European Colonial Politics and the Roots of the Holocaust

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Any attempt to understand and potentially explain the Holocaust is inevitably constrained by its enormity, complexity and sheer atrociousness, compounded by its apparent inconsistency with the grand narrative of the Western tradition. Despite this, the contention that the events of the Holocaust are rooted in European colonial politics has attracted significant interest, initially from Hannah Arendt as one of the many elements that crystallized into the rise of 20th Century totalitarianism, culminating in the atrocity of the Holocaust. This link, known as the 'boomerang thesis', has since been examined and elaborated upon by a range of political thinkers and historians, with a degree of convergence on the idea that, to some extent, the European imperialist experience played a part in the emergence of genocidal Nazi policies as 'the colonialists transmitted back to the state their ethic of ruthlessness' (Young-Bruehl 2006: 75).

This essay contends that whilst any causal link is impossible to arrive at due to a lack of historical inevitability, the imperialist mindset of racial superiority and its subsequent justification of brutality had an undoubtedly corrupting effect and could be seen as prefiguring future catastrophe. Thus, the events of European imperialism contributed to the creation of conditions in which the Holocaust somehow became 'thinkable and executable' (Zimmerer 2007: 115). Drawing on Hannah Arendt's seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which contends that 'it may be justifiable to consider the whole period [of imperialism] a preparatory stage for coming catastrophe' (Arendt 1979: 123), this essay examines elements of imperialist rule and their later totalitarian corollaries, most crucially the role of racism as an ideological weapon. In addition, the expansionist mentality and the use of bureaucracies to rule in European colonies have obvious correlations with the mentality and methods of pan-Germanic ideology that was such an integral feature of Nazism. Beyond Arendt, numerous thinkers have alleged other significant connections, including the German experience in South West Africa and the Herero Genocide of 1904-5, and the role of science, anthropology, literature and culture as aspects of the colonial experience which 'bred a psychology of domination' (King and Stone 2007: 3) allowing European theories of racial and cultural superiority and the dehumanization of colonial subjects abroad to result in the ruthless horrors of totalitarianism in Europe.

It is important to view the link alleged by Hannah Arendt between European imperialism and the Holocaust as somewhat tentative despite its undoubted importance in *Origins*. Arendt's rejection of historical inevitability and description of a range of other factors contributing to the rise of totalitarianism make any causal linkage difficult, and it is more realistic to interpret Arendt's portrayal of imperialism as 'a foreshadowing of the Holocaust, a hint of what was to come, but without strong causal links to it' (King 2004: 100). Indeed, in her own words: 'the stage seemed to be set for all possible horrors' (Arendt 1979: 221).

To Arendt it was the period of imperialism from 1884-1914 and the 'scramble for Africa' that ensued after the Berlin Conference that saw the rise of the methods and mentalities familiar to totalitarianism. This began with the principle of expansion as 'a permanent, supreme aim of politics' (Arendt 1979: 126) applying the economic logic of a capitalist system's endless pursuit of growth to politics in the permanent pursuit of power. Whilst sympathetic to Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1999), for Arendt the destructive principle was that of power as an end in itself, not the aimless accumulation of capital. This expansionism is characterized by pure power politics and rule by domineering violence, with the consequence of 'the destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered

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peoples as well as of the people at home' (Arendt 1979: 137). Indeed, power as an end in itself acts as a mysteriously apolitical principle, transcending any traditional considerations of utilitarianism or self-interest (King 2004: 106), features that were of course also conspicuously absent in the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany. Imperial rule became merely a 'means for some supposedly higher purpose' (Arendt 1979: 212), notably in the British domination by Cecil Rhodes in South Africa and Lord Cromer in Egypt. Here bureaucracy and secret decree were the basis of government with 'its inherent replacement of law with temporary and changing decrees' rooted in 'this superstition of a possible and magic identification of man with the forces of history' (Arendt 1979: 216). Henceforth, the suppression of ethical considerations and the potential for 'administrative massacre', most devastatingly shown in the Holocaust, was ever-present.

The role of racism in imperialist politics and its subsequent value to Nazism cannot be overstated. The rise of racism can be characterized by two parallel developments: as 'the only possible "explanation" and excuse for its [imperialism's] deeds' (Arendt 1979: 184) and as an emergency response by European colonizers to the alien unreality of Africa. The Boers of South Africa pioneered this racism as an ideological ruling device, using it to dominate the natives by designating themselves as 'more than human' and chosen people of divine origin (Arendt 1979: 195), demonstrating a situation analogous (albeit on a lesser scale) to Nazi ideology. It is important to clarify Arendt's understanding of totalitarian ideology, not as a guiding theory, but as the absolutist obedience to suprahuman forces, in this case, to the laws of Nature, which profess to offer a teleological 'key to history' (Arendt 1979: 225) and dismiss any semblance of individual conscience or contradictory claim.

The ideology of racism was used as a ruling device by imperialist powers, thereby legitimizing their actions despite the obvious contradiction to supposedly universal Enlightenment values of rights and equality. Race-thinking was transformed into racism by the context of imperialism, becoming 'ideologized' as a systematic worldview, 'politicized' as the organizing principle of politics, and 'biologized' with scientific (or pseudo-scientific) theories to generate a justification for imperialism (King 2004: 103-4). This racism was distinctively systematic, 'the major ideological pivot of colonial ideology', which functioned by reducing the colonial subject to the status of subhuman (Sartre 2006: xvii); and the embodiment of superfluity. The portrayal of this ineradicable and fundamental racial and cultural superiority of European colonizer over native subject filtered into the mainstream imperialist consciousness, thus convincing the colonizer of his 'innate capacity to rule and dominate' (Arendt 1979: 221).

It is also important to note the rise of racism as an emergency explanation created by Europeans in the confrontation with the absolute alien 'otherness' of colonial Africa. This is perhaps most aptly illustrated in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the dreamlike-nightmarish unreality of Africa with its infinite possibilities brings out the darkness of exploitation and subjugation in the European colonialists as a reaction to their fright and humiliation at the lack of 'civilization' and 'humanity' among the natives. This imperialist disposition is captured by Conrad in the archetypal imperialist character of Kurtz, whose experience in the Belgian Congo as an ivory-trader, characterized by rootlessness and confrontation with 'the other', results in him elevating himself to the status of a depraved demi-god and concluding his report on the natives with the grave injunction to 'exterminate all the brutes' (Conrad 1975: 138). This genocidal mentality was directly connected to the Holocaust by Sven Linqvist's *Exterminate All The Brutes* (1998) whose tale exposes European colonial atrocities as providing a precedent for future outrages. The colonial experience served to create a mentality where the use of violence by one race against another was established and accepted as perfectly legitimate (Shorten 2007: 183).

The natives are deemed to be superfluous and are dehumanized both in the ideology of racism and its practice, creating a situation where any scale of atrocity is justified and European men who kill them are not even aware they have committed murder as their victims are deemed to lack 'the specifically human character, the specifically human reality' (Arendt 1979: 192). This colonial imagery of the less-than-human 'savage' who is 'inevitably condemned to make way for Western civilization' (Traverso 2003: 63) has an obvious correlation to the Nazi depiction of the Jewish and Slavic peoples of Europe as 'the other', with perverse colonial logic acting as a precedent for Nazism (Traverso 2003: 62-73). Jurgen Zimmerer, among others, noted that the 'fundamental structures of dominance, exploitation, and murder' (Zimmerer 2007: 104) prominent in imperialism left the designated 'lower races' destined for extinction, and this would be brought about even by means of deliberate extermination (Zimmerer 2007: 107).

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This colonial racism of course could not remain exclusively in the colonies, with the 'boomerang effect' serving to infect European political culture with the same mentality; that human beings could be treated as if they were superfluous in the Eichmann-like indifference to matters of life and death (Arendt 2006). This is evident in the pan-Germanic continental imperialism under the Nazi regime. For Arendt, this was even more dangerous than overseas imperialism as it 'does not allow for any geographic distance between the methods and institutions of colony and of nation' (Arendt 1979: 223). Pan-Germanic imperialism adopted the principle of racism in the form of an 'enlarged tribal consciousness', with the Slavic peoples depicted as *untermenschen* in a familiar colonial paradigm of racial hierarchy (Kopp 2011: 35-40). Furthermore, it used methods of bureaucratic rule and secrecy, pseudo-science, and absolutist ideology of 'pseudo-mystical nonsense' focusing on supposed inner qualities to rule and justify their dominance in the East (Arendt 1979: 222-249). All of these were prominent features of imperialism reconfigured to accommodate the German desire for *lebensraum* in the form of eastward expansion.

Indeed, it is easy to view German continental imperialism as merely part of the grander European imperialist venture, with the principles and methods used often appearing to be simply more proximate versions of those used overseas. Enzo Traverso has noted how the model was provided by overseas imperialism and the methods of 'deportation, dehumanization, and racial extermination as undertaken by Hitler's Germany are in line with earlier ideas that were firmly anchored in the history of Western imperialism' (Traverso 2003: 73), the only difference being their execution within Europe itself, and upon European peoples fully immersed in Western civilization.

However it must be noted that the depiction of Jewish 'otherness' differed considerably from the portrayal of the traditional colonial 'other' who was deemed to be 'incapable' and therefore dependent on the superior race. In contrast to this almost paternalistic perspective, Nazi anti-Semitism portrayed the Jewish people as 'civilization's enemy', leaders of a conspiratorial political underworld and secret oppressors of the Aryan race (Traverso 2003: 74-75). Thus, the quest for their elimination went beyond that of the sheer exercise of power, and 'took on the grandiose dimension of a struggle for regeneration' (Traverso 2003: 75). Furber and Lower (2008) describe this atypical rationale as combining the views of 'Eastern Jews as natives in the classical colonial sense and as pernicious colonizers of supposed ancestral German land…combining contempt and fear in a lethal cocktail' (Furber and Lower 2008: 376) that exploded in the Holocaust. Furthermore, the correlation could still be claimed by using the colonial logic of 'the other', with the politically fundamental friend-enemy relation of Carl Schmitt creating the distance necessary for potential atrocities. Indeed, Zimmerer deems 'binary encoding of the world the central prerequisite for colonial rule' (Zimmerer 2007: 107), permitting the emergence of such integral dualisms as civilized-uncivilized, and human-subhuman. These dichotomies provide the justification for even the most horrendous deeds by detaching the perpetrator from the reality of his actions.

Another key experience that to some degree prefigured the Holocaust is the occurrence of German imperialism in South West Africa. Whilst Arendt's more general correlation between European imperialism and the Holocaust must remain tentative due to the fact that totalitarianism only emerged in Germany (and the USSR according to Arendt), this link can demonstrate a more concrete equivalence. Whilst both short-lived and minimal in comparison to British or French imperialism, the German experience is still significant, particularly the Herero Genocide and the cultural developments that glorified imperialism to the domestic audience. Elisa von Joeden-Forgey in particular has noted how 'ideas garnered from Germany's colonial experience were to have unforeseeable consequences for Germany's postwar [WWI] history' (von Joeden-Forgey 2007: 35).

The Herero Genocide in German South West Africa has been characterized as providing a precedent for later catastrophe. The war against the Herero people took on the features of fully-fledged genocide, waged against 'dying' peoples with the goal of total elimination demonstrated by General von Trotha's 'annihilation order' and demographically revealed by the Herero population decline from 80,000 in 1904 to under 20,000 by 1905 (Traverso 2003: 66). Further parallels can be drawn in the practice of 'extermination through deliberate neglect' employed by forcing the Herero people into the barren desert to a fate of certain death, and later in the war against the Soviet Union, which saw the destruction of infrastructure and the necessities of life on an colossal scale (Zimmerer 2007: 112).

Many of these imperial practices were made possible by the construction of an 'imaginary colonial history' (Zimmerer

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2007: 122) which glorified the past colonial era and constructed Slavic and Jewish people as equivalent to the colonial 'other'. This intellectual, literary and cultural effort pervaded into the dominant political culture, institutions, and popular mindset. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) captures the way in which the European image of the colonial world was designed to legitimize its domination; this is also evident in imperial German culture. The application of this to pan-Germanic continental imperialism proved particularly devastating, with the Slavic people casted into the category of non-Europeans in notable *lebensraum* and *volkisch* literature (Kopp 2011: 38). Furthermore, the genocidal aspect of imperialism was glorified in themes of 'genocidal fantasms' by Karl Angebauer and 'fraternity and frenzy' by Carl Koch, both examples of prominent German colonial literature (Lehmann 2011: 121-122). Carl Peters' brutal colonial policies became glamorized, and he figured as 'the greatest pioneer of German colonialism' (Saré 2011: 160) in Nazi cultural propaganda which attempted to gain popular approval for past atrocities in Africa in order to commit those of their own regime in Europe. The German experience in Africa provided rootless, Kurtz-like characters such as Carl Peters with the opportunity to dominate; providing a fertile breeding ground for the Nazi elite (Arendt 1979: 206).

A significant role was also played by the work of scientists and anthropologists who gave a degree of integrity to the racial hierarchies that were adopted by imperialism and therefore lent themselves to the ideology of Nazism. This lent credibility to otherwise outrageous actions, with social Darwinism in particular serving to spark a 'broad cultural process in which Western societies legitimized atrocity in the colonies in the name of "natural selection"' (Stone 2007: 192). This played a crucial role in the dehumanization of colonial subjects, and later in that of the victims of the Holocaust, making murder of the 'savage' thinkable due to the anthropological and scientific construction of racial and cultural hierarchies (Stone 2007: 194). Indeed, Michel Foucault has noted how biological racism and theories of evolutionism act as 'the precondition that makes killing acceptable' (Foucault 2004: 256). These pseudo-scientific theories permit racial and cultural superiority to be portrayed as scientifically verifiable to a domestic audience (Smith 1986: 150-151). Clearly, social Darwinism here is immensely dangerous, allowing scientific ideas to be reworked into theories of racial purity and applied eugenics as the idea of 'natural' selection becomes exploited into the elimination of entire groups.

The idea that the Holocaust is more directly rooted in European colonialism was particular popular among anti-colonial and prominent Black intellectuals. Aimé Césaire condemned Europeans as complicit in Nazism as 'they tolerated Nazism before it was inflicted on them…because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples' (Césaire 1972: 14), whilst Frantz Fanon described Nazism as 'a colonial system in the very heart of Europe' (Fanon 1967: 33). Whilst this may seem overly simplistic, the sheer incompatibility of imperialism and the Holocaust with the Enlightenment values extolled by the West lend their claims some validity. Indeed, whilst Hannah Arendt claimed that 'the subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition' (Arendt 1979: ix), significant claims have been made that 'Enlightenment is totalitarian' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 4) by nature. Nazi fascism can be viewed as merely 'European colonialism brought home to Europe' (Young 2004: 39), exposing the shallow, illusory, and paradoxically dehumanizing nature of European humanism itself (Sartre 2006: 160-169). Even the entire concept of genocide has been alleged to be 'a product of the history of colonization' with the inherent link between the two even incorporating the events of the Holocaust (Fitzmaurice 2008: 55). Demographic decline would suggest that this is indeed a distinct possibility, with Enzo Traverso citing the decline in the Congo from 20 million to 10 million from 1880 to 1920, and the decline in Sudan from 8-9 million to 2-3 million from 1882 to 1903 (Traverso 2003: 65). Statistics such as these lend credence to the claim that the Holocaust was by no means a unique rupture in the traditions and values of the West.

Whilst it is surely impossible to piece historical events together in a deterministic chain of definite and measured guilt, the events of European colonial politics show a certain level of brutality and domination that could certainly be seen as foreshadowing the Holocaust. The link suggested by Hannah Arendt carries significant weight with features of imperialism such as expansionism, the use of racism as an ideological device and rule by bureaucracy seeming to reoccur in pan-Germanic continental imperialism and the totalitarian methods and mentality of Nazism. Additionally, the role of science, culture, literature, and anthropology played key roles in making the imperialist justification for such violence seem somewhat legitimate. Whilst the German experience in South West Africa and the Herero Genocide are of significance, the wider phenomenon of imperial domination is the greater contributory factor to the genocidal mentality of Nazi Germany. An ethos of thought and norms developed in the colonies which created the

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potential for totalitarian domination and mass extermination in Europe, culminating in the catastrophic events of the Holocaust. Both the atrocities of imperialism and the Holocaust were made possible by these conditions in which human beings could be treated as utterly superfluous entities. This dehumanization of 'the other' bred an Eichmann-like indifference to concerns of life and death, stripping away the professed values of European humanism to reveal a previously-unfathomable heart of darkness at the core of Europe and within the whole of humanity itself.

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