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In June 1884, Captain Hendrik Witbooi led his Witbooi-Nama into central Damaraland, part of the newly declared German protectorate of Southwest Africa. This territory was under the control of the Okahandja Ovaherero, and their leader Maharero Tjamuaha was about to sign a protection treaty with the German colonial authorities. Although aware of this treaty, Witbooi repeatedly attacked the Ovaherero in the coming years, putting “the limits of German power on full display” (p. 119). German authorities were simply unable to give any meaningful protection. Without a sizable settler community or colonial military, colonial rule proved to be nothing but a mirage. In this manner, Witbooi “not only exposed the inaccuracies of European” beliefs about colonial rule “but also pressured German administrators to centralize and expand their occupation” of German Southwest Africa (p. 121).

This episode illustrates two central arguments that Adam A. Blackler, assistant professor of history at the University of Wyoming, convincingly makes in his new book, *An Imperial Homeland*. First, he argues that German ideas about colonial rule, but also racism and violence, were shaped in an “imperial homeland,” a field encompassing both metropole and colony. Second, Blackler shows that Africans were central actors in this process and thus have an “essential place in German history” (p. 4).

In his book, Blackler focuses on the relationship between the *Kaiserreich* and its colony in Southwest Africa. As its first overseas protectorate and only settler colony, he argues, Southwest Africa was especially influential for how Germans thought about empire, Africans, and themselves. In the first part, he concentrates on the precolonial period (1842-84). Mainly drawing on existing scholarship (e.g., Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism in Germany: Expansionism and Nationalism* [2008]), chapter 1 explores how questions of German unity and colonial expansion
went hand in hand in the rhetoric of liberal nationalists of the pre-1848 period, travel literature and magazines, and the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Together these discourses and events produced “an imperial consensus of largely educated, financially secure, and curious women and men” who began to perceive themselves as “natural colonizers” (pp. 20, 41). Chapter 2 then turns from central Europe to southern Africa, following Rhenish missionaries’ work in the region in the decades before 1884. Working with sources from missionary archives, Blackler complicates older interpretations of missionaries as simple agents of German colonialism. For him, it was only the frustrating experience of failing to proselytize Ovaherero that led missionaries like Carl Hugo Hahn to eventually adopt a new nationalistic form of evangelism. This Christian chauvinism, Blackler states, fused contemporary nationalist and racist beliefs with Christian philosophies. Through church registers, mission reports, and a host of other publications, Rhenish missionaries then influenced public discourse on colonialism more generally.

Part 2 of Imperial Homeland deals with colonial encounters from the beginning of formal colonization in 1884 to the 1904-7 war and genocide in Southwest Africa. Chapter 3 first investigates the relationship between Germany and its Southwest African colony by scrutinizing imperial propaganda, board games, and colonial exhibitions. They helped introduce the African protectorate into everyday life in the metropole, Blackler holds, and thus “prompted individuals to revise their conceptions of Heimat” to encompass Germany’s colonies (p. 81). Chapter 4 then turns to the encounters of Ovaherero and Nama with German colonial agents on Southwest African soil, including the confrontations with Witbooi detailed above. It was the ability of African actors to shatter European imperial fantasies of their superiority, the author plausibly argues, that made German authorities increasingly rely on violent forms of colonization. In 1904, Blackler suggests, this process led to genocide. But while the identified dynamic certainly contributed to the exterminatory violence Lothar von Trotha unleashed against Ovaherero and Nama, a more nuanced treatment of the subject—engaging the more complex explanations of Isabel V. Hull (Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany [2005]), Susanne Kuss (German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence [2017]), or Matthias Häussler (The Herero Genocide: War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia [2021]) in greater depth—would have been more persuasive. These authors all hold that extermination was not preplanned when the war started but was the result of a process of radicalization in the second half of 1904.

Finally, part 3 questions the post-genocidal period of 1905 to 1914. Chapter 5 shows how racial separation, the advancement of emigration of white women, and the colonial administration’s categorization of Afrikaners along strictly racial terms produced an apartheid state in the colony. And while it seems right to assume with Blackler that race thinking gained in importance during and after the genocide, we might question that it became the all-determining factor that he claims it to be. For instance, the author notes, that the so-called labor question became the “native question” after 1904 (p. 151). However, getting Africans to work for white farmers, businesses, and the state now mainly as forced laborers remained a central concern of the colonial administration—albeit one, of course, viewed through a racial lens. In a way, the mass murder of tens of thousands of Ovaherero and Nama had made the labor question an even more pressing problem. Racial thinking did not replace the hunger for African labor; they influenced each other. Chapter 6 finally studies how imperial masculinity changed in the wake of the genocide. In this especially well-researched chapter, Blackler studies memoirs and diaries of veterans as well as petitions by future settlers to the German Colonial Office—the latter being systematically evaluated for the first time. He uses these sources to show how “a significant collective
of white men believed in the value of strength, hierarchy, and the ability to wield such power reflexively and without remorse” (p. 203).

While generally making persuasive arguments, Blackler at times tends to overstate the influence of Southwest Africa on developments of German history more generally. For instance, more evidence is needed to show that the imperial masculinity forged in post-genocide Southwest became the “ultimate measure of German manhood,” that “the right man for our Southwest’ was the right man for Germany” after 1918 (p. 209). Equally, race might have “evolved into the principal measure by which Germans defined their identity” in the colony (p. 215). But whether the same holds true for metropolitan Germany after World War I and whether this was primarily a consequence of colonial experiences, and not the unsettling events of the Great War or other factors, needs further proof.[1]

These caveats aside, An Imperial Homeland is a very welcome and valuable contribution to the booming field of (German) imperial history. Blackler does a convincing job explaining how Germany’s imperial metropole and its only settler colony were linked and how both contributed to German identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He offers nuanced views and bases his arguments on a wide range of archival and published sources. What is more, he persuasively shows that African actors shaped this process in significant ways.

Note

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