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Sean Andrew Wempe. *Revenants of the German Empire: Colonial Germans, Imperialism, and the League of Nations.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 304 pp. $78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-090721-1.

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Demise or Transmutation for a Unique National Identity?

Sean Andrew Wempe's investigation of the afterlife in the 1920s of the Germans who lived in Germany's colonies challenges a narrative that sees them primarily as forerunners to Nazi brutality and imperial ambitions. Instead, he follows them down divergent paths that run the gamut from rejecting German citizenship en masse in favor of South African papers in the former German Southwest Africa to embracing the new postwar era's ostensibly more liberal and humane version of imperialism supervised by the League of Nations to, of course, trying to make their way in or even support Nazi Germany. The resulting well-written, nuanced examination of a unique German national identity, that of colonial Germans, integrates the German colonial experience into Weimar and Nazi history in new and substantive ways.

The book begins by reviewing the history and historiography of German colonials. Stripping Germany of its colonies and banishing them from the League of Nations mandate system was perceived as yet another way for the Allies hypocritically to brand Germans as uncivilized and morally deficient. The contested perception of German missionaries' contributions to European Orientalism are highlighted. The linkage of European imperialism to the Holocaust, especially as formulated by Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), has created some pushback as being a new version of the German *Sonderweg* thesis. Wempe situates his book exactly at this point by looking closely and critically at how these Germans engaged internationalism in the 1920s and especially after the Locarno Conference of 1925. Germany's brief membership in the League of Nations provided a number of surprising avenues for them to shape the new system of imperialism during the interwar period.

The Treaty of Versailles stripped Germany of all its colonies, and they soon passed over to the League of Nations mandate system. German colonials, except in German Southwest Africa, were expelled and their property confiscated. The accusation that they were much more brutal and uncivilized colonizers than other Europeans, thus justifying their expulsion, was as hard for them to take as their loss of home and property in the colonies. The organizations and leaders who promoted German colonies before the war now turned to seeking compensation or return as well as combating what they labeled a false German

"colonial guilt," placing them firmly in the large camp of Germans seeking to overturn the Treaty of Versailles.

Two key figures in this effort were Heinrich Schnee, the former governor of German East Africa who became the highest profile voice for returning Germans to their colonies, and Theodor Seitz, former governor of German Southwest Africa and postwar head for extensive lengths of time of both the German Colonial Society and Imperial Colonial Working Association, two of the largest German colonial lobby groups. They led colonial Germans in trying out many of the tropes a new international order provided in an effort to return to the antebellum status. They asserted that their expulsion denied them the new right to self-determination. Perceiving themselves as victims, they claimed that their new political weakness proved their moral strength in sticking together as a community. They cherrypicked favorable quotes by British imperialists concerning their colonial achievements to justify a return as superior colonizers. They harped on French colonial troops in the Rhineland as Allied militarization of Africans against white Europeans, something no "civilized" Europeans would ever do, and, of course, cast all sexual relations between German women and those troops, consensual or not, as brutal rapes. Since these tactics were ignored by the Allies and no restoration of German colonies was in the offering, the German colonial community soon fractured as they tried out new avenues of adaption to the postwar realities.

Those in the African colonies, Wempe argues, had created a new national identity for themselves as German Africans (***Deutsch Afrikaners***), rejecting the label of Germans abroad (***Auslandsdeutsche***) that the metropole used. There had been about four thousand of them in German East Africa and twelve thousand in German Southwest Africa. This alternative national identity rejected elements of German identity writ large, which they saw as weak and emasculated after the war, prone to mismanagement and subversion by socialists. Instead, these German Africans represent the real Germany in an African Heimat. Hypermasculinity marked the males as settler, farmer, and hunter and as manager of vast networks for transport and communication. The German woman, cast as a ***Kulturmutter***, was at the heart of the civilizing mission, creating the new homeland in Africa while educating and mothering Africans who were still infantilized in the traditional imperialist vein. While studies of nationalism have made much of both national indifference and hyper- or integral nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century, this book's highlighting of colonial Germans rejecting even the most fervent nationalism back home illuminates the malleability of national identities based on conditions of geography, time period, and the utility to new definitions of a national identity to those who construct and reconstruct these identities.

German Africans in the former German Southwest Africa took this rejection of German nationalism to the next level in the mid-1920s. This territory had been given as a mandate to South Africa, thus unusually taking it out of the hands of a European power. Here former colonials were offered the option to stay if they took up South African citizenship, which roughly two-thirds of them did. This collective rejection of German identity created a tremendous stir among German officials in the metropole. Seitz, the former governor here, strongly opposed it. Yet those colonials who became South Africans immediately used their newfound status to push for as much autonomy as possible, seeking to control their schools, their land, and their culture as a German oasis in Namibia. Here cultural identity trumped political national identity, and recovering this aspect of German colonial history is an important contribution of this book.

Back in Germany, the fact that the German colonial officials Schnee and Seitz kept company with traditional right of center political parties

demonstrates the limits to their efforts to reintegrate into German society. The national liberal German People's Party was the most open to pushing for a restitution of colonies, and Schnee was a representative for them in the national parliament from 1924 to 1932. The Social Democrats and Communists, of course, opposed all such talk, while the Center Party was ambivalent at best, supporting Catholic missionaries' restoration to African properties only tacitly. But as the favor of smaller right of center parties evaporated with voters in the late 1920s and early 1930s, so did any chance of German colonials making their way in German society with that distinctive identity intact.

The Locarno Conference in 1925 provided German colonials with a new option that further fractured the community. It reaffirmed the loss of the colonies, but by allowing Germany into the League of Nations, it opened the door to official participation on the Permanent Mandate Commission that had oversight of former German colonies and also much former territory of the Ottoman Empire. This new avenue made it possible for some former officials to take up a defense of German colonials using the new language of mandate imperialism with its civilizing mission of mandates for former colonies. The rhetoric became more internationalist and less colonial even as they fought to revise the Treaty of Versailles on colonial matters and keep the German colonial legacy alive, for example, by resisting efforts to establish a larger federation of East Africa that would absorb the former German East Africa into a larger British project.

Their most stunning success at influence in the new system was the appointment of Schnee as a member of the Manchurian Commission that was to investigate the crisis in China in 1931. Japan claimed that the Manchukuo government was independent and had legitimately asked for Japanese assistance while the Chinese government claimed it was a Japanese puppet, making China the victim of Japanese aggression entitled to league backing. Wempe deems Schnee's performance on the commission to have been fairly professional, or at least no worse than others. Above all, his position there presented Germany as a valued partner to the international system, not the usual way one might think about Germany's international status in the early 1930s. The commission ruled for China, but Japan had by that point already withdrawn from the league. Schnee did manage to work in a claim that Japan should therefore return their league mandate of the German South Sea territories to Germany, but that, of course, did not happen. The Nazi seizure of power in 1933 led Germany to leave the League of Nations and start down the path to a war of European conquest.

Schnee joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and offered his colonial expertise to the new government, but their imperial objectives lay in Europe, not overseas, bringing an end to German colonial interests for the time being. Wempe argues more broadly that these traditional colonists did not fit easily into the new Nazi scheme, noting, for example, that at Munich in 1938 Adolf Hitler was offered a league mandate somewhere in Africa instead of the Sudetenland, but he was not interested. The afterlife of German colonials had to wait until after the war to pick up again with continuity of staff and ideas, now modified to a modernizing mission in place of a civilizing mission in both West Germany's German African Society and East Germany's German African Society in the German Democratic Republic. Wempe tracks ongoing connections all the way up to 2016 with Germany's formal apology to Namibia for the Heroro genocide. The league mandate system in the meantime survived as the United Nation Trustee Council until 1994.

This excellent book puts the lives and actions of colonial Germans in the 1920s center stage. It does not settle all the debates about the role Germany's imperial past played in the 1930s and '40s, as some of those operative ideas took on a life of

their own, no longer directly connected to those who had lived as German colonials. The actual history of these colonials shows the many different options open in the 1920s to German history and national identity.

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