

Jens-Uwe Guettel. *German Expansionism, Imperial Liberalism and the United States, 1776–1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 292 S. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-02469-4.



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Linked to the rise in domestic industrial capacity and the ascent of an educated, commercially minded liberal political class desirous of expanded economic opportunities, Germany's global penetration during the long nineteenth century was predicated on the conviction that overseas expansion would deliver both mercantile benefits and domestic political change. Over the past decade, this period of domestic change and international activity has been a fruitful field for researchers studying the historical development of Germany. Historians have variously framed this penetration through the superordinate concept of "globalization"; or alternatively, imperialism, which is one of globalization's primary historical forms.

Whether viewed as imperial or globalizing endeavors, German attempts at overseas penetration during the nineteenth century did not take place in a historical vacuum, with numerous, pre-existing European empires all but crowding Germany out of the ranks of the global empires. While the antiquated Iberian empires offered a

counterexample to German liberals, the blue water empires of the British, the French, and the Dutch were perceived by German liberals as exemplars of successful European liberal imperialist ventures. With great verve and clarity, Jens-Uwe Guettel makes the case that missing from this picture is the key role of the United States, which he argues was central to German understandings of liberal empire and in some respects offered a template for German approaches to expansionism. Guettel traces Germany's liberal imperialism, or as he terms it, "imperial liberalism," from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, showing the numerous points of transatlantic overlap. Beginning with Immanuel Kant, Alexander von Humboldt, and Christoph Meiners' respective meditations on slavery, which derived their content from Anglo-American models, he illustrates how the tension between the negative experience of the condition of slavery for the slave and the utility of slavery as an institution enabling further European economic development was resolved in favor of the latter. From here, Guettel's account

moves on to a refutation of the notion of any special German affinity or empathy for the plight of Native Americans. He does this by demonstrating the favorable reception in Germany of American narratives of the “vanishing” Amerindians, which presented the extraordinary excess death rates associated with imperial expansion as either inexplicable “natural” occurrences or, quite often, a process in line with world-historical developments which dictated that “higher” forms of life must displace “lower” ones. Astutely, Guettel points out that this racializing discourse was multidirectional, with Friedrich Ratzel not merely transmitting current U.S. thought on indigenous policy, but also contributing to the renewal of liberal imperialist thought in the United States, influencing figures such as Frederick Jackson Turner. At this point it might have been interesting to see Guettel go even further and try to assess the impact and agency of ordinary German settlers in the United States on this transcontinental exchange. An admittedly difficult task, it might nonetheless have been possible by utilizing the material uncovered by Stefan von Senger und Etterlin in his 1991 work *Neu-Deutschland in Nordamerika: Massenauswanderung, nationale Gruppenansiedlungen und liberale Kolonialbewegung, 1815 – 1860*.

One of the main elements of U.S. imperialism that Guettel sees as translating well to the German context was the emphasis on what he terms the American-style laissez-faire approach to empire, which he argues particularly informed the views of not only Ratzel but also the left-liberal colonial secretary Bernhard Dernburg. Central to this American model were political liberty, economic self-reliance, a decentralized approach to settlement patterns, and a localized, “rational” approach to issues of colonial racial hierarchy. While the first three were certainly laissez-faire, the decentralized aspects of U.S. racial policy that Germany adopted were, at least in the late imperial period, not always apparent, as Guettel admits. A tension between localizing and centralizing im-

pulses was apparent, pronouncedly so under the left-liberal colonial secretary Wilhelm Solf, who in 1912 moved from a reliance on colony-specific ordinances forbidding miscegenation and mixed marriages towards a demand that such measures be enacted from Berlin and enshrined in national legislation. With Solf’s call for a law against mixed marriages defeated by the combined forces of the Catholic Centre Party and the Social Democrats in the Reichstag, Guettel explains how Solf once again turned to the example of the United States; this time to study how the segregationist Jim Crow laws of some states coexisted with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which seemed to contradict them at the federal level.

Guettel quite correctly reveals just how much changed for Germany after World War One. Germany lost a significant portion of its territory, including all of its overseas colonies, while also enduring a period of partial occupation, including occupation by African troops brought in under French auspices. This inversion of the hitherto-prevailing colonial socio-racial order was decried in the German press. In addition, as a result of the American entry into the war, Germany’s relationship with the United States suffered greatly, to the extent that favorable allusions to U.S. racial conditions in post-1918 German debates fell off markedly. Even more obvious, Guettel reveals, was the Nazi Party’s disdain for the state of racial law in the United States. Rejecting the prewar enthusiasm for a decentralized approach to racial law, the Nazis instead argued that the United States was in fact a racially degenerating counterexample which should follow the new, highly centralized German approach. “Unlike in 1912,” Guettel argues, “in 1935 America was not allowed to be exemplary” (p. 200). The previously admired liberal mode of U.S. imperialism was necessarily criticized on the same grounds—it lacked centralization and was too heavily bound up in notions such as individualism and political liberty which, the Nazis claimed, they had superseded. In this way, Guettel convincingly disrupts accounts of

Nazi imperialism that stress its continuity with prewar forms of liberal imperialism, suggesting instead that “the pre-1914 imperialism and post-1918 visions of living space in the East existed as perceived opposites within a framework of dialectical tension” (p. 223).

A natural field of further inquiry for both the author and other future researchers is the liberal depictions of Central Europe in nineteenth-century Germany. Raised briefly in the first chapter, it is one area that might profit from further analysis. Perhaps in deference to Woodruff Smith’s seminal *Lebensraum/Weltpolitik* distinction, Guettel seems to stress the distinction between overseas empire and contiguous European empire in liberal circles.[1] While he correctly points out the marked differences between liberal imperialism and Nazi imperialism in terms of political modality, racial policy, and manner of execution, it is worth remembering that German liberals such as Friedrich List, Friedrich Naumann, and Max Weber also had their own sense of a German-dominated *Mitteleuropa* (Central Europe) that complemented liberal demands for an overseas empire, as Guettel acknowledges (p. 63). The partial overlap in the imperial topography of liberal Germans and Nazi Germans does not mean that there were uniquely German structural or political continuities that determined the shift from liberal to Nazi imperialism. Given too that U.S. liberal imperialism largely (but not exclusively) took the shape of contiguous territorial expansion, Guettel might profitably assess how Central Europe looked to not just the Nazis but also nineteenth-century liberal Germans familiar with U.S. expansionism. This could potentially strengthen his already detailed and convincing refutation of overarching and idiosyncratic lines of political and imperial continuity in German history.

Guettel’s book is admirable for a number of reasons. It expertly dissects the twin myths that U.S. expansionism was uniquely devoid of violent, imperialist characteristics, and that the history of

German imperialism is somehow reducible to proto-Nazi violence. Citing the myriad statements of violent intent against indigenous people made by U.S. liberals and noting the transferal of these statements to German public discourse, Guettel lays out precisely how strategies for imperial consolidation were not contained to individual nation-states but were translocated. The book also successfully contextualizes prewar German imperialism within a liberal milieu which shared a set of assumptions with its American counterpart regarding the correct forms of imperial penetration and the requisite means for dealing with recalcitrant indigenous populations unwilling or unable to submit to the rigors of European politico-military dominance and work discipline. As Guettel shows, imperialism and the forms of socio-racial knowledge it engendered were an integral part of liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic.

Note

[1]. Woodruff D. Smith *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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