Colonial crossovers: Nazi Germany and its entanglements with other empires

Patrick Bernhard

Niels Henrik Abels vei 36, Blindernveien 11, 0851 Oslo, Norway
E-mail: Dr.PatrickBernhard@web.de

Abstract

Nazi Germany's place in the wider world is a controversial topic in historiography. While scholars such as Ian Kershaw argue that Hitler's dictatorship must be understood as a unique national phenomenon, others analyse Nazism within comparative frameworks. Mark Mazower, for example, argues that the international concept of 'empire' is useful for comprehending the German occupation of Europe. Using an approach native to transnational cultural studies, my contribution goes a step further: I analyse how the Nazis themselves positioned their regime in a wider international context, and thus gave meaning to it. My main thesis is that, while the Nazis took a broad look at international colonialism, they differentiated considerably between the various national experiences. French and British empire-building, for instance, did not receive the same attention as Japanese and Italian colonial projects. Based on new archival evidence, I show that the act of referring in particular to the Italian example was crucial for the Nazis. On the one hand, drawing strong parallels between Italian colonialism and the German rule of eastern Europe allowed Hitler to recruit support for his own visions of imperial conquest. On the other hand, Italian colonialism served as a blueprint for the Nazis' plans for racial segregation. The article thus shows the importance of transnational exchange for understanding ideological dynamics within the Nazi regime.

A unique racial state? Putting the first German dictatorship in perspective

Nazi Germany's place in the wider world is a controversial topic in historiography. Mainstream scholarship has frequently considered Nazi Germany to be a singular phenomenon in European history that had a unique developmental path, independent of the traditional democracies of France and Britain and the various fascist movements that emerged in the interwar period. In one widely read account, the British historian Ian Kershaw spoke of a 'uniqueness' that defined Nazism: for Kershaw, what rendered this right-wing dictatorship so

special and distinguished it from others was its intransigent stance on racial issues.[1] Whereas Hitler's state was structured around a racist ideology that ultimately led to the Holocaust, Kershaw insists that regimes such as Fascist Italy and Francoist Spain were only marginally interested in racial questions.

Furthermore, Kershaw argues that these dictatorships only took racist positions for tactical reasons – that is, to placate Germany, the dominant Axis partner. In this way, he claims that contact between right-wing dictatorships during the interwar period was superficial: according to Kershaw, instances of cross-cultural fertilization, such as the emulation of the Nazis' leader-cult by Franco's Spain, were little more than an 'aping' of the German model. For him, these gestures did not touch the essence of Nazism.[2]

Based on a reading of the secondary literature, Kershaw revives the long-standing understanding of a unique German path to modernity, albeit in a diminished form: while he does acknowledge that Germany was woven into the fabric of modern European history following unification, and thus shared various commonalities with its neighbours, he still sees the Nazi state as an exception. In the years between 1933 and 1945, the country became an absolute state in the strictest sense of the word: a regime largely disconnected from the world surrounding it. In the final analysis, Kershaw writes the history of Nazism as a disentangled history of a nation-state.

With the advent of transnational, culturalist, and postcolonial perspectives, these ideas have come under increasing scrutiny.[3] Three distinct strands of research can be identified. First, using transnational analytical frameworks, a new wave of scholarship has shown that even the ultranationalist and xenophobic right-wing dictatorships of the first half of the twentieth century had transnational moments. Driven not only by strategic considerations, but also by a shared racist ideology, these regimes collaborated and learned from each other precisely because they understood that they needed each other to overthrow the existing post-war order established by the Treaty of Versailles, and to fight against 'international Jewry', which the Nazis believed threatened the racial integrity of their own people.[4] Against this backdrop, policing and repression designed to socially exclude political and racial 'undesirables' became one of the most prolific fields of Axis cooperation.[5]

Second, cultural approaches to the history of Nazism have shattered claims that racism represented the unique essence of Hitler's regime. As Mark Roseman and a group of younger scholars have argued in a path-breaking new work, race was hardly the only factor shaping Nazi thought and action; nationalism, religion, and class, as well as economic considerations, also played important roles. [6] Moreover, as Roberta Pergher has argued, the Nazi regime had massive problems defining race and implementing coherent racist policies both domestically

1 Ian Kershaw, 'Hitler and the uniqueness of Nazism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 2, 2004, pp. 239–54.
2 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the final solution*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 354.
3 On historiography, see also Daniel Hedinger, 'The imperial nexus: the Second World War and the Axis in global perspective, pp. 184–205 in this issue.
4 See Ana Antic, Janna Conterio, and Dora Vargha, 'Conclusion: beyond liberal internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 25, 2, 2016, pp. 359–71.
5 Mario Ivani, *Esportare il fascismo: collaborazione di polizia e diplomazia culturale tra Italia fascista e Portogallo di Salazar (1928–1945)*, Bologna: Clueb 2008; Patrick Bernhard, 'Konzertierte Gegnerbekämpfung im Achsenbündnis: die Polizei im Dritten Reich und im faschistischen Italien 1933 bis 1943', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 59, 2011, pp. 229–62.
6 Mark Roseman, Devin Pendas, and Richard Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the racial state: rethinking Nazi Germany* (in preparation).

and in newly conquered territories.[7] In sum, these studies have de-essentialized 'race' as constituting the 'true' nature of Nazi Germany.

Third and finally, scholars working in the field of global history who have been inspired by postcolonial thought have begun applying the concept of empire, commonly used to analyse the relationship between European and extra-European societies in the nineteenth century, to the study of Nazi rule over Europe, especially its eastern territories. Mark Mazower, in particular, has sought to bring this perspective away from the margins of scholarship on Nazi Germany and into the mainstream. In his seminal work, *Hitler's empire*, he situates the Nazis' violent drive for expansionism in a context that goes well beyond the country's national development pathway. Indeed, he understands German domination over continental Europe as the most extreme outcome of the imperial rivalries that constituted Western modernity from the nineteenth century onwards.[8]

My contribution aims to integrate these three new historiographical approaches to examine how Nazi Germany's visions and policies sought to create a new racist empire, while at the same time offering an original answer to the question of Nazi Germany's place in the wider world. Indeed, while scholars such as Mark Mazower have argued that Nazism was the extreme outcome of European imperialism, such accounts only sporadically mention actual contacts and the mutual exchange that took place between the German and other empires with which it competed. In this article, I seek to close this gap. Using an approach native to transnational cultural studies, I analyse how the upper echelons of the Nazi regime positioned their rule in a wider international context, and thus gave meaning to it. In particular, I examine how Germans viewed the colonial projects of European and non-European regimes during the interwar period, and how they collected and processed information to fit their own needs.

Indeed, Nazi officials, bureaucrats, and technicians constantly invoked the examples offered by other imperial powers. Most notorious and often cited are Hitler's remarks concerning the British empire.[9] In 1942, as his troops struggled on the eastern front, Hitler noted that eastern Europe was to become Germany's India. His assertion is less amusing and bewildering than it might sound, especially to British ears. Despite claims that the so-called 'Age of Empire' ended with the outbreak of the First World War, at that time colonialism was still a prominent feature of European societies.[10] The Nazis, seemingly obsessed with their Germanic roots and race, were hardly exceptional in this regard. One should not forget that many Nazi leaders were born in the late nineteenth century, during the heyday of European imperialism.

My main thesis, however, is that, while the Nazis were broadly interested in international colonialism, they distinguished between the various national experiences. Ultimately, the French and British empires served primarily as a negative point of reference when it came to defining the Nazi empire in ideological terms. By contrast, newer forms of imperial conquest, especially the large-scale Japanese and Italian settlement projects in North Africa and Manchuria, provided positive templates for action to Hitler and his men.[11] As I will discuss in greater detail, Nazi Germany's vision of empire was crucially informed by the examples set by other nations.

---

7 Roberta Pergher, 'Looking at the "racial state" through the window of fascist Italy', conference abstract, http://web.archive.org/web/20160517193024/http://www.indiana.edu/~beyond/Abstracts/23_Oct_11_AM_3.pdf (consulted 21 March 2017).
8 Mark Mazower, *Hitler's empire: how the Nazis ruled Europe*, New York: Penguin Press, 2008.
9 Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: a new history*, London: Pan Books, 2000, p. 531.
10 See David Armitage, *Foundations of modern international thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 191.
11 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, 5th edn, Munich: Beck, 2010, p. 606.

Italian empire-building was particularly fascinating to the Nazi leadership because, *from the Nazi perspective*, the Italian Fascists had transcended traditional notions of colonialism, thus overcoming the very idea of imperialism – that is, the rule of a central power over a variety of peoples. Indeed, Italian authorities wanted to create a much more homogeneous empire in racial terms: the indigenous populations in their African colonies were to be marginalized and relegated to separate enclaves in the less fertile hinterlands in order to make way for the millions of white colonists the Fascist regime hoped to settle in Italian Africa. In this way, the Germans at the time understood Italian rule in Africa as a highly innovative and modern form of settlement colonialism, and it was precisely its seemingly new features they took a special interest in, as these resonated positively with their own vision of a racially pure settler society to be engineered in the newly conquered territories mainly of eastern Europe in the shadow of the Holocaust.[12] I argue that the Italian case was crucial for the Nazi leadership. On the one hand, drawing strong parallels between Italian colonialism and German rule of eastern Europe allowed Hitler to recruit support and enthusiasm for his own visions of imperial conquest. On the other hand, the Italian example also offered a blueprint for the Nazis' plans for racial segregation and eugenics, both in their future African colonies and in eastern Europe.

My transnational cultural approach uses different methods from classical historical comparisons. While the comparative historian identifies and elaborates on differences and commonalities between historical objects, cultural studies analyse the ways in which the people at the time identified and defined differences and similarities. These subjective frameworks of interpretation form the objects of my analysis. Accordingly, it is no longer the historian's task to describe the past 'as it really was', but rather how people in the past created reality when perceiving the world and making sense of what they saw. Thus, I draw on insights offered by cultural historians such as Roger Chartier and Frank Ankersmit.[13]

A transnational cultural approach to the history of Nazi imperialism has specific advantages. First, it allows us to move beyond questions regarding whether, for example, the Nazis misperceived British or French colonial rule and their associated conceptions of empire. Instead, we can take German perceptions of other empires for what they were: a specific form of appropriating the world and dealing with experiences gained abroad. Furthermore, we are also able to interpret the reception or rejection of given 'objects of transfer' as being the consequence of particular political, social, and cultural contexts. In this way we can understand cross-cultural exchange as a learning process independently of its 'success' or 'failure'. Indeed, such a historical approach is concerned with how Germans viewed and judged examples of colonialism against the backdrop of their *own* assumptions. Such an approach sheds light not only on the object of reflection but also on the observers, on their way of thinking, and on how they perceived themselves in a wider world. Entangled histories are thus also about the way in which the minds of the observers themselves are shaped when observing. Writing a transnational history of German imperialism after 1918 may help us to reconstruct

---

12 As the debate on the possible nexus between Nazism and colonialism has concentrated almost exclusively on the Holocaust, this aspect will not be dealt with in this article. See, most recently, Shelley Baranowski, 'The colonial roots of Nazi violence: the place of the Holocaust in Nazi imperialism', in Tobias Hof, ed., *Empire, ideology, mass violence: the long 20th century in comparative perspective*, Munich: Utz, 2016, pp. 71–96.
13 Roger Chartier, *Cultural history: between practices and representations*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993; Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, truth, and reference in historical representation*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012.

the genesis of what could be called 'Nazi identity', as identity is always the product of an encounter with the 'other' and does not constitute an endogenous essence.[14] As scholars such as Stuart Hall have argued, identities are historically defined: they are 'formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us'.[15] These cultural systems should not simply be equated with the nation. This is because identities are frequently the product of encounters with entities defined as alien. In this way, the very idea of being a 'true Nazi' must be understood at least in part as a consequence of the dynamics of entanglements with other foreign groups, movements, and regimes.

My argument has three parts. In the next section I will show how Germany both rivalled and cooperated with other imperial powers before 1933, sharing knowledge on various aspects of colonial rule while developing its imperial identity through comparisons with other empires. It is worth noting that, even after the loss of its overseas possessions following the First World War, Germany remained embedded in an international framework of imperial knowledge exchange. As the second part will demonstrate, Germany's dependence on this outside resource grew even stronger after the Nazi takeover in 1933. While the dictatorship dreamed of developing and integrating huge new territories into the Reich, it did not possess the requisite knowledge for doing so. As the Nazi leadership did not want to rely on its own colonial traditions, it sought to a considerable degree to mine the experiences of other imperial powers. Based on a systematic and, where appropriate, quantitative analysis of edited and unpublished primary sources, I will show that, while assessing the expertise of various colonial powers for solutions that would be applicable to its own imperial ambitions, German officials and experts did prioritize the knowledge they had gained. In the end, ideological concerns were pivotal, as the Germans drew distinctions between democracies and right-wing dictatorships, and then between authoritarian and fascist regimes when it came to conquest, dominion, and empire-building. In the third and last part I discuss the channels of knowledge exchange created between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and the subsequent learning processes that took place between them. More specifically, I will outline how Germany's plans for its new territories were informed by various racial population management techniques that were borrowed from abroad.

Copy and compete: Germany and Europe's imperial powers before 1933

As Alex Middleton reminds us, 'empires, after all, have always compared themselves to other empires'.[16] For example, imperial officials consistently sought information about their competitors and used such comparisons to justify certain techniques of imperial rule, which at the same time contributed to the formation of cultures that imagined themselves through comparisons with other empires. This indicates that 'knowledge about empire' became crucial both in domestic debates and in the struggle between the European powers. Thus, even at the peak of their animosities in the late nineteenth century, the European states had to deal with their

---

14 Lynn Hunt, *History writing in the global era*, New York: Norton, 2015.
15 Stuart Hall, 'The question of cultural identity', in Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, eds., *Modernity: an introduction to modern societies*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996, p. 598.
16 Alex Middleton, 'French Algeria in British imperial thought, 1830–1870', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 16, 1, 2015, pp. 1–15.

imperial rivals in cooperative ways, sharing experiences and exchanging colonial knowledge across national borders. Somewhat paradoxically, this caused nationalism to be accompanied by a growing internationalism, as confirmed by a number of studies that have uncovered linkages across the formal borders of imperial nations.[17]

International hubs of scholarly exchange emerged during this period. For example, the Institut Colonial International, founded in 1893 in Brussels, was just one of various organizations that brought together British, French, Belgian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch experts in what became known as 'colonial sciences'. The rapid rise of this new academic discipline was closely tied to its highly international outlook. The participating experts understood themselves as a transnational scientific community dedicated to influencing their nations' policy agendas in Africa and Asia.

Imperial Germany was deeply involved in these discussions. As a latecomer nation that only acquired its first overseas territories in 1884, Germany was largely dependent on experiences gained abroad in order to catch up in what has been described as the 'scramble' for overseas territories and imperial control. As Ulrike Lindner has shown, as the biggest and most successful colonial power, Great Britain became the 'gold standard' for Germany to emulate.[18] While Germany tacitly adapted some of the British strategies of imperial rule, it also expressly distanced itself from aspects of the British example. In a final analysis, this 'moment of demarcation' was crucial to the development of German imperial identity.

The situation did not entirely change after Germany's defeat in the First World War and the forced cession of its overseas possession following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Despite much bitterness about the loss of its colonies, Germany remained part of the international debate on empire, and German imperial experts continued cooperating with their European colleagues as they tried to use these channels to reclaim their former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific.[19] However, after Versailles, Germany could not rely on its own colonial experiences. This made it harder for the Germans to keep pace and not lag behind the imperial powers that were still in the 'race' for colonial holdings.

After the late 1920s two major developments altered the relations among empires and their colonial experts. First, the world economic crisis of 1929 caused many countries to withdraw funding for international organizations such as the International Africa Institute (IAI), founded in London in 1926. With the Rockefeller Foundation diminishing its support, the IAI essentially became a British institution, restricting its subsequent international work. Second, following the Great Depression two rising empires fundamentally challenged the international order: imperial Japan and Fascist Italy. Above all, Mussolini's regime presented itself as a radical alternative to the established order.

While scholars have documented the Italian regime's claims to be rebuilding the ancient Roman empire, its claims to represent modernity are often overlooked.[20] Indeed, the Italian Fascists linked the construction of their empire to something that few believed stood for

17   An overview is provided by Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after empire: decolonization, society, and culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 12–14.
18   Ulrike Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880–1914*, Berlin: Campus, 2011.
19   Stefan Esselborn, 'Übersetzer Afrikas: das Internationale Afrikainstitut (IIALC/IAI) und die Praxis afrikanistischer Expertise, 1926–1976', PhD thesis, University of Munich, 2016.
20   See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist modernities: Italy 1922–1945*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

modernity's promise of shaping the future: racism. Mussolini's regime envisioned a state-sponsored resettlement of millions of Italians to African territories that would serve as a breeding ground for the white race, thereby reversing the negative demographic trends under way in many European societies. The emerging imperial society would contribute to the racial regeneration of the decaying 'Old Continent'. The Italian Fascists asserted that their vision of a racial empire fundamentally differed from the economic rationale that shaped the politics of the traditional colonial powers. While the latter regimes served the interests of a few capitalists, the Fascist empire aimed at the betterment of the entire population. Accordingly, the Fascists spoke of the 'demographical colonization' undertaken by a 'proletarian empire'.[21] In this sense, fascist imperialism was depicted as something entirely new and unique. This later became a common feature within the Axis alliance. As Reto Hofmann argues, politicians, bureaucrats, and intellectuals in Italy, Germany, and Japan emphasized the alleged novelty of their policies, both for domestic reorganization, and for reshaping the way in which the world was governed.[22]

By the 1920s, the Fascist vision for remaking Italy through the creation of a new racial empire had become an international sensation.[23] Fascist Italy's imperial policies were particularly attractive because they promised to change the fate of the entire white race. As their purpose was demographic rather than economic, British experts such as the well-known geographer E. J. Russell observed that they differed from anything that had previously been put 'into large-scale operation'.[24] The effects of the world economic crisis and the widespread fear of the 'decay of the West' gave meaning to fascist anti-capitalist rhetoric, which promised a new racial beginning.

Germany joined the international wave of excitement over fascist empire. Indeed, the German fascination with Italian rule in Africa can hardly be overestimated. As recent research has shown, such enthusiasm was not limited to a few technical experts or fringe right-wing parties, but rather permeated broader segments of German postcolonial society, including particular conservative and nationalist circles.[25] This interest must be understood against the backdrop of a specific colonial culture that gained ground in Germany after 1919. Probably as a consequence of the traumatic loss of its overseas territories, this culture was not nationally defined, but was drawn from a European reservoir. Indeed, insofar as German cultural elites were engaged with colonial issues after 1918, their inspiration came from France, Britain, and, to an increasing degree, Italy.[26]

The magnetism exerted by Italy in particular has much to do with the course of European colonialism after 1918. Fascist expansionism seemed to demonstrate that the German dream of empire was anything but over. While other European colonial powers experienced a

---

21 Daniel Hedinger, *Der Traum von einer neuen Weltordnung: die Achse Tokio–Rom–Berlin, 1931–1942*, forthcoming Munich, 2017.
22 See Reto Hofmann, 'The fascist new–old order', pp. 166–83 in this issue.
23 On the worldwide interest in fascist Italy, see the overview of Arnd Bauerkämper, 'Interwar fascism in Europe and beyond: toward a transnational radical right', in Martin Durham and Margaret Power, eds., *New perspectives on the transnational right*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 39–66.
24 E. J. Russell, 'Agricultural colonization in the Pontine Marshes and Libya', *Geographical Journal*, 94, 4, 1939, pp. 273–89.
25 Patrick Bernhard, 'Borrowing from Mussolini: Nazi Germany's colonial aspirations in the shadow of Italian expansionism', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 41, 2013, pp. 617–43.
26 Birthe Kundrus, 'From the periphery to the center: on the significance of colonialism for the German empire', in Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, eds., *Imperial Germany revisited: continuing debates and new perspectives*, New York: Berghahn, 2013, pp. 243–66.

fundamental crisis of legitimacy in the interwar period, after they were either unable or unwilling to fulfil the promises of independence extended to their colonies during the First World War, Fascist Italy ruthlessly conquered significant territory in Ethiopia, and in 1936 became a major colonial power. In this way, it became a shining example that showed Germany the way towards a bright imperial future. The intoxicating nature of this vision made many Germans ignore various inconsistencies in Italy's imperial mission, including its utopian aspects.

Empire 2.0: updating and prioritizing foreign knowledge, 1933–43

After Hitler's seizure of power in January of 1933, the Nazis found their country integrated into a weakened international imperial framework. At this point, the Nazi leadership decided to remain within the established networks of inter-imperial exchange. This was partially an attempt to legitimize their regime at the international level. For years, the Nazis had been not only harshly criticized but also ridiculed for being an absurd German copy of the much admired 'Roman original'. One method for overcoming the party's status as a parvenu was to become proactive in the international academic community. Both Nazi officials and German academics hoped to capitalize on the new scholarly interest in interdisciplinarity and internationality, which were not only becoming increasingly fashionable in scientific circles, but could also be used to demonstrate how modern the Nazi regime actually was.[27]

As mentioned, the new regime was highly dependent on foreign knowledge for developing plans for future colonies and turning Germany into a new empire. Mining foreign knowledge and experience was crucial, for the new schemes being hatched by the Nazis went far beyond anything the country had previously undertaken. The regime was not only interested in building vast new colonies in Central Africa, but it also envisioned the conquest of enormous territories in eastern Europe to serve as 'living space' for the resettlement of millions of German colonists. However, the Nazi leadership made clear that it was not advisable to rely solely on past German experience when fleshing out such plans. Hitler himself, and also some of his closest collaborators – such as Hans Frank and Heinrich Himmler – believed that German colonial knowledge was completely outdated, as many years had passed since the country had lost its overseas territories.[28] In the interim period, both the Reich's political and legal frameworks and the situation on the ground in Africa had 'profoundly' changed. On the one hand, the new Germany had been transformed into a unified state with a clear racial vision that imperial Germany had never embraced. On the other hand, the 'natives' and their relations with the Europeans had undergone various changes as well. In this context, officials spoke of new 'native policies' that the colonial powers had specifically developed to clarify the legal definition of 'half-breeds', usually the descendants of a white father and a non-white mother. This is how an official at the Ministry of Justice assessed the contemporary situation in Africa. His assertion demonstrates that scepticism about the value of Germany's own colonial

27 Rüdiger Hachtmann, 'Forschen für Volk und "Führer": Wissenschaft und Technik', in Dietmar Süß and Winfried Süß, eds., *Das 'Dritte Reich': eine Einführung*, Munich: Pantheon, 2008, pp. 205–26.
28 Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German myth of the East: 1800 to the present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 188.

expertise did not remain limited to the upper echelons of the NSDAP but was shared by people within the traditional bureaucracy.[29]

To make matters worse, the Nazi leadership believed that the Kaiser's imperial policies had been a complete failure. For example, Fritz Tiebel, a high-ranking civil servant, asserted in a conversation with the Secretary to the Italian Minister for Africa Italiana that imperial Germany had been a liberal laissez-faire state during the nineteenth century, interested only in economic exploitation of its overseas possessions.[30] While Nazi representatives sometimes paid lip service to the 'glorious colonial past' in order to placate segments of German society that retained sentimental feelings about the country's former colonies, their internal communications made it quite clear that there was little to learn from imperial Germany, except from its mistakes.[31] It was thus logical to turn to foreign imperial powers as templates for the future Nazi empire. What Hitler and his inner circle had in mind was a new empire – a rebooted and relaunched Empire 2.0, if you will – that avoided the errors they believed had undermined Wilhelmine Germany.

Almost immediately after Hitler seized power, various organizations began collecting data on foreign countries that were potential colonial holdings. It is worth noting that not only the Party's Colonial Office was tasked with gathering information, nor was it simply traditional colonial policies that the Nazi leadership was interested in. Rather, various newly founded institutions of the regime that complemented existing international ties were charged with surveying the activities of other states, including in particular their spatial planning and settlement policies in urban and rural areas. This means that the interest in matters of reorganizing space was not limited to Africa and other more traditional places of settlement activities, but cut across various regions to include Europe. Indeed, the regime sought to map all spatial knowledge available at the time.

A good example is the Reich's Office for Spatial Planning, which was founded in 1935 and headed by Hanns Kerrl. It was formed to consolidate all planning and research activities. And as there was a lot of 'new ground' to cover, Kerrl was interested in how other nations dealt with similar problems. As a first step, he installed a proper department for foreign exchange. As he explained in a letter to the Foreign Office (which was to help him in establishing international contacts), he and his men were interested in specific countries, 'in particular Italy (including Abyssinia), England and the USA, but also the Netherlands'.[32] These countries were sent a questionnaire asking for detailed information regarding the organization of their planning activities, its legal basis, problems of financing, urbanism, and their most recent settlement projects. The data from these countries were immediately made accessible to other planning bodies that were being created by the new state, such as the Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung and the Forschungsdienst der Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft der Landwirtschaft, both headed since the mid 1930s by Konrad Meyer, an agronomist who subsequently became

---

29   National Archives, Berlin (henceforth BArch), R 3001, 22364, fol. 145, memo from Oberjustizrat Cusen, Reich's Ministry of Justice, December 1938.
30   See letter of Bernardo Attolico to Foreign Minister Ciano, 19 November 1938, in *I documenti diplomatici italiani, ottava serie: 1935–1939*, Rome: Ist. Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2003, vol. 10, p. 460.
31   See Werner Schubert, 'Das imaginäre Kolonialreich: die Vorbereitung der Kolonialgesetzgebung durch den Kolonialrechtsausschuß der Akademie für Deutsches Recht, das Reichskolonialamt und die Reichsministerien (1937–1942)', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Germanistische Abteilung*, 115, 1998, p. 97.
32   BArch, R 113, 1634, letter from the Reich's Office for Spatial Planning to the German Foreign Office, 12 March 1937.

the main architect of the SS settlement plans for eastern Europe.[33] In this context, Meyer and his colleague Paul Ritterbusch specifically referred to Italy as a leading country when it came to modern techniques of colonialism.[34] Additionally, the German Labour Front and its academic think tank examined other nations' problem-solving capacities in the area of spatial planning. Here, too, the planners' interest focused both on traditional colonial territories and on new forms of imperial rule, such as the Japanese settlements in Manchuria. The results were quite impressive. Between 1938 and 1942, the German Labour Front alone published more than fifty working papers on various African and Asian regions, including on 'Japanese colonization in East Asia'.[35]

At the start of the war, as the German planning staff begin making more detailed plans for their newly conquered territories, they encountered a basic problem: while they had acquired detailed materials on various imperial regimes, these imperial regimes varied greatly, and so did their respective approaches to imperial rule.[36] This forced German planners to compare, assess, and prioritize the new information they collected. In other words, the Nazi regime and its planning staff had to select foreign templates that fitted their own ideas of the future German empire.

As it soon turned out, German officials and experts were not equally interested in all foreign colonial experiences. The British empire remained a crucial point of reference and the German press continued to broadly cover India and Britain's other colonial possessions.[37] Yet the ways in which the Nazis referred to it have to be scrutinized. While Hitler, among others, admired the size and grandeur of British overseas possessions, the common notion that the Germans took colonial lessons from the British appears flawed. References to British rule in India are few and far between in planning documents for the settlement of Africa and eastern Europe.[38] Perhaps most importantly, British colonialism was seen as a venture from the past. As Hitler explained to his inner circle in August 1941, shortly after the Wehrmacht had invaded the Soviet Union, 'What India *was* for England, the territories of Russia *will* be for us.'[39] This means that the German dictator clearly saw Germany as the rightful heir of the British empire – an empire that he wanted to surpass.

What rendered the British and French empires so obsolete to German eyes was their failure to act in accordance with the racial imperatives of the time. To Hitler, both powers still clung to the old notion of imperial rule over a broad variety of populations.[40] He had very clear ideas about the ethnic composition of his future empire. Only a small part of the population was to be indigenous; the rest would be composed of Germans, and hence would not resemble the

---

33 See BArch, R 113, 1634, letter from the Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung to the Reichsstelle für Raumordnung, 21 March 1939. On the information returned by Italy, see Political Archives of the Foreign Office, Berlin (henceforth PA-AA), DBR, 1248a, vol. 1937–1939.
34 BArch, R 113, 1586, fol. 13, memo from the Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung, no. 1972/40, March 1940.
35 Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut der DAF, ed., *Das Kolonisationswerk Japans im ostasiatischen Raum*, Berlin: Eigenverlag, 1941. The working papers are collected in BArch, NS 5/IV, nos. 39864–40000.
36 Thus Wilhelm Wengler in his presentation during one of the sessions of the Committee for Colonial Law, April 1938, in Werner Schubert, ed., *Akademie für deutsches Recht 1933–1945: Protokolle der Ausschüsse*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2001, vol. 12, p. 414.
37 For more details, see Bernhard, 'Borrowing from Mussolini', pp. 621–2.
38 Jens-Uwe Guettel, *German expansionism, imperial liberalism, and the United States, 1776–1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
39 Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *Hitler's table talk, 1941–1944: his private conversations*, New York: Enigma Books, 2000, p. 24, emphasis added.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 426.

British and French dominions. What was even more shocking to Berlin was that London and Paris allowed the 'racial line' to be crossed. While the British contented themselves with discriminating against 'half-castes' in economic terms, the French even endorsed the assimilation of 'coloured people', according to one senior official of the Ministry of Justice who was tasked with providing the legal frameworks for future German colonies in Africa.[41] In the end, as a colleague of this official stated in internal exchanges, it was the ideological proximity to Nazism that determined which foreign model fitted best. Taking the example of colonial policing, he explained that there was a close relationship between the form of empire and the shape its security forces took: every regime had the kind of police force that corresponded to its 'true nature'.[42]

Given such logic, it is little surprise that Nazi officials and their senior staff within German bureaucracy were attracted by authoritarian and fascist templates, especially Fascist Italy and imperial Japan. It was this idea of being united by a specific fascist 'nexus' that helped them to overcome many of the national and racist resentments that they nurtured. Indeed, it was both in public statements *and* in internal debates that Japan and Italy were invoked as prime examples of a new way of thinking about empire. Thus, it would be misleading to dismiss the various positive statements made by Nazi officials regarding both regimes as mere 'Axis lyricism' intended to paper over deep-seated conflicts within fascist alliances. For example, describing closer European police collaboration to fight communism, in the mid 1930s the newly founded Gestapo proposed integrating a 'block of states' comprising Italy, Germany, Portugal, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey to form the 'center of a political defensive front of civilized European states against political criminality'.[43] In sharp contrast to European democracies, these nations were concerned with purging their societies of antisocial and dangerous 'elements', while at the same time fostering those elements they considered to be 'valuable' in racial terms.

Although leading representatives of the Nazi state referred to various right-wing regimes as being guided by certain shared ideas, they discriminated within them, and not all were on equal footing with their own regime. In his 1936 memorandum on autarky, Hitler clarified certain fundamental differences between authoritarian and fascist regimes.[44] He emphasized that only the Third Reich, imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy had sufficient control over their societies, and a common commitment to war, to fight the Soviet Union 'with any prospect of success'. Other states lacked the resolve and public support necessary for conflict with the 'disciplined rule' of the Soviets. Hitler believed that many other authoritarian regimes that were still forced to stabilize their political leadership were 'unable to direct this armed hand outwards for the preservation of their states' against the communist menace. According to him, Western democracies lacked the social cohesion necessary for the effective defence of their nations. Regardless of whether he was correct, this belief helps explain Hitler's aggressive behaviour in 1939, when he felt strongly supported by his principal Axis partners. In any event, the notion

---

41 BArch, R 3001, 22364, fol. 145, memo from Oberjustizrat Cusen, Reich's Ministry of Justice, December 1938.
42 BArch, R 1001, 9757, memo from the Colonial Office on policing, 1942.
43 PA-AA, R 100748, fiche 1909, memo from the Foreign Office, 14 March 1934.
44 Unsigned memorandum, August 1936, in *Documents on German foreign policy: from the archives of the German Foreign Ministry, series C (1933–1937), the Third Reich: first phase*, vol. 5: *March 5–October 31, 1936*, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1966, pp. 853–62. See also Aristotle Kallis, *Fascist ideology: territory and expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922–1945*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 38.

that only fascist governments could fully mobilize the resources of the nation was soon taken for granted.

Within these wider debates on the 'true nature' of Nazism and fascism, the particular way in which these regimes understood empire was of pivotal importance. Hitler again set the agenda here, providing the leadership of the Wehrmacht with an authoritative understanding of new fascist thinking about colonialism. Indeed, in a speech given to his generals shortly after the beginning of the war, he recognized that Germany and Italy were fundamentally driven by racial expansionism. For Hitler, the Italian Fascists had shown their true face in Africa. By expanding Italy's 'vital spaces' and resettling thousands of colonists in occupied territories, Mussolini's state was pursuing goals that were, for Hitler, 'based on the sound footing of the Volk' (*volklich fundiert*).[45]

Other German observers were similarly captivated by Japan's and Italy's vast settlement schemes, and saw them as unique in comparison to the undertakings of other imperial powers. Journalists and state officials alike drew strong parallels between these countries' colonization programmes and German expansionist visions. Most notably, they were impressed by the speed and magnitude of their allies' colonization programmes, and ultimately put pressure on the Nazi leadership not to lag behind international trends in what was dubbed 'modern colonization'. In 1936 Japan officially declared the start of the 'Millions to Manchuria Plan' to resettle one-fifth of Japan's farmers (or five million people) in Manchuria within twenty years. Shortly thereafter, in 1938, Italy followed suit, announcing that 500,000 Italian colonists would be resettled in Libya, and millions more in Ethiopia, which had been integrated into the new-born *Impero fascista*. These programmes received considerable public attention in Germany. While there was some media coverage of similar, yet smaller, Portuguese and Spanish settlement schemes, Japanese Manchuria and Africa Italiana were clearly the main focus of interest. For instance, it was only to Manchuria and Libya that German newspapers dispatched special correspondents, who provided their German readers with very detailed and numerous accounts, often on a weekly basis.[46] Just like Hitler, the authors highlighted in particular Italy's and Japan's far-reaching demographic ambitions.[47]

This clear hierarchy among fascist and authoritarian states is reflected in the number of German publications on empire, and the ways in which the Nazi leadership used foreign templates when discussing a country's political future. Using newspaper coverage of colonialism, I have created a 'fascism index' to examine patterns in how Germans perceived their imperial allies. One of the biggest collections of newspaper clippings was kept by the Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut (AWI). As a large academic think tank of the German Labour Front, the AWI was one of the organizations that the Nazi regime used to monitor labour relations and welfare problems both at home and in the newly conquered territories. In 1933, the AWI took over several existing newspaper clippings collections and further expanded them, until the collection comprised three million articles by the end of the war in 1945. As the newspaper clippings were collected along uniform principles and subdivided by

---

45   Adolf Hitler 'Denkschrift und Richtlinien über die Führung des Krieges im Westen vom 9.10.1939', in H. A. Jacobsen, ed., *Dokumente zur Vorgeschichte des Westfeldzuges 1939–40*, Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1956, p. 4.
46   On the high frequency of the reports see, for instance, the articles by Herbert von Borch in *DAZ*, October 26 1938, and November 5, 8, 18 and 20, 1938.
47   'Japans Siedlung in Mandschukuo: Erfahrungen und Pläne für die Zukunft', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, September 29, 1937.

individual country, it is possible to compare the data by counting the number of folders labelled 'colonialism' for each regime.[48] The result reads as follows: Japan stands atop the list with 101 folders, closely followed by Italy with 81 folders, while Salazar's Portugal and Franco's 'New Spain' trail behind with 49 and 30 folders respectively.

While the collection of information is an interesting indicator, more crucial is how this information was processed in the planning of Germany's colonial future. Examining how the upper echelons of the party and state bureaucracy used information concerning authoritarian and fascist regimes, we find that one country clearly stands out: Italy. In their minutes and memos, edited in *Records of the Reich Chancellery*, between 1933 and 1940 the German administration referred to Italy 195 times, Japan 37 times, Spain 29 times, and Portugal 7 times.[49] If we move away from various figures and examine how representatives of the Nazi regime viewed these administrations, Fascist Italy again appears at the forefront. In internal communications of the consular service, or in the discussions of experts working in institutions such as the AWI, Mussolini's colonial endeavours in Africa are described as 'particular', in a 'class of their own', 'second to none', and ultimately 'unique' relative to other regimes' efforts.[50] It seems that this narrative was so widespread that, despite his strong doubts regarding the Italian regime, the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, could not help but praise the Italians. After having seen a film on Libya and Abyssinia in his private theatre, he noted in his diaries that their policies in Africa were truly remarkable.[51] The notion that Mussolini's dictatorship stood head and shoulders above other authoritarian and fascist regimes shaped both the general debate concerning Germany's imperial future and the way in which German experts developed detailed plans for the new territories that the Reich was to hold in eastern Europe and Africa.

The Fascist script: the many meanings of the Italian template and its effects

Italy's colonial empire acquired various meanings for the Germans. First, as Mussolini's policy of conquest had been a significant driver of colonial aspirations within Germany, Hitler realized that Italy could be used to advertise his own visions of imperial conquest in eastern Europe. In other words, the Nazi leadership tried to harness colonial enthusiasm in Germany by drawing parallels between Italian colonialism in Africa and German rule in eastern Europe. Essentially, the regime sought to harness existing colonial aspirations within society in the pursuit of its objectives. In this endeavour, the Italian empire served as an extremely useful tool: it helped to translate Nazi ideas into the language of colonialism, an idiom that was still widely understood in Germany. It thus functioned as a crucial link between the 'old colonial world' and the new Nazi empire.

---

48 I used the finding aids of the National Archives in Berlin as the basis for my quantitative analysis.
49 Friedrich Hartmannsgruber, ed., *Akten der Reichskanzlei, Regierung Hitler: 1933–1945*, 7 vols., Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 1999–2015. The figures are based on the register of the edition.
50 BArch, R 1001, 9714, cable from the German Consul General in Addis Ababa to the German Foreign Office in Berlin, 22 November 1938, p. 1; BArch, NS 5, VI/28041, memo by Rudolf Fitzner, 'The Italian settlement scheme in North Africa', January 1939.
51 Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, part I: *Aufzeichnungen 1923–1941*, vol. 6: *August 1938–Juni 1939*, Munich: K. G. Saur, 1998, pp. 360–1.

This context helps to explain why the new Italian territories in North Africa were portrayed in the regime's official propaganda as new and unique. The Nazis argued that the new territories were not traditional colonies, but rather represented an integral part of the Italian homeland, just as the new territories in eastern Europe would be an integral part of Germany. To strengthen public acceptance for this narrative, Italian settlement activities in Africa – including in particular the shipping of the first 20,000 Italian colonists to Libya in October 1938 (the famous '*ventimila*') – received massive press coverage. The various journalists sent to Libya as special correspondents did not just have privileged access to Italian officials, who often arranged for guided tours of the new settlements.[52] They were also able to give their stories a very personal touch: they reported, for instance, on their private conversations with ordinary Italian families and their feelings about leaving their homes forever to settle in Libya, thus making it easy for German readers to relate to them.

In their stories on Libya, journalists stressed that the country had ceased to be a traditional colony. In 1938 its coastal region had been 'integrated into the Italian homeland' and now formed 'Italy's fourth shore'.[53] Libya was 'Italian soil'; the settlers did not 'migrate' to a colony, but had simply resettled. In this context, German journalists used the word '*umgesiedelt*' ('resettled') to refer to their own relocation of people to the east. Drawing on his personal experiences when accompanying Italian settlers to their new homes, one journalist explained that the new territories were simply an extension of Italy into Africa. An article in the *Voelkischer Beobachter*, the official Nazi party newspaper, made it very clear: in Libya the Fascists had created 'four new provinces *for Italy*'.[54]

Commending the Italian Fascists' colonial efforts allowed the Nazi regime to promote its own settlement scheme and overcome hesitation towards its plans for its newly conquered territories. Indeed, German state officials, merchants, and small farmers expressed considerable scepticism towards settling in Poland and its neighbouring countries; these territories were seen as the 'Wild East'.[55] It was therefore useful for the Nazi regime to draw on Italy's experience to demonstrate how resettlement had already been practised with great success, and to emphasize that the Italian settlers did not leave their country per se, but simply moved to another part of it.

Internal communications reveal that the Nazi leadership was curious about how the Fascist regime had convinced settlers to move to Africa. Indeed, Berlin appointed a special envoy, the labour attaché to the German embassy in Rome, to accompany the 20,000 settlers whom the Fascist regime sent to Libya in October 1938 to understand their hopes and fears.[56] It was with 'particular interest' that the Minister of Labour, Franz Seldtke, read this detailed travel report, and he immediately requested additional information on Italian colonialism.[57]

52 See, for example, R. Vogel, 'Italien kämpft gegen die Sahara', *N.S. Landpost*, 20 May 1938.
53 'Libyen mit dem Mutterlande vereinigt', *Berliner Börsenzeitung*, 26 October 1938. A very similar account appears in 'Die vierte Küste Italiens', *Deutsche Bergwerkszeitung*, 1 June 1939.
54 Robert Kroetz, 'Vier neue Provinzen für Italien: Kulturarbeit statt Ausbeutung', *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 October 1938.
55 Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi east: agents and witnesses of Germanization*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 126; R. M. Douglas, *Orderly and humane: the expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 46.
56 See PA-AA, DBR, 713d, letter from Oskar Karstedt, Reich Labour Ministry, to Wolfgang Spakler, social affairs attaché at the German embassy in Rome, 29 October 1938.
57 PA-AA, DBR, 713e, letter from Franz Seldte, Reich Labour Minister, to the German embassy in Rome, 26 April 1939.

The effects of the regime's propaganda upon German society are difficult to assess. There are, however, various indications that its efforts stirred enthusiasm among Germans for the colonial project in the east. Admittedly, many could not be persuaded and remained sceptical about the feasibility of settling millions of Germans within a short time span. Hermann Stresau, a librarian and writer, who had difficulties in making a living in Nazi Germany because of his liberal political beliefs, is a noteworthy representative of the sceptical camp. As he noted in his diaries, one evening he attended a public lecture on Italian colonialism, organized by the local Italo-German Cultural Society. Although the speaker proclaimed that the entire African continent would soon be under German and Italian rule, Stresau was more impressed by the limited possibilities that North Africa offered to white settlers.[58]

While clearly unpopular in some quarters, Italian and German dreams of empire were also supported by segments of German society. Surveying a wide variety of sources, such as official reports, personal letters, and diaries, it appears that the regime was able to reach a broad spectrum of the emerging 'national community'. Schoolchildren were among the prime groups to be targeted. Indeed, Hitler's regime focused its aspirations on future generations, hoping to impart the 'true Nazi spirit' in the area of empire-building. Winning the hearts and minds of the young took on tremendous significance. Italy's colonial aspirations, for example, were officially taught in German classrooms. *Volk und Führer*, the basic history textbook for German grammar schools, drew a direct comparison between the Reich's and Italy's expansionist goals, and emphasized that both nations had been denied 'vital space' for years.[59] To prepare teachers for presenting this topic, the Nazi Teachers' Organization provided additional information in its journal.[60]

Students were shown films that drew parallels between Nazi Germany's and Fascist Italy's imperial ambitions. A prime example is *Men make history: the march on Abyssinia*, a film produced by the NSDAP's Propaganda Department in 1938 and distributed in all schools in the Reich. In Stuttgart alone 30,000 schoolchildren saw the movie. The way in which the Fascist empire was presented, and the exoticism of the African setting, certainly had their effects. As the local Italian consul, who had attended the screening to monitor the audience's reactions, reported to his superiors in Rome, the students had enthusiastically applauded the film.[61] This was not just wishful thinking, nor was it an attempt to curry favour with the regime by reporting what many wanted to hear; private papers also corroborate the official view. As the East German writer Hermann Kant remembered his Nazi-era school days in his 1977 novel *Der Aufenthalt*, he and his schoolmates played 'Bombs on Adua', a game they had invented after seeing the film. Some of his friends who took the role of the Italian soldiers shot huge stones with a catapult at the 'Abyssinians' hiding under a tin sheet.[62] In the truest sense of the word, German children playfully learned and internalized the violent ideals of both regimes.

Another group to be targeted were the educated bourgeois elites in Germany. Here, the regime could rely on a plethora of organizations to disseminate knowledge on the Italian

58 Hermann Stresau, *Von Jahr zu Jahr*, Berlin: Minerva, 1948, p. 310.
59 Dietrich Klagges and Walter Franke, eds., *Volk und Führer: deutsche Geschichte für Schulen, vol 5: Der Weg zum Großdeutschen Reich*, Frankfurt am Main: Diesterweg, 1941, p. 189.
60 *Der Deutsche Erzieher*, 7, 1940, p. 218.
61 Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, D.G. Servizi della Propaganda, propaganda presso gli stati esteri, b. 97, Germania '1938' Ie parte, cable from the Italian consul in Stuttgart to the Italian Propaganda Ministry in Rome, 12 March 1938. See also *ibid.*, cable from the Italian embassy in Berlin to the Italian Propaganda Ministry, 9 July 1938.
62 Hermann Kant, *Der Aufenthalt: Roman*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1986, p. 264.

empire, mainly in the cultural sector. For instance, starting in the late 1920s, in dozens of towns local elites set up Italo-German cultural societies, often in the context of sister-city partnerships.[63] Talks and slide shows on Italian Africa were particularly popular among an audience of lawyers, doctors, university professors, entrepreneurs, and other local dignitaries. As the directors of the Deutsch-Italienische Studienstiftung, a foundation started by a Siemens Corporation executive in Berlin, observed, the encounters between the German audience and the Italian speakers proved to be particularly fruitful, as there was a chance to exchange ideas at a more informal level after the talk. These discussions 'over a beer or two' were 'highly inspirational' for both sides.[64]

Finally, members of Erwin Rommel's Afrikakorps also showed much affection for the Italian colonization project and were able to relate it to Germany's own quest for new territories. Not only had they been exposed to German propaganda on the Fascist and Nazi empires to prepare them for the fighting in Africa; they also witnessed what the Italians had actually achieved in Libya. Although many soldiers expressed contempt for the purportedly poor fighting abilities of their Axis comrades, they were impressed by the new Fascist settlements in the desert. In their letters, war diaries, and memoirs, soldiers described the villages and farms with their palm trees and green gardens as true paradises.[65] The concept most often used in this context was 'clean and neat'.[66] With 'untiring diligence' the settlers had greened the desert, and huge fields of golden grain surrounded villages whose centres were formed by elegant and snow-white buildings.

Sometimes, however, the soldiers' enthusiasm about Fascist endeavours was so great that the original message of the official propaganda got lost: namely, the link to Germany's expansionism in eastern Europe. For instance, in various letters German soldiers wrote that the fighting in North Africa was ultimately for German colonies in Africa.[67] Others, however, did see links between Africa and the eastern territories. When viewing the Italian villages in Libya for the first time, a veterinary officer wrote that he was reminded of 'German settlements in our eastern provinces'. The regime deemed the letter to be so important that it was published in a major newspaper.[68] In sum, the Nazi regime could use Fascist colonialism as a tool for social mobilization, even though it did not always control how Germans imbued these ideas with meaning.

However, Fascist colonialism was not only a means of social activation. It also provided a blueprint for emulation when the Nazi regime began developing plans for a future German empire in Africa *and* eastern Europe. Indeed, settlement experts were particularly interested in the racist dimension of Fascist rule in Africa. More specifically, German planning

63   There were about thirty local branches in the Reich. See Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Serie Affari Politici, Germania 1931–1945, b. 74, fasc. 2, letter from the Italian Ambassador in Berlin to the Italian Foreign Office 21 June 1943.
64   PA-AA, R 61301, Activities report of the Deutsch–Italienische Studienstiftung for the year 1938/39, p. 2.
65   Archives of the Museumsstiftung Post und Telekommunikation, Berlin, 3.2002.7605, letter from Second Lieutenant Robert Witzke, 31 March 1941.
66   Rudolf Marwan-Schlosser, *Rommels Flak als Pak: das Flak-Regiment 135 als Rückgrat des Deutschen Afrikakorps*, Wiener Neustadt: Weilburg, 1991, p. 107.
67   Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart, Sammlung Sterz, letters from Private Hans Eisenstein, 22 and 25 May 1941. For further evidence, see Carlo Gentile, 'Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Kampf gegen Resistenza und Zivilbevölkerung', in Thomas Schlemmer, Lutz Klinkhammer, and Amedeo Osti, eds., *Die 'Achse' im Krieg: Politik, Ideologie und Kriegführung 1939 bis 1945*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010, pp. 492–518.
68   Schmidt, 'Wie ich Libyen sah: ein Land voller Gegensätze, dessen Wesen man nur langsam kennen lernt', *Westdeutscher Beobachter*, 19 March 1942.

staff were intrigued by the Italian policies of racial segregation and their guidelines regarding the racial improvement of future settlers. On the basis of previously unearthed material, there is indication that German experts emulated Italian apartheid laws when they drafted the *Kolonialblutschutzgesetz*, a law to protect the 'purity of the German blood' in Germany's future African possessions. They were also inspired by Italian directives regarding the selection of settlers for the newly conquered territories in eastern Europe.[69]

This emulation process was facilitated by channels of exchange that Hans Frank and Heinrich Himmler had managed to create. A leading lawyer of the Nazi regime and subsequently a governor in occupied Poland, Frank helped both to elaborate the legal frameworks for the new German territories and to implement them on the ground. A fervent admirer of Mussolini who spoke some Italian, he quickly forged close links with leading legal experts of Germany's main Axis partner. The Academy for German Law, established in 1933 as the main institution to transform Germany into a dictatorship and headed by Frank himself, provided an important hub for cross-cultural exchange and learning. Italian specialists in colonial law were regular guests at the meetings of its Committee for Colonial Law, where they provided detailed information on current Italian legislation.[70] For instance, in May 1939 Renzo Meregazzi, Chief of Cabinet to the Ministry of Italian Africa, gave a speech to his German colleagues on the 'Fundamentals of colonial law and colonial policies within the Fascist empire'.[71] In his talk, Meregazzi stressed that Fascist Italy had taken an intransigent stance towards the problem of 'racial mixing', gradually enforcing its legislation over the last few years. In Africa the Fascist state protected not only Italian nationals but also the entire 'white race' from being 'contaminated' by those whom they identified as 'inferior races'. Laws forbade marriage and sexual contact between white and black people, and violators were severely punished, with multi-year prison sentences.[72]

Frank and his colleagues were so intrigued by Meregazzi's paper that they immediately translated and published it in German, along with other official texts.[73] For example, the law on 'Penalties for the Defence of the Prestige of the Race in regard to African Italian Natives' of May 1939 was reprinted in its entirety in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft*, the leading journal on comparative law, and introduced by Giuseppe Lo Verde.[74] A visiting professor at the University of Königsberg and co-editor of the eminent quarterly *Reich–Volksordnung–Lebensraum* (*Reich, population order, and living space*), Lo Verde regularly published on various problems of Italian and German law and was thus an important academic intermediary between

---

69 Scholars such as Birthe Kundrus have long assumed that the German legislation was in part inspired by the Italian experience, yet I am the first one to provide further evidence to support this idea. See Birthe Kundrus, 'Von Windhoek nach Nürnberg? Koloniale "Mischehenverbote" und die nationalsozialistische Rassengesetzgebung', in Birthe Kundrus, ed., *Phantasiereiche: zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2003, pp. 110–31.
70 PA-AA, DBR, 777c, letter from the German Foreign Office to the German embassy in Rome, 27 November 1937.
71 BArch, R 1501, 127192, fol. 169, invitation to the meeting of the Academy for German Law on colonial matters, 14 May 1939.
72 See, for instance, Renzo Meregazzi, 'Lineamenti della legislazione per l'impero', *Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, 2, 3, 1939, p. 12.
73 Renzo Meregazzi, *Die Grundlagen des italienischen Kolonialrechts und der faschistischen Kolonialpolitik*, Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1939.
74 'Strafmaßnahmen zum Schutze des Rassenprestiges gegenüber den Eingeborenen von Italienisch-Ostafrika', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft*, 1, 2, 54, 1939, pp. 109–12.

the two countries.[75] Finally, scholars such as Lo Verde were supported by the German embassy in Rome, which in late 1941 appointed a proper liaison officer for colonial matters. This post – a unique institution within the Reich's inter-imperial relations – was to guarantee a broad and constant flow of information between German and Italian academia.[76]

The main reason why Frank's staff were so attentive to foreign experiences in managing race relations was that the Nazi regime was about to draft its own colonial legislation for Germany's future colonies in Africa.[77] Beginning in 1933, the Nazi administration developed serious plans for a German *Mittelafrika* that was to encompass the former German East Africa, the Belgian Congo, French Senegal, and Madagascar. As victory over the Allies seemed within reach in 1940, preparations for the acquisition of African colonies intensified. When assuming control of the Allies' colonies, Germany would be confronted with a major problem: miscegenation. Thus, the new colonial masters were to administer and regulate race relations. Of course, the Germans had considerable expertise in racial legislation, the most notorious being the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Indeed, the Nuremberg Laws were initially to provide the basis for all subsequent legal planning for Germany's future colonies.

Yet as legal experts such as Wilhelm Wengler soon realized, the social and cultural context into which the law was to be inserted was different from the one at home. In Africa, the key problem was not separating 'German Jews' from 'Aryans', but 'white people' from 'black people'. Thus, it was not possible simply to extend domestic legislation to the colonies. Rather, the Germans needed a solution that was appropriate for the local situation. Wengler, one of the leading experts of comparative law at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institut, was an advocate for mimicking the Fascist legal template for Italian East Africa.[78] Not only was Italian legislation in this area quite restrictive – banning, for example, cohabitation between black women and white men – but its main value was that it had been tested on the ground. In other words, it had been shown to work effectively in Africa.[79]

Fascist colonial legislation inspired German law in various ways. Above all, the severity with which the Italian authorities punished any transgression of the colour line appealed to German officials' views regarding colonial racial relations.[80] In their deliberations on the future colonial law, senior officials at the Ministry of Justice believed that Mussolini's Italy could provide a 'strong stimulus' to the new Germany.[81] In contrast to the British and French, who did little to impede the creation of a new race of 'half-castes', the Italians had established one of the most comprehensive systems of racial segregation in colonial Africa, banning interracial marriage and cohabitation.[82]

75 Christian Tilitzki, *Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002, part 1, p. 1108.
76 PA-AA, Rome Quirinal (secret), 119, letter from the German Foreign Office to the Germany embassy in Rome, 3 October 1941.
77 BArch, R 1501, 127192, fol. 82, report by Freytagh-Loringhoven, president of the Committee for Colonial Law, 16 June 1938.
78 Wilhelm Wengler, 'Die Kritierien für die rechtliche Abgrenzung der verschiedenen Bevölkerungsgruppen in den Kolonien', *Zeitschrift für ausländisches öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht*, 8, 1938, pp. 48–83.
79 Wilhelm Wengler, 'Die Rechtsstellung der Mischlinge im italienischen Kolonialrecht nach dem Gesetz vom 13.5.1940', *Zeitschrift der Akademie für Deutsches Recht*, 8, 1941, pp. 127–8.
80 For an intriguing aspect of Fascist racial policies see Martina Salvante, 'Violated domesticity in Italian East Africa, 1937–1940', in Emily S. Burrill, Richard L. Roberts, and Elizabeth Thornberry, eds., *Domestic violence and the law in colonial and postcolonial Africa*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010, p. 98.
81 BArch, R 3001, 22364, fols. 144 and 414, memo from Oberjustizrat Cusen, Reich's Ministry of Justice, December 1938, p. 4, and Résumé on the deliberations concerning Dr Wengler's guidelines, March 1939.
82 Friedrich Schack, 'Die italienische Rassenpolitik in Afrika', *Afrika Rundschau*, 4 August 1940.

The success of the Italian authorities guided the Germans' decision to punish legal transgressions and provided a framework for determining the adequate degree of penalties.[83] While the first German draft of the *Kolonialblutschutzgesetz* had called for the expulsion of whites who had experienced sexual relationships with a black person, in the following versions the sentences were increased. Just as in Africa Italiana, whites who had sexual contact with non-whites were penalized with imprisonment. German officials had learned from the Italian experience that they needed stricter laws to deter possible offenders and enforce racial segregation. Indeed, before introducing prison sentences, Italian authorities had simply deported offenders, yet this had proven ineffective.

In their meetings, the legal experts of Frank's Academy explicitly referred to their country's fascist neighbour.[84] While also considering the emerging apartheid regime of the Union of South Africa as a possible template, they almost immediately scrapped this idea. As the delegate of the NSDAP's Office for Racial Policy proclaimed, it was an independent country. The situation on the ground could thus not be compared with the future German holdings in Africa, as these were to be dependent on the core areas of the German Reich. This argument was not entirely convincing, as the apartheid system could have been emulated regardless of the country's actual constitutional basis. However, the German debate is quite telling, for it shows us how foreign models that did not entirely fit the ideological frameworks of the Nazi regime were discarded as inappropriate.

The experiences of other colonial powers crucially informed German empire-building not just in Africa but in eastern Europe as well. In this connection, Heinrich Himmler was the foremost player in establishing close relations with Italian officials, experts, and technocrats. These relationships were significant, as Himmler was put in charge of the vast German resettlement programme for eastern Europe (commonly known as the *Generalplan Ost*) in October 1939. He not only sent his experts on field investigations to Italian North Africa (something that never occurred in the case of French North Africa) but also created an institutional framework for these contacts to put them on more solid footing. Thus, he established a joint Italian–German expert group to exchange ideas on agrarian and settlement problems, an organization with no equivalent in British–German or American–German relations. In this context, Giuseppe Tassinari, a famous agronomist and under-secretary in the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, gave a talk about Italy's new possessions in Abyssinia to an audience of select Nazi officials and settlement experts at the Harnack House in Berlin, one of the most important forums for scholarly dialogue in the Third Reich. The talk was deemed so important that it was immediately published in German.[85]

Two aspects of the Italian efforts in Africa absorbed Himmler in particular: the complete incorporation of the new territories into the homeland and the selection of settlers. Indeed, in 1939, after years of intensive colonization and land improvement, Libya's coastal region was officially recognized as Italian homeland, an accomplishment that perfectly matched Himmler's own idea for transforming the newly conquered eastern European territories into

---

83   Minutes of the session of the first working group on 'the state in the new protectorates', 7–9 December 1938, in Schubert, *Akademie für deutsches Recht*, vol. 12, p. 470.
84   See the presentation of K. Zoepke from the NSDAP's Office of Racial Policy, in *ibid.*, p. 501.
85   Giuseppe Tassinari, 'Die landwirtschaftlichen Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten Abessiniens', *Berichte über Landwirtschaft*, 23, 1938, pp. 599–620.

German lands, the infamous 'Germanization policies'.[86] Thus, the Italian example served as a source of encouragement to Himmler and his men, who felt that they were pursuing the correct policies when acquiring new territories. It is against this backdrop that we must understand Himmler's famous 1942 speech on empire-building in eastern Europe. According to him, these new territories would be 'a colony today, an area of settlement tomorrow and part of the Reich the day after tomorrow'.[87] The speech is intriguing for two reasons: on the one hand, it shows us how much Himmler's thinking was shaped by a colonial mindset; on the other, it makes it clear that he wanted to transcend that very same notion of colonialism – just as he thought the Italians had done.

Like Hans Frank before him, Himmler and his staff began gathering information on the Fascist empire in more systematic ways. A good example is provided by Helmut Müller-Westing's work. A junior officer of the SS and a law student in Prague, Müller-Westing was encouraged to travel to Libya and write his PhD thesis on the legal and technical aspects of the Italian settlements, with the main focus being the contract that settlers signed with the state.[88] His mentors were the agrarian expert Wilhelm Saure, who at the time worked for the Race and Settlement Office of the SS, and Oswald Pohl, one of Himmler's closest collaborators. Both were particularly interested in the Italian authorities' practical experiences since the nation had begun 'venturing off to new shores' of Africa.[89] Thus, the guiding question that Westing examined was *how* settlements should best be organized. As the author's introduction explained, now that the Nazi regime had entered a 'space without people' in eastern Europe and was about to design proper contracts with its future settlers, his thesis was meant to provide the necessary information for German experts to learn from an advanced system.[90]

One of Müller-Westing's and other scholars' findings was that large and productive settler families were key to colonial success.[91] However, as the Italian experience had shown, it was crucial for the male head of the family to be supported by at least two grown sons who could perform the farm's heavy manual labour. Himmler's men were so interested in Müller-Westing's conclusions that they immediately published them in their specialist journal *Neues Bauerntum*, noting that the author gave settlement experts much to consider.[92]

It was at this time that Himmler personally intervened in German planning for eastern Europe. In November 1941, he suggested a clause be inserted in the drafts for a German settler contract requiring presumptive settlers to have two grown sons.[93] Although similar regulations

---

86 Gerhard Wolf, 'The East as historical imagination and the Germanization policies of the Third Reich', in Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, eds., *Hitler's geographies: the spatialities of the Third Reich*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 93–109.

87 National Archives, Prague, 2325, sg. 109–11/127, ka. 145, excerpt from a speech given by Heinrich Himmler at the SS-Junkerschule Tölz, 23 November 1942. See also Bradley F. Smith and Agnes Peterson, eds., *Heinrich Himmler, Geheimreden von 1933 bis 1945*, Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen-Verlag, 1974, p. 273.

88 Helmut Müller-Westing, 'Der Siedlungshof in Libyen: Rechtsgrundlagen der faschistischen Volkssiedlung in Libyen, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Siedlungsvertrages', PhD thesis, Prague: Rechts- und staatswissenschaftliche Fakultät, 1941, printed, Bozen: Author's edition, 1941.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

90 *Ibid.*

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4 and 131. On the contracts between Italian settlers and the Fascist regime, see Roberta Pergher, *Fascist borderlands: nation, empire and Italy's settlement program, 1922–43*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017 (in press).

92 Helmut Müller-Westing, 'Der Siedlungshof in Libyen: Teil 1', *Neues Bauerntum*, 34, 1942, p. 218.

93 BArch, NS 19, 1596, letter from Heinrich Himmler to Ulrich Greifelt, 20 November 1941, and letter from the Reich Commissariat for the Strengthening of Germandom to Rudolf Brandt, personal assistant to Himmler, 10 August 1942. On German interest in Italian colonialism, see also Roberta Pergher, 'The consent of

had been discussed among German experts,[94] it was only after the Italian African experience that the head of the German settlement programme made it a mandatory requirement. Given that Himmler's staff at the very same time emulated Italian colonial architecture to serve as a model for the German settlements in eastern Europe, an important learning process appears to have taken place.[95] Selecting the right settlers became the key prerequisite for the emergence and prosperity of a new German imperial society; as 'Commissioner for the Strengthening of Germandom', it was Himmler's task to secure that society's 'racial integrity' in eastern Europe. Thus, it is not without irony that the measures taken to preserve the German race in the new territories were actually inspired by a foreign country.

Conclusion

I believe that my findings challenge previous assumptions on how to understand Nazi Germany's international context. First, the limits and shortcomings of nation-centred accounts that focus on race as a 'unique' and thus incomparable feature have become evident. It is worth noting that Nazi Germany was willing to learn – and actually did learn – in the field of racial population management from foreign countries. Its schemes for an apartheid regime in Germany's future African possessions, and, more importantly, for Nazi eugenics in its eastern European settlement project, were visibly influenced by Fascist Italy's African colonies. What is even more relevant is that this issue became a vehicle for the realization of a core aim of the Nazi regime – that is, to create a new, racially pure society.

Furthermore, my findings challenge another assumption that has recently become prominent, namely the idea that fascism in the interwar period was not an aberration, or an isolated case, but a manifestation of the 'dark side of Western modernity'.[96] Edward Ross Dickinson, a specialist of modern German history, argues that 'scientific racism' was a common feature of almost all Western societies in the first half of the twentieth century, and thus cannot solely be ascribed to Nazi Germany.[97]

While this argument was important for ending the view that Nazism was a complete aberration in Western modernity, it still exhibits certain deficits. Above all, the notion that modernity has a 'dark side' tends to ignore differences that existed between individual Western societies. Among many scholars, particularly in the UK, there is a certain propensity to overlook the substantial differences between democracies and totalitarian regimes while focusing almost exclusively on modernity's destructive potential.[98] From this perspective, modernity as such is to blame for racial discrimination, oppression, and ultimately genocide.[99] Such oversimplifications have been challenged by numerous scholars. Lynn Hunt, for example, bemoans the demonization of the French Revolution, which for many has become synonymous

---

memory: recovering fascist–settler relations in Libya', in Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher, eds., *In the society of fascists: acclamation, acquiescence, and agency*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 169–88.

94   Maria Fiebrandt, *Auslese für die Siedlergesellschaft: die Einbeziehung in die NS-Erbgesundheitspolitik im Kontext der Umsiedlungen 1939–1945*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014, p. 445.

95   Patrick Bernhard, 'Hitler's Africa in the east: Italian colonialism as a model for German planning in eastern Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, 2016, pp. 61–90.

96   Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The dark side of modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

97   Edward Ross Dickinson, 'Biopolitics, fascism, democracy: some reflections on our discourse about "modernity"', *Central European History*, 37, 1, 2004, pp. 1–48.

98   See, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.

99   The discussion on the relationship between Nazism and modernity is taken up by Ricardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: eine Bilanz der Forschung*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003.

with violence, terror, and authoritarianism.[100] Such a perspective wholly neglects the positive contributions made by the Revolution to political thought and practice. Thus, Hunt argues for more balanced accounts that give due attention to the specific and local manifestations of modernity in different time periods.

My contribution confirms the need for accounts that differentiate between specific manifestations of modernity. Examining the imperial regimes of the interwar period and their mutual contacts and relations, we find significant differences in how different countries and regimes were perceived. At various levels, German observers drew a distinction between Britain and France on the one hand, and Japan and Italy on the other. This distinction is visible not only in public rhetoric but also in internal deliberations about the future direction of the country. Indeed, Germany's self-purported kindred ties to Japan and Italy had a clear ideological basis, and were not merely founded by a desire to gloss over points of difference between wartime allies. For German observers, a fundamental area of difference between the democratic and fascist camps concerned demographic policy. Despite their underlying racist conceptions, the British and French visions of empire were seen as not racist *enough*. Fascist Italy, by contrast, clearly shared numerous fundamental beliefs with Nazi Germany, including the idea of rigidly separating people by race.

These often-repeated points of ideological distinction, which were eventually accepted as self-evident, crystallized into specific tangible differences. For example, the notion that Germany was the home of a unique form of fascist imperialism had significant effects on the way in which it conducted itself at the international level. The processes of exchange that took place between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in the area of colonial policy were unique and differed substantially from Germany's relations with other nations. As Hans Frank's and Heinrich Himmler's cooperation with Italian authorities has shown, these ties were far more elaborate and complex than the links that Germany maintained with other colonial powers at that time. By the same token, Germany's deepening contacts with its main ally also meant a weakening of relations with other colonial powers. This, in turn, had repercussions for the way that Nazi Germany perceived other regimes. Thus, as discussed, for a wide range of interlocking and self-reinforcing reasons, Germany came to view Fascist Italy as a role model worthy of emulation, as a vanguard nation in a much broader global fascist movement. Clearly, the 'inspirational force' exerted by Italian Fascism cannot be overlooked in seeking to account for the historical development of Nazi ideology, particularly as it relates to colonial policy and racial population management.

Patrick Bernhard is Associate Professor at the University of Oslo. He is the author of various publications that cover a broad range of topics, ranging from European fascism to colonialism, from war and genocide to peace movements and Cold War cultures, including Zivildienst zwischen Reform und Revolte: eine bundesdeutsche Institution im gesellschaftlichen Wandel, 1961–1982 *(2005).*

---

100   Lynn Hunt, 'The world we have gained: the future of the French Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 108, 2003, pp. 1–19.