In the past two decades, colonial studies, the postcolonial turn, the new imperial history, as well as world and global history have made serious strides toward revising key elements of German history.\(^1\) Instead of insisting that German modernity was a fundamentally unique, insular affair that incubated authoritarian social tendencies, scholars working in these fields have done much to reinsert Germany into the broader logic of nineteenth-century global history, in which the thalassocratic empires of Europe pursued the project of globalizing their economies, populations, and politics.\(^2\) During this period, settler colonies, including German South West Africa, were established and consolidated by European states at the expense of displaced, helotized, or murdered indigenous populations.\(^3\) Complementing these settler colonies were mercantile entrepôts and plantation colonies, which sprouted up as part of a systematic, global attempt to reorient non-European economies, work patterns, and epistemological frameworks along European lines. Although more modestly than some of its European collaborators and competitors, Germany joined Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States in a largely liberal project of global maritime imperialism.\(^4\)


\(^2\)Volker Berghahn has recently attempted to revive interest in the *Sonderweg* thesis in his recent overview of the literature in this field; see “German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler,” *German Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (2017): 147–62.


Not that the Habsburg Empire was entirely absent from this process. Although the new imperial history of the Habsburg Empire has remained largely focused on the imperial dynamics of Central Europe, there have been some important reminders that Austria, too, was outward looking and not disconnected from the processes of imperial globalization. Historians of Germany have made it abundantly clear, however, that Germany played an important and extended role in the processes of Europe’s global conquest, both inside and outside formal state colony settings. Alongside the establishment of a settler colony in Africa, German anthropology, German naval power and shipping, German commerce, German missionaries, German civil society associations, and German military power all played an important role in opening up the globe to European domination.

Thanks to an enormously productive surge of research since the mid-1990s, the importance of empire is now well established. In the process of researching the different aspects of German imperialism, some important new lines of debate have been firmly established, while some older concerns have found new empirical and theoretical terrain upon which to be tested. It is unsurprising, given the teleology of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German history, that the role of race as a category of rule in German imperial settings has been closely studied. For some, researching race and racialized violence in empire has


amounted to a search for the origins of Nazi race laws and, ultimately, the Holocaust. This has proven to be a controversial line of inquiry, however—one that inadvertently reinscribes a Eurocentric teleology onto the experiences of the colonized by narrating radical European violence against Africans as gaining deeper significance as the prelude to a future period of radical European violence against Europeans. Investigations of the function of race in Germany’s colonies have, more satisfactorily, offered a means of understanding how non-Nazi racial politics have functioned, and the extent to which German colonial concepts of race overlapped with those of other European powers.

Often intersecting with these questions of race, the operation of gender in empire has also been closely scrutinized: not only to write women into the history of empire, but also to uncover how the structures of patriarchy replicated themselves away from Europe (as, for example, in colonial citizenship laws). The operation of class politics with regard to empire has also been carefully explored, demonstrating that, while German workers were interested in the wider colonial world and its artefacts, the SPD could hardly be said to have been a pro-colonial party. Environmental historians and historians of colonial biopolitics have also tracked the histories of the ecological and health dimensions of Germany’s empire.

It is fair to say that the historiographical coverage of Germany’s different colonies has been uneven. Clearly, German East Africa, Cameroon, and Togo have not attracted the same

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10 Pascal Grosse, Kolonialismus, Eugenik und bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland 1850–1918 (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2000); Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama, eds., German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).


attention as the settler colony of German South West Africa. Nonetheless, the important fact that German imperialism extended well beyond that colony (and, indeed, included the desire for an “inner colonization” of the Polish East) is also well understood. Even histories of the German Pacific, for a long time left to specialists of Pacific history, are slowly gaining traction.

That colonial warfare in German South West Africa was genocidal is now accepted by many scholars—in stark contrast to the first time the East German historian Horst Dreckslor levelled the charge in 1966. This acceptance is largely a result of both Jürgen Zimmerer’s 2002 work on German South West Africa and the growth of the field of comparative genocide studies, which has facilitated scholarly discussions of colonial genocides worldwide. By contrast, the argument that German settlers were somehow more sympathetic toward indigenous peoples (or particular subsets of indigenous peoples) than other colonists has been strongly contested. The recent macro- and micro-level studies of German colonial violence have collectively shed significant light on the mechanics of Germany’s use of force in colonial settings around the world.


17 Christiane Bürger, Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte(n): Der Genozid in Namibia und die Geschichtsschreibung der DDR und BRD (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017).


positioning German colonial violence squarely alongside the violence employed by other European imperial powers in their colonies.20

Having been forced to decolonize by the victorious Entente powers after World War I, Germany’s formal colonial period ended far earlier than that of many other European states (and certainly far earlier than in British, Iberian, and French settler colonial successor states). At one time, this was seen as evidence that Germany’s colonial past was an unimportant dead-end; yet, new imperial histories, as well as transnational and global histories of Weimar Germany, have unsettled these misconceptions about the supposedly slight impact of Germany’s colonial entanglements after 1918—and even 1945—by looking at the after-effects of Germany’s forced decolonization and at German attempts to return to a global role via the routes of trade and international diplomacy.21

This turn to postwar and contemporary history has ultimately led to the question of what remains of German colonialism today. In answering that question, some historians have recently embraced the contemporary push to “decolonize” German history, a term that admittedly means different things to different people (as discussed later). Dissatisfied with the increasingly diminishing returns of textual hermeneutics alone, the recent challenge to “decolonize” German history has focused on a reckoning with German complicity in Europe’s nineteenth-century division of the globe. Some early forays into this arena remained predominantly theoretical, updating “postcolonial” approaches with a new adjectival descriptor—an approach that, while theoretically productive, perhaps missed the full extent of the material challenge posed by the demand to decolonize.22 This is not to say that there are not important theoretical questions to be asked of Germany’s imperial history, but this intellectual labor may not in itself constitute a decolonizing approach—something that requires the foregrounding of the voices, priorities, and epistemic frameworks of colonized peoples.23

It is encouraging, however, that the push in Germany to decolonize German history has made its way out of the universities and into public debates. Here Germany’s postwar civic tradition of Vergangenheitsbewältigung has been revived and German institutions have been pressed into responding to calls for them to decolonize. At the grass-roots level, this has seen debate flourish in numerous cities over the fate of long overlooked colonial memorials and street names dating from the colonial period.24 The recent exhibition in the Deutsches

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20Marie Muschalek, “Violence as Usual: Everyday Police Work and the Colonial State in German Southwest Africa,” in Rethinking the Colonial State: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives, ed. Søren Rud and Søren Ivarsson (Bingley: Emerald, 2017), 129–50; Kuss, German Colonial Wars; Stefan Rinke, ‘‘No Alternative to Extermination’: Germans and Their ‘Savages’ in Southern Brazil at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century,” in Fitzpatrick and Monteath, Savage Worlds, 21–41.


23Beyond German history, researchers around the world are beginning to ask what a truly decolonizing research praxis might actually look like. See, e.g., the special issue on decolonizing research practices, edited by Debbie Hohaia, Lisa Hall, and Nia Emmanouil, in Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts 22 (2017).

The Resurgence of Ancestors and the Emergence of Postcolonial Memory Practices,
*Postcolonial Studies* (forthcoming, 2018); Yann Le Gall,


moves to innocence … an attempt to deflect a settler identity, while continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupying stolen land.” Following Tuck and Yang, shifting toward decolonization as an analytical paradigm cannot—for nonindigenous researchers critically engaging with the colonial past while living in the Americas, New Zealand, Israel, and Australia (territories where indigenous people have been dispossessed)—merely be a theoretical position adopted when dealing with the history of Germany a century ago. Rather, it also entails a far more demanding commitment to recognize and reject the historical legacies of settler colonialism and its normalization by successor states as fundamentally illegitimate.

Like Münchhausen attempting to lift himself up by his own hair, nonindigenous scholars in settler colonial successor states face a profound dilemma when working on historical questions (such as those related to German colonialism) within the emerging paradigm of decolonization because they are, according to Tuck and Yang, effectively coterminous with that which is to be problematized, namely, “settler colonial futurity.” Their disavowal of colonialism is complicated by the fact that the dispossession they criticize never ended in their parts of the world. To be sure, Tuck and Yang’s position on decolonization is a maximalist one, offering little room for differentiation between sites of colonialism and the different ways in which different indigenous peoples might choose to engage with historians and other scholars working on the legacies of empire. Nevertheless, as Evelyn Araluen has recently written, it is worth bearing in mind that decolonization is more than just a set of discursive practices:

Most literary approaches to, or co-options of, decolonial theory are premised upon one version or another of Lyn Hejinian’s argument that purely discursive resistance implies the material political resistance of hegemony. The critical equivalent of this becomes the argument that “liberated” or resistant readings of colonial texts in scholarly, critical or pedagogic contexts are sufficiently influential to justify an invocation of the decolonial project. … We run the risk of foreclosing decolonisation to an academic elite by coding it purely within poetics and academic practice.

As the public interventions of German scholars in the field are demonstrating, the shift to “decolonization” is not merely a synonym for postcolonial hermeneutics, or transnational, global, or new imperial histories. Each of these approaches has value, but they are not the same thing. Accordingly, for scholars working in German colonial history, decolonization cannot simply become a new theoretical position for dealing with a comparatively distant German colonial past. To treat it as such— even to answer difficult questions about the nature of empire and colonialism—arguably threatens to defang its material orientation toward the colonized in the interests of making it suit the needs of the academy and existing theoretical traditions—a settler colonial trahison des clercs.

REFLECTIONS, RECKONINGS, AND REVELATIONS

30 Ibid., 11, 19.
31 Ibid., 35.