

No German *Sonderweg* in ‘Race Warfare’: The Genocide against the Herero and Nama (1904–1908)

The crimes of the *Wehrmacht* represent a deep caesura, not just in German history. From an international perspective too, the effects of this radicalisation of warfare can scarcely be understated [*sic*]. Since 1945, more and more new variations have demonstrated the high degree to which things that are generally categorised as war crimes have come to shape, and to some extent replace, modern warfare. [...] The German-Soviet war was not the first and only, but was definitely the decisive, starting point for developments that have since increasingly determined the course of military events: the war of annihilation adopted as a deliberate strategy, the terrorisation of the civilian population and the uninhibited exploitation of occupied countries, partisan warfare and the indiscriminate measures taken to combat it, the systematic maltreatment of prisoners of war, and the impressment of former adversaries into forced labour.¹

This summing up, a recent contribution to the continuing debate about the crimes of the German armed forces, is thoroughly typical of certain tendencies in both German and international World War research. It not only detaches the history of the Second World War from its prehistory, but also ignores the entire Asia-Pacific dimension of the conflict. As a result, the Second World War is turned into a European regional conflict, and no justification is apparent for the global significance attributed to it, which would require considering it in comparison with both earlier conflicts and simultaneous developments. Only the First World War is assigned a certain precursor role, as a result of which many of what are considered to have been breaches of taboos are moved forward thirty years. The Second World War – and we are not talking about the Holocaust here – and the way Germany waged it is afforded a pre-eminent role in world history, being presented, on the basis of the various breaches of taboos that took place during it, as an unprecedented event. In a disturbing analogy to the decontextualisation of the Holocaust,² the whole war is turned into an event without a history, an event lifted right out of history.

Furthermore: to regard this war as being unprecedented because of factors that it displays such as ‘the war of annihilation adopted as a deliberate strategy’,

1 Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter and Ulrike Jureit, “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Ereignisse und Kontroversen der Forschung”, in Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter and Ulrike Jureit, eds, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Bilanz einer Debatte*, München 2005, pp. 21–28, here p. 27f.

2 For more on this problem, see, for example, Götz Aly, *Macht – Geist – Wahn. Kontinuitäten deutschen Denkens*, Frankfurt 1999, pp. 185–196.

the 'terrorisation of the civilian population' and the 'uninhibited exploitation' of countries and people, not to mention the particular brutality of its partisan warfare, betrays an amazing level of ignorance of world history. The assertion that the waging of a partisan war, or, to use the modern terminology, asymmetric warfare, always requires the Second World War's Eastern Front as a role model, is based on pure Eurocentrism. Guerrilla fighters, or 'terrorists' as they are more often called nowadays, do not need the Second World War to inspire them; they have plenty of role models in their own history. The asymmetric wars of the present day are, as a rule, fought out in former colonial regions – one needs only to think of Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.³ And it is the colonial wars by which the histories of these countries have been shaped that ought to be investigated first and foremost in the search for precursors and as providing inspiration for the military tactics employed. Nor do the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia, to name just three countries that have taken the lead in major military actions since the beginning of the twenty first century, need the German *Wehrmacht* as a model to develop their fundamental tactics. All three countries have imperial traditions that include the copious use of massive levels of force.⁴

Nevertheless, the authors quoted at the beginning are not completely wrong, and this leads directly to the question of *Sonderwege* (specific national paths) and continuities. The Second World War, in the way it was conducted above all, if not exclusively – remembering Nanking or similar occurrences – by the German *Wehrmacht* does indeed show striking similarities to wars of the later colonial period and to neo-colonial wars. Not, though, because it led to the establishment of new traditions and strategies, even in the aspects mentioned, but because the Second World War itself displays considerable structural similarities to colonial wars of the past.⁵ We can and must interpret the 'war on the Eastern Front' – and it is this that people in Germany are thinking of when they talk about the Second

3 For an introduction to the asymmetric wars of the present day, see Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*, Reinbek 2004.

4 An initial overview of the topic of colonial wars is provided (in German) by Thoralf Klein and Frank Schumacher, eds, *Kolonialkriege. Militärische Gewalt im Zeichen des Imperialismus*, Hamburg 2006. A 'classic' handbook of anti-partisan warfare is Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars*, London 1896, various editions since then. Having appeared in the nineteenth century, its publication date demonstrates the error of assuming it was the Second World War that acted as a trigger.

5 However, this does not mean that army commanders and military theoreticians did not learn lessons from the past in terms of their strategies and doctrines, because ultimately armies tend to be among the institutions that are most capable of learning and adapting.

World War possessing a new quality – as a colonial war,⁶ if we consider the structures lying behind the armies of tanks, the mechanisation of warfare and the dog-fights in the skies.⁷

It is not a matter of monocausal explanations or one-dimensional lines of development, but rather of the fact that in many of its characteristic features the war demonstrates enough similarities with colonial conflicts to be interpreted using the instruments of (post-)colonial historiography. The question of what direct relationships with previous colonial conflicts exist is initially a subordinate one; although here too there are a number of indications that particular developments can be traced back to earlier conflicts. Research on this is however still in its infancy, as the academic world has up to now almost entirely failed to take account of the entire complex of questions concerning the colonial origins of twentieth-century conflicts, despite the forceful admonitions of people such as Hannah Arendt or Aimé Césaire. On the one hand, this has been a result of the blinkered nature of German and European/North American national historiography, both of which have equally ignored the role played by colonialism in shaping world history over the past half-millennium, while at the same time often trivialising and romanticising it. On the other hand, it also arose out of the Eurocentric, if not even racist, arrogance that leads many to believe that situations and developments that can be described in relation to Africa, Asia or the Americas could not possibly be applicable to 'developed' Europe with its 'higher level of civilisation'.

In fact, however, both the Nazi war aims and the methods with which the war was fought fit perfectly into a colonial template: conquest, control, exploitation and settlement have, after all, been among the fundamental aims of the European appropriation of the world since the early days of the Portuguese and Spanish expeditions of conquest. Above all, however, the Manichean logic of the binary distinctions on which Germany's manner of waging war was based provides almost an ideal type of colonialism. It goes beyond the friend/foe distinction that is fundamental to every military conflict, since the opponent is not merely the Other, but is transformed into the Absolute Other, even into a no longer human creature, who can then be annihilated or destroyed, to use the euphemisms frequently applied to the murder and slaughter of the defenceless in par-

6 The Germans conducted the war in the East in a markedly different way from that in the West. As an introduction, see the series published by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, 10 vols, Stuttgart 1984ff.

7 On this subject, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Die Geburt des 'Ostlandes' aus dem Geiste des Kolonialismus. Ein postkolonialer Blick auf die NS-Eroberungs- und Vernichtungspolitik", *Sozial.Geschichte. Zeitschrift für die historische Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 1 (2004), pp. 10–43 (English version: "The Birth of the 'Ostland' out of the Spirit of Colonialism", pp. 230–261 in this book).

ticular. A war of annihilation, however, is in the tradition of colonial warfare; and a colonial war is, in practice, almost always also a war of annihilation!

Pointing out the colonial dimension of the German war of annihilation in the East neither takes away its significance and its horror, nor does it diminish German responsibility. It does however help towards understanding both the mental and the discursive environment that gave rise to some of the underlying ideas, but also and especially to the willingness to implement them. Attempts are made again and again to discredit this approach⁸ by claiming that other European states had even more extreme experiences with colonialism than the Germans had, but nevertheless did not commit any crimes comparable to those of the Third Reich. This argument on the one hand confuses continuity with causality; while on the other hand it overlooks the important distinction that the question is not how it came about that the Nazis came to power in Germany, which is primarily to be explained in terms of the immediately preceding events since the First World War; rather, it concerns the tradition their imperialistic programme of conquest stood in, and what models they were able to draw on once the decision to undertake a new attempt at colonialism had been taken. Even this does not mean that the 'archives' of colonialism were the only source available for them to draw on, and which they did indeed draw on; but only that these archives did exist and played an important role, in terms of both motivation and practical implementation, with regard to the war on the Eastern Front in particular.

Such a postcolonial and global approach also offers an explanation as to why so many Germans were quite prepared to participate in the crimes and why they did not offer resistance, or more determined resistance. Colonial conquest and administration and the waging of colonial wars were not perceived as anything new, as breaches of any taboo, but were rather recognised as familiar factors, as normal processes in the course of history. They also helped to give meaning to events, including on a personal level. This may not have applied to every individual soldier – convinced anti-Polish or anti-Russian racists had less need for such justification⁹ – but it was true for a sufficiently large number to be taken seriously as an explanation.

The elite of the regime used colonial images and chains of association; and were themselves quite at home in the world of colonial discourse and attitudes. If

⁸ Most recently by Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Vollbrachte Hitler eine ‚afrikanische‘ Tat? Der Herero-Krieg und der Holocaust: Zur Kritik der neuesten Sonderwegsthese", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (11 September 2007).

⁹ Here too, however, it would be worthwhile to go more deeply into the question of the extent to which the racism directed against Slavs bore and bears similarities to that directed against Africans. For more on racism, see Christian Geulen, *Geschichte des Rassismus*, München 2007.

Hitler could write that "the struggle for hegemony in the world will be decided in favour of Europe by the possession of Russia; this will make 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 too we will govern this colonial territory of ours.,¹⁰ then this is to be taken seriously. The colonial dimension of Nazi policies in the East cannot be read out of this passage alone,¹¹ nor does it mean that Hitler would have created a one-to-one copy of the British style of colonialism; it does not even mean that he had any accurate picture of the actual state of affairs in India. Pointing out that the British colonial empire by no means corresponded to what the *'Führer'* imagined it to be misses the point of the argument completely, since whether Hitler had a correct understanding of British colonialism is irrelevant to determining whether he was influenced by colonialist concepts. What is important in this question is not so much any historical reality of colonialism, however that may be 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. Although there has been no detailed research into the matter, it seems that the colonial world as Germans – including Hitler – imagined it to be had been shaped by an author who did not possess any colonial experience and who, at least on the surface, did not even deal with the theme of colonialism in his work: Karl May.

The passage quoted above, at any rate, shows beyond all doubt that Hitler – like other leading representatives of the regime – was in the grip of an imaginary conception of the imperial world. He believed in a colonial world order in the sense of a 'racial' state, divided into serving and ruling classes on the basis of constructed ethnic entities and of a social Darwinist interlinking of 'race' and 'space', that is to say on the connection between the biopolitical principle and the geographical one. And precisely that is a clear characteristic of settler colonialism.

However, the links to colonialism are not restricted only to the field of imagination. Numerous structural similarities also support a postcolonial approach to the Third Reich's policies of expansion and annihilation. This chapter can only

¹⁰ Hitler, 17 September 1941, in: Adolf Hitler: *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier*, ed. Werner Jochmann, Hamburg 1980, pp. 60–64.

¹¹ Nor has anyone as yet attempted to do so, even if this is repeatedly alleged, with denunciatory intent, by those criticising the post-colonial perspective. See, for example, the contentious article by Gerwarth and Malinowski published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. For more detail, see Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, "Der Holocaust als 'kolonialer Genozid' Europäische Kolonialgewalt und nationalsozialistischer Vernichtungskrieg", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 33 (2007), pp. 439–466.

touch on these points briefly:¹² in many ways, for instance, the *Lebensraum* ('living space') concept follows the same internal logic as the colonial movement during the *Kaiserreich*. Thus Wilhelminian imperialism – just like its counterparts elsewhere in Europe – was nourished in a not insignificant measure by the social Darwinist understanding of the Nation as a biopolitical organism in permanent competition with other nations. The assumption was that this competition could only be won, and the survival of one's own collective thereby secured, if all resources, including the population, could be mobilised. Colonies were intended to act as Germanised retention cisterns for the massive flows of emigrants – which in the contemporary world of ideas otherwise had to mean a substantial loss for the collective body of the German people – at the same time as providing sales markets and being sources of raw materials. Thus space for settlement became an essential requirement; and in the logic of settler colonialism this meant that the space for the local population had to be limited, insofar as they were granted the right to stay or, in the last instance, even to stay alive at all in their homeland. This applied equally to Africa and to Ukraine. Accordingly, the ways the settlers, both in actual practice and in plans for the future, dealt with the populations originally occupying the conquered or to-be-conquered regions demonstrated deeply colonialist traits. According to Hitler, "The Slavic peoples [...] are not destined to lead independent lives of their own." And so he wanted to supply the Ukrainians with "headscarves, glass bead necklaces as jewellery, and all the other things that appeal to colonial peoples".¹³

More important than all utterances emanating from Hitler, however – and at this point I do not wish to discuss either the debate between 'functionalists' and 'intentionalists', or the dispute about Hitler's position and the importance of his personal role in the murderous policies of the Third Reich – are the structural similarities in the governmental and administrative utopia. Above all, these similarities are sufficient to provide the justification for making use of colonial and post-colonial instruments in analysing the Nazi politics of terror.

12 For an extensive presentation, see 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", pp. 125–153 in this book); Jürgen Zimmerer, "Geburt des 'Ostlandes'" (English version: "The Birth of the 'Ostland' out of the Spirit of Colonialism", pp. 230–261 in this book). This latter text also contains a more detailed analysis of the relevant literature. Such an analysis will be kept brief below for reasons of space.

13 Hitler, 17 September 1941, in Hitler, *Monologe*, pp. 60–64. The mention of "glass beads" takes up one of the central motifs in the European history of expansion and contact; they are the classic symbol of 'underdevelopment' and of a quintessentially 'native' existence. It also demonstrates how the interweaving of colonial fantasies with the actual exercise of imperial rule was increasingly giving rise to practical effects.

Central to this are the concepts of 'race' and 'space', and the relationship between the two, which shaped both the colonial settlement and expansion programme and that of the Nazis. Both systems involved establishing patterns of domination based on a 'racial hierarchy' and extending these to other territories as well. With regard to National Socialism this is a familiar enough concept; but settler colonialism too, which is what we are concerned with above all when we refer to colonialism in this context, was necessarily based on the establishment of a hierarchy, understood in ethnic terms, among the elements of the population. The invasion and occupation of other continents were motivated and justified by the division of people into higher 'races', which were destined to rule, and lower ones who were doomed to be subjugated. Whether unashamed robbery or justified in terms of a 'civilising mission', it is only rarely that any acceptance of the 'indigenous' peoples as counterparts of equal status is to be found. Rather, almost everywhere the local peoples were degraded and disenfranchised. Whether it was the proselytising of the 'heathen', the 'White Man's Burden' or the 'Manifest Destiny': the legitimising concept might vary, but an emphasis on the colonisers' standing as guardians of the true faith or their 'chosen-ness' always played an important role in the ideological preparation of the expansion of colonial domination. Indeed, the enormous expropriation – theft – of land and the exploitation associated with settler colonialism could not have been justified at all except by invoking a fundamental inequality. All too often, at the lowest end of this imagined ranking system the colonisers placed groups that they thought to be doomed to destruction; helping along with the fulfilment of this 'destiny' was seen almost as a 'duty' within the wider context of world history, rather than the brutal mass murder that it actually was.¹⁴ This binary encoding, this establishment of a 'racial hierarchy', also characterised the violence associated with settlement and the expropriation of land. The original population were considered to be 'racially inferior' or even less than human, so that their human rights did not have to be taken into account.

These are the same conditions that make the Second World War so shocking, above and beyond the number of the victims and the extent of the destruction, both of which were apocalyptic in scale. It is precisely the combination of the destructive power of high-technology weapons with the efficiency of modern bureaucracy and the racist ideology of the inferiority of the adversary that led to any attempts to contain the consequences of waging war, such as those provided for under international law, for example, remaining ineffective. Therein lies the root

¹⁴ For example, see 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.

of the 'unrestrained violence' that is deplored by so many commentators. Such violence knows no limits, because the human rights of the adversary, which ought to place a limit on the violence, have been set aside. This is why colonial wars are 'unrestrained wars', as was the war of annihilation in Eastern Europe as well. Such wars are inherently different from so-called 'contained wars', that is to say wars in which attempts are made to protect the civilian population and also above all the combatants themselves, a form of warfare that characterised, for example, the Western Front in the Second World War, despite all the war crimes that took place there as well. The Hague Convention (1899/1907), for instance, attempted to achieve such containment, but it explicitly did not apply to colonial wars. So even contemporaries – at least the Europeans: the inhabitants of the colonies were not consulted – were aware of the differences in the natures of these two kinds of war; and to a large extent they accepted the situation. As is well known, the Hague Convention was not applied on the Eastern Front either; explicit legal instruments, such as the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlaß* (Decree on the Jurisdiction of Martial Law), and the *Kommissarbefehl* (Commissar Order), suspended it de facto. Thus this order and this decree transformed the war on the Eastern Front from a relatively contained (European) one into an unrestrained colonial war. In what is almost a classic argument from the sphere of colonialism, the other side was accused of conducting the war with a degree of cruelty that did not conform to European standards, and this was taken as justification for one's own unrestrained brutality. As the Commissar Order, for example, states: "In the battle against Bolshevism, it must be assumed that the enemy will not behave in a manner consistent with the principles of humanity or international law. Hate-filled, cruel and inhumane treatment of our prisoners is to be expected, especially from the political commissars of all kinds, who are those truly responsible for maintaining resistance. To give quarter or display clemency in accordance with international law" would therefore be "the wrong way to treat these elements". The "political commissars" were said to be "the originators of barbaric, Asiatic forms of combat". Thus it was necessary to undertake extreme measures against them, "summarily, unhesitatingly and with all severity. As a matter of routine, therefore, if captured in battle or when exercising resistance, they are to be shot dead immediately."¹⁵

The Decree on the Jurisdiction of Martial Law also empowered German troops to perform summary executions and to shoot hostages in large-scale acts

15 Der Führer und Oberste Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht, "Erlaß über die Ausübung der Kriegsgerichtsbarkeit im Gebiet 'Barbarossa' und über besondere Maßnahmen der Truppe" [Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlaß], 13 May 1941, BArch MA, RW 4/v. 577, sheets 72–74; "Richtlinien für die Behandlung politischer Kommissare" [Kommissarbefehl], 6 June 1941, BArch MA, RW 4/v. 578, sheets 42–44.

of retribution. Policies such as these were part of the standard repertoire of colonial warfare. The 'new' aspect was that these measures were applied to Europeans. Nazi anti-Slavic racism paired with anti-Bolshevism, which was associated with that racism in many ways, led to a process of 'Othering', as it is called in postcolonial theory,¹⁶ in which images of 'the enemy' taken over from colonialist thinking were transferred to the enemy in the 'East'. These images, as the reference above to "Asiatic forms of combat" indicates, were in itself something taken out of the colonial archive. The Decree on the Jurisdiction of Martial Law and the Commissar Order are expressions of this transformation of the European war into a colonial war.¹⁷

In the twentieth century, the armies of tanks and fleets of bombers merely made it actually possible to destroy and kill on a scale unparalleled in history. It is this scale of the destruction that makes historians identify the First World War above all as a precursor event. And no doubt that war did play an important role. But just as the First World War, despite its name, was not the first globally fought war in history (the Seven Years' War at least is worth mentioning as a rival candidate), so too the contempt for humanity with which technological advances were used for the purposes of mass murder can be traced back well beyond that 'great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century'. At the Battle of Omdurman, for example, British units and allied Egyptian troops killed up to 10,000 of the Mahdi's warriors and wounded 16,000 in a single day (2 September 1898), above all thanks to the use of the Maxim machine gun, while themselves suffering losses of only 48 dead and 382 wounded.¹⁸ 'Soldiers of scientific war' was the term used by the young war correspondent Winston Churchill to describe the army that brought about this turning point in military and colonial history.¹⁹

The machine gun made it possible to carry out massacres on a completely new scale. Only a few years before, 14,000 Zulus had needed three hours to kill 900 British soldiers at Isandlwana. At Omdurman, moreover, it was the numerically stronger army that suffered such horrendous losses. The machine gun thus soon became the guarantor and symbol of European dominance, as was ex-

16 For an introduction to this complex of issues, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London 1998.

17 This was a gradual process that presumably began during the Polish campaign, though it only became fully effective with Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. See Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*.

18 A general survey of the Battle of Omdurman can be found in John C. Pollock, *Kitchener. The Road to Omdurman*, London 1998.

19 Winston Spencer Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of The Reconquest of the Soudan*, 2 vols, London 1899, pp. 82–164.

pressed almost in the form of an aphorism by Hilaire Belloc: "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun and they have not."²⁰

The fact that military or administratively organised massacres had become technically feasible conjoined with the binary view of the nature of the world underlying colonialism. The adversary was not merely the 'Other' but was transformed into a thoroughly incompatible 'Absolute Other' with whom reconciliation or even coexistence was impossible. The view of the 'indigenous Other' as being nonhuman or subhuman contributed extensively to a willingness to use excessive violence. Such violence is unrestrained, since 'subhuman beings' are not granted the enjoyment of that moral protection that fellow human beings can still claim, even when they are adversaries in war. According to Helen Fein, however, this exclusion of certain people or groups from the community of those "whom we are obligated to protect, to take into account, and to whom we must account",²¹ is a major prerequisite for the initiation of genocide; the ideological prerequisite, so to speak, for turning quite ordinary people into mass murderers. The effect that this had in everyday colonial life can be seen in an example from Australia, where young men sometimes spent their Sundays having fun hunting Australian Aboriginal people:

There are instances when the young men of the station have employed the Sunday in hunting the blacks, not only for some definite purpose, but also for the sake of the sport.²²

Murder as a sport became possible because the original inhabitants were not seen as being fully human:

And, being a useless race, what does it matter what they suffer any more than the distinguished philanthropist, who writes in his behalf, cares for the wounded half-dead pigeon he tortures at his shooting matches. 'I do not see the necessity,' was the reply of a distinguished wit to an applicant for an office who remarked that 'he must live;' and we virtually and practically say the same to the blacks and with better reason.²³

was an explanation given in a reader's letter printed in the newspaper 'The Queenslander'. The consequences of dehumanisation, the negation of what it means to be human, could not be expressed more clearly. And there was no softening of this attitude where women and children were concerned. Settlers hunted them deliberately in order to destroy the reproductive capacity of the enemy,

²⁰ Hilaire Belloc, *The Modern Traveller*, London 1898, p. 41.

²¹ 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.

²² Quoted according to Alison Palmer, *Colonial Genocide*, Adelaide 2000, p. 44.

²³ The Queenslander, 8 May 1880, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/20332884>, accessed 12 Jul. 2023, see Palmer, *Genocide*, p. 45.

who was understood to be the 'absolute Other'. In 1889, a report on so-called settler vigilante justice against 'cattle thieves' stated:

He shot all the men he discovered on his run, because they were cattle killers; the women, because they gave birth to cattle killers; and the children, because they would in time become cattle killers.²⁴

In the United States, one Colonel Chivington, a former Methodist minister and the commander of the Third Colorado Militia Regiment, expressed himself as follows: "My intention is to kill all Indians I come across"; and he ordered his men "[to] kill and scalp all, little and big", i.e. adults and children, because "Nits make lice",²⁵ a saying that was coined with regard to the 'Indians' during King Philip's War (1675–1677).

This same genocidal logic is also displayed in Heinrich Himmler's notorious Posen speech of 1943:

The question arose: what of the women and children? Here too I have decided to find a very clear solution. I did not think I would be justified in eradicating the men – in other words, killing them or having them killed – while allowing their avengers, in the shape of their children, to grow up for our sons and grandsons to have to deal with. The hard decision had to be taken to remove these people from the face of the earth.²⁶

Naturally, the perpetrators quoted above differ from one another in many respects. In view of the singularity of every historical event in terms both of the process and of the context, it would be senseless to consider them as identical. Nonetheless, it is impossible to overlook the fact that the colonial extermination logic was paralleled in Nazism.

So-called punitive expeditions such as were carried out by Chivington and others²⁷ were a tried and tested method of driving local populations out of certain regions or of making them amenable through terror. Other than in the case of criminal prosecution – in respect of which, incidentally, the issue as to whether it was legally legitimate for a European state to presume that it possessed the com-

²⁴ Quoted according to *ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁵ Quoted according to Michael Mann, *Dark Side of Democracy*, Cambridge 2005, p. 98.

²⁶ Himmler, 'Rede in Posen', 6 October 1943, quoted according to Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Petersen, eds, *Heinrich Himmler. Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, Frankfurt 1974, pp. 169f.

²⁷ The murdering of 'Indians' even constituted the main *raison d'être* for these militias. When the Governor of Colorado was petitioned by an army officer to at least try to negotiate with the American Indians, he asked rhetorically what he should then do with Chivington's regiment. "They have been raised to kill Indians", he declared, "and they must kill Indians." Quoted according to Mann, *Dark Side of Democracy*, p. 98.

petence to impose criminal justice outside its sovereign territory (in Europe) would provide plentiful material for a protracted and controversial debate – in which a criminal who is alleged to have committed a particular crime is sought and if necessary punished, these 'punitive expeditions' were purely acts of revenge involving only summary punishment.

The bombardment of the Hermit Islands in the South Pacific, for example, arose out of a personal initiative of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's. The inhabitants there had allegedly murdered a German sea captain, a European merchant and several workers. As a punishment the German gunboats *Carola* and *Hyäne* bombarded the islands and landed sailors on them; these combed the islands, murdering all the indigenous warriors and destroying "villages, plantations and canoes".²⁸

Notable with regard to this action are not only the facts that it occurred two years before the islands were officially declared a German *Schutzgebiet*, or that Bismarck personally recommended that the campaign of extermination should be continued (whereupon the *Hyäne* resumed the murderous campaign that it had previously broken off), but also that it occurred in the South Pacific, which is generally presented even today, and even among academics, as an example of peaceful German colonial rule, differing – supposedly – from the excesses seen in Africa. While the number of victims in the South Seas may have been relatively low – which however is no surprise considering the smaller population of the area – the application of similar tactics in German East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (that is, prior to the Maji Maji War, which claimed about 300,000 victims) led to tens of thousands of deaths.²⁹ These summary punishments, this form of terror, are to be found again in the form of the shootings of hostages carried out by the German *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War.³⁰

The conduct of German troops gained worldwide notoriety through the repression of the so-called 'Boxer Uprising' in China. In his 'Hun Speech', as it became known, Emperor Wilhelm II explicitly issued the order for terroristic massacres:

²⁸ For more on this topic see Alexander Krug's book, *'Der Hauptzweck ist die Tötung von Kanaken'.* *Die deutschen Strafexpeditionen in den Kolonien der Südsee 1872–1914*, Tönning 2005. Krug fills page after page with accounts of German atrocities and clearly demonstrates the repressive character of German rule. The bombardment of the Hermit Islands is described on pages 33–49.

²⁹ Michael Pesek estimates the number of victims in the war against the Hehe at about 100,000. Particular brutality started to be used after the Hehe had attacked and annihilated a German patrol. Michael Pesek, *Koloniale Herrschaft in Deutsch-Ostafrika. Expeditionen, Militär und Verwaltung seit 1880*, Frankfurt 2005, pp. 191–196.

³⁰ On this subject, see Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg 1999, pp. 870–974.

When you come face to face with the enemy, then he will be trounced, no quarter will be given, prisoners will not be taken. Those who fall into your hands shall be in your hand. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila won a reputation that still makes them appear mighty in stories that have lived on right down to today, so may the name of Germany be made known in China in such a way that no Chinese will ever again even dare so much as to look askance at a German.³¹

Not only did this make it a war aim to spread terror; more than that, the call to kill all prisoners was an explicit authorisation to wage war in a manner contrary to any spirit of restraint.

In the context of a different political ideology, Hitler had explained before the German attack on the Soviet Union that because Communism represented a "monstrous danger for the future", German soldiers needed to

distance themselves from any standpoint of soldierly camaraderie. The Communist is not a comrade beforehand, and not a comrade afterwards. This is a battle of annihilation. If we do not view it as such, then we will still beat the enemy, but in thirty years' time we will find ourselves faced by the Communist enemy again. We are not waging this war in order to conserve the enemy.³²

The term "comrade" implies a military adversary of equal stature, whose essential human dignity is recognised as being worthy of protection. Communists, on the other hand, were no more comrades than the Chinese or the Africans were; we referred above to the link made between Bolsheviks and 'Asiatics'.

In China, as is well known, the German Emperor's troops carried out his instructions to the letter. Having arrived too late to take part in the actual fighting, they acquired a reputation for extreme brutality through their draconian 'pacification policy' and their punitive expeditions, which resulted in large numbers of casualties. In this, however, they were not alone. The forces of the seven other powers taking part in the campaign also practised 'retaliatory justice', either on separate occasions or acting in concert.³³ In the view of the Commander of the American contingent, Adna R. Chaffee, "It is safe to say that where one real Boxer has been killed since the capture of Peking, fifty harmless coolies or laborers on

31 Quoted according to Bernd Sösemann, "'Pardon wird nicht gegeben!' Staatliche Zensur und Presseöffentlichkeit zur 'Hunnenrede'", in Mechthild Leutner and Klaus Mühlhahn, eds, *Kolonialkrieg in China. Die Niederschlagung der Boxerbewegung 1900–1901*, Berlin 2007, pp. 118–122, here p. 188.

32 Address by Hitler to military commanders dated 30 March 1941, transcript made by Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff, quoted according to Michael Burleigh, *Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, Frankfurt 2000, p. 597.

33 For an introduction to the German involvement in the 'Boxer War', see Leutner and Mühlhahn, eds, *Kolonialkrieg*.

the farms, including not a few women and children, have been slain." The 'Boxers' were "closely tied up with the broad mass of the population", so that if "a large number of people" were killed, then there would "also be Boxers among them".³⁴

At about the same time, the U.S. military was waging a war in the Philippines that claimed large numbers of victims. Violence against the civilian population escalated especially after local resistance fighters initiated a phase of guerrilla warfare. In December 1900, General Arthur MacArthur imposed martial law on the islands. "In countless campaigns of devastation, the agricultural basis of entire districts was systematically destroyed, and the surviving population resettled into so-called concentration camps."³⁵ When the US 9th Regiment was then caught in an ambush on the island of Samar, the situation escalated even further. General 'Hell Roaring' Jake Smith was commissioned to devastate the entire province. He ordered that every man who would have been able to offer military resistance should be killed. His Order of the Day was to "burn, plunder and kill", in such a way as to transform the area into "a howling wilderness".³⁶

34 Quoted according to George Lynch, *The War of the Civilisations. Being the Record of a 'Foreign Devil's' Experiences with the Allies in China*, London 1901, p. 84.

35 Frank Schumacher, "Niederbrennen, plündern und töten sollt ihr": Der Kolonialkrieg der USA auf den Philippinen (1899–1913)", in Thoralf Klein and Frank Schumacher, eds, *Kolonialkriege. Militärische Gewalt im Zeichen des Imperialismus*, Hamburg 2006, pp. 109–144, here p. 122. This also includes an overview of the context and course of the war. As is well known, the 'Boers' in South Africa had to endure a similar experience during the South African War, when the British Army, as a measure to counter the guerrilla warfare directed against them, held tens of thousands of 'Boer' women and children captive in camps. On this subject, see Christoph Marx, "Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht": Kriegsgefangene im Burenkrieg 1899–1902", in Rüdiger Overmans, ed., *In der Hand des Feindes' – Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Köln 1999, pp. 255–276.

36 Schuhmacher, "Niederbrennen", p. 122. Jan-Bart Gewald too has pointed out this and other contemporary parallels. A remarkable finding of his is that when the American civil administration found out about the excesses of their military in the Philippines, it intervened and put a stop to the war of extermination. This was however not the case in German South West Africa. On the contrary, von Trotha was explicitly given a free hand. Gewald, *Learning to wage and win wars in Africa: A provisional history of German military activity in Congo, Tanzania, China and Namibia*, African Studies Centre, ASC Working Paper no. 60, Leiden 2005, <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Pdf/workingpaper60.pdf>, accessed 12 Jul. 2023. Despite the fact that in German South West Africa too, the most brutal of von Trotha's orders were ultimately revoked, the authorities were so slow in doing so that the work of extermination can be regarded as having been largely completed by then. See Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid. Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in Larissa Förster, ed., *Namibia-Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*, Köln 2004, pp. 106–121 (English version: "The German Empire and Genocide", pp. 154–174 in this book).

The immediate shooting of all armed warriors was also the first order that General von Trotha issued, while he was still on board ship on his way to South West Africa. The war against the Herero had broken out in the German colony on 12 January 1904, and became the longest colonial war, with the highest tally of casualties, fought under the Wilhelminian Empire. Because the conflict was regarded in Berlin as being of the greatest importance, and because the authorities there did not trust the then Governor Theodor Leutwein to take radical enough measures to crush the resistance, the colonial war veteran Lothar von Trotha, well known for his brutality, was named Commander in Chief and sent to Africa. The timing of this first order is significant, because being issued while von Trotha was still far removed from any logistical problems or the turmoil of battle – factors which have been put forward in attempts to explain the radicalisation of policy in terms of the situation and to play down the ideological component³⁷ – it shows that von Trotha had set out to pursue his brutal strategy from the very start. The Emperor had given him a free hand, requiring him simply to crush the 'rebellion' using whatever means were necessary. This was his authority to pursue a war of annihilation, and ultimately also to commit genocide. Von Trotha, who had earned the bloody reputation which qualified him for the task in South West Africa during the war against the Hehe in German East Africa mentioned above and had also taken part in the suppression of the 'Boxer Uprising', clearly thought in the categories of 'race war'. He believed Africans would "yield only to force", and was determined to exercise this with "blatant terrorism and even with cruelty". In this way he intended to "annihilate the rebellious tribes with rivers of blood".³⁸

This is genocidal rhetoric. It is only a small step from this point to the decision to completely drive the Herero out of the territory and to destroy them. In the background was the idea of South West Africa as a settler colony for Germans. Genocide needs two opposing groups or two groups defined as absolute opposites, one of which is willing and able to replace the other. Raphael Lemkin, the originator of the concept of genocide and 'father' of the UN Genocide Convention, knew this when he wrote the following in his fundamental work, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*:

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,

³⁷ On this subject, see the debate between Hull and Zimmerer in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 37, Washington 2005.

³⁸ Von Trotha to Leutwein, 5 November 1904, as quoted by Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus 1884–1915*, 2nd edn, Berlin 1984, p. 156.

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.³⁹

Such were the categories von Trotha thought in too, and in his famous argument with Leutwein, who warned him not to destroy all the Herero as they were needed as labourers, he dismissed this argument completely, pointing out that South West Africa was a settler colony and that the Whites would just have to work for themselves. What then followed was the often-quoted Annihilation Proclamation of 2 October 1904, in which von Trotha decreed:

The Hereros have ceased to be German subjects.

They have murdered and robbed, have cut off the ears and noses and other bodily parts of wounded soldiers, and are now too cowardly to want to go on fighting. I say to that people: Whoever delivers one of their *Kapteins* to one of my posts as a prisoner will be given 1,000 marks; whoever brings Samuel Maharero will be given 5,000 marks. But the Herero people must quit this country. If they do not, I will compel them to do so with the *Groot Rohr* [cannon].

Within the borders of German territory, any Herero, with or without a firearm, with or without livestock, will be shot; nor will I give refuge to women or children any more. I will drive them back to their people or have them fired upon.⁴⁰

In an Order of the Day of the same date, he sought to clarify this by stating that for the sake of the reputation of the German soldier the order to "fire upon women and children" was "to be understood in such a way that shots were to be fired over their heads, in order to force them to run away". He "definitely assume[d] that this Proclamation would lead to no further male prisoners being taken", but would not degenerate "into atrocities against women and children". They would "doubtless run away, if shots are fired over their heads a couple of times".⁴¹

This proclamation sanctioned the ensuing mass murder. Survival in the Omaheke was not possible; the only Herero that could be shot at were those who were trying to escape from the semi-desert due to the life-threatening conditions there. Also, the explanation that women and children were to be 'spared' is to be thought of, at best, as potentially relieving German soldiers of a duty that von Trotha did not want to have to directly order them to undertake, namely that of actually shoot-

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

40 Proclamation by von Trotha, Osombo-Wind[imbe], 2 October 1904, Federal Archives Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch), Imperial Colonial Office R-1001/2089, Sheet 7af. This is a copy of the original document. Other copies of the Proclamation can be found in the Federal Archives, Military Archives Freiburg (BA-MA) and in the National Archive of Namibia in Windhoek (NAN).

41 Ibid.

ing women and children; for there was virtually no chance of their surviving if they were 'driven back' again. The need to camouflage the murder of women and children, even in the midst of general mass murder, arose again in the Second World War when Himmler ordered the massacre of the Pripet Marshes in his Order of the Day of 1 August 1941: "All Jewish men are to be shot, Jewish women driven into the swamps."⁴² The intention was clear: that they too would perish there without a German soldier even having to raise his weapon.

The consequences of this policy in South West Africa, consequences which from the autumn of 1904 onwards also included the war of extermination against the Nama, are well known.⁴³ Up to 80 per cent of the Herero and half of the Nama lost their lives. Displacement, destruction of livelihoods and annihilation in the camps were applied so systematically that this war may well be designated as the first genocide of the twentieth century.⁴⁴

Alongside the driving of the population out into the desert, a main feature of this German war of annihilation was the establishment of concentration camps, and these camps in particular distinguish it even from the colonial punitive expeditions of other nations. They serve as evidence of the will to exterminate which persisted within the German military, or at least within an influential section of the military, over a period of four years, and show up the cool, calculated nature of this policy of extermination. The murder of old people, women and children through neglect, such as is documented with regard to the concentration camp on Shark Island – statements about other camps are difficult to make due to inadequate research – had nothing to do with the tactical or strategic necessities of war. Moreover, at a time when there was no longer any military threat in the greater part of the country, this policy proved to be economically counterproductive: the people concerned could have been used as workers, for which there was an urgent requirement.⁴⁵ It is also this intentional extermination through neglect that distinguishes the German concentration camps from those in the Philippines or in South Africa. They were not, it is true, extermination camps in the Nazi sense, but they were places of annihilation through neglect, comparable to a number of the Ger-

⁴² Gerlach, p. 278.

⁴³ For a summary 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.

⁴⁴ For more details of the reasoning behind this claim, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid" (English version: "The German Empire and Genocide", pp. 154–174 in this book).

⁴⁵ With regard to the camp on Shark Island, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene im Kolonialkrieg. Der Krieg gegen die Herero und Nama in Deutsch Südwestafrika (1904–1907)", in Rüdiger Overmans, ed., *In der Hand des Feindes' – Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Köln 1999, pp. 277–294; Caspar W. Erichsen, *The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently Among Them'. Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904–08*, Leiden 2005.

man camps for Soviet prisoners of war during the Second World War.⁴⁶ If Omdurman stands for the mechanisation of massacre, then Shark Island takes its place alongside it as a symbol of administrative mass murder. The ethnic cleansing of whole swathes of land, the clearance of large areas in order to then rebuild them as model economic areas, to create space for settlement, already bears a close resemblance to the goals later outlined in the *Generalplan Ost* during the Second World War.⁴⁷ Under this master plan, up to 80 million Russians were to be driven out of the newly established German colonial lands into the areas beyond the Urals, whereby the planners were well aware that several million (up to 30 million, to be more exact) would not survive this.

Refusing to acknowledge the colonial dimension of the Eastern Front is not only Euro-centric, but also obstructs a clear view of new perspectives on the most pressing issues of the history of the war in the East: and in particular the issue of how it came about, and why so many took part in it so willingly. By contrast, the predominating master narrative (especially in Germany) relating to the breach of taboos during the war in the East dehistoricises what actually happened. What, though, if the question as to why this breach of taboos occurred is the wrong question to ask, because the German soldiers did not even notice that they were breaking a taboo? What if they felt they were acting in accordance with a centuries-old colonial history that had been positively received? Taking colonial precursors and worlds of colonial imagination seriously does not construct any causalities. Of course there is no causality between colonialism and National Socialism in the sense that the Nazi crimes necessarily had to follow on from the events of colonialism. Nonetheless, the two are connected by the colonial discourse in which *Lebensraum* thinking seemed to be an entirely natural answer to the social Darwinist and therefore colonialist question of ensuring the survival of one's own biopolitical collective. The world of colonialist ideas offered a framework for explanation and legitimisation, allowing individual soldiers to make sense of their own actions. After all, the colonial 'development' and transformation of entire continents, the 'clearing away' of structures – and peoples – that

46 See the classic study on prisoners of war by Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945*, Stuttgart 1978.

47 On the plans for the re-ordering of German South West Africa, see Jürgen Zimmerer, "Der Wahn der Planbarkeit: Vertreibung, unfreie Arbeit und Völkermord als Elemente der Bevölkerungsökonomie in Deutsch-Südwestafrika", in Michael Mann, ed., *Comparativ*, 13/4 (2003), Special Issue: Menschenhandel und unfreie Arbeit, pp. 96–113. (English version: "Planning Frenzy: Forced Labour, Expulsion and Genocide as Elements of Population Economics in German South West Africa", pp. 57–76 in this book). For a summary of the *Generalplan Ost*, see Mechthild Rössler and Sabine Schleiermacher, eds, *Der 'Generalplan Ost'*, Berlin 1993; Czesław Madajczyk, ed., *Vom Generalplan Ost zum Generalsiedlungsplan*, München 1994.

had existed beforehand and a restructuring 'from scratch' had been practices that had been commonly applied and had received recognition (among the colonial powers) in world history since the fifteenth century at the latest. Those who examined their own actions from within this perspective would feel themselves to be justified by world history.

But are these exclusively German continuities? Is this a *Sonderweg*, a special path and a uniquely German approach? The answer must be no, even though the prominent role of German colonialism in general and of the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama in particular need to be acknowledged, especially simply because of their temporal proximity. And both colonialism and the Herero and Nama War were very familiar to the German public, and enjoyed a popularity that is almost inconceivable today.⁴⁸ However, it should also be emphasised that on the one hand both colonialism (including German colonialism) and the Herero and Nama War form part of a global process, and on the other hand, that the mental 'archives' of colonialism also drew upon ideas and views from the colonial experiences of other colonial powers and other times.

The stage has now been reached at which the question of colonial genocide is being researched and openly debated from Sydney to San Francisco. The colonial wars waged by other countries were indeed often no less bloody or heavy in casualties. The German Empire, however, can claim the dubious honour of having picked up these tendencies and systematised them in a manner that had never been seen before. And this does indeed make the genocide in South West Africa a key event in both German history and in the universal history of genocide.

There is no specifically German *Sonderweg* in 'race warfare'; however, responsibility for the war in the East and the way it was waged cannot simply be laid to the charge of history in general. As the Second World War in Western Europe showed, a different approach would have been possible. The Commissar Order and the Martial Law Decree quite deliberately turned European adversaries into 'Natives', 'racially inferior' people whose extermination was not merely not forbidden, but was even demanded. It is high time to view the Second World War from a global perspective. Both German history and wider European history can only benefit from this.

For the concrete case of German rule in Eastern Europe during the Second World War, this means turning our attention to a previously neglected strand of tradition in German history. This will allow us to identify precursors and recognise

⁴⁸ See Zimmerer, "Geburt des 'Ostlandes'" (English version: "The Birth of the 'Ostland' out of the Spirit of Colonialism", pp. 230–261 in this book) for a detailed presentation of the ways in which colonial visions and experiences from imperial days were transferred to the Third Reich.

models of behaviour. Some elements that appear unique from a narrow perspective may turn out to be variants – admittedly ones carried to utter extremes – of practices previously applied in the colonial context. In this way, the Second World War and the colonial wars in Africa, Asia or America can be used as analytical building blocks for a global history of mass violence. And the writing of such a history is a task we are urgently called upon to undertake.