

# Book Review: German Colonialism in a Global Age

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*While most studies of European colonialism tend to focus on the British and French empires, German colonialism in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had a significant impact not only on German colonies, but also on German society itself. In this book, a number of scholars assess German colonialism during the Bismarckian and Wilhelmine eras (1871–1918) and how colonial mentalities and practices shaped later histories during the Nazi era. Mahon Murphy writes that the book does an admirable job of bringing together diverse approaches on the subject, while inviting the reader to reconsider imperial history and the global interactions that played a fundamental role in shaping it.*

**German Colonialism in a Global Age. Bradley Naranch and Geoff Eley (eds). Duke University Press. 2014.**

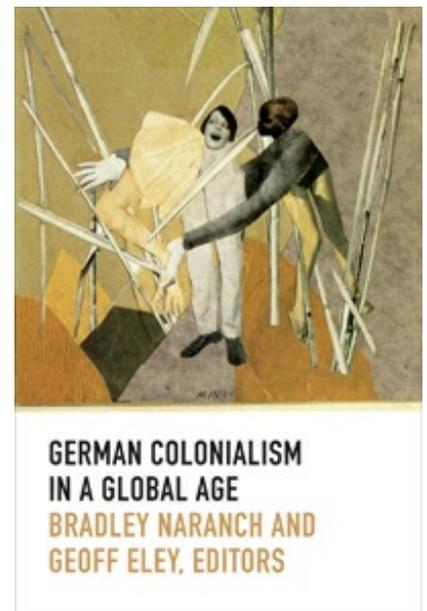
David Ciarlo's contribution to this edited volume on German colonialism makes the connection between the popularity of goods advertised as suitable for the colonies in late nineteenth century German newspapers and trends among modern urbanites for outdoor gear and off road vehicles. Both are, or were, rarely applied to their designed use but their suitability for rugged conditions serves as a necessary precondition for their purchase. The same could be said of the study of German colonialism, which more often than not finds itself applied to fields of global history, transnational history, gender studies, the history of the Third Reich and the holocaust and is rarely put to its own specific purpose.

The concept of German colonialism is, for many, a marginal phenomenon. Germany, as a late comer to the Imperial table, holding its colonial possessions for a relatively short thirty years and, overshadowed by the British and French empires, is often overlooked in studies of Imperialism. However, as this book shows, the history of German colonialism highlights crossovers in colonial encounters. As well as offering an insight into the latest historiography on German colonialism this book attempts to integrate the expectations, frustrations and fantasies of the German colonial project into German history in particular and the history of Colonialism general.

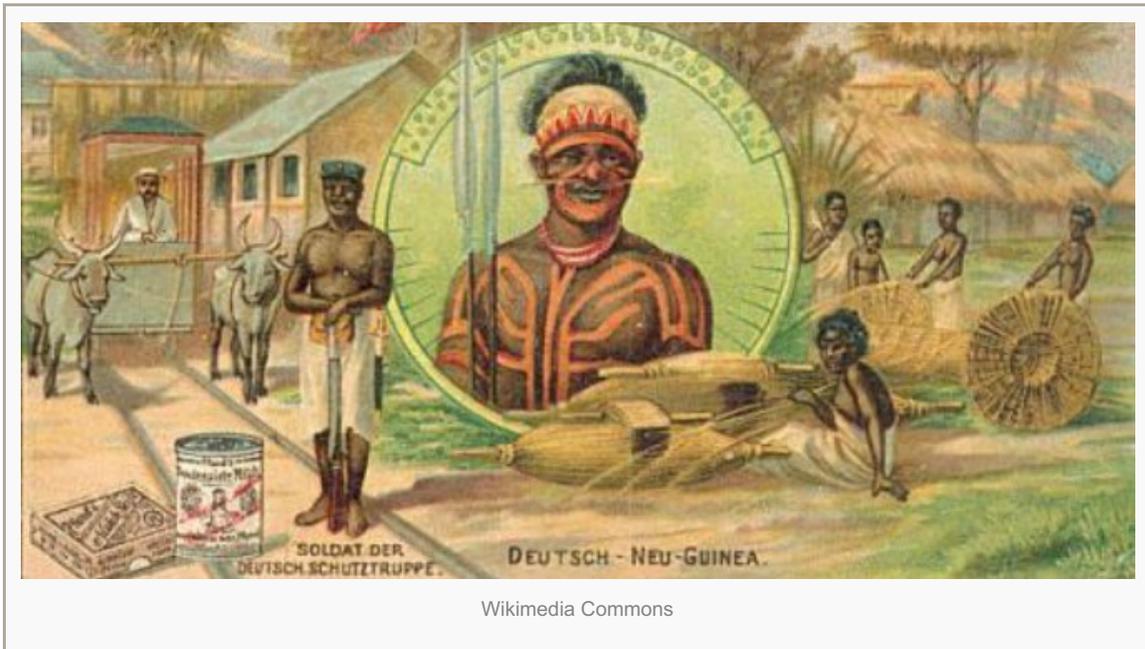
Dennis Sweeney, in his contribution, follows the writing of Ernst Haas, the Chairman of the Pan-German League in 1905, in offering the conceptual difference between colonialism and imperialism. While colonialism involved the direct acquisition of, or control over, territories or the creation of settlement colonies, imperialism acted more as a system of foreign policy and expansionist efforts to bring a state beyond its borders in establishing new governing relationships over its own and 'foreign' peoples. This definition then widens the scope and allows for a very fruitful discussion of German colonialism that does not simply refer to Germany's colonies and protectorates (those looking for an overview of Germany's colonies would be best directed to Sebastian Conrad's 'German Colonialism: A Short History' Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Hence we get an interesting analysis from Jennifer Jenkins of Russian-Germans settling in Iran after the First World War and communist revolution forced them out of Russia and the role the imagined 'Wild East' of Prussian-Poland played in the culture wars of the 1870s and 1880s (Sebastian Conrad's chapter). Through this definition we can understand colonialism through the framework of global modernity.

In the main this book deals with knowledge transfers with other Imperial or Great powers and domestic perceptions in Germany of its colonial project. Germany was of course operating in a period where national mobilisation, networks of capital markets and knowledge converged to produce a new competitive global geopolitics of war and



empire. There is not a lot of space devoted to the indigenous former subjects of the German Empire although there is discussion on how they were perceived and governed, Klaus Mühlmann's chapter on German colonialism in China being particularly interesting with regard to colonials administration. Rather we are presented with a continuation and development of Susanne Zantop's pioneering ideas on the image of empire, the colonial fantasy, in the hundred year history of modern Germany from mid-1800s to the Second World War.



Interestingly, as the distinction between colonialism and Imperialism suggests, this book takes the history of German expansion out of the colonial office or foreign policy makers and looks at the impact of imperial expansion on sociologists, scientists the press, advertisers, and working class Germans. Through the contributions to this volume we can see the pervasiveness and presence of colonial discourse in ordinary German life, illustrated by the wave of patriotism unleashed by the so-called 'Hottentot Elections' December 1906 – January 1907, where colonial interests dominated the campaign agenda.

There is, of course, quite an extensive amount of literature available on Germany's Imperial mission and what this book successfully aims at is to anchor Germany's colonial past in a more expanded history of empire. The scope is broad, when it comes to colonialism; Naranch informs us there are no marginal players and no protected places entirely free of its impact. Secondly and connected, colonialism in Africa and Asia between 1884 and 1914 was neither the first nor the final expression of a continuing imperial project. If this all seems quite loose then that is exactly the point, rather than hoping to trace the road from 'Windhoek to Auschwitz' for example, this volume offers the reader an open ended account of German colonial history with all strands not necessarily leading to Eastern Europe in 1939-45, indeed some not even leading anywhere, but nonetheless interesting for it.

The field of German colonialism is disparate to say the least, but herein lies its usefulness for changing the way we approach the study of history. Without the restraints of a fixed centre or a dominant research paradigm the field is allowed to be, as Naranch argues in the introduction, a site of original and creative scholarship and an area for further growth. The aim of this book is to establish an explanatory framework to help in answering questions related what to makes the study of German colonialism viable and what impact it has had on the German historiography and the study of Empire in general. This edited volume does an admirable job of tackling the task set before it and by widening the definitions of what colonialism meant for those who imagined themselves as colonialists, invites us to reconsider imperial history and the global interactions that played a fundamental role in shaping it. In arguing about the necessity for a study of a relatively minor Empire, Naranch states that the impact of German colonialism could be as subtle as new sentences added to a school text book or as severe as mass murder, internment and economic enslavement. In this edited volume we get a flavour of all these extremes.

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**Mahon Murphy** recently completed his PhD at the History department at the LSE where he also received his MA. He researches on empires during war. His PhD thesis looked at the treatment of European prisoners in a colonial context with a focus on the fall of the German colonies and protectorates in Africa, China and the Pacific. He is currently a fellow at Trinity College Dublin where he is researching on the British military occupation of Jerusalem 1917-1920 as part of the HERA funded project [Making War, Mapping Europe: Militarized Cultural Encounters](#), 1792-1920. [Read more reviews by Mahon.](#)

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