

German Colonialism

Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany

Edited by

Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama

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Acknowledgments

The initial idea for this collection of essays emerged from our conference "Germany's Colonialism in International Perspective: International Interdisciplinary Conference on German Colonialism and Post-Colonialism," held in September 2007 at San Francisco State University. Presentations at the conference revealed many different and, at times, contested assessments of Germany's colonial past. We decided to follow up on some of the heated debates, especially the ones surrounding what has been referred to as "the continuity thesis" and the possible link(s) between the Holocaust and Germany's imperial history in Africa. Apart from several contributors who attended the conference, we solicited additional contributions from colleagues to offer a wide range of responses to this topic.

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Hannah Arendt, Imperialisms, and the Holocaust

A. Dirk Moses

Hannah Arendt has made a comeback with scholars of German colonialism and mass violence via renewed attention to her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Routinely cited in the 1970s, she was subsequently forgotten as Holocaust researchers focused on anti-Semitism or conducted regional case studies and as German historiography studied the postwar legacies of the dictatorships and the cultural history of German modernities.¹ The revival of colonial and imperial questions with the transnational paradigm and the exhaustion of the internationalist and structuralist frameworks in Holocaust research have driven some scholars to revisit “grand” historical theory.² In this context Arendt’s argument that Nazi totalitarianism and the Holocaust were prefigured by, or had their roots in, European imperialism offers orientation because it embeds these German and European formations in a world-historical framework. A new, and heated, “continuity thesis” debate has broken out in German historiography over this question, more than forty years after the Fischer controversy about German aims in the First World War and their relationship to Hitler’s expansionism.³ Jürgen Zimmerer, to name the most prominent advocate of the continuity thesis, invokes Arendt to authorize the contention that the Holocaust had colonial roots or was even an

extreme form of colonial violence. And he is not alone. German atrocities in Southwest Africa between 1904 and 1907, notes Trutz von Trotha, citing the earlier work of Horst Gründer, is the “only proof of Hannah Arendt’s thesis that the foundations of totalitarianism could be seen to be emergent in the colonial policy of Africa.”⁴

I will show that this invocation of Arendt is based on a mistaken understanding of her position. Far from proposing a “boomerang” thesis about the corrosive effect of colonialism in Africa on the German and European metropole, Arendt was advancing an alternative continuity argument in service of a broader agenda about the *discontinuity* between what she called “the Western tradition” and totalitarian crimes. The relevance of her invocation of British colonialism in Africa was not to demonstrate their infection of Germany, let alone Russia. It was to redeem British rule, which she admired. The German colonialism and imperialism relevant to Nazism and the Holocaust was not to be found in Africa, as commonly supposed, but in the Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism of central Europe. “Continental imperialism,” as she called Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism, fed into totalitarianism and its unique crimes, while any abuses of “Western imperialism” were rationally limited.⁵

I will question Arendt’s distinction between these types of imperialism and her justification for the Holocaust’s uniqueness. Arendt’s argument, which scholars such as Dan Diner and Russell A. Berman have taken up, ascribes the origins of totalitarian ideologies to non-Western sources, such as Islamism. A postcolonial approach to the relationship between imperialism and genocide places the German experience in a transnational context. This context challenges the comforting exculpations of Western imperialism by the invocation of totalitarian ideologies, without, however, crudely reducing Nazism and the Holocaust to a mere instance or function of European colonial expansion, as the boomerang thesis implies.

The Other German Imperialism

Let us recall that for Arendt the problem with late-nineteenth-century European imperialism was that it undermined the nation-state that she thought continued the Western tradition of politics rooted in Greek and Roman sources. The global economic expansionism of excess, parasitic capital, and the “human detritus” produced by industrialization meant that national politics

became corrupted by annexation and rule over distant peoples, using racism as an ideology of justification. Rule over foreign peoples in the colonies corrupted Europeans because they were far removed from the "healthy restraint of ordinary European society."⁶ But Arendt was also quite explicit that the roots of Nazism did *not* lie in African colonialism or imperialism:

The immediate predecessor of totalitarian imperialism is not the British, Dutch or French version of overseas colonial rule, but the German, Austrian, and Russian version of a *continental imperialism* which never actually succeeded, therefore is neglected by students of imperialism, but which in the form of the so-called pan-movements—pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism—was a very potent political force in Central and Eastern Europe. . . . and since continental imperialism intended to found its "empire" in Europe itself, it did not depend upon a color line to distinguish between "higher and lower" breeds; instead it proposed to treat European peoples as colonials under the rule of a master race of Germanic or Slavic origin.⁷

With this statement Arendt anticipated, by many decades, the current trend to regard east-central Europe as Germany's colonial space.⁸ Her suggestion that Europe was the functional equivalent of extra-European possessions of other empires echoed Hitler's well-known statement that the Ukraine would be for Germany what India was for the British.⁹ The common denominator was the aspiration for German expansion in the interests of power, prosperity, and security. *Mittelpolitik* (the acquisitions of extra-European colonies with a strong navy) and *Ostpolitik* (eastern Europe as Germany's imperial space: *Mittelamerika*) represented flip sides of the same coin.¹⁰ Colonialism is an analytical category that can apply in both maritime and contiguous contexts. "Modern colonialism," as one scholar put it recently, "can be defined as the annexation of a territory by people with ties to a foreign state who perceive the conquered population as culturally distant and inferior. Annexation is followed by efforts to appropriate the resources of the colony and to dominate its inhabitants in an ongoing way, that is, by a state apparatus."¹¹ For this reason restricting colonialism to maritime empires is misleading.

Arendt went to great lengths to distinguish what she called "the more respectable imperialism of the Western nations" from the continental imperialism of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism that she thought led to Hitler and Stalin respectively.¹² The point of her British example is to show how that empire avoided the boomerang effect by resisting the temptation to

crush Indian resistance with "administrative massacres" and by relinquishing "government over subject races." The French, far from being driven out of North Africa, had "learned to give up Algeria."¹³ The success of European decolonization was a major story for her. "It is one of the *glories* of Europe, and especially of Great Britain, that she preferred to liquidate the empire."¹⁴ For Arendt this development marked the victory of the nation-state over the transnational movements of racism and imperialism that overwhelmed Germany and Russia. The Western empire-states represented the survival of the Western political tradition that she wished to redeem.

The distinction between East and West obtained during the life of the Western empires, as well. Oceans insulated the maritime empires of Britain and France from the brutal realities of their faraway colonies. But continental empire, by virtue of its contiguous territory, "does not allow for any geographic distance between the methods and institutions of colony and of nation, so that it did not require boomerang effects in order to make itself and all its consequences felt in Europe." As a consequence, this sort of "imperialism truly begins at home."¹⁵ Why the domestic origins of this imperialism proved so pernicious, Arendt continued, was that the German version was an expression of Pan-German tribalism, whereas "Western imperialism" retained the salutary traditions of the Roman Empire, above all the rule of law and integrity of state institutions. Indeed, Western imperialism, notwithstanding "its antinational tendencies," had been given "a new lease on life to the antiquated institutions of the nation-state" (OT 225). Britain's two-party system contained the imperialist impulse, and no radical expansionist or chauvinist movements were able to establish themselves outside it. The party system also oriented the political class to the common good rather than simply advocating sectional interests (OT 250). Parliament and public opinion also ensured that minimum human rights were respected in the colonies; violent pacification and oppression notwithstanding: "It is to the salutary restraining of these institutions that we owe those benefits which, after all and despite everything, the non-European peoples have been able to derive from Western domination."¹⁶

Political cultural differences between East and West were salient. If in Britain the citizens acting through the parties could become proprietors of the state at the next election, for racist Pan-Germans the state was an alien institution above the citizenry. It thus sought to subvert the state and enthroned its "movement" to rule exclusively for its tribal members rather than for all citizens of the state (OT 255). Moreover, because central and

eastern European leaders had little or no experience of constitutional government, they were all too inclined to resort to authoritarianism, that is, rule by decree.

Now Arendt knew that rule by decree, which was the classic mode of unlimited bureaucratic rather than limited constitutional government, obtained in the Western (or what she called also "overseas") empires; but, yet again, she distinguished between the imperialisms, mitigating the worst of Western imperial rule. Whereas in continental imperialism, however secretive and arbitrary, "native rules and a native bureaucracy were accepted as legitimate government," in overseas colonialism "the very fact that the administrators over native populations were imported and felt to be usurpers, mitigated its influence on the subject peoples" (OT 243-44). And, as Marx had observed, while domination was naked in the colonies, it was less apparent on the continent, thus preventing the "political reasoning by the people through the withholding of information" (OT 246).

Pan-German racism was also different from that of Western imperialism. While the prejudices of the French and British could "claim a certain basis in authentic experience" (presumably she means ruling over "racially" different people), German discrimination against Slavs and the Aryan/non-Aryan distinction was "completely ideological in basis." The racism was therefore all the more fanatical. Capitalist expansion drove "overseas imperialism," but the continental variant was animated by chimeric dreams of fulfilling the German people's fantasized destiny removed from any reality check. Arendt attributed this distinction to the great influence of intellectuals and "the mob" in the latter, unlike the business elites who directed British and French capital (OT 224-26).

But why did this tribal nationalism of "the mob" exist at all? We know that Arendt drew on the liberal historiography of scholars like Hans Kohn to posit the traditional distinction between the (negative) integral nationalism of the East and (positive) civic nationalism of the West. The reason for the difference, she argued, was that the populations of Western countries had "achieved the sovereignty of a nation-state" (OT 227) in revolutions against absolutism, while the mixed ethnic borderlands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire could only be ruled by a neutral state standing above the national fray. A region with changing frontiers and experiencing "continuous migration," it was populated by rootless people, "masses who had not the slightest idea of the meaning of *patria* and patriotism, not the vaguest notion of responsibility for a common, limited community" (OT 232). The peoples of

these mixed-population areas on the edge of empires did not recognize the shared humanity of one another because they were all too aware of cultural difference. Instead, they equated consanguinity with politics, envisaging borders wherever their conationals resided. Tribal nationalism was thereby expansionist. If in the West the state of emancipated citizenry inherited the function to regard all citizens equally under the law, in central and eastern Europe the state and law became an instrument of the ethnically exclusive body politic.

Arendt posited two reasons for the anti-Semitism of the German and Slavic nationalist movements. One was the identification of Jews with the alien Habsburg state; that is, they were colluders with foreign oppressors, a supranational people, and scapegoats against which to mobilize their masses. The other was the religious dimension that suffused German continental imperialism, which displayed messianic tendencies—above all, the myth of "chosen people"—imported from Judaism into Western culture by Christianity. Focusing on this mythic dimension allowed Arendt, once again, to distinguish German and Western imperialism: "In contrast to overseas imperialism, which was content with relative superiority, a national mission, or a white man's burden, the pan-movements started with absolute claims to chosenness" (OT 232-33).

The links between the Pan-Germans and National Socialism are not empirically fleshed out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt's basic point was to demonstrate that the Pan-Germans nurtured a culture of racist imperialism and that Hitler was a product of this culture. The Austrian Pan-German Georg von Schoenerer was his "spiritual father" (OT 241). It is no accident that Arendt originally wanted to call Nazism "race imperialism" rather than a type of totalitarianism.¹⁷ Her other basic point was that this culture was limited in the British and other Western cases in two ways: within its colonies and in the metropole.

Making this distinction led Arendt to make some problematic arguments. To begin with, her intention in the analysis of Boer rule in southern Africa was to show that the Boers had not developed a polity along Western lines either. In fact, she mounted her case for this problem in terms of the Europeans' reversion to the "savages" they were governing and exploiting.¹⁸ Thus the Boers had degenerated—in a memorable phrase, she wrote that they "had sunk back to the level of savage tribes," again echoing British propaganda, as George Steinmetz has pointed out¹⁹—because they lived parasitically on the labor of the Africans, thereby forsaking the fabrication of a human polis.²⁰

Arendt appreciated that the "African savages . . . had frightened Europeans literally out of their wits" (*OT* 206). It was understandable, if not admirable, that the Boers became racists, though less so with the imported Indian and Chinese laborers because they were closer to the human world than the natural world.

Second, this blind spot regarding Africans was evident in her touching faith in the power of civilization to inhibit genocide. Thus, she praised the Italian reluctance to join in the Nazi persecution of Jews by ascribing it to "the almost automatic general humanity of an old and civilized people," although she was also aware that Italian troops at the time were butchering citizens of Ethiopia by aerial bombing.²¹ Arendt was able to make such claims by literally consigning to a footnote the apparently atypical case of the Belgian Congo, which she knew cost tens of millions of lives, and excusing the large-scale massacres as instrumentally limited actions.²² Far from trying to link European colonialism in Africa to Nazism and the Holocaust, then, the purpose of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and her oeuvre in this respect was to disentangle them and distinguish the Holocaust from previous genocides.

Arendt's Uniqueness of the Holocaust

What, then, according to Arendt, was unprecedented about the Holocaust? Arendt's only extensive discussion of this question in relation to the new genocide concept appears in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She criticized the indictment of Eichmann by the Jerusalem court for interpreting the Holocaust as "not much more than the most horrible pogrom in Jewish history," instead of recognizing its unprecedented nature. Unprecedented was the Nazi regime's determination that "the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth." This was a "new crime," a crime "against the human status." "Expulsion" (by which she seemingly meant forced emigration, deportation, and what today is often called "ethnic cleansing"), by contrast, was "an offense against fellow-nations." Genocide, she continued, was "an attack on human diversity as such," a statement that echoed the United Nations Declaration on Genocide in 1946, which was heavily influenced by Raphael Lemkin's philosophy that the "human cosmos" was violated by the destruction of its constituent nations.²³ But why did she insist that genocide was unprecedented when elsewhere she suggested it was not? Even if she qualified

this statement by confining it to the modern era, was she suggesting that no genocides had taken place, for instance, in the colonial world since 1500?

The answer is that she distinguished between the Holocaust and previous genocides. The former was purely ideological while the latter were pragmatic. Whereas conventional genocides, so to speak, were limited by utilitarian aims, such as pacification or domination, and were to that extent rational, the extermination of Jews was unlimited, running counter to the war effort by the diversion of resources; it was therefore irrational (*OT* 445). The posited homology was the limitless expansionism of imperialism with the limitless, ideologically motivated intention to exterminate all Jews. The Holocaust, she argued, "could not be explained by any utilitarian purpose; Jews had been murdered all over Europe, not only in the East, and their annihilation was not due to any desire to gain territory that could be used for colonization by Germans."²⁴ This distinction has become a commonplace among proponents of the uniqueness thesis, who set off the Holocaust from other mass crimes.

What Arendt intended by "pragmatic" considerations was made clear by her references to territorial gain and colonization but also when she praised the Jerusalem court for making distinctions between suppressing opposition. Such suppression amounted to "war crimes, such as shooting of partisans and killing of hostages" and even ethnic cleansing and destruction "of native populations to permit colonization by an invader." These were a "known, though criminal, purpose," a telling slippage about the criminal nature of imperial expansion through the ages that she did not explore. The extermination of the Jews, however, was a "crime against humanity," whose intent and purpose were unprecedented.²⁵

What precisely is the content of this "unprecedentedness"? She implied that the nature of the regime prevented Eichmann from judging his own actions by civilized standards. Eichmann and other Nazi criminals were committing crimes "under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong."²⁶ The context was unique and the motives for the Holocaust incomprehensible, that is, irrational. The Nazis could not see that they were embarking on a criminal enterprise. For Arendt "the unprecedented crime of genocide in the midst of Occidental civilization" applied only to the Holocaust (*OT* xiv).

To make her point, Arendt entertained Eichmann's claim that German actions could be understood in terms of a *realpolitische* state of emergency, the rule of *raison d'état*. In keeping with the Western tradition, she noted

that "concessions [can be] made to the stringencies of *Realpolitik*, in order to preserve power and thus assure the continuance of the existing legal order as a whole." Usually, such crimes were exempt from legal redress "because the existence of the state itself is at stake, and no outside political entity has the right to deny a state its existence or prescribe how it is to preserve it." This argument did not apply to Eichmann, she concluded, when the state concerned, like the Nazi regime, "is founded on criminal principles." She left the analysis at that, posing only a series of rhetorical questions: "Can we apply the same principle that is applied to a governmental apparatus in which crime and violence are exceptions and borderline cases to a political order in which crime is legal and the rule?"²⁷

The Holocaust and the "Western Tradition"

Perhaps we can. Arendt may not have pursued this line of reasoning because it may have revealed that the Nazi persecution of Jews and communists was a radical manifestation of a venerable Western tradition of legitimately liquidating internal enemies, real or imagined. Far from being a "restraint" (her term) on mass violence, the "Western tradition" can license it in its own defense because the state need not abide by the rules of war when suppressing rebellion and insurgency, which is necessarily criminalized.²⁸ Counterinsurgency served the same function in the Nazi empire in which Jews were murdered preemptively as potential rebels or partisans. Consider Himmler's infamous Posen speech, with its well-known reference to "the unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory [*Ruhmesblatt*]," a statement often interpreted as the euphoric *Rausch* of victorious psychopaths: "For we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today—amid the bombing raids, the hardships and the deprivations of war—we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues. If the Jews were still ensconced in the body of the German nation, we probably would have reached the 1916–17 stage by now."²⁹

Jews were particularly suspect, above all Soviet Jews, because Nazism defined them as congenitally hostile to Germans. The Nazis had convinced themselves that Jews were responsible for the traumatic collapse of the German home front and military morale in 1917 and 1918, as well as the short-lived postwar socialist government in Munich and for other Bolshevik uprisings.³⁰ As the supposed bearers of Bolshevism, Jews were perceived by

many Germans as linked both to insurrection at home and to the terrorist regime in the USSR that had exterminated classes and peoples in an "Asiatic" manner. There could be no place for such a dangerous people in the German Empire.

Moreover, by criminalizing Soviet and Jewish enemies, the German state authorized its military to conduct the eastern campaign as a colonial or civil conflict in which the laws of war regarding the treatment of combatants and civilians did not apply. The German state regarded all resistance as illegitimate and targeted civilians *preemptively* and often *collectively* to forestall future resistance, just as in colonial wars of "pacification" against unruly tribes. Hitler rejected the application of the laws of war in the Soviet campaign with the infamous "commissar order" of June 6, 1941, which permitted the summary execution of Bolshevik functionaries. The *Wehrmacht* subsequently allowed three million Russian POWs to perish. *Einsatzgruppen* acting according to the formula "Jew equals Bolshevik equals partisan"³¹ murdered Soviet Jewish men and eventually women and children.

Farrastical as these beliefs may have been, are they qualitatively different from other genocidal conjunctures in which innocent civilians are also targeted as putative security threats? Contrary to Arendt's claim that the camps served no utilitarian purpose and were therefore historically unprecedented, it could be argued that, for the Nazis, they served a purpose of existential significance, ensuring that a perceived mortal enemy would never again represent a threat. Arendt may respond by pointing out, accurately, that the threat was a fantasy, but so they usually are in genocides. Genocidal elites are always gripped by paranoia, often in moments of military crisis, such as in Ottoman Turkey in 1915 and Rwanda in 1994.

Military crisis is not always necessary to precipitate genocide, however. Demographic anxieties may suffice. Serbian intellectuals and national elites thought that the Albanian majority in Kosovo threatened the existence of Serbia itself. In the manner of genocidal propaganda generally, the Serbian media portrayed ethnic Serbs as hapless victims of Croats and Bosnian Muslims who were intent on destroying Serbia—like during the Second World War. It constructed a nationalist "unconscious" and a "new reality" in which the destruction of their "enemies" was an act of self-defense.³² What is more, the crushing of rebellion all too often leads to collective punishment of entire groups, such as the Bolshevik genocidal attack, in 1919 and 1920, on the Don and Kuban Cossacks, who were targeted for "mass terror" and "extermination." Of three million, up to half a million Cossacks were

killed or deported before the Bolsheviks stopped the campaign. The trauma of having to establish the revolutionary regime against inner and outer enemies led to a hypervigilant countenance toward perceived "socially harmful" elements in the populations, who were murdered or jailed preemptively as a prophylaxis—that is, not because of what they had done but because of who they were and what they *might* do.³³ Genocide and "ethnic cleansing" are ultimately as much about security, including future security, as they are exercises in racial purity. Students of comparative genocide can identify common logics and patterns in an astonishing number of cases while also acknowledging differences between them.³⁴

Arendt would reply by saying such a method was mistaken. The "hallmark of the modern historical and political sciences," she wrote, was the confusion in which "everything distinct disappears and everything that is new and shocking is (not explained but) explained away either through drawing some analogies or reducing it to a previously known chain of causes and influence."³⁵ Moreover, she would say that I have not understood that humanity was confronted with a "radical evil" that cannot "be explained by comprehensible motives" (OT 459). What I need to appreciate, she would say, is that totalitarian crimes had shattered the received categories of political thought. The burden of our time was to recognize this fact and imagine a new political science in which action, in her sense of the word, would rupture the automatism of events and totalitarian ideologies unleashed by modernity.³⁶

What is this radical evil if it is incomprehensible in human terms? "There is only one thing that seems to be discernible," she wrote: "we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all means have become equally superfluous" (OT 459). A suprahuman historical process of limitless expansion, which began shattering the stable limits of the nation-state, had, in the form of totalitarianism, overwhelmed Germany and Russia, which were "caught in the process of nature or history for the sake of accelerating its movement; as such, they can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law" (OT 468).³⁷ She made equally speculative and opaque comments about the camps, whose goal was to "liquidate all [human] spontaneity" (OT 456). Her point was that the evil that Eichmann and his ilk perpetrated was banal because the significance of the Holocaust cannot be read from their limited subjective intentions or conscience. They were manifestations of a broader, world-historical process that they did not understand, whose contours Arendt was outlining and against whose radical evil she was warning her contemporaries. Her sketch of Lawrence of Arabia in *The Ori-*

gins of Totalitarianism, for instance, made this point about imperialism in general. Lawrence, as a man who gave himself over to blind historical forces, "took great delight in a role that demanded reconditioning of his whole personality until he fitted into the Great Game, until he became the incarnation of the force of the Arab national movement, until he lost all natural vanity in his mysterious alliance with forces necessarily bigger than himself no matter how big he could have been, until he acquired a deadly 'contempt, not for other men, but for all they do' on their own initiative and not in alliance with the forces of history" (OT 317–18).

Historians of the Holocaust might wonder whether Arendt's philosophical approach can be applied in empirical research. However distasteful and difficult a serious consideration of their motives may be, the genocidal killers are comprehensible because they are human—and closer to commonplace thinking about security and legitimate violence than many are prepared to countenance. The burden that the twentieth century placed on us is actually to confront the proposition that sources within "Western civilization" may be the culprit rather than resorting to speculative historical philosophies that are empirically impossible to demonstrate.³⁸

The signs are strong enough to warrant asking whether Arendt obsessed about this "system," its independent power, and its radical novelty to obscure the fact that the Western tradition found an application in the Nazi paranoia about a Jewish security threat and consequent extermination policies. This was no subterranean tradition that rose to the surface, as she supposed. There was, rather, an explicitly articulated doctrine of total war against inner rebels and colonial others that philosophers, international lawyers, and military thinkers had repeated and handed down for hundreds of years. What is more, notwithstanding obvious differences between Nazis and (other) Western powers, they shared a discursive terrain in which Europe (or the Occident) was counterposed to a degenerate "Asiatic" influence, against which Western culture, however defined, was to be defended. Hitler's writings are littered with such justifications of Nazi expansionism; as the *Völkische Beobachter* put it, "Without Germany, the West would be lost" to Soviet barbarism.³⁹

Colonial Memory and the Holocaust

Non-European intellectuals and their European supporters challenged this perspective for most of the twentieth century. As might be expected, asking

them what "shocks the conscience of mankind," as the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expresses the threshold of humanitarian consciousness, yields different answers from Arendt's. Suffice it for our purposes to recall the answers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon about the fascist nature of colonial rule. Du Bois, for instance, wrote in *The World and Africa* in 1947 that "there was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of children—which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folks in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world."⁴⁰

In response to such a flattening out of events and memory, the German-Israeli historian Dan Diner has reiterated the status of the Holocaust as a civilizational rupture (*Zivilisationsbruch*) by distinguishing it from colonial genocides. His book *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse* is worth considering briefly because it is a conscious defense of the Arendtian thesis against a comparative genocide studies and postcolonial memory. Following Arendt, Diner contends that colonial violence, even when genocidal, was pragmatically limited in scope, whereas the Holocaust was perpetrated for purely ideological reasons as demonstrated by the murder of valuable Jewish workers. Murder for the sake of murder, the Holocaust transgressed all hitherto "observed ethical and instrumental limitations of action" and thereby "destroyed ontological security."⁴¹ Citizens of postcolonial countries, especially Muslim ones, are blind to this distinction, he thinks, because the European powers that had resisted Nazis inflicted violence on them, such as in the French massacre in Sétif on May 8, 1945, the day of Europe's liberation from Nazi rule. For many colonized people, then, all Europeans tend to be the same, and some even thought that Nazi Germany could be a possible ally in the anti-imperial struggle.

To make his case, Diner resorts to an ontological argument, much like Arendt. The Holocaust as *Zivilisationsbruch* is only recognizable against the background of the Enlightenment's premises because it negates them, he thinks. Those still in thrall to a religious worldview—Diner refers to Muslims—cannot appreciate the profane role in Western consciousness played by the Holocaust as a surrogate source for ethical norms and identity. Likewise, a "trans-historical and simultaneously anthropological-oriented notion of violence," which he fears is beginning to move to the "centre of discourse," loses the ability to make the necessary historical distinctions. Only a sense of historical judgment that is prepared to make distinctions can recognize

Auschwitz's special significance as the "ultimate genocide," he states in a circular argument.⁴² Whether you can see what he wants you to see depends, ultimately, on who you are.

Diner ends up secularizing the Holocaust against his own intentions and in contradiction to his secularization thesis. "While the Enlightenment placed itself in the position of God and was, in turn, negated by the Holocaust, now the Holocaust, with its nullification of belief in the Enlightenment, takes the place that was formerly occupied by God."⁴³ Diner makes explicit what is implicit in this discourse, namely that attempts to draw radical distinctions between the Holocaust and other genocides end up reproducing the binary of sacred and profane.⁴⁴

The corner into which authors paint themselves in trying to make points like this is all too evident here. The unprecedentedness of the Holocaust is asserted based on contestable assertions and then made a cornerstone of Western civilization. Those who will not or cannot recognize Diner's position are at best lacking in historical judgment; at worst they are relativizing the Holocaust.⁴⁵ Unlike Arendt, then, Diner, who is concerned by denial and relativization of the Holocaust in the Muslim and Arab worlds, admits that his understanding of the Holocaust is necessarily Western-centric. His answer is that the rest of the world needs to learn from the West.⁴⁶

Diner's choices of either recognizing the Holocaust as the "ultimate genocide" or being a "denier" are as unnecessarily stark as the sacred/profane binary is reductive. There are alternatives. One is to narrate or situate the Holocaust into the broader history of empire, showing how the Nazi project was intended at once as a compensation for the colonies lost at Versailles and as an invulnerable rival to the British, French, and ever-more-powerful U.S. empires.⁴⁷ Another is discernible in the work of the literature scholar Michael Rothberg, who shows how a transnational perspective can make links between Holocaust memory and memories of colonialism and decolonization without entering into identity politics. Rothberg identifies a tradition that he calls "multidirectional memory," in which Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals remember and relate different forms of racism and extreme violence without lapsing into facile equation or producing crude hierarchies of suffering. As it happens, Rothberg can show that Holocaust memory developed in the 1960s, at the height of decolonization, and that the different traumas were always refracted through the other in complex ways.⁴⁸ Recourse need not be made to ontologically based arguments that claim the privileges of insight. *Pace* Arendt and Diner, just as the conventional tools of historical

analysis can map out the common logics and patterns of genocide, they can also reconstruct the cogeneration of different traumatic memories and show thereby that the differences and similarities between the Holocaust and colonial violence were apparent to many intellectuals at the time.

Notes

1. To be sure, political theorists continued to work on Arendt, but genocide and Holocaust historiography was not their focus; see, e.g., Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*; Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*; and Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*.
2. See Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*; Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*; King and Stone, *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History*; Kieman, *Blood and Soil*; and Smith, *The Continuities of German History*.
3. See Fitzpatrick, "The Pre-History of the Holocaust?" On the Fischer controversy see Moses, *The Politics of Illusion*.
4. Trotha, "The Fellows Can Just Stare," 434. See also Zimmerer, "Colonialism and the Holocaust"; Zimmerer, "The Birth of the Ostland Out of the Spirit of Colonialism"; and Chickering, "Total War."
5. Arendt's argument is largely repeated by Shelley Baranowski and Kirby Miller in this volume.
6. Arendt, "Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism," 460.
7. Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism," 37–38 (my emphasis).
8. See Kristin Kopp's and Shelley Baranowski's chapters in this volume. See also Nelson, *Germans, Poland, and Colonial Expansion to the East*; Dickinson, "The German Empire"; Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature*; and Ther, "Deutsche Geschichte als imperiale Geschichte."
9. See Stone, *History, Memory and Mass Atrocity*, 174–93.
10. Geoff Eley has made this point in a number of conference and workshop commentaries. See Linlevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 166–67.
11. Steinmetz, "The Devil's Handwriting," 42.
12. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 222–24.
13. *Ibid.*, xvii (my emphasis).
14. Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism," 35 (my emphasis); Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, xviii.
15. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 223; subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text, using the abbreviation *OT*.
16. Arendt, "Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism," 447.
17. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 18.

18. To be sure, a handful of scholars have noted this racist strain in Arendt's argument. See, e.g., Dossa, "Human Status and Politics"; Norton, "Heart of Darkness"; Presbey, "Critic of Boers or Africans?"; James, "All Power to the People!"; Gines, "Race Thinking and Racism in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*"; and Bernasconi, "When the Real Crime Began."
19. Steinmetz, "Decolonizing German Theory," 8.
20. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 207. "The Boers were the first European group to become completely alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself" (194).
21. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 179; see also Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 168.
22. Arendt, "Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism," 444n8; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 185.
23. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 267–69; see also Moses, "Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide."
24. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 275. See also Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, chap. 3; and Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*.
25. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 275.
26. *Ibid.*, 276.
27. *Ibid.*, 291–92.
28. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 157. On this doctrine see Neff, *War and the Law of Nations*, chap. 6.
29. Quoted in Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*, 132–33.
30. Hitler, *Hitler's Words*, 246; Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation," 491–92, 498.
31. Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, 93.
32. See Parin, "Open Wounds."
33. See Holquist, "Conductor Merciless, Mass Terror."
34. Bloxham and Moses, *The Oxford Handbook on Genocide Studies*; Stone, *The Historiography of Genocide*.
35. Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," 405.
36. *Ibid.*
37. See also Mayer, "Hannah Arendt, National Socialism, and the Project of Foundation."
38. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii. I explore the relationship between modernity and genocide in Moses, "Genocide and Modernity."
39. Quoted in Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 351n88.
40. Du Bois, *The World and Africa*, 23. See also Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; and Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 101. Du Bois's views on this matter changed after his visit to the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1949. On his development see Rohberg, "W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw."

41. Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse*, 13–14, 35, 81.
42. *Ibid.*, 104–7.
43. *Ibid.*, 106.
44. See Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century?'"
45. I am not disputing that there is, in fact, much Holocaust denial in the Muslim world. See, e.g., Litvak and Webman, "Perceptions of the Holocaust in Palestinian Public Discourse."
46. On Holocaust memory as part of a Western civilizing mission see Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust*.
47. See Moses, *Empire, Genocides and Mazowes, Hitler's Empire*.
48. See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*; Rothberg, "W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw"; Rothberg, "The Work of Testimony in the Age of Decolonization"; and Rothberg, "Between Auschwitz and Algeria." Diner's title, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse*, bears a striking resemblance to Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" that was first articulated in his 2004 article cited above, but it is not cited in Diner's book.

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5

Caesura, Continuity, and Myth

The Stakes of Tethering the Holocaust to German Colonial Theory

Kitty Millet

In *Landscape and Memory* Simon Schama describes Białowieża, a primeval forest at the border of Poland and Belarus, in relation to the German concept of the *Urwald*. Quoting Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* to get at the underpinnings of Białowieża as *Urwald*, Schama demonstrates the forest's imagined significance to the Poles and then, by extension, to the Germans, Lithuanians, and Russians: "—in a dense fog beyond which, 'fables so declare,' is a kind of primitive paradise: an ark of species, animal and vegetable; some of every kind. . . . Their progeny are sent beyond the secret cradle-world, called 'Motherland' by the huntsmen, but the archetypal animals remain in zoological utopia."¹

Associating Białowieża with Eden, the huntsman who enters this place has an opportunity to regain access to "an ark of species," in which the depths of the forest signify a life-giving center. It is salvific and redemptive, preserving species by virtue of sequestering them away from "civilizing human custom" so that "the wild beast with the tame lives as a brother" and the unarmed man "would pass through the midst of them unharmed" (*LM* 60). Tellingly, this subjunctive construction suggests an imagined place that could be realized but is not. In this respect Mickiewicz's archetypal beginning of nature pro-