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***German Colonialism: A Short History*. By Sebastian Conrad .
Translated by Sorcha O'Hagan . Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press. 2012. Pp. xii + 233. Cloth \$80.00. ISBN 978-1107008144.
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Lora Wildenthal, Rice University

This is the indispensable handbook on German colonialism. Everyone working in that area already knows that, as this book appeared in German in 2008. To everyone else, if you seek an efficient and completely reliable orientation to the facts and issues of the German colonial empire and German colonialism more broadly defined, consult this book.

What makes Conrad's treatment so good? From the very first sentences, he poses questions of proportion, contextualization, and comparison. For the German colonial empire, a historical episode readily dismissed as short-lived and insignificant, posing these questions clears the path for systematic thinking about what is and is not important, to whom. Using compact references to old and new historiography, Conrad makes vivid the stakes of how he narrates this handbook. He places the German colonial empire and Germany itself in the contexts of other metropolises, other colonial empires, and globalization more generally (e.g., pp. 12, 150). "Globalization" can be a vague and irritating word, but it is well chosen here. Germans went everywhere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in all kinds of roles, and so to invoke a wide range of economic, migratory, and cultural patterns as the setting is to help the reader avoid foreshortening what can be analyzed fruitfully as both German and colonial. Conrad describes individual German colonies in sufficient detail as to indicate their distinctness within the German colonial empire as well as their similarities to their own neighboring regions outside that empire. Comparison, Conrad points out in several ways, may well show us sameness, given that transnational phenomena were often staged in their day as supposedly distinctively national phenomena (p. 129). Conrad therefore prefers to examine an event within one era and transnationally, rather than present the event as one element in a long, strictly German time line (e.g., p. 17).

Conrad applies a broad definition of colonialism, but not so broad as to become arbitrary. There can be “colonial interactions” outside formal empire; “colonial interactions” are “characterized” by these criteria: “imperial and colonized societies (1) have different socio-political orders, (2) have different pre-histories and (3) are differentiated, in the minds of the colonizers” (pp. 13–14). This means that such diverse phenomena as German settlement in Brazil and Nazi empire in eastern Europe can be analyzed as colonial. This also means that the question of colonialism's impact on the German metropole—economic or cultural—does not need to be answered solely with data from Germany's colonies. Germans' colonial thinking was formed by the existence of other colonial empires; by Germans' direct participation in those other empires; by Germans' [End Page 422] efforts to exert power in regions they did not formally administer; and, yes, by German colonies and particularly the memorialization of that colonial rule in the wake of Germany's unique form of decolonization. Altogether, Conrad's analytical insights are useful even to those who are interested in colonialism generally, and not necessarily the specific German case.

In fact, the English edition has some improvements over the 2008 German edition: additions to the text itself, illustrations, and a bibliographical essay. The illustrations are numerous and carefully annotated so that they make a genuine contribution to the points in the text. The bibliographical essay at the end is more useful than what would by now be a blizzard of individual references. Really, on every page one can find an invitation to further investigation of matters that neither Conrad nor anyone else has even necessarily followed up, and some tips on the way. Such new research may or may not draw upon the definitions and frameworks he suggests, but it must at least be cognizant of them.

Even though it is indispensable, I don't imagine that many instructors will assign it in undergraduate classes. It is very information-dense, and other, monographic treatments offer more fleshed-out arguments and narrative drama. The recent books by Andrew Zimmerman or David Ciarlo, or essays in the forthcoming Bradley Naranch-Geoff Eley collection or other edited volumes on German colonialism, would draw students into the subject matter more effectively. After all, Conrad's book is a reference work. But it is so well written that one might well be tempted.