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South African Empire

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This special issue on the 'South African empire' evolved from the South African empire research project, the origins of which lie in the discomfort of a number of historians of Namibia with dominant characteristics of the treatment of Namibia within the main lines of South African historiography. South African historians, they felt, failed to understand the importance of South Africa's only colony, South West Africa/Namibia, and that this was an expression of the reproduction of what seemed like the codes and conventions of a continuing imperial repertoire of South Africa itself. The South African empire project, conducted through a series of workshops and forums held in Basel, Cape Town, Windhoek and Uppsala between 2009 and 2013, and an international conference, 'Re-Figuring the South African Empire', confirmed a deeply felt predicament about the audacity of de facto and conceptual neglect (one would almost call it denialism) on part of the South African historiography of South Africa's 75-year-long colonial rule over Namibia. This trend seems to be symptomatic of a bigger structural and ideological failure by the South African state to acknowledge either colonisation or decolonisation. The South African empire project problematised such narrow conceptions and, indeed, parochial exercises by leading South African historians from its very beginnings. The editors of this volume argue that the time has come for South African history to be provincialised, to understand the region's history from the vantage points of its margins, and to shift perspectives away from the teleological narrative of the emergence and consolidation of a modern South African nation-state throughout the 20th century.

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