

GERMAN IMPERIAL BIOGRAPHIES: SOLDIERS, SCIENTISTS, AND OFFICIALS AND THE “ARENDR THESIS“

Workshop at the GHI, May 4, 2006. Co-sponsored by the GHI, the Center for German and European Studies and the Arsham and Charlotte Ohanessian Chair in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, and the Joint Initiative in German and European Studies/DAAD at the University of Toronto. Conveners: Karen Oslund (GHI), Eric D. Weitz (University of Minnesota), Jürgen Zimmerer (University of Sheffield).

Participants: Andreas Eckert (University of Hamburg), Malte Fuhrmann (Oriental Institute, Berlin), David Furber (Cornell University), Christian Geulen (University of Koblenz), Jennifer Jenkins (University of Toronto), Robert Nelson (University of Windsor), Lenny Urena (University of Michigan), Todd Weir (University of Washington).

This one-day workshop was designed to test the “Arendt Thesis,” Hannah Arendt’s argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that the roots of European racism at home, culminating in the Holocaust, as well as totalitarianism lay in the establishment of colonial empires abroad. In imperialism, Arendt argued, Europeans learned that they could exercise total and arbitrary powers over subject peoples, a model they then brought back to Europe. While Arendt’s thesis is often repeated in the scholarship in many disciplines, the workshop offered the opportunity to test her argument with far greater empirical acuity than is usual.

Jürgen Zimmerer delivered the keynote address to the workshop participants, who were joined by many of those who had come to the GHI for a related conference on “Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and the Environment” that began the next day. Zimmerer argued for the critical importance of the German colonial experience to the larger course of modern German history. That approach has made increasing headway in contemporary scholarship, Zimmerer argued, and challenges both the liberal notion of the incomparability of the Holocaust and the conservative, celebratory perspective on German national history. Zimmerer made the case for seeing Africa, especially the genocide of the Herero and Nama, and Auschwitz as two poles of German history in the twentieth century. He noted distinct similarities in German policies in both areas, especially in the resort to massive violence against populations deemed dangerous. The taboos against such violence had already been broken in Africa, which made their reenactment within Europe against Jews and

others so much easier. The Nazis and others drew on a colonial “archive,” a repertoire of ideas and practices of domination. Seeing the links between the two areas and the two time periods helps place German history in a transnational framework, he concluded.

Zimmerer’s talk inspired active discussion, with many participants raising issues concerning the comparability between Germany and other European colonial powers, the larger realm of imperialism (not just colonialism), and the problem of a new *Sonderweg*. These issues kept returning in the discussions of other papers. David Furber’s presentation, “Tenuous Connections: The First and Second German Empire,” noted that in contrast to the British and French empires, there was little of a German “civilizing mission.” The Nazis’ drive for a colonial empire defined by total domination, rather than “civilizing,” links the two German imperialisms in Africa and Eastern Europe. Christian Geulen’s contribution, “African Screen: Carl Peters and the Colonial Culture in Weimar and Nazi Germany,” explored the creation of the Peters legend as a mechanism for the transmission of colonial ideas and practices. Like Furber, Geulen argued for a critical connection between the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich, in his case by the way the colonial past was remembered, especially in the Weimar years.

Malte Fuhrmann and Jennifer Jenkins each provided biographies of an individual who proved central to the propagation of Orientalist ideas concerning, respectively, the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Fuhrmann’s paper, “From the Orient Colony to the Home Front against Democracy: The Career of Hans Humann, a Modern Imperialist Activist,” focused on an avid Turkophile and promoter of the German-Turkish alliance in World War I. Humann supported the Young Turks’ deportation and extermination of the Armenians and provided one of the links between extreme population politics in the larger imperial realm and Nazi policies in Europe. Jenkins’ paper, “Excavating Zarathustra: Orientalism, Nationalism and Ernst Herzfeld’s *Archaeological History of Iran*,” explored the peripatetic career of a German Orientalist who helped provide the scholarly basis for modern Iranian nationalism while also supporting German imperial expansion in Iran. Many German Persianists searched for Aryan origins and became closely allied with the Nazis. Herzfeld, in contrast, provided a richer, more complex narrative of the past.

Robert Nelson in “A German in the Prairies: Max Sering, Imperialism, and Inner Colonization” explored the work of another imperialist, the scholar and activist Max Sering. Associated with the Verein für Sozialpolitik and inspired in part by his travels in (of all places) the Canadian West, Sering looked to German settlement in the East as a way to resolve the tensions and congestion of urban industrial life. Sering’s notion of “empty space” was a trope that appeared in virtually all colonial

settings, including Nazi domination of central and eastern Europe. Lenny Urena in "Intimacies of Empire: Epidemics, Racial Hygiene, and the Works of Cocky Physicians in the Prussian-Polish Provinces, 1890–1905" explored the tropes of health and disease in German attitudes and policies toward Poles. The technologies of modern medicine were used to assert German domination over Poles, Urena argued, a practice that demonstrates similarities between the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich. Todd Weir explored the unlikely case of the Independent Social Democrat Ernst Däumig, who joined quite a number of other Germans to serve in the French Foreign Legion. Although Däumig would undergo a series of political "conversions," he actively supported the "civilizing mission" of colonialism. Finally, Eric Weitz, in "Race, Imperialism, and Genocides: The German Imperial Realm, 1890–1945," presented a possible research project designed first to track the subsequent careers of German officers and officials who served in Southwest Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and second, to explore the institutional settings for the transmission of ideas and practices in the officer corps and the Foreign Office for the "handling" of "troublesome" populations. While expressing some agreement with the Arendt Thesis, Weitz also argued that there is, as yet, little empirical evidence to support a strong causal argument that links German imperialism abroad and the Holocaust at home.

Andreas Eckert provided an excellent wrap-up of the day's proceedings. He appreciated, he said, the wide array of geographic areas that came under consideration and the prevailing understanding—in contrast to much of the public and scholarly discussion in Germany—that the imperial experience was critical to Germany's development in the modern period. Discussions of and research on the Holocaust, in particular, are still reluctant to adopt a broader, transnational perspective that takes into account Germany's imperial past. Eckert noted that "Imperial Biographies" marked the first time that there had been such an extensive discussion of the links between German practices abroad and German history in Europe. He and others remarked on the importance of publishing the papers so a wider audience would have access to the discussion.

Eric D. Weitz