Fascist Empire?

Nazi Germany and the Problem of Colonialism

The Holocaust as a Colonial Genocide: A Fierce Debate

Few topics have recently sparked more controversy in contemporary German history than the possible nexus between colonialism and the Nazis’ policies of dominion in Eastern Europe. Starting in the early 1950s, and influenced by the violent anti-colonial struggles of the post-war period, various intellectuals such as Martinique-born Frantz Fanon and Jewish-German émigré Hannah Arendt made a strong point for seeing in western colonialism an important, albeit not the only historical factor contributing to the rise of Hitler’s dictatorship in the 20th century. They argued that the European experience in the colonies had a dramatic backlash on the Old Continent itself. Racist thought and action severely influenced western political cultures since the late 19th century. What Arendt dubbed the «boomerang effect» of imperialism resulted in a radicalization of racist ideologies on the Old Continent, thereby laying one of the foundations of mass violence during World War II. By the 1990s, Fanon’s and Arendt’s ideas have been taken up by historians such as Mark Mazower and Jürgen Zimmerer who, informed by postcolonial thought, describe Nazi dominion of Europe as an extreme form of colonial rule. Thus, instead of focusing on the purported peculiarities of German traditions, they have tried to understand the causes of the Holocaust from a perspective that transcends national historiography.

Within mainstream historiography on Nazism, this approach was met by sharp criticism, if it was not ignored altogether. The reluctance to use broader international concepts such as imperialism had foremost to do with historiographical traditions. Nation-centered accounts had been the quasi natural framework of analysis since the professionalization of the discipline in the 19th century. Yet it appears that there have always been political reasons at play as well. A good example is the objection raised by left-liberal historians since the 1980s. According to Ian Kershaw, for instance, the Holocaust and thus the entire Nazi regime were unique, and cannot be compared to any other regime, colonial or not. This notion is again the result of the massive public controversy that broke out in the Mid-1980s over the manner in which the Nazi regime should be contextualized, known as

the «Historians’ Dispute». Conservative scholars argued for a general revision of the history of the Nazi period through comparison. As their left-liberal opponents claimed, the «revisionists» were interested in «relativizing» the history of Nazism, that is, in demonstrating that although the «Third Reich» was criminal, «there were many others like it, and therefore the Germans had no reason to feel more guilty about their past than any other people»³. While some Germans whole-heartedly embraced this comforting national narrative, for now the left-liberal historians seem to have won the upper hand; the idea of the Nazi Holocaust as a historical singularity has become one of the corner stones of German identity.

Thus, stakes are high in this debate that has lasted for decades now. One would therefore assume that everything has already been said about Nazism’s place in a wider world. Surprisingly, both the proponents of the idea that there was a colonial dimension to Nazi politics in Eastern Europe and their critics offer relatively little empirical backing for their assumptions. As even their most fervent supporters admitted, Arendt and Fanon never provided extensive evidence to make their point⁴. Likewise, the works of their opponents also show some astounding lacunae. Klaus Hildebrand, for instance, in his voluminous study «Vom Reich zum Weltreich» (or in English «From Empire to World Empire»), published in 1969, stated that Hitler and his inner circle were never interested in colonies and even showed much contempt for the seemingly old world of 19th century colonialism⁵. On the other hand, however, Hildebrand failed to discuss the wide-ranging German planning that took place from the late 1930s onwards in terms of mastering both the future German colonies in Africa and its newly conquered territories in Eastern Europe.

Germany’s Ties with Other Empires

As my research has shown, both projects were not only taken seriously by the regime, they were also considerably influenced by colonial ideologies, knowledge, and practices. Admittedly, it was not the country’s own colonial experiences that the German planning staff in the various «think tanks» of the regime drew upon and made use of when designing, for instance, settlement schemes for the future German «Middle Africa» and occupied Poland and Russia. As a matter of fact, Hitler himself, but also some of his closest collaborators, such as Hans Frank and Heinrich Himmler, considered colonization under the «Kaiser» a complete failure. However, the German dictator and his inner

⁴ King and Stone, *Introduction*, cit., pp. 3 and 7.
circle took a very different stance when it came to the colonial endeavours of other European nations. In general, there was a significant interest in foreign templates. While German planners had a general interest in international colonialism, there was one country that stood out as a template: Fascist Italy, since Mussolini’s «March on Rome» much envied and admired by Hitler, despite all the resentments that many Germans nourished against their neighbors south of the Alps.

**Colonial Lessons: Fascist Italy as a Template**

German officials did not limit themselves to simply lauding the Fascist endeavors in Africa; their interest also translated into tangible instances of cross-cultural emulation. This concerned at first German colonial planning in the more traditional sense of the word. Starting in 1933 and with increasing intensity after the spring of 1940, when it appeared that Germany would inherit the overseas possessions of defeated France and Belgium, numerous state and Party organizations developed serious and very detailed plans for a «Mittelafrika» that was to complement the future German «living space» in Europe. These plans borrowed heavily from Italian experiences in Abyssinia. The planning staff mimicked numerous Italian policies, ranging from bureaucratic structures needed to manage the new colonial territories to police repression and even racism.

There is clear indication that German legal experts emulated Italian racial laws when they drafted the «Kolonialblutschutzgesetz», a law to protect the «purity of the German blood» in Germany’s future African possessions.

This emulation process was not limited to the African colonial experience, but also influenced Nazi empire-building in Eastern Europe. Again, Germans learned at various levels. Those technocrats charged with elaborating plans to settle millions of German colonists in Eastern Europe, to give just one example, adopted Fascist Italian colonial architecture in order to create a new settler society at the edge of the new German empire. It was not so much the aesthetics of Italy’s new settlements...

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and towns in Libya and Abyssinia they were interested in, but their social and political functions, i.e. providing all necessary facilities to serve the goal of social integration of the new settlers. In the end, the Fascist piazza actually travelled from Libya as far as occupied Poland where it was integrated in some model villages for German settlers.

**Why these findings do not minimize German responsibility for Nazi crimes: a conclusion**

Do these findings relativize the crimes committed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe, as contended by Nicola Labanca? I would argue no. In fact, they might even augment their severity. Logically, the severity of Nazi crimes would only be reduced if the Germans had been forced to work with Italy and/or adopt elements of Mussolini’s regime. However, German collaboration with Italy was wholly voluntary. Moreover, based on their study of Italian colonial policy in Africa, German planners knew that the forced relocation of indigenous populations, for instance, was only possible through violence and murder. Considering German planners adopted techniques of racial exclusion with full knowledge of their murderous consequences, one could even speak of heightened German culpability.¹⁰

My findings are also fully in line with more recent international research that has revised earlier apologetic accounts. Some scholars of the German occupation of Europe once argued that highlighting the active collaboration of indigenous populations in Ukraine, Poland, and Hungary could be seen as minimizing German responsibility for the Holocaust. However, such arguments, which were the product of an effort to whitewash one owns’ responsibility and construct artificial notions of national difference, are now universally rejected. Labanca seems to be unaware of these more recent trends in international historiography on Axis rule in Europe. Also, it is extremely unfortunate that Labanca refrains from explaining why German culpability is at all mitigated by transnational borrowing; claiming such a causal link is indeed anything but self-explanatory. Rather, it requires a solid argument that is supported by a vindication why such a far-reaching statement is valid. With my paper, I hope to contribute to the effort to overcome worn patterns of thought and outdated notions of national particularism, particularly in relation to the study of exchange between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Transnational history offers a unique occasion to dispose of outmoded national stereotypes. One should take advantage of this opportunity.

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