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ENTANGLED NARRATIVES OF COLONIALISM

Promoting Overseas and Continental Expansion in Nazi Germany

by Rachel O'Sullivan

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Photo credit: Reich Governor of Bavaria and head of the NSDAP Office of Colonial Policy and the Reich Colonial League Franz Ritter von Epp opens the colonial policy training school in Ladeburg-Bernau on 29 October 1938. The school was set up to train individuals in National Socialist colonial policy, preparing them for possible administrative roles in overseas territories that the regime hoped to reacquire. It aimed to educate party members, military officers, and other individuals who were likely to be involved in colonial governance and administration Image 183-H14239. Bundesarchiv, CC BY-SA 3.0

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Nazi Germany's eastern expansion has meant the Nazi goal of Lebensraum (living space) is often solely associated with Eastern Europe. However, the justifications for claiming overseas colonies by colonial enthusiasts during the Third Reich were often strikingly similar to the narratives of those who supported eastern expansion.

Although Nazi Germany is heavily associated with its eastern expansion during the Second World War, many groups did not abandon the fantasy of reestablishing a German empire in Africa, even after the National Socialists came to power with their clearly eastward-orientated ideology in 1933. In fact, from as early as 1934, Nazi state institutions, such as the "Kolonialpolitisches Amt der NSDAP" (NSDAP Office of Colonial Policy, KPA) under the leadership of war veteran Franz Ritter von Epp, officially planned for an eventual German return to Africa after the war. Meanwhile, colonial enthusiasts throughout Germany were eagerly producing material such as books and leaflets, attended specialized schools and organized events which promoted German overseas expansion. Such colonial enthusiasts were often members of the "Reichskolonialbund" (Reich Colonial League, RKB), also under the leadership of Epp, which was formed in 1933 when the "Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft" (German Colonial Society, founded in 1887) merged with other smaller organizations. While the KPA undertook all official planning for the future reclamation of the German colonies in Africa, the RKB raised awareness and educated the public on colonial matters.

The propaganda produced by colonial enthusiasts has often been widely understood as distinct from the propaganda of those who were promoting Germany's continental expansion towards Eastern Europe, especially given that Adolf Hitler and other leading Nazis were openly critical of the former colonial policies of the "Kaiserreich" (German Empire, 1871-1918) and instead supported eastern expansion. However, when examined closely, the arguments for overseas expansion and for continental expansion were actually much more similar than many would expect. While the desired geographical locations differed greatly, as did Germany's historical relationship to the territories, numerous authors, researchers, and activists projected comparable fantasies, heavily influenced by National Socialist ideology, onto territories in both Africa and Eastern Europe. These people utilized very similar discourse, concepts, and language to justify their calls for expansion and they proposed almost identical solutions to identical problems.

'Lebensraum' (Living Space)

Unsurprisingly, a key reason for the desire for territorial expansion was that increased possession of space would not only lead to increased national resources but also supposedly allow the German nation to grow and flourish. "Lebensraum" was an essential concept in

National Socialist ideology and one of the driving forces of Nazi Germany.

Nevertheless, the concept predated the Nazi regime by many years. In 1897, Friedrich Ratzel, a geographer and ethnographer, linked the term "Lebensraum" to the principle that geography influenced how society developed, hence the need for geographical expansion. The supposed need for space was particularly prevalent in German political and academic discourses during the interwar period given that after the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles stipulated the occupation and demilitarization of the Rhineland, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, transfer of German land to Poland, the confiscation of all Germany's overseas colonies (Cameroon, Togo, German South West Africa, German East Africa, German New Guinea and German Samoa) and their assignment to other states such as Belgium, Britain and France.

The term "Lebensraum" was adopted by the National Socialists to describe the space that would allow Germany to combat overpopulation, access natural resources and food and thus help secure the nation for future generations of Germans. Following Nazi Germany's racial ideology, "Lebensraum" would not only be created by acquiring space but also by ethnically reordering and cleansing the populations living in the eastern territories, while also populating these territories with German settlers. As opposed to looking for this space overseas, many during the Third Reich, particularly academics engaged in so-called "Ostforschung" (Research on the East) saw Poland and other territories in Eastern Europe as the perfect location for German expansion. "Ostforscher" academics worked in a variety of fields, such as history, ethnography, and geography, and concentrated their work on Eastern European regions. During the interwar period and the Third Reich, their work became increasingly political. It directly addressed issues such as the reclamation of German territory in Poland and German expansion further east, lending a scientific "legitimacy" to National Socialist discourses. Additionally, their work often fed into the detrimental stereotypes about Eastern European populations which were circulating and therefore became both increasingly radicalized and popular during the Nazi regime.

Such academics were particularly vocal regarding how much space was available for "Lebensraum" in the neighboring Polish territories. The historian Hermann Aubin noted that, despite a fall in Polish migration to the West, Poland still had "an abundance for its population."[1] In the publication, "Breslau und Deutscher Osten" (Breslau and the German East), Otto Fitzner, an engineer and economist, provided a comparison table listing population numbers per square kilometre, demonstrating that the further east one went, the more space available.[2] Such theories about space available in Poland often tied to racist beliefs about the Polish population being unorganized and chaotic. Poles were often accused of being unable or incapable of managing the territory properly and, therefore, in need of German help.

A float in Albstadt-Tailfingen in 1933 organized by Helene Hakenmüller, head of the female branch of the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft in Talfingen and wife of Paul Hakenmüller, one of the heads of the Johannes Hakenmüller textile factory. The float notes the amount of land in the former German colonies compared to Germany and says “without colonies, no raw materials. Without raw materials, no work. Hand over the colonies.” Particularly noteworthy are the swastika flags also present. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

Interestingly, published material relating to overseas colonialism also employed the notion of “Lebensraum" (they would, occasionally, even use the exact term) and the link between space and the future development of the German nation. Epp highlighted Germany’s supposedly desperate need for "Lebensraum" in the publication "Deutschland braucht Kolonien" (Germany Needs Colonies) which accompanied the RKB colonial exhibition in Hamburg in 1936. The publication quoted Epp: "The German people need land, and we demand land for our starving people."[3] The pamphlet also featured a comparison table, not unlike the one created by Fitzner mentioned above, titled "The German has the least ‘Lebensraum' of all." The table listed the size ratio of European empires’ colonies in relation to the empire itself and recorded that in 1914, England’s colonies were 105 times as big as England, Belgium’s colonies were eighty times its size, and France’s colonies were twenty-two times its size, while Germany’s were only five and a half times the size of Germany.[4]

2. Irredentism

The concept of irredentism, the policy of advocating for the return of territory to a country which formerly had possession of it, was particularly noticeable during the interwar period. As

previously mentioned, Germany had lost all its overseas colonies and also territory that had been directly connected to it. The notion that Germany must reclaim what was taken principally related to continental territory. It was often used to justify future German involvement there, with narratives claiming that the Germans would economically and culturally “reconstruct” the land after its years under foreign rule. "Ostforscher" scholars frequently pointed out how German settlers had colonized eastern territory since the Middle Ages, known as the “Ostsiedlung" (Eastern Settlement), and how the influence of German settlers could be seen in the architecture such as city walls, houses, and churches, as well as in discovered archaeological artefacts. Publications emphasized that the German people were supposedly the only culture bearers (“Kulturträger") in the East where they introduced Western culture to supposedly uncultured Eastern populations. In a published volume of academic papers titled "Der Deutsche Osten" (The German East), the editors explained that “many of the greatest and lasting achievements which the German people have in their history are closely connected with the German East.”[5] The historical involvement of Germans within the territory was thus seen as a justification, and a proof, of the German right to reclaim it given that, in the eyes of those who supported German continental expansion, the territory was German to begin with.

The Askari-Relief monument as it appears today in Tansania-Park, Hamburg. The relief was inaugurated in 1939 by the National Socialists and Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, Commander of the Schuztruppe in German East Africa, in honour of the native soldiers, known as Askari, serving in the German Army. Rachel O’Sullivan, 2023, CC BY-SA 4.0

Irredentist ideology also appeared regarding the former German colonies in Africa during the

interwar period, as, though the land had not originally been German, many colonial enthusiasts perceived the territories as “German" given the “Kaiserreich"’s colonization of them. Even in their titles, publications on the topic of Africa (known as “Afrikabücher", Africa Books) such as "Unvergessenes deutsches Land" (Unforgotten German Land) upheld the theory that the former colonies in Africa remained intrinsically German despite the years of Belgian, British, and French rule after the First World War. It, like many other books of its kind, featured numerous ethnographic photos alongside ones of German schoolchildren, German-style houses, administrative buildings, and infrastructure.

For those who promoted overseas expansion, the “Kaiserreich"’s cultural or developmental efforts in the African territories further warranted their reclamation. The German responsibility to the former colonial subjects of the “Kaiserreich" was also strongly emphasized. In the book "Kolonien oder Nicht?" (Colonies or Not?), the author argued that Germany had "a duty of honour towards the natives of our [former] colonies."[6] Similarly, Senta Dinglreiter, who detailed her travels through Africa, published a book under the title "Wann kommen die Deutschen endlich wieder?" (When will the Germans finally return?). In the title, as well as in the book, the author endorsed the theory that the formerly colonized populations had remained loyal to Germany and were eagerly awaiting the Germans' return.[7]

'Rescuing' Germans Abroad

Even more significant than references to the native African population was the notion that the German settlers in the former overseas colonies, now living under foreign rule, needed assistance from Germany. Having remained in the former German colonies after the Treaty of Versailles, these settlers were portrayed by colonial enthusiasts as having endured an endless struggle to preserve the German language and culture, as well as their settler presence, against all odds. Propaganda highlighted the supposed Germanness of these settlers and publications featured numerous pictures of German settlers and their farms in places such as Windhoek (formerly in German South West Africa).

Three male youths in Hitler Youth uniforms inspect a map of Africa in the German School in Oldeani, present-day Tanzania (formerly German East Africa), 1940, Image 108-232-25. Doerdrechter / Bundesarchiv, CC BY-SA 3.0

The German settlers featured in such publications were not only described as loyal custodians of Germanness abroad but also as loyal members of the “Volksgemeinschaft" (people’s community) who fitted into National Socialist racial ideals. For example, "Das neue Volksbuch der Kolonien" (The New Folk Book of the Colonies) included a photograph of two fair-haired youths, one male and one female, and described the third-generation Germans in "the South West” as “German to the core and healthy."[8]

Like the colonial enthusiasts who utilized the plight of Germans abroad in the former colonies to justify German overseas expansion, those who supported Germany’s continental expansion to Eastern Europe also used the notion of stranded German minority groups, known as “Volksdeutsche" to further their case. They alluded to how, after the First World War, millions of Germans suddenly found themselves living outside of German borders. Such supporters of Germany’s eastern expansion attempted to drum up sympathy for these Germans, similar to the colonial enthusiasts regarding the German settlers in Africa, by highlighting how well they had preserved their culture and language. Karl Thalheim, an economist and lecturer, argued that the Germans living in East Europe still had their native dialects just as their Palatine, Swabian and Silesian ancestors did.[9] Similarly, Erich Lindow wrote about how the Germans in Danzig (Gdańsk) held watch for Germany and clung to German East Prussia. He further linked this to irredentist claims by describing Danzig in such terms: "German is the city and its culture, German is the spirit and German is the feeling of its citizens."[10]

“‘Eternal German East - We are determined to make a German farming district out of the Wartheland,’ Gauleiter Arthur Greiser.” Badge from the Wartheland in annexed Poland expressing the irredentist sentiment of the unending nature of the “German East”, undated, Doc. I-869-0007. Insytut Zachodni, Free access - no reuse

Conclusion

Despite the differences between the former German colonies in Africa and Eastern Europe, during the interwar years and the Third Reich, the issues facing Germany were continually addressed by two different groups whose subject matter, discourses, solutions, and justifications repeatedly overlapped. While the colonial enthusiasts would ultimately struggle to stay relevant after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the supporters of German Eastern expansion saw their work become very important for the increasingly destructive reality. Thankfully, the colonial enthusiasts' plan for a new German empire in Africa was, however, to remain a fantasy.

Footnotes

1. Hermann Aubin: Die historisch-geographischen Grundlagen der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen. In: Brackmann, Albert (eds.): Deutschland und Polen – Beiträge zu ihren geschichtlichen Beziehungen. München, Berlin 1933, p. 25.
2. Otto Fitzner: Die kommenden Aufgaben der Wirtschaft im Osten. In: Breslau und deutscher Osten. Frankfurt a.M. 1941, p. 50.
3. Deutschland braucht Kolonien. Eine Werbe- und Leseschrift anläßlich der Kolonialausstellung vom 4. Februar bis 15. April 1936. Altona (Elbe) 1934, p. 41.
4. Ibid., p. 43.
5. Thalheim, Karl C., Hillen Ziegfeld, Arnold: Vorwort. In: Thalheim, Karl. C., Hillen Ziegfeld, Arnold (eds.): Der Deutsche Osten: Seine Geschichte, sein Wesen und seine Aufgabe. Berlin 1936, p. xi.
6. Bauer, Heinz Wilhelm: Kolonien oder nicht? Die Einstellung von Partei und Staat zum kolonialen Gedanken. Leipzig 1935, p. 48.
7. Dinglreiter, Senta: Wann kommen die Deutschen endlich wieder? Eine Reise durch unsere Kolonien in Afrika. Leipzig 1935.
8. Kuntze, Paul H.: Das neue Volksbuch der Kolonien. Leipzig 1941, Img. 60 (Photographer: Ilse Steinhoff).
9. Thalheim, Karl: Deutsches Vorfeld im Osten. In: Thalheim, Karl C., Hillen Ziegfeld, Arnold (eds.): Der Deutsche Osten: Seine Geschichte, sein Wesen und seine Aufgabe. Berlin 1936, p. 305.
10. Ludow, Erich: Danzig, in: Thalheim, Karl C., Hillen Ziegfeld, Arnold (eds.): Der Deutsche Osten: Seine Geschichte, sein Wesen und seine Aufgabe. Berlin 1936, pp. 305, 97.

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