Introduction

In her controversial report from Jerusalem on the 1961 trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, the German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt struggled to define the significance of the Nazi regime's attempt to exterminate the Jews. She was certain of the defendant's guilt and the appropriateness of the death sentence imposed on him. Against widespread international criticism of Israel's kidnapping of Eichmann in Argentina to bring him to justice, she defended the right of the Israeli court to try him. Nevertheless, Arendt resisted the court's claim that the "final solution" amounted to the culmination of centuries of antisemitism. Instead she believed that the Judeocide was a "new crime, the crime against humanity – in the sense of a crime 'against the human status,' or against the very nature of mankind." Genocide, she continued, "is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the 'human status' without which the very words 'mankind' or 'humanity' would be devoid of meaning." As "a crime against humanity," the Nazi effort to make the Jews "disappear from the face of the earth" was indeed "perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people." Yet, "Only the choice of victims," she said, and "not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism."[1]

This insight from the Eichmann trial has drawn less attention over the years than Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as a bland careerist and her biting criticism of Jewish leaders in occupied Europe, who in her

[1] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised and enlarged ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984), 268–9.

view, contributed to their own destruction.[2] Historians of Germany have rediscovered Arendt of late, but they have focused on her sprawling and problematic work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to apply her insights regarding the contributions of European imperialism to the emergence of totalitarian regimes in Europe after World War I and the Nazi genocide against the Jews during World War II.[3] The determination to apply imperialism and empire as categories of analysis to generate fresh insights into the historical development of Germany, which Arendt's work has spawned, has produced a lively debate between two competing perspectives. The first focuses on the long-term impact of Imperial Germany's maritime colonialism before the Great War, and explores the possible continuities between Imperial German colonial practices and the Third Reich.[4] A second and more recently articulated position that challenges the first recognizes that "Germany," be it the Holy Roman Empire until its dissolution in 1806, or the Second Empire after 1871, was a continental empire well before it ever ventured overseas. That legacy and the longstanding German fascination with and dread of the "east," Russia especially, carried important consequences, notwithstanding the nationalist imaginings of German colonies overseas that extended at least as far back as the Revolution of 1848.[5]

[2] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 116–26, esp. 125. For the latter point, Arendt built upon the documentation in Raul Hilberg's pioneering *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961).

[3] *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1972). *Origins* was first published in 1951.

[4] Exemplary in this regard is Jürgen Zimmerer, "Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archeology of Genocide": in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York and Oxford: Berg): 49–76; "Holocaust und Kolonialismus: Beitrag zu einer Archäologie des genozidalen Gedenkens," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 51, no. 12 (2003): 1098–119; "Die Geburt des 'Ostlandes' aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus: Die nationalsozialistische Eroberungs-und Beherrschungspolitik in (post-)kolonialer Perspektive," *Sozial.Geschichte: Zeitschrift für historische Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 19, no. 1 (2004): 10–43; and his recent book, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: LTI, 2007). See also Benjamin Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe," *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 429–64.

[5] See Edward Ross Dickinson, "The German Empire: an Empire?" *History Workshop Journal* 66 (2008): 129–62; Russell Berman, "Colonialism, and no end: The other continuity theses," in *Colonial (Dis)-Continuities: Race, Holocaust, and Postwar German*, eds Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming); and Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Der Holocaust als 'kolonialer

Yet such starkly posed alternatives limit the ways in which "empire" as a category of analysis applies to Germany, and not only because Germany's two-dimensional imperial ambitions, continental and maritime, warrant further assessment as to how each stood in relation to the other. Rather, comparative studies that explore the links between empire, colonialism, and genocide are offering new ways to historicize the Nazi regime's obsession with the biological endangerment of the German *Volk* and its mutually reinforcing remedies, the acquisition of "living space" (*Lebensraum*) at the expense of the Slavs and the extermination of the Jews. Using the fifteenth-century "reconquests" (*reconquistas*) of Christian Spain against the Moors and the Muskovite princes against the Mongols as examples, A. Dirk Moses argues that, "the founding of empires can be linked to the experience of a society's having been colonized and subjected to imperial conquest and rule," often leading to the expulsion or destruction of the one-time colonizer. Moses suggests that this insight could prove especially relevant to National Socialism, a German "national liberation movement," for which the acquisition of a vast empire would exterminate millions, and especially the Jews, who were perceived as the pernicious agents of foreign colonization and contamination.[6] Yet Moses' argument also applies to the combination of brashness and pessimism that characterized the imperialism of the Second German Empire. If far less extreme than the Third Reich, pre–World War I aspirations to an even larger empire than the post-1871 entity joined two goals, creating internal cohesion and marginalizing domestic "enemies," and the achievement of global power. Major ruptures and discontinuities indeed punctuated the history of the "first" German unification from

Genozid'? Europäische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (2007): 439–66; and "Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz," *Central European History* 42, no. 3 (2009): 279–300. On the "east" in the German imagination, see Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex: Die Deutschen und der Osten 1900–1945* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005); *Traumland Osten: Deutsche Bilder vom östlichen Europa im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gregor Thum (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006); Wolfgang Wippermann, *Die Deutschen und der Osten: Feindbild und Traumland* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2007); and Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6   A. Dirk Moses, "Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History," in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A Dirk Moses (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2008): 30–40. See also the telling comparisons in Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12–3.

1871 to 1945. Nevertheless, the insecurities of Imperial Germany, which were interwoven in the triumphs that followed unification, established a pattern that would intensify through war, defeat, and economic crisis.

This book, a synthesis that draws primarily upon the findings of recent scholarship, argues that Germany offers an example of a less-appreciated "tension of empire," the aspiration to imperialist expansion and the simultaneous fear of dissolution at the hands of its imperialist rivals. That tension arose from the memory of the late medieval decline of German settlements in the Slavic lands of Eastern Europe, the religious conflict of the Reformation and the Thirty Years War, the decentralization and eventual break-up of the Holy Roman Empire under Napoleon, the triumphant but "incomplete" unification of 1871, which left large communities of ethnic Germans beyond the boundaries of the Second Empire, and finally, Imperial Germany's defeat and "subjugation" at the end of World War I. If the boundaries between European colonizers and the indigenous peoples they colonized were fluid and subject to contestation, as Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler famously observed over ten years ago,[7] the boundaries between becoming or being an empire and being bested by imperialist rivals could be equally impermanent and unstable. Through German eyes, beginning with the educated middle classes that propelled the drive to German unification in the nineteenth century, the prospect of sudden and devastating reversal lay barely hidden beneath the promise of a globally powerful Germany. The volatile combination of ambition and dread, which was embedded in a religious and millenarian vision of national death and resurrection,[8] informed the determination to challenge European imperialist rivals and ultimately the United States. At the same time, the perceived "failure" to eliminate social, religious, and ethnic divisions at home led increasingly to the demonization of domestic "enemies," who appeared to be the agents of foreign foes. That tendency, already evident during the Second Empire, grew more pronounced under the Weimar Republic, which many Germans saw as the noxious offspring of the Entente's depredations. In their view an unholy alliance of liberals, "Marxists" and especially Jews

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[7] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

[8] Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), and Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Michael Schröter and trans., Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5–8.

presided over the post–World War I Weimar "system," doing the bidding
of Germany's foreign "colonizers."

Although the desire to recover and extend Germany's prewar maritime
empire persisted among former colonial administrators and public intellec-
tuals after the Great War, Germany's defeat, the collapse of the Hohenzollern
monarchy, and what was perceived as a punitive postwar peace settlement
meant that the acquisition of a continental "living space" became cen-
tral to a German resurgence. Catapulted into power as the expression of
populist and elite discontent unleashed by the Depression, the National
Socialists would combine the projects of empire and genocide. Although
markedly different from the vision of a restored and modernized Holy
Roman Empire that infused the nationalism of Catholics before World
War I, the Nazi "Greater German Reich" would, unlike the Bismarckian
and predominantly Protestant "lesser Germany," be invulnerable to for-
eign conquest and dismemberment. As a corrective to the failure of the
Second Empire to realize its imperialist ambitions before and during the
Great War, an expanded German *Lebensraum* would provide the resources
to compete with, and triumph over, the Nazi regime's imperialist rivals. It
would forge a harmonious and racially purified empire that by subordinat-
ing, expelling, or killing its enemies would ensure the domination of the
German master race, a final triumphant resurrection over a past of unful-
filled aspirations. Because Jews mythically personified Germany's foreign
and domestic enemies, they embodied the fragile boundaries between the
dream of expanding and maintaining an empire and losing it through mili-
tary defeat and racial pollution. As Isabel Hull has argued recently, German
military doctrine had long presupposed that victory in war required the
complete destruction of the enemy.[9] The Third Reich would distinguish
itself by eliminating the enemy *behind* the enemy.

Despite the long imperial history of Germany, *Nazi Empire* limits its
chronological focus to the "first" German unification (the second being
in 1990), the period between the founding of the Second Empire to
the demise of the Third Reich. During the 1960s and 1970s, choosing
this particular chronological frame would have been unexceptional in
light of the controversy that the historian Fritz Fischer unleashed with
his *Germany's War Aims in the First World War*, published in 1961.[10]

[9] Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial
Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).
[10] *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914–1918*
(Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961). Fischer went further in his *War of Illusions: German Policies*

By identifying continuities in the imperialistic war plans of the Second
Empire and Third Reich, Fischer influenced a generation of scholars to
investigate Germany's "deviation" (*Sonderweg*, or "special path") from
the liberal democratic west as the source of its descent into fascism.
Dominated by an agrarian and industrial elite, the Second Empire pur-
sued imperialism and ultimately war to shore up its power against the
rise of the German labor movement. Although weakened by revolution
and military defeat in 1918, the elite recovered enough to put the Nazis in
power in 1933, again to secure its social and political domination.[11] This
book does not restore the "special path" argument, which historians since
the 1980s have progressively dismantled.[12] Yet with due allowance for the
discontinuities between the founding of the Second Empire and the end
of the Third Reich, a common thread emerges. Imperial Germany and its
two successors staged the drama of German imperialist aspiration, the
eschatology of ethnic homogeneity over diversity, imperial enlargement
over stasis, and *Lebensraum* as the route to biological survival.

As the European order changed during the nineteenth century from a
conglomeration of dynastic empires to a composition of hybrids, that is,
empires that strove to become internally cohesive nation states, Imperial
Germany was potentially the most destabilizing because it anticipated
further enlargement even as it partially fulfilled German nationalist
aspirations of long standing. Although the "Iron Chancellor" Otto von
Bismarck temporarily contained expansionist ambitions in favor of inter-
nal consolidation and stabilizing the concert of great powers, Imperial
Germany's military might and rapid economic growth increased the pres-
sure to compete for preeminence with other "world empires." That pres-
sure grew all the more intense because of Bismarck's seeming inability to
contain domestic "enemies," especially ethnic minorities and the emerging
German left. Yet Germany's acquisition of protectorates overseas and its
efforts to establish informal empire on the continent, resulted in its near
total diplomatic isolation. That predicament, coupled by the anxieties
generated by the transnational migration of Slavs and Jews, gave rise to
a radical nationalist fear of annihilation that encouraged the disastrous

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from 1911 to 1914, trans. Marian Jackson (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969) by argu-
ing that Germany bore the sole responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914.

[11] Exemplary in this regard was Hans-Ulrich Wehler's *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918*
(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1973).

[12] The onslaught began with David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley. See their *The Peculiarities
of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteeth-Century Germany* (New
York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

brinkmanship at the commanding heights of the Reich government in the summer of 1914. "Preventive war" was to be the antidote to international "encirclement," and as an important by-product, internal division.

If the Second Empire represented the potential of German nation and empire building, its defeat, the loss of its overseas empire, and its partial dismemberment after World War I reawakened earlier experiences of division and victimization by the European great powers, made more intense by economic crisis and deep domestic political divisions. To be sure, the Weimar republic was by no means destined to fail or was the viscerally antirepublican, anti-Marxist, and antisemitic radical right, from which the Nazi movement would emerge, destined to succeed. During the tumultuous first four years of the republic's life, the threat of foreign intervention and the Entente's desire to stabilize the German economy undermined radical nationalist and imperialist putschism. Furthermore, during Weimar's "middle years" between 1924 and 1929, a rough economic stabilization and a tenuously restored European state system that was partially willing to entertain German revisionist claims against the postwar peace settlement, allowed the republic to establish a degree of legitimacy. Yet, in addition to destroying the global economic and political order, the Great Depression propelled a new movement to power, the National Socialists, who defined their imperialism not only against the "bourgeois" revisionism of the republic, but also against what they deemed as the absurdity of Wilhelmine imperialism, its prioritizing of commercial over racial ends. Although economic objectives, the acquisition of raw materials and labor, were deeply embedded in the Nazi *Lebensraum* project, they were the means to more important goals, settlement, ethnic cleansing, and the racial revitalization of the *Volk* as to key to its German invulnerability.

Genocide, often the outcome of colonial conquest, has been a disturbingly common historical and contemporary problem.[13] The Nazi variant, the regime's solution to the "incomplete" unification of 1871, the defeat and collapse of 1918, and the crisis of the European state system between the wars, was the most extreme manifestation of a long-standing European problem, the tension between the maintenance of empire with all of its diversity and the struggle for ethnic and ideological

[13] For extensive comparative studies, see Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); and Mark Levene's *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*. Vol. I, *The Meaning of Genocide*, and vol. II, *The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005). A third volume is forthcoming.

homogeneity. Without the Nazis' obsession with the mythical power of the Jewish "enemy" and the long history of antisemitism, of course, the Holocaust would not have happened. Yet the distinctive characteristic of the Holocaust that total war reinforced, its remarkable consistency, in which Hitler's charismatic authority unleashed the ideologically murderous zeal and personal ambition of thousands of the Reich's epigones in the field, transformed the homogenizing capacities of the European nation states into what Arendt termed the "attack on human diversity as such." By ensuring the triumph of an empire that was to last a millennium, the Nazi "living space," cleansed of "undesirables" and "subhumans," would end the tension between dominion and annihilation.

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From Imperial Consolidation to Global Ambitions

Imperial Germany, 1871–1914

The unification of Germany, which followed Prussia's victories over Denmark in 1864, the Austrian Empire in 1866, and France in 1871, produced a new territorial state with formidable military power, economic potential, and expansionist ambitions. Having triumphed three times in succession over enemy armies, the German "Second Empire" promised to become, for many of its citizens, the more effective successor to the first, the Holy Roman Empire, and thus the heir to Rome itself. Following the dreams of the revolutionaries of 1848, many imagined that the new Germany was but the first stage in the achievement of a dominion that would extend beyond its present borders to include ethnic Germans scattered throughout Europe, a realm that would reach as far as Constantinople and the Black Sea.[1] Imperial Germany came nowhere close to achieving that goal during its forty-seven-year lifespan. Yet by the beginning of the twentieth century, its export industries, which included electrical engineering, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, metals, finished goods, and machine-tool production, had transformed it into Europe's most dynamic economy.[2] Germany's rapid economic growth over a short period, second only to that of the United States after the

[1] Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), 6–7; Wolfgang Mommsen, *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Anfang vom Ende des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 96–7; and MacGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54–7.

[2] Niels P. Peterson, "Das Kaiserreich in Prozessen ökonomischer Globalisierung," in *Das Kaiserreich transnational: Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, eds. Sebastian Conrad und Jürgen Osterhammel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), 55–6.

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Civil War, testified to its emergence as one of three new global players, along with America and Japan, that would rival the dominant European empires, Great Britain and France. The multiplication of industrialized and industrializing empires hastened global commercialization and the frenetic scramble for colonies in previously inaccessible parts of the globe that characterized the last third of the nineteenth century. At a time when global imperialist competition weakened the concert of European great powers that stabilized the continent after the defeat of Napoleon more than a half century earlier, the ambitions that Germany's military prowess and economic power spawned, reflected in its determination to "catch up" with and surpass Europe's leaders, meant that Germany would play a pivotal role in that competition.

In the 1860s, the prime minister of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, opportunistically promoted unification to expand Prussian power, dissolve the German Confederation (the loose association of German states constructed after the defeat of Napoleon led jointly by Prussia and the Austrian Empire), and co-opt liberal nationalists, who sought a united Germany with constitutional limitations on monarchical power. Despite bitter battles between Prussian liberals and Bismarck over the accountability of the government and its military to parliament, the expectation of the commercial, legal, and cultural benefits of unification, for which Prussian economic power was indispensable, divided the liberal movement and worked to Bismarck's advantage. The Prussian army's impressive performance contributed to unification on Bismarck's terms, as did the fear of many liberals in Prussia and in other German states that a "ring" of enemies, especially France and Russia, would continue to profit from a politically fragmented Central Europe. Only unification under Prussian leadership would allow Germany to compete with other empires.[3] The ethnic tensions arising from Prussia's past as a colonizer, precipitated by the large number of Poles in its eastern territories of Silesia, West Prussia, and Posen, which Frederick the Great annexed during the eighteenth century, proved equally relevant to liberal sentiment. The demands of liberal revolutionaries in 1848 for a German national state provoked Polish rebellions in Prussia's eastern provinces, which had remained outside of the German Confederation. The Polish uprising in 1863 against the Russian Empire caused Prussian liberals especially to believe that too much democracy would bolster the political influence of

[3] Harald Biermann, *Ideologie statt Realpolitik"*; *Kleindeutsche Liberale und auswärtige Politik vor der Reichsgründung* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2006), 239–53.