

Book Review

Steven Press, *Blood and Diamonds: German Imperial Ambitions in Africa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 336. \$35.00 (Cloth).

In *Blood and Diamonds*, Steven Press examines the history of the German colony of Southwest Africa (Namibia) from its founding in 1884 to Germany's loss of its overseas colonial possessions at the end of the First World War. In examining the history of German Southwest Africa, Press places that history within the larger context of the emerging international diamond trade during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Press also seeks to demonstrate that, contrary to the conventional historiography of the German colonial empire, at least in the case of Southwest Africa, the German colonial empire was of greater economic significance than has generally been considered the case by historians, and that the colony's role in the international diamond trade provides significant insight into that economic importance. By examining Southwest Africa and its role in the global diamond trade, Press further seeks to reassess Germany's overseas empire, to shed new light on German imperialism, and to reimagine Germany's global role in four ways: 1) genocidal violence; 2) the uneven distribution among Germans of colonial loot; 3) the impact of German colonial economics both transnationally and globally; and finally, 4) the connection between German colonial violence and an everyday process of consumption that predominantly emerged in the United States (10).

The book is arranged topically, each chapter providing an analysis of a key aspect of German Southwest Africa's history, such as the acquisition and establishment of the colony in the early 1880s, the discovery of diamonds in the colony in 1908, the exploitation of the indigenous African population, the relationship between the colony and the German metropole, and the colony's importance within the international diamond trade.

The unifying thread that runs through the book's chapters is the role of the international diamond trade in German Southwest Africa's history and development and the colony's role in the German empire. It was the discovery of diamonds in 1908 that transformed the colony's economic significance for Germany, establishing it as a

central part of the international diamond trade, increasingly in competition with the most important diamond consortium of the time, De Beers.

One of the more interesting aspects of the book is Press's analysis of the diamond trade. Press demonstrates that diamonds are an "invented product" (6). As a natural resource, diamonds are of limited use; their real importance lies rather in their use in jewelry, particularly engagement rings, and their importance as a marker of wealth and social status. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, diamonds came to play a particularly important role in the developing culture of materialism and consumption that was emerging in a rapidly industrializing United States. This development, Press argues, played a key role in European imperialism in general and, more specifically, in German imperialism. It was, Press argues, the almost insatiable desire of the American consumer for diamonds that transformed German Southwest Africa into such an important colony both within the German Empire, as well as within the global economy.

The discovery of diamonds in 1908 came soon after the genocidal campaign of the German colonial authorities against the Herero and Nama peoples carried out between 1904 and 1908. Having decimated these two indigenous populations, German colonial authorities now turned to the indigenous population of Obamvoland, located in the northern part of the colony. Lured to work in the diamond fields, workers from Obamvoland faced cruel, harsh, and exploitative conditions, echoing the campaigns against the Herero and Nama. In addition to his analysis of the indigenous Africans living in the colony, Press also discusses various other groups active in Southwest Africa, such as colonial officials, smugglers, and fortune seekers. Another topic that occurs throughout the book is the harsh living conditions in the colony, such as extreme temperatures and a lack of sufficient fresh water.

The treatment of the indigenous population by the Germans and the issue of continuity from this treatment to the Holocaust has long been a topic of German historiography; see for example Isabel Hull's *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Press expands on this historiography by examining the role of the diamond trade in this history of violence and exploitation. However, the most significant aspect of the analysis by Press is his reevaluation of the economic importance of German colonial empire. Press does this by analyzing the complex web of relationships between the German colonial administration, the German Colonial Office, the commercial interests in Germany that financed the diamond trade, and the role and importance of the diamond trade within the larger global economy. In examining these relationships, Press reassesses the importance of the German colonial empire. Press notes that historians have been misled into thinking that "the economic reach of German colonialism was brief and minimal" (231). Press, however, demonstrates that "by tracing flows of labor, violence, capital, politics, and commodity chains related to German diamonds in

Southwest Africa...German colonialism became entangled in ways that made a deep impact not only at home, on the relationship between the German Empire and the world” (231). For example, Press analyzes the role of the diamond trade in southwest Africa and its role within the global economy, most particularly the emerging market for diamonds as a commodity, as engagement rings, in the United States.

In *Blood and Diamonds*, Steven Press presents a well-researched, well written, and engaging history of the German colony of Southwest Africa. In so doing, he contributes to the already existing historiography of German colonial violence in Southwest Africa, while at the same time challenging long-standing assumptions about the economic importance of German colonialism. Although a serious academic monograph, this book is accessible to non-academics and thus would be well suited for intermediate and upper division history courses. The topical nature of each chapter would allow for a narrower focus on certain issues addressed in the book. Likewise, the wide range of issues addressed by Press would allow for an examination of such topics as the role of the German colonial empire in the emerging global economy at the turn of the twentieth century, the relationship between colony and metropole, or the connection between colonial violence and twentieth century genocide, particularly the Holocaust.

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