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978-1-107-02469-4 - German Expansionism, Imperial Liberalism, and the United States, 1776–1945

Jens-Uwe Guettel

Excerpt

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## Introduction

“Even those of us who feel completely liberated from the German original sin of adoring everything foreign just because it is foreign still have much to learn from the measures the Americans have taken to solve the Native problem.”

Alexander Kuhn, *Zum Eingeborenenproblem in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* [Regarding the Native Problem in German Southwest Africa] (1905)

“[While it is] a trite saying that ‘the pen is mightier than the sword,’ it is equally true that the bullet is the pioneer of civilization.”

*Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*: “The Rifle” (1886, 1893)<sup>1</sup>

“The history of the colonization of the United States, clearly the biggest colonial endeavor the world has ever known, had as its first act the complete extermination of its native peoples.” Thus spoke Bernhard Dernburg, the German left-liberal ex-banker and new head of the German Colonial Office in January 1907, during a speech meant to fire up pro-colonialist German voters for the upcoming national elections. Present-day readers, German or American alike, may be startled by Dernburg’s mention

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Richard Slotkin, “Buffalo Bill’s ‘Wild West’ and the Mythologization of the American Empire,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 171.

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of genocide and his labeling the expansion across the continent of the fledgling American republic a “colonial endeavor,” analogous to nineteenth-century European imperialism no less. Although Dernburg did not approve of genocidal violence as a colonialist tool, seeing the United States as the biggest colonial endeavor in the world nevertheless recommended America both for close scrutiny and for emulation in Germany’s own colonies. Nor did the importance of America for Germany’s colonial ventures go unnoticed on the other side of the Atlantic: Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, author of the famous essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” thus remarked, “American colonization has become the mother of German colonial policy.”<sup>2</sup>

By 1907, these ideas were no longer new. During a speech at a meeting of the German National-Liberal Party in September 1884, the year in which the German Empire began to acquire overseas possessions, Friedrich Ratzel, an influential geographer and one of Imperial Germany’s most fervent proponents of overseas expansion, remarked that “if we had had the option 200 years ago, we too would have preferred to carve a New Germany out of North America. . . . However, today we do not have this choice and it would be foolish to turn down black bread just because we did not reach the white bread in time.” In no uncertain terms Ratzel described American westward expansion as colonialism and used the impossibility of creating a “New Germany” on American soil, represented positively by the image of refined, high-quality white bread, as an argument for German imperialist endeavors in Africa. Of course, the term “black bread” Ratzel used to depict Africa just happened to include an adjective often employed to describe race, a clear reminder that colonial expansion and race went hand in hand.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Dernburg, “Speech in front of the Kolonialpolitisches Aktionskomité,” in *Reichstagsauflösung und Kolonialpolitik*, ed. Gustav Schmoller (Berlin: Wedekind, 1907), 7–8. Turner cited in Peter Bergmann, “American Exceptionalism and the German ‘Sonderweg’ in Tandem,” *The International History Review* 23, no. 3 (2001): 516.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Ratzel, *Wider die Reichsnörgler: Ein Wort zur Kolonialfrage aus Wählerkreisen* (München: 1884), 23.

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This book traces America's role within German expansionism from its intellectual origins in the late eighteenth century to its murderous and bitter end in 1945. Throughout the nineteenth century and until 1914, German observers attributed the impressive and unmatched success of America's westward expansion to laissez-faire principles and the country's liberal political system. These conclusions made American colonization practices especially attractive for liberal German expansionists – and it was German liberals, together with the social groups traditionally supportive of liberal ideas, such as entrepreneurs, merchants, and academics, who during the late nineteenth century provided much of the public pressure and support for German overseas expansion. America thus occupied an important position in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German expansionist discourse and practice. The following analysis highlights the significance of German liberalism for German colonialist discourse and overseas expansion before and after 1884, the year in which the German Empire began to acquire colonies. Ideas of empire and colonialism deeply permeated liberal and progressive segments of German society from the late eighteenth century until 1914, fueled by transatlantic German-American exchanges on matters of territorial expansion and race.<sup>4</sup>

This book thus dissects and contests preconceived notions of German and, at least indirectly, American exceptionalisms: German perspectives on the American frontier reveal that pro-colonialist sentiments in nineteenth-century Germany grew as much from transatlantic exchanges on expansionism and race as from domestic and national contexts. German admiration for the United States was never exclusively rooted in America's supposedly exceptional status as the world's biggest and most successful republic. Instead, from the perspective of German observers, the United States' attractiveness was inseparable from its westward expansion. The experience of the United States appeared to

<sup>4</sup> Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalismus in Deutschland*, 1. Aufl. ed., *Neue historische Bibliothek* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 218–19; Horst Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1985), 54.

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demonstrate that empire and the development of a political system based on liberal principles had to go hand in hand, because both seemed to be invariably connected to continuous colonization. Moreover, although it was indeed perceived as the land of exceptional freedom and opportunity, the United States also offered intriguing examples of social exclusion, expulsion, and extinction – necessary byproducts of colonialism in the minds of nineteenth-century Germans (and Americans for that matter). German observers discerned (sometimes with and sometimes without regret) that the many advantages America offered to its white inhabitants were linked to various forms of disfranchisement of the country's ethnic minorities, most obviously blacks and Native Americans. Ultimately, these approaches were all at least potentially applicable in Germany's colonies as well.<sup>5</sup>

German views of America thus became key components not only of nineteenth-century colonial discourse but also of real-life conditions in the German colonies. Germany's main (and for all practical intents and purposes only) settler colony was German Southwest Africa, where American-style settlement policies and mixed-race marriage prohibitions were explored. In addition, in German East Africa and German Samoa, the introduction of race codes was justified against the backdrop of American segregation statutes. Soon after 1776, Germans began to identify the United States as an exemplary, yet unexceptional (and hence replicable) empire. In other words, American expansionism and racial policies were seen as models that European colonizers could and should reproduce elsewhere in the world – in particular in Germany's own colonies. Contrary to popular and scholarly belief, eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century Germans were therefore neither necessarily sympathetic to America's Indians nor did they always accept romanticized depictions of them. Instead, German expansionists frequently viewed both American reservation policies and sometimes the outright

<sup>5</sup> In the following, the terms "Native Americans," "Indians," and "Amerindians" are used interchangeably. See Colin G. Calloway, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), vii.

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extermination of Amerindians as unavoidable side effects of successful colonization policies. This perspective was by no means uniquely German, but rather shared by the Western world: For example, Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West* shows, which ran successfully in Germany and Europe during the 1890s, but had initially been equally if not more popular in the eastern United States, aimed not only to entertain audiences with spectacular scenes from "the West" but were also geared to emphasize the "moral truth" of the frontier experience, namely "that violence and savage war were the necessary instruments of American progress" and that "the bullet is the pioneer of civilization." In turn, during the 1890s Americans applied practices and terminology related to the frontier in an overseas context – for example during the Spanish-American War, when Cody proposed a "Wild West" approach and Theodore Roosevelt's First Volunteer Cavalry regiment took on the name, "The Rough Riders," a term generally applied to Western horsemen and made famous by Cody's shows.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Slotkin, "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," 171–79; Susanne Zantop, "The Beautiful, the Ugly, and the German: Race, Gender and Nationality in Eighteenth-Century Anthropological Discourse," in *Gender and Germanness* (Providence: Bergahn, 1997); Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Susanne Zantop, "Der Indianer' im Rasse- und Geschlechterdiskurs der deutschen Spätaufklärung," in *Das Subjekt und die Anderen: Interkulturalität und Geschlechterdifferenz vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff (Berlin: 2001); Hartmut Lutz, "German Indianthusiasm: A Socially Constructed German National(ist) Myth," in *Germans and Indians. Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); H. Glenn Penny, "Elusive Authenticity: The Quest for the Authentic Indian in German Public Culture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 4 (2006); H. Glenn Penny, "Illustrating America. Images of the North American Wild West in German Periodicals, 1825–1890," in *I like America: Fictions of the Wild West*, ed. Pamela Kort and Max Hollein (Munich: Prestel, 2006); Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5. On the so-called *Drang nach Osten* see most recently David Blackburn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 282; Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire. Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 20–27.

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This study underlines the liberal impact on German colonialism from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century and traces the divide that existed between German expansionism before and after the Great War. Although continuities persisted as well, after 1918 the vanishing importance of liberal ideas was more than matched by the ascendancy of radically new notions of how and why Germany needed to expand again after the Versailles Treaty had forced the country to relinquish its colonies and to cede around 20 percent of its contiguous European territory to France, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania. This new expansionism was enunciated, for example, by Nazi ideologues such as Alfred Rosenberg. Understanding the important roles played by liberal German colonialists before 1914 and the significance of the United States for them highlights the differences and ruptures between pre-World War I colonialism and Nazi expansionism.

German colonialism has traditionally been viewed as hardly more than a sideshow, a mere distraction from Imperial Germany's many (and allegedly more important) domestic developments and problems. Moreover, according to this view, nineteenth-century German liberals were not so much the originators of German expansionist sentiment as they were distracted by it. According to historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler's famous analysis, German imperialism was thus a "social imperialism" that "amounted to a conservative 'taming' policy which sought to divert abroad reform attempts which found their expression in the emancipatory forces of liberalism." The classic post-1945 German exceptionalism argument – *Sonderweg* – held that, instead of being "distracted," "diverted," or "tamed" by Otto von Bismarck, German liberals should have directed their attention to liberal-democratic reform at home, as did (allegedly) their counterparts in Britain, the United States, and France, and not focus on pointless colonial adventures. This interpretation, put forth in various ways by scholars such as Wehler and other German historians during the 1960s and 1970s, reinforced the impression that imperialism and colonialism were not substantial elements of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German

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history, because Germany's true problems were to be found at home and not in overseas ventures.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Until the 1990s, only a small group of German-speaking historians, among them most prominently Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Klaus Bade, Pogge von Strandmann, and Hans Fenske, engaged with German imperialism in a sustained fashion. Among English-speaking historians, only A. J. P. Taylor stands out in this respect. Although colonial specialists such as Horst Gründer, Helmut Bley, and Horst Drechsler published important and detailed accounts of German colonialism, only the aforementioned historians attempted to analyze and explain German expansionism, imperialism, and colonialism against the broad backdrop of nineteenth-century German history. Wehler's influential evaluation of German overseas expansion as a "distraction," a "social imperialism" meant to project domestic tensions overseas, has traditionally been the most influential explanation for Germany's acquisition of colonies. Other historians of Wehler's generation, most prominently Thomas Nipperdey and Lothar Gall, have paid little attention to German imperialism. Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Anchor Books, 1969), 46; H. Pogge von Strandmann, "Domestic Origins of Germany's Colonial Expansion under Bismarck," *Past and Present* 42, no. 1 (1969); Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus* (Köln, Berlin: Kiepenheuer u. Witsch, 1969); A. J. P. Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies 1884–1885: A Move in Bismarck's European Policy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970); Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Imperialismus* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1970); Hans Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Dover, N.H.: Berg Publishers, 1985 [1973]), 173; Klaus J. Bade, *Fabri und der Imperialismus in der Bismarckzeit* (Freiburg: Atlantis-Verlag, 1975); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Wandlung der Liberalen Idee im Zeitalter des Imperialismus," in *Liberalismus und imperialistischer Staat. Der Imperialismus als Problem liberaler Parteien in Deutschland*, ed. K. Holl and G. List (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Bismarck's Imperialism," in *Imperial Germany*, ed. James Sheehan (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), 180–222; Horst Drechsler, *Let us die fighting: The struggle of the Herero and Nama against German imperialism (1884–1915)* (Zed Press, 1980); Horst Drechsler, *Aufstände in Südwestafrika* (Berlin (East): Dietz, 1984); Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, Klaus Hildebrand, *Deutsche Außenpolitik 1871–1918*, vol. II, *Enzyklopädie Deutscher Geschichte* (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1989); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Sozialimperialismus," in *Escape into War? The Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany*, ed. Gregor Schöllgen (Berg, 1990), 8; Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918. Vol. II – Machtstaat und Demokratie* (München: C. H. Beck, 1992); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Das Ringen um den nationalen Staat. Die Gründung und der innere Ausbau des Deutschen Reiches unter Otto von Bismarck 1850 bis 1890* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1993); Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich: Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler 1871–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1995); Helmut Bley, *Namibia under German Rule* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996); Lothar Gall, *Europa auf dem Weg in die Moderne, 1850–1890* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1997);

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Horst Gründer, “Zum Stellenwert des Rassismus im Spektrum der deutschen Kolonialideologie,” in *Rassenmischehen – Mischlinge – Rassentrennung. Zur Politik der Rasse im deutschen Kolonialreich*, ed. Frank Becker (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2004). Already in the 1970s, Hans Fenske demonstrated that expansionist sentiment was not merely a product of German nationalism after the founding of the German Empire. Although his work traced German colonial discourse to the eighteenth century, his findings never led to a revision of the “Wehlerian paradigm.” In fact, Fenske claimed that his findings supported Wehler’s thesis, which they did not. See Hans Fenske, “Imperialistische Tendenzen in Deutschland vor 1866: Auswanderung, überseeische Bestrebungen, Weltmachtsträume,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 97/98 (1978): 378–79. Only in the 1990s did scholars begin to engage more seriously and in sustained fashion with Germany’s expansionist past; this group of scholars includes, most prominently, Susanne Zantop, Jürgen Zimmerer, Pascal Grosse, Birthe Kundrus, and John K. Noyes. In the first years of the twenty-first century, several important works on this subject have been published, including Jürgen Conrad’s *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, Andrew Zimmerman’s *Alabama in Africa*, Lora Wildenthal’s *German Women for Empire*, Dirk van Laak’s *Imperiale Infrastruktur*, and Matthew Fitzpatrick’s *Liberal Imperialism in Germany*. See Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany*; Frank Lorenz Müller, “Imperialist Ambitions in Vormärz and Revolutionary Germany: The Agitation for German Settlement Colonies Overseas, 1840–1849,” *German History* 17, no. 3 (1999); Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner* (Münster: Lit, 2001); Birthe Kundrus, “Die Kolonien – “Kinder des Gefühls und der Phantasie,” in *Phantasiereiche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, ed. Birthe Kundrus (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2003); Birthe Kundrus, “Von Windhoek nach Nuernberg? Koloniale ‘Mischehenverbote’ und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung,” in *Phantasiereiche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, ed. Birthe Kundrus (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 2003); Benjamin Madley, “Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803–1910,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 2 (2004); Dirk van Laak, *Imperiale Infrastruktur: Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004); Pascal Grosse, “What Does German Colonialism Have To Do With National Socialism? A Conceptual Framework,” in *Germany’s Colonial Pasts*, ed. Eric Ames (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German Southwest Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe,” *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005); Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (München: C. H. Beck, 2006); John K. Noyes, “Commerce, colonialism, and the globalization of action in late Enlightenment Germany,” *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006); Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism in Germany. Expansionism and Nationalism, 1848–1884* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2008); Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).



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During the decades immediately following World War II, the political atmosphere in West Germany strengthened the tendency of a new generation of German historians to dismiss the phenomenon of German imperialism as secondary, as part of an authoritarian and antiliberal past that needed to be erased. The ideological needs of the young, West German republic thus reinforced scholarly propensities to create a history of liberalism that was untainted by expansionist tendencies. Similar leanings can be observed in the United States during the Cold War. After 1945, the face-off with the Soviet Union, which had just extended its hegemony over almost all of Central and Eastern Europe, helped generate the idea that America's own imperialist and colonialist past was positively exceptional. According to this notion, the United States, unlike most European states, never (or at the most only peripherally) engaged in the so-called New Imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during which Europeans divided up much of the world. As a result, late nineteenth-century American imperialism, peaking with the conquest of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam in 1898, was presented as an unfortunate and brief "aberration" from American liberal and republican principles (the Philippines gained independence in 1946). More important, America's westward expansion before the 1890s was typically entirely absolved of ties to imperialism. Despite having been debunked by scholars, the notion that the United States was never an imperialist nation still permeates American political discourse today.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Liberal Imperialism in Germany. Expansionism and Nationalism, 1848–1884*, 4. Use of the term "empire" in respect to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American continental expansion (as opposed to American imperialism after 1898) remains infrequent and quasi-heretical to this day. The geographer Neil Smith, author of one of the most recent books on American imperialism, thus distinguishes American imperialism after 1898 from American westward expansion. In his classic study *The Rising American Empire*, Robert W. Van Alstyne argues that, through the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans used the term "empire" and conceived of the United States as an ever expanding "empire." After the Civil War, this particular characterization began to fall out of favor and, from 1898 onward, was used by critics of U.S. overseas expansion. After World War I, "imperialism" ceased to

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Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German expansionists saw a different history. The United States was immensely important for them because they viewed America as an expanding empire even before it acquired overseas colonies. After all, during the nineteenth century, two issues that became more and more critical for German expansionists existed conjointly along the American frontier and in the American South: Acquiring space prompted the need to manage people(s), and this management was often carried out through race. For German expansionists, the U.S. experience thus became especially important with respect to questions of settler colonialism and the “handling” of native and other allegedly racially inferior peoples.

In recent years, German colonial activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have attracted the attention of a number of scholars. This scholarly interest has resulted in the publication of many exciting new works on the German Empire, German imperialism, and German liberalism. Sebastian Conrad's *Globalisierung und Nation* reinterprets Imperial German history against a global and transnational backdrop. Andrew Zimmerman's *Alabama in Africa* expertly demonstrates that concrete economic and intellectual connections between Germany, Germany's African colonies, and the American South shaped this transnational framework. In addition, Matthew Fitzpatrick's *Liberal Imperialism* outlines nineteenth-century German liberalism's relationship to expansionist discourse and shows how colonialist visions played a key role for German liberals in their attempt to construct a German national identity between 1848

be a positive categorization in any way, and after World War II, maintaining America's nonentanglement in the history of European imperialism became a common exercise. Richard Koebner, “The Concept of Economic Imperialism,” *The Economic History Review* 2, no. 1 (1949): 5; William Appleman Williams, “The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy,” *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (1955); R.W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), 6–7; Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xiii.