

**Berlin Program Alumni Roundtable
at the 30th Annual GSA Conference
Sept. 28 - Oct. 1, 2006 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

**Colonial Past and Postcolonial Present: Reflecting on Race
and Warfare in German Thought, 1890-2005**

Moderator: Patricia A Herminhouse, University of Rochester

Participants:

Michelle Moyd, Dept. of History, Cornell University, Berlin Program Fellow 2003-2004

David Pizzo, Dept. of History, UNC Chapel Hill, Berlin Program Fellow 2002-2003

The panel involved presentations by Michelle Moyd and myself. Michelle laid out the course of her research and gave our audience a wonderful overview of the state of “colonial commemoration” and “colonial memory” in Germany today. She had the opportunity to witness and participate in several of the events surrounding the centennial of the genocide of the Herero in Southwest Africa (1904) and the outbreak of the Maji Maji War in East Africa (1905). Her presentation dovetailed very nicely with presentations earlier in the day that focused on monument culture and cultural amnesia in modern Germany, and she sparked a lively debate on mass media events such as the musical *Afrika* and the recent debate surrounding the “pygmy exhibition”.

My presentation was drawn from my ongoing dissertation, *German Conquest, Hehe Resistance & Colonial Power: The German-Hehe War in Southern Tanganyika, 1891-1898*. In my presentation, I began by describing my research experiences in Berlin and in Dar es Salaam and Iringa (both in Tanzania). From there I moved to discussing some of the philosophical and intellectual issues generated by an examination of the German imperial experience in Africa and elsewhere. While acknowledging the undeniable uniqueness and particularities of the German case, I sought to embed the German *Weltreich* within the broader history and historiography of European Empires. In doing so, I attempted to problematize the oft-deployed theory of a German (colonial) *Sonderweg*.

I utilized three approaches to question the *Sonderweg*-thesis: an emphasis on the exigencies and contingencies *vor Ort* (based on my own Tanzanian case study); a transnational approach that focused on the multiple overlapping, globalized circuits of violence in East Africa in the late 19th century; and a comparative approach that held up the Hehe-German case against those of other imperial powers in Africa and Asia. I focused particularly on the American conquest of the Philippines, the French in Côte d’Ivoire, the Belgian Congo, and the British in South Africa. As to the last case, a recent book by the historian Reviel Netz offers a succinct summary of the brutal realities that characterized the turn of the last century across the colonial world: “The Point must be stressed. When we note the surprising fact that the concentration camp was invented by Britain, in 1900, this is an indictment not of Britain but of 1900. The concentration camp was

called forth by the times themselves. War was total, so that the enemy population had to be dealt with.”¹

The debate that followed was a lively—and at times heated—one, with some commentators being intrigued by a broader, more “global” approach to the German imperial case. Others wanted to reassert the particular violence perpetrated by the German Empire, particularly those who study the genocide of the Herero and Nama in German Southwest Africa. My response was that, while there are important differences between the German Empire and its contemporaries, the perpetration of *extreme violence* against the colonized was not one of them. Leopold’s Congo, for example, witnessed the death of nearly 10 million Africans, a horrific demographic event that dwarfs other catastrophes until the World Wars of the 20th century, and the American occupation of the Philippines resulted in the death of between 250,000 and 1 million Filipinos (depending on the source) between 1899 and 1913. The point, as we agreed collectively, is not to weigh one event against the other in terms of mere body count; rather, it seems that German atrocities were part of a much broader spectrum of extreme imperial violence. Indeed, this was precisely Hannah Arendt’s assertion over half a century ago in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Overall, the discussion that Michelle and I led touched on a number of contemporary debates. What is the state of “colonial memory” in the Federal Republic? How much have the academic debates about genocide in colonial Africa affected the consciousness of the broader public? What does the extreme violence perpetrated by German—and other—imperialisms say about modernity itself? Michelle and I both found the debate to be a fruitful one. As for the effect the roundtable had on my work specifically, despite, or perhaps because of, this heated discussion, I was given the opportunity to review Hennig Melber’s edited volume, *Genozid und Gedenken: Namibisch-deutsch Geschichte und Gegenwart* (2005) for the German Studies Review. This opportunity and the excellent feedback I got after my presentation were invaluable in advancing my employment prospects for 2007, so the GSA roundtable had a very direct affect on my academic career. I hope to be able to participate in Berlin Program-sponsored activities in the future, and with any luck, I will soon be back in Berlin to do follow-up research and to rekindle connections in Germany. I thank the program for this wonderful and fulfilling opportunity.

*Report by David Pizzo
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¹ Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 145.