Les camps de concentration nazis comme phénomène singulier à la lumière de la critique post-coloniale

A post-colonial interpretation of the Nazi concentration camps has become fashionable in recent years. Post-colonial critics implicitly, sometimes explicitly, aim to remove the Holocaust from its central position in memory culture, by pointing to other genocides and in particular to the murderous record of the imperial powers. In effect, this is a zero-sum exercise, in which recognition of one historical phenomenon displaces another. In the case of concentration camps, reference is made to the German camps in colonial South-West Africa and their role in the genocide of the Herero and Nama. It is usually based on the notion of Auschwitz as *pars pro toto*, with the genocide of the Jews assumed to be the prime function of the camps. The reality of the Nazi camps, as all of us here know, was far more complex, more varied, and subject to dynamic shift in function over the twelve years of their existence.

Although there are self-evidently vast differences between, say, French colonial warfare in Algeria or British warfare in India, and Nazi genocide, there are undeniably structural similarities. Guerrilla warfare waged by liberation movements had much in common with partisan resistance to Nazi rule in the Second World War; Nazi measures of repression were not dissimilar to imperial counter-insurgency. The British military strategist Charles Callwell, in his seminal book of 1896, *Small Wars*, praised General Thomas Robert Bugeaud's policy of 'absolute war' to crush the Algerian resistance in the 1840s as 'the right way … of dealing with an antagonist who adopts the guerrilla mode of war'.[1] Summary executions, the killing of unarmed civilians, and other atrocities were accepted as necessary elements of the absolute war strategy.[2] Callwell approved of the French military in Algeria, who, 'regardless of the maxim, "Les reprêsailles sont toujours inutiles", dealt very severely with the smouldering disaffection of the conquered territory for years after Abd el Kader's power was gone, and their procedure succeeded.'[3]

Not only extreme cases such as Bugeaud's strategy in Algeria, but in general colonial expansion by European powers was accompanied by violent invasion, asymmetric warfare

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[1] Marie-Cecile Thoral, 'French Colonial Counter-Insurgency: General Bugeaud and the Conquest of Algeria, 1840-47', British Journal of Military History, 1/2 (2015), pp. 8-27, 9, citing Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed., London: HMSO, 1906; 1st ed. London 1896, p. 128.

[2] Marie-Cecile Thoral, 'French Colonial Counter-Insurgency: General Bugeaud and the Conquest of Algeria, 1840-47', British Journal of Military History, 1/2 (2015), pp. 8-27, 9.

[3] Callwell, *Small Wars*, p. 148. In fact, General Bugeaud's counter-insurgency in Algeria was more complex and more flexible than the historical consensus has hitherto allowed. Marie-Cécile Thoral has shown that alongside 'material warfare against civilians' he deployed 'psychological warfare … and a policy of conciliation and cooperation aimed at winning the support of the local population', a strategy whose 'effectiveness and modernity is undeniable.' Thoral, 'French Colonial Counter-Insurgency', p. 27.

against inferior opponents, and brutal measures of repression to ensure 'security'. International law enshrined in the Geneva and Hague conventions between 1864 and 1907, with the intention of humanizing warfare and protecting non-combatants, specifically excluded colonial peoples. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the British lawyers Thomas J. Lawrence, John Westlake, and Lassa Oppenheim shaped a legal system that sanctioned imperial conquest. James Lorimer, the foremost theoretician of the *Institut de droit international,* argued in 1884 that 'only European States merited full recognition … "barbaric" and "savage" communities merited only a partial … recognition'.[4]

If we move from colonial counter-insurgency in general to the concentration camps in particular, there appears to be an obvious continuity from their use in the colonial warfare of the *fin de siècle* and the Nazi camps. Hannah Arendt famously postulated such a connection, but merely in suggestive terms, leaving it to others to trace the evidence. Some have argued there is not only an echo from 1900 to 1933, but also a causal connection. Isabel Hull draws a direct connnection between German military culture in South-West Africa and the mass destruction and death perpetrated under the Third Reich.[5]

Jürgen Zimmerer's book title *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?* (2011) summarized his thesis that the genocide of the Herero in concentration camps was 'paradigmatic for the Nazi war of extermination', starting a path that culminated in the Holocaust.[6] Dirk Moses, the leading post-colonial critic of Germany's memory culture, claims that 'Germany in particular is the exemplar of an experience [all the European powers] underwent in varying degrees of intensity. It is the country where the process occurred most radically.'[7] Another post-colonial theorist, Anne Berg, writes: 'Rather than an unprecedented *Sonderfall*, Nazism introduced into Europe, adapted, and modernized practices that hitherto had been directed almost exclusively against nonwhite populations in European-dominated colonies or settler states.'[8]

It is true that the Nazi camps set up in 1933 were anything but *sui generis*. The evidence for their colonial origin, however, whether in South-West Africa or other colonial

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[4] (On Lorimer): M. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-19608* (2002), at 70-71. (On Westlake et al.): A. Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (2007), at 144, and Fisch, *Die europäische Expansion*, at 307-308. See also A. Orakhelashvili, 'The Idea of European International Law', 17 *EJIL* (2006), at 318-321.

[5] Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp. 324-333, esp. 333.

[6] Gerwarth and Malinowski, 'Hannah Arendt's Ghosts', pp. 282-283. Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*, Münster, 2011.

[7] A. Dirk Moses, 'Conceptual blockages and definitional dilemmas in the "Racial Century": Genocides of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust', *Patterns of Prejudice* 36 (2002), pp. 7-36, cited in Gerwarth and Malinowski, 'Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz', *Central European History* 42 (2009), pp. 279-300, 280.

[8] Anne Berg, 'The *Gespenst* of Postcolonial Theory', *Central European History* 56 (2023), pp. 273-277, 276.

wars, is tenuous. Possibly there was a dim, second-hand imagining of the colonial camps. But the context was a memory of the camps of the First World War which many Germans experienced. The prime function of the Nazi camps in 1933 was brutal political repression, to crush any opposition. It was their transformation in the 1930s into sites of social and racial terror that made them unique.

By contrast, 'Nazi warfare, characterized by the readiness to commit massive war crimes and genocide, differed fundamentally from the war of 1914', was *sui generis*.[9] That applied especially to the development of concentration camps, radicalized beyond recognition from those of 1914-18, transformed into sites of the mass incarceration of elites of occupied Europe, ruthless exploitation of labour regardless of survival, and industrialized mass murder.

Surely, this made the Nazi camps singular? Thirty years ago, history as a discipline was under sustained attack by postmodernist theory, which declared that since all historical documents were a form of literary representation, the Holocaust could not be objectively 'proved'; ultimately, all history was 'an invention, or fiction, of historians themselves'.[10] This 'relativized' the Nazi dictatorship, and laid the ground for the denial of its singularity. But do we really need the concept 'singularity'? If it means that a phenomenon is 'beyond history', or 'beyond explanation', my answer is no. If it means it is unique, then, in order to prove what is after all a platitude, comparison is required, a legitimate tool of historical analysis.

Michael Wildt has written that the Holocaust is in any case too complex to be explained by 'singularity'. For if not only Jews, but also Soviet prisoners of war, Sinti and Roma, and all those defined as 'racially inferior' were targeted, 'singularity' becomes meaningless. Instead of isolating the genocide of the Jews as 'singular', Wildt proposes treating the Holocaust as the product of the entangled history of violence in the context of imperialism, racism, and a radicalizing dynamic of warfare.[11] This seems to me to be eminently reasonable.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book, *Homo Sacer*, influential in cultural studies and much appreciated by students seeking a systematic approach, comes from a different direction. Rather than pretend that the historical sources about the Nazi camps are mere texts or fictions, he attempts to reduce 'the camp' to its essence, to explain it as the 'nomos of modernity'. He draws parallels between democracy and totalitarianism, between

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[9] Alan Kramer, 'German War Crimes 1914 and 1941: The Question of Continuity', in Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp, eds., *Imperial Germany Revisited. Continuing Debates and New Perspectives* (New York, 2011 [German ed. 2009]), pp. 239-250, 248.
[10] Raphael Samuel, quoted in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History,* p. 7.
[11] Michael Wildt, 'Was heißt: Singularität des Holocaust?', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 19 (2022), pp. 128-147, 138-143.

Nazi violence and that of other modern states; indeed, National Socialism is the 'etiological paradigm for all forms of government-sanctioned human-rights violation.'[12] Delighting in provocative generalization, Agamben equates the internment of migrants in Italy and *zones d'attente* in French airports for passengers seeking asylum with Nazi concentration camps, positing a general 'creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction'.[13] Such flat reasoning unwittingly proves that comparison is not equation.

Post-colonial critiques are not dissimilar, but go one step further. While referring to historical cases, they elide the distinctions between colonial violence and fascism, and in effect decontextualize both. They reduce complexity to simple slogans. After 1945, Britain and France faced accusations from the liberation movements in Kenya and Algeria that their captured fighters were subjected to torture and illegal killing in internment camps. In the British case, the crimes against the Mau Mau were denied and hushed up at the time. Recent research has estimated that possibly over 200,000 mainly Kikuyu suspects were interned in camps; torture and forced labour were standard practice. The author Caroline Elkins published a sensationalist book under the suggestive title *Britain's Gulag,* accusing Britain of genocide in Kenya, a claim which cannot be sustained.[14]

Did the French run concentration camps in Algeria, 1954-1962? The forced resettlement of millions and the horrendous death toll of 300,000 made it one of the most murderous decolonization wars in history. But calling the *centres de regroupement* 'concentration camps', as the FLN did, and using the term 'genocide', as the Algerian president Bouteflika did as recently as 2007, was an exaggeration calculated for polemical effect.[15] Nevertheless, one can reasonably categorize the *centres d'hébergement* and the *centres de triage*, where torture was routinely used against some 10,000 detainees, as concentration camps, without equating them with Auschwitz.[16]

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[12] Ichiro Takayoshi, 'Can philosophy explain Nazi violence? Giorgio Agamben and the problem of the "historico-philosophical" method', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13 (2011), pp. 47-66, 49-50.
[13] *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, 1998; Italian edn., Turin, 1995), p. 174. See the incisive critique of Agamben by Ichiro Takayoshi, 'Can philosophy explain Nazi violence? Giorgio Agamben and the problem of the "historico-philosophical" method', *Journal of Genocide Research* 13 (2011), pp. 47-66.
[14] Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005); Bethwell A. Ogot, review article, 'Britain's Gulag', *Journal of African History* 46 (2005), pp. 493–505, pp. 496–7, 501; John Blacker, 'The Demography of Mau Mau: Fertility and Mortality in Kenya in the 1950s: A Demographer's Viewpoint', *African Affairs* 106 (2007), pp. 205–27.
[15] Feichtinger and Malinowski, '"Eine Million Algerier"', esp. pp. 108–9; Evans, *Algeria*, pp. 337–8.
[16] Moritz Feichtinger, '"Concentration camps in all but name?" Zwangsumsiedlung und Counterinsurgency, 1950-1970', in: Bettina Greiner and Alan Kramer, *Welt der Lager. Zur "Erfolgsgeschichte" einer Institution*, Hamburg, 2013, pp. 302-327, 316; Cf. Raphaelle Branche, *La torture e l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1952-1962*, Paris 2001.

Still, it must be asked if the post-colonial critique of a western (in particular German) obsession with the singularity of the Nazi genocide is justified.

The reaction of the world to the civilization rupture of the Holocaust was a historically formative moment. It had a profound effect on international human rights law and on the awareness of the destructive nature of racism. For all the differences between capitalism and communism, there was a basic anti-fascist consensus. It was entirely logical that colonial liberation movements and newly independent states should measure their past imperial masters by the standards of liberty, equality, and human rights. For too long, imperial apologists defended the 'civilizing mission', and the fundamentally criminal nature of colonial conquest and rule went unrecognized; outbursts of violent repression were explained away as exceptions necessary for the 'pacification' of territory.

Recently, the respected scholar Achille Mbembe was criticized in Germany for viewing the Holocaust as part of the history of colonialism, for declaring the apartheid regime in South Africa and the annihilation of the Jews to be two emblematic manifestations of the same 'separation mania'.[17] His detractors claimed that he was 'relativizing' the Holocaust, thus denying its singularity. The debate became politically charged, involving the stigmatization of Mbembe. Especially since the Hamas pogrom of 7 October 2023 angry polemics have drowned out the quieter voices of scholars who point to the necessity of 'multidirectional memory'.[18]

Yet post-colonial theorists in turn exaggerate in claiming to bring a 'new prominence to matters of colony and empire'.[19] For more than a century, there have been those in the metropole who investigated and condemned the colonial system — Emily Hobhouse in relation to the concentration camps in the South African War; Edmond Morel, who denounced King Leopold's Congo atrocities; Albert Londres with his reports on forced labour and incarceration in the French empire in the 1920s; or Michel Rocard in Algeria in 1959. These were no 'post-colonialists', content with symbolic gestures of outrage — they effected real shifts of policy that saved countless lives.

History provides endless examples of colonial exploitation, enslavement, and mass murder. The fact that non-European elites mobilize political capital by pointing to European double standards does not delegitimize this perspective. It is essential to comprehend the Nazi state's character as (among other things) a colonizing empire, and not to treat the concentration camp system as an island outside history. Comparison with the Japanese camp

[17] https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achille_Mbembe, accessed 11 October 2025.
[18] Cf. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
[19] Cf. Leela Ghandi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

system in the Second World War is illuminating. In the West, we recall only the Allied prisoners of war who suffered terribly, yet the world, including Asia, has forgotten the fate of millions of Asians drafted into forced labour with great cruelty – ten million alone on Java – causing mass death in the name of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

There remains a fundamental distinction between the intentional, planned organization of the genocide of all 11 million Jews, the goal of the Wannsee conference, and even the worst colonial massacres. There is no colonial equivalent to the machinery of Nazi mass murder, a combination of modern bureaucracy, long-distance trans-continental transport, and killing factories. And there are no colonial precursors from which such a system was derived.[20]

As we have seen, the polemical equation of colonial repression with the Nazi camps and genocide has a long history. We live in a world which since the 1950s can be termed ‘post-colonial’; the poisonous legacy of European, Japanese, and American imperialism will be with us for a long time, as will that of Chinese and Russian imperialism. Perhaps post-colonial theory, ignoring its polemical barbs, is a useful reminder to combat selective memory and to integrate the global history of imperialism with our analysis of the Nazi system, while employing rigorous historical comparative methods to identify distinctions, learning processes, and the power of violent fantasies.

[20] I thank Stephan Malinowski for his inspiring argument on this.