The Scramble for Europe

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- *Nazi Empire: German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler* by Shelley Baranowski
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A few decades ago, historians searching for the longer-term roots of Nazism's theory and practice looked to the ruptures and discontinuities in German history: the failed revolution of 1848; the blockage of democratic politics after unification in 1871; the continued dominance of aristocratic elites over a socially and politically supine middle class; the entrenched power of the traditionally authoritarian and belligerent Prussian military tradition – in short, everything, they argued, that had come by the outbreak of the First World War to distinguish Germany from other major European powers and set it on a 'special path' to modernity that ended not in the creation of a democratic political system and open society to go with an industrial economy, but in the rise and triumph of the Third Reich.

Such arguments were discredited by the 1990s, as it became clear that imperial Germany's middle classes had been far from supine, its political culture was active and engaged, and its aristocratic elites had lost most of their power by the outbreak of the First World War. The 1848 Revolution was shown to have transformed German political culture, not to have restored the old regime. Comparisons with other countries revealed similar deficits of social mobility and openness in Britain, tendencies to authoritarianism in France, military domination in Austria and more besides. But if there was no domestic 'special path' from unification to the rise of the Third Reich, where should historians look instead?

Over the last few years, the answer, it has become increasingly clear, can be found only by expanding our vision and viewing German history not in a domestic context or even a European one, but in the context of global and above all colonial developments in the Victorian era and after. This view of German history is perhaps possible only at a time when we have become acutely aware of globalisation as a contemporary phenomenon, but it has thrown up many vital new interpretations and generated a growing quantity of significant research that links Germany's relation to the world in the 19th century with its attempt under the Nazis to dominate it. Now this research has been brought together in a powerful and persuasive new synthesis by Shelley Baranowski, previously known for

more specialised studies, notably an excellent book on the Nazi labour and leisure organisation, Strength through Joy.

Baranowski's story begins in the mid-1880s, when Bismarck reluctantly agreed to the establishment of colonial protectorates in order to win the support of National Liberals and Free Conservatives in the Reichstag. Bismarck was wary of the financial and political commitment involved in full colonisation, but he was soon outflanked by imperialist enthusiasts, merchants and adventurers, and by 1890, when he was forced out of office, Germany had a fully-fledged overseas empire. It was, admittedly, not much to write home about. The 'scramble for Africa' had left the Reich with little more than leftovers after the British and the French had taken their share: Namibia, Cameroon, Tanganyika, Togo; elsewhere in the world, New Guinea and assorted Pacific islands such as Nauru and the Bismarck Archipelago. A younger generation of nationalists, who didn't share Bismarck's sense of the precariousness of the newly created Reich, complained it was an empire on the level of the (late 19th-century) Spanish or Portuguese empires, hardly worthy of a major European power.

Moreover, the colonies Germany did possess proved in more than one instance peculiarly difficult to run. The colonial regime responded with policies of extreme harshness. Prussian military doctrine held that the complete destruction of enemy forces was the prime objective of war, but in the colonies this became enmeshed with racism and a fear of guerrilla attacks to create a genocidal mentality that responded to unrest and uprisings with a policy of total annihilation, by methods that included deliberate starvation: 150,000 Hehe were killed in this way in Tanganyika and a further 300,000 people in the Maji-Maji revolt. Even more notoriously, 60 per cent of the Hereros and Nama were exterminated in Namibia, many of them driven into the desert without supplies, their water holes poisoned, their cattle sequestered, their crops destroyed, and large numbers imprisoned in concentration camps, where they died of disease and malnutrition. Victory was followed by the establishment of an apartheid regime with laws and regulations forbidding racial mixing and reducing the Africans to the status of poorly paid labourers.

Already, however, German policy had begun to move towards the acquisition of new colonies. Where were they to come from? With Kaiser Wilhelm II's assumption of a leading role in policy-making, Germany began the construction of a large battle fleet in 1898. By focusing on heavy battleships rather than light, mobile cruisers, the navy's creator, Admiral von Tirpitz, was adopting the high-risk strategy of working towards, or at least threatening, a Trafalgar-style confrontation in the North Sea that would defeat or

cripple the British, whose domination of the seas was regarded as the major obstacle to German imperial glory, and force them to agree to an expansion of the German overseas empire. Germany now adopted an aggressive 'world policy', aiming to boost the status of its empire and gain a 'place in the sun' comparable to that of other European powers. Soon, uncontrollable imperialist enthusiasms were bubbling up from the steamy undergrowth of pressure-group politics.

These focused on Europe as much as overseas. A large chunk of Poland, annexed in the 18th century, belonged to Germany, and the government began to encourage ethnic Germans to settle in areas dominated by Polish-speakers, but although 130,000 moved there in the imperial period, that was by no means enough to replace the 940,000 ethnic Germans who migrated west between 1886 and 1905 in search of a better life. Dissatisfied with this situation, radical nationalists began to demand a war in the east that would conquer the Slavs and rescue the millions of imperilled German-speakers who lived in Eastern Europe from 'Russification' and 'Magyarisation' by incorporating them into a hugely expanded Reich. The influential Pan-German League went even further, pressing the government to contemplate the annexation of Holland, Flanders, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Romania and the Habsburg Empire, all of which they thought of as 'German' lands, and to couple this with the removal of civil rights from Germany's tiny Jewish minority. Once German domination of Europe had been achieved, the expansion of the overseas empire would inevitably follow.

Under such influences, Social Darwinism gained increasing currency in government circles, propagating a view of international relations as determined by a struggle between races – Germanic, Slavic, Latin – for survival and ultimately domination. A large colonial empire was obviously Germany's due. Nevertheless, colonial ideology continued to be opposed by the two largest political parties, the Marxist-oriented Social Democrats and the Catholic Centre, who vehemently condemned German colonial atrocities in 1905-6. In 1913, these parties, together with left-wing liberals, managed to block the introduction of anti-miscegenation measures in Germany on grounds of the sanctity of marriage (for the Catholics) and the universality of human rights (for the socialists and liberals). Even so, the resulting Citizenship Law, uniquely among European nations, defined citizenship not by residence but by 'community of descent'.

When war threatened in 1914, the pressure from the Pan-Germans made it (at the very least) easier for the government to get involved, while the Social Darwinist convictions of some of the major actors weakened the will to find a peaceful way out of the crisis. Once war had broken out, the government formulated a secret programme that aimed for

major territorial acquisitions and the economic and military subjugation of most of Europe, as well as the seizure of the French and Portuguese possessions in sub-Saharan Africa. These aims went far beyond those of the British and French; hardliners in the leadership, driven by the military stalemate in the west, Allied control of the seas and growing food shortages at home, demanded even more far-reaching annexations.

Meanwhile, German rule in the occupied areas of Europe became ever harsher at the same time as the military tightened its grip on Germany itself. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the effective capitulation of the Russians at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, more than a million square miles and 50 million people, together with most of Russia's coal, iron and oil deposits and half its industry, were lost to Germany and its Turkish ally. A million German troops helped impose a ruthless military dictatorship in the occupied areas, which stretched from Estonia in the north through huge swathes of Belarus and Ukraine to the north-eastern hinterland of the Black Sea in the south. Along with economic exploitation and the brutal suppression of nationalist movements came the imposition of a new racial order in which the inhabitants of the region were explicitly treated as second-class citizens, foreshadowing the regime that would be imposed by the Nazis a quarter of a century later.

In the peace settlement that followed defeat in 1918, Germany lost all its overseas colonies, 13 per cent of its territory in Europe (including Alsace-Lorraine to France, and industrial areas in the east to the newly created state of Poland), and almost all its military equipment. Its armed forces were restricted to 100,000 men, and the government had to agree to the payment over subsequent decades of large sums of money in reparations for the economic damage caused by the war. These terms caused general disbelief and then outrage; after all, the war had ended while German troops were still on foreign soil, and military defeat had been far from total. Moreover – a fact often overlooked by historians – British and French troops occupied the Rhineland for most of the 1920s, providing a constant reminder of Germany's subjugation to foreign powers. In 1923, when it fell behind with reparation payments, the French sent an expeditionary force into the industrial region of the Ruhr to seize key resources, causing further resentment.

Yet did this amount, as Baranowski claims, to the 'colonisation' of Germany by the Allies? Certainly, propaganda attacks on the occupation of the Ruhr focused heavily on the racial defilement symbolised by the French use of troops from its African colonies. But by the mid-1920s the violent clashes between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces that had brought machine guns and tanks onto the streets of

Germany's major cities in the immediate aftermath of the war had subsided and the economy had stabilised. The negotiating skills of Gustav Stresemann, the long-serving foreign minister, brought readmission into the international community, the renegotiation of reparations and the removal of the occupying troops. There is little evidence of any widespread feeling among Germans that the country had been 'colonised'; only among extreme anti-semites was there a conviction that the Weimar Republic was controlled by an international Jewish conspiracy, but even here the language of colonisation can rarely be found, and it must also be remembered that the Nazi Party did so poorly in the elections of 1928, winning less than 3 per cent of the vote, that it soft-pedalled its violent anti-semitism in subsequent elections. The anti-Jewish disturbances of the postwar years were both less widespread and less representative of public opinion than Baranowski implies.

Only once the depression of the early 1930s had bankrupted banks and businesses and put more than a third of the workforce out of a job did the Nazis win mass support; and only when they were brought into power as the conservative elites' coalition partners – the elites were seeking popular legitimacy for their plans to destroy Weimar democracy – did they unveil their visceral anti-semitism once more and begin to implement it in a series of decrees and laws backed by stormtrooper violence against Nazism's opponents, above all on the left. By this time, the idea of a German empire had come to be dominated not by overseas colonies, which had been the concern only of small and impotent minority pressure groups during the Weimar years, but by the vision of a European empire, one that built on the experiences of the First World War but went far beyond them.

Still, memory of Germany's overseas empire remained and was even revived by the Nazis. How far did the colonial experience influence the policy of extermination under Hitler? Baranowski addresses this central question in a subtle and balanced way, avoiding some of the excesses of the most vehement historical exponents of the continuity thesis but retaining some of its central elements even so. In the first half of 1933 the Nazis set up hundreds of concentration camps, into which they drove more than 100,000 of their political opponents, using them for forced labour and treating them so brutally that many hundreds died. But these bore little resemblance to the camps in which the Herero had been starved to death in Namibia, and in any case the idea of concentrating civilian populations in prison camps was by no means a German invention: it dated back at least as far as US campaigns against Native Americans in the 1830s.

The Nazis did see their camps as a kind of counter-insurgency tool, but their primary purpose was to intimidate and 're-educate' opponents of the regime, who were brutalised until they agreed not to mount any further resistance. Almost all the inmates had been released by 1934, when the task of repression was turned over to the regular police, the courts and the state prison system. If there was a colonial precedent, then, as Baranowski remarks, it had been totally transformed and owed far more to the political polarisation of Europe after the Bolshevik Revolution – at roughly the same time, similar institutions emerged in the Soviet Union, owing nothing at all to colonial precedents.

There was no parallel in the Soviet Union, however, to the racial policies adopted by the Nazis. How much did the imposition of 'racial hygiene', the laws against intermarriage and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, and the forcible sterilisation of up to 400,000 'hereditarily inferior' Germans, owe to Germany's prior colonial experience? As Baranowski persuasively argues, there were striking precedents in the anti-miscegenation laws passed in pre-1914 Namibia, the segregationist response to colonial insurrection, and the more extreme policies advocated by the pan-Germans during the debates over the Citizenship Law of 1913. 'Imperialism,' she remarks, 'linked the two bourgeois phobias of socialism and racial mixing, in which workers were imagined much like "natives".' Germany's decolonisation in 1919 eliminated the previous distinction between colonial and domestic law and boosted fears of 'alien races' such as Jews and Gypsies polluting the German race at home. The concepts were the same; only the practice was radicalised.

There were personal continuities too: Hermann Göring's father had been the first colonial governor of Namibia, while the eugenicist Eugen Fischer used his research on mixed-race groups there to argue against racial mixing during the Third Reich, when medical scientists who had trained in his institute, such as the Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele, played a major role in implementing eugenic policies. Yet in the end these continuities were less important than the discontinuities that Baranowski enumerates. Arguing persuasively against the trend of much recent historical opinion, she insists repeatedly on the centrality of terror and violence to the Nazi seizure and practice of power, which marked a crucial rupture with Weimar's administration of welfare and policing. The crushing of the labour movement, the arrest or exile of Jewish and liberal public health and welfare officials, and, she might have added, the destruction of the free press and news media, removed the major obstacles to the deployment of eugenicist policies by the state, while the rapid growth of the racially obsessed SS under Himmler pushed on the central implementation of policies such as the mass sterilisation of the allegedly mentally ill and handicapped on a scale unrivalled in any other country.

Uniquely, too, this policy, coupled with the exclusion of Jews from economic and social life on racial grounds, was designed to pave the way for a war of imperialist expansion in the east, and during the war itself was transformed into a campaign of mass murder in which 200,000 mentally ill and disabled Germans were killed by Nazi doctors.

The symbiosis of racial policy and war became even clearer from 1939 onwards. Building on recent scholarship, Baranowski shows in detail how the invasion of Poland was designed from the outset to destroy the Polish nation, executing Poles and Jews in scores of thousands, displacing them from their homes, expropriating their property or – in the case of the Poles – shipping them off to Germany as forced labour. The Germans all but eliminated any distinction between combatants and civilians, abandoning all attempt to follow the laws and conventions of war to which – with rare exceptions – they adhered in the west. SS and army troops alike regarded the Poles as savages, the Jews as a lower species of being. All this was repeated on a larger scale following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, reflecting not only prejudices against Slavs and 'eastern Jews' widespread even in the working class before 1914 but also the practices common among European conquerors of colonial territories since the Spanish invasion of the Americas in the 16th century.

Yet, as Baranowski points out, 'the mass expulsion or killing of native populations' in the colonial setting of the 19th century 'often followed frontier conflicts on the ground between European settlers and indigenous peoples over land and resources.' Administrations in the imperial metropoles often tried to restrain settlers greedy for land and labour, though they generally ended up tolerating and eventually endorsing their rapacity. Even the genocidal decision in the Namibian war was taken locally, by a military commander who brushed aside the reservations of the colonial governor and his superiors in Berlin, and colonial atrocities frequently aroused fierce criticism at home. The Nazis, by contrast, launched their war of racial subjugation and extermination in the east without the slightest provocation and in the absence of any doubts or criticisms, except on the part of a handful of conservative army officers. Moreover, throughout the war, they co-ordinated and directed it from the centre, acting on directions from Hitler himself. This is not to deny that there were disputes within the Nazi elite over the implementation of ethnic cleansing and annihilation. But the basic direction of policy was clear, culminating in the General Plan for the East, officially adopted in 1942, which envisaged the extermination by starvation and disease of at least 30 and possibly as many as 45 million Slavs and the resettlement of most of Eastern Europe by German colonists. Here indeed, as Baranowski puts it, was the 'Nazi place in the sun'.

German plans for Africa, revived in the 1930s as Hitler took up once more the demand for the return of former colonies, envisaged no such policy of genocide; rather, they differed little in essence from conventional European paradigms of colonial development. The 'natives' were to be separated out from European settler society, to be sure, but German administrators were to educate, feed and improve the health of indigenous Africans, developing the colonial economies to aid the supply of raw materials and foodstuffs for the metropole. This was partly because the Nazis did not see Africa as a major source of German settlement, but also because they posed no threat of the kind they imagined was constituted by the Slavs and, above all, the Jews. The destruction of the Slavs and Jews was linked in Nazi policy to the purification and consolidation of the German race itself, as it was not in the colonial situation. Indeed, SS units even roamed Eastern Europe in search of 'racially valuable' blond, blue-eyed children, kidnapping tens of thousands of them and arranging their adoption by German parents under new identities – a policy unthinkable in colonial Africa. Finally, Nazi policy in Eastern Europe was driven at least in part by the immediate imperatives of ensuring an adequate food supply for Germany itself, whose agriculture was in no way able to feed the Reich and its armies. Once more, therefore, the Nazis radicalised earlier imperialist practices or departed from them in significant respects, rather than simply continuing them.

How can the Nazi extermination of the Jews be fitted into the colonial paradigm? Certainly, prewar radical nationalists fitted anti-semitism into their vision of international relations as a Darwinian struggle for survival and supremacy between races. The policies of segregation, deportation and expropriation to which Germany's and then Europe's Jews were subjected all had their precedents in the colonies. But the deliberate scouring of a whole continent and potentially – as suggested by the minutes of the conference held at Wannsee to discuss the implementation of the 'final solution of the Jewish question in Europe' – the entire surface of the globe for Jews to be carried off to assembly-line extermination in gas chambers or killing pits had no precedent.

Baranowski sensibly calls into question the arguments of some historians that the mass murders committed by German colonial administrators and military commanders before 1914 were not only comparable to the later Nazi genocide, but even created a genocidal mentality that led directly to the Holocaust. As she points out, other European powers engaged in similar policies, all of which, including those of the Germans, were designed above all to destroy the economic independence of conquered populations and turn them into a docile labour force or, in areas deemed suitable, clear them out to make way for settlement. Something like this was what the Nazis planned in Eastern Europe, and at

some points in the process, Nazi administrators did use Jewish labour for the war economy as well, but in the long run this was, as they put it, just a slower form of 'annihilation through labour', *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*. While the General Plan for the East undoubtedly envisaged the genocidal elimination of tens of millions of Slavs, it was driven by ideological imperatives fundamentally different from those of the Holocaust, which designated the Jews as the 'global enemy', the *Weltfeind*, not a regional obstacle posed by savages but a world conspiracy mounted by a cunning and ruthless enemy designed to destroy the German nation entirely.

These arguments will be discussed and debated for a long time to come. Although Baranowski set out to write a textbook, she has produced something much more important: a skilful and carefully nuanced synthesis of some of the most productive ideas to have emerged in the debate about the origins of Nazism and Nazi extremism in the past few years. Reflecting current concerns, these focus not so much on how or why the Nazis came to power, as on what they did once they had achieved it, above all during the war. From this point of view, they are addressing a rather different set of questions from those posed by the old 'special path' thesis. Baranowski's book nonetheless puts them clearly on the map, debates their pros and cons with subtlety and sophistication, and should be read by anyone interested in the calamitous and ultimately exterminatory path taken by German history in the 20th century.

Vol. 33 No. 3 · 3 February 2011 » Richard J. Evans » The Scramble for Europe
pages 17-19 | 3935 words