

The Exhibition` A Decolonised History of World War Two opened in Cape Town:

A contribution to the discussion on decolonising education in South Africa

An Historical perspective. *Translated and edited from a report by Karl Roessel, Curator*

In story telling the hunter always triumphs over the lion. Why, because in African idiom it is the hunter that tells the story and of course that is carried over into historiography. The writing of history usually expresses the view of those who have the power and the means to spread their version of events. In colonial times it was the colonial masters and so it is important in post-colonial times to decolonise the writing of history to make possible a change of perspective.

That was the tenor of the address by Kark Roessel curator of the exhibition created by the Cologne based association "recherche internationale," when it was opened on 28 February 2017. Brought to South Africa by the Denis Goldberg Legacy Foundation Trust and housed at the Castle of Good Hope this is the first English language version of the exhibition.

The Castle is the oldest building in South Africa and dates from Dutch colonial times and is a fitting place for the exhibition because a significant number of the altogether 335 000 South African men and women who served in WWII were recruited there.

However wide spread the history of that war, generally the part played by millions of people from Africa, Asia and Oceania and South America is omitted. The exhibition which has been displayed in 60 cities in Germany and Switzerland reminds us with text, photographs, audio stations and videos of the "forgotten liberators" of Europe and the price they paid in the war against Fascism. Large parts of the Third World became battlefields and at the end of the war remained devastated and covered in landmines. All continents were plundered for raw materials for the weapons industries of the warring forces. In Africa alone hundreds of thousands were pressed into forced labour. All in all there were more deaths in the Third World during the World War II than in Germany, Italy and Japan combined.

Since Denis Goldberg, ANC veteran, saw this exhibition six years ago in Germany he has wanted to present it in South Africa and throughout Africa. In his opening address to more than 100 people he said, " People in Africa and elsewhere who fought for the liberation of the world from Nazi terror and Fascism deserve to be acknowledged and to be respected. It is a spiritual and psychological restitution that the world has to make." The exhibition is a timely contribution to the current discussions at South African Universities on the "decolonisation of education." Many talk about it but we are presenting an example of decolonised history. In South Africa, just over 20 years into its democracy there is a need to be conscious of the contribution of African, Coloured, and Indian men and women to global history. Therefore it will go to Freedom Park in Pretoria from July 2017 and the Holocaust

and Genocide Centre in Johannesburg from January 2018. Other venues will follow during 2018 and 2019.

The exhibition has been expanded by Denis Goldberg to include more historical information about the role of South Africa in the second world war. We are reminded of the discrimination against black soldiers who were paid much less than white soldiers, less well equipped and denied fire arms. They were reduced to be bearers and drivers who nevertheless performed great deeds of valour.

The invited guests in the open air of the courtyard of the old colonial Castle building included underground fighters of the ANC who have now attained high rank in the new military forces, politicians and museum directors, diplomatic representatives, artists, journalists and photographers who during the apartheid times worked for such legendary magazines as *Drum*.

The event started with a performance by dozens of children of the Kronendal Music Academy of Hout Bay. Denis is its patron. They performed a medley of South African freedom songs and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* with great enthusiasm as an expression of hope and triumph over the past social divisions and a better future.

Calvyn Gilfellan, Director of the heritage protected Castle of Good Hope and its Military Museum, explained the importance of a place that represented the era of colonialism and imperialism, presenting new ways of looking at history. Therefore an anti-colonial Documentation Centre for the Castle of Good hope is under discussion.

Colonel de Castro, commander of the Air force base in Cape Town also pleaded for a rethinking of history. To that end general Msimang, commander of the Air force instructed the Air force Museum to contribute artefacts for the South African section of the exhibition. In particular a bicycle of the kind given to black soldiers when they were demobilised so they could get to work, if they had a job, though their demobilisation grants were pitifully small.

Karl Roessel, the curator who came especially from Cologne in Germany for the opening of the exhibition, said that the initiators of recherche internationale, were greatly honoured that the first showing of the exhibition outside Europe is in a country where their research started over 20 years ago. At last there is a global understanding of history that significantly advances the development of mutual solidarity. Against the background of the hundreds of thousands of Africans who fought for the liberation of Europe from fascism, it is shameful at present to see the hysteria with which Europeans react when Africans fleeing poverty and wars reach their borders. Even children and grandchildren are refused visas to visit the graves of their ancestors who died in battle in Europe. Overcoming ignorance of the past and the responsibility of the industrialised nations for the destruction of the whole continent through colonialism and war is an important theme of the exhibition.

Tina Jerman of Exile Kulturkoordination of Essen in Germany has been engaged in raising funds for the English language version of the exhibition, saw the presentation of the exhibition in Cape Town as an important example of cultural exchange between people and a continuation of the anti apartheid activity so many people in Germany had been engaged in.

Jan Leidecker, the Director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Southern Africa could not be present. The State Secretariat of North Rhine-Westphalia and the RLF are the main sponsors of the exhibition. Denis Goldberg thanked them for making this exchange possible. He also thanked the CEO of the Castle and the staff of the Military Museum who worked tirelessly to get the exhibition ready on time.

It is the wish of all concerned that high school students should visit the exhibition. Work sheets have been prepared in a student pack and there is a matching teacher pack.

Contact Doreen Hendricks: marketing@castleofgoodhope.co.za to apply for support for transport to the exhibition and entrance to the Castle from distant high schools in not so well off areas may be applied for. The exhibition will be open until 30 June 2017. Visiting groups will be given a tour of the exhibition and a tour of the Castle.