

Conclusion

What does this history of Germany and the East, told through the biography of an agrarian economist, tell us about the larger questions of Modern German History? One of the most central of these questions centres upon the transformation of the German Right, from the Bismarckian 1870s to the Hitlerian 1930s. By following a character who was always amongst key conservative groups, but never wholly belonged to any of them, we see perhaps more clearly how it all transpired. In Sering, we encounter many tensions found in the conservatism of the era. His opinion of farmers combined an intractable contradiction: a desire for them to be free yeomen who were simultaneously restricted by the state in what they could do with their farms. This is an excellent illustration of the vexed relationship between German conservatives and the working, or farming, class. A version of “reactionary modernism” can be seen in (a) the Sering who had a deeply agrarian romantic idea of what small plot farmers breathing in fresh air could make of the Fatherland, and (b) the Sering who simultaneously served as a high-ranking member of the Navy League, demanding more money for steelworkers to weld ships in industrial ports, again, for a better Fatherland. The same man who saw endless work to be done within Germany was also in favour of a global colonial empire. Sering’s experience of the extremes of the First World War serve as a synecdoche for the nation, from boundary expanding ambitions of conquest to personal tragedy and loss. This experience also epitomized the transformation of much conservative thinking in Germany from 1914 to the 1920s. Sering, and virtually the entire German Right, discarded forever their dream of an overseas empire and, from 1915 to 1945, the German East became the one and true site of a German Colonial Empire. The long end to the First World War in the East, from Versailles and the resultant rise of Poland, to the world-transforming Russian Civil War, to angry Freikorps veterans wandering the streets of Sering’s struggling Berlin, together resulted in *the* key break in the conservative transformation. While he refused to abide the biological racial turn, Sering did roar against the *Diktat*.

Although he fought against the extremes of Darré and Meyer, Sering's agrarian dreams had more in common with many elements of National Socialism than he would ever have liked to admit. Indeed, at the end of his life he was imagining an Eastern Europe once again under the yoke of German imperialism. Given who took power in Germany in 1933, and the manner in which the occupation of the East was then carried out from 1939, it has been easy for historians to overlook the continuing, seminal importance of Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* of 1915 and similar imperial thinking about the East. Its re-emergence among Sering and fellow *Ostforscher* in the 1930s shows us that there is no easy binary of moderate, stay-at-home conservatism versus radical, conquering, genocidal National Socialism. Throughout the period from 1915 to 1945, Sering and his ilk represented a more gradual, but no less real, transformation of the German Right.

What does this story tell us about the history of German Colonialism, as well as the Global History of Settler Colonialism? The hard binaries applied by frameworks and theories in modern colonial studies resist grasping and truly understanding the ways that colonial attitudes form, manifest, and evolve. German thinkers like Sering and, I would argue, his equivalents in many nations around the world, saw a continuum in the structures of domination we call colonization, from spaces inside one's own borders, to adjacent lands, to distant, often overseas, territories. Similarly, the kinds of people considered ripe for colonization existed in this vast variety of spaces and, thus, ran the gamut from appearing incredibly similar to Germans, that is, Poles, to subjects that a German colonial agent could more easily judge to be "the colonized," that is, the Herero. This long continuum does, and should, complicate the history of colonialism. The continual focus of scholars on the post-1500 subjugation of distant peoples of colour by European colonizers elides not only the long pre-1500 intra-European history of colonization, it also erases much pre-, and post-1500 settler colonialisms around the globe, including practices that took place in the zones that Europeans would come to dominate. This strikes me as rendering non-European peoples as having "no history," in the very way that nineteenth century European colonizers attempted to argue. Settler colonization takes on its proper significance when we acknowledge and accept that most of the globe has experienced it – often many times – at different points over several millennia.¹ That it is historically an all too common element of a great number of civilizations is all the more reason to engage with it on a

¹ See the excellent new collection of Edward Cavanaugh and Lorenzo Verancini, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

global, comparative scale. By normalizing Germany's long engagement with its East, placing it firmly in the Great Power history of adjacent settler colonialism, be that of Russia or, in the story of this book, Canada and the United States, one removes German (and American) history from the exceptionalism trap that shuts down comparison.

All continents supply histories of "inner-colonial" activities but, to add just one more instance closer to this book's main example, we need merely to shift our gaze southward from the German East. The evolving character of empire and colonization can be found among "German nationalists" in Germany's neighbour, the Habsburg Empire. Although on a much smaller scale, the story Pieter Judson relates of the "inner colonial" settlement program in southern Styria, in land "threatened" by Slovenes, tracks right alongside what happened in Posen and West Prussia.² In the decades before the First World War, the Südmark Settlement Program raised funds to purchase bankrupt Slovene farms and help incoming German speakers settle in the borderlands. But, just like their neighbours to the north, it was not long before most of their funding was being used to simply keep settlers from going bankrupt or to subsidize German speakers to buy German-speaker owned farms. Finally, just as in the Polish space, the catastrophe of 1918/1919 resulted in much more hardened views of ethnic exclusion in these former Habsburg borderland areas, with the resulting violence and "cleansing" of "incorrect" populations. Of course, at the southern edge of the now defunct Habsburg Empire, in Greece and Turkey, a brutal population exchange took place, culminating in the burning of Smyrna in 1922. "Incorrect" populations had been ethnically cleansed and "correct" populations had then been "inner colonized" into the newly emptied spaces. This was deemed by the victorious Great Powers to be a "correcting" of the populations, thus confirming that a radical evolution had taken place well beyond the minds of just German settlement planners.

Jürgen Osterhammel's definition of colonialism is perhaps the most cited in today's scholarship on German history. Does the story of this book align with his three criteria for what makes a situation colonial? As his first criteria, he explains that, "colonialism is not just any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed according to the needs and interests of the colonial state." This was clearly always the German goal in Polish space. His second criteria highlights: "the unwillingness of the new rulers to make cultural

² Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), ch. 4.

concessions to subjugated societies ... Extensive acculturation to the values and customs of Europe was expected of the colonized.”³ There was never any discussion among German settlement experts that there might be any value to develop a “Hellenized” population of German farmers that incorporated, appropriated, or enmeshed any ideals or practices of Polish culture. Assimilation was to go one way only in the German East. Finally, following from this last point comes the third criteria, that the colonizer take on an “ideological” understanding of their mission as a “civilizing” mission.⁴ This was openly stated by German settlement experts. The German settlement program for its eastern space was, by Osterhammel’s definition, a story of colonialism.

The European Union’s farm policy is today replete with elaborate farm subsidies, tariffs, and cheap farm credit to support “family farms.” It is, in fact, the single most substantial field of expenditure in the EU. In the very rhetoric employed to justify such enormous outlays of capital, one hears rather familiar language concerning the importance of protecting the hearty European peasant farmer from the ravages of modern industrial farming and free markets, alongside invocations of maintaining “Kulturlandschaften” and the German “Heimat.” In crucial ways, the legacy of Max Sering is alive and well in Europe today.⁵

After Max Sering’s death, his wife Anna Sering continued to live at Luciusstr. 9 for a few years. In 1943, however, after packing up and sending most of Max Sering’s papers into the safe keeping of the federal archival system, she and her daughter’s family made the move south, to the safer environs of Munich. This was indeed in the nick of time, as the house, and its world famous Sering Institut, were destroyed during an Allied bombing raid shortly thereafter.⁶ While Sering’s academic papers sit today in the *Bundesarchiv* in Koblenz, and although some personal effects, including photographs, travelled south with the family, it was during this confusing and destructive period that, much of the personal correspondence of Max Sering disappeared. It has thus been difficult to delve deeply into the personality of the man at the centre of our story. Although many

³ Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, trans. Shelley L. Frisch (Princeton: Mark Wiener, 1997), 15–16.

⁴ Osterhammel, *Colonialism*, 16.

⁵ For a good overview, which openly states that “What used to be written off as agricultural romanticism is now finding more and more support,” see Antonio Piccinini and Margaret Loseby, *Agricultural Policies in Europe and the USA: Farmers between Subsidies and the Market* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), xvii.

⁶ Constantin von Dietze, “Gedenkrede auf Max Sering anlässlich der 100. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages. Gehalten auf der Tagung der Forschungsgesellschaft für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie in München am 21. Juni 1957,” *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 6 (1958): 1, fn. 1.

rejected his ideas, especially the *Junker*, it does appear that almost everyone who met him liked him. He was an extraordinarily hard-working, serious, and concerned academic. He believed what he believed with great passion and conviction. He was a cultural chauvinist, but he did not see non-German populations as dispensable. Sering felt profoundly that his approach to agrarian economics and settlement would result in the greatest happiness for the most people in his homeland, a homeland that could include assimilated Poles.

But what was the cost of this system of beliefs to German, and world history? What Sering wanted, what he tried to create, was not what settler colonialism became in East Central Europe in its final, most violent phase. Sering desired to fashion a world modelled upon what he and many around the globe, then and now, consider to be perhaps the greatest example of a successful “Great Power.” Here are the words of Sering’s acolyte, Constantin von Dietze, writing on the 100th anniversary of Sering’s birth:

What impressed Sering the most in America was the huge settlement process that opened up a whole continent, with the Homestead Law of 1862 and its prospect of free land ... Here Max Sering experienced the mighty building of a new empire. He put all his intellectual and moral power to use the knowledge he gained there for his own country, with regard to its foreign policy position among the empires, its economic development and its social order.⁷

It was the scale and speed of North American “inner colonization” that was new and impressive but, otherwise, the global history of settler colonialism was rather old. Empires had conquered peoples and settled on their land since the dawn of civilization. In the era of nationalism, however, there was something new, the idea of homogenization. Difference was to be eliminated, by assimilation or removal. While genocide was part and parcel of global imperialism in the nineteenth century, arguably also on the American western frontier that Sering first visited in 1883, his emphasis on a nationalist settler colonial program in the German East accelerated German policy along a trajectory that would ultimately see all the violence of the overseas colonial world occur right in the heart of Europe, in what was perhaps the most radical version of colonization humanity ever endured.

⁷ Dietze, “Gedenkrede,” 6.