In January 1901, four African American men from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama arrived in the German Colony of Togo in West Africa. Their expedition was financed by a German business organization that worked closely with the government on agriculture in the German overseas empire, the Kolonialwirtschaftliches Komitee. The agricultural attaché at the German embassy in Washington DC had approached Booker T. Washington the previous summer to organize this expedition, which was to transform cotton growing in Togo so that it would supply the world market with raw materials for European industry rather than supply local spinners and weavers.

Leading the expedition was James Nathan Calloway, a faculty member in the Tuskegee agriculture department. He had graduated from Fisk University in 1890 and, like all Fisk graduates, had learned to speak German. John Winfrey Robinson, who had graduated from Tuskegee in 1897, accompanied Calloway. After graduation, Robinson had taught school in Alabama for a year before returning to Tuskegee to do postgraduate work in agriculture, likely with Calloway and George Washington Carver, the famous head of the agriculture department at Tuskegee. Robinson would soon become the leader of the expedition. Also on the expedition were Allen Lynn Burks, a recent graduate in agriculture from Tuskegee, and Shepherd Lincoln Harris, who had come to Tuskegee from Union, Georgia, in 1886 to study mechanics, but had never graduated.

Observers around the world hailed the expedition as an important success, and other colonial powers soon imitated the colonial cotton efforts in German Togo. The Tuskegee men bred a variety of cotton that grew in Togo and produced a fiber equivalent to that of the American Upland cotton necessary for industrial textile manufacture. As European
mills mechanized cotton spinning and weaving, their machines became increasingly intolerant to variations in cotton fiber, giving the United States a near monopoly on a fiber that had grown in many parts of the world since antiquity. The Tuskegee expedition members were the first in Africa to succeed in producing significant quantities of cotton equivalent to American Upland. Soon British, French, and other colonial powers followed the German example, in some cases with instructors from Tuskegee.

Thanks to the cascading effects of the Tuskegee expedition, cotton is grown as a cash crop in much of West Africa. Colonial cotton programs, though carried out in the name, and sometimes even in the sincere belief, of economic progress for Africa, have been a political and economic disaster for Africans because of the coercion they involved, the economic opportunities Africans had to forgo to grow cotton, and, today, the terms of trade that force West African growers to compete with lavishly subsidized US and European growers.²

The important place of the German empire in the colonial transformation of West Africa stands at odds with the marginal place given to German colonialism, with the exception of the genocidal war against the Herero in Namibia, in historical memory today. It is true that the German overseas empire was relatively small and relatively brief, but other colonial powers regarded it as an exemplary colonial power, bringing its well-known preeminence in the social and natural sciences to bear on what would today be termed development. Frederick Lugard, for example, one of the pioneers of the British Empire in East Africa, and later perhaps the greatest political theorist of colonialism, wrote in 1893 that the German administration in East Africa “... set us an example in the thorough and practical way in which they set about to develop their territories,” although, he allowed, “as regards tact with the natives, the advantage, perhaps, lies with us.”³ Togo was the Musterkolonie, the model colony, of Germany.

The Treaty of Versailles after the First World War transferred the African territories of Germany to the League of Nations, with Britain, France, and South Africa ruling the territories on the League’s behalf. The basis of this transfer was not the venerable right of conquest, but rather the view that German colonial policy was brutal and inhumane. German colonial policy was indeed brutal and inhumane, as all colonial policy necessarily is. What German opponents of the Treaty of Versailles came to call the “colonial guilt lie” obscured not only the brutality of all colonialism, but also the extent to which other colonial powers employed German colonial policy as a model for their own.

The Tuskegee expedition to Togo was probably the single most admired German colonial effort. Yet the Tuskegee expedition was, obvi-
ously, at least as much an American effort as a German effort. The Tuskegee expedition to Togo reveals how theories and practices of the control of formally free labor in Germany, the United States South, and colonial Africa shaped each other. It shows how the New South—the South of segregation and sharecropping that emerged to replace the Old South of slavery and secession—became, via Tuskegee Institute, a model for colonial rule in Africa. It also suggests how colonial rule in Africa, in turn, shaped Tuskegee Institute, perhaps the most important institution of the New South.

I. Booker T. Washington and the Origins of Tuskegee Institute

Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in Virginia in 1856. He attended Hampton Institute, a Virginia normal school, a school for training teachers, established for African Americans by Freedmen’s Bureau Officer Samuel Chapman Armstrong in 1868. Armstrong had grown up in Hawaii, and he sought to apply to freedpeople the pedagogy his missionary father had employed for Hawaiians. Samuel Armstrong described both blacks and Hawaiians as members of “weak tropical races” who should be trained for hard manual labor. Booker T. Washington graduated from Hampton in 1875 and, in 1881, established a similar normal school for African Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Tuskegee Institute, like Hampton, trained African American primary school teachers who would employ what they called “industrial education” in their own classrooms. Industrial education did not mean vocational training for particular trades, but rather imparting an aptitude and enthusiasm for physical labor, as well as personal virtues like cleanliness, sobriety, and thrift that many supposed African Americans to lack. Proponents of industrial education contrasted it to a literary or academic curriculum that they regarded as impractical for the majority of African Americans and that gave blacks too elevated a sense of their role in society. Many who supported industrial education opposed political agitation against disenfranchisement, segregation, and other forms of racist injustice in the United States. Most historians today agree with W.E.B. Du Bois’s assessment, in his 1903 Souls of Black Folk, that industrial education did not merely respond to the measures by which blacks were kept economically and politically subordinate, but rather “helped their speedier accomplishment.”

Booker T. Washington became nationally and internationally recognized as a black leader and a prominent representative of the New South in 1895, as a result of an address he delivered to the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. This speech has become known as the
“Atlanta Compromise” because it suggested to many listeners that Washington accepted segregation and disenfranchisement. Many heard this message in the famous simile that has since come to stand for the entire speech: “In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” While Washington characterized this interpretation of his speech as a “wrong idea of my position,” this wrong idea appealed to white elites in the United States and elsewhere who supported Washington’s position as a black leader.

In the years immediately following his sudden rise to fame, Washington seems to have taken advantage of his new authority to begin moving Tuskegee Institute beyond the colonial education offered at Hampton. The new Tuskegee that he might have created would have set about transforming, rather than facilitating, the subordinate political and economic status of blacks in the New South. Immediately after his speech, Washington began a seven-year effort to recruit W.E.B. Du Bois to Tuskegee. The split between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, which has become a canonical feature of narratives of American intellectual history, in fact emerged only in the twentieth century as a result of new political engagements of each thinker. Washington hoped that Du Bois would found a center at Tuskegee to conduct sociological research aimed at improving the conditions of African Americans in the South. In 1896, Washington hired George Washington Carver, a star agricultural researcher, who carried out agricultural research to transform black agriculture in the South, hoping to break the forced cotton monocropping that contributed to the poverty and dependence of black sharecroppers. Washington was no covert radical, to be sure, but before 1900 there was at least an ambivalence in Tuskegee that pointed to an alternate path for the institution. This ambivalence would be clarified when Tuskegee began working with the German empire, returning industrial education to its colonial origins.

II. Germany and the American South

The German officials who invited Booker T. Washington to send Tuskegee personnel to Togo thought to do so because many German academic, business, and political elites had a longstanding interest in the American South. German interest in the American South came in part from its interest in American cotton. The German cotton textile industry was the second largest in Europe, after the British industry, and Germany consumed about a fifth of the total US crop each year. Like their European counterparts, German textile manufacturers needed American cotton for mechanized spinning and weaving. India, the second largest supplier of
cotton to the world market, produced a cotton whose staple was too short to be used in textile machinery unless mixed with American cotton. The cotton famine that accompanied the American Civil War, when the Union blockade and wartime disruptions sharply reduced the supply of American cotton to Europe, made clear the international economic importance of the cotton of the American South and also the danger the American monopoly presented.

European and American observers shared the view that black labor was necessary for successful cotton growing and that African Americans, therefore, were in part responsible for the global preeminence of American cotton. Explanations for the connection between blacks and cotton ranged from assertions that blacks were “natural” cotton growers to more accurate observations that the brutal racism of the United States South, both during and after slavery, made it especially feasible to force black people to do the backbreaking and poorly paid labor of cotton growing. In fact, the sharecroppers that produced most of the world’s cotton supply after the Civil War were not all black, and by 1910 the number of white tenant farmers in the cotton states approached, and by 1930 exceeded, the number of black tenant farmers in the region. However, the incorrect assumption that all cotton sharecroppers were black made it possible for many Americans to ignore the plight of all sharecroppers and also informed European plans for colonial cotton.

Many Germans had an especially strong interest in the American South because parts of Germany, like the American South, had undergone a transition from bound to free labor in the nineteenth century. In 1810, the Kingdom of Prussia freed all serfs, agricultural laborers bound to large estates in hereditary servitude. As in the American South after emancipation, many of these freedpeople remained subject to the authority of their former masters, for whom they continued to work as agricultural tenants. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, these German freedpeople began migrating en masse to greater freedom, both inside Germany and overseas, especially to the United States. Economic and political elites worried about labor shortages on agricultural estates and about the transformation of supposedly conservative peasants into radical workers. While African Americans would begin a similar migration during the First World War, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the American South presented a model of constrained agricultural labor that Germany seemed to be losing to migration.

German economists founded the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Social Policy Association) to discuss how to control free labor to prevent emancipation from leading to economic dislocation and political challenges to the status quo. The Verein was led by Gustav Schmoller, a professor of economics known for his rejection of abstract classical political economy in favor of
empirical, historical methods. Schmoller had been interested in the possibilities for controlling free labor in the American South since 1866, and free labor in the American South remained important in discussions about Germany in the Verein für Sozialpolitik. Georg Friedrich Knapp, a professor of statistics, focused his attention on the liberation of the serfs and often lamented that the social science of the eighteenth century had condemned serfdom without developing “a replacement” for it. Knapp studied plantation agriculture in the New World, both before and after emancipation, to study how political and economic elites controlled free agricultural labor. Schmoller elaborated the political implications of Knapp’s historical research, noting that a kind of re-peasantization of the working class could prevent the spread of social democracy after the decline of “patriarchal relations” and calling for mass settlement of workers on small farms in the Prussian East.

The Verein für Sozialpolitik had a major influence on German policy. Under Bismarck, the Prussian state began a policy of “internal colonization” to settle Germans on small farms in the Prussian East. For Bismarck and others in charge of the policy, internal colonization had more to do with changing the ethnic balance of eastern Prussia, which had a large Polish population. The Verein, though interested primarily in settling small farmers as a way to prevent the political instability of a mobile working class, applauded and advised the Prussian Settlement Commission that oversaw internal colonization. Members of the Verein, initially, were not particularly interested in the ethnic aspect of internal colonization.

When Max Weber joined the Verein für Sozialpolitik in 1890, at the age of twenty-six, he brought the ethnic concerns of the Prussian Settlement Commission into the Verein für Sozialpolitik. Weber had just finished military service in one of the areas of Prussian internal colonization and had come to despise Poles as a “race” both culturally and biologically distinct from Germans. Weber became a prominent member of the Verein with studies of the by then decades-old problem of free agricultural labor in Germany. His innovation, applauded by his colleagues, was to add concerns about racial conflict and degeneration to older concerns about class conflict and social degeneration. While members of the Verein had learned to connect race, racism, and free labor in their observations of the American South, Weber taught them to make similar racial observations about free labor inside Germany.

When W.E.B. Du Bois came to Germany in 1892 at the age of twenty-four to begin a Ph.D. with Gustav Schmoller, members of the Verein für Sozialpolitik were understandably enthusiastic about enlisting him as an African American expert for the organization. Schmoller had Du Bois write a thesis on agricultural smallholding in the American South, a topic
of great interest to the Verein, and Max Weber later had Du Bois write an article for the journal of the Verein on the “Negro Question in the United States.” Du Bois, and later Booker T. Washington, taught Weber and other members of the Verein much about race and free labor in the United States. Although Du Bois had political and ethical views totally at odds with the authoritarian and often racist views of Weber and his colleagues, he nonetheless remained an important colleague of his German teachers. Even before the Tuskegee expedition to Togo, the New South was an important reference for German social thought and social policy.

III. Tuskegee in Togo

The members of the Tuskegee expedition to Togo believed that their purpose was to improve the conditions of Africans who were economically and culturally inferior to African Americans but racially identical. They assumed, like many black nationalists at the time, as well as nearly all European colonial authorities, that slavery, for all its inexcusable horrors, had raised African Americans above Africans by teaching them to value labor and to accept Christianity. African Americans had a duty to bring these valuable lessons to Africa. This ethnocentric assumption about African inferiority made it possible for some African Americans with genuinely emancipatory aspirations to participate in what Europeans regarded as a colonial “civilizing mission” in Africa.16

When the members of the Tuskegee expedition landed in Togo, they did not encounter the primitive people they likely expected, but rather African societies in the midst of major political and economic crises brought about by the onset of colonialism. The area that became Togo, a no-man’s land between the slaving kingdoms of Asante and Dahomey, had been a major source of captives in the Atlantic slave trade. With abolition, the area was able to establish diverse economies that included selling its abundant palm oil to European merchants on relatively equal and autonomous terms.17

With the onset of colonial rule 1884, Germans began efforts to transform the inhabitants of southern Togo into an economically and politically dependent population. The Ewe, the main ethnic group in southern Togo, organized production in extended households. Several women shared a single husband and each lived in a separate household with separate children, fields, and property, connected to each other through market exchange. Togolese practiced mixed cultivation, and African yams were the major food crop. The oil of the palms ubiquitous in southern Togo had many local uses and could also be sold to European firms for cash. Cotton was grown only for local spinning and weaving. Transforming these households into monogamous patriarchal family farms
growing cotton for the world market, as the Tuskegee expedition was to do, would entail a decline in wealth, personal autonomy, and political independence for the region. This, indeed, was one of the aims of the German state in promoting cotton in Togo.¹⁸

The Tuskegee expedition followed the German military conquest of Togo.¹⁹ Calloway and the others first set up an experimental cotton farm at Tove, a group of villages along a north-south road that had long resisted German rule. The area had produced pottery in demand throughout Togo, which had allowed it to remain independent of European trade networks. In 1895, the Germans laid waste to the area, burning villages, destroying farms, killing many, and destroying the local pottery industry. When the Tuskegee expedition members arrived in the area six years later, they likely did not know of this recent history, although the abandoned huts they at first occupied might have raised suspicions. At Tove, John Robinson produced a variety of cotton that approximated American Upland and grew successfully in Togo. The Tuskegee farm produced seeds that the government distributed to growers throughout the colony. Calloway and the other expedition members soon returned home, leaving John Robinson to continue the cotton project.

In 1904, Robinson set up a cotton school at Notsé, an area south of Atakpame that had, like Tove, recently been conquered by the German government. The cotton school gave three years of training in cotton growing to male students from all over the colony. The German government compelled thirty to forty students to enroll each year; only two students ever attended of their own free will. The government forced graduates of the school, deemed unlikely to continue cotton farming on their own, to settle in their home districts as model cotton farmers under the supervision of local officials. John Robinson himself came up with this idea, which, he explained, treated each graduate as “what we call a ‘crop-per’ i.e. one who makes a farm under the direction of another.”²⁰ The German government applied a scheme modeled, if only in its coercive nature, on the sharecropping system of the New South. The New South and Tuskegee had been recruited as participants in a colonial political economic struggle in Africa.

In 1909, Robinson left Notsé to found a second cotton school in the North of Togo, a region over which the German government had only recently established some police control. He drowned crossing a river near Notsé, ending the direct involvement of Tuskegee in German Togo. Both Tove and Notsé remained in operation under French occupation and continue as agricultural research stations in independent Togo. The expedition was widely admired and imitated by English and French colonial authorities, who began introducing commercial cotton cultivation in their own West African territories and elsewhere. The Gold Coast press,
run by Africans literate in English, did not specifically mention the Tuskegee expedition, but was often harshly critical of German colonial policy in neighboring Togo, pointing to brutality, lack of educational opportunities, and forced labor.

IV. Transnational Tuskegee

Booker T. Washington had become known in his 1895 Atlanta speech for urging African Americans to “cast down your buckets where you are,” to remain, primarily as agricultural laborers, in the South rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere. Thanks, in part, to the international attention he received for this speech, Washington began promoting Tuskegee as a colonial institution, suitable for black labor anywhere in the world, beginning with the expedition to German Togo. The German colonial government continued to model colonial policy on the American South and to regard Booker T. Washington as an authority on black labor and cotton. Bernhard Dernburg, Germany’s best known Colonial Secretary, visited Tuskegee and Booker T. Washington during his time in office. The colonial interests of Tuskegee represented a departure from the more emancipatory institute that might have emerged from the combined efforts of Carver and Du Bois.

With his increasing entanglements in colonial Africa, Washington began to transform Tuskegee itself to bring it in line with the image of an industrial school for blacks that had made him famous the world over, one that more thoroughly rejected academic education in favor of industrial training. Roscoe Conkling Bruce, head of the academic department at Tuskegee since 1902, led this transformation. After Tuskegee personnel began their work in Togo, Washington pressured George Washington Carver to devote more research to cotton. Carver soon became known not only for his work on peanuts and other crops that might give black farmers food independence, but also, internationally, for his work on cotton growing and colonial agriculture. In 1904, Washington joined the American branch of E.D. Morel’s Congo Reform Association. Morel, a journalist and activist tireless in exposing the atrocities of Belgian rule in the Congo, considered the small farming that Tuskegee promoted in German Togo as a colonial alternative to the Belgian abuses. Indeed, Morel even proposed transferring the Congo to Germany to correct these abuses. In 1912, Washington organized an “International Conference on the Negro” at Tuskegee, which brought together missionaries and educators from Europe, the United States, and Africa, to study “the methods employed in helping the Negro people of the United States, with a view of deciding to what extent Tuskegee and Hampton methods may be applied to conditions in these countries, as well as to conditions in Af-
rica.” The influence of Tuskegee and Hampton would continue in Africa after Washington’s death in 1915 and the end of German colonial rule.23

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Studying the Tuskegee expedition to Togo in the three regional contexts from which it emerged, the southern United States, eastern Germany, and West Africa, reveals large transnational effects of a relatively small historical event. The Germans and Americans involved in the expedition presupposed significant similarities among the three regions it brought together. They assumed similarities between free labor in Germany and the United States; they assumed similarities between Africans and African Americans; and they assumed similarities between African cotton and American cotton. The results of this globalization of the New South were anything but homogenization, however. Rather, the expedition helped create the network of economic disparities that characterizes the global economy to this day. Colonial states undermined West African economic and political autonomy, exploiting the region as a source of raw materials and, with changing global commodities prices, later abandoning the region to the poverty that forced cotton farming had created. Forced cotton farming became a central element of the colonial economies of West Africa because Germany appropriated the American New South as a colonial model. This globalized New South continued well beyond the First World War, when the Treaty of Versailles erased the public memory of the German origins of this American type of colonization. Tuskegee adapted its self-presentation and even its curriculum from a focus on the New South to a focus on a global South. Washington traded the potential of challenging the status quo of the New South for the international influence he obtained by working with European imperialism. Colonial rule in Africa, the racist order of the New South, and internal colonization in eastern Prussia were interlinked counterrevolutions against the emancipation of bonded labor in the nineteenth century. The pivotal role of Tuskegee Institute in connecting these counterrevolutions suggests the dependence of political and economic elites on those whom they oppress and exploit, and thus points to the emancipatory potential inherent in even the most dismal global moments.

Notes

1 The brief space of this essay, which summarizes parts of a book manuscript, allows me only to cite the most directly relevant secondary literature. See also Andrew Zimmerman, “A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers,” American Historical Review 110 (2005): 1362–1398. The classic account of the expedition is Louis Harlan, “Booker T. Washington and the White Man’s Burden,” American Historical Review 71 (1966): 441–467. See, more


13 See, for example, Georg Friedrich Knapp, *Die Landarbeiter in Knechtschaft und Freiheit: Vier Vorträge* (Leipzig, 1891).


18 The best contemporary accounts of Ewe political economy from the German colonial period are Jakob Spieth, Die Ewe-Stämme: Material zur Kunde des Ewe-Volkes in Deutsch-Togo (Berlin, 1906) and Diedrich Westermann, Die Glidyi-Ewe in Togo: Züge aus ihrem Gesellschaftsleben (Berlin, 1935).

19 My account of the expedition is based on archival sources in the Togo National Archives, of which microfilm copies are available in the Bundesarchiv, Berlin (BArch), R150, and the archives of the Kolonialabteilung des Auswärtigen Amtes and the Reichskolonialamt, BArch, R1001.


