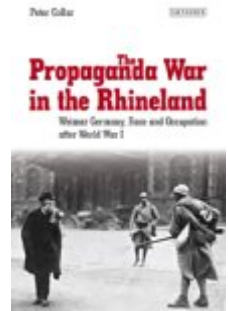


Peter Collar. *The Propaganda War in the Rhineland: Weimar Germany, Race and Occupation after World War I.* International Library of Twentieth Century History Series. London: I. B. Tauris, 2013. Illustrations, maps. xvii + 330 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78076-346-0.



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In *The Propaganda War in the Rhineland: Weimar Germany, Race and Occupation after World War I*, Peter Collar explores the institutional history and use of racial themes in the postwar German propaganda campaign directed against the French Rhineland occupation from 1919 to 1924 of the Bavarian Palatinate (the Pfalz). This campaign was intended to undermine French plans and prevent the alienation of German territories west of the Rhine. The themes employed by German propagandists included references to the race and supposed barbaric behavior of French African colonial soldiers against white Germans to generate a sympathetic response not only within Germany but also in France's two largest wartime allies, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The armistice that ended the First World War and the Versailles Treaty that followed it mandated the occupation of German territories west of the Rhine River by Allied troops. The Rhineland areas of Prussia, Bavaria, Hessen, and Oldenburg were placed under Allied control for an extended

period after the war to ensure that the Weimar government abided by the terms of the peace. If the Germans failed to carry out any part of this edict, the occupied zones—especially bridgeheads cleared of German troops east of the main Rhine bridges—would serve as springboards from which armies might be launched into Germany to enforce compliance.

Both the French and German governments were very sensitive to activities of their traditional enemy in this frontier region as control of it by one nation had historically posed a significant strategic threat to the other. While the Germans could be reasonably confident that none of the other occupying powers would invent excuses to annex or alienate the lands they occupied, the French Army of the Rhine's control of a zone extending along the Rhine River roughly from Bonn to Karlsruhe combined with the voiced determination of some French leaders to separate the Rhine regions from Germany either by annexation or by creation of a buffer state gave the Germans cause to be concerned. Moreover, as Collar

relates, the occupied Bavarian territory was in various ways disaffected and disconnected—including physically—from the rest of Bavaria and from Germany by the end of the war, and it was feared that its people might be particularly susceptible to French overtures. Such a development might benefit France by creating a more effective defensive barrier against Germany, but it raised for the Germans the threat of French armies closer to the heart of German industry.

Lacking the means to resist this aggression openly and forcibly, mobilization of public opinion was one of the few tools remaining to the Germans. They—a term with confusing antecedents, as Collar explains vis-à-vis the confusing and conflicting bonds of loyalty to local, regional, and national authorities—soon began a propaganda campaign designed to evoke a sympathetic international reaction against French intentions. Simultaneous campaigns also aimed to build German solidarity, lift German morale in the occupied areas, and harness public opinion in unoccupied Germany. This aggressive propaganda war was undertaken by angry and fearful Germans and the Weimar government to fight the humiliation of defeat, to reject the injustice of a harsh treaty and blame for the guilt, and to save Germany intact.

Given the recent war, Germany would have generated little sympathy by advancing an argument in favor of the inviolability of national frontiers. After all, in its four-year-long attempt to redesign the map of Europe, Germany had demonstrated little respect for the integrity of other nations. So, if an appeal against national disintegration seemed unlikely to produce a sympathetic reaction, in particular in France's two most influential allies (and creditors), the Americans and the British, a different approach was needed. Creation of a rift between these two nations and their wartime ally depended on finding themes that would resonate particularly with them and compliment their recognition of the importance of the

German nation as an integral and important part of modern Europe.

The particular aspect of these campaigns to which other historians have given the greatest attention, and to which Collar returns obliquely, is the use of themes associated with race. The opportunity for this focus arose in connection with the use by France of soldiers from their African colonies in their occupation force. German propagandists made the racist argument that the imposition by the French of less civilized black French colonial troops in positions of authority over white Germans was intended to humiliate them, inflicting a “black shame”—the *Schwarze Schmach*—on a civilized European nation of equals. Aware of the resonance that this subjugation—especially of white German women to black men—would have in Britain and in particular in Jim Crow America, this theme became an important part of the German appeal for relief from France's apparently odious plan.

Collar, who holds a doctorate in German history from Birkbeck, University of London, makes it clear that this propaganda “campaign” could not be called unified, centralized, or smoothly coordinated, and the overall program, if it can be characterized as such, was a very complicated one. Propaganda work was carried out by a disparate collection of institutions and individuals, sometimes in coordination and at other times in competition. Propaganda plans were designed and promoted by public institutions at the Reich and state levels, by private organizations, and by individuals often without reference to one another. Though there is a growing literature on the *Schwarze Schmach* propaganda campaign, the “roles of the different agencies actively engaged in this propaganda, often with conflicting interests and motivation, have so far not been comprehensively addressed by historians” (p. 2). It is this latter that forms the focus of *The Propaganda War in the Rhineland*.

Collar's approach to this postwar episode "considers the Schwarze Schmach campaign in the wider context of propaganda against the Rhineland occupation and it therefore brings in, to a greater extent, organizational issues" (p. 6). In his introduction, he reviews existing scholarship, which he says generally presents the campaign as a well-coordinated and centrally controlled effort reflecting the attitude of most Germans. As noted, he challenges this view. *The Propaganda War in the Rhineland* "explores the way in which the organisations that played a significant part in Rhineland propaganda were set up, the extent to which they interacted with each other and the extent to which rivalry and conflict over resources affect the conduct of the campaigns. I also examine in greater depth than has been done hitherto the role of the individual in organising and creating propaganda" (pp. 6-7).

Collar's book is organized into eight dense chapters. The first chapter provides the background and origins of the propaganda campaign. After a period in early 1919 of little activity, due primarily to the turmoil in the immediate aftermath of the war and an unwillingness by governmental organs to act prior to the promulgation of the final treaty, the first action was taken by an individual, Dr. Theodore von Winterstein, who set up an organization, the Pfalzzentrale, to generate propaganda and organize protests against the separatist activities in the Pfalz. Other organizations also came into existence during this period—the Reich Centre for Homeland Service (*Heimatsdienst*) and the Social Welfare in the Rhineland (*Volkspflege*)—that joined agencies like the Foreign Ministry and Reich Chancellery in propaganda work.

The second chapter traces the expansion of the Pfalzzentrale and its rivalry with the *Volkspflege* over financial support and disagreements over propaganda concepts. Chapter 3 explores origins of *Schwarze Schmach* campaign, and chapter 4 explores the role of German women in

that campaign as the "main victims" of the French colonial troops. In chapter 4, Collar also studies the activities of women's organizations like the Rhineland Women's League (*Rheinische Frauenliga*) and individuals like Ray Beveridge during the period. He writes that "two important questions that have hardly been addressed so far are first, at a time when middle-class women were beginning to play a more assertive role in national life, could a distinctive female perspective be said to exist? Second, the contribution of women's groups to the campaign largely took the form of widespread organised protests. Did this represent the expression of widespread and spontaneous support from the grass roots in unoccupied Germany and abroad—or was it simply clever exploitation by the nationalist Right?" (p. 9).

Chapter 5 explores other contributions to the propaganda campaign by organizations and individuals whose offerings have received much less attention in the literature. In this chapter, Collar addresses again the notion that the campaign was under some centralized control. "In the course of my research I have become convinced that, while propaganda against the occupation was sanctioned or encouraged from above by Reich and state governments, to speak simply of centrally coordinated or directed campaigns is to misread the situation" (p. 9). Close coordination of effort or even message, he writes, was not an absolute priority, and submissions ranging from crude rants to scholarly essays to the campaign came from a wide spectrum of unsolicited contributors.

Later developments, including the need of the Pfalzzentrale to operate clandestinely from 1921 through its dissolution in 1924 under Allied pressure, are covered in chapter 6. This period was shaped by the French occupation of the Ruhr, the failure of Germany to defeat the French invasion through a passive resistance campaign, and the separatist seizure of control of the Pfalz and subsequent violent reaction. Chapter 7 provides a specific analysis of the Pfalzzentrale propaganda

program, and the final chapter considers the Rhineland propaganda effort in the wider Reich context as the product of a fractured society.

Relatively few American readers are aware of the Allied occupation of the Rhineland that followed the First World War, of the United States' participation in the occupation, of the growing disapproval of French behavior, of the question of race in the Rhineland, and in particular of the appeal by the Germans to racial attitudes in the United States. A search of Google for the phrase "the occupation of Germany" returns about ninety-two million responses, the vast majority of which deal with that later post-WWII period. A link to an article in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* on the Nazi occupation of Poland even appears before any First World War link to the Rhineland occupation.

Compared to combat histories of the First World War, histories of the interwar period and the rise of the Nazis, and similar topics, relatively few works by Americans examine the occupation. Among the American works, General Henry T. Allen's two books *My Rhineland Journal* (1923) and *The Rhineland Occupation* (1927) are the most prominent; there is very little more. As with most historical writing related to the Great War, English historians are more prolific on this subject, but in general the Rhineland occupation is usually mentioned only in connection to other subjects, like the failure of the Wilsonian vision, the French invasion in the Ruhr, or the failure of Weimar or Versailles. Most histories are more concerned with the coming of the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, or the events leading to the Second World War than with events in the Rhineland.

Indeed, among the few stories from this time and place that touch on Americans, race, and Western Europe are those tales related by black veterans of the First World War who recorded their very favorable impressions of relations with and acceptance by the French people during their

time serving on the western front. While these stories provide an interesting contrast to the impression that German propagandists tried to create of the French-as-racists with the *Schwarze Schmach* campaign, Collar's book offers an opportunity to expand such parochial views. Given the colonial experience of the British in Africa and the existence of Jim Crow in many parts of the United States, the humiliation claimed by Germans at the hands of French African soldiers would have resonated in both of those nations. Readers wishing to explore an important aspect of this in Collar's history will be most interested in a section in chapter 4, "Women in Rhineland Propaganda," which includes the story of Beveridge, an American actress and activist who supported the racist campaign against France and its colonial soldiers.

Based on exhaustive archival research, Collar's history makes an important contribution to the complicated history of the *Schwarze Schmach* campaign literature. More than that, it is an important demonstration of how deep historical complexity can be revealed by close analysis of something that seemed clear and obvious—a coordinated German propaganda program—that turns out to be anything but straightforward. Collar shows in a thoroughgoing account how the many-sided German effort to save the Rhineland employed a weapon of the weak and how it took advantage of many different themes, but in particular of the emotional force, impact, and resonant power of racism in the fight against the French threat. While some combats are carried out by using the tools of the powerful, other battles are waged by the weak using their tools appropriate to their situation. And like a partisan war, not all of these battles are going to be under the control of a single commander with a unified vision and goal.

I highly recommend this book.

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