

The Kaiser's lost African empire and the Alternative für Deutschland: Colonial guilt-denial and authoritarian populism in Germany

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Abstract

This article examines the role which the “imaginary” of the empire that Germany lost in 1919 plays in the contemporary German extreme right, and especially its leading expression, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). It focuses on the symbolic importance of the former colonies in South West Africa / Namibia and East Africa / Tanzania and of the less emotionally charged, although also significant, German ‘informal empire’ connections to South Africa. The article highlights that the AfD draws on a considerable legacy of political activism concerning Africa stretching back through the colonial revanchist nationalism of the Weimar era, the global network of the Nazi Party’s “Foreign Organisation”, and the post-war populism of Franz Josef Strauß. AfD ideologues glorify the achievements of the Kaiserreich, and emphasise that Germany has nothing to be ashamed of, in relation to its record in the colonial era. With the recent demands from Namibia for the payment of German reparations for the 1904-7 genocide in that country, this past has become a very live issue in German politics, and the AfD has made much of its opposition to any admission of German culpability. The article also shows how the AfD portrays itself as the defender of the German minority in Namibia and of white South Africans, whose position is represented as a warning of what happens when white people allow racial “others” to attain political power. The analysis seeks to avoid simple “culturalist” /historicist explanations of the presence of these issues in contemporary politics, embedding its account in the continuities of significant social, economic and strategic relationships between southern Africa and Germany.

Keywords: Alternative für Deutschland; German colonialism; Herero reparations; Germans in Namibia; Franz Josef Strauß.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die rol wat die “imaginêre” van die ryk, wat Duitsland in 1919 verloor het, speel in die hedendaagse Duitse vêrregse beweging, en veral wat betref sy vernaamste manifestasie, die AfD. Dit fokus op die simboliese belang van die voormalige kolonies in Suidwes-Afrika/Namibië en Oos-Afrika/Tanzanië en die

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minder belaaide, maar steeds belangrike, Duitse “informele ryk” se bande met Suid-Afrika. Die artikel belig die feit dat die AfD hom beroep op ’n noemenswaardige nalatenskap van politieke aktivisme wat betref Afrika, wat so vër terugstrek as die koloniale revanchistiese nasionalisme van die Weimar-era, die globale netwerk van die Nazi Party se “Oorsese Organisasie”, en die na-oorlogse populisme van Franz Josef Strauß. AfD ideoloë verheerlik die prestasies van die Kaiserreich, en beklemtoon dat Duitsland niks het om oor skaam te wees wat betref sy koloniale verlede nie. Met Namibië se onlangse eis om die betaling van Duitse reparasies vir die 1904-7 volksmoord in daardie land, het die verlede ’n baie lewendige vraagstuk in die Duitse politiek geword, en die AfD het veel gewag gemaak van sy teenstand wat betref enige erkenning van Duitse aandadigheid. Die artikel wys ook hoe die AfD homself uitbeeld as die beskermheer van die Duitse minderheid in Namibië en van wit Suid-Afrikaners, wie se posisie uitgebeeld word as ’n waarskuwing oor wat gebeur wanneer wit mense die “rasse-ander” toelaat om politieke mag te verkry. Die analise poog om vereenvoudigde “kulturistiese”/historistiese verklarings oor die teenwoordigheid van hierdie vraagstukke in hedendaagse politiek te vermy deur sy weergawe te grond op die kontinuïteit van belangrike sosiale, ekonomiese en strategiese verhoudings tussen Suider-Afrika en Duitsland.

Sleutelwoorde: Alternative für Deutschland; Duitse kolonialisme; Herero reparasies; Duitsers in Namibië; Franz Josef Strauß.

Over the short period from its formation in 2013, the extreme right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has become a significant force in German politics. In the national parliamentary (*Bundestag*) elections of 2017 it attained 12.6 percent of the vote, and in the 2019 provincial (*Land*) elections, it became the second party in five of the six units covering the former East German state (although support in the territory of the pre-1990 Federal Republic remains relatively weak). This was the most successful electoral performance by a far-right party since the formation of the Federal Republic in 1949. Its overall position weakened slightly in the 2021 elections, but it became the strongest party in the provinces of Thuringia and Saxony. Despite the AfD being relatively far less successful in terms of its impact on national politics than the movements headed by Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen or Nigel Farage, given Germany’s history, the rise of a powerful party of intense nationalism and racism has been alarming for both German and international observers.

A battle over conceptions of the national history has played a crucial role in the politics which has enabled the AfD since its formation in 2013. And within that struggle over what Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), a small but important theme has been the seemingly obscure topic of the colonial empire which Germany constructed after the 1884 Berlin Conference and lost at the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. This article seeks to explain why the politics of the colonial past, and particularly of the history of Germany in southern and eastern Africa, has been a useful theme for the AfD.

Current political issues are situated by AfD ideologues inside a familiar complex of far-right themes: “common sense” versus intellectualism; the danger to the nation of racial outsiders and corrupt elites; threatened traditional gender roles; the good countryside and small towns versus the wicked cities; and a sense of national victimhood.¹ But their sense of history is central to all of this. Like other extreme right movements, the AfD compares the allegedly squalid present to a glorious national past.² Yet the fact that for most of the last thousand years there was no unified German state makes locating the right historical forerunner quite tricky. Moreover, the history of National Socialism becomes a central problem, as the height of national power also comprises a massive national trauma and a criminality with which no significant number of voters would want to identify. The AfD solves this problem by minimising the years 1933–45, insisting that Nazism is but a small blot on a millennium of national achievement, and sometimes making an equivalence between the Hitler regime and the East German Cold War state, as varying forms of tyranny.

Instead, the party has a tendency to look back to the relatively brief period when Germany was both territorially whole and dominated by conservative traditionalists: the Empire of 1871 to 1918. And within that period, precisely because the denunciation of the colonial past and its racist legacy has become important in contemporary left-liberal intellectual and political endeavour, the AfD has embraced a defence of the supposedly benevolent and developmental role played in the colonial world by the *Kaiserreich*. This discourse appears in a different way than other current European colonial nostalgias though, because Germany, unlike Britain and France, lost its African holdings not by the granting of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, but by being stripped of them at the end of the First World War. For the German right, historically, that loss was experienced at the time as a further national humiliation compounding the defeat of 1918. It has generated a subsequent hundred years of victimological German rightist activism and rhetoric, the traces of which can be found in the AfD’s work today.

This article does not suggest that current right-wing populism is somehow “the same” as historical fascism. Contemporary movements operating in a context of competitive elections, a functioning legal system and a competitive media and by and large avoiding the use of militia violence, are not in any simple sense “fascist”.³ Yet it is equally the case that there are important ideological continuities between historical fascism and the modern right mass movements like the AfD.

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1. J. Stanley *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (Random House, New York, 2018).
 2. Stanley, *How Fascism Works*; R. Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (Polity, Cambridge, 2018).
 3. C. Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity, Cambridge, 2019).

The long-term historical underpinnings of the AfD’s colonial politics

In accounting for the “memory politics” of the AfD, one needs to strike a difficult balance, by taking historical and cultural continuities seriously, without lapsing into “historicism” or “culturalism”. On the one hand, the AfD’s discursive strategies do draw on a century of extreme right German cultural politics about the lost empire. Many of the very specific ideas associated with Africa that the party uses, are not just generally colonialist, but rather reflect how the post-1919 “problem” of the phantom empire was addressed, across time, by German intellectuals and activists. The AfD’s Africa-imagery comes from that of the Weimar right, of the Nazi era, and of the populist version of Christian Democracy expressed in the Bavarian (Catholic) Christian Social Union (CSU) of Franz-Josef Strauss during the 1950s to 1980s. But on the other hand, one must be aware of the danger of treating cultural elements as “free floating” rather than anchored in specific socio-political relationships. I will seek to demonstrate that the continuity of pro-colonial rhetoric has been underpinned by very strong structural links between Germany and Southern and Eastern Africa from then to the present.

There are three main axes of such continuing connections to Africa south of the Equator which are relevant to the AfD’s interventions.

Firstly, there was a major long-term German commercial, export and (later) industrial manufacturing presence in South Africa, dating back to the nineteenth century, interrupted only during the World Wars, and continuing to the present. This has been the basis for the continuous existence of a small but strong local German community with closer ties to the homeland. Some South African Germans assimilated into the dominant Anglophone economic elite and others into the Afrikaner population (although often with a distinct sense of heritage).⁴ But a network of German schools, Lutheran/Evangelical Churches and community organisations also provided a basis for a continuous German identity. In the colonial era, this identity was strongly patriotic: for example, in the pre-First World War years, there were strong local German naval-expansion clubs in southern Africa.⁵ The local Germans’ antagonism to British interests was echoed in Germany itself in the German right’s sympathy with the pre-1899 Boer Republics (shared by the Kaiser himself) and later, with the new Afrikaner nationalism. There were close links between the German authorities in South West Africa, and the Afrikaners who took up arms against the Botha-Smuts government in South Africa in 1914. South West African Germans proved highly susceptible to the appeal of National Socialism, with a Nazi network forming in the 1930s, and taking over community organisations, despite government repression. Both Berlin and the local community were sympathetic and supportive to the overtly fascist strands of Afrikaner

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4. L. Kriel, “Heimat in the ‘Veld’? German Afrikaners of Missionary Descent and their Imaginings of Women and Home”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 41, 2, 2015, pp 228–256; J. Hyslop, “Durban as a Portal of Globalization: Mines, Railways, Docks and Steamships in the Empire of Otto Siedle’s Natal Direct Line, 1879–1929”, *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 26, 1, 2015, pp 35–50.
 5. S. Manz, “Nationalism Gone Global: The Hauptverband Deutscher Flottenvereine im Ausland, 1898–1918”, *German History*, 30, 2, 2012, pp 199–221.

nationalism such as the “Grey Shirts” in the 1930s and the Ossewa Brandwag in the early war years.⁶ Although the post-1945 German South African community tended to be more politically pragmatic, both they and the Bonn government took a largely favourable view of the apartheid regime. By the 1960s, South Africa was Germany’s third largest trading partner, with, for example, large scale Volkswagen, Mercedes and BMW assembly plants being built in the country. Even SPD (Social Democratic) politicians tended to be hesitant to criticise the Pretoria regime, at least until the late 1970s. There was a strong cultivation of links with the South African authoritarian regime, especially by the CSU, some elements of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the neo-Nazi fringe elements around the National Democratic Party.⁷ In the post-apartheid era, the generally well-off German community has adapted to the new realities and there is little sign of AfD support. Although South Africa still has very important economic links with Germany, the country is much less significant to the Federal Republic than it was in the 1960s. But for the AfD, the defeat of white minority power in South Africa serves as an awful warning of a future “great replacement” of white westerners. Moreover, they have maintained links with Afrikaner nationalist extremist organisations, in some cases through personal links going back to the apartheid era and beyond, whose stories help the AfD to articulate their narrative of Western decline.

Secondly, the continuing presence of a significant German population in South West Africa (the later Namibia) which came under South African rule through the League of Nations mandate of 1919, and remained under its control until independence in 1990, has provided, for the German right, a theme of the defence of the interests of an ethnically-aligned and supposedly threatened population, which traverses the last century. The German South Westers, though few in number, were economically central in the territory, dominating its agriculture and commerce – and remain quite powerful in these spheres today. Many have educational, business and cultural links to Germany.⁸ After the end of German imperial rule, there was a strong revanchist sentiment amongst the German settlers which was ripe for political exploitation. The result was that National Socialists hegemonised the white politics of the territory in the 1930s, despite some quite strenuous attempts by the South African government to put

6. R. Citino, *Germany and the Union of South Africa in the Nazi Period* (Greenwood Press, New York, 1991); M. Shain, *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930–1948* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2015).

7. H. Melber and G. Wellmer, “West German Relations with Namibia”, in A.D. Cooper (ed.), *Allies in Apartheid: Western Capitalism and Occupied Namibia* (St. Martins, New York, 1988), pp 91–113; T. Dederig, “South African-German Relations from Versailles to Soweto: Perceptions and Policies”, in H. Lessing, T. Dederig, J. Kampmann and D. Smit (eds), *Umstrittene Beziehungen: Protestantismus zwischen dem südlichen Afrika und Deutschland von den 1930er Jahren bis in die Apartheidzeit* (Harrasowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2015), pp 249–263.

8. D.J. Walther, *Creating Germans Abroad: Cultural Policies and National Identity in Namibia* (Ohio University Press, Athens: OH, 2002).

down their activities.⁹ Although there were initial tensions between the Germans and the less well-off Afrikaner settlers who came into the territory from the 1920s, in the post-1945 period it became clear to the German population that their interests were linked to those of the South African regime. Seats were created for white South West Africa representation in the South African parliament, and the Germans there largely supported the Afrikaner National Party. The post-war German right became seriously committed to backing the attempts to create an “internal settlement” in Namibia that would protect white interests, while drawing in some black participation and excluding the SWAPO liberation movement. Though the German Namibians have been largely pragmatic in their approach to the post-1990 African nationalist government, they are now somewhat under pressure from SWAPO’s threats of land expropriation. This enables the AfD to cast the Namibian Germans as victims, building on many decades of German right-wing solidarity with them. It feeds into the AfD anti-immigration narrative of “Africa” as a threat to Germans.

Thirdly, the imbrication of southern Africa in the German dimension of the Cold War led to the casting of the struggle against racial domination in southern Africa by the German right as a Communist plot against Western Christian civilisation, and this is a thematic which the AfD continues to use. During the Cold War, not only the German extreme right fringe, but also the CSU and to a significant extent the CDU, were remarkably sympathetic to South African rule in Namibia on anti-communist, as well as racist, ideological grounds. From around the 1960 Congo crisis, southern Africa came to be seen by the western powers as a theatre of Soviet expansionism, and Cold War-oriented Germans were willing to give the South African government the benefit of the doubt as an ally against their chief opponent. On the other hand, East Germany aided the SWAPO insurgents in Namibia and the ANC revolutionaries in South Africa. And West German leftist radicals, and some church groups supported the liberation movement.¹⁰ This gave a strong intra-German dimension to politics around southern Africa, making it all the more possible for the right to present the story of the region in Cold War terms.¹¹ The AfD continues in this ideological vein, portraying the SWAPO and ANC governments as “Communist” opponents of the West.

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9. B. Bennett, *Hitler over Africa* (T. Werner Laurie, London, 1939); Citino, *Germany and the Union*; P.J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover: NH, 1991).
 10. R. Deffenbaugh, *The Lutheran World Federation and Namibia* (Geneva, Lutheran World Federation, 2007) <https://www.lutheranworld.org/> (downloaded 8 November 2019).
 11. G. Brenke, *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Namibia-Konflikt* (R. Oldenbourg, Munich, 1989); Melber and Wellmer, “West German Relations”.

Imperial nostalgia: The AfD and colonial guilt

A flavour of the practice of AfD colonial memory politics may be gained from a debate that occurred in the Bundestag on 19 November 2020. With members masked in the face of the increasingly devastating Coronavirus pandemic, the house turned to discuss the subject of the restitution of museum items looted from the colonial world and what in German is called the *Aufarbeitung* (roughly, intellectual and political working through) of the history of colonialism. The debate was precipitated by a motion from the Green Party, strongly in favour of restitution and of the acknowledgement of the guilt of the old German Empire. But the occasion was seen as an opportunity to state a very different view by the AfD, for whom the whole issue crystallised much of what they see as wrong with contemporary German society.

The AfD put forward a counter-resolution that warned that the Green’s proposal would lead to the “depletion of European Museums that for many years had, in an exemplary fashion curated and conserved collection items, and thereby had protected the Memory of Humanity”. But more broadly, their proposal attacked what they alleged was the “moralism” of the debate on the question. In their view, it had led to a situation where Germany was (unfairly) expected to recognise its “Guilt” and “Responsibility” for colonialism. The AfD thus opposed the return of cultural objects, except in exceptional cases.¹² The accompanying document to the resolution went much further, roundly condemning centre-right, liberal and leftist attempts, in Germany, but also in other European countries, to apologise for colonialism and to support the return of objects on that basis. President Macron of France came in for particular abuse on this score.¹³

More dramatic, was the oration of the AfD Deputy, the suave Dr Marc Jongen, during the debate. He started off on an ironic note: “Through our Guilt, Through our Guilt, through our great Guilt’: That is the maxim of Green-Leftist Memory Politics ...”. Jongen accused his radical opponents of following “the Stalinist Georg Lukács in the 1950s” in portraying the whole of German history as leading to Hitler, and attacked this “undifferentiated Guilt-narrative”. While conceding that aspects of the colonial era were “problematic” he pointed out that that history could not be undone and suggested ulterior motives on the part of its critics. He deplored the impact of academic-activist “post-colonial ideology” characterised by “its hate towards all that is European, Western, White ...”. With a side-swipe at “Critical Whiteness Studies” Jongen continued, displaying evident enjoyment as he taunted the by now enraged hecklers on his left, with quotes from Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre’s advocacy of anti-colonial violence. He implied a direct link between the views of these leftist icons and recent terrorist incidents, as well as to the so-called “cancel culture” and the, according to him, “often violent” Black Lives Matter Movement. Jongen said that the proposals of the pro-

12. M. Jongen et. al., “Antrag der Abgeordneten Dr. Marc Jongen, Marc Bernhard ... und der Fraktion der AfD: Restitution von Sammlungsgut aus kolonialem Kontext stoppen”, 6 December 2020. <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/199/1919914.pdf> (downloaded 6 January 2021).

13. M. Jongen, et.al., “Begründung”, 6 December 2020. <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/199/1919914.pdf> (downloaded 6 January 2021).

restitution faction to set up a centre for the study of the colonial question was not – as the AfD was willing for – to “work through” German colonialism “in a differentiated way”; but only as a framework for the acknowledgement of German colonial crime. This would give young people nothing but revulsion and shame about their own culture, leaving them in a state of defencelessness. The AfD, he said, defended the tradition of the Enlightenment which his opponents had long abandoned.¹⁴

AfD colonial revisionism is part of a larger critique that the party makes of what it calls the *Schuldskult* (Cult of Guilt) in German political culture. For them, the acknowledgement of colonial crimes is part of a self-flagellating view of the national history, shaped by excessive apologetics for the Nazi past. The AfD sees the supposed *Schuldskult* as undermining national self-confidence and preventing an appreciation of the glorious political and cultural achievements of the nation. In the much-quoted words of AfD leader Alexander Gauland “Hitler and the Nazis are just a bit of bird shit in over a thousand years of successful German history”.¹⁵ In this perspective, focusing on German responsibility for colonial rule in Africa, is another manifestation of self-destructive behaviour.

This critique of an unfair attribution of blame to Germans has deep roots. The AfD’s colonial guilt rhetoric actually has a direct connection to the colonial politics of the Weimar era. Famously, there was massive resentment and outcry on the German right against the War Guilt Clause written into the Treaty of Versailles by the victorious allies, under which Germany had to shoulder moral responsibility for the First World War. This rejection of guilt was also part of the politics of the German revanchist colonial lobby, which demanded the return of the colonies. A key formative role in this was played by the sometime Governor of German East Africa, Heinrich Schnee. In 1924, Schnee published a book called *Die koloniale Schuldlüge – The Colonial Guilt Lie*.¹⁶ This title brilliantly captured the rhetoric against the War Guilt Clause for the sphere of colonial politics. The idea that Germans were being unfairly burdened with guilt over colonialism was to have an exceptionally long life. In Weimar, Germany’s renewed claim to be a global power was connected to a heroic and benign vision of the colonial past. Most important of the groups seeking the return of the colonies in this period, was the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* (DKG – German Colonial Society), which was led from 1930 by Schnee himself. There was also the *Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland* (VDA – People’s League for Germans Abroad), a powerful nationalist movement organising German communities abroad, which was well represented in southern Africa, as well as a number of other groups. This colonial network was particularly strong amongst traditionalist conservative elites, business circles and the middle classes. The future post-war Christian Democrat Chancellor Konrad Adenauer himself, was, in the early 30s, the vice-president of the *Kolonialgesellschaft*. Though like other

14. Deutscher Bundestag, “Anträge von AfD und Grünen zur Aufarbeitung kolonialen Unrechts beraten”, 23 November 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxLwAFMvI0w> (downloaded 6 January 2021).

15. *Berliner Morgenpost*, 13 November 2018.

16. H. Schnee, *Die Koloniale Schuldlüge* (Heinrich, Munich, 1924).

colonial countries Germany had a vast reservoir of colonial popular culture, what their activity did was to infuse it with a particular sense of grievance over the loss of power. The colonial organisations played the long game, aiming at intermediate goals that would maintain Germany’s position as a power with an interest in colonial questions, pending a more favourable turn in international politics.¹⁷ The colonial groups took great offence at British and South African criticisms of previous German rule – and certainly on the South African side, such denunciations were notably hypocritical.

Heinrich Schnee had gained considerable renown for his participation in the extended campaign of quasi-guerrilla war in German East Africa, led by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, whose tactical brilliance and undefeated status gave much-needed pride to right wing nationalists in Germany. The legend of this campaign provided a central part of the lost empire myth. Lettow-Vorbeck and Schnee returned to a hero’s welcome. Lettow-Vorbeck’s memoirs, and an adaptation of them for young readers, entitled *Heia Safari* (Hurrah, Safari) were bestsellers when published in 1920.¹⁸ ‘*Heia Safari*’ was the cliché of all German colonial clichés, especially popularised in a song written in 1916 by German wildlife artist and South West Africa settler Hans Aschenborn, which remained popular in right wing circles well into the late 20th century. Lettow-Vorbeck’s emphasis in his writings on the loyalty of the African Askari troops and porters was central to the way in which the empire was remembered by Germans as beneficial, and has continued to serve as proof of imperial magnanimity in the minds of those disposed to believe in it. When the General died in 1964, the then CDU Federal Defence Minister, Uwe von Hassel (who had himself spent his childhood and youth in East Africa) arranged for elderly Askaris to fly in from Tanzania to attend the funeral, as living evidence of the loyalty which the great man had evoked.¹⁹ In 1966 a television documentary programme series, ironically titled *Heia Safari*, was broadcast on the ARD channel, criticising German policy in Africa during the colonial era. ARD was flooded with comments from viewers. A fascinating analysis of their letters by Eckhard Michels tells us a great deal about the politics that was being exploited.²⁰ The letters were overwhelmingly negative, with fully three quarters taking a hostile view of the programmes. Significantly, the letters that were positive came mainly from young viewers, whereas most of the hostile ones came from people who had grown up in the emperor’s time or in the Third Reich. Some were motivated not by

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17. S.A. Wempe, “From Unfit Imperialists to Fellow Civilizers: German Colonial Officials as Imperial Experts in the League of Nations, 1919–1933”, *German History*, 34, 1, 2016, pp 21–48.
 18. P. von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika* (Leipzig, Hase & Köhler, 1920); P. von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Heia Safari: Deutschlands Kampf in Ostafrika* (Leipzig, Hase & Köhler, 1920).
 19. J. Verber, “The Conundrum of Colonialism in Postwar Germany”, PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010; U. Schulte-Varendorff, *Kolonialheld für Kaiser und Führer: General Lettow Vorbeck – Mythos und Wahrheit* (Christoph Links, Berlin, 2006); B. Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).
 20. E. Michels, “Geschichtspolitik im Fernsehen: Die WDR-Dokumentation ‘Heia Safari’ von 1966/7 über Deutschlands Kolonialvergangenheit”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 56, 2008, pp 467–491.

a particular affinity for colonial history, but by a general reactionary sense that, in the aftermath of the post-1945 reckoning, they were fed up with a constant focus on the crimes of the past. Others charged that a “national masochism” was at work or claimed that the critical revisiting of the past helped the Communist cause. The loyalty of German-ruled Africans, the developmental benefits of colonialism, and a relativising comparison of what the Germans had done with the actions of other colonial powers were common themes. What is striking here is that a vigorous debate on German colonialism was certainly present in the childhood and youth of some of today’s elderly AfD voters.

A major cultural source of Weimar-era interest in African colonisation was Hans Grimm’s best-selling 1926 novel, *Volk Ohne Raum* (People without Space). Grimm had spent an extensive period before the First World War as a businessman in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, and his partially autobiographical book is a polemic in favour of colonial settlement in Africa as a solution to the traumas of German industrialisation and class division. By the end of the Nazi regime, this rambling anti-British, anti-Semitic, anti-Socialist tome of over a thousand pages had sold half a million copies in Germany.²¹

The experienced Africa correspondent Bartholomäus Grill connects this history of pro-colonial grievance explicitly to the current discourse of the German extreme right. He recounts that:

My father, like my grandfather suffered from the loss of the colonies ... That was experienced both by my grandfather and later by my father as a kind of phantom (limb) pain, a humiliation. Germany was no longer a world power and he always dreamed that Hitler would reconquer these colonies and so after the war he raised us in the spirit of the colonial times... All the clichés, distorted pictures, imaginaries, that we made for ourselves of Africa have remained the same, and have come to the surface again in the migration debate... They have broken through again, if you look at it, in the way the AfD argues, in the identitarian movement and the right-wing radicalism.²²

Grill is a controversial figure for his reluctance to acknowledge the genocidal nature of German policy in South West Africa, but this comment, like much of his work, gives an interesting insight into the role colonial Africa played in national identity.

The colonial *Kaiserreich* is a theme in AfD talk. Sometimes this is presented in a blatantly racist manner, with a clear orientation to winning the support of the most extreme voters. In March 2019, the Baden-Württemberg AfD politician Wolfgang

21. W. Smith, “The Colonial Novel as Political Propaganda: Hans Grimm’s *Volk Ohne Raum*”, *German Studies Review*, 6, 2, 1983, pp 215–235.

22. A. Rahmlow, and B. Grill, “Ein Schritt weg von Herrenmenschum”, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 23 March 2019 https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/bartholomaeus-grill-ueber-kolonialgeschichte-ein-schritt.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=444419 (downloaded 25 October 2019).

Gedeon declared during a debate in the *Landtag* (Provincial Assembly) that “Colonialism is a sign that the European white race were far civilizationally superior to other races and ethnicities”. German colonialism was actually largely a constructive and benevolent achievement; according to Gedeon, one could say that colonisation saved the conquered nations “a lot of blood and a lot of sweat”.²³

But a more usual strand in AfD treatment of the imperial past is aimed toward opinion that does not want overtly to indulge in this kind of racism. Instead, it expresses a longing for traditionalist order. Some of the clearest statements of AfD *Kaiserreich* colonial nostalgia have come from Harald Weyel, a member of the libertarian wing of the party and part of the AfD delegation in the Federal Parliament, who is himself a person of colour.²⁴ Weyel, who calls himself a “Prussian-Hessian National-Cosmopolitan”, is the son of a German mother and an African-American GI father. He is thus, as a perspicacious journalist observes, the perfect alibi for the party’s claim that it is not racist. Weyel casts the immigration issue as matter of culture, denying that the AfD is driven by racial ideology. A romanticisation of the imperial past is central to his thinking. Weyel advocates “eventually arranging things in Germany, so that normality, as it was in the *Kaiserreich*, will be restored”. According to Weyel, the Empire treated its subjects in Africa with respect and empathy. Today’s Germany, Weyel says, unlike in the Kaiser’s time, does not have a purposive existence. For him, it is an oppressive analogue of the former Communist German state: “the DDR 2.0, with flatscreens”.²⁵ In his case, glorification of the just *Kaiserreich* provides one basis for the AfD libertarians’ advanced form of “racism without race”.

This emphasis on the need to reclaim the colonial past can easily be turned into useful retail politics. In the recent period, the AfD has sought to exploit cultural struggles around colonial history at a local level. Pride in colonial heritage becomes a weapon in the party’s war on immigration and multiculturalism. In particular, they have engaged in the question of opposing the changes in the names of streets called after colonial figures demanded by left activists. For example, in the suburb of Neukölln, Berlin, the party fought against a proposal for the renaming of *Wissmannstraße*, a street called after a colonial governor of German East Africa. The AfD’s opposition was framed in part by talking about the role of von Wissmann in suppressing the Muslim-controlled slave trade in the colony. This allowed them to combine Islamophobia and the theme of the benevolent empire. They also played on a feeling of local patriotism, appealing to a sense that outsiders were trying to impose policies on residents. After several protests, the proposal was defeated in the Neukölln Council.²⁶ Later however, the leftists came back for another attempt, and the street has now been renamed after Lucy Lameck, a Tanzanian independence-era political figure.

23. *Rhein Neckar Zeitung*, 28 October 2019.

24. M. Lau, “Zurück ins Kaiserreich”, *Zeit Online*, <https://www.zeit.de/2017/47/harald-weyel-afd-bundestagsabgeordneter-migration> (downloaded 28 October 2019).

25. Lau, “Zurück ins Kaiserreich”.

26. A. Bohne, “AfD entdeckt Kolonialismus: War doch nicht alles schlecht damals”, *iz3W*, no date, <https://www.iz3w.org/zeitschrift/ausgaben/369-friedensprozesse/kolonialismus> (downloaded 5 November 2019).

Nazi Era legacies

The legacies of Nazism are detectable in the AfD, but are often in embarrassing tension with the more dominant attempt to portray an image of modernity, individualism and entrepreneurship. This ambiguity, and its historical background is worth exploring.

Some AfD leaders use rhetoric about contemporary Africa that is shockingly obviously evocative of Nazism, while other opinions appear, superficially, quite “developmentalist” and sensible. Thus, on the one hand, Thuringian AfD leader Björn Höcke reverts to a national socialist discourse of existential racial struggle to assert that there is no place for immigrants in Germany. In a notorious 2015 pronouncement, Höcke explained the migration crisis in the terms of a supposedly fundamentally different biological evolution of European and African people, which he claimed, was built on different reproductive strategies:

In Africa the so-called small-r strategy dominates, which aims at the highest possible [population] growth. There, the so-called expansion type dominates, and in Europe, people overwhelmingly followed the big-K strategy, that tried to use the capacity of the *Lebensraum* optimally, here lives a placeholder-type. Simply put, Evolution has divided Africa and Europe into two different reproduction strategies.²⁷

On the other hand, the party’s libertarian, free marketeer faction, seeks to present the AfD in more internationally acceptable terms. The Africa spokesman of the AfD in the *Bundestag*, Dietmar Friedhoff, portrays the party as supporting capitalist development in African countries, which can resolve the immigration issue by providing Africans with economic opportunities at home. German development aid has, in his presentation of the issue, created dependency, rather than stimulating African enterprise.²⁸ Friedhoff is thus able to mobilise populist resentment about development aid, while presenting the AfD as the protagonist of a brighter future for Africans. Friedhoff even goes as far as championing specific grievances of African countries, criticising, for example, the low prices paid to African agriculturalists.²⁹ He uses the development aid question to further the AfD’s climate denialism, claiming that German aid policies linked to climate change mitigation hold back African economic development.³⁰ The Neo-Nazi and libertarian faces of the AfD ultimately though justify the same policies: shutting down immigration, ending development aid and opposing multiculturalism.

27. Bohne, “AfD entdeckt”.

28. *AfD Kompakt*, 29 August 2019.

29. *AfD Kompakt*, 21 June 2019.

30. *AfD Kompakt*, 26 June 2019.

The Nazis always prioritised future expansion in Eastern Europe over the return of the African colonies. Nevertheless, they put a considerable amount of effort into colonial politics, for three main reasons. Firstly, they needed the support of traditionalist elites, who were deeply invested in getting the colonies back. This synthesis was reflected in the person of General Franz Ritter von Epp, a Kaiser-era officer who became symbolic head of colonial organisations under the Nazis, and whose earlier career had included participation in the suppression of the Chinese “Boxer” movement and in the Namibian Genocide, as well as being an early leader of the Nazi stormtroopers. Secondly, the large and well-organised German communities in multiple countries provided the regime with a useful political instrument. And thirdly, the idea of returning the colonies was a useful global bargaining chip; the British government considered it seriously as a form of appeasement.³¹

Through the 1930s and into the early war years, a considerable amount of work was done to impress the German public mind with the role of the country in the colonial and semi-colonial world, led by the Nazis’ *Auslands-Organisation* (*A-O*: Foreign Organisation), which was headed by the South African-raised Ernst Wilhlem Bohle, a protégé of Rudolf Hess. Bohle ascended with astounding speed to the position of Gauleiter for all party structures abroad. After the Nazi seizure of power, a priority was to take over the extensive international network of the VDA, as the premier overseas German group. Bohle attained control of all NSDAP party branches abroad, of the political vetting of consular officials, of a network of 1 500 German schools across the world, and also of German merchant sailors, a vast globally mobile workforce who could be used for all sorts of intelligence purposes.³² Bohle’s propaganda was oddly developmentalist, stressing the German role in economic and social progress, not only in the old Empire, but globally. For instance, a book published in Berlin in 1940 by the *A-O*, entitled *Deutsche Schaffen in Aller Welt*,³³ presents a photographic representation of Germans at work in their former territories abroad and in their informal economic realm across the globe. The volume is packed with pictures of transnational 1930s Germans labouring away in agriculture, industry and science. Generally, they are shown in supervisory positions in relation to local workers, but some of these images hint at a more cooperative relationship, in a way which creepily foreshadows post-war depictions of development aid. The hegemony of the Nazis in parts of the German diaspora is also highlighted: a surprisingly large Nazi rally is held in Argentina; the Windhoek German School greets the morning with the Hitler salute; a Nazi flag floats over a remote farmstead in Africa.

The Nazi era was important for consolidating the links between the German extreme right and both Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa and a highly mobilised network of German settlers in the region, with results that continue to echo. The rise

31. H.-A. Jacobsen and A.L. Smith Jr., *The Nazi Party and the German Foreign Office* (Routledge, New York and London, 2007).

32. D.M. McKale, *The Swastika outside Germany* (Kent State University Press, Kent: OH, 1971), pp 53–63.

33. H. Otto, *Deutsche Schaffen in Aller Welt: Ein Bildband deutscher Leistung im Auslande* (Verlag Joh. Kasper, Berlin, [1940]1942).

of the Nazis during the initial years of the Great Depression had a huge resonance amongst the German communities in South Africa. The foundation of the regional offshoot of the party in Cape Town by Professor Hermann Bohle, Ernst’s father, in 1932 was quickly followed by the establishment of branches amongst ethnic Germans across the towns and cities of the Union. In South West Africa, after Hitler’s seizure of power, Nazism rapidly attained a near-hegemonic position in the politics of the German settlers, despite the South African government’s attempts to suppress it.³⁴ Although the Hertzog government clamped down on formal Nazi organisation after a spectacular July 1934 rally of the *Pfadfinder* (Pathfinder) youth movement in Windhoek, the Nazis kept re-emerging through other fronts. Nazis and the German state agencies fostered a number of small South African Fascist groups, like Louis Weichardt’s Grey Shirts, and the Rand’s Black Shirts, who caused a major riot in Johannesburg when they clashed with leftists in November 1938. In Namibia opponents of the Nazis were physically intimidated on a wide scale.³⁵ Local Nazi interventions in the German community were common: for example, in 1938 in Johannesburg, 400 local Nazi sympathisers were mobilised to take control of the local German school. A meeting culminated in the Nazi slate sweeping the board and the singing of the Horst Wessel Song.³⁶

Broader Nazi influence was extended in many ways. Importantly, the A-O hosted many visits to Germany from the Afrikaner nationalist student organisation, the Studentebond. Some future leading South African ideologues and politicians, such as Piet Meyer, who was to become head of the apartheid state broadcaster and chair of the all-powerful Afrikaner secret society, the Broederbond, were involved in these visits. Though J.B.M. Hertzog, the South African prime minister of the time, was a Germanophile, and at first sympathetic to Hitler, his fear of German geo-political ambitions in Africa turned him against the Nazis.³⁷ The Hitler government made some diplomatic headway through the influence of the South African cabinet member Oswald Pirow, as well as several pro-German officials in the Foreign Affairs Department. An instinctive authoritarian, Pirow, from a German immigrant family, was deeply attracted to Nazism. He made official visits to Berlin on two occasions, being received both times by the Führer.³⁸ When in 1939, South Africa entered the war on the British side under the leadership of Jan Smuts, the country was in a precarious security position. Great numbers of Afrikaner nationalists had joined the recently founded, overtly fascist, Ossewa Brandwag, a mass movement which was strongly pro-Nazi. Many OB members subsequently participated in an active sabotage campaign, and some cooperated with Axis intelligence networks run out of Portuguese East

34. McKale, *The Swastika*, pp 95–97; G. Dornseif, *Südwestler Pfadfinder zwischen allen Fronten* <https://web.archive.org/web/20110719032750/http://www.golf-dornseif.de/uploads/Suedwester%20Pfadfinder%20zwischen%20allen%20Fronten.pdf> 2019 (downloaded 5 November 2019).

35. Bennett, *Hitler over Africa*.

36. Otto, *Deutsche Schaffen*.

37. T. Dederig, “South Africa and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–6”, *The International History Review*, 35, 5, 2013, pp 1009–1030.

38. N.G. Garson, Oswald Pirow, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition) <https://www.oxforddnb.com/> (downloaded 5 November 2019).

Africa. And Pirow tried to set up his own fascist movement, initially with a significant number of MPs in support. Even the D.F. Malan wing of the Afrikaner nationalists flirted with German agents. Although it would be wrong to categorise the post-1948 apartheid regime as Fascist in any straightforward way, there certainly were key individuals in the regime shaped by Nazi influences in the 1930s and early 1940s and who had strong German connections.³⁹

In a remarkable manner, southern African links to the German right formed in the Nazi era were continued in more respectable form in the post-war period. In 1965, a number of West German civil society groups created the *Deutsch-Südafrikanische Gesellschaft* (DSAG), aimed to foster relations between the two countries. It had a newspaper, *Afrika-Post*, which was steeped in the imagery of the German colonial period. Astonishingly, one of DSAG’s founders was none other than the self-reinvented Ernst Wilhelm Bohle. Bohle had suffered only a brief imprisonment despite being tried at Nuremberg, and had reinvented himself as a successful businessman. The DSAG was tightly linked to CSU and CDU. The group had a broad base of support within South Africa and Namibia as well, ranging from the overtly reactionary Afrikaans-German Cultural Association to the slickly liberal-capitalist South Africa Foundation. It arranged an extensive programme of bilateral visits and cultural exchanges, enabling the South African establishment to put its positions to German business leaders, politicians and journalists. It attained considerable success in influencing centre-right public opinion, to the extent that Social Democratic politicians who disapproved of South African Prime Minister B.J. Vorster’s policies, felt constrained from pursuing more hostile policies by centrist public opinion. But beyond the respectable realm in politics, DSAG also overlapped with the clearly neo-fascist right: some DSAG members could also be found in a Southern Africa Aid Committee organised by the neo-Nazi NPD, with the slogan of “Save White Africa”.⁴⁰ Former Nazi officials also shaped pro-South African discourse in a significant way. For instance, Gustav Sonnenhol, a former SS member and Nazi diplomat, who was ambassador to Pretoria from 1968 to 1972, rapidly emerged as a prominent and outright apartheid apologist. In 1978, shortly after retirement, he published a book which was a resounding defence of the South African political system.⁴¹ In retirement, Sonnenhol was also president of the *Afrika-Forderungsgesellschaft*, a group linked to right wing activists in the churches. This organisation developed a rhetoric around defending the “victims of terrorism in southern Africa”.⁴²

39. Citino, *Germany and the Union*; Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*.

40. Melber and Wellmer, “West German Relations”.

41. S. Schrafstetter, “A Nazi Diplomat Turned Apologist for Apartheid: Gustav Sonnenhol, Vergangenheitsbewältigung and West German Foreign Policy towards South Africa”, *German History*, 28, 1, 2010, pp 44–66.

42. Melber and Wellmer, “West German Relations”, p 105.

Cold War and apartheid legacies

In South Africa the AfD has been attracted to right wing Afrikaner nationalist groups. And this connection has melded with the currency in international rightist circles of the conspiracy theory of “white genocide”, around the murders of white farmers in South Africa. In March 2019, Sven Tritschler, an AfD representative in the North Rhine Westphalia *Landtag*, arranged for the South African Freedom Front parliamentarian Corné Mulder to speak in Düsseldorf. Mulder is the son of the South African apartheid-era cabinet minister, Connie Mulder, who was, in 1978, only narrowly beaten by P.W Botha in a struggle for the premiership of the apartheid state. His presence suggests some interesting continuities of networks. During the 1970s there was an extensive propaganda campaign on behalf of the Pretoria government. This was conducted by the South African Department of Information, under the leadership of the elder Mulder, and was subsidised generously by the DSAG. Mulder’s department produced its own magazine aimed at German policy makers and hired top-level public relations advisers, including a former editor of *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s leading news magazine.⁴³ Tritschler explained that Corné Mulder had been invited because

the widely spread bright reports about the Continent and South Africa don’t give an authentic picture of what is in reality a very threatening situation. A situation that can only create new streams of refugees to Europe, but also is relevant for the retrospective evaluation of how to deal rationally with changing minority relationships.

Mulder’s speech was a not-so-thinly-veiled exercise in connecting the changed social position of Afrikaners to the international extreme right’s notion of the “great replacement” of whites:

Make sure that you don’t become a minority in your own country. Minorities that lose political influence, will soon lose everything else. Nobody else is going to protect for you the values that have been handed down to you for centuries, when you become a minority in your own land.

His picture of a lawless and corrupt South Africa used some real issues in the country to feed the anti-immigration paranoia of his audience.

The very strong connections between the present German far right and apartheid-nostalgic South Africans have an important background in the career of Franz Josef Strauß, the CSU right-wing populist leader of Bavaria in the post-Second World War period, who played a major role in promoting a pro-South African position in Germany. Strauß, a larger-than-life figure in every sense of the phrase, was remarkable for his ability to occupy all the political space between the centre-right and

43. J.K. Haasbroek, “A Historical Perspective of the Information Scandal”, M.A. thesis, University of the Free State, 2016.

the neo-fascist fringe (while clearly distancing himself from the latter).⁴⁴ He had extraordinary influence in German politics, serving in important cabinet positions through the 1950s and 1960s and as minister-president of Bavaria from 1978 until his death in 1988.

Strauß was a significant force in creating a narrative of the conflict in southern Africa not as battles over racial inequality, but as a struggle by civilised white “western” forces against Communist barbarism. Strauß’s defence of South Africa and its control of Namibia was an appealing ideological theme for those who followed him and has left a strong legacy. Defending an embattled fraternal minority abroad, reverting to the deeply embedded romanticisation of the Kaiser’s Empire, and expressing resentment at change in the global racial order, his position appealed deeply to his constituency in small town and rural Bavaria, and to the German right more generally. Following a 1966 trip to South Africa, Strauß declared that apartheid policy was not motivated by racism but by religious commitment, and took up the defence of the Pretoria government and the South West Africa German community as one of his political causes.⁴⁵

Shortly thereafter, he ran a populist campaign against the *Heia Safari* television series, in which he defended the memory of the German Empire. When the Schmidt government took the symbolic action of closing the German consulate in Windhoek in 1977, Strauß led an outcry in Germany, charging that the state was leaving German citizens without legal protection, and declaring that in a SWAPO-ruled Namibia there would be no place for whites except in prisons and cemeteries. He brought the issue of re-opening the consulate to the vote in the *Bundestag*, but was narrowly defeated. Given that this was also the moment at which Honecker’s East Germany was becoming a visible supporter of the revolutionary regimes in Angola and Mozambique as well as of SWAPO and the ANC, these actions also allowed Strauß to burnish his credentials as a hard-liner against the Communist regime across the border. In the mid-1980s Strauß’s activism over southern Africa continued. When the Free Democratic Party liberal Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher pushed a more critical stance toward apartheid, Strauß again seized the populist ground that opened up, making friendly visits to South Africa and Namibia.⁴⁶ For public consumption in southern Africa and Bavaria, his message was one of the pure populist defence of the colonial order and its latter day extensions, and was much admired on the right.

44. S. Finger, ‘Franz Josef Strauß: Der verhinderte Kanzler’, PhD dissertation, University of Bonn, 2005; M.S. Milosch, *Modernizing Bavaria: The Politics of Franz Josef Strauß and the CSU, 1949-1969* (Berghahn, New York and Oxford, 2006).

45. *Der Spiegel*, 16 May 1966.

46. Brenke, *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Namibia-Konflikt*, pp 144–150; J. Leinemann, ‘Das macht ihm keiner nach’, *Der Spiegel*, 1 February 1988 <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13526048.html> (downloaded 8 November 2019).

This rhetoric is continued by the AfD in its special concern for the supposedly threatened Germans of Namibia who face land expropriation by a “Marxist” government. AfD Representative Stephan Protschka claimed that his sources among the Germans in Namibia told of a hostility that had never been present before, as a result of the agitation around land, and he accused the SWAPO government of creating a racial confrontation. “Our compatriots on the ground” feared dispossession and violence, as in Zimbabwe. Protschka denounced the German Federal Government for not standing up for the German minority, including its failure adequately to support German schools. Protschka declared that: “Instead of holding Guilt-cult debates, the Federal Government should fight, with hard bargaining for security-guarantees for our countrymen and above all for our economic interests on the ground.”⁴⁷

The Namibian genocide

What has particularly catalysed the colonialism debate in Germany has been a new awareness of the German genocide against the Nama and Herero in Namibia in 1904–08, as the consequence of a long campaign by Namibian activists. Although its history was for years neglected, the genocide has come to be seen as a low point even in the bloody history of colonialism. But the AfD proved equal to the challenge of trying to turn the matter to their advantage.

Historians have long written about the subject, starting with the work during the 1960s of Horst Drechsler in the East and Helmut Bley in the Federal Republic.⁴⁸ And the historiography that this began to generate received some attention in school and university curricula. But it was only in the new century that the issue of the genocide and German colonialism more generally began to break through to public consciousness.⁴⁹ This has particularly been precipitated by the highly effective campaign by Namibians to draw attention to the genocide and to demand a German recognition of responsibility and compensation. Germany has just recently, in 2021, made an official apology for the genocide, and offered financial compensation. But discontent persists on the Namibian side over the nature of the German acknowledgement and the amount of money on offer. And there is tension internally over whether the Namibian government or the descendants of genocide victims should be the recipients of whatever is paid out.

47. S. Protschka, AfD-Bundestagsabgeordneter Stephan Protschka im ZUERST! 1 June 2018 <https://zuerst.de/2018/06/01/afd-bundestagsabgeordneter-stephan-protschka-im-zuerst-interview-ueber-namibische-forderungen-an-die-bundesregierung-die-werden-schon-einknicken/> (downloaded 28 October 2019).

48. H. Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism* (Zed, London, 1980); H. Bley, *Namibia Under German Rule* (LIT, Hamburg, 1996).

49. G. Krüger, “Koloniale Schuld und Afrikanische Geschichte: Es ist Zeit für einen neuen historischen Blick auf das koloniale Afrika”, *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 6 June 2018. <https://geschichtedergewenart.ch/koloniale-schuld-und-afrikanische-geschichte-es-ist-zeit-fuer-einen-neuen-historischen-blick-auf-das-koloniale-afrika/> (downloaded 25 October 2019).

The AfD, however, has found itself a revisionist champion for its upbeat view of the colonial record in the American academic Bruce Gilley, who is able to relativise the genocide. Gilley, who made his name with a massively controversial 2017 article, “The Case for Colonialism”,⁵⁰ astonishingly turned for guidance to – the ghost of Heinrich Schnee. Gilley was invited to Berlin by the AfD Bundestag faction to speak about his work, and there, explicitly claimed that Schnee’s idea of the ‘Colonial Guilt-Lie’ was an accurate characterisation of contemporary writing about colonialism as a whole. Instead, he emphasised the beneficial effects of colonialism. Moreover, he blamed Weimar anti-colonialism for undermining the stability of Germany and preparing the way for Hitler. While acknowledging that the Namibian 1904–8 conflict involved atrocities, Gilley depicted them as an aberration from German imperial policy, attributing responsibility to the German commander Von Trotha, and emphasising – without a great deal of evidence in his support – the opposition of the political and military leadership in Germany to what was done.⁵¹

Crude as the Gilley position may be, AfD manipulation of the issues around the Namibian genocide is more subtle than may initially appear. Firstly, the AfD is able to play on the analytically problematic nature of the genocide category, as originally a legal term with a historically contingent definition, which has migrated into historical and sociological discourse. There actually is some valid room for intellectual contestation of definitions of genocide, and how these should be used in the Namibian case, but that is instrumentalised by the AfD for its own ends. Secondly, as historian Gesine Kruger points out within the current liberal narrative about the genocide, by de-emphasising the uprising of the Herero which precipitated the 1904 events, there is a tendency to portray Africans as hapless victims, denying their agency.⁵² AfD commentators depict the Germans as acting defensively in 1904, and liberals have somewhat disarmed themselves in the face of this argument. Consequently, the German right’s representation of the Namibian genocide is able, quite cleverly, to manipulate some real historiographic problems.

The AfD also shows an awareness of the internal problems within politics in Namibia, which makes the question of possible reparations complex. The AfD has used these real issues to challenge the validity of the reparations discussion as such. For example, in the *Bundestag* AfD member Stephan Protschka disparaged the existing aid programme to Namibia, highlighting SWAPO misuse of funds.⁵³ This claim tapped into divisions in Namibia. In the initial post-independence period, the SWAPO government showed little interest in the genocide question. SWAPO is an overwhelmingly Ovambo-

50. Gilley’s paper was originally published in *Third World Quarterly* in 2017. Following a massive international outcry, it was withdrawn by the journal. The text is currently available on the website of the National Association of Scholars, <https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/31/2/the-case-for-colonialism> (downloaded 13 September 2021).

51. R. Heinze, “Yes, Colonialism was a Monstrosity”, 29 January 2020 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/colonialism-germany-africa-herero-afd-bruce-gilley> (downloaded 13 October 2021).

52. Krüger, “Koloniale Schuld”.

53. Protschka, “AfD-Bundestagsabgeordneter”.

based party and the Herero and Nama ethnic groups were not regarded by it as loyal supporters. When the government did start to take up the issue, it conceived it in terms of talks between the Namibian and German governments and the payment of reparations on a state-to-state basis. Herero and Nama activists were not universally happy with this approach. Many of them want direct arrangements between the Herero and Nama, and the Germans, and the payment of compensation on a direct basis to the descendant communities of the victims. Given the well-established issues of corruption in the Namibian government, where there have been many charges of the skimming off of German development aid at the highest levels of SWAPO, this latter demand is understandable.

German communities in southern Africa have played a much lesser role in AfD activities than in previous iterations of rightist imperial nostalgia. The Germans in Namibia have, by and large, pragmatically avoided activities that would provoke the SWAPO government. Some have participated enthusiastically in the new order, while many have kept their resentments below the surface, in a situation where they had a great deal to lose economically, but little political power. There is no real evidence of the AfD seriously organising directly in the country, although AfD officials visit from time to time and have some networks of contacts. But given the vastly disproportionate role of German farmers in land ownership, there is great short-term potential for a clash of the German community with government on agricultural policy, and the AfD would certainly treat such an eventuality as a political opportunity to be exploited.

Conclusion

There are clear dangers in any overemphasis on historical continuities. Least of all do I want to paint a picture of unbroken German reaction. The current prominence of the AfD is so shocking particularly because there is so much to admire about the democratic political culture of contemporary Germany. And probably no society in the contemporary world has worked as hard and creatively to come to terms with its grisly past. But: the idea of the lost empire, the identification with the German diaspora in the southern African region, forms of racial ideology about Africans, and the sense of national grievance against other countries’ attitudes to German aspirations in Africa, are all elements which straddle the German right’s interface with southern Africa across a century. The dangers of historicism are self-evident. Yet continuities in the German right’s mobilisation of the memory of the Empire, between 1919 and the present, are striking. It keeps reappearing, invoked as a misunderstood ideal. And the connections amongst its devotees across eras are long ranging. The Africa rhetoric of the AfD rings with echoes of the language of Schnee, Bohle and Strauß. Right-wing populisms build an artificial past, for a repressive present, but they do not construct it out of nothing. As the contemporary ultra-right works to create an imagined return to a better age, the Empire that was abolished in 1919 lives on.

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