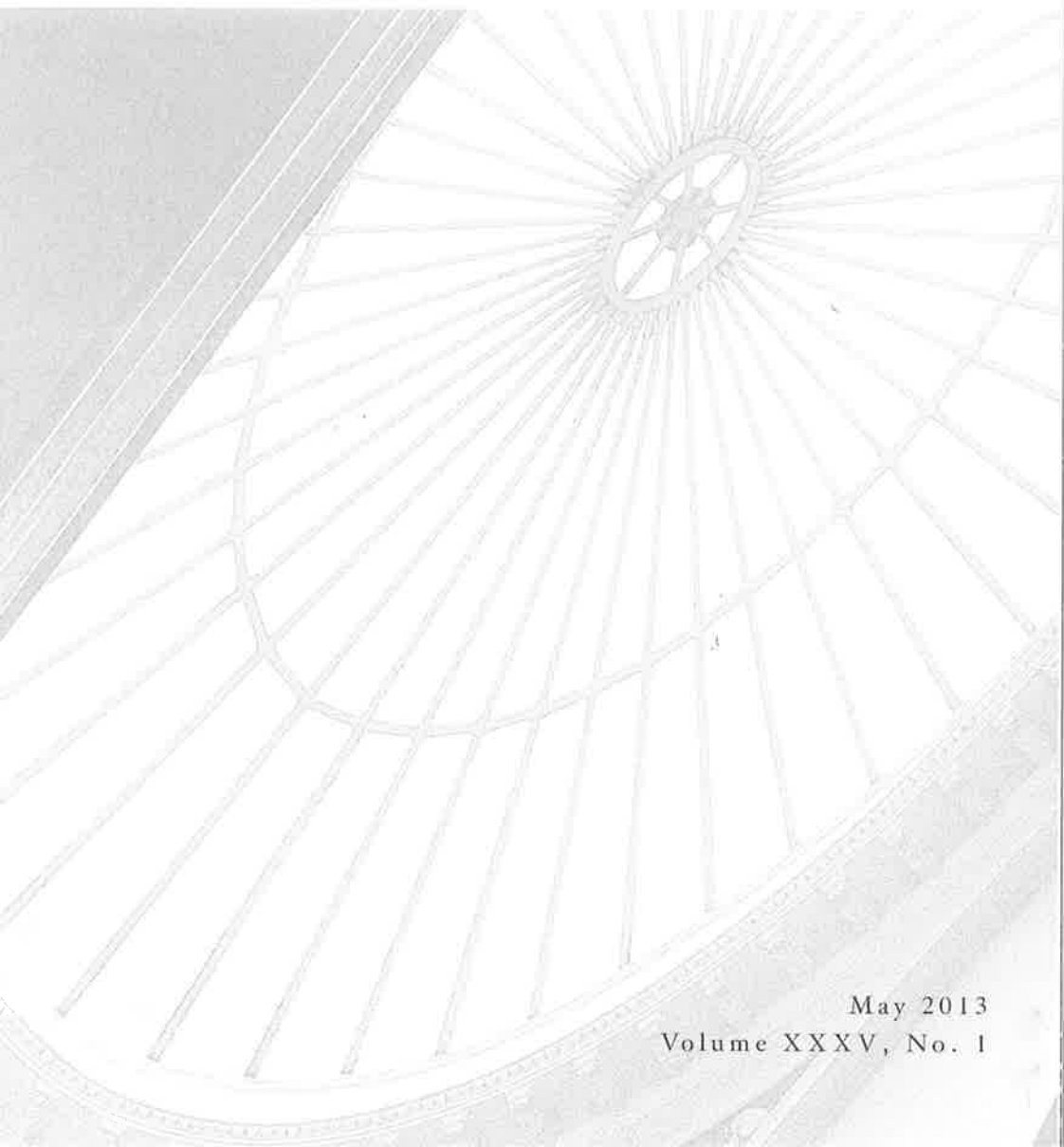


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ULRIKE LINDNER, *Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914*, Globalgeschichte, 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2011), 533 pp. ISBN 978 3 593 39485 5. €56.00

This book places itself squarely within the on-going trend in German historiography towards transnational studies and 'entangled histories'. Over 500 pages long, it is a detailed study that examines diverse aspects of its topic, from relations between missionaries and officials of differing nationalities to racism, warfare, and policies on labour migrancy. Its main thesis is stated on the back cover: that German colonialism, from a global perspective, was part of a shared, imperial European project. It is, in other words, part of a discussion of German more than of African history. The present reader, as an Africanist, may offer an outsider's perspective, which hopefully will prove useful.

Based on archival research in fourteen sites as well as a large quantity of printed sources, the study brings together a mass of information and fully succeeds in showing that neither colonial power ever acted in isolation from its European neighbour. This is particularly revealing with regard to a story that has recently been discussed predominantly as quintessentially German, namely the genocidal war in German South-West Africa/Namibia. Lindner shows that British observers were uncomfortable with, at times revolted by, German methods, but by and large deferred to an overarching colonial interest; what she calls the shared imperial project. A war that has been described as a precursor of the Holocaust thus becomes a matter of entangled history; a finding that perhaps complicates the drawing of straight lines from one atrocity to the other.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the book deals with the struggle by German officials to make sense of the 'bastardized' Afro-British Hill family in South-West Africa. At one level, this is a story of a family network that exploded rigid racial categories by severing the normally assumed link between somatic racial appearance (even if attenuated) and cultural affiliation. The greater flexibility of British officials compared with German ones confirms the impression, recurrent in the text, that the 'better-practised' British colonialists were also the more pragmatic, willing to let exceptions stand. But as the author points out, this is also part of a global story of colonial anxi-

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eties about miscegenation. In this regard, it is a reminder of how much discursive and legislative work went into the maintenance of purportedly 'natural' boundaries. Other welcome additions to our knowledge of the period include the part on knowledge transfer between the colonial powers, and even relatively well-known stories, such as that of Carl Peters becoming unhinged, take on a new appearance with the inclusion of the British perspective.

Lindner sets out at length how the British and German media, as well as officialdom, constantly examined each other's practices, reported each other's wars, and assessed each other's success or failures. In the process, they reproduced widespread truisms, such as that of Britain's longer-standing imperial antecedents and pragmatism, and the German tendency to over-reflect and over-regulate. It is revealing to see that British observers occasionally gasped at German readiness to extinguish colonial subjects' lives, even (or especially?) if the German atrocities in question are not best understood as precursors to the Holocaust. Such observations on 'national character' coming through in colonial practice, slightly updated, also recur in the older comparative literature on European colonialism in Africa. In the view of Africa-focused historians, it often exaggerated neat distinctions between colonial 'systems', all of which in practice depended on muddling through with much help from Africans. In this sense, Lindner's shift of focus from these differences in nuance to the overarching commonalities between European colonial powers is very welcome.

Nevertheless, the present reader wonders whether the notion of a 'shared project' isn't rather too strong to characterize the commonalities that Lindner demonstrates did exist. She cites from the diaries of the British officer Richard Meinertzhagen of his time in Kenya, from 1902 to 1906, on British officers' relations with African women and his impression of German inexperience and rigidity. This man would achieve his greatest notoriety among Germans during the First World War, when he ran highly successful British intelligence operations behind German lines in German East Africa. But as early as the period 1902 to 1906, he repeatedly expressed the expectation that Britain would eventually regain Mount Kilimanjaro that had so regrettably been 'presented' to Germany when boundaries between the colonies were finalized. A future war between the competing colonialists was simply a given to this military subaltern.

Meinertzhagen may have been exceptional in this respect. But his readiness to interact with his German counterparts while on business in German East Africa, observing their doings with the expectation that they would someday benefit Britain, also shows that cooperation was possible, even for someone who implicitly refuted any cooperation *towards a shared goal*. Cooperation here was strictly a means to the end of ultimately strengthening one's own nation, for competition in the global and European arena as much as in the immediate colonial context ('we seem to get most of what we want, eventually', concludes Meinertzhagen). A character like this gives the impression that British and German colonial projects in Africa were parallel rather than shared. Ideologically, yes, they drew on shared discourses of civilization and racial hierarchy, and in practice they cooperated on security, and to make sure the assertion of European racial superiority was not undermined by the appearance of individual Europeans defeated by African insurgency or living conditions. But the ultimate interests were national rather than European. Lindner acknowledges the pervasiveness of competition, but her references to the 'shared project' sit uncomfortably with it.

Similarly, Lindner's acknowledgement of the basic nastiness of colonialism, of all national stripes, is a welcome respite from the work of Anglophone colonial apologists, who have recently had a renaissance spearheaded by Niall Ferguson. Yet here, too, this reader regrets that she did not delve further into the ambiguities surrounding blithely stated ideas of racial and civilizational hierarchy. Her approach to the issue is, in a way, distinctively German: she takes as read that colonialists' behaviour towards their subjects was often awful, and conditioned by strongly hierarchical views of the world that, in hindsight, have no redeeming features. In other words, she accepts that Germany's colonial past is plainly an embarrassment to contemporary Germans, rather than the object of soul-searching and 'did we do good or did we do harm?'-type debate, as occurs in Britain.

But this acknowledgment of the self-serving and hypocritical nature of much colonial rhetoric stops short of examining the contradictions that arose at least for those colonialists for whom humanitarian aims were real. Such humanitarians did exist, as Lindner also shows, especially among missionaries. The added tensions arising from Lindner's transnational perspective might have served to high-

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light their predicament. It is easy in hindsight to assume that the relationship between humanitarian ideals and the grasping, exploitative practice especially of settler colonialism was mediated by nothing more than hypocrisy. But some contemporaries were clear that more complicated processes were involved. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is an example, and it is perhaps not coincidental that the book was written by a Polish immigrant to Britain; his status as a (white) outsider is likely to have helped him observe the contradictions in white self-projection as humanitarian. How did German and British observers reconcile their revulsion at the respective other side's 'excesses' with the collective maintenance of the fiction of white supremacy and humanitarianism? Arguably examining this question in depth would have required a separate and quite different book, but the present study could at any rate have opened up some perspectives.

Related to the avoidance of this topic is a characteristic of the book that is particularly liable to grate on the present reader, namely the way Africans remain in the shadow for much of it. They mainly occur as inter-actors with the European powers and as policy problems. Again, the simple explanation is that the author's focus was elsewhere; this is really a study of European relations in an overseas arena, more than of German and British relations with Africans. But I suspect that I am not alone among non-European historians in sometimes wishing that Europeanists were a tad more careful in acknowledging the limitations of what they do when entering global or transnational contexts. Still, historians of Africa too will find much in this book that makes it worth reading, particularly where the ready distinction between European and African actors breaks down, as in the part on the Hill family.

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