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Imperial Correlations Between German Southwest Africa and the Nazi Reich

In studying the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, the average historian faces the danger of conceding to the idea that such a regime was an anomaly isolated from other cases of genocide fed by Western imperialism. Although the Holocaust and its related efforts were certainly a phenomenon in terms of organization, success, and breadth, to cut this case off from the rest of its ideological brethren represents an ignorance of correlating factors and encourages the belief that such a situation is unrepeatable. To combat this inclination to ostracism, Ben Kiernan presents his work *Blood and Soil* as an examination of the unifying themes of global genocide, which are composed of expansionism, racism, agrarianism, and the cult of antiquity. Although these themes may seem vague, even irrelevant to each other and the topic, Kiernan painstakingly documents the events of more than fifteen international examples of genocide, including Nazi Germany and German Southwest Africa where the extermination of the Herero and Nama peoples were among the most thorough and destructive in all of Africa, and how each one connects to the broader themes of mass murder. However, these two cases powered by the Nazi Reich and the Kaiserreich are also united by the common goals of imperialism, which can be summarized as the quest to spread commerce, Christianity, and civilization. To be fair, the Nazi Reich was far less interested in spreading Christianity as opposed to community, but its interest in economy and Aryan culture are undeniable on any front.

As each of these themes coincide within both case studies, the imperial correlations between the Herero Genocide of German Southwest Africa and the occupation of Eastern Europe under the Third Reich become more clearly manifest despite the differences in time, regime, and geography. As such, these links serve to refute the myth that the origins and outcomes of National Socialism were an aberration unrelated to the wider world of Western imperialism.

To ground these theories in the cases presented in Kiernan's book, it serves to explain the origin and relationship of each one within the broader narrative of genocide. Linking the claim of a Portuguese Jesuit that the whole world was homicidal at the beginning of man with early modern Europeans' increased interest in expansionism, Kiernan asserts that "a cult of antiquity inspired those on the brink of modernity even as they took up technological innovations, including some that facilitated mass murder."¹ This obsession with ancestral connection has manifested itself in more than one form, from attempts to claim legitimacy for new eras from past empires to attempts to emulate the success and influence of these bygone dynasties. All of Western civilization remained, and still remains, entranced with the precedent set by Rome as it asserted its power over the Mediterranean world. As such, this rapture has created a complex in which new generations seek the affirmation of past generations by imitating their same values and ideologies. On a contrary note, the Old Testament, whose teachings were replete throughout the medieval Christian world, stood in stark opposition to active cultivation, as shown by Cain's portrayal and dismissal after murdering his brother Abel. Instead, "Biblical pastoralism and the medieval model of a pristine, idyllic garden both

¹ Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (Harrisonburg: Yale University Press, 2007), 1.

rejected the cultivator. Farming found relative ideological favor only in the modern era.”² The emphasis on farming was a product of the despicable union between misled ideas about ancestral claim to the earth and about which ethnic group was most suited to proper farming. The National Socialists of Germany in particular honed in on this theory of a blood stake in the soil. The idea of blood is an ancient ideal from which racism takes its root. Before the modern era, racism was based primarily on matters of religion, particularly in terms of the Abrahamic faiths, but with the dawn of the Industrial age, racism began to take on a more scientific format as the expansionist powers of Europe, as well as those in other corners of the globe, looked to quantify their xenophobia with their newfound tool of conquest. Representing the tying point between each other genocidal tenet and the aims of imperialism, expansionism serves as the focal point for the aims of ancestral emulation, agrarian enterprise, and racial justification as well as the first necessary step in ensuring the imperial spread of commerce, Christianity, and civilization. While these imperial aims are exclusive to the European standard in the case of Christianity, this is not to say that the rest of the globe lacked similar goals of conquest. For the two cases under study, the Herero Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, these three standards apply in eerily similar and reflective ways.

Although European imperialism had truly begun with the discovery of the New World at the end of the fifteenth century, the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 began a trajectory of exploitation and extermination over Africa that would arc across the turn of the century and have lasting consequences into the present day. Held in the capital of the newly unified German State, the conference was organized by Otto von Bismarck, the

² Kiernan, *Blood and Soil*, 2.

Iron Chancellor, despite his personal disinterest in colonialism. Indeed, Bismarck was not alone in his sentiments. None of the German states had actively pursued a unified colonial enterprise until 1879 with the signing of a “Friendship Treaty” between Samoa and other European powers, but according to co-authors Julia Hell and George Steinmetz, “the conventional date marking the onset of the formal German empire is April 24, 1884, when Germany declared Southwest Africa a protectorate.”³ Later that year, the Conference for the partition of Africa began with representatives from nearly every major and minor Western power in attendance. Naturally, there were no representatives from any existing or prospective African colonies present; however, as noted in his review of *Bismarck, Europe and Africa*, A. G. Hopkins notes “there is general agreement...that [the Conference] did not cause partition and that Crowe was broadly correct in minimizing its influence.”⁴ Rather, the Conference marked the fifteenth year in a sudden reversal of public opinion concerning colonialism. Although the nineteenth century had opened with the same fervor for imperialist aspirations as in years past, public opinion had grown increasingly hostile toward expansionism, likely a result of the rise of humanism within intellectual circles. Despite the claim that such endeavors were in favor of commercial expansion, research conducted by Dr. Rempel at Western New England College states that “by the 1820’s several countries, after having long colonial connections, had lost

³ Julia Hell and George Steinmetz, “The Visual Archive of Colonialism: Germany and Namibia,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 48 (2006): accessed April 24, 2016, <http://publicculture.org/articles/view/18/1/the-visual-archive-of-colonialism-germany-and-nam>

⁴ A. G. Hopkins, Review of *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Africa Conference, 1884-1885, and the Onset of Partition*, edited by Stig Forster, Wolfgang Mommsen, Ronald Robinson, *The Journal of African History* 33, no. 2 (1992): 350, accessed April 25, 2016, [http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/pdf/183027.pdf?_ =1461649233872](http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/pdf/183027.pdf?_=1461649233872)

these connections without suffering any apparent economic deprivation.”⁵ Echoing this observation is Joseph A Schumpeter who argues instead that imperialism was driven more by the act of action, for the simple sake of being a goal for a nation to accomplish.⁶ Schumpeter’s strongest argument however is one that coincides with Kiernan’s pre-established theories on genocide: imperialism is an atavism. Just as certain species honor their hereditary roots with retentive genes, both imperialism and genocide exhibit tendencies to revert back to a preconceived notion of an ancestral precedent. This tendency serves as one of the largest prompting factors in validating colonial ventures abroad with events like the Berlin Conference.

With the establishing of Southwest Africa as a German protectorate in 1884 and the claiming of modern day Tanzania and the Republics of Cameroon and Togo by the following year, Germany had established itself as a serious player in the realm of colonial enterprise, superseded only by the French and the British in scale on conquest. Having created an overseas empire of considerable diversity, the German Reich was able to call upon the resources provided by “hunters in the Kalahari desert, Nama pastoralists, Ngoni soldiers, Islamic lords in the Sudan, Swahili-speaking traders, and many others” to provide the economic gain that purportedly accompanies imperialism.⁷ With the smallest

⁵ Gerhard Rempel, “The New Imperialism,” *Internet Archive*, last modified December 16, 2002, <http://web.archive.org/web/20021216072333/http://mars.acnet.wnec.edu/~grempe/courses/wc2/lectures/imperialism.html>

⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, “The Sociology of Imperialism, 1918,” *Modern History Sourcebook*, accessed April 25, 2016. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1918schumpeter1.asp>

⁷ Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, “German Imperialism in Africa: The Distorted Images of Cameroon, Namibia, Tanzania, and Togo,” *Journal of Black Studies* 23, no. 2 (1992): 235-46, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/pdf/2784532.pdf>

number of indigenous people living within the second largest territory under German imperial control, Southwest Africa appeared to be the most ideal location to begin colonizing in earnest. Thus began the invasive acquisition of land and resources once occupied by the Herero and Nama peoples. Relying on the strict traditions of Herero kinship and the Germans' stereotypical ideas about "tribal" governance, Samuel Maharero, a Herero man educated in local Lutheran schools, was able to manipulate his way into becoming paramount chief over all Hereros. During this time of already unstable relations with the German colonists, the area was struck by an outbreak of rinderpest, which rendered the primary source of economic wealth and diet obsolete. According to Richard Voeltz's review of *Herero Heroes*, "the rinderpest epidemic further weakened Herero society, forcing large numbers of Hereros off the land and onto the labor market. New warlords such as Kajata and Willy Kain, as well as Samuel Mahaerero, sought to exploit the situation by exporting labor and selling land."⁸ These stressors in combination with the various indignities of rape, drunkenness, and an inability to testify in court finally culminated with a mass revolt in January of 1904. Despite having acquired his command only four months prior, the German general Lothar von Trotha defeated the Herero at the Battle of Waterberg, shepherded the survivors into the Omaheke Desert, and sealed the way behind them with his now infamous Extermination Order, which mandated that any Herero, be them man, woman, or child, caught trying to escape back into German territory would be shot on sight. Von Trotha's

⁸ Richard A. Voeltz, Review of *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Heroes of Namibia, 1890-1923*, by Jan-Bart Gewald, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 435-36, accessed April 25, 2016, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.waterfield.murraystate.edu/stable/pdf/220700.pdf?_=1461657007646

threat, meant to forcibly secure the land for the German Reich, echoed the passionate request of a Pan-German advertisement some fourteen years earlier, which called for all Germans to “be a conquering people which takes its portion of the world itself!”⁹ Having taken this new portion of the world through incredible force, von Trotha and his men seemed content to wait out their victims in the desert until starvation and dehydration finished the war for them. With their atavistic obsession with imperialism, reliance on racial tropes, pursuit of expansive territory, and exploitation of preexisting economic factors, the German occupation of what would one day become Namibia was a textbook example of genocide according to Kiernan, such that it rendered conditions for life impossible.

Meanwhile, many Herero men, women, and children were taken to concentration camps, like the establishments on Shark Island, where they experienced forced labor, inadequate living conditions, regular sexual assault, and medical experimentation meant to further justify the racist stigmas developed by imperial theorists all over Europe. These medical experimentations were powered by the drive to develop the fields of anthropology and ethnography, which at that time served to perpetuate the idea of “tribalism” as a way of over simplifying and trivializing the monolithic social structure of native peoples. This racist ideology, already prevalent among intellectual groups and growing with each passing year, was also rampant among the common people, though to a much less precise degree. In his written recollections, a German foot soldier named Gustave Freensen documents his experiences while on campaign from 1903 to 1904,

⁹ Mildred S. Wertheimer, “Program of the Pan-German League, 1890-1898,” *Modern History Sourcebook*, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1890pangerman.asp>

during which he remarks that he “was surprised that so many hard undertakings, of which I had never heard or read so much as a word, had been carried through by Germans, and that already so much German blood had been lavishly spilled in this hot, barren land.”¹⁰

Underlining the fact that the common German displayed little understanding of his environment while maintaining a deeply ingrained complex of blood superiority, Freensen’s story is also a chilling tale of brutality against “the enemy”, a brutality that Kaiser Wilhelm II praises in his speech to the Reichstag in November of 1905 in which he proclaims that “I know that I speak for the German people when I warmly thank and proudly acknowledge the officers and troops who answered my call and defended our territories with heroic courage at risk to their own lives.”¹¹ That “heroic courage” culminated with the extermination of some 75,000 Herero and Nama people, an eighty percent and fifty percent depopulation, respectively. Although the number of victims and persecutors would increase dramatically with the rise of the Nazi Reich within the next three decades, the themes of imperialism and genocide established by the precedent in Namibia would serve as a common thread with the goals of the National Socialist Party.

As the most infamous political group in Western memory, the National Socialists occupy a piece of cultural memory so dark and twisted that it seems only possible to consider it in isolation to other cases. Having risen to power in the late 1920s and early 1930s on the rising wave of discontented Germans angry with the policies introduced by

¹⁰ Gustave Freensen, “In the German South African Army, 1903-1904,” *The World’s Story: A History of the World in Story, Song and Art* 3, edited by Eva March Tappan, *Modern History Sourcebook*, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1904freesen.asp>

¹¹ Kaiser Wilhelm II, “The Kaiser on Southwest Africa: Reichstag Speech by Wilhelm II (November 28, 1905),” *The Speeches of Kaiser Wilhelm II*, edited by Johannes Penzler, *German History in Documents and Images* 3: 289, accessed April 26, 2016, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=788

the Weimar Republic, the Nazis established a despotic authority with incredible rapidity that relied on the universal belief in a racial hierarchy crowned by the Aryan Volk. At the very bottom of this social totem pole were the Slavs of Eastern Europe while Jews were not even considered to be part of this structure. With the invasion and partition of Poland in 1939, the Nazis established a harsh system of targeted elimination that demanded the systematic murder of Polish elites, including military officers, priests, political figures, and aristocratic leaders, to effectively wipe out the carriers of Polish nationalism. As Shelley Baranowski notes in her book *Nazi Empire*, “from the outset, the German attack was an ideologically motivated total war aimed at the destruction of the Polish nation.”¹² In tandem with this idea were the brutal reprisals put in place by the Nazi occupation forces which designated that any Pole caught aiding or abetting a Jew would be put to death, a decree which existed nowhere else in the whole of Nazi occupied Europe. This treatment of Polish citizens reflected both the racist ideologies of the Nazi Reich as well as the expansionist policies required for *Lebensraum*, the term coined by Friedrich Ratzel in 1901 to encompass the quest for land sufficient for the needs of ethnic Germans. The idea of divide and conquer within the Polish lands was not a new idea, either in terms of concept as explored within the colonial holdings of the Kaiserreich or location as evidenced by the 1915 proposal *Land ohne Menschen*, which cleaved to the idea of a German colonial destiny in the East. Therefore, “the Nazis were thus certainly not the first German nationalists to think of radical solutions for the Polish

¹² Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 234.

problem through colonization and expulsion.”¹³ Indeed, the post-war aspect of the *Generalplan Ost* involved the starvation, ejection, and enslavement of some thirty million Slavs per each fate so that the final dream of the Nazi Empire might be realized: Germanization of the East. It was toward this ultimatum that every aspect of the imperialist genocide enacted throughout Eastern Europe was driven, from the racial hierarchy of Nazi society and obsession with claiming Roman legitimacy to the quest for “living space” and land for cultivation.

The organization of Eastern Europe under the Nazi Regime involved the implementation of *Generalplan Ost*, which was an odious enough program even without its post-war aims. It was designed as a means of expelling, exterminating, or enslaving the entire Slavic population of Eastern Europe in order to make room for immigrating ethnic Germans. Combining the ideologies of *Lebensraum* with *Drang nach Osten*, the plan was never fully utilized during the war due to Germany’s defeat; however, millions of civilian deaths can still be attributed to its earlier *Kleine Planung*. This first version of the plan, to be carried out while invasion was underway, called for the removal of several million people from the Balkan states, whose political lines would be subsequently wiped out. Whether a land was directly annexed to Germany or simply made a protectorate, *Einsatzgruppen* were released across the territory to weed out Jews and partisans with savage meticulousness while the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe was slowly dissolved by means of labor camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau and later through the efforts of the *Aktion Reinhard* death camps, Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. As the Wehrmacht was slowly ground back across its territory, marginal concentration camps were emptied

¹³ Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 78.

in anticipation of enemy liberation, where “their inmates were either killed, allowed to die on pointless death marches or herded into other camps inside the Reich, where overcrowding, overwork, the lack of supplies, disease and the brutality of the guards soon caused the mortality rate to soar.”¹⁴ It was this final stage that saw the Nazi war machine was at its most destructive, bloodily sputtering across its now lost territories while cannibalizing itself as the doctrines it was built upon came crashing down.

Connected most clearly by the shared themes of genocide coined by Kiernan, the Herero Genocide of Southwest Africa and the occupation regime of Eastern Europe under the Nazi Empire exhibit certain subtle and obvious correlations that seek to join the two disparate cases together in a common realm of genocide fathered by imperialism. Despite their differences in geography and regime, both cases employ racism as a quantifiable branch of science, able to be proved through anatomical measurements, and rely on a cult of antiquity to lend legitimacy to their claims for nationhood and existence. Additionally, neither case wasted time building schools, hospitals, or new missionaries in either dominated territory as the single goal was the conversion of the land to a Germanized agrarian state, possible only through aggressive expansionism at the price of the racially inferior as dictated by the norms established by antiquity. Indeed, these four themes are hardly the only correlating factors. Rather, the two cases actually share key figures in their related events. The father of Nazi leader Herman Göring served as the *Reichskommissar* of German Southwest Africa while the future Nazi governor of Bavaria, Franz Ritter, was directly involved in the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples. Future rector of the University of Berlin during the Nazi Regime, Eugen Fischer

¹⁴ Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, 406.

“carried out his racialist research in German Southwest Africa, on miscegenation among the mixed Dutch/Hottentot ‘Rehoboth Bastards.’”¹⁵ During his time at the University, Fischer was responsible for supporting the pseudo-science that would later compose the research of the infamous Josef Mengele. This sharing of culpable figures resulted also in the shared usage of language when referring to those deemed to be “unclean”, “uncivil”, or “savage”. This common terminology hints at the intellectual as well as social threads that run through both regimes just as it supports the similarity in policies and administration. Perhaps one of the most interesting correlations between each case is the perpetuity of the German victim complex first established by the outcome of the Thirty Years’ War. This complex was strengthened by their later defeat at the hands of Napoleon and their failure to unify in 1848. Having been constantly overshadowed and overpowered by their more puissant neighbors, Germans began to cultivate a need for strength within numbers via unification. In order to defend that unification, there came the drive to conquer or be conquered, as evidenced by their almost immediate involvement in colonial enterprises in order to measure up to their French and British rivals. This desire would only be destroyed after the defeat and partition of Germany following World War II.

For all that genocide has occurred many times over the course of human history, the term itself is not yet a century old. Instead, it was coined during the Second World War by Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin who witnessed the systematic destruction of his people and understood it to be far more than an act of war. Lemkin’s definition qualified genocide as the destruction of the political and social structures of culture,

¹⁵ Kiernan, *Blood and Soil*, 36.

language, nationality, religion, and economy as well as the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and physical life. Although his definition was eventually rejected and modified, his efforts were instrumental in organizing the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948. This convention was pivotal in establishing a precedent for justice within international courts, based on the opening of the resolution which stated how “recognizing that at all periods of history genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity; and being convinced that, in order to liberate mankind from such an odious scourge, international co-operation is required”.¹⁶ In part due to the sheer magnitude of the atrocity and also due to the inclination toward activism with regards to European brutality, the definition of genocide was established alongside a universal declaration of human rights in that same year which stated that “whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”¹⁷ Ignoring the inherent ironies of realizing such human standards only in retrospect to a largely European humanitarian disaster, the efforts of the U.N. to quantify such a crime and attach added significance to it were commendable, and while they have been largely unsuccessful in preventing genocide, recognition for the crime has certainly increased. Perhaps one of

¹⁶ “Resolution 260 (III) A of the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1948” *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, The Avalon Project*, accessed on April 26, 2016,

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/genocide.asp

¹⁷ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *U.N. Convention 1948, The Avalon Project*, accessed April 26, 2016,

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/unrights.asp

the largest dangers to the integration of the Nazi Holocaust into the global narrative lies in the ideas promoted by historians like Daniel Goldhagen. In his work *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Goldhagen examines the origins and permeation of anti-Semitism within German society and how this lone ideology was enough to launch the most virulently destructive genocide in human history. According to him, German anti-Semitism was an almost racial archetype and “no other source of motivation can plausibly account for their actions.”¹⁸ Even with disregarding the simple ahistorical nature of his argument, Goldhagen’s theory perpetuates the myth that National Socialist ideologies were stand-alone anomalies without any kind of foundational logos and independent of the intricate racial hierarchy. By pinning the entire justification for the Holocaust solely on the role of anti-Semitism, Goldhagen creates the idea that such genocidal motivations are easily identifiable and “curable”. Goldhagen’s assessment is limited at best and ultimately fails to grasp the overarching imperial and genocidal concepts that are shared between the occupation of Eastern Europe and the Genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples.

¹⁸ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 416.