
In Lieu of an Introduction

National Socialism from a Postcolonial Perspective: A Plea for the Globalisation of the History of German Mass Violence

The Germans and Colonialism¹

Germans find colonialism a hard subject to tackle. For many years, it was disregarded at universities and repressed in the public consciousness. Although the subject has been brought back to mind in recent years, it is generally exoticised and treated as a mere banality.²

Hegel's well-known dictum that Africa does not have any history is apparently still believed by many people, at least in the sense that if Africa does have any history, this does not have any relevance to one's 'own' history, whether that is European or German. If taught at university level at all, colonial history has generally been and still is pushed aside into peripheral niches in terms of staff appointments. Although professorships and chairs for African, Asian and Latin American History or for Non-European History in general have been established here and there in recent decades, the result has been to make it even easier for other chairs designated as dealing with national history to focus solely on Germany. Even though this situation is gradually beginning to change, the significance of colonialism and globalisation for German history in particular is still

1 The journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* ('History and Society') recently published an article criticising my theses (Vol. 33, 2007, No. 3). Its polemical tone appeared to be justified by the fact that it was placed in the 'debate' section: after all, when two people are debating it is normal for the tone to become more direct. However, the fact that my reply was not accepted for publication suggests an odd understanding of the academic culture of debate. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* for allowing this debate to continue, regardless of its own position with regard to the content.

2 The three-part television documentary 'Deutsche Kolonien' ('German Colonies', first broadcast by the ZDF from 8–22 November, 2005) may be taken as one example among many. Horst Gründer, the doyen of the field of colonial history in Germany, was responsible for both the film and the accompanying book: Gisela Graichen and Horst Gründer, eds, *Deutsche Kolonien. Traum und Trauma*, München 2005. However, this did not save either the book or the film from being kitschy or from a manner of presentation bordering on the apologetic. See also my detailed critique: Jürgen Zimmerer, "Warum nicht mal 'nen Neger? Menschenfresser und barbusige Mädchen: Ein ZDF-Film und ein Buch verkitschen und verharmlosen den deutschen Kolonialismus in skandalöser Weise" ["Why not put in a negro? Cannibals and bare-breasted girls: a ZDF film and book present a kitschy view of German colonialism that scandalously plays down its impact"], *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (23 November 2005).

being wantonly underestimated. For example, one need only look at the generalised knee-jerk rejection of any postcolonial perspective on the history of the Third Reich, arising at best out of ignorance and at worst out of Eurocentricity and colonial apologetics. It is amazing to see the vehemence with which scholars have refused to consider any link between colonialism and Nazism, or have even branded such thinking as representing an underhand relativisation of the Holocaust. This makes one wonder what kind of idealised image of colonialism it is that is prevalent even in academic circles and that makes it appear almost obscene to attempt to determine structural similarities between the behaviour of German administrators in the colonies and in occupied Russia.

Before going into this in greater detail, I would first like to define the key coordinates of the project that I intend to refer to as 'the globalisation of the history of German violence'. This seems to be necessary as the debate is suffering under a cavalier refusal to acknowledge large parts of the relevant research and also a wilful distortion of its arguments.

Contrary to the claim that is constantly being repeated and which in itself is Germanocentric in its restrictiveness, this debate on the relationship between colonialism and National Socialism is not a reprise of the debate about a German *Sonderweg* (the often postulated 'special path' or 'different way'), nor is it a discussion that is primarily rooted in German history and therefore predominantly shaped by representatives of the German historians' guild. Rather, it is above all a debate about colonialism, its consequences and how it should be handled, both in the former colonies and in the former colonial powers. After all, it was none other than Aimé Césaire who concluded as early as 1950 that the factor that made the Holocaust appear so unbearable

[...] is not the *humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he [Hitler] applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.³

Césaire here stands in the tradition of black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, George Padmore and Oliver Cox, all of whom concerned themselves with the relationship between fascism and colonialism. They saw the former not as an aberration of history but rather as the logical culmination of a European culture of extermination and exploitation that colonialism had given birth to. As early as 1947, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote:

³ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), quoted according to Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, Chicago 2001, p. 246: English edition *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 13 ff.

There was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.⁴

It was contemporaries of the Third Reich who looked to colonialism to explain its atrocities. As authentic expressions of those who had themselves suffered under these forms of violence, they deserve to be examined carefully and not simply swept aside with Eurocentric panache. Such a high-handed attitude, especially coming from the pens of the beneficiaries of colonialism and their descendants, can all too easily become apologetic itself. I shall return to this point below.

Thus Hannah Arendt, who examined imperialism in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951),⁵ was by no means the first to raise the question of a relationship between colonial and Nazi mass violence. She is, however, arguably the most influential of such authors, at least in the field of Holocaust research. She attempted to link colonialism and National Socialism in a fruitful way; whether her attempt was successful or convincing is a matter of continued debate.⁶

The debate about colonialism and National Socialism is not being conducted only in Germany and does not impinge only on research into National Socialism. It is time this was recognised in Germany too. We are now seeing decolonisation and globalisation producing the same effects in the historical field as they already have in the political and economic spheres: doubt is being cast on old certainties and scholars are being forced to adopt new perspectives. A tectonic shift is taking place in the study of history in its traditional westernised manifestations; the subject is becoming and must become global. If this is to be achieved, it is necessary both to solve the fundamental problem of developing concepts and ideas that will allow global history to be written in a way that is truly comprehensive in its scope, and also to answer the central question as to what the actual benefit of a global perspective is: what can be understood better with such a perspective than without it?

4 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (1947), quoted according to Robin Kelly, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism”, *Monthly Review*, 51/6 (1999), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1199kell.htm>, accessed 12 Jul. 2023.

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1951.

6 See also Richard H. King and Dan Stone, eds, *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History. Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide*, New York 2007.

Towards a Global History of Mass Violence

For the global history of mass violence, which will be the primary focus of what follows, this is easy to demonstrate: From Armenia to Rwanda, from the war against the Herero and Nama to the wars of succession in Yugoslavia, extreme violence is a hallmark – if not *the* hallmark – of the 20th century; a violence that is heavily charged with ideology and is exercised indiscriminately against combatants and civilians, against men, women and children. At the centre of these considerations stands the history of the Second World War: the total of 55 million deaths brought about by war and genocide marks this as the bloodiest decade by far⁷ in world history. The task of incorporating the experiences of the Second World War into the framework of a global history of mass violence is one of the challenges that need to be met.

A global history of violence seeks to answer questions about the causes, forms and consequences of such extreme violence. In spite of its obvious importance, the global history of violence is marginalised in two respects: firstly, as mentioned above, because Global History is not adequately represented in academic circles, and secondly because the history of violence – and especially mass violence – is neglected within Global History.⁸ However, if we wish to understand the 20th century we can no longer allow ourselves this luxury.⁹

Much the same applies to German history. Taking it out of its global context simply provincialises it. This is not merely Eurocentric; it also stands in the way of any fruitful approach from the outside to Germany's national history.¹⁰ A post-colonial view of the conduct of the Second World War in the eastern European theatre, on the other hand, brings it out of its historical isolation and makes it fruitful for a global, integral analysis of the 20th century and beyond. This makes

7 It is appropriate to refer to a 'decade' in view of the importance – which is often overlooked from a Eurocentric perspective – of the Asian theatre of war and the fact that the Japanese surrender certainly did not bring the dying to an end immediately.

8 In its efforts to highlight the activity (agency) and the resistance of colonised people, research that is committed to a postcolonial perspective appears to have lost sight of the violent character of colonial mastery.

9 This, however, does not yet even address the importance of an analysis of 20th century violence to the understanding and perhaps the prevention of violence in the 21st century. As an introduction to this topic, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Environmental Genocide? Climate Change, Mass Violence and the Question of Ideology", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9/3 (2007), pp. 349–352.

10 Here I am referring to national history in the narrow sense; because of course German colonial history in Asia, Africa or the Pacific also forms part of German national history, just as Prussian rule over parts of what is now Poland is also certainly to be considered a part of German national history.

many points that otherwise seem incomprehensible much easier to understand. For the history of colonialism, on the other hand, a postcolonial perspective on the politics of German occupation and domination will afford valuable insights into the development, mode of operation and ultimate failure of racial ideologies and the conceptions of *Lebensraum* ('living space') at a crucial point in the development of European modernity.

The purpose of any postcolonial consideration of the Third Reich is to overcome the Eurocentric and to some extent Germanocentric view of the Second World War. It is not its aim to pursue the construction of a German *Sonderweg*, nor to relativise one phenomenon or enhance the significance of another.

Colonialism is an extremely complex phenomenon.¹¹ Its European variant alone¹² showed many different faces in the course of over five centuries, which demand to be taken seriously: European colonialism destroyed and built up, it brought death and medical progress, it brought slavery and education. European colonialism can neither be defined in terms of only one of these forms, nor can the motives, justifications and concrete actions of the Europeans and their descendants or the reactions of the indigenous populations be briefly summed up in any generalised way. It is therefore misleading even to refer simply to 'colonialism'. Colonialism cannot be turned into a dualistic horror story simply by stringing together a set of specific atrocities or of criminal personalities of the stature of a Pizarro or a Lothar von Trotha, any more than it can be transformed into a story of salvation by reference to certain persons whose biographies radiate virtue and achievement or to beneficial developments that it gave rise to. And under no circumstances should colonialism be assessed only in the light of its final phase, when the former colonial powers were desperately attempting at the eleventh hour to fulfil the promise of the 'civilising mission' by which they had justified their empire-building outside Europe. Nor may one, when attempting to arrive at a nuanced assessment of colonialism, ignore the settler colonies: because it was precisely in these, from South to North America, from New Zealand to Australia and on to South Africa, that the devastation and destruction of the indigenous cultures were the most far-reaching.

It is in these countries too that the debate concerning mass violence, especially as reflected in ethnic cleansing and genocide, is currently being conducted on a theoretically sophisticated level. This is the global context in which the de-

¹¹ For an introduction to the topic in German, see Andreas Eckert, *Kolonialismus*, Frankfurt 2006; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Kolonialismus. Geschichte – Formen – Folgen*, München 1995; Wolfgang Reinhard, *Kleine Geschichte des Kolonialismus*, 2nd edn, Stuttgart 2008.

¹² I do not have the space here to discuss non-European forms of colonialism, although they too would be well worth examining.

bate on the first genocide of the 20th century, committed against the Herero and the Nama in German South West Africa (1904–1908), is also being conducted. The fact that this is hardly noticed in Germany, but that the debate is constantly being (mis-)interpreted as a form of German self-absorption, is itself a result of the restrictive narrowness of perspective referred to above.

If the outbreaks of genocidal violence that occurred in Australia, North America and South Africa are analysed, they reveal parallels and structural similarities that are worth looking into. Settler colonialism – which is what we have to do with in all of these three cases – is the attempt to control the indigenous populations of largish geographical areas and reorganise their lives in ways determined by a foreign population that has penetrated the region from outside. Both the initial invasion and the subsequent occupation of foreign continents were justified by dividing humankind into higher ‘races’ with a ‘destiny’ to rule and lower ‘races’ that are subject to them. This doctrine of fundamental inequality was the only way in which the massive theft of land and the vast degree of exploitation that colonialism brought with it could possibly be justified.¹³ All too often, groups of people who were considered to be at the bottom end of this ranking were imagined to be doomed ‘races’. Helping this process along was regarded rather as doing one’s bit to further the inevitable march of world history than as the brutal mass murder that it actually was.¹⁴

In this way, the ground was prepared for the exclusion of the indigenous population from the community of those “whom we are obligated to protect, to take into account, and to whom we must account”,¹⁵ and this was one of the major prerequisites for the initiation of genocide – the ideological prerequisite, so to speak, for turning quite normal people into mass murderers. In addition, considerable pressure was exerted by settlement, which intensified the competition for land; this too made genocidal violence more likely to occur in settler colonies than in plantation colonies:

13 I have explored this point in more detail in Jürgen Zimmerer, “Holocaust und Kolonialismus. Beitrag zu einer Archäologie des genozidalen Gedankens”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 51/12 (2003), pp. 1098–1119 (English version: “Colonialism and the Holocaust. Towards an Archaeology of Genocide”, pp. 125–153 in this book).

14 See, for example, Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies. Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Victoria 1997; Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, Cambridge 1995.

15 Helen Fein, “Definition and Discontent: Labelling, Detecting, and Explaining Genocide in the Twentieth Century”, in Stig Förster and Gerhard Hirschfeld, eds, *Genozid in der modernen Geschichte*, Münster 1999, pp. 11–21, here p. 20.

Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain, or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and the colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals.¹⁶

The mechanism here described is precisely that of settler colonialism: the existing situation or “pattern” is suppressed or even eliminated and then replaced by a new one. It is therefore superfluous to ask whether the term ‘genocide’ can be applied to colonialism: genocide is colonial by nature. This was Raphael Lemkin’s view too, as is shown by the above quotation, taken from his fundamental analysis of the Nazis’ occupation policy in Eastern Europe, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. The ‘father’ of the UN Genocide Convention¹⁷ developed his concept explicitly with both of these phenomena in mind. Lemkin regarded the German occupation and extermination policies as being essentially colonial.

Deprovincialising German History

How important then is the colonial war in German South West Africa within the global history of genocidal violence? The answer is complex: on the one hand, of course, it involves the genocidal quality of settler colonialism – German South West Africa was after all the only German ‘protectorate’ that can be regarded, at least to a certain degree, as a settler colony – while on the other hand it represents a striking example of an outbreak of mass violence in German history. Colonial history is always both a part of the history of the colonised region and also part of the history of the colonising nation. It is precisely this that endows colonialism and the historical research into it with their global character. Within German history, the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes are among the most important points of reference. As the global history of (genocidal) mass violence also represents an important reference framework, this is a point where there is a meeting of interests between those studying national history and those investigating global aspects.

It is, though, little more than a truism that colonial genocide cannot be equated with the Nazi genocide: they were too different in the ways they were executed and in their choices of victims. Ultimately it is not possible to equate

¹⁶ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Law of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*, Washington 1944, p. 79.

¹⁷ With regard to Raphael Lemkin, see Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer, eds, *The Origins of Genocide. Raphael Lemkin as a Historian of Mass Violence*, London 2009.

one historical event with another; but it is nevertheless worthwhile comparing them, as it is not possible to define the specific, singular features of each without precisely detailing the features they have in common, which alone allow such a comparison to be made. This is precisely what comparative genocide research aims at. Any criticisms confusing comparison with equation which may be voiced in the course of such an analysis (and especially where such confusion is deliberate) are both polemical and ideological, or at least are neither scientifically nor intellectually honest.

What then is the relationship between the first genocide of the 20th century and the genocidal colonial violence of previous centuries? If we examine genocidal settler violence, we cannot fail to notice that on the North American and Australian frontiers the predominant factor was privatised violence exercised by individual persons or by groups of local settlers ganging together. At times these actions were sanctioned by the colonial authorities, at other times they were opposed by it. In general, the colonial state had neither the power nor any opportunity to control such behaviour on the spot in individual cases. The violence was correspondingly uncoordinated.¹⁸

Germany's war against the Herero and the Nama, on the other hand, was a turning point in respect of state organisation and bureaucratisation, as it represented a four-year-long, centrally directed colonial war of 'pacification' and genocide. The physical annihilation of the Herero and the Nama was not unintended 'collateral damage' as a by-product of the waging of a brutal war, as was the case in the Philippines more or less contemporaneously; rather, it was the objective of the war almost from the outset.¹⁹ In addition, the war – the causes, progress and consequences of which cannot be described in detail here²⁰ – combined genocidal massacre with ethnic cleansing and extermination through neglect in camps. This

¹⁸ I have examined this issue in detail in Zimmerer, "Holocaust und Kolonialismus" (English version: "Colonialism and the Holocaust", pp. 125–153 in this book).

¹⁹ The thesis of situational radicalisation, recently taken up again by Isabel Hull, which to a great extent casts a veil over the ideological intentions of genocide, does not stand up to an empirical examination. On this subject, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Annihilation in Africa: The 'Race War' in German Southwest Africa (1904–1908) and its Significance for a Global History of Genocide", *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Washington 37/Fall (2005), pp. 51–57.

²⁰ For an introduction to the history of the war, see Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg in Namibia (1904–1908) und seine Folgen*, Berlin 2003. As an introduction to its historiography, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Colonial Genocide: The Herero and Nama War (1904–1908) in German South West Africa and its Significance", in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of Genocide*, London 2007, pp. 323–343.

too betrays a degree of ideological conviction and political centralisation that does not appear to have existed to the same extent in other colonial contexts.²¹

The genocide in South West Africa is important in German history in two respects. Firstly, it showed that fantasies of genocidal violence (and actions in realisation of those fantasies) existed in the German military and administration as early as the beginning of the 20th century. Secondly, it popularised this violence, leading to the spread of such fantasies of destruction and their legitimisation.²²

Moreover, the occurrence of such genocidal practices in the military and in administration twice within a space of only 40 years is a clear indicator of the extent to which these practices were rooted in the structure and mentality of both organisations. This fact is sufficient in itself to raise the question of the connection between colonial and Nazi crimes. This is a complex relationship that the cliché of causality, which is as simplistic as it is polemical, cannot do justice to (any more than the related cliché of the *Sonderweg* can).

For the genocide in German South West Africa was two things: it was both an expression of a pre-existent genocidal tendency, and maybe even of a genocidal mentality, and also an intensifier and populariser of these tendencies. There is a path that connects Windhoek or the Waterberg to Auschwitz; but in the first place it did not begin in the Namibian uplands, and secondly it was not the only possible path that could have been followed. Of course there were other long-standing ideologies, especially anti-Semitism, anti-Bolshevism and anti-Slavism (a tradition which the myth of the colonisation of the East also forms part of) that played equally large or even larger roles in the initiation, form and legitimisation

21 Comparative violence research is still too much in its infancy to be able to provide an answer to the question as to whether the German genocide was a procedure that was quite typical of the colonial wars of the time, or whether, as intentional genocide, it was an exceptional phenomenon. For initial considerations, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kein Sonderweg im Rassenkrieg. Der Genozid an den Herero und Nama 1904–08 zwischen deutschen Kontinuitäten und der Globalgeschichte der Massengewalt", in Sven-Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, eds, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich in der Kontroverse*, Göttingen 2008, pp. 323–340 (English version: "No German Sonderweg in 'Race Warfare': The Genocide against the Herero and Nama (1904–1908)", pp. 297–316 in this book). For an introduction to the international research, refer to the various articles in Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer, eds, "Settlers, Imperialism, Genocide", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10/2 (2008) (thematic issue), and in A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, New York 2008.

22 For an introduction, see Jürgen Zimmerer, „Die Geburt des ‘Ostlandes’ aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus. Die nationalsozialistische Eroberungs- und Beherrschungspolitik in (post-)kolonialer Perspektive", *Sozial.Geschichte. Zeitschrift für historische Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 19/1 (2004), pp. 10–43 (English version: "The Birth of the Ostland Out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A (Post)colonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Annihilation", pp. 230–261 in this book).

of the Nazis' crimes. However, recognising the influence of these other factors does not negate the link to or the relevance of colonial history.

The ramifications of this relationship are in no way limited to the murderous and destructive policy of genocide. Rather, they also encompass, among other things, the first German attempt to found a 'racial state', a state and society organised on the basis of an ethnic hierarchy, as was attempted in German South West Africa. White Germans formed the 'master' class and Africans the lowest, the working class. These strata were kept strictly apart by segregation laws which also attempted to prevent sexual contacts by classifying them as *Rassenschande*, 'racial defilement'.²³ However, the racism that is expressed in this situation proves two things. Firstly, it shows that the binary structure of opposing concepts that made 'the African' into an unapproachable 'Other' was not limited to the years of war. What the German commander Lothar von Trotha described in his exterminatory rhetoric as a 'race war', in which Africans would "yield only to force" and which he was willing to pursue with 'blatant terrorism and even with cruelty' in order to annihilate "the rebellious tribes with rivers of blood",²⁴ was just as much a radical consequence of this way of thinking as were the permanent subjugation and the exploitation of the indigenous population. Secondly, the fundamental position occupied by racism in the structure of the colonial state and society in German South West Africa – quite independently of the question of genocide – also throws up the question of its relationship to the racial state of the Third Reich. 'Race' and 'territory', or 'race' and 'space', were crucial elements in both systems.

However, any statement declaring that a specific regime, in this case the Third Reich, is colonial by nature must be linked to the question as to how far this understanding can potentially help to explain *both* (settler) colonialism and its violent excesses *and* the crimes committed by the Third Reich.

As mentioned above, there is a lively international debate about colonial human rights violations, mass crimes and cases of genocide which is not restricted to the period prior to the Holocaust. Colonialism and the Third Reich do not follow on from one another; rather, colonialism preceded the Third Reich, ex-

²³ I have analysed this in great detail in Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia*, Münster/Hamburg/London 2001 [English edition: *German Rule, African Subjects: State Aspirations and the Reality of Power in Colonial Namibia*, New York 2021].

²⁴ On this subject, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "The First Genocide of the Twentieth Century: The German War of Destruction in South West Africa (1904–1908) and the Global History of Genocide", in Doris L. Bergen, ed., *Lessons and Legacies, viii: From Generation to Generation*, Evanston 2008, pp. 34–64 (a revised version appears in this book on pp. 29–56).

isted parallel to it and outlasted it. The same holds true for the occurrence of genocidal violence. The post-Holocaust call of 'never again' found little resonance, especially in the states that emerged from the former European colonies. In Rwanda, to mention only the most infamous example, one of the most meticulously planned genocides in history took place within only three months in 1994: the fact that the 'technical' aspects of the use of machetes and knives were more reminiscent – at least to European minds – of an uncontrolled eruption of 'tribal violence' does nothing to alter this fact. For the events accompanying the partitioning of India or in Indonesia, Cambodia, East Timor, Biafra, Bosnia or Darfur, too, the classification as genocide has been suggested. Any attempt to explain these outbreaks of mass violence must refer back both to the Holocaust and also to the outbreaks of colonial violence in the decades and centuries before the crimes of the National Socialists.²⁵

National Socialism from a Postcolonial Perspective

But how useful is a global and postcolonial perspective in analysing the Third Reich? Only a knowledge of what is generally the case allows one to identify what is unique. Talking in general terms about the singularity of certain occurrences does not throw light on them, but rather obscures them. The murder of whole population groups, for instance, is by no means unique in history; it has occurred and continues to occur relatively often.²⁶ The conquest and exploitation of largish territories has never been unusual either. Even the reorganisation of geographi-

²⁵ These include the cases of genocide in the final phase of the history of the Ottoman Empire: see Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer, eds, *Late Ottoman Genocides: The Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and Young Turkish Population and Extermination Policies*, London 2009; Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller, eds, *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah*, Zürich 2002.

²⁶ For an introduction, see the following general works: Boris Barth, *Genozid. Völkermord im 20. Jahrhundert: Geschichte – Theorien – Kontroversen*, München 2006; Adam Jones, *Genocide. A Comprehensive Introduction*, London 2006; Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, New Haven 2007; Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 2 vols, London 2005; Michael Mann, *Die dunkle Seite der Demokratie. Eine Theorie der ethnischen Säuberung*, Hamburg 2007; Norman M. Naimark, *Flammender Hass. Ethnische Säuberungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, München 2004; Dominik J. Schaller, Boyadjian Rupen, Hanno Scholtz and Vivianne Berg, eds, *Enteignet – Vertrieben – Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung*, Zürich 2004; Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, Cambridge 2007; Jacques Semelin, *Säubern und Vernichten. Die politische Dimension von Massakern und Völkermorden*, Hamburg 2007; Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide. Utopias of Race and Nation*, Princeton 2003.

cal space, i.e. territory, on a 'racial' basis is not new: the history of colonialism provides countless examples.

Setting aside the purely technical aspects of the methods of conquest, exploitation and annihilation, what was new in the Nazi period were the criteria for the selection of the groups to be annihilated. This is where the Holocaust, the murder of the European Jews, differs from the violence used and the policy of destruction implemented against Poles, Russians and others. Although both 'the Slav' and 'the Jew' were derogated and caricatured in a way that fits neatly into the pattern of colonial Othering, the underlying rationale seems to have differed. This is despite the fact that both anti-Slavism and anti-Semitism have centuries-old traditions in Germany. In principle, anti-Slavism can be traced back to the colonisation of the East during the Middle Ages. 'The East' and its inhabitants were again and again portrayed as being 'primitive', 'underdeveloped', and the region as one that needed to be controlled and 'developed' – that is to say, colonised. Obviously, colonisation meant something different in the 12th century from what it meant in the late 19th or early 20th century; but the idea of a region being 'underdeveloped' or of a culture being 'primitive' is a constant theme running through history right back to the beginnings of Carolingian missionary efforts in the East, and fits in precisely with that binary structure of opposing concepts that served as a basis for overseas colonisation. Thus, the tradition of the colonisation of the East, which was also a factor that helped to shape the policies and worldview of the Nazis, does not in any way contradict the postcolonial interpretation: indeed, it vindicates it.

In the course of German history, imperial fantasies have been projected onto a variety of geographical locations: the open spaces of Russia's eastern plains, the Balkans, Africa and America. What they all had in common was that they were settlement fantasies: these areas were supposed to provide *Lebensraum* for the German people. Initially, these projects were not understood in a Malthusian or Social Darwinian sense; the impacts on the native populations, however, were ultimately similar. There was no room for them: they had to be driven out, subjugated or assimilated. This approach already came very close to cultural genocide. According to Lemkin, forced assimilation is also an act of genocide, whether it is of a cultural or a religious nature.²⁷

If one regards eastern and overseas colonisation as two sides of the same (imperial) coin, then the First World War colonial experiment 'Ober Ost' also fits neatly into this tradition. What Hindenburg, Ludendorff and others created dur-

27 Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, p. 79.

ing their short time in power was a colonial structure.²⁸ Thus the simple objection that it was 'Ober Ost' – rather than German South West Africa – that provided, as it were, a dry run for the Nazi policies of expansion and subjugation, so that any colonial dimension may be disregarded, misses the point. 'Ober Ost' was just as much an expression of colonial fantasies as was the policy of conquest and subjugation carried out 25 years later.

Anti-Semitism too may well be viewed from a postcolonial standpoint, supplying as it does the image of an 'absolute Other' which in Fein's words is outside one's own moral sphere. This provided the basis for the dehumanisation in camps and ghettos during the Second World War that some historians see as a prerequisite for the mass murder. Anti-Semitism, however, is distinguished from anti-Slavism and from the traditional colonial racism seen in Africa, Asia, Australia or America by the idea of the existence of a global Jewish conspiracy. In the view of anti-Semites this conspiracy makes 'Jewry' especially dangerous, and therefore requires a global 'final solution'. Tied in, if not congruent, with this understanding is the implicit assumption of Jewish 'superiority' – a feature that is not to be found either in anti-Slavism or in colonial racism, in which the 'Other' was always seen as inferior. 'The Jew', by contrast, was considered to be an especially dangerous antagonist because of his 'superiority'. While anti-Slavism and colonial racism attribute superiority to the colonisers, to the Germans/Aryans, anti-Semitism attributes the role of the superior coloniser to the Jews and sees the Germans/Aryans as the colonised. After 1918 the latter did indeed perceive themselves as being subjected to occupation by foreign powers, humiliated and robbed of their national identity. After a period in which they had seen themselves as ideal colonisers, bringing benefits to the world by seeking to conquer it, they felt themselves tricked out of the rewards and prestige due to them for their pains and deprivations. Not only did the Treaty of Versailles determine that Germany was unfit to have colonies, thus justifying its being stripped of them: almost worse than that was the humiliation that France inflicted on Germany as a former colonial power by quite deliberately deploying African colonial troops in the French-occupied Rhineland. In a kind of 'reverse colonialism', the personified 'colonial Other', the 'Black' African, then became the master of the 'White' German. The phrase 'die schwarze Schmach am Rhein' – generally translated as 'the black horror on the Rhine', though 'disgrace' would be a more accurate translation than 'horror' – became a shorthand expression for this humiliation as well as a

²⁸ For the German experience in eastern Europe during the First World War, see Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*, Cambridge 2000.

rallying cry against the political order after the First World War, which was threatening to turn the world upside down. This 'horror' or 'disgrace', further intensified by grossly exaggerated rumours about sexual relationships between occupying soldiers and German women, was felt far beyond the nationalist and right-wing scenes. In this, the sexualised fantasy of the formidable sexual potency of 'Black' masculinity came into disastrous contact with the biopolitical concept of a contamination of the 'body of the German people'. If in the colonies, and in German South West Africa in particular, there was a desire to prevent the emergence of a 'mixed population', since this would call into question the strict 'racial segregation' that colonial rule was founded on: the 'black horror' was regarded as a biopolitical attack on the genetic substance of the German 'race'. It was no mere accident that one of the first measures of racial policy implemented by the Nazi regime was the forced sterilisation of the 'Rhineland bastards'.²⁹

The accusation of biopolitical colonisation of the 'body of the German people' could of course also be levied against the Jews. According to the *völkisch* manner of thinking the Jews were the oppressors and exploiters of the German nation, the colonisers of the 'Aryan race'. Anti-Semitic rhetoric referring for instance to 'alien elements in the Aryan race', to 'racial defilement' and 'racial contamination', displays this same biopolitical logic. Conspiracy theories associated with anti-Semitism – world domination by Jewish high finance and the exploitation of Germany by Jewish money magnates – even attribute a colonising role to the Jews. Seen through this prism, the struggle against Versailles and against 'international Jewry' was turned into a 'war of liberation' from colonialism.³⁰ However, whereas the 'danger' emanating from the 'black horror on the Rhine' still appeared containable, as it was visible, this seemed not to be the case with the Jews, which made them appear incomparably more threatening. 'The Jew' not only seemed 'superior', but was also invisible. And as we know to be the case from the colonial experience, laws and conflicts relating to segregation are all the more rigid, the less distinct the separation of the two groups is in everyday practice, whether because the 'Other' cannot easily be identified or because the population

29 Christian Koller, *'Von Wilden aller Rassen niedergemetzelt': die Diskussion um die Verwendung von Kolonialtruppen in Europa zwischen Rassismus, Kolonial- und Militärpolitik (1914–1930)*, Stuttgart 2001; Reiner Pommerin, *Sterilisierung der Rheinlandbastarde. Das Schicksal einer farbigen deutschen Minderheit 1918–1937*, Düsseldorf 1979.

30 One does not need to go as far as A. Dirk Moses, who recently interpreted the Holocaust as anti-colonial, subaltern genocide. A. Dirk Moses, "Empire, Colony, Genocide. Keywords and the Philosophy of History", in A. Dirk Moses, *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, New York 2008, pp. 3–54, here p. 37.

fails to uphold the prescribed segregation unless forced to do so by prohibitions or indoctrination.³¹

The application of colonial terminology and concepts to situations in the European sphere was not unfamiliar to contemporaries, as can be seen, for example, from the use of the term *Binnenkolonisation* – ‘internal colonisation’ – even in the days of the German Empire. At that time it was the eastern provinces of the Empire, which were inhabited predominantly by people of Polish origin, that were to be colonised and Germanised. In particular with regard to ‘education to work’, but also to various processes of cultural assimilation, concepts were prevalent that were also applied in the German overseas colonies in Africa and Asia.³² What is important for the thesis presented here is an appreciation of the fact that colonial approaches and structures of argumentation existed independently of any specific geographical location and any sense of exoticism, and that ‘German history’, even if the application of the term is restricted to its European aspects, still demonstrates colonial traits.

There are repeated attempts to discredit the postcolonial view of the mass crimes committed under the Third Reich by pointing out that other European states had longer and more intensive experiences with colonialism than Germany had, but that no crimes of a magnitude comparable to those of the Third Reich were committed in them. From this, the conclusion is drawn that colonialism is a negligible factor in explaining mass violence. However, this simplistic argument on the one hand confuses continuity with causality, while on the other hand overlooking the important distinction that the question is not *why* the crimes of the Nazis took place in Germany, but rather *how* they came about and what the strategies were that were used to justify and support them. The postcolonial perspective does not explain – nor does it try to explain – why the Nazis came to power in Germany. Rather, it tries to explain the tradition that their programme of imperial conquest stood in and the role models they were able to draw on once they had decided to play the colonialism card again. The postcolonial view also tries to

31 German South West Africa is an outstanding example here as well, the ‘racial segregation’ propagated by the German colonial administration having initially had to be laboriously implemented against the resistance of a part of the German settler population. On this subject see Jürgen Zimmerer, “Deutscher Rassenstaat in Afrika. Ordnung, Entwicklung und Segregation in Deutsch-Südwest (1884–1915)”, in Micha Brumlik, Susanne Meinl, and Werner Renz, eds, *Gesetzliches Unrecht. Rassistisches Recht im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 2005, pp. 135–153 (English version: “Germany’s Racial State in Africa: Order, Development and Segregation in German South West Africa (1884–1915)”, pp. 104–121 in this book).

32 On this subject, see Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, München 2006, pp. 74–123.

explain what patterns of justification were used to conceal the frequently invoked ‘rupture in civilisation’.³³

Such a postcolonial and global approach also provides an explanation for why so many Germans, completely “ordinary men”,³⁴ participated so willingly in these crimes and why they did not exercise resistance, or exercise it more strongly. Colonialist conquest, administration and warfare were not perceived as something new, as the breaking of a taboo; rather they were felt to be something familiar, a recognised phenomenon that had been practised throughout the course of history. This also helped to give meaning to the events on an individual level.

The objection that German soldiers and the Nazi leadership had an erroneous view of colonialism does not hold water either. If Hitler, for example, could write that “The struggle for hegemony in the world will be decided in favour of Europe by the possession of Russia; that makes Europe the place that is more secure against blockade than anywhere else in the world. The territory of Russia is our India, and just as the English rule India with only a handful of people, so we will govern this colonial territory of ours”,³⁵ this proves that the dictator’s ideas were entrenched in colonialist discourse and thinking. This does not mean that he would have created a one-to-one copy of the style of British colonialism, nor does it even mean that he had any accurate picture of the state of affairs in India. But whether Hitler had a correct understanding of British colonialism is irrelevant to determining whether he was influenced by colonialist concepts. What is important is not so much any historical reality of colonialism, however that may have been defined, but rather the perception of such colonialism prevailing in Germany and particularly in the corridors of power of the regime and among its expert advisers.

As a mental construct and as a framework for claims to legitimacy, colonialism can to a great extent be detached from historical and contemporary examples. The reality is that just as anti-Semitism is able to develop its powerful impact effectively regardless of the fact that Jewish life and the Jewish identity are by no means realistically portrayed – indeed, just the opposite is the case – so the power of the colonial concept is effectively brought to bear even though di-

³³ Helmut Walser Smith, who is not otherwise linked to my theses in any way, has written of various ‘vanishing points’ that research has concentrated on: Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History. Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 13–38.

³⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York 1992.

³⁵ Hitler, 17 September 1941, in Adolf Hitler, *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier*, ed. Werner Jochmann, Hamburg 1980, pp. 60–64.

vorced from any portrayal of historical reality. But this construct too becomes real. How this works is shown by the example of a private soldier who, a few weeks after the attack on the Soviet Union, wrote home as follows:

Marvellous as the successes are, great as the advance is [...], Russia on the whole is still a huge disappointment for the individual. There is nothing of culture, nothing of paradise [...] but only the absolute depths, filth, people who demonstrate to us that we will face a huge task of colonisation here.³⁶

This disappointment did not put the brakes on the will to conquer, but rather justified it. Above all, visions of settler colonialism – however misconceived they may have been – provided those who committed crimes a legitimisation even for their acts of violence: they could declare these deeds to be part of their ‘colonising mission’. Colonialist ideas not only justify mass murder, but also allow the individual to deceive himself about his own terrible deeds.

From Faith in Modernity and the Ideology of Progress to Colonial Apologetics

In the light of the many arguments, the broad international debate and the fact that other connections between National Socialism and German history are acknowledged although they span far longer periods of time, the question arises as to why the role of colonialism as an inspiration and analytical framework has so often been denied, and why critics of a (post)colonial approach have not shied away either from personal defamation or from colonial apologetics.

It would be too simple to attribute the blame for this purely to the constraints of the discipline, in which it is supposedly only possible for an academic to make his mark at the expense of others. There is more at stake here: issues relating to ‘progress’ and the absence of historical ‘development’, and at bottom to the superiority of the western world.

From the critics’ point of view, a general condemnation of any postcolonial perspective has the advantage that they can feel themselves to be on the safe side if they make sure they do not in any way deviate from the broadly accepted academic consensus. Arguments are then not examined too closely. It is precisely for this reason that statements regarding the postcolonial perspective allow conclusions to be drawn about the fundamental attitudes among those involved in the

³⁶ These were the words of a soldier of the 12th Airborne Regiment, 20 July 1941, quoted by Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941–1944*, Hamburg 1999, p. 102.

discipline. And that is one of the reasons why it is well worth the effort to concern oneself with the debate in detail.

Fundamentally, the Hegelian position that there is an African (and colonial) 'Other' that lacks any history lives on in this debate. As well as the Germanocentrism that cannot permit any suggestion that the world outside may be significant for national history, a degree of uncritical belief in 'progress' is also implicit in it. Colonialism is once again highly regarded – and this is a phenomenon that can be observed internationally – as a modernising force. Viewed in this way, colonialism means 'civilisation' and 'progress', factors which in their turn brought about the rise of the 'west'.

The question as to why colonialism encountered opposition, generally leading to the application of more and more radical measures and the unleashing of violence, is completely ignored. Colonialism is reduced to its potential as a modernising force. This point of view is not only a form of apologia, but also completely ignores the tensions that characterise the relationship between modernity and violence, a relationship for which colonialism provides what can almost be regarded as a Weberian ideal type.

If the thesis formulated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno and by Zygmunt Bauman and others that there is a connection between modernity and the Holocaust evoked criticism, then this is even more so in the case of the connection between colonial violence and modernity, as it undermines even more seriously the foundations of western society. Even if it was possible to factor the Holocaust out of the universal history of modernity to some extent by restricting it to Germany and its particular history – the Germans themselves having succeeded in presenting the twelve disastrous years of the Third Reich as a mere aberration and expunging them from their national history – this procedure does not seem to work in respect of colonial violence. The modern world, the western world, is founded on colonialism, and as a result is discredited along with it in its central values. In a time that is seeing a new missionary zeal being propagated in the West in the aftermath of 9/11 and the associated war on terror, critiques of colonialism are no longer *en vogue*. Rather, positive examples from earlier times are invoked. This global political context helps to explain the vehemence with which every notion of there being a connection between colonialism and National Socialism is rejected.

In view of the numerous generalised condemnations of any attempt to view the Third Reich and its policies of exploitation, conquest and extermination from a postcolonial perspective, it is surprising that up to now such attempts have been met by only two serious counter-attempts at rebuttal – serious in that they use the tools of academic argumentation. Birthe Kundrus was involved in both.

After her polemic attempt³⁷ to suppress the debate even before it had really got under way by using both personal and factual defamation (accusations that the Holocaust was being relativised through comparison and equation with other events) had been met with broad resistance both from historians and from academics in related disciplines,³⁸ she followed it up with her lengthy article in 'WerkstattGeschichte'.³⁹

Apart from many differences in matters of detail, the thing that above all divides Kundrus from the present author is her view of colonialism. Whereas in the one case, that of colonialism, Kundrus takes colonial discourse and rhetoric at their face value, in the other case, that of National Socialism, she calls for it to be evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of its social practice. Not only does this distort every comparative or relational perspective, it also leads to a playing down of the impact of colonialism. For example: Kundrus sees a fundamental difference between the Nuremberg race laws and the Windhoek race ordinances, in that the latter were not legislation enacted by the Reichstag parliament in Berlin, but only administrative regulations issued by colonial officials in Windhoek.⁴⁰ As a result, they would only have been valid and applicable within the colony. Kundrus gives the example that a Herero who travelled to Berlin would not have been subject to any official or legal disadvantages there, whereas in the Third Reich Jews could not be safe against stigmatisation or persecution anywhere where the German government's writ ran.

Apart from the fact that the formal legal distinction between laws and ordinances had no practical consequences in everyday life, the example of the Herero on his travels leads the reader up the garden path and ultimately only serves to put an unrealistic positive gloss on the colonial situation. After 1904 there was in fact no way in which Herero would have been able to travel freely to the 'mother

37 Birthe Kundrus, "Grenzen der Gleichsetzung. Kolonialverbrechen und Vernichtungspolitik", *Informationszentrum 3. Welt (iz3w)*, 275/March (2004), pp. 30–33.

38 See for example Christoph Marx, "Entsorgen und Entseuchen. Zur Diskussionskultur in der derzeitigen namibischen Historiographie – eine Polemik", in Henning Melber, ed., *Genozid und Gedenken. Namibisch-deutsche Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Frankfurt 2005, pp. 141–161; Henning Melber, "How to Come to Terms with the Past: Re-visiting the German Colonial Genocide in Namibia", *Africa Spectrum* 40/2 (2005), pp. 139–148; Reinhart Kößler, "From Genocide to Holocaust? Structural Parallels and Discursive Conditions", *Africa Spectrum*, 40/2 (2005), pp. 309–317.

39 Birthe Kundrus, "Kontinuitäten, Parallelen, Rezeptionen. Überlegungen zur "Kolonialisierung" des Nationalsozialismus", *WerkstattGeschichte*, 43 (2006), pp. 45–62.

40 With regard to this argumentation see also Birthe Kundrus, "Von Windhoek nach Nürnberg? Koloniale 'Mischehenverbote' und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung", in Birthe Kundrus, ed., *Phantasiereiche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, Frankfurt 2003, pp. 110–131.

country'. If they had survived war and genocide within the boundaries of the German colony, then they were registered, issued with pass tokens and incorporated into a system of forced labour. Not only were they subject to limitations in their free choice of their places of residence and their freedom to trade, but they were even deprived of their freedom of movement.⁴¹ Any Herero who wanted to leave the district he was registered as being resident in had to exchange his pass token (which bore a number and had to be worn in a clearly visible manner) for a travel pass at the local German police station, giving precise details of his travel route, and had to have this travel pass signed by the local office at his place of destination immediately on arrival there. The pass token and the travel pass could be inspected at any time by any White person. It may be true that a Herero or Nama would not have been persecuted within Germany itself; but his or her chances of reaching the ports of Swakopmund, Lüderitzbucht or Walvis Bay, never mind Hamburg or Bremen, without being discovered, severely punished and sent back, were virtually zero. Indeed, not a single case of the kind is known from the records.

What can this example teach us then, apart from the fact that there were subtle legal differences which led to Jews and Herero being treated differently? No serious academic claims that the treatment of the Herero and that of the Jews were the same. But it is impossible to deny that people of both groups were stigmatised and discriminated against because of their 'race', that sexual relations with Whites/Germans/'Aryans' were evaluated as '*Rassenschande*', 'racial defilement' (in Nazi terminology) or as a 'sin against racial consciousness' (in the language current in German South West Africa) and that in both cases Germans or the part of the German nation living in German South West Africa were thus considered to be a biopolitical collective. Kundrus disputes this. Moreover, she even casts doubt on the consensus arrived at by historians of Africa over the past few years that the war waged by the German Empire against the Herero was genocide. Why does she claim, against all the historical evidence, that General von Trotha spared the lives of women and children in his Extermination Order of 2 October 1904, when in fact he explicitly ordered them to be driven back into the desert where they were to die of thirst?⁴²

⁴¹ I have gone into this in more detail in Jürgen Zimmerer, "Von Windhuk nach Warschau. Die rassische Privilegiengesellschaft in Deutsch-Südwestafrika – ein Modell mit Zukunft?", in Frank Becker, ed., *Rassenpolitik in den deutschen Kolonien*, Stuttgart 2004, pp. 97–123 (English version: "From Windhoek to Warsaw: The Society of Racial Privilege in German South West Africa – a Model with a Future?", pp. 201–229 in this book).

⁴² This claim was made in a panel discussion at the Department of History of the University of Freiburg on 7 February 2008.

Is it really necessary and historically justifiable to play down the impact of colonialism in order to refute any link to the Third Reich? Is it not more important and more intellectually honest to take colonialism (and in this case above all settler colonialism) and National Socialism seriously as phenomena of extreme violence, and to investigate the connections, relationships and similarities, in order to better understand the differences? It may be that the reason why there is such a lack of appreciation of colonialism's potential for violence is that Hegel's dictum that African history is not important enough to merit any closer consideration still resonates in the background. In any case, it is a conspicuous fact that none of the critics of the postcolonial perspective are themselves historians of Africa, which may at least partly explain why they appear to take a bird's eye view of the matter.

It was also Hegel who saw the pinnacle of development in the modern European state, a 'development' that justified force and oppression for the 'greater good' of civilisation. Without a doubt, a certain degree of unquestioning faith in the state and in 'progress' that takes no notice of alternative forms of socialisation and political community, and consequently does not question the fundamental legitimacy of forced cultural change, is to be found in the debate outlined above.

Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski also seek to discredit the postcolonial perspective, though on a more sophisticated argumentative level, by presenting a more positive assessment of colonialism.⁴³ They try to do this by adopting two problematic intellectual approaches: the first being to completely ignore settler colonialism, and the second, which is linked to it, being to place a one-sided emphasis on colonialism's potential for promoting development. They speak of colonialism, but then deal only with 'indirect rule' on the one hand and with a few African and Asian intellectuals who they say were shaped by the 'school of colonialism' on the other. And so they see, in the fact that National Socialism neither knew the concept of 'indirect rule' nor planned to initiate any 'development' of the subjugated peoples, proof that National Socialism and colonialism were fundamentally different. Leaving aside the question as to whether or not Nazi plans for the satellite regimes of central, southeastern and western Europe corresponded to ideas of 'indirect rule': their argument fundamentally misses the core of the debate. It is settler colonialism that is the primary framework of reference for the Nazis' imperialistic ideas: Germans were to be settled in eastern Europe, and were to develop and control this *Lebensraum* (a central term in Nazi ideol-

43 Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Der Holocaust als kolonialer Genozid? Europäische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 33 (2007), pp. 439–466.

ogy). Settler colonies like North America, Australia and New Zealand, which significantly are not mentioned by Gerwarth and Malinowski, did not experience 'indirect rule' (except as a temporary measure for tactical reasons), nor did they display the 'promise of development' that Gerwarth and Malinowski deem to be so characteristic. There exists neither a Native American Nehru, nor an Australian Kenyatta, nor a Ho Chi Minh from New Zealand. If one were to apply Gerwarth and Malinowski's criteria, one would come to the absurd conclusion that there were no echoes of colonialism in the histories of the United States, Canada, New Zealand or Australia.

It is also noticeable that the examples of successful 'development' put forward by Gerwarth and Malinowski are all cases taken from the final phase of colonialism, when the colonial powers, especially the United Kingdom, in the knowledge that the independence movements could no longer be stopped, attempted literally at the last minute to do something to window-dress their records.⁴⁴ Far less of this 'civilisatory' mission had been perceptible in earlier centuries.⁴⁵ To project this trait of development policy in the years following the First World War back into the past, however, is to view history with hindsight. Such an approach is based precisely on the kind of understanding of tradition and continuity that is held to be inadmissible in analysing National Socialism.

Above and beyond the desire to reject the postcolonial perspective at any cost, however, there appears to be another important motivation for the emphasis on the developmental characteristics of colonialism. Colonialism essentially shaped the modern world, and created the hegemonic position of 'the West' that prevailed right through to the beginning of the 21st century. Whereas National Socialism with all its crimes appears as a negative alternative model, colonialism has in recent years enjoyed a 'rediscovery', especially of its positive aspects, in part as a – positively perceived – precursor to globalisation.⁴⁶

It is therefore seen as essential to repudiate every connection between colonialism and National Socialism, not only in order to ensure that National Socialism is not relativised but also to rescue a certain way of looking at colonialism.

44 A responsibility of the colonial powers for their subjects overseas had been formulated at the latest by the peace conference at Versailles. Jürgen Zimmerer, "Von der Bevormundung zur Selbstbestimmung. Die Pariser Friedenskonferenz und ihre Auswirkungen auf die britische Kolonialherrschaft im Südlichen Afrika", in Gerd Krumeich, ed., *Versailles 1919: Ziele – Wirkung – Wahrnehmung*, Essen 2001, pp. 145–158.

45 By contrast, the argument of the civilisatory mission had always played a prominent role in the justification for expanding colonial power. As an introduction, see Boris Barth and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds, *Zivilisationsmissionen. Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Konstanz 2005.

46 For instance, see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World*, London 2003.

Colonialism is subjected to a de facto whitewashing by placing a one-sided emphasis on the emancipatory elements of non-settler colonialism (while almost completely ignoring settler colonialism). Pointing to “an ambivalence that was missing from National Socialism, but by contrast played a vital role in late European colonialism, regarding forced modernisation and development on the one hand, and violence and destruction on the other”,⁴⁷ is in fact mere lip service: in reality, hardly any consideration is given to colonial violence, especially in settler colonialism. Misinterpretations of history, such as, for example, the judgment that von Trotha was recalled because of his violations of the law, whereas Nazi perpetrators were shielded by laws (the correct version being that von Trotha was incited from the highest level to exercise particular ruthlessness and was ultimately relieved of his command because he had not won the war quickly enough), imply an image of colonialism as a system that is under an obligation to respect minimum humanitarian requirements, and in which any crimes that may have been committed are to be regarded as regrettable ‘operational glitches’ or collateral damage. Not only is this approach revealingly reminiscent of the view that was typical of the post-war period in Germany of National Socialism as an ‘operational glitch’;⁴⁸ it also draws a veil over the systemically inherent potential for violence in colonialism. Anyone who presents the Nazi claim to be entitled to determine who had a right to live in the world and who not as being historically unique, without even mentioning the destructive potential of settler colonialism that resulted in the destruction of dozens of cultures, overlooks the fact that the racial hierarchies that deliberately encompassed the consequential ‘disappearance’ of entire peoples were a fundamental feature of settler colonialism. There was no other way of justifying the mass murder and robbery that settler colonialism basically was.

If, however, one takes the inherent excessive violence of settler colonialism seriously, then the postcolonial perspective on National Socialism can no longer be disparaged, but is rather explicitly demanded. This does not mean equating the Holocaust with other acts of mass violence and genocide, nor does it relativise it in any way. Rather, it opens up the way to a comprehensive analysis that helps us to understand both phenomena – settler colonialism and National Socialism – better.

47 Gerwarth and Malinowski, *Der Holocaust als kolonialer Genozid?*, p. 461.

48 Fritz Fischer, *Hitler war kein Betriebsunfall*, München 1998.

