. Racist beliefs are learned and applied unconsciously even in childhood; they lead to discrimination and hurt. This is effectively shown by addressing the issue of structural racism in addition to the routine racism of everyday life.
- Avoid reproducing racism. It is crucial that racism is not reproduced in conversations or in discussions about it.
- React to racist comments: a teacher should always react to racist comments, whether made intentionally or not. To remain silent suggests they are normal. Pupils can interpret a teacher's silence as acceptance of such comments. Students affected by racism take a teacher's silence to mean it is in order for them to be hurt and demeaned in the classroom. Depending on the comment, a teacher can correct what was said or lead a discussion for clarification purposes.
- To experience racism is to experience violence: those affected by it need to be strong. Keep in mind that it is rarely easy to speak about racism or to seek help when faced with it.
- Include the views of all involved: every class has students in it who have experienced racism or whose relatives or role models are confronted with it. Their viewpoint deserves equal attention and respect. It is crucial not to expose them; instead take heed of their experiences, feelings, and concerns.
- Family history: it is entirely possible that school pupils have ancestors who had direct experience of colonial oppression, if not slavery. Pupils' views on the subject are relevant and need to be considered.
- Generally, a civil culture of discourse and respectful use of language are required in the classroom. Racism and Language

6) El-Maawi, R., Owzar, M., Bur, T. & Attoun, S. (2022). *No to Racism: Grundlagen für eine rassismuskritische Schulkultur*. Bern: hep Verlag, p. 87.

Racism and language

When considering colonialism and racism, the use of respectful language is essential to avoid situations that reproduce racism. This requires classes to discuss words and phrases coined in the colonial era that are still in use today. Many of these words and phrases reflect a racist and colonial worldview, and were created by Europe's colonial powers as a way to demean the 'Others'.

As they consider the colonial origins of words and phrases that are still in use today, pupils become aware of the narratives associated with them. It is essential that teachers deconstruct these narratives to help their pupils develop a critical understanding of how these words and phrases were used in the past. Here teachers can direct pupils to appropriate online glossaries.

Another measure that avoids the European and colonial perspective is the use of self-designations for individuals or entire populations in place of foreign, European terms. This facilitates more nuanced and respectful communication.

If teachers choose to make use in class of texts containing racist phrases and *Othering* narratives, they are advised to think carefully about what it is they hope to achieve. Texts of this type can serve to deconstruct stereotypes and racist ideas, but there is a risk that they will reproduce racism.

Racism and images

In principle, the use of images in the classroom is valuable, and pupils respond well to it. When it comes to the pictorial sources of colonialism, however, we encounter problems similar to those we find with textual sources. Surviving pictures largely show the European, colonial perspective; they were often used to construct 'the colonial Other'.

With the invention of photography in the 19th century, pictorial sources increased significantly. Photographs not only served purely documentary purposes; they were also brought into play as instruments of power and control. During the age of imperialism, photography facilitated surveys of colonial territories, and underscored colonial superiority. The photographer and writer Teju Cole has drawn attention to the remarkable similarity that exists between photography and violence, one that emerged in the nineteenth century and continues to this day. Anthropological photographs that were produced within imperialist structures and images shot by contemporary photo journalists are closely allied with both types of image, emphasizing a defined hierarchy. When particular groups of people are classed as 'foreign' or 'different', news agencies are more inclined to publish explicit and distressing images of those who belong to them. Conversely, the media are much more cautious about showing injuries and instances of humiliation of people with whom their readers feel some affinity. Such an assessment is often based on racial compassion and class loyalty.⁷

Pictures and photographs therefore need to be chosen carefully and with a view to their intended pedagogical usefulness. Problems arise with the decontextualized and thoughtless use of harrowing images intended to arouse horror at what happened in the colonies. Such images demean their subjects and reinforce the perception

7) Teju, C. (2019). *When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism. (And When It Still Is.)*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html>, (last accessed on 23.05.2024).

Didactical inputs

of native populations as passive victims deprived of their individuality. Pupils with ancestors who came from such places can feel hurt by such images.

Moreover, teachers need to show consideration for the sensitivity or shame with which pupils might react to human trauma.⁸ There is also a need to avoid portrayals that objectify, exoticize, or sexualize individuals, as not to do so would only reinforce stereotypical images in pupils' minds. It is crucial here to think about who photographed whom, how it was done, and to what end.

In contrast, there are pictorial sources that present the Indigenous perspective. Photo studios owned and managed by local people were established in many colonial towns, for instance. Depictions of Black People and People of Colour as role models and individuals with agency add a sense of multiperspectivity to lessons.

8) IHRA (2019). Empfehlungen zum Lehren und Lernen über den Holocaust, <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/empfehlungen-lehren-lernen-uber-den-holocaust>, (last accessed on 24.05.2024).