CHAPTER 2

War, Defeat, and the Urgency of Lebensraum: German Imperialism from the Second Empire to the Third Reich

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Introduction

In August 1914, Imperial Germany declared war on France, the Russian Empire, and Great Britain, convinced that defeating its neighbours at that moment would eliminate its long-term strategic disadvantage. Despite a century-long debate as to which belligerent was most responsible for the outbreak of World War I, the competition and paranoia among the European powers leading up to the war makes it difficult to blame a single party for a global catastrophe. Arguing against the still prevalent view that Germany was most responsible, Christopher Clark argues compellingly that the explosive nationalism in the Balkans so intensified the rivalries among the great powers that each was willing to risk war. Yet Germany’s emergence as an economic and military great power in the decades after unification, and its desire for an enlarged empire as testimony to that fact, no doubt contributed to a more competitive continental and global rivalry. That rivalry in turn spawned the dread of encirclement by enemies that the German attack in 1914 sought to remedy.

The imperialism of the Kaiserreich consisted of two distinct but overlapping dimensions, the first maritime, the second continental. The need for commercial and trading interests for markets, raw materials, and labour was a prime motivation in the first case, in addition to the particular objectives of cultural emissaries such as missionaries and geographers. The second embraced desires both for an informal continental empire [Mitteleuropa] that Germany would dominate economically, and for territorial expansion into Eastern Europe. Until the Kaiser removed the ‘Iron Chancellor’ Otto von Bismarck in 1890, continental expansion was not in play because Bismarck did not want to endanger the gains of unification by antagonising Germany’s neighbours. Yet by the first decade of the twentieth century, expansion gained more traction.

1 Clark 2012.
Militant nationalist pressure groups, most notably the Pan-German League, which because of its connections occupied the centre of the radical nationalist movement, obsessed over Germany’s population deficit in comparison with Slavs. Although the Pan-Germans continued to promote overseas colonialism, they now advocated living space in the East to provide land for German settlers, who otherwise would have emigrated to the Americas. Despite the diverse threads of German imperialism, a common theme united them. In addition to creating a world power, empire would triumph over a history of division among Germans and vulnerability to foreign intervention.

Since the end of the Second World War, historians have struggled to identify the roots of the Nazi catastrophe, especially since the early 1960s when the Hamburg scholar Fritz Fischer linked the imperialist war plans of the Second Empire and those of the Third Reich. Teleological notions of continuity associated with Fischer and his successors have fallen out of favour as historians have narrowed their focus to the First World War as decisive in radicalising German expansionism. Nevertheless, the rediscovery of German imperialism and colonialism before World War I as topics for scholarly discussion has once more put the continuity question on the table. Jürgen Zimmerer’s attempt to link the genocidal violence of the Herero War in German South West Africa from 1904 to 1907 with that of the Third Reich indicates that the desire for a broader optic through which to examine the Third Reich remains palpable. The historical connections between National Socialism and the more distant past deserve attention, especially the dream of an enlarged empire that would embrace all Germans. If dreams of continental living space during the Kaiserreich were less potent than they became after the Great War, the racist biopolitics of the Pan-German League envisioned the elimination of the

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2 See the argument of the Pan-German leader Heinrich Claß 1914, p. 440, who looked to the Medieval German settlements in the East as his model. As Liulevicius 2009, p. 3 notes, defining the geographical boundaries of the ‘East’ has eluded precision, but it potentially included Poland, the Baltic lands, Ukraine, Russia, the Czech lands and the Balkans, as well as the eastern Prussian provinces of Imperial Germany.

3 There is a large literature on German imperialism. For a superb summary and analysis of recent scholarship, see Conrad, 2008.


5 See Alexander Anievas’s essay in this volume, ‘Marxist Theory and the Origins of the First World War’, for a thoroughgoing critique of the scholarship and a sophisticated theoretical ‘way out’ of the difficulties embedded in previous explanations for the war’s outbreak.