

Christian S. Davis. *Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Germans of Jewish Descent in Imperial Germany.* Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2012. vii+281 S. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-472-02780-4.

Reviewed by Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker

Published on H-Judaic (August, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

At the height of his popularity in 1906 and 1907, Colonial State Secretary Bernhard Dernburg received hundreds of postcards, telegrams, and letters lauding his work for the German people. Writers showered him with thanks and called him a new “Luther” and a true “German man.” In his fascinating book, Christian Davis describes the lives of Bernhard Dernburg and other men of at least partial Jewish heritage who played an important role in German colonies. Davis considers contemporary antisemites whose racial antisemitism prefigured aspects of National Socialism and investigates how colonialism could both support and undermine antisemitic efforts in the Wilhelmine period (1890-1914).

Davis builds his book from archival study of government papers and a close reading of the antisemitic press. He then compares his original findings to the existing literature on antisemitism and German imperialism. The clear and nuanced examination of the secondary sources on his topic is one of the many strengths of the book.

His argument unfolds in four substantive chapters. The first chapter mines the antisemitic press to show the commonalities between radical antisemitic and radical imperialist worldviews. He begins the chapter with a concise overview of the antisemitic movement in Germany, and then through effective biographical sketches shows

how most antisemites favored overseas colonies. Through an examination of Theodor Fritsch's *Hammer* [hammer], Davis also presents evidence of the surprising diversity among antisemitic activists. Even if the majority of antisemites favored imperialist efforts, the editors of the *Hammer* thought imperialism offered little to average Germans and only enriched the great industrialists. The *Hammer* also printed letters like the vivid account from one reader, “If today a good friend entered my room and said he wanted to settle in our colonies, I would immediately send for a doctor and have him examined for sunstroke” (p. 51). In addition, this chapter presents persuasive evidence for the antisemitic sentiments of leading imperialist figures.

In chapter 2 Davis argues that the representations of Jews and Africans merged, especially in the last decade before WWI. Davis includes evidence that shows racist thinking even by the critics of Germany's empire and claims, “together these comments betray the power of the rhetoric of radical difference, showing that it eventually influenced the thinking of even colonialism's harshest critics” (p. 89). Here more evidence could have solidified Davis's claim for the increased racism of left-wing politicians and change over time. In the core of his chapter, Davis finds overlap in the images of Africans and Jews. Both were

allegedly immoral, rootless, lazy, uncreative, nomadic, hyper-sexual, and hostile to non-Jewish Germans. He also describes direct links between these groups in the antisemitic press. These findings should help shape our understanding of popular racist perceptions in the late imperial period. The predominant antisemitic image of a Jew was of a decadent, over-intellectualized, and sly individual that would seem the direct opposite the racist fantasy of the black “savage.” Davis’s research provides new evidence for the flexibility within antisemitic and black stereotypes.

In chapter 3 Davis turns to Germans of Jewish descent and considers the careers of imperialist leaders like Paul Kayser, Emin Pasha, Ernst Vohsen, Otto Arendt, and Julius Scharlach, as well as many others. Davis shows how many of these figures attracted widespread support in the popular press—even within the pro-imperialist antisemitic press. Emin Pasha, born Isaak Schnitzer, received fervent praise across the political spectrum—and interestingly even from antisemitic politicians and antisemitic journalists. Davis also discusses evidence that figures like Ernst Vohsen or Paul Kayser treated Africans more generously and humanely than their fellow colonial officials did. Davis describes Paul Kayser’s attitudes toward black Africans in some depth and argues that “Kayser possessed a strongly liberal outlook on the meaning and importance of race, especially concerning the nature, characteristics, and capabilities of individual black Africans” (p. 176).

Chapter 4 focuses on Bernhard Dernburg, who was the first person of Jewish descent since 1879 to serve at a cabinet level post. Dernburg represents perhaps an even more extreme version of the dynamic described in chapter 3. Antisemites in the Reichstag and many in the antisemitic press defended Dernburg from attacks of colonial critics as well as those on the right. In Davis’s analysis, “many dedicated antisemites seemed genuinely convinced of Dernburg’s ‘German spirit,’ at least for a time” (p. 243). Davis also

suggests plausibly that Dernburg’s experience being the target of prejudice allowed him to think outside of existing stereotypes of black Africans.

Davis falls on the “continuity” side of debates about the links between Germany’s imperial actions in the Wilhelmine and the National Socialist periods (p. 21). Discussions about German colonies allowed radical antisemites to spread their racist worldview and to “propagate to the wider public a vocabulary of racial domination and notions of the morality of racial violence” with important similarities to the most radical antisemites’ attitudes towards Jews (p. 250).

Davis’s study complicates the existing understanding of antisemitism in Wilhelmine Germany and offers important overviews of themes that are of central and even increasing importance in the field, such as German imperialism in Africa. At the same time, additional analysis in a couple of key areas might have enriched Davis’s study. He describes the *Tägliche Rundschau* [daily review] and Werner Sombart as antisemitic, although they were strictly not perceived in this light in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Davis later points to the *Rundschau* as an example of an antisemitic paper that supported Germans of Jewish descent, making a definition of antisemitism helpful in clarifying his points. I also wondered about the extent to which some of his individuals “of Jewish descent” were also considered “Jewish” by the German public. The father of Bernhard Dernburg, the subject of chapter 4, was baptized as a child. In other words, Dernburg’s mother was a Christian, and his father had been raised as a Christian. Emin Pasha converted to Christianity as a child, and Paul Kayser converted to Christianity in 1882 at age 37 after he had already had a successful career as a university lecturer, judge, and tutor to Bismarck’s children. At several points Davis describes newspapers “downplaying” his subjects’ Jewish heritage and notes that the telegrams and letters sent to Dernburg “contained virtually nothing antisemitic and

few references to his Jewish heritage, [which] testifies to the limits of Wilhelminian antisemitism” (p. 247). But was this possibly because men like Dernburg were considered to be part of the German Protestant community? After all, they *were* German Protestants. Following the lead of Isaac Deutscher, Davis suggests the “most inclusive definition of ‘Jewishness’” as “being the target of anti-semitism” (p. 191). This perspective problematically places antisemitism at the center of a definition of Jewishness. At the same time, this is where Davis’s sources lead him because little evidence of the Jewish identity of his subjects is left except for their discussions of their experience of anti-semitism. Davis’s research should spur renewed interest in popular attitudes towards conversion as well as antisemitism.

This book is an outstanding contribution to the literature on the imperial period. Davis’s nuanced examination of antisemitism in the context of colonial debates provides a new perspective on issues of central importance for German history. His analysis of the open embrace of genocide by colonial activists as well as the withering criticism of imperial excesses by the Social Democratic and Center Party leaders should be required reading for those who study this period. This book’s clarity and lively stories would make it suitable for an advanced undergraduate seminar as well as graduate courses. It is recommended for all those interested in antisemitism, imperialism, and modern German history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Lisa Fetheringill Zwicker. Review of Davis, Christian S. *Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Germans of Jewish Descent in Imperial Germany*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35859>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.