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Jonas Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco: Colonial Concentration Camps in Southern Africa, 1900-1908* (Translated by Elizabeth Janik), New York/Oxford, Berghahn, 2019, 289p.

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Jonas Kreienbaum's book is a historically imaginative contribution to the continuing debate on the history of the concentration camp, and is based on solid and extensive research. It is innovative in bringing together the two most commonly cited instances of the early use of such camps. These are the British camps of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the German use of camps as part of the massive repression against the Herero and Nama in South West Africa / Namibia (1904-1908). In both cases Kreienbaum provides meticulously well documented accounts of the organization and social dynamics of the camps, and the struggles around policy toward them amongst both the military and political leaderships on the spot and their metropolitan superiors. The outstanding quality of Kreienbaum's scholarship will certainly make this book an indispensable reference point for researchers interested in either of his case studies, and for those concerned with the history of concentration camps more broadly. However, his insistence that the German South West Africa case was not essentially genocidal goes against the tendency of much recent historical writing and is likely to make the work controversial. In my view it is somewhat unfortunate that Kreienbaum enters into this debate on the genocidal nature of the Namibian War, as it is not really necessary either to his useful account of the Namibian camps or to his creative contribution on the comparisons with and connections to South Africa, and is likely to distract attention from them.

In his introduction Kreienbaum sets up four well defined central issues, to be discussed in the book. Firstly, he raises the question of the motivation of the perpetrators. Were the British and German initiators of the camps genocidal in their aims, or were they focused on transformation of colonized populations through social engineering, or were they primarily concerned with labour exploitation? Secondly, he poses the question, originally framed by Hannah Arendt, of whether colonial violence, and specifically the policies of the Germans in Namibia, led directly to the totalitarian camps of the mid Twentieth Century, and specifically to the Nazi camps. Thirdly – and here the comparison with the British case is particularly useful – he asks whether the German violence in its South West African colony can be traced to the imputed special national historical path of the *Sonderweg,* familiar from German historical debates, or whether Germany is in fact typical of European states in the colonial sphere. Those familiar with the literature on Germany may well reflect here on Blackbourn and Eley's insistence that

Germany was more like other West European states than many scholars have been willing to acknowledge.[1] Finally, he asks how far colonial powers borrowed concentration camp technologies from each other. This seems to me a particularly important issue to raise in the context he is looking at. The German South West Africa colony and the British and Boer political entities of the period are normally examined in isolation from one another. But the connections between these colonial projects were in fact dense – for instance there was an economically important German community in the future South Africa, and AEG and Siemens organized the provision of electricity for the Rand mines. British, German and indeed Portuguese colonial interests in the region were deeply connected in this era. This is a challenging and rich agenda.

Kreienbaum offers us four excellent main chapters followed by a comparative reflection and conclusion. Chapter One summarizes the course of the two wars. The overview of the South African War is expertly done and well written, and the account of the Namibian War is exemplary in its clarity. In Chapter Two, Kreienbaum addresses the issue of the purpose of the camps. In the South African case, he does a brilliant job of correcting the rather muddled thinking that can be found in some of the literature, showing how the role of the camps needs to be differentiated across time and in terms of distinct projects. The Namibia section carefully traces the German policy debates on the camps and the implementation of camp policy. Chapter Three provides comprehensive parallel accounts of the functioning of the camps in the two theatres of war. These are deeply informed and powerfully written. In the Namibian case there is an interesting differentiation made in relation to the treatment of Herero and Nama prisoners, with Kreienbaum arguing that the latter were regarded as more dangerous because of their long-sustained insurgency. Kreienbaum is particularly informative on how in both cases the labour of colonized Africans was mobilized on an extensive scale. This has perhaps been insufficiently emphasized in work on the South African camps. In the Namibian case, Kreienbaum provides much important detail on the use of African labour in the ports of Swakopmund and Lüderitz, on railway building and other projects. While briefer, the fourth chapter on knowledge transfer is really suggestive in its exploration of how the German framing and justification of their camp system drew on the invocation of British policy across the border of a few years earlier. There is some revealing detail of the process of the transmission of knowledge here. For instance, Kreienbaum brings to light that both one of German South West Africa's Governors, Friedrich von Lindequist, and one of its military commanders, Ludwig von Estorff, had visited the British camps in South Africa, and he shows the institutional role of the German Rhenish Mission which was active in both the British and German colonies, as a link between the camps in the two empires.

Kreienbaum creates a kind of unified theory of the two case studies, seeing a similar pattern in both. This approach is useful in certain respects but tends to blur important differences in others. I would agree with Kreienbaum that in both cases the camps were initially the product of colonial war. Both the British and the Germans sought to break armed resistance by mass incarceration of civilian populations. And his emphasis on the role of camps as sources of African labour is valuable. But Kreienbaum makes another argument which is less straightforwardly convincing. He contends that an important function of the camps was 'social engineering' in terms of educating the internees into the social roles envisaged by their conquerors. There is some basis for this in the South African case, in that the British did create some schooling provision for Boer children in camps, and saw instruction of the Boers in health and sanitation as socially uplifting. It is indeed the case that the British envisaged the Boers as a subordinate white group who could help to maintain the racial order in the sub-continent. Kreienbaum persuasively explains this educational intervention – although the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalism a decade later might raise some doubts on its long-term efficacy. But for both black South African and Namibian prisoners, his idea that there was systematic socialization into a role as subordinate labourers seems a little overplayed. The colonial authorities hardly needed to use persuasion when they had extensive means of coercion at their disposal. The argument that colonial missions and administrators imposed an ideological hegemony on African subjects is contestable even for colonized elites, let alone for labourers.

Where the parallels that Kreienbaum sees come rather unstuck though, is in his insistence that neither of the two camp systems was genocidal. In both cases he attributes the mass death that occurred to maladministration, material shortages and the like. However, this view corresponds to reality much more in the South African case than the Namibian. In South Africa, there is no real controversy. No serious case can be made that the British

[1] Blackbourn David and Eley Geoff (1984), *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* , Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

authorities had explicit genocidal intentions, a position that is now only advocated by a fringe of the most extreme Afrikaner nationalists. As Kreienbaum documents, the mass deaths in the early stages of the camps in South Africa were due to neglect of public health questions and inadequate supplies while the British army was in charge, and death rates fell dramatically once the British civil administration took over. But his case for a lack of genocidal dynamics is harder to make for Namibia. The prime piece of evidence for genocidal intent in the Namibian case is the 'destruction order' (*Vernichtungsbefehl*) in relation to the Herero issued by the German commander von Trotha in 1904. While not denying the violence involved, Kreienbaum emphasizes that this policy was only implemented by von Trotha for a period of about three months before it was revoked by Berlin. He also argues that the high mortality at the camps was not intentional and provides a detailed account of the policy discussions amongst camp authorities in support of this. This seems a little like special pleading. Perhaps what misleads here is an excessive emphasis on Kreienbaum's part on subjective intentionality. The pervasive racist ideology of colonialism had an inherent exterminist logic, which is a different question from that of what individual officials aimed to do. In the case of the British camps this logic was somewhat restrained by the politics of the period, in which the activity of Liberal critics of the war led to camp administration being subject to intense scrutiny in the British public sphere. But in Germany, despite criticism from the Social Democrats and others, this constraint was lacking. And von Trotha's *Vernichtungsbefehl*, a direct statement of a policy of annihilation if ever there was one, cannot be bracketed out from the picture of the establishment of the camps.

Kreienbaum also rather overstates his case in rejecting a link between the South West Africa camps and Nazism. In countering the work of Jürgen Zimmerer, Joachim Zeller and others[2] who insist on the continuity of the South West African camps and the camps of the Nazi era, Kreienbaum relies on an over-polarized framing of the argument. He argues that the South West African camps were not the same as the Nazi death camps, and this is self-evidently true. But one could accept this without rejecting the case that there were genuine links between the technologies of repression in the two cases. It could, certainly, fairly be argued that the protagonists of the 'continuity' thesis still need to do more to explore the cultural and organizational mechanisms of the passing on of repressive techniques and the biographies of personnel who link these events, but that does not mean that they do not have a valid argument. It is hard not to see significance in the development in Namibia of techniques such as the railway shipment of systematically 'labeled' prisoners to camps or in the future presence in the Nazi leadership of veterans of the Namibia War such as Franz Ritter von Epp. To say that the colonial and Nazi camps were different is still not a case against seeing how the first might have contributed to the second.

This intellectual clash though points to a wider problem in genocide studies. Genocide, as originally delineated by Raphael Lemkin and other scholars in the 1940s, was a legal concept. It only gradually moved into historical and sociological discourse.[3] The peculiarities of the way it is defined in the 1948 UN Genocide convention created some important ambiguities and goes against a common-sense understanding of the term – for example, in the Convention some forms of repression which do not involve physical violence count as genocide, while some forms of organized killing, such as executions of adherents of a political ideology, do not. The difficulty of finding a satisfactory definition of genocide has led some scholars to prefer terms such as 'mass killing'. Nevertheless, for many scholars and activists it remains politically important to define certain historic moments as genocide. While Kreienbaum's motives in disputing the genocide characterization are unimpeachable, and he in no way plays down the violence of German colonial policy, this has not been the case for all participants in the Namibian debate in contemporary Germany. For some of the German extreme right, denying genocide in Namibia has been a strategy for rehabilitating the colonial past. In this context it is a pity that the way this book engages with the genocide question is likely to somewhat obscure its genuine and very considerable scholarly merits.

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[2] Zimmerer Jürgen and Zeller Joachim (2008), *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904-1908 and its Aftermath*, Monmouth, Merlin.
[3] Power Samantha (2002), *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide,* New York, Basic Books; Moses Dirk (2021), *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

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