

Arthur J. Knoll and Lewis H. Gann, eds., *Germans in the Tropics: Essays in German Colonial History*. Contributions in Comparative Colonial Studies, no. 24. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987. Pp. xiv, 178, bibliography, index. US\$39.95.

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The editors of this volume have assembled nine historians, all of established reputation in the field, to produce what is at once a useful and provocative contribution to knowledge. Although at first glance a slender book, the length of the enterprise is compensated for by the use of quite small print. The aim has been to present a critical updating of the state of research on Wilhelmine Germany's colonial record in Africa and the Pacific as well as to reinvestigate the various theses advanced to explain the German participation in the scramble for colonies by the European powers in the three decades prior to the Great War.

Since the end of World War II there has arisen a veritable international scholarly industry in the field of imperial Germany's colonial endeavor. The main reason has been the fact that the records of the Reichskolonialamt in particular have become more or less accessible for the very first time. Without these, housed in the Potsdam archival repository of the German Democratic Republic, no meaningful research could be undertaken. It was, indeed, a breakthrough when much of this material was microfilmed and acquired by libraries in the Western world. This latter circumstance led in fact to the production of the first symposium in English on the former German Pacific colonies based on official records (John A. Moses and Paul M. Kennedy, eds., *Germany in the Pacific and Far East, 1884-1914* [St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977]). Since then a number of monographs and proceedings of symposia have appeared, of which the present volume is the latest example in English.

There is also still great interest in Germany in setting the colonial record straight as a recent conference (June 1989) held at the Pädagogische Hochschule in Schwäbisch Gmünd indicates. The proceedings of that international symposium--in which a number of the contributors to the present volume participated--will further add to knowledge of an eventful and controversial, albeit short, episode of German history, an episode about which "Germans nowadays are apt to be ashamed," to quote the editors of the present collection. Indeed the investigation of the colonial record assists in the ongoing process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (digesting the painful legacy of the past) in which German

historians seem to be perennially engaged--witness the current *Historikerstreit*. Understandably, the desire to refute the *Kolonialschuldlüge* (the lie of Germany's colonial guilt) is a legitimate inspiration for this research, especially if carried out in collaboration with non-German colleagues. But it is a task of great relevance not only to Germans themselves but also, and indeed more so, to the native peoples who were colonized. In this regard, "the Germans" were responsible for catapulting numerous, in varying degrees stone-age, peoples into the twentieth century. For this reason alone the record of the German presence in the form of planters, administrators, scientists, soldiers, and missionaries, and their impact, needs to be clarified.

The essays collected here contribute in no small measure to this clarification. At the very least they pose a series of questions about Germany's colonial experience: Why was the venture into the colonial field undertaken at all? Were there any significant voices of protest against it? Was it economically worth the effort? How did a handful of administrators on the slenderest of budgets handle their respective tasks? Through a series of case studies these questions are addressed honestly and soberly, but separately, by individual scholars representing both liberal and Marxist standpoints. It is, in this respect, encouraging to see scholarly collaboration among historians dispersed not only geographically (e.g., Peter Hempenstall of Australia), but also across ideological boundaries (e.g., Helmuth Stoecker and Peter Sebald from the German Democratic Republic, with five U.S. and one West German historian).

While most of the results are as yet tentative, they point to some reliable conclusions. For example, the German colonial enterprise was carried out on a shoestring; it was by no means widely popular among the bourgeoisie (not to mention the Social Democratic electorate); economically it was the riskiest of capitalist enterprises, although certain groups in Germany evinced great enthusiasm for maintaining a colonial presence. In this regard some of the conclusions amount to a direct challenge both to Marxist interpretations of German colonialism and to the social imperialism thesis of Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Some of the essays raise serious doubt whether the latter thesis can withstand scrutiny in the light of the economic facts. One is, perhaps, forced back into seeking political/ideological motivations. While it has been demonstrated that the vast majority of Germans did not wish to risk personal investment in shaky colonial enterprises or sacrifice themselves in the colonial service--not even the military wanted to maintain vast contingents overseas--there was still that all-important political will for Germany to have her "place in the sun." Was it the underlying belief widely shared by the

*Bildungsbürgertum* that in the inevitable collision of the Great Powers for world hegemony, it was prudent to maintain a presence, however unprofitable for the meantime, in the far-flung corners of the earth to become the bases for the spread of *Kultur* in the future? That is, perhaps, an unanswerable question, but one which nevertheless poses itself tantalizingly.

Finally, what the present collection does confirm is the fact that there were far-sighted and humane German colonial officials; the record was by no means one of unrelieved, ruthless brutality and exploitation. As well, in comparison with the other colonial powers, the record of German science and medicine among the colonized peoples stands up very positively. The same can be said of German exploration. And all these endeavors, the most important of course being the economic exploitation of the colonies, have left a legacy of infrastructures and knowledge that has had far-ranging impact on peoples as distant from each other as Western Samoa and Togo. We will never know what the long-term consequences of a continued German colonial presence in the tropics would have been, but studies such as the present volume certainly give us valuable clues.