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Sebastian Conrad’s German Colonialism: A Short History provides a much needed discussion and analysis of the German colonial adventure that spanned a mere thirty years and ended with the First World War. The momentous events of the twentieth century have obscured Germany’s role as a colonial power, a role which is revealing in light of what followed. Conrad’s small but dense book provides a useful and illuminating interpretation of German dreams and the practical realities of administrating empire in Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

Germany’s late arrival to the colonial game was a product of its political form; the area that would become Germany was for centuries a fragmented patchwork of small states. Not until the arrival of Bismarck and unification in 1871 was there a national state with which to pursue colonial aims. Still, Conrad demonstrates that ‘Germans’ had a more than passing interest in establishing a footprint abroad, from ill-fated settlements in Texas in the early nineteenth century, to the ultra-sophisticated mercantile networks scattered throughout the world under the auspices of the Hansaetical League and its member cities (p.25).

Even with a unified Germany, a colonial empire was not a foregone conclusion; Bismarck was not especially keen to the idea. Nevertheless, the empire builders won the day, and here is where things get interesting. The vision laid out for foreign adventures never fails to highlight the national character and zeitgeist. The German case for empire was no exception. Looking to ‘export social tensions’, Bismarck could countenance empire, but only of the economic sort. His ideal empire furthered the goals of private German economic actors with minimal state support. He never envisioned large permanent settlements abroad (p.21). Bismarck was, despite his immense stature in Germany’s political history, swept up by the momentum of other social, political and historical agencies. Conrad deftly navigates the complex influences and outcomes of German colonialism. Bismarck’s commercial concerns are contrasted with those who had other visions and goals. German geographical societies caught the popular imagination with tales of adventurous travelers and chroniclers in the heroic age of European exploration and competition. National pride in these efforts fed calls for empire amidst Germany’s rise to great power status. The chauvinism that is the starting point for any colonial exercise was also to be found in the German case. Missionaries informed the public, after their own fashion, of the exotic parts of the world and reinforced the notion that benighted peoples needed a helping hand on the road to progress (p. 23).

German chauvinism took on a sinister hue in its African possessions, notably South-West Africa, today’s Namibia. The war of annihilation against the Herero people can be seen to prefigure Nazi Germany’s policy of racial extermination in the occupied territories during World War Two. Though Conrad does not entirely support this historical corollary, there were disturbing similarities (p. 159). The idea of total war was manifested in the person of Lothar von Trotha, the general who directed the campaign against the Herero and who promised ‘rivers of blood’ (p.85). Von Trotha delivered on his oath but his methods found detractors in Berlin.

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Before being recalled, von Trotha led a brutal reaction to native unrest that led to women and children being targeted, the construction of prison camps and a massive reduction in the Herero and Nama (the other main native group) populations. After the war, a totalizing system was implemented that saw travel restrictions and official documentation and numbering with a metal identification mark of all native peoples over the age seven; a creepy foreshadowing of the number tattoos in Nazi concentration camps. The settlement in South-West Africa is the only German overseas possession that retains a German speaking population (p. 39).

Conrad also touches on the German commercial empire in China and its outposts in the Pacific, where permanent settlement was never envisaged. In Pacific colonies, like Samoa, German men frequently married locals, something forbidden in Africa, and later banned altogether. The politics of race figured prominently in the colonial imagination and in practice, reaching its zenith of suppression and persecution in South-West Africa and German East Africa. By contrast, the German imperial jackboot trod more lightly in its small possessions in Asia and the Pacific.

Alas, the German colonial world ground to sudden halt with defeat in the Great War. Or did it? One of Conrad’s truly admirable efforts with German Colonialism: A short History is to show that the colonial project for Germany both predated and outlived its official temporality and stretched beyond its specific spatiality. A rigid definition of colonialism is insufficient to encompass the German experience. Conrad shows how the colonial idea lived in the imagination and in public discourse and thus how it is still in a sense a vectoring force in the political and social sphere (p. 186). Conrad has provided a thoroughly readable and nuanced account of a complex history.