Continuities, parallels, receptions.
Reflections on the ‘colonization’ of National Socialism*

Birthe Kundrus

Abstract
The colonial turn has now reached German historiography. Whether colonial structures and mentalities also existed outside of classic overseas empires, and, as a result, the analytical categories of colonial history can also be applied to the interpretation of issues that would appear at first to differ from ‘colonial’ ones, is currently the focus of various debates. One of these discussions centers on whether the German occupation of eastern Europe in World War II can be described as ‘colonial’ and whether the violent practices that characterized the occupation had their antecedents in formal German colonial rule in the period from 1884 to 1918. The article discusses these questions on two levels: on a methodological level it proposes to distinguish between continuity, transfer, and parallelism; and in its empirical part it examines – as part of a transfer history – how the proponents of National Socialism perceived the traditions of colonialism and how they related National Socialism to these traditions. Thereby it stresses the creative character of these receptions, which did not necessarily have anything in common with the original colonial phenomenon.

The imperial turn has now arrived in German historiography too. A closer consideration of colonial histories, as well as the incorporation of transnational and global perceptions of Germany’s national history, allows for new perspectives, even on well-established objects of research. For example, Philipp Ther, prompted by current discussions around analytical methods and theory in Eastern European studies, recently argued that the imperialistic dimension of the German Empire should be explored not only in its overseas possessions, but also in its domination of the Polish population of the Prussian eastern provinces.1 The question of whether colonial structures and mindsets can also be identified outside the classical overseas empires, thereby making analytical categories of colonial history useful in the interpretation of outwardly ‘noncolonial’ subjects, pervades

---


Copyright © 2008 Otjivanda Presse.Essen Eck & Hartmann GbR
a further debate. This concerns, firstly, to what extent the German occupation of Eastern Europe during the Second World War could be described as 'colonial', and, secondly, whether these practices of violence could be traced back to the formal German colonial possessions that existed from 1884 to 1918. The debate is not only about the parallels between these two periods, but rather the correlations between colonialism and Nazi occupation. However, until now, a seeming lack of sufficient conceptual precision has occasionally become apparent in this field of argumentation. Therefore, the goal of the following is to come to more sustainable conclusions concerning possible lines of connection between the German Empire and National Socialism, as well as the possibilities and limits of using a colonial analytical framework in examining the 1939—1945 German occupation of Eastern Europe.

I. The debate: the genocide of the Herero and the German war of extermination

This German continuities debate finds its roots in the controversy concerning whether or not a direct line can be drawn from the 1904—1908 German colonial wars to the National Socialist genocide of World War II. This 'continuing debate on continuities' emerged from the sense of horror provoked by the twentieth century's violent nature and Germany's major role in these brutal excesses. It is part of a broader international discussion about whether and how the experiences and practices of colonial violence influenced the wars of the twentieth century.²

Jürgen Zimmerer got the ball rolling with numerous articles. He concludes that the Herero and Nama wars, echoing the genocides committed by local settler militias on the American and Australian frontiers, represented a "crucial link to the crimes of the National Socialists".³ The genocide of the Herero was therefore an "important inspiration" for National Socialist warfare in Eastern Europe.⁴ According to Zimmerer, it broke the last taboo, namely the annihilation of another ethnicity not only in theory, but also in practice:

The war against the Herero and Nama had consequences not only for Namibia, however, but also for subsequent German history, since it marked an important step towards the Nazi war of extermination. A style of waging war was introduced overseas which anticipated events in Europe 40 years later. The


⁴ Ibid.: 1119.
classification of a racial war; the banishing of people into areas where their lives were in danger, the destruction of basic foodstuffs, summary execution and extermination by neglect all provide clear parallels. [...] The genocide in German South-West Africa is also significant as a prelude to the Holocaust. One need only to consider notions such as concentration camps and genocide to relate these events to the mass crimes committed during the Third Reich. Although one must beware of making precipitate comparisons, it cannot be denied that there are actual structural similarities between the genocide committed on the Herero and Nama and the Holocaust which reward further reflection.\(^5\)

He sees these "structural similarities" primarily in the mental disposition towards mass murder, the role of the state as perpetrator, and the bureaucratization of the extermination process.\(^6\) In addition, the notions of *Rasse* and *Raum* ('race' and 'territorial space'), as central concepts within National Socialist policies of conquest and extermination, also stood within the tradition of European colonialism. Consequently, he understands the war against Poland and the Soviet Union as the "largest colonial war of conquest in history".\(^7\) However, according to Zimmerer, drawing these kinds of connections does not mean that the crimes of the National Socialists can be monocausally traced back to the theory and practice of German colonialism.\(^8\)

His theses have found some support.\(^9\) In the Fritz Bauer Institute’s annual on genocide and war crimes in the first half of the twentieth century, Aram Mattioli — supported by the volume’s editors Imtrud Wojak and Susanne Meini — declared: There "is some evidence that the genocides committed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War were prepared for by (among other contributing factors) a lengthy process of cumulatively unleashing warlike violence in the colonial periphery."\(^10\) In the case of Italy, Mattioli can well substantiate his thesis that the conquest of Abyssinia was a testing ground for violent force; however, the usefulness of applying these colonial roots to the German context remains for now only a proposition. In view of the German colonial


\(^7\) Jürgen Zimmerer, "Annihilation in Africa. The "Race War" in German Southwest Africa (1904 — 1908) and its Significance for a Global History of Genocide", GII Bulletin, 37, 2005: 31-57 (54).

\(^8\) Zimmerer, "Genozid": 122.


regime’s establishment of concentration camps for captured Herero, Micha Brumlík believes that the “hypothesis of the German colonial wars functioning as a role model” for German National Socialism has gained “increasing plausibility“.

11 Reinhart Kößler and Henning Melber place more emphasis on racial obsession as the guiding continuity. They see “evident lines of connection” between antisemitism and colonial racism, coming to this conclusion: “Colonial racism, and the extermination discourse built upon it, anticipated which was later perfected decades later in the industrially operated extermination camps”. They temper this with: “Although an attempt to draw a seamless continuity from the genocide in German South-West Africa to the terror and the organized mass extermination under the Nazi regime would be too facile, this does not completely rule out correlations and lines of connection.” The uniqueness of the Shoah would lie in the synthesis of the various forms of violence, “but not at all in a total rejection of a continuity with the extermination practices of colonialism.”

12 These writings tie in with Hannah Arendt’s classic theses particularly that the racism of imperialism is to be regarded as the “hothouse nursery” of totalitarianism. Her proposition is now re-examined under altered methodological and theoretical premises, accentuating it primarily as an analyses of violence.

13 On the one hand, having constructed a link between colonial history and National Socialism, these authors leave open the question of whether this points to parallels situationally caused by foreign rule, or whether this is a specifically German continuity. The chosen terminological repertoire remains ambiguous. Such terms include “common element”, “line of tradition”, “forerunner role”, and “extremely radicalized variant”. On the other hand, it is debatable whether the concepts of Rasse and Raum really imply such similarities — or whether they actually could point to another logic, despite having nearly identical terminology such as Lebensraum (‘living space’) and antisemitism or antisemitsm.

14 In addition, one needs to consider what role the ideational and political transfer with other countries had in shaping Germany’s violent path in the twentieth century, and how the


15 Zimmerer, “Genozid”: 122.

16 In one of his latest publications, Zimmerer also emphasizes these distinctions more than previously. Cf. Jürgen Zimmerer, “Rassenkrieg und Völkermond. Der Kolonialkrieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika und die Globalgeschichte des Genozids”, in: Melber, Genozid: 23-48 (46-47).
intervening years, particularly World War One, influenced this scenario. After considering all these factors, it would seem that the significance of colonialism for the phenomenon of National Socialist tyranny would not deserve such heavy emphasis.17 Moreover, some scholars have recently taken the empirical findings concerning the genocide of the Herero and subjected them to revision, thereby cutting away at the roots of these lines of connection. Isabel Hull regards the war against the Herero as a military campaign which was conducted according to European ideas. For example, Trotha's Battle of Waterberg is seen as following the model of a concentrated decisive battle using encirclement, as was once done at Königgrätz as well as at Sedan — just that at Waterberg, this encirclement was unsuccessful. The Herero fled into the waterless Omahaheke. This stoked the frustrated hubris of German military leader Lothar von Trotha, and with it the genocidal potential of German military culture. All the military thought and all the military planning of this military culture in Germany, according to Hull, was focused upon offensive tactics and the decisive battle. Therefore, it accepted only two outcomes: either the (physical) annihilation of the opponent, or one's own destruction. This resulted in both the strength and the weakness of the German military, particularly its characteristic susceptibility to both genocidal as well as self-destructive warfare. According to this analysis, this was caused by the periodic failure of the mechanism for political self-correction. In German South-West Africa, von Trotha was relieved of command and his orders rescinded only after the mass mortalities had already begun. Therefore, the genocide was less a result of racist ideology, and more due to military context. And perhaps racism — not in the sense of thinking in racial categories, but rather of racial hate — could frequently be less a cause and more a result of colonialism and colonial violence.18 Therefore, Hull shows not only that the significance of ideology in the context of unrestrained violence needs to be reconsidered once again, but also that the thesis of colonies being laboratories of violence is too simply depicted.19 Rather, colonial and metropolitan ideas became interwoven in the colonies, and Africa saw the perpetuation of military techniques which would first reappear in Europe during World War I.20 In addition, she highlights a fact that Boris Barth also emphasizes: that the


20 Similar argumentation from Dieter Langewiesche: "In view of the violence threatening the civilian population, in a war that dissolved the boundaries them and the battling troops, Europeans in the First World War were overtaken by their own history as well as by their contemporary practices outside Europe." "Esakierte die Kriegsgewalt im Laufe der Geschichte?", in: Jörg Baberowski, (ed.), Moderne Zeiten? Krieg, Revolution und Gewalt im 20. Jahrhundert, Göttingen, Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2006: 12-36 (29).
content of von Trotha's order was by no means unambiguous, and that he was effectuating it after the fact, when the killing and death by neglect were already long in progress. Precisely because the intention could not be clearly identified, and because the order could also be understood as a call for drastic ethnic cleansing, Barth categorizes the war against the Herero not as genocide, but rather as a counter insurgency action spun out of control. Colonial histories being full of such massive unleashings of violence, he sees the German war against the Herero as being within the range of similar counter-guerrilla actions conducted by other European imperial powers in their colonial wars. While Hull remains very reserved on the question of a continuity with the 'Third Reich', seeing a break in German military culture occurring in 1918, Barth declares that the empirical proof supporting a line of connection from colonialism to National Socialism is simply lacking.

Incidentally, this continuity thesis also brings up the old debate around the German Sonderweg ('unique path'), with its attendant inconsistencies. If one accepts the claim that the violence of German colonial rule was so much more intense than the British, French, or Belgian, then one would have to investigate where this special intensity came from. However, if German colonialism basically resembled that of the other imperial powers, then it pulls the rug out from under this claim of a specifically German path from Windhoek to Warsaw; then, either many paths led from Omdurman, Addis Ababa, and Luzon to the violent excesses of National Socialism, or none at all. Additionally, from the perspective of a history of violence, the nebulous discussion of 'connections', 'parallels', 'traditions', 'similarities', 'commonalities', and 'correspondences' is problematic. Defining traditions of violence — attitudes as well as practices — is a tremendously difficult undertaking. The thesis of colonial inspirational models and connections alleges a continuity of violence. This continuity would consist of a brutalization, in the sense of a dismantlement of inhibitions against violent behavior, outlasting the war against the Herero, and not only against Africans, but also against other 'races', particularly Jews and 'Slavs'. In other words: German warfare is alleged to have a specifically genocidal disposition, finding its beginning in the genocide of the Herero and its end in the Second World War. According to this, the German army attended an African school of violence. Aside from the question of whether Hull was right in casting doubt upon this basic premise, there is the further question of whether and how colonial attitudes and practices of violence influenced the memory of the military, as well as the training programs and world view of this institution. Did colonial mentalities come into play during World War I, breaking new ground in the battles of the Freikorps paramilitary groups, surviving in a mantle of civility until 1935, and then undergoing a

sanctioned revival with positive connotations in 1939/1941? And how could such a course of evolution be substantiated? In short: what are the mechanisms for transmitting experiences of violence? Supporters apparently assume an ideational, mental, or perhaps also praxeological nucleus that survives all transformations, adaptations, and transfers. But how can one articulate this core phenomenon with precision? Herein lies the theoretical and methodological challenge for this continuity thesis, which is immediately accompanied by a second challenge, namely: how this core, this genocidal disposition, could endure the shift of location from overseas to Europe. In short: how it not only endured through time, but also through space. Certainly some ideas and socializations can be successfully transferred over time and space, e.g. the British conception of sports, but does exterminatory violence belong in this category?

The present text cannot answer this question of the colonies as an alleged school of violence, or of the supposed mechanism for the transmission of violence; this would require a longue durée approach in the style of Isabell Hull’s study, as well as a more nuanced theory of violence. However, what the following will attempt to do is hone the repertory of terms that have been utilized — as well as those that have been avoided — in this continuity debate, thus laying the methodological-theoretical foundation for a colonial-historiographical analytical framework for the German occupation of Eastern Europe during World War II. This discussion is to be given a more solid foundation in two ways: the first part of my analysis concerns research efforts around the idea of continuity. In my opinion, the described analogy-building utilizes a kind of linguistic game that tries to connect two events, so that Event B 'somehow' results from Event A. In historical science, that generally means constructing a causal chain over time, i.e. continuities. This linguistic game has not only been used by today’s historians, but also by the contemporaries of the period. Therefore, the second step examines the question of whether and when the National Socialists themselves harked back to the classic age of colonialism in their occupation and governance of Eastern European regions. What functions did this act of evocation have, and what significance did it have for the exercise of power and its manifest forms of violence in the affected regions?

2. The problem of continuity

At the heart of historiography lies this question of how one should define historical continuity. A core problem of historical science is the question of how and how much the past flows into society’s present. Strangely enough, this idea of continuity has remained relatively unexamined until now. On the one hand, the term seems omnipresent, and is generally assumed to be self-evident. On the other hand, there is very little agreement as to what it actually means. "It functions like a wildcard or a covert agent whose applicability and authority remain unknown."23

In his recently published study, Thomas Schwietring attempts to address the theoretical deficit around this concept and argues against a rigid terminological definition. According to him, the smallest common denominator characterizing historiographical continuity is the stability of particular elements in the midst of a broader changing context. Correspondingly, Johann Gustav Droysen understands historical continuity neither as causality (an uninterrupted chain of events defined by its beginning), nor as finality (an evolutionary process defined by its end); instead, it is simply the open-ended flow of becoming. Alexander Gerschenkron concurs by saying that continuity indicates not a lack of change, but rather a particular characteristic of change. The idea of discontinuity would therefore be derived similarly from that of continuity. From this, Schwietring draws the conclusion that "the idea of continuity serves to help formulate the momentary solidification and stabilization of elements within historical reality, without denying its essentially dynamic and open-ended character."  

According to Schwietring, only if one accepts these many preconditions, and regards continuity under the presumption of a wide range of applicable potentialities, does it make sense to utilize this concept. Schwietring thereby emphasizes the open-endedness of history, which is co-written by later generations as they react or forget. However, it remains difficult to say what exactly is meant by the "solidification and stabilization of elements". If continuity is also to include phenomena such as misunderstanding and forgetting, while simultaneously emphasizing the subjective utilization of available potentialities by subsequent commentators, then Schwietring's theses stand in danger of becoming fuzzy, despite being admirably nuanced. For example, if Hitler actually saw in the "displacement of Native Americans by Europeans" a "model" for the occupation of Eastern Europe, did there exist a continuity between these two events, the extermination in America and Hitler's policies?  

And what would this continuity consist of? In his own thinking, the Führer framed himself as being within a universal and eternal urge to expand that was basic to humanity. He spoke of the Earth as a "contested trophy" which continuously passes into the "hands of the strongest". It may be that this tendency exists, but was it the decisive and causative factor for both the extermination of Native Americans as well as the murderous occupation policies in Eastern Europe? Does there exist a temporal connection between the two events which transcends this particular transfer — in the sense of a "partial identicalness" of constellations, goals and behaviors?

—


in the different periods.\textsuperscript{27} This narrowly delineated definition had been supported by Thomas Nipperdey.

Probably not. Since linear relationships and causal chains are rarely evident, especially over longer time periods and distances, a solution to the dilemma of continuity could be found in favoring the idea of transfer. The continuity thesis also implies this idea, when it claims that colonial experiences of violence have been transferred to other geographical and political contexts, in the process defining new target groups for violence. Favoring the idea of transfer would have two advantages: the flow of change, which is explicitly emphasized by supporters of the continuity thesis themselves, would be easier to integrate in this model. This is because transfers go through numerous stages of transmission and translation. When an idea is transferred, its start form is often quite different from its end form. According to Johannes Paulmann, transfer generally does not mean an "exact emulation of foreign ideas and institutions" but rather a "process of productive adaptation."\textsuperscript{28}

And the second advantage would be this: it makes it easier to show how societies themselves cultivate continuities, for example traditions. Zimmerer and others emphasize this impetus too, for example when they speak of colonialism as a "cultural reservoir" which was tapped into during the "Third Reich.\textsuperscript{29} Continuities develop their power as a kind of backwards projection for a subsequent society, such as when it uses them as a support for legitimating claims to power. That was likely the primary purpose of the aforementioned statement from Hitler, who was not particularly aware of the actual affairs of North and South America. The focus of this particular approach is not so much on the persistence of the past as on how historical happenings are perceived by later generations. An observation by Jörn Rüsen refers to this level of reception. Referring to the constructive character of historical science, he defines the narrative construction of continuity as a form of \textit{Kontingenzbewältigung} ("coping with contingency") by which the historical consciousness presumes durability under changing conditions and thereby manufactures a historified identity.\textsuperscript{30} Dietmar Rothermund presents a similar argument: "The shortage to date of convincing theories of historical change can be traced back to the dominance of \textit{Kontingenzbewältigung} and discontinuity denial."\textsuperscript{31}

However, this discussion of transfers or continuities becomes complicated by two observations by Reinhart Koselleck, namely that history is not a linear timeline, but

\begin{itemize}
\item Zimmerer, "Rassenkrieg": 48.
\end{itemize}
instead is ‘stratified’, and that one is never confronted with just one context, but with many contexts evolving in parallel.\textsuperscript{32} According to his model, there exist experiences which become universalized through communication in groups, and which thereby mould them into communities. However, to keep these experiences meaningful in the present moment, they must be integrated into contemporary social practices, into texts which are read and interpreted, into rituals, traditions, etc. Against the background of this interpretive framework, meanings are given in turn to current experiences, which then help determine collective behavior. According to Koselleck, each particular moment has not just one past, but rather a simultaneity and multiplicity of pasts. In his \textit{Zeitschichten} ("time strata") model, Reinhart Koselleck thereby emphasizes two impetuses: on the one hand, the transmission of tradition, and on the other hand, the parallel character of history. Therefore, the question would be whether and how colonial experiences, be they violent or otherwise, become integrated into later practices of any type, thereby guiding the interpretation of the present. Beyond that, the relevant parallel contexts would also have to be analyzed. On the question of relationships between colonial and National Socialist histories of violence, at least five contemporaneous contexts of experience and interpretation would seem to me significant:

1. colonialism, from German or European colonial rule up until the African agendas of the National Socialists;

2. the Eastern Europe discourse, from the German Empire to the First World War to the war of extermination against the Soviet Union;

3. the radicalization of modern antisemitism into an ‘Erösungsantisemitismus’ (Saul Friedländer’s ‘redemptive antisemitism’), which declared the Jews to be the dangerous—ubiquitous enemy race which had declared war against the ‘Aryans’, who must now take it up;

4. the development of military and paramilitary warfare between 1884 and 1945, which was perfected in the course of totalization and industrialization during World War II, and tended towards genocidal campaigns on the German side as of 1941;

5. the ‘German question’, or the search for ways to unite a religiously and socially divided, ethnically diverse people, to hold together the worldwide German diaspora, and to create a secure position for the German nation in a world of empires.

All these topics were marked by \textit{Wiederholungsstrukturen} (Reinhart Koselleck’s ‘repetition structures’), which were constantly being disrupted by the insertion of new experiences, developments and events, as well as internal dynamics. The ways in which continuities were supported not only structurally, but also mentally, have probably been least researched for topics 1 and 4 until now. However, even less research has been applied to the question of transfers and/or relationships between these strands.\textsuperscript{33} Did


\textsuperscript{33} On the connection between antisemitism and colonial racism cf. Birte Kundrus, “Von Windhoek nach Nürnberg? Koloniale ·Mischehenverbote· und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung”, in: idem,
these processes run not only in parallel, but also with interconnections in development and content? For example, were the völkisch dreams of the 'German East' around 1900 also a response to the frustrating real-world results of German colonial efforts? Or was the underlying colonial dream, as suggested by Ther as well as David Blackbourn, always about Eastern Europe? In this case, one would still need to explain how colonialism and German 'aspirations' towards Eastern Europe influenced each other, and where they did not — and where something new emerged. And crucial to the present topic, which cuts across not only time, but also space: did the National Socialists in any way refer back to the colonial methods of ruling — also in terms of the previously mentioned legitimation of their regime?

3. Colonial responses

At least some of the existing research uses a colonial-historical analytical framework to describe the goals and practices which characterized National Socialist occupation policies in Poland and the USSR. The expansion of the empire, the settlement of Germans from Eastern Europe, and the establishment of racist privileges for the dominant class were alleged to be comparable to the structures of the former German colonial settlements of German South-West Africa. Especially among authors from the USA, there is an increasing tendency towards attaching the 'colonial' label to the goals and practices which characterized National Socialist occupation policies in Poland and the USSR. In Germany too, several scholars studying National Socialism have used the colonialism concept to create correlations, as Dlemut Majer has done. She states that


(37) For example Wendy Lower, Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine, Chapell Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Lower uses the term as more a label and less an analytical instrument, remaining ambivalent towards it. Although on p. 11 she speaks of a "colonial-style occupation system", on p. 27-29 she also underlines the differences, especially compared to the colonial system of rule in India. David Bruce Furber takes it farther in Going East: Colonialism and German Life in Nazi-Occupied Poland, Diss., University of Buffalo, 2003, his unpublished dissertation. Furber states that the characteristics of colonial rule, particularly of the phase of high imperialism, can also be identified in the German occupation of Poland. These are seen less as continuities and more as parallels in the expansion into foreign territories. The results of this approach are highly instructive. However, because Furber avoids making statements about the causes, specificities, and ruptures between the two forms of foreign rule, he declines the methodological-theoretical challenge of elucidating his thesis of manifold analogies.
colonial, and by that she especially means racist, thought processes and terminologies had been applied to the Kulturvölker ("cultured peoples") of Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Poles, Czechs and Russians. Unfortunately, questions about the significance of these colonial analogies, and what they reveal about colonialism and National Socialism, fade into the background of these studies. A good way to begin addressing these questions would be to identify the circumstances in which National Socialist actors themselves talked about European and German colonial rule, placing themselves in this line of tradition. What function was played by the building of such analogies? In the following, some preliminary answers will be brought forward for discussion by way of three rather unsystematically chosen examples. Examples from Hitler’s conceptual worldview will play a large role, since he was the central leader and the supporting documentation is extremely good, such as in the Monologe im Führerhauptquartier ("monologues from the Führer’s headquarters") recorded by Heinrich Himmler, as well as in Hitler’s Mein Kampf, and his final Testament which was transcribed by Martin Bormann. Due to lacking research, it would be difficult to say whether his ideas could be taken pars pro toto for those of other Nazi policy-makers, but that remains for now beside the point. First, a field of inquiry needs to be marked out, concerning how much significance colonial precedents may have had for National Socialism.

1. In its own colonial agendas, especially in regards to Africa, the Nazi leadership postulated a close connection to Germany’s lost colonial empire. Since the end of the 1920s, and especially with the coming to power of the National Socialist Party and its global geopolitical ambitions, colonial revisionism seemed to find its second wind. The rapid rise of the ‘Third Reich’ provoked an almost feverish sense of anticipation among many. For example, the businessman Otto Schloffer, who had once been active in East Africa, opined in 1939: “Having given us military supremacy, the re militarization of the Rhineland, and the Greater German Empire, I confidently believe that the Führer will also bring us back the colonies.” In this regard the continuities primarily existed in the personnel, the most prominent example probably being that of Franz Ritter von Epp, who climbed the ranks as an officer in China, German South-West Africa, and in the Ruhr Freikorps, before becoming head of the Nazi Party’s Kolonialpolitisches Amt (‘colonial policy office’). It was also in terms of content that these ambitions found their roots in

---


40 Cf. in van Laak, Infrastruktur: 292.
the colonial antecedents of the German Empire and the colonial revisionism of the Weimar Republic, although the core of this new German colonial empire was planned to be the Belgian Congo. However, the times were also moving on, along with more than a few of the Nazi colonial planners, especially those of the Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut ("institute for manpower studies"), as shown by Karsten Linne's research. Naked robber economies had become just as obsolete as the use of unrestrained violence against Africans. In the face of a predicted labor shortage, the 'colonial labor question' had to be solved with a sensitivity towards social welfare; in addition, segregation had to be more strictly enforced, to solve the 'miserogenation problem' once and for all. Behind all this stood a desire to 'prove' something to the old colonial powers, and to do it better than them, England in particular. These wide-ranging, scattered, social-imperialist plans referred back primarily to the previous experiences of the German Empire; however, in these plans, one can also clearly see how various time strata, experiences, and epochs became amalgamated.

In the real world, the 'Drang nach Osten' ('drive towards the East') proved to be much stronger. This prioritization was often justified with precisely the idea that old-fashioned colonialism had been a wrong turn that the 'Third Reich' would not repeat. Early on, even before seizing power, Hitler spoke out against colonial plans to regain a foothold in Africa. He stood by this during the war too: "Colonial policies can be pursued after one has Europe", said Hitler on 18 October 1941 at his Führerheadquarters. Two months earlier, during a short visit to the recently occupied Ukraine, he was even more articulate: "What India was for England, the Eastern Territory will be for us. If only I could show the German nation what this territory means for the future! Colonies are a questionable asset; this soil is safely ours." In accordance with this low prioritization, the evolving war plans considered making an offer to England that Germany abstain from colonies and navy-building, in return for guaranteed impunity for Germany in Eastern Europe. In his so-called political testament of February 1945, Hitler even declared all the colonial ventures of Spain, France and England to be failures. Continental peoples should only expand into regions "where the geographical connection to the motherland is secure". This belief in being 'rooted in the land' went so far that Hitler rhetorically sided with the colonized peoples, for example when he regretted not having helped "overseas peoples under French protectorates towards independence". He viewed the German Empire's colonial ambitions to be a historical

41 Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf, München, Eher, 1930: 742.
43 Hitler, Monologe, 8–11 Aug 1941: 55.
45 Similarly also Werner Best, "Grundlagen einer deutschen Großraum-Verwaltung", in: Festgabe für Heinrich Himmler, Darmstadt, Wittich, 1941: 33–60 (44, 51).
"dalliance" that fortunately ended in 1918.\textsuperscript{46} Therefore, the extensive preparations for the coming colonial empire remained on the drawing board. Although classical colonialism did undergo another powerful surge under National Socialism, serious efforts to regain the colonies were not initiated. Even more: in setting a course towards Eastern Europe, the leadership placed itself in an emphatic discontinuity with classical colonialism. 'Lebensraum im Osten' ('living space in the East') clearly meant something different, more specific and more important than 'colonial supplementary territory'.

2. The National Socialists adopted the internationally widespread expression 'concentration camp' to describe encampments in which they imprisoned their opponents.\textsuperscript{47} This instrument for discipline and maintaining authority, tested in places like Cuba, the Philippines, the Transvaal and German South-West Africa, originally signified a large accommodation for the "internment of civilians during wartime."\textsuperscript{48} As an extralegal space predominantly for the imprisonment of civilians, whose labor was exploited and who were subject to political and personal caprice, these camps did in fact exhibit some commonalities with the structure and everyday operations of a Nazi concentration camp.\textsuperscript{49} However, there also existed significant differences in function. The Nazi camps were at first oriented towards their own domestic population, in accordance with the National Socialist idea of Völkischer Kampf ('Volk-oriented struggle') which also pointed inwards. Here, internment was not for locking up convicted criminals like in prisons, or for holding captured enemy civilians and soldiers like in wartime, but was instead a preventative policing measure. It was only after the beginning of the war that the majority of inmates were drawn from subjugated peoples, with the proportion of German prisoners dropping to 5–10\%. Two further distinctive features should be briefly mentioned: the concentration camp system represented a significant element of population management in which the incarceration of the socially or otherwise undesirable was to contribute to a national renewal. Ultimately, in the case of National Socialism, one needs to distinguish between the extermination camps, in which mass murder took place according to plan, and the other concentration camps, in which the people mostly died of hunger, beatings, and diseases brought on by unhygienic conditions. However, Karin Orth has shown that the mass mortalities of these camps did


\textsuperscript{49} Brumlik, "Jahrhundert".
not begin until 1944, and were then a consequence of SS disorganization.\textsuperscript{50} This does in fact find a parallel in the camps of Namibia, where the high death rate probably resulted from, first and foremost, poor planning and organizational overload.

3. Both the German occupiers as well as the Polish and Soviet subjected populations frequently characterized the situation on the ground as being 'colonial'. The Eastern European societies were thereby expressing their experience of what it meant to be the raw materials of imperialist politics. In contrast, for the National Socialists using this rhetoric was about the legitimation of their rule, as well as finding orientation. Hitler himself frequently compared the 'Slavic peoples' with 'natives' who must be denied education due to their revolutionary potential, whose only purpose was to labor, but for whom life would be better than under Stalin. This settler society was to be founded upon a racist privilege in which "the lowest stable boy [...] [must] rank higher than any of the natives" outside the German settlement centers.\textsuperscript{51} "Then begins the other world, in which we intend to let the Russians live as they wish. Just that we dominate them."\textsuperscript{52} Especially in the case of the Ukraine, which was seen primarily as a zone of exploitation of raw materials, popular imperialist archetypes such as the image of the wily colonist fed into the fantasies of the Führer: "To the Ukrainians we will give headscarves, glass beads, and whatever else pleases colonized peoples."\textsuperscript{53} The Ukrainian guard details of the SS and Polizei commanders in the district of Lublin were also sometimes called 'Askaris' by the SS, alluding to the native troops employed in German East Africa.\textsuperscript{54} Regional officials of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories received recommended reading lists including such titles as Kurt Freber's \textit{With a Backpack to India}, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck's \textit{On Fatherland and Colony}, as well as Paul H. Schultz-Kampfenkel’s \textit{In the African Jungle as Trapper and Hunter}.\textsuperscript{55} In the Cultural Department of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine in April 1942, it was said that here, "to be frank", one is "clearly among \textit{Neger} ('niggers')."\textsuperscript{56} As early as September 1940, the Reich


\textsuperscript{51} Hitler, \textit{Monologe}, 17 September 1941: 63; cf. also ibid., 3 March 1945: 311.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 8–11 Aug 1941: 55.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 17 Sep 1941: 63.


\textsuperscript{55} Lower, \textit{Nazi Empire-Building}: 26.

\textsuperscript{56} Cit. in Majer, "Osteuropa": 126. Cf. also Lower, \textit{Nazi Empire-Building}: 109. "Neger" also refers back to the plantation society of the American South. This reference to the "race question" of the United States was incidentally intended to counter international accusations that the Nazi government promulgated unacceptable racial policies. Cf. Johnpeter Horst Grill, Robert L. Jenkins, "The Nazi and the American South in the 1930s. A Mirror Image?", \textit{The Journal of Southern History}, 58, 1992, Nr. 4: 667-694.
Chancellery remarked that the political leadership would handle the Poles like the "natives of a colony".57 In May 1940, the Governor of the Generalgouvernement Hans Frank stated that "it goes without saying that the jurisdiction of the Poles must be likened to that of natives in other parts of the world".58 In 1939, a German soldier asserted that the heavy resistance encountered in Polish cities was characteristic of "savage peoples", and compared his experiences with those of armies in colonies which similarly had to battle against "savages".59 The president of the Reichsschrifttums-

 kammer ("Reich writer's union"), poet Hanns Johst, who went with his "beloved Heinrich Himmler" to inspect the status of the deportations and resettlement actions in occupied Poland, remarked:

The Poles are not a nation-building people. [...] A land that has so little sense for settlement-building, so that it does not even suffice for the style of a village, has no right to any kind of independent sovereignty in the European sphere. It is a colonial land.60

On the one hand, one could see these testimonies as the building of traditions, in the manner of Koselleck. On the other hand, the last quotation makes it particularly clear that, like in all of these reframings and attempts at orientation (to find out where the Germans have disembarked), the colonial rhetoric was more than just a projection of Poland within the imperialist framework of the nineteenth century. Johst was equally making reference to Poland's not existing at all as a state for nearly 130 years, namely after the partition of Poland from the end of the eighteenth century until the end of the First World War. By the same token, he was also speaking indirectly of the German Ostsee ("settlement in the East") of the Middle Ages, which once encompassed this region too, but of which, sadly, nothing more was to be seen.61

It was not just that the disparate historical phenomena of colonization and colonialism were being blended together.62 Much supports an interpretation that this tapping into the inventory of colonial concepts and traditions was not so much a direct takeover of colonial thought patterns, modes of governance, or (as especially emphasized by Koselleck) experiences. Rather, it is better understood as a search for inspirational sources, and above all as a declaration of the ambition to rule over Eastern Europe.63 Evidently there was a conceptual gap when it came to defining the character of all these new territories: the Generalgouvernement and the various Generalkommissariate.

57 Cit. in Majer, "Osteuropa": 125.
58 Cit. in ibid.: 127.
61 Cf. also Lower, Nazi Empire-Building: 204.
62 Cf. also Furber, Going East: 23.
63 Cf. Hull, Destruction: 331, for similar analogy-building in the First World War.
Nazi elites, as well as the men and women on the ground, then borrowed especially from historical models: ancient Sparta ("slave or helot peoples"), the antebellum American South, the Middle Ages German Ostkolonisation ("colonization of the East"), and in addition to German and British colonialism.

Summary

Summarized in brief: new insights can be brought to light by differentiating between continuities (in the narrower sense of causal chains), transfers, and situationally contingent parallels. The most obvious continuities are probably to be found in the explicitly colonial plans for Africa. The occupation authorities also tried to utilize the reservoir of colonial experiences and institutions in their efforts towards the economic exploitation of Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, it still holds true: there is no continuity without modification. The twenty years between the First and Second World Wars were not simply leapfrogged. Research that explicitly applies Koselleck’s time-strata model to the colonial plans of the ‘Third Reich’ would likely reveal evidence that supports this stratification very well.

In attempting to adequately assess the repercussions of colonialism, these continuities (in the narrower sense of causal chains) appear to be less significant than the subjective tradition-building efforts of the National Socialists. The three offered examples show that ideas of German and British colonial rule were always received in particular ways which allowed them to be adapted to Nazi plans and practices, thereby undergoing further development and modifications. In the intertemporal transfer of colonial ideas to nonclassical colonial contexts it becomes especially clear that these ideas were accompanied by a shift in meaning, if not a complete reconfiguration. Here, colonial traditions were professed, i.e. colonial terminology was cited, while largely being standing divorced from their original context, as evidenced by the apparently unconsidered adoption of the term ‘concentration camp’. One gets the impression that these comments were not particularly informed by a concrete knowledge of colonial structures and practices, but rather that they spoke mostly of ideals and fantasies. The act of reception is a creative process — rarely straightforward, always fickle, quite idiosyncratic and full of fantasy. Harking back to colonial archetypes helped to provide orientation in an alien, unfamiliar and insecure situation, reducing the complexities to a compact formula while always legitimizing the position of the Germans. From this, one can surmise that the implementation of colonial traditions — also in the garb of the Ostkolonisation of the Middle Ages — contributed to the dynamics of German rule in Eastern Europe — especially in its violent expressions. However, one should remember that the goal of historical retrospection was not just about constructing lines of

64 Cf. also Christoph Marx, Geschichte Afrikas. Von 1800 bis zur Gegenwart, Paderborn et. al, Schöningh, 2004: 121.
connection, but also about capping these same lines. Just as the Prussian Ostsiedlung before World War I was regarded as a valuable lesson in how not to do things, the real-world imperialist efforts of the German Empire were interpreted as a wrong turn. Beyond continuities and transfers exists the question of whether there exists a set of rituals, behaviors, and conceptual frameworks which can always be implemented in actual expansions, allowing the conqueror to set himself up as ‘master’ and correspondingly creating the ‘subject’. An example would be the border zones produced by expanding empires, the frontiers, in which a high level of violence frequently develops, not the least because of violent fantasies. In this case, some of these ‘colonizations’ would be less about German continuities or conscious transfers and more about situationally contingent parallels which would also be identifiable for other nations and contexts of expansion.

Nonetheless, beyond these connections, one should not underplay the specific situation of the period, and must analyze the “interactions between the imagined and the existent” (Stefan Troebst) in occupied Eastern Europe, also in relation to all the other mentioned strands of tradition, be it antisemitism, the discourse around Eastern Europe, or the development of warfare. It is only through this differentiation and contextualization that it will be possible to exploit the potential presented by a colonial-historical interpretive framework in analyzing the Nazi rule of violence, and thereby lift the ambiguities of the previous contributions to this debate.

Bibliography


65 For example, in February 1938 at the Reich training course for Gau administrators in the Nazi teacher’s union there was a resolution to stop speaking of “East German colonization” but rather of “East German land development”, “reclamation”, and “resettlement”, in order to dissociate themselves from the “coarse propaganda” of German colonial enthusiasts. Rudolf Walther, “Imperialismus”, in: Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, (eds.), Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, vol. 3, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1982: 171-236 (231).


68 This is probably also the approach of Furber, Going East.


Furber, David Bruce, Going East. Colonialism and German Life in Nazi-Occupied Poland, unpubl. Diss., University of Buffalo, 2003.


Hitler, Adolf, Mein Kampf, München, Eher, 1930.


