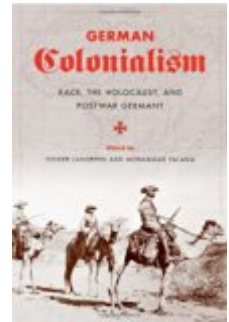


Volker Langbehn, Mohammad Salama, eds.. *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 327 pp. \$29.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-14973-0.



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German Colonialism captures exceedingly well the diversity and richness of recent work on the topic. The essays range widely and draw on a mix of disciplinary approaches. But this remains very much a work in German history. The questions that animate the editors and contributors are those derived from the arc of Germany's development in the modern world: motivations for German colonialism; comparisons between Germany's European, Eurasian, and overseas imperial ventures; and, most centrally, links between colonialism and the Holocaust. None of the essays gets inside African, Ottoman, or Pacific societies that came under German influence or domination. The inclusion of Africanist scholars in particular would have given the book a very different dimension.

Wisely, the editors have chosen not to present a particular interpretive line. Readers quickly obtain a fine sense for the various ways of thinking about the critical issues of German colonialism, making the book especially useful for the classroom. Looming over the book, indeed, smack in

the center of the subtitle, is the Holocaust. Many readers will know the details of the arguments about the imperial origins of the Holocaust, since much has been published in various venues. Both proponents and skeptics of the linkage idea are well represented here.

Kitty Millet provides an interesting study of Ludwig Heck, director of the Berlin Zoo, and Hermann Göring as *Reichsjägermeister* (among his many other titles). Heck was dispatched to occupied Poland and proceeded to distribute the most interesting specimens (in his mind) from Polish zoos to his own and other zoos around Germany. And then he organized a hunt, really a slaughter, of the remaining animals by SS officers. For Millet, this incident demonstrates the Nazi penchant for removing “useless” beings from colonized territory, which would then be applied on the human scale to Jews. Millet concludes that the Holocaust cannot be reduced to more generic forms of racial subordination, which may be ubiquitous but are rarely exterminatory in nature. The Nazis’ “aesthetic politics” placed the Jews entirely outside

the human category, and was therefore distinctive from other colonialisms. “The Nazis did not see the Jews as a species unto themselves—a group to be colonized—but rather as an aspect of the environment that had to be removed,” Millet argues (p. 111).

In contrast, Shelley Baranowski stresses the continuities of Nazi colonial policy abroad to eastern Europe. Poland was not only a “laboratory” for racial policies, as Christopher Browning has described it. The Nazis drew on long-standing hostilities toward Poles and on Prussian settlement policies, to which they added their ideologically driven intent to destroy human diversity. The effort to exploit Poland and the Polish people led in a straight line to the extermination of the Jews. Even more, the genocide of the Herero and Nama and other colonial practices in Southwest Africa “contributed to a reservoir of ideas and experiences that National Socialism adapted and radicalized” (p. 51). “National Socialism,” she concludes, “belongs to a longer history of violence associated with the rise and disintegration of empires. The Holocaust as a specifically German crime ... belongs to a longer history of German colonialism” (p. 64).

This perspective, in my view, is not sharp enough. National Socialism and the Holocaust “belong” to many histories—the West, Europe, Germany, Jews, modernity, World War I and its aftermath, and, yes, colonialism, to name only the leading candidates. But how does one weigh the impact of these various belongings? What were the causative factors that enable us best to explain the Nazi seizure of power, Nazi policy in the 1930s, the character of World War II, and the Holocaust? Colonialism no doubt exacerbated race thinking and stimulated longings for a greater German empire. But so did the German defeat in World War I, the hostility toward Bolshevism and the Soviet Union, the Weimar Republic’s many crises, and long-standing antagonisms toward Jews. And that hardly exhausts the list. To

seize on German colonialism as the *primary* explanation for Nazi atrocities, including the Holocaust, creates an unbalanced history and diminishes the distinctiveness of the National Socialist regime. There is precious little evidence that the genocide of the Herero and Nama, or of the Armenians for that matter, a genocide in which many German officials and officers were complicit, had any powerful, causative impact on Nazi policies toward the handicapped, Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, or anyone else. The Nazis did not need the precedents of Southwest Africa or the Ottoman Empire, just as they did not need the murderous policies of the Stalinist Soviet Union as a model. They were fully capable of generating extermination on their own.

And that means that we have to look for much more than the imperial experience abroad to understand National Socialism and the Holocaust. We have to look to the exclusionary logic embedded in the models of nation-states and national empires—that is, empires responding to the challenge of national claims—and to the very specific, step-by-step implementation of policies, including unforeseen contingencies and consequences. The historiography on the Holocaust has, of course, been most incisive about the consequential radicalization of anti-Jewish policies, especially in the eight-month period from the invasion of the Soviet Union to the Wannsee Conference. But that is rarely taken into account by proponents of the continuity thesis, who tend to rely on a *Zeitgeist*-type argument about imperial racism.

Dirk Moses puts a different turn on the continuity question by a thoughtful analysis of Hannah Arendt’s writings. Moses is not quite satisfied by the incessant referencing of the “boomerang” thesis, Arendt’s argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that the Holocaust marked the bringing home to Europe of the racism that Europeans had learned in the colonies. Notably, Moses draws attention to the very significant but rela-

tively neglected parts of *Origins* in which Arendt wrote about Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism. He rightly contends that for her, the “pan” movements were the source of the European descent into totalitarianism because they substituted racial concepts of belonging for national citizenship. The national form evoked for Arendt her beloved Greek *polis* and the invention of rights in the French Revolution. The “pan” forms of nationalism signified unbounded imperial claims and arbitrary rule. Not in the extra-European world but in the “pan” movements lay the origins of totalitarianism and the Holocaust. In actuality, Moses writes, Arendt admired British colonialism. He offers a postcolonial approach that refuses to “exculpate” Western imperialism (p. 73).

Moses goes on to argue that Arendt posited the uniqueness of the Holocaust. It was *the* veritable crime against humanity, an unprecedented act, nothing more and nothing less, because it was an attack on the intractable reality of human diversity, not a war on a population for pragmatic purposes like territorial gain. In that sense, Moses suggests, her writings fall short of the more insightful commentary of Raphael Lemkin, the originator of the term “genocide,” because Lemkin understood that there were many precedents, including colonial ones. Moreover, all genocidal elites mobilize fantasies of existential threats, and the determination to excise that danger is “pragmatic.” Moses then critiques Dan Diner’s Arendtian effort to sustain the uniqueness of the Holocaust by also asserting its “non-rational” (Diner’s terminology, not irrational), unprecedented character.

Moses’s interesting and significant critique nonetheless exhibits two problems. First, he presents Arendt as a completely coherent thinker. In fact, she was, at times, maddeningly slippery even when she was at her most brilliantly insightful. In some passages of *Origins* she reads like a defender of the nation-state as the great institutional promoter of human rights. In others, the

nation-state is precisely the problem. In the oft-cited, still powerful passages on statelessness, she argued that the great irony of the French Revolution was that despite its universalist claims, one only has rights as a national citizen, and citizenship is by definition exclusionary. The worst situation of all, short of annihilation, is statelessness. Second, Moses needs to define far more clearly what, if anything, marked the distinctiveness (not uniqueness!--there I agree with him) of the National Socialist regime. Otherwise, the Third Reich is reduced to just another awful regime among the catalog of atrocity perpetrators. If a comparative method is to be productive, it has to involve the analysis not only of similarities, but of differences as well.

Other major issues come up in *German Colonialism*. Malte Fuhmann makes the significant point that to many Germans, especially members of the elite, the Ottoman Empire was a far more important site of imperial engagement than was the formal colonial empire. Kristin Kopp applies the colonial model to Germany in Poland. Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann demonstrates the importance of economic interests as a motive for German colonialism, laying to rest myths about Bismarck and Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s notion of “social imperialism,” a concept that has not stood the test of time. He shows that colonialism, as was the case elsewhere in Europe, was very much a liberal project, and documents the critical role of the little-researched *Kolonialrat*, in which business interests held sway. Luis Madureira considers the neocolonial impact of the German Democratic Republic’s alignment with Marxist regimes and movements in Lusophone Africa and in Cuba. Martin Braach-Maksyvtis critiques West Germany’s “adoration” for Israel (p. 295). Not very convincingly, he roots that sentiment not in German guilt over the Holocaust but in common colonial desires in the Federal Republic and in Israel.

Finally, Russell Berman, in a chapter that stands in the middle of the volume but serves as

an overarching critique, lambasts German colonial studies for remaining stuck in the national paradigm. “National history has taken on some transnational characteristics,” he writes, “but it is far from comparative and rarely global in scope” (p. 165). He goes on to write that the “opportunity to theorize colonies and empire across wider expanses of space and time was excluded from the start of the current wave of scholarly engagement” (p. 166). He asks: “Why hold onto the primacy of national structures, if we are insisting on the importance of global processes?” (p. 167).

Why indeed? But the answer is simple. Because the nation-state became the most dynamic political form of the nineteenth century, then became predominant in the West in the wake of World I and around the world after World War II. Today there are something like 195 sovereign states that make up the international community. They still have the most powerful regulatory impact on their citizens, for good and bad. We do need global and comparative studies, because all of these states operate in regional or global fields. No state exists onto itself. Global history is critically important (does one really need to say that again?), and all those nice-sounding things that go along with it—flows, exchanges, relations—constitute vital points of understanding (even when they are so often not that nice and, in fact, can be quite deadly). But we cannot write and research as if the nation-state has not been a powerful, constant reality of modernity that has shaped so much about how those flows, exchanges, and relations actually manifested themselves (even when we recognize that the classic European nation-states were, at one and the same time, empires, such that national empires might be the better term). In his zeal, Berman leaves us with a truncated history, whether its topics be literary and cultural or social, political, and economic. And his cause is not helped by his roaming over the terrain of Roman and Islamic history, and much more, in such cursory fashion. In contrast, Jane Burbank and Fred Cooper’s *Empires in World His-*

tory (2010) enables one to see in vivid fashion both the commonalities and the distinctiveness of various imperial forms.

German Colonialism is a state-of-the-art collection. I have focused on only a few of the highlights, but there is much more to be gleaned from the volume. The excellent, wide-ranging chapters quickly draw the reader into the most recent debates in literary and historical studies on German colonialism.

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