



Willeke Sandler. *Empire in the Heimat: Colonialism and Public Culture in the Third Reich.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 360 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-069790-7.

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Lobbying Germans for Colonialism, Again

Those in Germany who tried to make a case for colonies stood in a long tradition, since at least the 1860s. Also since the nineteenth century, it was an often deplored “fact” among German enthusiasts of colonialism that too few of their compatriots were thoroughly interested in the colonies. Once imperial Germany did “acquire” colonies, these enthusiasts abhorred the idea that—in their eyes—criticism of colonialism was widespread. Recent research on subaltern colonialisms in Germany has added a further layer of complexity that shows the ambivalent relations and tensions between colonialist leaders and lower-class Germans with regard to the colonies and “colonial (public) culture” in Germany.[1] And even at the highest echelons of society enthusiasm for colonialism was limited: official Germany, whether imperial or republican, refrained from “recognizing colonial engagements.” For instance, there were no state funerals for “colonial pioneers” (p. 2). German society honored only a few of them, such as Hermann Wissmann, with a monument before 1914. As Winfried Speitkamp summarized years ago: “Evidently, the popularity of the colonial idea [in Germany] remained limited.”[2] And it was the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft (DKG), Germany’s colonial pressure group par excellence, that worked constantly to reverse this trend, especially after the loss of the colonies in 1919 and well into the Nazi period.

Whereas the social and political repercussions in Ger-

many of the possession of colonies and their loss after 1919 have by now been thoroughly explored, the place of the former colonies and colonialism in the public culture of Nazi Germany still deserves more attention by historians—even though Britta Schilling’s work includes a study of colonial merchandise (*Kolonialwaren*) and school books after 1933.[3] Nazi Germany’s politics and planning (administrative but also in terms of civil engineering) related to the former colonies, and “Africa” in general, have been investigated in only two major publications: the classic study by Klaus Hildebrand, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich* (1969), and, more recently, Karsten Linne’s *Deutschland jenseits des Äquators* (2008). Also Dirk van Laak’s *Imperiale Infrastruktur* (2004) contains valuable analysis of the Nazi period and its relationship to colonialism.

It is against this historiographical background that Willeke Sandler’s *Empire in the Heimat* can offer a number of new insights, even though some parts of the book give the impression of an English summary of the older German literature. Sandler commences with a broad overview of the “stakes of overseas colonialism in the Weimar Republic” (chapter 1). A quotation from a 1929 DKG pamphlet, bemoaning that the DKG’s twenty-five thousand members represented “a number that in today’s political life means absolutely nothing” (p. 44), illustrates the disillusionment of many of the old-guard colonialists with the political impact of their public activism—

considering that they had deplored their lack of influence for the last thirty years. Enthusiasts of colonialism, who considered that political parties all too often merely paid lip service to the demands for the “return of Germany’s colonies,” hoped to benefit from intensified propaganda and general lobbying among all parties. This included increasingly also the NSDAP (Nazi Party), which had already in its 1920 program demanded “land and territory (colonies) to feed our people.”[4] Nazi leaders, most of all Adolf Hitler, were eager to win support from colonialist circles; they made clear since the late 1920s that they supported the colonialists’ demands in Africa and elsewhere but never at the expense of their prioritization of eastern Europe as the future settlement area for Germans. Hildebrand has shown that in the early 1930s, the Nazis’ colonial policy became an instrument of domestic politics rather than foreign policy. Still, in 1933, colonialists were optimistic that the new regime would become more activist than previous governments in pursuing their cause for reclaiming overseas colonies.

While Hildebrand puts his focus on the disputes within the NSDAP on the “colonial question” and its relevance for Hitler’s foreign policy, Sandler provides an in-depth analysis of the activities of the colonialist organizations. Between 1933 and 1935, the DKG and other colonialist organizations underwent a process of “self-coordination” (*Selbstgleichschaltung*), rebranding their umbrella organization Reichskolonialbund (RKB, consisting of eighteen member organizations), introducing the *Führerprinzip*, incorporating Nazi dignitaries to the leadership, and expelling “politically suspect” and “non-Aryan” members (p. 65). DKG leaders made several public gestures that signaled their loyalty and desire to publicly associate themselves with the Nazi regime, always hoping to reach a wider public. DKG president Heinrich Schnee, the former governor of German East Africa, met Hitler in March 1933 and requested from him a public statement on the importance of the colonies for Germany. Hitler, however, responded hesitatingly: “I will think about it” (p. 63). In 1934, a Colonial Policy Office was created within the NSDAP, led by Franz Ritter von Epp, which would in later years set guidelines for the RKB’s colonial propaganda efforts. Intensified colonialist propaganda aimed at the creation of a mass movement used not only (as hitherto) lectures and written materials but also more modern media, in particular films. These efforts paid off. In comparison to 1933, the DKG almost doubled its membership by 1936 to fifty thousand (and reached close to two million by 1941). Characterizing the ambivalent mood of the colonialists in the early days of

the new regime, Sandler speaks of a “continued sense of organizational autonomy” and a “combination of loyalty and expectation” for more support for the colonial cause (pp. 60, 63). As it turned out, “relations between colonialists and Nazis did not always run smoothly” (p. 89).

It is well known that leading NSDAP members and Hitler repeatedly gave statements not only for but also against overseas colonialism. And colonialists had a hard time to either “ignore” those voices or to convince the broader masses—at least themselves—that such negative utterances were made merely for tactical reasons (for example, for diplomatic purposes vis-à-vis Britain) and were not the “true” NSDAP position on the issue. Sandler characterizes this approach as a “willful misinterpret[ation]” of NSDAP obstructions (p. 274). From her sources (mostly derived from the files of the DKG and the NSDAP colonial subdepartments), Sandler provides ample examples showing that “most of the problems between colonialists and Nazi organizations came from competition over turf” (p. 91). However, in the background the fundamental dispute always loomed large between colonialists’ overseas goals and NSDAP’s continental goals. DKG and RKB eagerly argued that *Kolonialpolitik* and *Ostpolitik* (for the “return” of Polish territories lost after World War I) “did not mutually exclude, but rather supplement each other,” yet Hitler left little doubt that he wanted “colonial propaganda adapted to contemporary foreign policy” (p. 112). Subsequently, in 1936, the NSDAP, tired of the continued attempts at organizational and argumentative autonomy of the RKB, enforced—against Schnee—the dissolution of the DKG, resulting in a second *Gleichschaltung* (coordination) and a “new” RKB, led by Ritter von Epp. This new organization, more fully integrated into the Nazi apparatus, was extremely successful in finally becoming the mass movement its predecessor never managed to be. But the ways this integration of colonialism into the Nazi public sphere was achieved (for example, parades, exhibitions, “revues,” and posters) caused deep frustrations among the old colonial elite, who, though satisfied with the government support, complained about their expertise being abused as *Kolonialkitsch* (colonial kitsch). By using these means of depicting past (and future) overseas colonialism, those at the helm of the RKB and in the propaganda departments of the Nazi state were attempting to “integrate the African *Heimat* into the heart of the German nation” (p. 226). Sandler’s chapter on “colonial feature films,” like *Carl Peters* (1941), *Ohm Krüger* (1941), and *Germanin* (1943), attests to the manipulative force Nazi propaganda reached by producing such anti-Semitic, racist,

and Anglophobic imagery.

In her depiction of the ways German colonialism was remembered during the Nazi period, Sandler dissects a myth of the benevolent, capable German colonialism produced by the RKB/DKG jointly with NSDAP organs. Taking the example of the Herero genocide, she rightfully argues against the idea that “the memory of this colonial violence remained a fixed narrative of extermination through the Second World War” (p. 122). Instead, Sandler recognizes a “whitewashed version of this history [of genocide], which presents German colonists as victims and rarely mentions the ultimate fate of the Herero” (pp. 122-23). In emphasizing this “sanitized memory,” Sandler thus confirms the argument in Susanne Kuss’s *Deutsches Militär auf kolonialen Kriegsschauplätzen* (2010) that—for the wars against Poland and the Soviet Union—there was no “learning” from the colonial war in German southwest Africa forty years earlier.

When war broke out in 1939 and most parts of eastern Europe were occupied by the Wehrmacht until 1942, enthusiasts of colonialism were eagerly awaiting the resurrection of Germany’s overseas colonial empire. However, with the territorial focus shifting to the East, the RKB struggled to explain the distinctiveness of African territories and their continuing necessity for the German *volk*. Following the defeat at Stalingrad, all colonial propaganda activities ceased and the work of the RKB came to an end. Now, Nazi leaders formally judged colonial topics as being irrelevant. Remarkably, throughout the book, Sandler distinguishes between “colonialists” and “Nazis,” even though it is clear from her analysis that there were numerous “Nazi colonialists” (but of course also there were Nazis who opposed overseas colonialism).

In sum, Sandler has written a highly accessible account of colonialism and public culture in Nazi Germany. She indeed shows that colonialists “operated after 1919 [and after 1933] within a time warp. They continuously reworked the German colonial past and projected it into the future, while using the language and needs of the [Nazi] present” (p. 7). Thus, the colonialist responses to the Nazi regime “reveal the working of public culture under dictatorship” (p. 11). For those new to the subject, this book gives an excellent overview of the topic; others, especially those familiar with German historiography since Hildebrand, however, will find a new approach to old material.

Notes

[1]. John Philip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3, 88.

[2]. Winfried Speitkamp, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 147. All translations by author.

[3]. Short, *Magic Lantern Empire*; Susanne Heyn, *Kolonial bewegte Jugend: Beziehungsgeschichten zwischen Deutschland und Südwestafrika zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2018); Britta Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Jared Poley, *Decolonization in Germany: Weimar Narratives of Colonial Loss and Foreign Occupation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[4]. Section 3 of the “Program of the German Workers’ Party” (1920), German History in Documents and Images, http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3910.

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