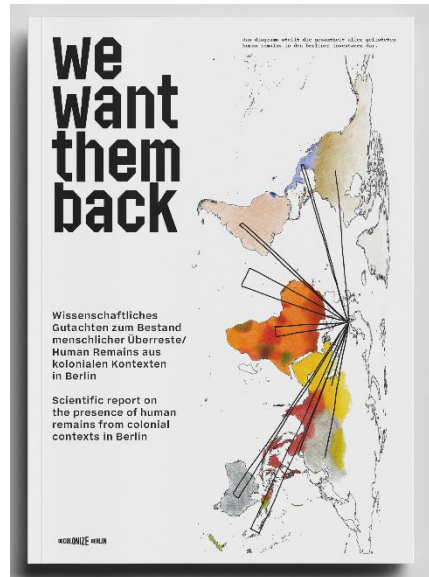


FAQ:

## We Want Them Back.

### Scientific report on the presence of human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin



When and where is the publication *We Want Them Back.* published?

The publication has been published digitally on the website [www.decolonize-berlin.de](http://www.decolonize-berlin.de) on Feb. 28, 2022. Click here to download the publication: [Download-Link](#)

The printed version (edition of 300 copies) can be obtained on request through Decolonize Berlin ([info\[at\]decolonize-berlin.de](mailto:info[at]decolonize-berlin.de))

Who is the publisher of the publication?

The publication is published by Decolonize Berlin e.V. and was commissioned by the coordination office for a city-wide concept for coming to terms with Berlin's colonial past.

What was the idea behind commissioning an expert opinion on human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin?

The crimes of the colonial era and their consequences are visible everywhere in Europe, the Federal Republic of Germany and Berlin - especially in public institutions such as museums and universities. Thousands of deceased people are still there to this day: without a grave, without a memorial. The repatriation of ancestral human remains occupies a prominent position in the context of restitution and reparation claims. The handling of human remains from colonial contexts by institutions is based on a fundamental violation of basic and human rights. Neither is the peace of the dead respected, nor is the right to burial and mourning by descendants respected.

This coloniality was addressed in the participation process of the coordination center. Due to the lack of publicly accessible information about the (ancestral) human remains, we decided to commission an expert opinion as a first step towards more transparency about the presence of (ancestral) human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin.

## What initiated the commissioning of the expert opinion?

The report was initiated by the decades-long search by activists from former colonies for the bones of their ancestors. The lack of transparency and the highly regulated access to information do not allow many people to find the remains of their ancestors and bring them home.

## How is the expert opinion embedded in the publication?

With this publication, we would like to show an alternative to the formal language of administrations and the objectifying language of scientific and cultural institutions – and speak of the deceased with dignity, as.

Therefore, in addition to Isabelle Reimann's expert opinion, there are also contributions by repatriation practitioners, poems and artistic confrontations with present colonial injustices, among others by Jephta U. Nguherimo as well as Adetoun and Michael Küppers-Adebisi.

## How long did it take to write this report?

The coordination office at Decolonize Berlin e.V. commissioned the expert Isabelle Reimann in February 2021. The publication now appears about a year later.

## What was the process of creation like?

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the anthropologist and provenance researcher Isabelle Reimann was advised by a group of repatriation practitioners. Prof. Paul Turnbull agreed to be the supervisor to the research.

During this period, not only was an inventory taken, but there was also feedback with repatriation practitioners from communities of origin, some of whose comments and observations are included in the publication. The published comments are by Edward Halealoha Ayau (Hawai'i), Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (Tansania/Germany) and Christian Kopp (Germany), and Evelin Huki and Santi Hitorangi (Rapa Nui (Easter Island)).

## What is the intention behind this book?

With this publication, we want to contribute to providing transparent information for communities of origin and repatriation practitioners, so that it becomes easier for them to bring their ancestors back home. At the same time, we would like to encourage an ontological and epistemic rethinking of the deceased.

## What is the core message of the report?

The core of the report is the inventory by ethnologist and provenance researcher Isabelle Reimann. It compiles the current state of the art and research on human remains from colonial contexts.

- Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz,

- *Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte (BGAEU),*
- *Charité,*
- *Museums für Naturkunde,*
- *Zoologischen Lehrsammlungen an den Berliner Universitäten der HU und FU,*
- *Bestände im Lautarchiv der HU,*
- *weißensee kunsthochschule berlin und*
- *Deutschen Historischen Museum.*

In addition, the genesis of the Berlin collections will be briefly described and embedded in the international and German discourse on an ethical approach to the international repatriation movement.

## What are the recommendations from the publication?

The authors give specific recommendations for future practices in dealing with the deceased, for example, in relation to the role of communities of origin, a dignified treatment of the deceased and necessary transparency. Specific suggestions include:

1. implementation of fundamental and human rights and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples.
2. rehumanization through the creation of a legal framework
3. creation of an advisory board or commission (consisting of experienced repatriation practitioners and representatives of communities and indigenous organizations whose ancestors are likely to be in the collections)
4. cross-institutional reappraisal projects (promotion of cross-institutional and international provenance research).

## How did the title of the publication "We Want Them Back" come about?

Although it is a scientific report, the title was intended to emphasize the political demand for repatriation of all human remains from colonial contexts. The title "We Want Them Back" highlights people from former colonies and community representatives as acting subjects and rights holders. It is a clear political statement that also underpins the aim of the publication.

The subtitle of the publication is the title of the expert opinion, which is the core of the publication.

## What is the meaning of the design of the publication?

In terms of design, the publication also stands out from previous publications on the topic of "(ancestral) human remains" from colonial contexts. The team of *visual intelligence* drew on Black/diasporic histories for developing a concept around typeface, structure, and visualizations, thus reworking the content in a colonial-critical way. The use of W.E.B. Du Bois's digital typeface for the headings can be cited as an example.

The visualizations of the so-called inventories also make it possible to comprehend the sheer number of deceased persons lying in the land of Berlin and illustrate the colonial continuity.

### Is there also an English translation?

The publication is available in German and English. In the printed version, both languages are on an equal footing. Digitally, the publication is available for download.

### What is the coordination office at Decolonize Berlin?

In August 2019, the Berlin House of Representatives approved the development of a city-wide reappraisal and remembrance concept on the history and consequences of colonialism in the state of Berlin ([DS 18/1788](#)).

The task to run the coordination office was given to Decolonize Berlin e.V.. The coordination office is responsible for organising a participatory process with activists and representatives of civil society organisations as well as the administration and political structures. The goal is to intensify the discussions on Germany's and Berlin's colonial past and colonialities, to anchor the topic in science and education, and to develop dignified forms of remembrance.

The concept for the decolonization of Berlin is to encompass the areas of culture, education, business, science and research, as well as the activation of Berlin's city partnership with Windhoek (Namibia).

Accompanying research work is an integral part of the project.