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A window into the history of marine research expeditions Original photographs of the German Atlantic Expedition with research vessel METEOR I donated by GEOMAR made accessible by the German Maritime Museum

05.01.2023/Bremerhaven/Kiel. Almost 100 years after the German Atlantic Expedition with research vessel METEOR I, the German Maritime Museum receives original photographs of the voyage as a donation from GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel. The negatives, which are available on glass plates and photographic film, are now being digitised and presented as part of the museum's permanent exhibition. They provide direct insights into the history of research shipping.

– Joint press release of the German Maritime Museum (DSM) / Leibniz Institute of Maritime History and GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel –

Twelve ordinary-looking wooden boxes have recently been placed in the study area of the research depot at the German Maritime Museum (DSM), Leibniz Institute for Maritime History. They hold a small sensation: original photographs of the German Atlantic Expedition with research vessel METEOR I that took place between 1925 and 1927. They have now come to Bremerhaven as a donation from GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel.

DSM curator Dr. Ulrike Heine puts on gloves, opens one of the wooden boxes and takes out a thin paper envelope. Carefully, she pulls out a glass plate and holds it up against the light. In the slightly blurred miniature scene, men can be seen – obviously in heavy seas – with measuring instruments on board METEOR I. “The research vessel METEOR was underway from 1925 to 1927 for one of the most important expeditions of the 20th century: the German Atlantic Expedition,” Dr. Heine knows. During the 777 days of travel, the scientific crew crossed the South Atlantic 14 times, conducted 67,000 echo soundings and more than 1000 balloon and kite launches. The first depth profile of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge – a submarine mountain range – and a cartography of the South Atlantic are owed to the oceanographic enterprise.

According to the DSM, the photographic convolute is a valuable cultural asset that opens a direct window into the history of research shipping. “Today, there are live broadcasts from research ships and updates on social media. Back then, photographs and the first moving images documented expeditions financed with public money and made them accessible to the public. We are looking at important milestones in science communication in the field of marine research,” says Dr. Heine. The 1400 negatives on glass plates and photographic film show life on board, the use of the then new measuring technology and land excursions of crew and researchers. The photographs were taken by the scientists and some higher-ranking crew members. By capturing procedures on board in detail, they created important documents of this expedition.

The voyage of METEOR I was historic in two ways: scientifically, because the transition from descriptive to physical oceanography becomes visible, and politically, because the Weimar Republic wanted to use the expedition to regain its international profile after the First World War. METEOR I dropped anchor in former German colonies in West Africa and visited areas in South America where Germans lived abroad. The land excursions were also extensively documented by the amateur photographers. “In this way, the photographs also reflect colonial revisionist efforts of the Weimar

Republic,” says historian and director of the German Maritime Museum, Professor Dr. Ruth Schilling.

Before the wooden boxes came to the DSM, they had probably been in Kiel since the mid-1940s. Here, a short inventory was created and individual pictures were used for publications. With the acquisition as a donation, the DSM can now digitise the photographs, make them publicly accessible and store them professionally in the new research depot. “The photographs represent an important addition to the collection for the area of research shipping, which is extraordinarily important for us,” Professor Schilling emphasises.

Museum curator Heine now needs a detective’s intuition: “I would like to find out what guidelines were used to take the photographs, whether the meticulously labelled collection is complete and how the boxes came to Kiel.” The assumption: the German oceanographer Georg Wüst (1890-1977), whose name is written in old German script on one of the boxes, sailed on METEOR I and took charge of the oceanographic work on board. After the expedition, he analysed the data at the Institute of Oceanography in Berlin. When the Berlin institution was destroyed during the Second World War, the researcher presumably took the images back to the Baltic Sea city to the Institute of Oceanography at Kiel University, one of the institutions that later became today's GEOMAR.

“I am very grateful that these precious historical documents are being made accessible and preserved by experts in the best possible way,” says Professor Dr. Katja Matthes, Director of GEOMAR. “Not only for us, who today continue to discover and explore the ocean on modern ships with state-of-the-art instruments, do these recordings promise exciting insights into life and scientific work on board. They also provide important evidence that calls for a critical examination of the history of marine research in Germany and Kiel.”

The glass plates and negatives are a significant addition to the DSM’s collection on the history of research shipping. The original diaries of METEOR I captain Fritz Spiess, a model of the ship, as well as an extensive photo album and an inventory book of the expedition already belong to the museum. “In the inventory book, the complete equipment is documented right down to the photographic technology, which allows many conclusions to be drawn about the glass plates and photographs,” explains Dr. Heine, who holds a doctorate in cultural studies and has already focused on the history of photography for earlier projects. A collection of photographs from the deep-sea expedition of the VALDIVA from 1898 to 1899 that is comparable in scope and content is in the collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. There is a lively exchange with colleagues in Berlin on questions of storage, conservation and digitisation of the glass plates. By making the METEOR photographs accessible, the DSM continues its long-standing research on the German Atlantic Expedition.

An important part of the METEOR photographs will be on display in digital form together with the captain’s diary in the permanent exhibition. By 2025 at the latest, the public will be particularly interested in these documents. Then the expedition, which provided important foundations for Atlantic research, will be exactly 100 years ago.

Links:

<https://www.dsm.museum/en> German Maritime Museum, Leibniz Institute for Maritime History
<https://www.geomar.de/en> GEOMAR Helmholtz Centre for Ocean Research Kiel

Images:

Images are available for download at <http://www.geomar.de/n8770-e>

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