

Book review: Thomas Kolnberger (ed.): August Kohl - Ein Luxemburger Söldner im Indonesien des 19. Jahrhunderts; Kommentierte Edition der Reise- und Lebensbeschreibungen (1859-1865) des Soldaten August Kohl. Mersch: Centre National de Littérature 2015. ISBN 978-2-919903-45-0

Lehners, Jean-Paul

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Lehners, J.-P. (2017). Book review: Thomas Kolnberger (ed.): August Kohl - Ein Luxemburger Söldner im Indonesien des 19. Jahrhunderts; Kommentierte Edition der Reise- und Lebensbeschreibungen (1859-1865) des Soldaten August Kohl. Mersch: Centre National de Littérature 2015. ISBN 978-2-919903-45-0. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 48(1-2), 152-154. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2017.1-2.4084>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

THOMAS KOLNBERGER (ed.), *August Kohl. Ein Luxemburger Söldner im Indonesien des 19. Jahrhunderts. Kommentierte Edition der Reise- und Lebensbeschreibungen (1859–1865) des Soldaten August Kohl*. Mersch: Centre National de Littérature, 2015. 312 pages, €25.00. ISBN 978-2-919903-45-0

Thomas Kolnberger, a historian who has made a name for himself with his excellent historical and geographical dissertation on Phnom Penh, presents here as a publisher a work which is remarkable both in terms of its content as well as its decorative apparatus. His work deals with the transcription of a manuscript of 195 pages, one of two writings that differ slightly from one another. The manuscript, which was written in German cursive with the title *Reise, Abendtheueren, u. Soldatenleben eines Luxemburgers im Ost-indischen Archipel*, was for several generations in possession of the author's family and was deposited in the national literature archive in Mersch only in 2011.

August-Nikolaus-Joseph Kohl was a horn maker by profession. He was born in 1834 in Luxembourg City and died there in 1921 at the age of 87. Fifty years after his return from Indonesia (a long period of time which undoubtedly influenced his memories, though to what extent we cannot know; what did he highlight, omit or invent?) he describes his time as a mercenary in the Dutch colonial army in Indonesia. His various exciting experiences during his six-year stay, and on his journey via Paris and Liège to present-day Indonesia, are recounted in an easy-to read language and include stories of diseases, mutinies, punishments, combat and much more. Unsurprisingly, like many of his contemporaries, he questions neither colonialism itself nor the racism of the time. The moral of his story is, to put it simply, that "home is still best".

The transcription, together with 339 footnotes, is elaborated very meticulously. Is this a work of literature or is it a contribution to historiography? That is the question the publisher poses at the beginning of his introduction, leaving it to the reader to decide. The second part of the publication contains four articles, which place the notes of August Kohl in a broader context. In the first article ("Einmal Ostindien und zurück. Die Reise- und Lebensbeschreibungen oder die 'kleine Heldenreise' des August Kohl") Thomas Kolnberger analyses the text as a "brief hero's journey", based on the ideal model of Campbell and Vogler, a cycle with twelve stages, adapted to the present work. The second article ("Luxemburger Söldner in Niederländisch-Indien während des 'langen 19. Jahrhunderts'. Ein Quellenbericht und eine statistische Auswertung im kolonialen Kontext"), also by Kolnberger, deals with a detailed description of sources and a critique of sources as well as, as the title implies, tables and graphs, among others describing the Luxembourg mercenaries and their military employers during the 19th century.

Helmut Lukas provides in a third article (“Die Kolonie Niederländisch-Indien im 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Überblick zur historischen Entwicklung mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Zeit August Kohls”) a very helpful, concentrated overview of the colony in the 19th century with a view to earlier times. In a final article (“Luxemburg im 19. Jahrhundert. Von der Festungs- und Garnisonsstadt zur offenen Stadt”) Norbert Franz describes the political, economic and social development of Luxembourg in the 19th century and provides an introduction to the state- and nation-building as well as the development of the city of Luxembourg before and after the dismantling of the fortress from 1868 onwards. Although Luxembourg was not a colonial power, the presence of hundreds of Luxembourgers in foreign armies shows that the subject of colonialism should not be underestimated.

An article on the involvement of Luxembourgers in colonial endeavours would have been a useful addition to the book. Unfortunately, little research has been produced on this topic. Among the few pieces worth noting are that of Yvan Staus (Yvan Staus (2009): “The Luxembourgers in the Dutch-East-Indian Army from 1810 to 1913. A Case Study of Colonial Population Movements to South East Asia in the 19th century.” *Hémecht – Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte / Revue d’histoire luxembourgeoise* 61(4), pp. 467–493), the printed version of the master thesis of Régis Moes on the Luxembourgers in the Congo (Régis Moes (2012): *Cette colonie qui nous appartient un peu. La communauté luxembourgeoise au Congo belge 1883–1960*. Luxembourg: Editions d’Lëtzeburger Land) or the work of Claude Wey, among others in his function as curator of the exhibition “Von Orchideen, Kakao und Kolibris – Naturforscher und Pflanzenjäger in Lateinamerika”, which was presented in 2016 in the Luxembourg National Museum of Natural History. Another article covering this issue is forthcoming: Ulbe Bosma / Thomas Kolnberger: Military Migrants. In the Colonial Army of the Dutch East Indies. *Itinerario – International Journal of the European Expansion and Global Interaction* 2017(2) (in print).

In addition, the reception of Dutch colonial policy in Luxembourg remains unmentioned. The work in hand is an important contribution to global history from the point of view of a state without colonial power. It can also be seen as an illustration of a global curriculum vita from a bottom-up perspective, in the form of the life of a simple mercenary from the lower class, one of the more than 1,000 Luxembourgers who served during the period from the French Revolution until World War I in the colonial army of the Dutch East Indies (only 40 per cent of the colonial army was Dutch) and who were searching for an alternative livelihoods whereby the mercenary service was endorsed by the state. In this way August Kohl played a role in the conquest of today’s Indonesia by the Dutch Colonial Army, whose rule extended over 40 years. In the course of his experiences, Kohl, like his European contemporaries, failed

to perceive the multicultural environment in the country around him, for example ignoring the five gender categories of Bugis people.

In conclusion, it should be highlighted that the volume is excellently illustrated and appeals to the reader through its very successful layout. It is thus a joy to read and to look at.

Jean-Paul Lehnens