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Review of Janne Lahti (ed.), *German and United States Colonialism in a  
Connected World: Entangled Empires*

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JANNE LAHTI (ed.), *German and United States Colonialism in a Connected World: Entangled Empires*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 319 pp. ISBN 978 3 030 53205 5. £89.99

‘Europeans increasingly tended to see in America an idealized or distorted image of their own countries, onto which they could project their own aspirations and fears, their self-confidence and . . . guilty despair.’<sup>1</sup> This quotation from historian Hugh Honour captures the gist of this edited volume that brings together an impressive list of international scholars of colonialism and empire. At a moment when the legacies and memories of German colonialism are being discussed with great urgency and controversy, this is a timely publication. It takes a step back and explores the various ideas and concepts Germans had about their nation’s imperial expansion. The basic assumptions of Janne Lahti’s edited volume are that the United States have served as a main reference point for German imperialism, and that comparison should be a central category of analysis in the study of imperialism. According to Andrew Zimmerman, this is pertinent since

the United States has been, arguably, the most successful white supremacist society in human history, a slaveholding settler colony that generated enormous power and prosperity and moral self-validation for a white ruling class. No wonder so many imperial and colonial thinkers have looked to the country as a model state and empire (p. 302).

Indeed, many Germans have looked to the United States for clues concerning discourses on and practices of settler colonialism.

The introduction by Janne Lahti is followed by twelve chapters, whose key themes are framed by two concluding comments by Andrew Zimmerman and Sebastian Conrad. To do justice to each of the highly insightful and carefully argued contributions would exceed the confines of this review, so highlights from individual chapters will need to suffice. In ‘The Fantasy of Open Space on the Frontier’, Robert L.

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (London, 1976), 3.

Nelson engages with agricultural economist Max Sering, who travelled to the American western frontier in the 1880s intending to apply the practices of colonial expansion he observed there to German plans for Eastern Europe. He recognized the importance of canal and railway infrastructure for colonial settlement, but also anticipated resistance from the local population to the arrival of German settlers. Closely observing US policies of removal and assimilation towards Native Americans, Sering favoured the assimilation of Slavic peoples. However, he was also concerned about the preservation of German language and identity, and about German nationalism in a non-German environment. Eventually, this advocate of 'inner colonization' came to embrace more direct, violent measures – namely, the 'Indian removal' of the Poles in order to create space for Germans east of Prussia.

Labour is a central category of analysis in a number of essays. In her chapter 'Ruling Classes and Serving Races', for instance, Dörte Lerp focuses on the impact of global migration flows on questions of labour and land. She analyses how Germans were granted privileged access to land that was inhabited by Poles and Africans respectively, and how colonial labour was organized along racial and ethnic lines, resulting in the creation of a white German 'ruling class' on the one hand, and a population of 'serving races' on the other (p. 131).<sup>2</sup> This was modelled on the US system of race-based slavery, as were practices of land appropriation that were similar to policies of removal and genocide towards Native Americans during the westward expansion. Lerp's discussion aptly demonstrates the transimperial circulation of ideas and practices relating to the (controlled) mobility of enslaved African Americans, Native Americans, Africans, and Poles, and that the empires found sometimes similar, sometimes different 'solutions' for the 'challenges' they faced.

Janne Lahti and Michelle Moyd offer an expert comparative analysis of Apaches and askaris as colonial soldiers in their chapter 'In Service of Empires'. Their contribution is an important intervention

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to depart from the editorial policy of the *Bulletin* and keep the word 'white' uncapitalized in this review, since unlike 'Black', it does not refer to a shared historical experience and is not an emancipatory act of self-naming. However, I want to stress that 'Black', 'white', and other racial categories are socially constructed and that race is a biological fiction.

in a volume in which few chapters engage with the perspectives and motives of colonized subjects. By insightfully discussing the many similarities and differences between Apaches in the US west in the 1870s and African soldiers in German East Africa in the late 1880s and 1890s, they demonstrate that working as colonial soldiers offered these men ‘unintended opportunities . . . to pursue their own goals and empowerment’ (p. 235). Recruitment into colonial armies offered access to masculinity through a readiness for combat and violence, enabled them to provide for their (extended) families, and endowed them with privileges, even if these came at the price of losing their larger communities and being regarded as traitors to their people. Lahti and Moyd’s discussion highlights the agency of these soldiers, who were ‘practitioners of colonial rule’ (p. 265). Their motives for joining the colonial forces were sometimes in direct opposition to what Euro-American and German colonial settlers intended, and the colonizers eventually realized that the recruitment of Apache soldiers fighting alongside white soldiers, and the deployment of askaris in their confrontation with white German settlers, had been a ‘terrible mistake’ (p. 268). The analysis highlights the understanding to be gained from comparative perspectives on imperial practices, and by including the voices and perspectives of the colonized, it demonstrates that they also exerted agency (albeit of a limited kind) and were complicit in colonial violence.

Andrew Zimmermann’s afterword emphasizes that the majority of the chapters in the book engage with imperialist thinkers and their writings and practices. These sources convey a distorted image of the colonized, whose basic humanity is often questioned. Yet, in line with Edward Said’s foundational, but controversial, approach of Orientalism, all the contributors engage with their protagonists critically. In a similar vein, Sebastian Conrad notes that interactions and entanglements between empires were largely one-sided affairs, since many German imperial protagonists looked across the Atlantic for inspiration, but this gaze was rarely reciprocated. The main point of interest for Germans was the westward expansion, along with its railway infrastructure and its accompanying ideology of manifest destiny. This served as a pretext for Germany’s own expansionist fantasies towards Eastern Europe and in African colonial settlements—both

intended to bring German emigration to the United States to a halt. One crucial point that connects all the contributions in this volume, Conrad emphasizes, is that empire is first and foremost a political strategy. Empires thrived thanks to the mobility of cheap labour and a deeply racialized colonial workforce, but also because of the movement of ideas, concepts, and practices across the Atlantic.

This is a fine volume that promises to create productive discussions among historians and in the classroom. It clearly demonstrates the global, transnational nature of imperialism and empire by offering comparative analyses of labour recruitment practices, colonial settlements, removal and assimilation policies towards indigenous peoples, and the agents of colonial policies.

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