1 Settler Colonialism and How to Tell a Story
Inner Colonization and Biography

This book employs the device of an intellectual biography to tell the story of German settler colonialism in East Central Europe. The subject is a man named Max Sering, someone who was once a world renowned, much liked and respected agrarian economist. Sering became an adult in the early years of the newly established German empire, was the "father of agrarian settlement" throughout most of his life and died having just completed a memorandum on the wartime economy of the Nazi regime that had defeated the Polish Army. His long life and work provide an excellent framework with which to tell the story of Germany and the East from 1871 to 1945. Further, using a biography to tell a story that transcends the great fissure in German History – 1933 – is a useful tool to in turn transcend the great "continuity debate" at the heart of the historical profession among those who study Germany. Whether or not German history "broke" in 1933, whether German History is discontinuous from 1932 to 1934 or not, Max Sering's mind, his students, his colleagues, their frames of reference, their life stories, and earlier influences, *continued*. I argue that there were global continuities in the transnational world of settler colonial thinking, and that Sering's study of various settler practices, most notably what he learned on the North American frontier as a twenty-six-year-old in 1883, crucially informed how he thought Germans should settle their land, both in terms of what they should and very much should *not* do. As is likely already clear, I am a "lumper," not a "splitter."[1] I was trained in comparative history and believe we learn much more by finding connections and similarities between groups, communities, and nations than when we pursue what many of my colleagues tend toward: siloed national histories where exceptionalism and singularity are emphasized.

[1] Peter Fritzsche (Illinois) introduced me to these terms at one of the much-storied Midwest German History Conferences, and it has stayed with me ever since. The most famous version of this distinction is of course Isaiah Berlin's Hedgehog and Fox.

But one man's life does not evidence some firm causality in a nation's history. This book will not argue A caused B which ultimately caused C, taking us on a straightforward journey from land cleared of Indigenous people in Medicine Hat, Alberta, to forced evacuations of Polish families near the Warta River (or, to push the connection as far as it could ever possibly go, the gas vans of Chelmno). My connections, my causalities, while sometimes direct, are far more often in the abstract world of mental universes, and what is deemed to be newly possible. As Hannah Arendt long ago told us, the global imperialism of the nineteenth century opened up new mental horizons in terms of space, race, forced population transfer, and ultimately genocide.[2] Jens-Uwe Guettel, Matthew Fitzpatrick, Erik Grimmer-Solem, and others have shown us the particular appeal to Germans of the great experiment in adjacent settler colonialism that was the American West in the late 1800s.[3] Other historians, such as David Blackbourn and Vejas Liulevicius, have revealed the many references among German "eastern" thinkers to the Wild West, especially via popular culture, for example, through Karl May's extremely popular novels.[4] But, with Max Sering, we find a flesh and blood, "real" connection between the two frontiers, the North American West and the German East. While the "splitter" historians will always point out, correctly, that Sering never said: "the American West is the model for settlement in the German East," I hope to convince the reader that Sering's 1883 journey was of great importance to the scientist, that it provided him with a powerful fantasy of what was possible, a vision that percolated throughout his lifelong work on settler colonialism, and thereby influenced the many thinkers with whom he interacted, and who in turn read him.

There were two closely connected fantasies at play in Sering's mind: the desire for empty, free land for settlement, and the dream of a deeply agrarian world, where peasants loved the soil and their nation. First, what

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951). In 2006, Eric Weitz and Jürgen Zimmerer hosted an important conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, "German Imperial Biographies: Soldiers, Scientists, and Officials, and the 'Arendt Thesis'." The discussions there were formative to the early phase of this book project.

[3] Jens-Uwe Guettel, *German Expansionism, Imperial Liberalism, and the United States, 1776–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism in Germany: Expansionism and Nationalism, 1848–1884* (New York: Berghahn, 2008); Erik Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire: Globalization and the German Quest for World Status, 1875–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[4] David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: J. Cape, 2006); Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

was this desire for emptiness? Intellectually, the young Sering knew in 1883 that Iowa farmland was empty, ready for the taking, because Indigenous peoples had been cleared from that space. At the same time that he was critical of the Americans for the way in which they had cleared the Indigenous population from their land, he was jealous of the freedom that they then had to organize these spaces, a situation so unlike the German, where agrarian planners had to contend with "full" spaces and an eastern frontier robustly populated by ethnic Poles. Yet, like any colonial gaze, the ability to see emptiness/fullness changed with circumstances. For Sering, in 1912, the eastern Prussian Province of Posen was empty and awaiting more German settlers. By 1916, Posen was "full" and Latvia empty. In 1919, he saw the new eastern borderlands, now much closer to Berlin, as thinly populated and in desperate need of German settlers as a bulwark against the newly created Polish state. I do not believe Sering was being cynical. He was working within shifting political circumstances. The settler colonizer sees emptiness or fullness based upon the bounds of their abilities to remake land in the nation's image.[5] Ambition is managed by power. Second, while never a biological racist, Sering was an extreme agrarian. But he was no simple romantic, and was instead a liberal-nationalist in his approach, more Jeffersonian, or indeed Ratzellian, in his understanding of the role of farmers in the modern world.[6] As we will see, although a Kaiser-loving monarchist, he had no time for the aristocratic landed elite, the *Junker*, and instead devoted his life to the re-creation of small peasant farmers, happily toiling away on their own patch of soil, safely removed from the unhealthy cities of modernity. This fantasy of his, that Germany could be a Great Power via the migration of unemployed workers away from the cities, onto their own farms, ideally in the ethnically threatened East, was the governing passion of his life and work.

Emptiness/fullness, settlers, and soil were always conceived of as being in a "space" and, while this book discusses many spaces, there is one overarching theatre, one palimpsest of earth, water, furrows, houses, bones, and wheat, that is at the heart of our story: the *Wartheland* of East Central Europe. Today, the Warta River flows some 800 km, beginning as a small stream in the uplands near Krakow, then eventually

[5] Robert L. Nelson, "Emptiness in the Colonial Gaze: Labor, Property and Nature," *International Labor and Working Class History Journal* 79 (2011): 161–174.

[6] Seminal with regard to the thought of Locke, farming, and the liberal, colonial gaze, is Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also Mark Bassin, "Friedrich Ratzel's Travels in the United States: A Study in the Genesis of His Anthropogeography," *History of Geography Newsletter* 4 (1984): 11–22.

becoming a wide, meandering river through today's city of Poznan, before ultimately joining the Oder, some 90 km east of Berlin, on the German–Polish border. How thinkers, based mainly in Berlin, at the western edge of this borderland, imagined the soil in this space, and the blood in the veins of those who tilled it, is central to what I conceive as the story of a colonial frontier. At times, concepts applied to this "close" or adjacent space would be implemented by the Germans further afield, most notably in Latvia and Belarus during the First World War. Throughout our story, Sering (and others) also compared this borderland space with Germany's other liminal zones, Alsace and Schleswig. Further, the settler colonialism of the Warta space was compared to the farthest reaches of Siberia, Argentina, and Germany's African colonies. Such interconnections should support my argument that there was a global discourse of settler colonialism as it occurred both inside and outside Europe, and that Germany's colonial history, from the *Kaiserreich* to the Third Reich, was and is closely intertwined with that discourse.[7] But always, we will return to this "heartland" of the Warta. It is where modern German settler colonialism began, and where, as we shall see at the end of our story, the purest form of "inner colonization" was finally implemented, but in a manner the Germans never imagined.

A close, or adjacent colonial frontier, a frontier *within* a nation's borders, a settler colonialism a mere two to three hours east of the capital by train, puts us in relatively less "settled territory," intellectually speaking. The term that Max Sering used, and that shall be employed throughout this work, is "inner colonization." For Sering and his colleagues there was one long continuum from inner to outer (or overseas) colonization. In German, it is indeed the case that *Kolonie* can indicate any settlement, such as the tiny garden plots with their little cottages that one finds throughout the city of Berlin today, *Gartenkolonien*. To agrarian economists in the 1880s, settler colonialism began, for example, with the provision of farms on the outskirts of Dresden, to unemployed Dresden labourers. Simply settling city folk on agrarian land, any agrarian land, was the initial goal. But for many of these thinkers, ideal inner colonization was only achieved when those Dresden workers were settled in the borderland areas threatened by "foreign" farmers. And enemy

[7] For an excellent discussion of this back and forth in German imperial ambitions, see Geoff Eley, "Empire by Land or Sea? Germany's Imperial Imaginary, 1840–1945," in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, ed. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 19–45. For a direct comparison of Germany's eastern borderlands to the most important German overseas colony, see Dörte Lerp, *Imperiale Grenzräume. Bevölkerungspolitiken in Deutsch-Südwestafrika und den östlichen Provinzen Preußens 1884–1914* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2016).

number one for German nationalists were the Polish farmers in the eastern provinces of Prussia: Posen and West Prussia. But again, all settlement of Germans on agrarian land was deemed to be a form of colonialism, whether in Saxony, the Polish Borderlands, or Tanzania. The threatened Prussian East however was always ground zero for the settlement experts in this book, and thus "inner colonization" will be our focus: settling farmers at the frontier of empire, but always within the empire's borders. It is for this reason that the example par excellence of global inner colonization was the North American West. While the vast overseas empires of the British and, to a certain extent, the French, were exceedingly admired by the Germans, Germany could never truly compete on the oceans. Thus, it was to the great land empires, the United States (and to a certain extent Canada) and Russia to which the practitioners of inner colonization looked. With every American removal of Indigenous peoples westward, every westward expansion of American sovereignty, and resulting provision of land to settlers inside that newly expanded border, America was practicing inner colonization on a scale the world had perhaps never witnessed.

Max Sering witnessed it all. He stood on the vast "empty" expanse of Nebraska in 1883. He attended the very Chicago World's Fair where Frederick Jackson Turner first laid out his "Frontier Thesis." He was the main intellectual force behind the Settlement Commission that attempted to settle Germans among the Poles in the Eastern Borderlands from 1886 to 1914. He travelled east to occupied Latvia in 1915 and conceived of Germany's eventual plan for the settlement of one and a half million Germans there. He lectured in Kiev, in the late Summer of 1918, on all the possibilities of Germany's vast new Eastern Empire. He fought the Versailles Treaty at international conferences and in various publications, all the while continuing to provide the academic heft for a renewed German settlement of the now much closer eastern borderlands. Although by 1934 he was marginalized for his failure to recognize the crucial importance of race to settlement, by 1935 he was happily working closely with the geopolitical crowd, the *Ostforscher*, arguing forcefully for proper German "Space" (*Raum*) in the East. When he died, in November 1939, he would have been pleased that his beloved Warta soil was once again German, but he likely did not realize what the ultimate endpoint would be: the utter transformation of this space into a Nazi vision of a colonial *and* racial frontier. Just because our subject, Max Sering, who was not a Nazi, and would not have approved of the most coldly "rational" form of pure settler colonialism in the Warta Space, that is, the forced deportation of Polish farmers, does not render him a useless guide to understanding the last phase of the German East.

Sering, by all accounts a kind man and excellent teacher, possessed a relatively modest, nineteenth-century ethnic chauvinism, and is therefore perhaps the ideal figure for our story. We can understand him. Over many decades, and with admirers that stretched from Max Weber, to Friedrich Ebert, to Hjalmar Schacht, Sering built up a vision and an understanding of Germany as a nation that needed to settle its people on its own land. He saw Slavs as a threat to German sovereignty who needed to be tamed and "erased." For Sering this meant erasure through assimilation, for others it meant erasure via removal. Through the biography of this influential thinker, we will see how he, and others like him, influenced the way Germany thought about the East.

What Is Inner Colonization?

At the outset we should discuss this unusual term, its unusual history, and how it will be applied in this book. There are two main ways in which the term is used: one is as an economic model of extraction of resources from the periphery, and one is a settler-based concept grounded in ethnic groups and their organization within a nation-state. The first approach was examined by Lenin and more famously by Gramsci, in the latter's analysis of the Italian North's exploitation of the poor Italian South. This model was the basis for Michael Hechter's 1975 publication *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966*.[8] Although Hechter's model analyzed how the English metropole extracted goods and services from the ethnically different Welsh, Scottish, and Irish, this was not a study of race-based settler colonialism. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of inner colonization was extended to ethnically defined groups occupying specific land inside nation-states, from the idea of inner cities as colonies of African Americans, to the 1975 declaration by the Dene Nation of Northern Canada that they were an internal colony, to thinking around Quebec's place in North America. Several examples such as these were the focus of a landmark special edition on "internal colonialism" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* in 1979.[9] By 1984, Robert Hind dismissed these various studies as

[8] Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[9] This edition contained an article specifically about Quebec, Kenneth McRoberts, "Internal Colonialism: The Case of Quebec," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (1979): 293–318. Spivak uses this approach, oppressed populations within a nation, as her version of "internal colonization," specifically citing African-Americans in the United

offer[ing] too many explanations, and mak[ing] too many deductions in an ad hoc or an ex post facto manner … [They] imply an improbable degree of cohesion and identity amongst specific social groups, and they oversimplify complex social structures and relationships … Their nature is such that they tend to assert or assume that which they are endeavouring to demonstrate or prove, a practice which leads to intellectual incoherence and a distortion of historical processes.[10]

Despite this warning, "inner" or "internal" colonization/colonialism has continued to appear in works ranging from Russia's "colonization" and assimilation of its vast peasantry,[11] to the program undertaken in Fascist Italy to first reclaim and then colonize the Pontine Marshes south of Rome (colonizzazione interna).[12]

The form of colonization that is central to this book is what was called "inner colonization" at the time by German thinkers. This was an ethnically based settler colonialism powerfully grounded in agrarian thinking about who should cultivate what soil. Because colonization to these thinkers involved the settlement of people on land to cultivate and thereby nationalize that land, the geographic scope of colonization was vast. Settler colonialism literally began outside of the metropole's cities, on any vacant but fertile land, even land that was in no way ethnically questioned, such as the aforementioned farmland just outside of Dresden in the Saxon countryside. The spectrum had as its endpoint the settlement of citizens on farmland in far-away colonies overseas. It is, however, the midpoint of this settler colonial thinking that is central to our study: the settlement of citizens on arable land that was ethnically challenged, settlement in the Prussian Polish borderlands. Although "inner" colonization was applied to the innermost settlement on those

States. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 172. See also, Mel Watkins, ed., *Dene Nation: The Colony within* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), and Barbara Arneil, *Domestic Colonies: The Turn Inward to Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[10] Robert J. Hind, "The Internal Colonial Concept," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984), 553. For an excellent overview of the use and abuse of the term, see Jack Hicks, "On the Application of Theories of 'Internal Colonialism' to Inuit Societies." Presentation for the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association. Winnipeg, June 5, 2004.

[11] Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (New York: Polity, 2011).

[12] Federico Caprotti, *Mussolini's Cities: Internal Colonialism in Italy, 1930–1939* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria, 2007). See also, Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire: Sovereignty and Settlement in Italy's Borderlands, 1922–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Saxon fields, it was most closely associated with frontier settlement in those borderlands.

While Germans from the 1880s to the 1940s appear to be the only practitioners to call this practice "inner colonization," ethnically-based agrarian settlement at the edge of empire, or more humbly, nation-state, was a global endeavour and was studied by settlement planners around the world. The American West was the single greatest model of such borderland settlement and was studied by experts from Russia to Argentina.[13] Thus, although "inner colonization" can be used as an abstract name to describe a certain practice, in this book, inner colonization is the named practice of the actual specialists at the time. It is hoped that such a concrete description of a major form of global colonial practice can help in the theoretical evolution of colonial studies. Further, because the legacy of this settler colonial practice still affects our world today, from the still unsettled colonial situation in North America to the highly problematic existence of Russian settlers in Latvia and eastern Ukraine, German inner colonization offers important lessons from the past. Finally, as will be noted in the Conclusion, the agrarian mindset that praised the peasant and supported a landscape and economy populated with small farms continues as a powerful trope in the European Union today.

The German East (and Now the American West?)

At the heart of this book is the argument that settler colonial thinking is at the core of the history of Germany in East Central Europe until 1945. The major recent historiography on this theme has centred on the way in which overseas, or "classic," settler colonialism affected German thinking about race, genocide, and Eastern Europe. The most controversial intervention on this question comes from the German historian Jürgen Zimmerer, and is best summed up in the title of his most famous work, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz: On the Relationship between Colonialism and the Holocaust*.[14] At the foundation of this

[13] Willard Sunderland, "The 'Colonization Question': Visions of Colonization in Late Imperial Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 48 (2000): 210–232; Mark Bassin, "Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993): 473–511; Carl E. Solberg, *The Prairies and the Pampas: Agrarian Policy in Canada and Argentina, 1880–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Susi K. Frank, "'Innere Kolonisation' und 'frontier'-Mythos: Räumliche Deutungskonzepte in Rußland und den USA," *Osteuropa* 53 (2003): 1658–1675.

[14] Jürgen Zimmerer *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Munich: LIT, 2011). This book is being translated into English. For a

school of thought is the idea that colonial Germans developed radical ways of dealing with "problem" populations in their overseas colonies, practiced genocide there, and imported these ways of thinking back into the Reich and eventually to the Eastern Front in the Second World War. In a crucial collection that interrogates these ideas, Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley ask, what about the settler colonial history of the very space, East Central Europe, where the Holocaust eventually took place?[15] In posing such a question, they harken back to a much earlier and important thinker, Hannah Arendt, in her landmark 1961 study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.[16] In that work, Arendt sketches the contours of nineteenth-century global colonial thinking, wrapped up in race and space, and links it to German thinking about East Central Europe well under way before 1900. Ideas central to settler colonial practices around the world, such as those found in the British Empire, were already apparent in nineteenth-century German thinking about their own eastern frontier where, some thousand years earlier, Teutons and Slavs had met in the *Wartheland*. This is the colonial trajectory along which this book is set.

The idea that late nineteenth-century frontier settlement, especially that of the model par excellence, the American West, served as an inspiration for German colonial practices in Eastern Europe, has now made its way into some more recent publications.[17] Carroll Kakel's

serious critique of Zimmerer (and others) who make imperial connections to the Holocaust, see Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz," *Central European History* 42 (2009), 279–300. They make two important points: (1) "What is surprising about the course of the current debate on the continuation of colonial traditions by Nazi Germany is the extent to which World War I has been neglected," (290) and (2) "it remains plausible to assume that the ideas and practices that characterized Europe's colonial mastery over the world had *some* repercussions on inner-European history and that 'knowledge transfers' occurred in some areas (such as eugenics and 'racial hygiene,' settlement planning, and racist legislation)" (298).

[15] Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley, eds., *German Colonialism in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Fascinatingly, and in contradistinction to Zimmerer, Dörte Lerp traces the influence of colonization in the Prussian East to how Germans approached settlement in German Southwest Africa. Although she discusses the Homestead Act, the American West as a model for the German East is not central to her book, a study which instead focusses on comparing and contrasting the German East to German Southwest Africa. See Lerp, *Imperiale Grenzräume*. See such a comparative also in Sebastian Conrad, "'Eingeborenenpolitik' in Kolonie und Metropole: 'Erziehung zur Arbeit' in Ostafrika und Ostwestfalen," in *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 107–128.

[16] Arendt, *Origins*.

[17] One of the first comparisons was Folke Dovring, "European Reactions to the Homestead Act," *The Journal of Economic History* 22 (1962): 461–472. "The

The American West and the Nazi East is a straightforward comparison of these two genocidal frontiers and the logics of continental imperialism that lay behind them. Kakel claims that while the Nazi empire was based upon space and race, and the American empire mainly on space, it is easy to argue that race was *built into* frontier expansion in America.[18] A key difference in my work is that I trace a similar American-style expansion in the German East, long before Hitler. A settler colonial politics with race *built in* was already well established in the *Wartheland* while Hitler was still a child. Whereas Kakel traces a nineteenth-century American model radicalized by Hitler, I trace an American model inspiring and shaping settler politics in the nineteenth-century German East and argue that the resulting settler practice in the East then radicalized under Hitler. In his important book, *German Expansionism, Imperial Liberalism, and the United States, 1776–1945*, Jens-Uwe Guettel displays the long German fascination with American westward expansion during the nineteenth century and sees ways in which American settler colonialism influenced German overseas colonialism, especially in Namibia. For the post-1918 world, however, when German colonial attention shifted and narrowed to the East while German attitudes toward America soured, Guettel refuses to see any link between the two continental imperial projects. The influence of American race-thinking on the Germans is central to Angela Zimmerman's *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, The German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South*,[19] as it is in James Q. Whitman's recent *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*.[20] The idea of the American western frontier as a discursive model for German novels set in the Eastern

evidence thus far assembled cannot show very distinctly what effect the Homestead Act had upon European minds. Probably much of it has been indirect rather than tangible. As with many things in America, it is bound to have influenced thinking about socio-political matters in various directions. Along with other features in the complex interaction between Europe and America, it is likely to have contributed to modifying ideas rather than material conditions in Europe." (471–472)

[18] Carroll Kakel, *The American West and the Nazi East* (New York: Palgrave, 2011). See also Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler's Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016). For a truly simplistic version of the influence of the American West on the Nazi East, see Helmuth Schuster, "Theorien, Utopien und rassistische Abgründe sozialwissenschaftlicher Bevölkerungsforschung zwischen wilhelminischen Mitteleuropa-Modell und SS-Generalplan Ost," in *Rassenmythos und Sozialwissenschaften in Deutschland,* ed. Carsten Klingemann (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1987), 316–344.

[19] Angela Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, The German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[20] James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).