

Historian Jürgen Zimmerer promotes post-colonial Antisemitism

Von Dr. phil. Clemens Heni, 14. Oktober 2017

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In a debate in the German weekly Freitag 34/2017, published October 8, 2017, its publisher Jakob Augstein, known for his anti-Israel stance, and his colleague, Michael Angele, interviewed journalist Alan Posener and historian Jürgen Zimmerer about colonialism and the Holocaust.

Zimmerer is a leading ideologue of post-colonial theory. This article analyzes his scholarly shortcomings. Framing colonialism as forerunner of Nazi Germany and the Shoah is antisemitic in effect, if not intent.

Many people obfuscate their anti-Jewish resentments by framing them as trendy or scholarly up-to-date. Antisemitism is a specific phenomenon. Antisemitism is not just a form of racism, it is a complete different category. Antisemitism is constructed on race theories, conspiracy myths, blood libels, tropes of Jewish power and countless other aspects. Antisemitism sees Jews behind capitalism and communism, behind the media, the current refugee crisis ("Soros"), behind 9/11 etc. Antisemitism is not about discrimination, prejudice or mobbing. Antisemitism is the "longest hatred" and a "lethal obsession", as historian Robert Solomon Wistrich (1945–2015) framed it.

Racism, on the other hand, is based on discrimination, rule and power, not on extermination or conspiracy myths. Slavery was a horrible crime, but it was obviously not developed to eradicate people, let alone a specific people. It was means

for exploitation.

In recent decades, it has become mainstream to deny the uniqueness of the Shoah and to accuse Jews as well as Israel to emphasize and even to study that uniqueness. Scholars such as Amos Goldberg from Israel accuse the Holocaust Memorial at Yad Vashem for being exclusive. In his distorted view, the Shoah was not unique. He represents a huge trend in contemporary activism and scholarship regarding our colonial past. Some like Amelia Plumelle-Urbe talk about "concentration universe America" since 1492, accusing America for being a kind of Nazi Germany. This anti-American ideology is well received in Germany in particular. Others, such as Heinz Dieterich in 1991 spoke about a "500 Year Reich" (1492–1992), projecting German guilt of the Holocaust on to America and the West. That kind of ideology is no longer a hard-core left-wing esoteric ideology. It has become mainstream.

Scholar in cultural studies in the Netherlands, Imani Tafari-Ama, currently a fellow of the German Federal Foundation of Culture in the city of Flensburg in the north of Germany, is among the most aggressive deniers of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. June 11, 2017, in the German daily *tageszeitung* (taz) she claimed, „the diversion of Africans was the worst crime in human history, even bigger than the Holocaust.” That statement is one of the worst forms of contemporary antisemitism. Why? It denies that the industrial killing of six million Jews was unprecedented. That is a form of soft-core Holocaust denial, as scholarship frames it. Slave trade was a huge crime, both in its well-known Christian and in its often-denied Islamic versions. However, these crimes were not at all unprecedented (think about antiquity and slavery etc.), nor were they intended to kill an entire people.

Let us focus on historian Jürgen Zimmerer and his allies:

There is a special trend in historiography to distort the

Holocaust by denying its unprecedented character and to frame the murder of Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa in 1904–1907 as *Kaiser's Holocaust*. This is the title of a book written by David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen in 2010. They claim:

“Our understanding of what Nazism was and where its underlying ideas and philosophies came from is perhaps incomplete unless we explore what happened in Africa under Kaiser Wilhelm.”

First, this approach is far from original. In 1975, historian Peter Schmitt-Egner published a study (in German) about Colonialism and Fascism, where he denied that antisemitism is an ideology sui generis. His attempt is obsessed with “class struggle” and capitalism, therefore colonialism is seen as the forerunner to equally capitalist fascism. Many leftists deny the sui generis dimension of antisemitism and National Socialist Germany. For them, bourgeois rule tends to be fascist and that is more or less the same kind of capitalist exploitation all over the modern world. Any specificity of National Socialist antisemitic ideology and the German antisemitic people are set aside. Post-colonial studies are the worldwide left-wing form of that denial of the unprecedented character of Treblinka, Babi Jar and Sobibor.

The Holocaust was not a form of “Social Darwinism,” nor were the Jews seen as the “weak,” as Olusoga and Erichsen think. Contrary to that, Germans saw Jews as superior, dangerous, and as preparing a world conspiracy. There is no connection between the “People without Space,” as one chapter in *Kaiser's Holocaust* reads, and the Shoah, because antisemitism and the Shoah had nothing to do with land gain, imperialism or any other form of political, territorial, economic, cultural, social etc. purpose.

In 1992, historian Wolfgang Benz published in the first volume

of his *Yearbook on Research on Antisemitism* an article by publicist Henning Melber, who argued in the same post-colonial vein. Melber emphasized German continuities and ignored the analysis of antisemitism as distinct from research on racism, colonialism, and the *cui bono* of that kind of violence and crime.

Historian Jürgen Zimmerer is a leading voice in comparing and equating German colonialism and Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In 2003, he published an article wherein he stated that “genocides in the colonies” are in the same “category” as “National Socialist murder policies.” In 2011, Zimmerer published a collection of his essays on colonialism and the Holocaust, entitled *From Windhuk to Auschwitz?* He insists that as early as 1947 American civil rights activist and historian W.E.B. Dubois (1868–1963) said:

“There was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”

That is not true and rather shows an anti-Jewish resentment in the first place. Never before did a country, let alone one of the most industrialized countries in the world, try to eradicate an entire people from the earth. Eliminationist antisemitism was the German ideology, which led to the Holocaust. There is vast literature about the uniqueness and specificity of the Shoah, but most post-colonial authors ignore that scholarship intentionally, as it would show their low scholarly standard and their post-colonial resentment against Jews in general and the emphasis on the uniqueness of the Shoah in particular.

Zimmerer emphasizes that another author posited comparable

arguments like DuBois. This is the old superstar of post-colonialism-studies, Aimé Césaire, who wrote in 1950 that the crime of the Holocaust is (supposedly) seen as horrible not because of

“the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he [Hitler] applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs, of Algeria, the colonies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”

Césaire argued in an antisemitic way and denied that the Holocaust was an unprecedented crime since never before was it the aim of a government or a group to exterminate an entire people. The Holocaust was not based on a *cui bono*; there was no territorial, political, social, cultural or economic, let alone religious conflict between Germans and Jews. German ideology defamed Jews and wanted to kill them, the long history of antisemitism since antiquity was an essential component of this singling out of Jews.

Zimmerer deals little if ever with literature on antisemitism or the uniqueness of the Shoah. On the other hand, historians such as Steven T. Katz deal extensively with the uniqueness of the Shoah, without ignoring arguments who oppose that view. Zimmerer pleads for a “post-colonial and global approach” to Nazi Germany. He embeds National Socialism completely in the history of colonialism. The scholarly failure of this endeavor can already be seen on the cover picture: there is a picture of several Germans in uniform in 1941 looking at a model of a village, which was part of an exposition “Plan and Composition in the East.” At best, this could be discussed in relation to the Nazi “Generalplan Ost.” However, this has nothing to do with the Shoah. Auschwitz was not a plan for new villages. Treblinka was not about colonialism or exploitation: it was about the destruction of European Jews.

Colonialism was about racism, exploitation, and land gain, as well as about inner-imperialist and inner-colonialist struggle between world powers, including England, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, the Arabs and Turks (Ottoman Empire), and Japan, among others.

In 2010, historian Jakob Zollmann published his doctoral dissertation about *Colonial Rule and its Limits. Colonial Police in German South-West Africa 1894–1915*. He did field research in Namibia, too, and argues in line with other historians of colonialism in Africa that the German colonial state was rather weak and not at all totalitarian or fascist in a European sense. The most important aspect may be his claim that Zimmerer and his colleagues ignore that Africans have a history of their own, which may not be seen as a forerunner of Nazi Germany. This is a distortion of African resistance against the Germans, for example. Projecting Namibian history as nothing but the “birthplace” of the “Ostland”, as Zimmerer argues, is a denial of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Zimmerer deals with a “post-colonial perspective on the National Socialist policies of conquest and rule,” completely distorting that the Shoah was neither about “conquest,” nor about “rule.” The administration of “German South-West Africa,” however, was indeed about rule, as Zimmerer is well aware, since he is the author of a book on German rule over Africans.

Both Zimmerer and Zollmann show in their work how Germans tried to establish rules for their colony and how they failed in controlling the entire territory. Local “gangs” were widespread in the countryside and the German police were well aware of their restricted influence. However, the conclusions both historians are drawing from official documents and diaries of the time are diametrically opposed. While Zollmann puts the story in a rather typical colonial context and not as a forerunner to Nazi Germany, Zimmerer interprets the colonial sources from his “post-colonial perspective on the Nazi policy

of conquest and extermination”.

In 2007, Zollmann discussed the German debate about the relationship of colonialism and Nazi Germany:

“I would argue that the gradual re-orientation of German historians towards world history, international history, and the attendant paradigms of comparability, of transnationalism, of entangled and global history lies at the bottom of this (re-)new(ed) interest in the German colonial past.”

Zollmann also criticizes authors Reinhart Kößler and Henning Melber, who are “taking up Hannah Arendt,” and “actually construct a direct connection between settler colonialism and Nazi dictatorship.” Post-colonial and post-structuralist theory uses Arendt in order to de-specify the Holocaust and to deny the unprecedented character of the Shoah. Particularly for non-Jewish authors such a kosher stamp for distorting the Holocaust is important.

Historians Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski reject the argument that there was a more or less direct connection from Windhoek to Auschwitz. They can show that the German war against the Herero and Nama (1904–1907) was a typical colonial war, neither unprecedented nor a forerunner to the Second World War, to say nothing of the Shoah. The Spanish-Cuban War (1895–1898) and the American-Philippine War (1898–1902) as well as the Second Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902) were colonial wars that included mass murder and atrocities. These wars were directed against native populations who had attacked or were seen as a concrete (military) threat to the colonial power.

Furthermore, they claim that it’s remarkable that Zimmerer and those who follow the Windhoek to Auschwitz paradigm simply ignore the role played by the First World War 1914–1918. Even a murderer like Lothar von Trotha, who was responsible for the

atrocities against the Herero in 1904, was harshly criticized in the German Kaiserreich.

Historian Jakob Zollmann analyzed the methodological, epistemological and theoretical mistakes in Jürgen Zimmerer's approach:

“Indeed, Jürgen Zimmerer warns against, even rejects, an equation of the Holocaust with colonial genocide (...) German colonial experience is seen by Zimmerer to have acted as a cultural (re)-source (kulturelles Reservoir) from which the National Socialists would have drawn their ideas. These rather ominously formulated ideas of Zimmerer are repeated in his piece titled Die Geburt des ‘Ostlands’ aus dem Geist des Kolonialismus. And they do not become clearer here, as the ominous title – ‘Birth of the ‘Ostland’ conceived by the spirit of colonialism’, demonstrates. His title gives the impression of answering a question which has been posed by those who want to emphasize the continuities, not to say causalities, Zimmerer had just denied in his article. A ‘birth’ has only one reason – it is mono-causal by its very nature. By choosing this title, Zimmerer has de-scribed a situation of a ‘because/therefore...’ In his understanding the spirit of colonialism is the reason for the ‘Ostland’ – and all that has happened there, including the extermination of the Jews. No colonialism, no ideas of Germanised Eastern Europe, no Holocaust? Zimmerer’s arguments do not convince, they confuse – not only the reader, but also the issues.”

Historian Winfried Speitkamp, too, rejects the argument that German South-West Africa was a forerunner to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. He criticizes Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller who still see Africans like the Herero and Nama as passive victims alone, and ignore their resistance and particularly the specifics of African history and German (and other) colonial histories in Africa. This is all the more important, because the mass murder of Herero and Nama was a

result of their initial active resistance to colonial Germany.

The German crimes against the Herero and Nama were in no way connected to National Socialism and the Holocaust. Colonialism has nothing to do with the rise of German eliminationist antisemitism. Post-colonial theory is a huge failure, when promoting these historical lies, promoted by Jürgen Zimmerer and many others. They need to learn: there was no *cui bono* in the Shoah. Racism and colonialism were about a *cui bono*. Racism is and was about exploitation or land gain and so on, antisemitism and the Holocaust were about destruction and killing an entire people, the Jews. Racism means rule over people, antisemitism and the Shoah meant destroying an entire people. But most people in the post-colonial camp are unwilling to understand that difference.

However, we are not talking about scholarly mistakes alone. I fear most scholars and activists who deny the uniqueness of the Shoah have anti-Jewish as well as anti-Zionist resentments. That might be among the reasons why post-colonialism is such a huge trend in academia all around the world.

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