

A Nation Forged by Empire: The Hidden Legacy of German Colonialism

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Abstract: The European colonial empires have long since ceased to exist. Yet, we continue to grapple with the complex legacy they have left behind (Mbembe 2001; Stoler 2016). Drawing on a wide range of primary sources from various European and African archives, this paper explores the vestiges of German colonialism, arguing that Germany’s overseas empire in Africa, the Pacific, and China (ca. 1884–1919) was an important factor in the formation of the German nation-state. The colonies, or protectorates (*Schutzgebiete*), as they were officially called, shaped the development of the metropole’s political system by strengthening the power of the federal government and helping to solidify German national identity (in the sense of Smith 1986; 1991; cf. Brubaker 2004). As a corollary to this, German colonialism weakened the country’s pronounced federalism, which was rooted in longstanding regional allegiances (Weichlein 2004; Langewiesche 2020), and fueled state centralization, thus bringing national identity into sharper focus. After losing its protectorates and most of its imperial border regions in Europe as a result of World War I, Germany retained a sense of historical continuity largely on account of the developments the colonies had helped to spur. The overseas empire had vanished, but its structural effects lived on, veiled in the form of the nation.

Outline of the Argument: In recent years, Germany’s colonial past has reemerged as a contentious issue. Public and scholarly debates on the subject were already widespread in the 1960s and ’70s (Albrecht 2008; Bürger 2017; Schilling 2014), but over the past decade the topic has gained political salience that makes it increasingly difficult to ignore. Germany’s process of “coming to terms with its past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) is expanding beyond the well-established practice of remembering the victims of National Socialism and East German Communism (Olick 2016; Sälter 2020; cf. Neiman 2019) to include a public reckoning with German colonialism (Conrad 2021). Much of the debate has centered on atrocities committed by German troops during the Herero and Nama War (1904–1907) in colonial Namibia. But more recently, heated exchanges during the run-up to the 2021 opening of the Berlin Humboldt Forum has focused national attention on the issues of restoring looted art and confronting Germany’s past colonialist entanglements (Morat 2019; see also President Steinmeier’s speech at the opening ceremony). Some scholars and public intellectuals have argued that institutional miscalculations and missteps related to both matters demonstrate once more how deeply ingrained within mainstream society the colonial gaze remains (Terkessidis 2019; Grill 2019; a similar point was already made by Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop 1998). The German colonial empire may be a thing of the past, but true decolonization has yet to happen.

A few prominent scholars have put colonialism even more firmly front and center in discussions about Germany’s past by tracing a direct line from the German overseas empire to the Third Reich. Jürgen Zimmerer (2011), a leading proponent of this position, regards the Nazi empire’s

expansion into Central and Eastern Europe, in particular the *Generalplan Ost* (ca. 1940–1942), as a continuation of policies first developed in colonial Namibia, Germany’s only settler colony. In a similar vein, albeit with greater breadth, Shelley Baranowski (2011) makes the case that the Nazis’ imperial ambitions had their historical roots in Germany’s nineteenth-century expansionism in Europe and overseas. The idea that the Third Reich adopted strategies and tactics that can be traced back to colonial Africa was, by this point, not entirely novel. In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, written against the backdrop of World War II, Hannah Arendt had made a similar claim, as part of a broader discussion that went beyond Germany. Among the various origins of totalitarian rule, Arendt singled out colonial racism and the propensity of the European powers to govern their colonies by decree, rather than by the rule of law (Arendt 1973 [1951], chaps. 5–6).

Although the positions outlined above differ considerably in their details, they share a common feature: they look for colonial legacies primarily in the various forms of empire and racism that emerged after Germany lost its protectorates. While this approach certainly captures an important aspect of colonialism’s complex afterlife, I propose a shift in perspective aimed at expanding our understanding of the structural aftereffects of the European overseas empires. Not only did they leave behind vestiges of empire and racism that remain visible today, but they also played a significant role in the formation of modern national states in Europe (Burbank, Cooper 2010, chap. 8; cf. Go 2016, chap. 3). This legacy of European colonialism is typically overlooked (e.g., Wimmer, Feinstein 2010), since it masquerades as the polar opposite of empire, namely the nation-state. Yet it was this legacy, I argue, that created historical continuity after Germany forfeited most of its imperial territories (both in Europe and overseas) in the wake of World War I. This is not to say that the German nation was thus “complete” (as if questions of national identity could ever be settled) or to disregard the role imperial policies would play in the decades to come. But I do want to underline that the German nation-state, which outlasted the dismantling of its overseas empire, was in a sense co-created by it.

Making sense of this paradox—the nation as the child of empire—requires moving beyond the received wisdom in political theory that opposes empires to nations. Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1983), for example, regard the two political forms as inherently incompatible. While empires are political formations with a pronounced core-periphery structure and shifting frontiers, creating a system of unequal integration and layered sovereignty, nation-states—or so they argue—strive to create homogenous political communities with fixed, clear-cut borders, based on notions of civic equality and indivisible sovereignty. The principle of national self-determination, instituted following World War I, was compatible with identities grounded in nation-states, but apparently not with imperial rule (Manela 2007; Fisch 2015). On this view, empires and nations represent two competing modes of organizing political communities that are, by and large, mutually exclusive.

Upon closer inspection, however, the relationship between empires and nations reveals itself to be more intricate and nuanced. Contradicting the narrative of a natural progression “from empire

to nation” (Emerson 1960), recent scholarship has argued that the two political forms are intimately linked and mutually reinforcing (Mazower 2009; Kumar 2010; Breuilly 2017; Fradera 2018; Getachew 2019). This assertion also holds true for modern Germany (Dickinson 2008; Conrad 2010; Berger 2015; Hewitson 2018; Grimmer-Solem 2019). The unification of German lands under Prussian leadership already had pronounced imperial features: Not only did Prussia manage to oust its rival power Austria in the process, it also dominated the other constituent states within the German Reich. In addition, national unification entailed territorial expansion, as the rise of Prussia had a century before (Ther 2004). When the German Reich came into existence in 1871, roughly 10 percent of its population, or four million people in total, belonged to ethnic minorities, most of whom were German citizens.

Soon after unification, Germany embarked on a program of overseas expansion, adding another layer of empire, notwithstanding Bismarck’s initial reluctance and persistent wariness (Wehler 1969; Smith 1978; Conrad 2012). True, the German colonial empire was short-lived, lasting barely thirty years, but it quickly managed to establish itself as the third-largest overseas empire in the decades around 1900, exhibiting a high degree of internal diversity (Steinmetz 2007). No less importantly, it left a complex, lasting legacy, as the recent and heated “German catechism” debate that renegotiated the place of colonialism in Germany’s remembrance culture has once more demonstrated (Moses 2021; Habermas 2021). While for people in the former colonies, the German overseas empire is an integral part of their national history, the reverse is not the case. Nonetheless, the German nation is, in a certain sense, a child of its empire in Africa, the Pacific, and China. The colonies helped transform the loosely integrated German federal state under Prussian hegemony into an increasingly centralized system of government with a pronounced collective identity, complementing the deep-rooted regional allegiances (cf. Applegate 1990; Confino 1997; Green 2001). In particular, the colonial empire had the following effects on the political system of its metropole:

- expanding the constitutional powers of the emperor and thereby helping to transform the office from that of a Prussian king presiding over the Reich as *primus inter pares* to a full-fledged imperial monarch reigning over the other German princes (Haardt 2020: chap. 4);
- bolstering the position of the chancellor, who managed the colonial government and bore political responsibility for the overseas territories;
- contributing to the rise of the Reichstag, which proved itself quite adept at generating political capital out of the various colonial scandals and the protectorates’ notorious lack of funds, giving it increasing influence on foreign policy despite having few constitutional powers (e.g., Habermas 2016: chap. 1);
- stimulating the Foreign Office’s organizational growth, resulting in the establishment of a new central authority, the *Reichskolonialamt*, in 1907;
- fueling and justifying the massive expansion of the Imperial German Navy, making Germany the world’s largest maritime power after Britain in the years leading up to World War I;

- prompting the creation of a nationality law based on biological descent in 1913, as under the old citizenship act of 1870, § 21, German nationals who lived in the colonies for more than ten consecutive years lost their citizenship, hampering the politically desirable settlement of Germans in the country's overseas territories;
- stimulating the foundation of voluntary associations—such as the German Colonial Society and the Pan-German League—that crossed regional divides and framed their purpose in terms of a national mission;
- stoking national sentiments in political discourse and the media—for example, by providing a justification for an expansive *Weltpolitik* or becoming the object of revisionist claims after the loss of empire (Ciarlo 2011; Wempe 2019).

Besides a rapidly growing body of scholarship, my paper—which is based on my research for a book project investigating the colonial legacies of German colonialism—draws on the following sources: files from various state and colonial authorities (e.g., the German and British foreign offices, the governor's offices in Southwest and East Africa); parliamentary proceedings, laws, and regulations, along with interpretations of those laws by legal scholars of the era; press articles; and popular colonial literature. I also draw on documents written by individuals confronted with the impositions and paradoxes of German colonial rule. For example, the journals of the Nama captain Hendrik Witbooi (1996 [1884–1905]) contain accounts of campaigns, alongside minutes of meetings with German officials and correspondence with other African leaders, providing rich insights into “subaltern agency” (Guha 1999) and strategies of colonial “state evasion” (Scott 2009). Certainly, these sources have their inherent biases, omissions, and other flaws. Taken together, however, they allow us to draw tentative conclusions about how the colonies influenced Germany's formation as a modern nation.

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