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Introduction by J.P. Short, University of Georgia

More than one historian of German Southwest Africa has eyed the diamond strike of 1908 and dreamed of telling a rich tale of greed and folly in the desert. Steven Press has finally told that tale, capturing the whole range of desperate fantasy, then frenzy and fraud: all the scheming and violence and calculation at the heart of it. It is a story of only a few short years, from 1908 to the collapse of German colonial power with the coming of World War I in 1914. But Press carefully unfolds every significant aspect of it: the diamond rush itself, its southern African context, colonial labor policy, global—and especially American—diamond markets, finance, cartels, and German politics. Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa is at once a colonial, an economic, and a labor history; also a German, a Namibian, and a global one. It would not be too much to say that he...leaves no stone unturned.

The origins of this study were already visible, faintly, in Press’s 2017 book, Rogue Empires, which discussed private, corporate colonialism and sovereignty transactions in the Scramble for Africa.¹ The Bremen merchant-adventurer Adolf Lüderitz, who in 1882 was angling to secure rights to Angra Pequeña, a rare natural harbor on the coast of southwestern Africa, appears in that book. The perceptions of the much larger diplomatic and political forces at play led a skeptical German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to grant protection to the ill-starred “Lüderitzland,” gateway to the implacable Namib desert and core of an eventual German Southwest Africa. Press takes the story from there, re-examining in Blood and Diamonds the succeeding twenty-five years of colonial history in light of the diamond boom at their bitter end. The essential narrative is familiar: the “swindler” (19) Lüderitz pushing “chimerical” (49) plans before dying “in obscurity” (22), followed by a long chain of more deceit, failure, and backroom deals uneasily intertwined with the grim determination to wrest a settler colony from the arid land and the Herero, San, and Nama people who lived there.

And then came the discovery of the diamonds, which changed everything, even if in Blood and Diamonds, it often seems that plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. Looking back in the narrative from 1908 to the early 1880s, Press surveys the whole history of the colony as a kind of prelude to the strike. Diamonds were always the driving force—in founding the colony, expanding it, and destroying its people. Their significance, as discussed in Rogue Empires, was linked to the great diamond rush in South Africa ten years earlier.² And yet, the talk of diamonds was surrounded by uncertainty, the taint of rumor and lies, as against the cold, shrewd truths of Bismarck. Press writes that in seeking state protection, “Lüderitz told yet more lies, writing to Bismarck about troves of minerals he knew lay buried along the southwest African coast—even though neither he, nor any professional engineer, had yet been there.”³ Years of rumor and empty talk followed. And Press’s account does not suggest any urgency on the part of individuals or institutions in getting to the bottom of it all. Some twenty years into the history of the colony, in the face of further still unconfirmed, scattered reports of diamonds, colonial officials declined the offers of engineers to find them (49). As late as the winter of 1908, just months before the diamond strike, the listless, much-maligned German Colonial Corporation for Southwest Africa, which was exhausted by the stagnation of the colonial economy, managed to rouse itself from its torpor sufficiently to actually sell off its mining rights to the German state—only to claw them back as soon as diamonds materialized soon thereafter (70-71).

The contradictions and ambiguities surrounding the story of diamonds in Southwest Africa before 1908 are important here because of the extraordinary status Press attributes to the strike itself for the larger history of Wilhelmine Germany and its globalizing and imperialist project. Press argues strongly for an economic history of the German colonial empire, one that takes into account not only the conventional metropolitan balance

² Press, Rogue Empires, 139-40, 145.
³ Press, Rogue Empires, 135.
sheet, asking whether empire made any money in global exports, and exploitation on the ground, in this case in Southwest Africa, but also commercial and financial connections globally. He rightly rejects the assumption that “colonial economics existed in a linear relationship between metropole and colony” (4). Instead, the aim is “to evaluate the impact of German colonial economics transnationally and globally, rather than strictly in relation to the German metropole” (10). If Bismarck’s ironic map of Africa showed, as he dismissively put it, France and Russia, with Germany wedged in between, Press’s includes Lüderitz Bay and the Namib, Cape Town and Kimberly, to be sure, and also New York and London and Antwerp: the network of labor, diplomacy, trade, and finance that moved diamonds around the world.

The reviewers in this roundtable, Saima Nakuti Ashipala, Jack Guenther, Jean-Michel Johnston, and Sean Andrew Wempe, all of whom are historians of transnational, imperial, and postcolonial Germany, take a keen interest in this economic approach and welcome the bold claims Press makes. This is a clear pattern in the reviews, suggesting the broader contemporary resonance of a more materialist account of colonialism. The chapters on the global diamond market, colonial labor history, the colonial stock bubble, the singular cartel structure in Germany, and the ultimate collapse of the whole business are especially vivid and compelling in this regard. But it could be just as compelling to explore a bit further the question of just what the particular form of “colonial economics” that is represented by diamonds can tell us. Is it only the strike, the sudden riches, the rapid animation of a machinery of brutal exploitation that, retrospectively, shines a light on the economic underpinnings of empire? Is the older story of commercial fantasists and failures not somehow integral to this, if we want to say something broadly about colonial economic history, or even the history of German capitalism? The idea that colonialism is driven by economics only where colonies are economically “rational” and “profitable” is misleading. In this account the diamond strike stands for German colonialism more generally, and certainly for the history of Southwest Africa. Press’s book, he says, “charts the rise and fall of Germany’s colonial diamonds as a means to reassess Germany’s overseas empire” (3). Diamonds are a “catalyst for German formal colonisation,” and even, finally, the answer to that ageing historical riddle: why, against so much resistance, was there a German colonial empire at all? (9). It would be interesting to reflect on a conception of colonial economic history that is sufficiently capacious to encompass Dernburg’s ruthless rationalization of diamond production and the “irrational”: diamonds, yes, and, less spectacularly, bêche-de-mer fisheries (plugged into the Chinese market) or copra plantations in the Western Pacific, but also failed cotton cultivation in East Africa and chartered companies courting bankruptcy and unprofitable railroads and those mirage-like colonial markets, ever receding into the future.

However, the book does not depend on this link, compelling as the overall problem is, and might be stronger without it. Steven Press has scoured the history of Southwest Africa with all the care of a prospector, and found diamonds where no one had found them before. The book may itself betray a trace of Diamantenfieber, but who would protest? As the reviews for this roundtable suggest, it’s definitely contagious.
Contributors:

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Saima Nakuti Ashipala is a postdoctoral fellow with the International Studies Group at the University of the Free State. She was awarded a PhD in Africa Studies from the University of the Free State for her thesis, “International Diplomacy and Big Business in Namibia: the Case of the Rössing Uranium Mine.” She is currently working on publishing her monography based on her PhD dissertation. Her research focuses on diplomatic, mining, and labour history in southern Africa. Her publications include: Christopher R. Hill and Saima Nakuti Ashipala, “‘Follow the Yellowcake Road’: Historical Geographies of Namibian Uranium from the Rössing Mine,” Journal of Historical Social Research (forthcoming); Ashipala, “Technical and Vocational Education and the Place of Indigenous Labour in the Mining Industry of Namibia, 1970-1990,” Journal of Southern African Studies, 47:1 (2021) 127-142; Ashipala, “Sovereignty over Diamond Resources: (Re)-negotiating Colonial Contracts in Southern Africa,” in Cultural Sovereignty beyond the Modern State: Space, Objects and Media, edited by Gregor Feindt, Bernhard Gissibl and Johannes Paulmann (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021): 65-86.

Jack Guenther is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Princeton University. He is currently completing a dissertation titled “Globalization and International Order after Empire: Hamburg, Germany, 1888-1974.” He also works on German commercial interests in Latin America during the Wilhelmine period (1888-1918) and on the history of liberalism in Germany.

Jean-Michel Johnston is Lecturer in Modern European History at Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge. His most recent publication is Networks of Modernity: Germany in the Age of the Telegraph, 1830-1880 (Oxford, 2021), and he is now working on three projects: a history of the communications revolution across Western Europe; an investigation into the role of infrastructure in the collapse of the German Empire; and a history of the Armenian diaspora in nineteenth-century Europe.

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On 28 May 2021, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated that Germany was “pleased and indeed grateful” to “have agreed with Namibia on how to deal with the darkest chapter of our shared history.”¹ The “darkest chapter” refers to the atrocities committed by Germany against the Herero and Nama people between 1904 and 1908, which Germany was now prepared to call “a genocide” in keeping with “today’s perspective.”² That perspective stems from the definition of genocide provided in the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defines genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”³ Of great interest, however, and particularly with respect to the book under review, is Maas’s omission of the chapter following the “darkest chapter,” namely that of the discovery of diamonds in Southwest Africa, which colonial Germany claimed as “its” own.

These dual chapters form the focus of Steven Press’s awe-inspiring book, Blood and Diamonds: Germany’s Imperial Ambitions in Africa, which was published in June 2021, mere days after Germany’s apology for genocide. Blood and Diamonds stresses the importance of colonial economics in Germany’s shared history with Namibia. Regarding the negotiations between Germany and Namibia, for instance, Press writes that although the two sides have been focused on an acknowledgement and apology for the genocide, colonial economics, and specifically the history of diamonds, should play a central role in debates on reparations. This, Press argues, is because “highly lucrative diamond deposits existed on Southwest African land [that was] stolen through treaty deceit by Germans in the 1880s …[and] …as Germans continue to discuss reconciliation with Namibia, they would do well to make reparations that account for this economic injustice, and not solely the genocide between 1904 and 1907” (246). While the discussions on reconciliation were concluded with an apology for the genocide, contentious issues remain, most of which are primarily centred on securing economic justice for the affected communities. In as much as the events of the German colonial period in present-day Namibia occurred over century ago, the central arguments in Blood and Diamonds are very much of contemporary relevance.

Press takes his readers on an eleven chapter journey from rulers to riches, the rush to conflict, markets, labour, and stocks as well as the underworld, politics, takeover, and guns. Throughout these chapters, Press navigates the role and importance of diamonds in the colonial project, arguing that the discovery of diamonds and other natural resources lay at the heart of the motivation to establish a German colony in Southwest Africa. The opening paragraph, for instance, introduces the reader to the colonial frontier of Lüderitz, a coastal town which was posthumously named after Adolf Lüderitz, the German merchant whose petitions for “protection” led to the establishment of the colony. Press describes the desert land surrounding Lüderitz as “a place that induces fear beyond that attending most wildernesses,” which begs the question of why a merchant from imperial Germany sought to deceive an indigenous leader so as to possess this dreaded wilderness (1). The answer, as Press so convincingly demonstrates, lies in the millions of diamonds that were buried under the sands of the Namib. Perhaps a critique of the book’s subtitle is that it refers to “Germany’s imperial ambitions in Africa,” when in actual fact the focus is solely on the colony of Southwest Africa (present day Namibia), and Germany’s other “imperial ambitions in Africa” are only referenced in passing comments, i.e., Togo, Cameroon, and present-day Tanzania (German East Africa)—while a noteworthy

omission is that of present-day Burundi and Rwanda. These omissions do not, however, detract from the book’s objective to demonstrate the importance of colonial economics.

Germany’s imperial ambitions interestingly began with the aim of “limited-liability,” where the flag followed trade, and the administrative and financial responsibility for establishing the colony fell to merchants and not the state (17). Press calls this aim “illusory” (17); this is best demonstrated in Southwest Africa, where the German government wound up carrying the weight of administering the colony’s economic, civilian, and military spheres. Lüderitz had not only failed in his “flag followed trade” duty, but had also attempted to sell the “sovereign” right to govern the territory to British interests after his search for minerals proved futile. Much to the dismay of the German government, history repeated itself when the Colonial Corporation that succeeded Lüderitz also made a similar attempt, forcing the German government to pay for the supposed sovereign rights to Southwest Africa. That the colony remained in German hands was thanks to the disillusioned Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who sought to protect imperial Germany’s “prestige” and investor “confidence” in the colonial project (21). The problem for Lüderitz, who died in 1886 while prospecting on the Orange River, and his successor, the Colonial Corporation, was that the mineral wealth they sought eluded them. As the proverb goes, “it is the glory of God to conceal a thing: But the honour of kings is to search out a matter.” Southwest diamonds were concealed “in a way no German expected,” (50) and it would be over two decades before their “discovery” would bring “honour” to Imperial Germany.

Press challenges the argument made by historians that Imperial Germany was unable to replicate its economic prowess in its overseas colonies (4). These colonies, according to historians, “disappointed economically” for three main reasons: first, they did not meet the metropole’s “raw material needs;” second, they did not provide “a steady market for German exports;” and third, the overseas colonies did not contribute much to Germany’s total exports to the world (4). As a result, German leaders viewed German colonialism as having been “economically inconsequential” (4). Press challenges this argument, despite the fact that he points to Bismarck’s continual request for more and more money for infrastructural projects and military expeditions against indigenous populations in Southwest Africa. Moreover, for over two decades, German Southwest Africa took more than it gave. Press, however, challenges the statistics upon which the arguments on the economic value of Germany’s overseas colonies are based, arguing that the colonies contributed far more than was officially acknowledged. To illustrate his point, Press follows the money, or in this case, the diamonds, from the Forbidden Zone on the outskirts of Lüderitz to Berlin, Antwerp, and onward to New York. Press penned five chapters (chapters 4 to 8) to demonstrate just how economically consequential German overseas territories were and the impact these colonies had on “global circuits of labor and capital, as well as on commodity chains” (4). The economic contributions of the final decade of Germany’s colonial period thus out weights the financial burden of the first two decades.

Blood and Diamonds also demonstrates how colonial economics made and broke leaders in imperial Germany, key among which was Bismarck himself. The leading character for Press, however, was the Colonial Secretary Bernhard Dernburg, a man whose personality lends humour to what is otherwise a very serious study. Dernburg stands out precisely because his name would typically be omitted from studies that focus on conquest, war, and genocide. Here, men like Imperial Commissioner Heinrich Goering, Imperial Commissioner Curt von François, Governor and Commander in Chief Theodor Leutwein and Commander in Chief Lieutenant General Lotha von Trotha take centre stage. The economic dimensions to German colonialism, however, presents us with men like Dernburg, who crafted the governance structures for the mining of Southwest diamonds to serve the benefit of a few, as Press illustrates.

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The other character of interest is August Stauch, a German railway engineer who was erroneously credited for the discovery of diamonds in Southwest (57). Stauch, though valorised by the settler community as a mineral pioneer, owed his fame and fortune to Zacharias Lewala, a railway worker whose diamond discovery was brought to Stauch’s attention by Lewala’s foreman (57). Press’s narrative unfortunately omits the name of Lewala’s foreman, a missed opportunity to grant due credit to all the “kings” who searched out the matter of the elusive diamonds. Stauch’s fortunes did not end in Lüderitz, but paved the way to his chairmanship of the Diamond Regie, based in Berlin, which was established by Dernburg as the central distribution agency for Southwest diamonds in competition with De Beers (108).

What the presentation of characters like Dernburg and Stauch achieves for Blood and Diamonds is to expose the link between colony and metropole, detailing as it does the aspirations and experiences of the settler community, colonial and imperial politics, the role of diamonds in the colonial and imperial economy, as well as in the global labour and trade markets. Of particular interests also is Dernburg’s Jewish ancestry and the antisemitic attacks he faced in both the colony and the metropole. Press argues that “colonialism fueled German antisemitism both during and after the imperial era.” (240) This is evidenced by Dernburg’s experience as Colonial Secretary and supports the thesis that colonialism, and the genocide against the Herero and the Nama, was “a precursor to Holocaust” (241).

The strength of Blood and Diamonds is undoubtedly its expansion on what constitutes the economic dimensions of German colonialism in present day Namibia, and especially in relation to the genocide. Land, labour, and the associated resources such as cattle, grazing, and water are too often presented as the main causes of the 1904-1908 war of resistance. This is especially because the “discovery” of diamonds in 1908 resulted in their placement outside of considerations of the reasons for the war. If anything, “diamonds” are associated more with the concentration camps that were established as a result of the war and the need to secure labour for the budding colonial economy, rather than with the actual war itself. Press writes, however, that “because German officials had manifold indications that diamonds would surface in Southwest, and because Germans were actively searching for mineral wealth, it is necessary to consider more than land and labor as economic motives for German violence against the Nama and Herero” (52). It is the search for mineral wealth, on lands owned by indigenous populations who were viewed as obstacles to such wealth, that explains the atrocities meted out against indigenous populations by German colonial authorities (51). In stressing the link between blood and diamonds Press urges us to consider that in 1913 alone, the statistics for the trade in Southwest diamonds indicate that Germany made “a sum of 1.4 billion marks,” a sum which he argues “easily surpassed what Germany was said to have spent cumulatively on its colonial governing expenses since 1884…. thus] colonial diamonds meant serious, and significant, money” for Imperial Germany (91).

Blood and Diamonds, as Press points out, is situated in the historiography on German imperialism and makes a very important contribution the literature on colonial economics (9). There are other areas, however, to which the book makes valuable contributions. Comparative studies on the different “brands” of colonialism, the paths of mineral resource development in the various colonies, and the colonial competition that existed between the various colonial powers, could well benefit from Blood and Diamonds. Press’s book also contributes to the literature on the interrelationship between natural resources and conflict and questions of sovereignty over natural resources.

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spanning three different continents. When we consider that most of these sources, and especially the official
documentation referenced by Press, were consulted in the respective languages of the various players in the
trade of Southwest diamonds, it is safe to conclude that Press has produced a remarkable work. Moreover,
Press has more than proven his argument that “in the history of German colonialism, blood and diamonds
belong together” (246). This statement alone would lead many at the German Foreign Ministry to be “pleased
and indeed grateful” to have reached a conclusion in the negotiations with Namibia prior to the publication
of Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa.
Blood and Diamonds: Germany’s Imperial Ambitions in Africa is a thoroughly engaging, important book. While the historiography of Imperial Germany has flourished for nearly two decades, economic and financial histories of Germany’s pre-1914 imperial expansion have been relative latecomers to new research.\(^1\) In Blood and Diamonds, Steven Press puts German colonial economics front and center. He returns to one of the key questions of imperial historiography—who did imperialism benefit?—but is equally concerned with how different constituencies thought they might benefit from imperial expansion and colonial conquest. Blood and Diamonds is a book about a nation buying into empire, and about how empire paid out—and not just in Germany. The architecture of fin-de-siècle globalization, in which diamonds could be mined in southern Africa, processed in Antwerp, and sold in the American Midwest, is key context and cause. Set against this global backdrop, the story of Blood and Diamonds unfolds above all in the country that became Namibia, known then to Germans as “Southwest Africa.” Between 1904 and 1908, Southwest Africa was the site of a genocidal campaign waged by Germans against the Herero and Nama, who had risen up against brutal colonial rule. The argument of the book, captured in the title, is that the blood that was shed during that campaign and the diamonds that dotted the sands of Southwest Africa’s forbidding desert region provide a device for understanding German imperialism in general.

Blood and Diamonds begins in Southwest Africa’s “Forbidden Zone,” a stretch of the perilous Namib desert that runs along the region’s Atlantic coastline. Potentially deadly and potentially profitable, naturally forbidding and artificially forbidden, the desert is a metaphor for the story that follows. It is the story of “why Germans pursued… brutal routes to colonial power” (9). Press uncovers the history of the diamond rush in this colony and the political contests that attended it.

Blood and Diamonds reveals how the diamond discovery offered a new lease on life to Southwest Africa, at a time when colonial conquest was less popular than more fashionable imperial gambits like naval armament and when the area seemed little more than “an embarrassing drain on the German treasury” (30). As Press shows, Germans had sought diamonds in the region since 1884, but the gemstones’ presence was only officially confirmed in June 1908 after a series of genocidal military campaigns. Any evidence that the hunt for diamonds caused the genocide is circumstantial, but it is clear that the killing and dispossession made it easier to search for, and benefit from, the many small diamonds that dotted the Namibian sand.

No sooner had the first diamonds been uncovered than different sets of German financiers, politicians, colonial settlers, and “adventurers” began to imagine how the strike might pay off. These images of diamond wealth spurred political conflict between large capitalist interests and frontier “adventurers” and between liberal imperialist reformers and Germany’s antisemitic lobby. Political conflict was twinned with that of a more brutal sort. Press covers the brutal labor conditions, dispossession, and forced migration that the diamond rush brought to Southwest Africa’s indigenous Herero, Nama, Ovambo, and San. Defined by racism and irrational violence, those conditions were often short-sighted and economically self-defeating.

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Throughout, Press shows how “heterogeneous cultural interpretations of colonialism” became a topic of serious debate in the metropole and among Southwest Africa’s settlers (104). While the First World War scuttled Germany’s diamond designs and tanked the price of colonial mining shares, it intensified cultural interpretations of German colonialism and political contests over Germany’s place in the world. Diamonds may be forever, but the afterlives of empire linger quite some time, as well.

The story summarized above supports the argument that colonial economics were important for domestic political conflicts, for Germany’s place in the world, and for the violence that unfolded within colonial borders. This is the major historiographical intervention of Blood and Diamonds, and it is impressively made. In doing so, Press leans on two main contentions. First, he argues that historians should “evaluate the impact of German colonial economics transnationally and globally,” (10) and second, that along with asking whom imperialism benefitted, it is necessary to ask “how, when, and with what results particular segments of society bought into the idea that imperialism would benefit them” (5).

The global framework is a particular strength, because Press achieves it in the book’s narrative and historiographical registers. The diamond market around 1900 was by definition global. The diamond rush in Southwest Africa coincided with a diamond consumption boom in the United States, as middle-class Americans grew ever fonder of diamond engagement rings. German colonial planners knew that they could sell diamonds across the Atlantic, and it only makes sense to evaluate the significance of Southwest Africa’s stones within this broad scope (55-8; 97-101). Additionally, a wide reading of other imperial historiographies, and well-chosen comparisons with Britain, France, and other European empires, inoculates the book against strains of German pathology or exceptionalism. Blood and Diamonds thus builds on a growing body of literature that understands German imperialism to have conformed to liberal imperial norms more often than not.

Global integration like that seen around the turn of the twentieth century did not produce homogeneity, but rather opened new fault lines for political contests. Another of the book’s contributions is to reinvestigate these fault lines and how they shifted over the decade and a half before 1914. Press shows how the conflicts that emerged between frontier entrepreneurs and reformist Secretary for Colonial Affairs Bernhard Dernburg, the different liberal and populist interpretations of what a German colonial empire was supposed to be, and the thorny issue of how to divide up colonial loot were fundamental to the direction of German imperialism. In so doing, he offers an account of something similar to social imperialism, but with nuanced and careful attention to how political coalitions formed and dissolved as global and imperial concerns penetrated German society. Without pathologizing Germany’s Weltpolitik or assuming that certain political constituencies capitulated to others, this account of how differing visions of Germany’s place in the world cooperated and collided is a particularly valuable contribution.

These arguments point to the strength of “blood and diamonds” as an explanatory dyad for understanding Imperial Germany. Press lays it out alongside similar phrases: John Maynard Keynes’ “coal and iron,” Eckart Kehr’s “rye and iron,” Fritz Stern’s “gold and iron,” and Niall Ferguson’s “paper and iron.” “Blood and

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“Blood and Diamonds” is a metonym for an imperial dynamic between violence and value. Historians have long known that the economic modernization that accompanied liberal imperialism involved a great deal of violence. Press shows how it functioned in the German colonial context, which was once thought to be distinct from the classic liberal empires, and how it precipitated metropolitan political conflicts. Equally interesting is the second metaphor that “blood and diamonds” implies: the relationship between global economic integration and national—racial, even—identity and prestige. At turns in the book, economic success bolstered Germany’s national prestige and was pilloried as undermining it. It is clear that, even before the Great War, definitions of how Germany ought to relate to the world were shifting. Rather than a total caesura, the War was a catalyst for these shifts.

While Blood and Diamonds makes a powerful case for revising how we understand Imperial Germany’s economic history, one of its arguments will doubtless elicit debate. As with many recent discussions of Southwest Africa, Press offers conclusions on the long-term legacies of turn-of-the-century German imperialism. Recent scholarship has circled the possibility of colonial continuities—of key causal arrows running from colonial violence before the First World War to the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. This is an argument with an old pedigree that has resurfaced in the past decade, especially as historians have come to recognize that the campaign against the Herero and Nama was genocidal. For Press, the grueling labor conditions in diamond mines, as well as the high death rates born from German racism and “irrational behavior,” ran counter to Germans’ economic interests in a way that “paralleled conditions… under the Third Reich” and thus “constitute a new kind of link” between colonial violence and Nazi crimes (232).

To be clear, this argument for a “link” in the dynamic between violence and value is not an argument for a German colonial Sonderweg, or “special path.” Nor is the claim a maximalist one, given the care with which Press treats the subject matter; Blood and Diamonds threads this causal and scholarly needle with particular sensitivity. It is nevertheless not entirely convincing. The assumption that diamond miners’ default position should have been to follow their rational economic interests to the letter is arguable, as is the suggestion that German colonial violence was particularly racist and irrational when compared to other empires. Moreover, the book is principally devoted to the decade before 1914 and does not trace potential links into the Nazi period.

This is not to say that the dynamic between value and violence cannot not be traced forward into the Nazi years, or that historians should stop investigating the links between colonial rule and Nazism. But one would need also to account for other legacies and incorporate other potential links and disruptions. We know, for example, that former colonial Germans turned to the new League of Nations to push “open door” policies


6 In the postwar years both Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire, among others, suggested that fascism, and Nazism in particular, might represent a re-direction of European colonial interests and tactics onto Europe. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1973 [1951]); Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000 [1950]), 36. Systematic studies of the possible links between colonialism and the Holocaust, or of the Holocaust as one in a series of qualitatively similar incidents of state violence, are a more recent development. The elegance of Blood and Diamonds is a welcome addition to these often-febrile debates.
and pursue claims in the market. Likewise, the legacies of imperial political economy involved not only colonial economics, but also important economic spheres of influence in places like Latin America, China, and the Ottoman Empire.

In fact, by focusing historical attention on the different constituencies that supported German imperialism and how they fit together, and by addressing the affinities and conflicts between national prestige and international economic interests, Press offers a route to understanding how Germany’s imperial ambitions before 1914 warped in different ways during the Weimar years: toward Nazism, yes, but also toward the new internationalism of the interwar years and toward a colonial irredentism that sometimes sat awkwardly with other nationalist agendas.

In this vein, the final pages offer an insightful story of how post-Versailles liberal empire’s losers and populist aggrieved parties seized on the absence of empire and the purportedly unfair distribution of colonial loot to push an ultra-nationalist, antisemitic agenda that treated internationalism and capitalism as inconsistent with German values (232). Here lies much fertile ground for new research not only into the legacies of German colonialism and imperialism, but also into how those legacies interacted with other critical, domestic causes of Nazism and the Holocaust.

Any questions should, therefore, reinforce the place of Blood and Diamonds as a key addition to the new historiography of Imperial Germany. That some of the book’s broadest interpretive claims will spark debate reflects its analytic caution and an attention to competing historiographical currents. These aside, the book’s principal contributions are important.

Reinvigorating the economic history of German colonialism is a particularly necessary addition to recent literature. Colonial economics impacted both politics in Germany and Germany’s relationship with the world. While the links between Imperial Germany and the Nazi period remain disputed, historians would do well to add “blood and diamonds” to German economic history’s defining pairs.

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8 Grimmer-Solem, Learning Empire.

Review by Jean-Michel Johnston, University of Cambridge

The infamous “blood and iron” speech pronounced by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1862, as Steven Press highlights, has provided inspiration for numerous explanations of Germany’s rise to power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Previous symbolic pairings of “coal and iron,” “paper and iron,” “gold and iron,” or “rye and iron,” however, evoked the sources of Germany’s domestic transformation as a primarily continental empire. With “blood and diamonds,” Press evokes instead the marriage of wealth and coercion that drove the country’s imperialist expansion overseas. The title encapsulates his proposed answer to the apparent paradox of German colonialism: the violent and stubborn pursuit of control over colonies that were widely believed to be economically inconsequential. As his beautifully crafted account of the rise and fall of the diamond industry in Southwest Africa reveals, there was in fact considerable money to be made in parts of the Kaiserreich’s overseas territories, by combining local exertions of power with international flows of people, goods, and capital. The strength of Press’s research lies in revealing how such linkages integrated Germany and its empire into the machinery of globalisation at the turn of the twentieth century.

Over the past two decades, historians have opened up numerous avenues of inquiry into the nature of German imperialism. No longer understood primarily as an outgrowth of domestic social conflicts, the Kaiserreich’s pursuit of a “place under the sun” has been resituated in a broader context of European imperial expansion.¹ As in Britain and France, “fantasies” of colonisation, ideologies of “civilisation,” a political culture of power and domination, and the promise of economic opportunities fuelled Germany’s pursuit of territorial control overseas.² Yet, whilst late nineteenth-century Germany’s status as an industrial powerhouse on the European continent has long been recognised, unlike that of its neighbours, the broader empire’s place in the contemporary process of economic globalisation tends to be minimised. The working assumption, as Press highlights, is that “colonial economics existed in a linear relationship between metropole and colony” (4), and that this relationship was essentially unprofitable. Blood and Diamonds powerfully challenges this assumption by illuminating the wider, sometimes circuitous channels through which a particularly lucrative and exploitative mineral industry operated.

This book therefore applies an economic lens to the picture of German imperialism, one that allows the full extent of the diamond industry to come into view, “from discovery to consumption” (5). To a certain extent, Press thereby builds upon the growing trend of histories which investigate the mechanisms of globalisation through the perspective of individual commodities, exemplified by Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton.³ But this lens comes with a crucial filter: diamonds were, and remain, a luxury; and as such, the mechanism of their production and distribution was peculiar. Whatever the actual, widespread availability of diamonds, supply could not always be perceived to match demand, for fear that this luxury status would be lost. Spotlighting an oft-overlooked transatlantic connection in Germany’s imperial network, Press shows that the majority of this demand came from the United States during this period, where the market for “exclusive” engagement rings expanded under the watchful eye of the industry’s giants. Maintaining the prestige of diamonds in the face of expanding consumption, meanwhile, was itself dependent upon the regulatory and coercive practices of (in this case) German imperial rule. The explanatory force of Press’s argument thus derives from the feedback


mechanism that connected the domestic pursuit of profit, the overseas expression of power, and the emergence of a globalised economy.

The workings of this coercive economic mechanism are revealed as the reader progresses through the book’s carefully elaborated structure. The two opening chapters, “Rulers” and “Riches,” run almost in parallel, and establish the groundwork for Press’s argument. We are first introduced to Southwest Africa and its place in the German overseas empire from the 1880s to the early 1900s, and then to the global diamond industry which was dominated at the time by British-controlled South Africa and the De Beers enterprise. The “protectorate” initially established by the German state over the lands fraudulently acquired by the imperialist adventurer Adolf Lüderitz was soon transferred to the Colonial Corporation, a consortium led by key individuals in business and banking. From the outset, the example of South Africa’s booming diamond and gold industry fuelled the Corporation’s hopes of finding mineral wealth in the region, although such expectations conflicted with alternative visions of Southwest as a settler colony supported by agriculture. Both potential projects stalled, hampered by a lack of natural resources, but their pursuit led to repeated incursions onto the territory of the indigenous Herero and Nama peoples, and ultimately their brutal, genocidal repression under General Lothar von Trotha.

In this context, the appointment in 1906 of the banker Bernhard Dernburg as head of a new Colonial Office appeared to mark a “capitalist turn” in the state’s approach to the colony—it triggered the mechanism whose consequences are explored in the following, core chapters of the book. The confirmation of diamond discoveries in Southwest Africa in 1908 led to a rush which transformed Lüderitz Bay, as soldiers were shipped out and infrastructure and migrants poured in. The promise of wealth created a tense relationship between settlers, the Corporation, and the De Beers company across the border, all of who sought to benefit from the seemingly limitless supply of diamonds. The solution was the creation of a “Forbidden Zone” of exclusive access for the Colonial Corporation, and of a state-sanction cartel run by a “Regie,” which managed every stage of production, from the mining to the selling of diamonds. With this arrangement, “German” diamonds could penetrate a growing market in the United States in a regulated manner, without upsetting the delicate balance of increasing demand for a product whose supply had to appear relatively limited.

The industry’s expansion was supported by a number of intermediary forces and arrangements. The entire process rested, at its source, upon the labour of the Ovambo people in Southwest Africa, who were “contracted” to extract the diamonds, working in atrocious conditions, often deprived of water and basic necessities. Control of production itself relied upon a tacit arrangement between the German state and the Corporation, neither encroaching too far onto the other’s sphere of influence—by allowing labour abuses to go unchallenged, for instance. When it came to the finishing of the raw diamonds, the Regie tapped into an existing centre of expertise in Antwerp, through which its products were processed, before moving on to the US, where the market for engagement rings was expanding. The boom in Southwest Africa’s diamond industry was simultaneously buoyed by a speculative bubble in Germany itself, a kind of second “founding fever” which meant that Germany “had arrived as a colonial power” (139). While Press’s lens remains sharply focused on the diamond industry in the Southwest, his analysis thus leads the reader to Germany, Europe, the United States—and back again.

This cog in the machinery of Germany’s colonial enterprise generated friction as it turned. The initial shift towards the production of diamonds for a global market alienated conservative elites and members of the Pan-German Association who had hoped to see Southwest develop into an agricultural colony. They denounced the profit-driven enterprise as “un-German” and decried the influx of foreign migrants to the colony that was “diluting” its ethnic composition—fears which, Press argues, contributed to the introduction of the jus sanguinis citizenship law in 1913. Dernburg himself, and the purportedly Jewish network of capitalists around him, also quickly became the target of antisemitic attacks. Elsewhere on the political spectrum, the supply-chain’s reliance upon Antwerp as a hub of expertise was criticised for bypassing homegrown diamond-finishing industries in towns such as Hanau, whilst Centre Party leader Matthias
Erzberger used the transformation of Southwest as fuel for his critique of big business. Speculation in the industry, which had initially been tolerated as it kept capital “inside” Germany, was eventually denounced, and the taxation of stock dividends proposed as a means of avoiding further duties on imports or land inheritance. All in all, it seems, the transformation of Southwest Africa heightened the tensions surrounding the forward march of capitalism in Germany itself.

Much of the tension contained in this mechanism was released when the speculative bubble around the diamond business burst and Dernburg resigned in 1910. As Press states, hopes were raised that his departure would “undo the inequity of capitalism exposed in and around Erzberger’s campaign” (193). In fact, it removed the linchpin in the closed system controlled by the Regie and opened it up to greater participation, whether by parliamentary commissions, settlers in Southwest, or the Germans” great rival in the industry, De Beers. Subsequent attempts at Anglo-German collaboration in this particular business did not prevent the outbreak of World War I, which severed the connection between the diamond fields of Southwest Africa, Germany, Europe, and the United States. Wealth and coercion continued to characterise business and government in the region, but their alliance in the name of German imperialism had been dissolved.

Press thus never loses sight of the multiple levels at which the diamond industry operated: from the brutal exploitation of Ovambo workers in Southwest Africa to the advertising campaigns which promoted the market for engagement rings in the US. Germany and its empire nonetheless remain front and centre of the analysis, and every step of the way he subtly reintegrates his account into the broader historiography. It is striking how far back some of these historiographical connections reach. In the description of Southwest as a screen onto which competing German visions of modernisation were projected, for instance, we find echoes of Eckart Kehr’s reflections, a century ago, on the conflicting attitudes of conservative aristocrats and the business-minded bourgeoisie towards South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. As Press demonstrates, however, in the case of the Southwest such conflicts were also a response to the “miniature industrial revolution” (107) that was taking place in Germany’s own colony.

The long-standing question of Germany’s economic “backwardness,” meanwhile, is similarly illuminated in a new way. As in Germany itself, a government-sanctioned cartel was created around the diamond industry, allowing its leaders to bypass competition and integrate pre-existing centres of expertise, including abroad. But Press also provides a fresh twist on the concept, alluding to a kind of “cartel” of sovereignty that also existed between the imperial state and the Colonial Corporation in Southwest Africa—monopolies of power, too, can rely upon a division of labour. These are just two examples of the ways in which Press’s account effectively revives the “relatively moribund field of colonial economics” (9), reconnecting a new field of inquiry to its historiographical roots. It provides a much-needed sense of process to the narrative of German imperial expansion, drawing upon the strengths of economic history.

Of course, the diamond industry of Southwest Africa remained one cog in a complex mechanism of national, imperial, and global transformation at the turn of the twentieth century. The core of Press’s account is the period 1890-1914, and the connections he draws to earlier and later developments are suggested, rather than established. His challenge to the assumption of a “linear relationship between metropole and colony” works particularly well where the diamond industry is fully plugged into contemporary networks of global exchange. A different approach might be necessary when considering how the “challenges of globalisation,” which were
meticulously examined by Cornelius Torp, influenced Bismarck’s earlier “colonial turn” in the 1880s. Further research might also consider how the rotation of the diamond-encrusted cog at the heart of Germany’s empire helped to turn others. Press suggests, for instance, that Dernburg’s resignation removed a key advocate of peace from the corridors of power in Berlin, but whether and how this, or the diamond industry, might actually have affected Germany’s “flight forward” into war is less clear. Moreover, Press offers a convincing answer to the question of why Germany pursued colonial expansion so vigorously and violently, but it is not clear that the same underlying mechanism continued into the 1930s and beyond.

In exposing the backward and forward linkages of one key component of Germany’s imperial expansion, Press’s work is an exemplary illustration of the material connections between local, imperial, and global developments. It is to be hoped that others will build on such an approach to consider how the broader economic machinery of German imperialism functioned. In the meantime, through the rigour, subtlety, and elegance of his work, Press has produced one of the most thought-provoking recent books in this field.

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Since the publication of Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* in 2014, histories on commodity culture and colonialism have themselves become a hot commodity, with new works on wares such as tea, opium, coconuts, palm oil, and a renewed interest in the history of rubber coming out on a yearly basis.1 Unlike the works on commodity culture in the previous wave that focused on important discussions of advertising, consumer culture, and the social dynamics of colonial imports of goods and artifacts in a specific metropole,2 this newest wave seems to be making a different set of equally important contributions to our understanding of empire. They do so by looking at global systems of exchange, ties to labor practices and experiences, and the worldwide economic significance of specific colonial commodity markets in the financial ecosystem beyond the particular imperial power extracting those resources, even when looking at national-imperial case studies to do so. As part of this new wave of work on the economic culture and impact of imperialism, Steven Press makes an important contribution in his second book, *Blood and Diamonds: Germany’s Imperial Ambitions in Africa*. Building on his research in a wide range of archives on three continents, Press has written an important and thorough examination of the emerging global diamond industry of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, its structures, its finances, its feuds, and its labor practices through a case study on the development of the diamond fields of German Southwest Africa (now Namibia). The book also ties in with the historiography of diamonds as a commodity, touches on imperial brutality, and adds some interesting questions about the German inflationary periods and the continuities of antisemitism in German society.3

Press “charts the rise and fall of Germany’s colonial diamonds as a means to reassess Germany’s overseas empire” and push back on the notion of “German colonialism as economically inconsequential” (3-4). He points out that Germany’s commodity exports from its colonies were significantly undercounted in official numbers of the era and that, despite lasting only thirty years and change, “German colonialism had a major effect on global circuits of labor and capital, as well as on commodity chains” in the era leading up to the First World War (4). Press begins in a familiar spot for those who work on the history of German colonialism in Southwestern Africa: Adolph Lüderitz, a merchant and the “founder”—in terms of German foothold in the region—of Germany’s first colony during the nineteenth-century Scramble for Africa. The topic of

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Chapter 1 is very similar to that of Press’s well-received first book, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe’s Scramble for Africa,* in that it analyzes the dubious contracts Lüderitz made with the local Nama that ultimately led to the justification of the German state’s claims on the region and seizure of the territory as a *Schutzgebiet* (Protectorate/Colony) in 1884. He then quickly walks through the history of the Herero Genocide, the brutal extermination between 1904 and 1907 of the Herero, Nama, and San peoples by German troops, which he later expands upon in chapter 6. Chapter 2 continues with backstory material, but focuses less on the specific colony of Southwest Africa and more on the global diamond industry. Press recounts how it was constructed in the nineteenth century and maintained in the twentieth, and its domination by South African mines based in Kimberley, which was controlled by the British Empire, with all the global marketing and sales stones going through an elaborate syndicate centered in London. This section, therefore, sets the stage for the German imperial diamond industry which emerged as a challenger to the near monopoly held by the British.

Throughout the remainder of Press’s text, a central figure looms over the history of the diamond industry in Germany and German Southwest Africa: Bernhard Dernburg, Germany’s colonial secretary and head of the Imperial Colonial Office from 1907 to 1910. Chapters 3 through 5 outline how Dernburg centralized, structured, and controlled Southwest Africa’s diamond industry in the wake of the 1908 diamond rush in the colony. Press demonstrates how, in order to keep British and South African competitors from purchasing the diamond fields, Dernburg used a three-pronged strategy to develop, but also ensure state control of, the colony’s diamonds: establishing a “Forbidden Zone” where only the state-financed German Colonial Corporation could extract diamonds in the colony; centralizing the pricing and sales of diamonds in a “state-approved, national cartel” known as the “Regie”; and partnering the “Regie” with a Belgian firm in Antwerp that would cut and polish the stones and market them for the growing US market. Press shows in these chapters that, although this led to some initial success for Germany’s fledgling diamond industry, it generated frustrations and hostilities from white German settlers in the colony who objected to the metropole, in the form of Dernburg’s office, seemingly excluding them from the ability to profit from the diamond fields on their own. The centralization of the diamond industry sparked a fairly typical settler-metropole antagonism. This is exemplified in examples like Dernburg’s feud with Southwest African “amateur” mine magnate wannabe, August Stauch—that was often expressed in settler-populist anti-government and extreme, antisemitic rhetorical attacks on Dernburg, who was born to a prominent Jewish family and later converted to Lutheranism. This thread of colonial diamonds, populist settlers who were antagonistic towards the metropole and the colonial state, and racist antisemitism is one that is a strong line in Press’s argument and is fleshed out most in chapters 7 through 9 and in Dernburg’s downfall and resignation from his colonial office.
posts as detailed in chapter 10. Press’s work on Dernburg offers a deep dive into a key metropolitan official in Germany’s colonial ambitions and policies in this era and is one of my favorite aspects of the book.

Chapter 6, though the weakest in many respects, is a portion of Press’s work that one hopes will generate more dialogue in the field, as it addresses the ongoing legacies of colonial brutality from the Herero Genocide (1904–1907) in the form of its consequences for labor availability and labor practices in the diamond fields of the Namib Desert. Essentially, it concerns the “Blood” in Blood and Diamonds, which, despite the titular billing, is largely ignored in the book save in this one chapter. Press describes the abysmal labor practices Germans imposed on the Ovambo and migrant workers from the Cape colony, which were the largest pool of African laborers to draw from following the brutal extermination of so many of the Herero, Nama, and San. Here, however, the perspective is largely from the German side—even when citing statistics on the fatality rates of Ovambo and other African laborers—and on the commodity impact of labor shortages and the ongoing brutality of those extracting the resources rather than that of those on the receiving end of economically-driven violence. Press’s work is, first and foremost, a commodity history. It is wonderful that it contains a chapter on this important continuity between the genocidal violence and treatment of laborers in the colony, but this topic could generate books on its own, and I sincerely hope future scholars run with the topic. It would be interesting to see how others, for instance, would tackle the issue of labor in the diamond fields of Southwest Africa from an Ovambo perspective in the wake of the genocide against the Herero, Nama, and San, perhaps in a fashion similar to Michelle Moyer’s work on Askari troops in German East Africa (now Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi) or Marie Muschalek’s Violence as Usual on policing in German Southwest Africa, both of which masterfully read sources “against the grain” to get at the labor and social experiences of Africans serving in the German military or working in German-run colonial police forces. That approach to Africans laboring in the diamond fields seems especially warranted in the Southwest African colonial setting and will hopefully be added to the literature in a substantive way in the future to build on the discussion Press has started here.

Other reviewers have been more critical of this particular section of the book, and I note and agree with many of their concerns. In particular, I share Thaddeus Sunseri’s assessment that the Sonderweg/revived Arendt Thesis—which takes a somewhat teleological approach to the inevitability of the Holocaust after Germany’s colonial period—is being yet again conjured up in a way that somewhat breezes over the massive debate that has been had over the better part of the last two decades concerning the nuances and contingencies that need to be considered when charting the connections between the Herero Genocide and the Holocaust. Those of us in the sub-specialty on German Colonialism may, in some ways, be expecting too much of a single book to tackle both an excellent in-depth commodity history of diamonds and a thorough, refined approach to the contentious historiography on the continuity of violence in imperialism and some allowances should be made. Still, the chief issue with chapter 6 is the overemphasis on the diamonds at the expense of the blood in terms of the overall balance of the book’s argument and its marketing. Given the centrality of the concept that inspired the title of the book, I would have liked to see more on the

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connections. Press draws between the two and engagement with the scholarship that is more nuanced on these connections. More work needs to be done on the topic of economics and its relationship to genocide and genocidal legacies in the German colonies to more firmly establish the continuities or ruptures of those relationships. Press’s book offers a useful start—alongside others—to that discussion, but the connections between the genocide in Southwestern Africa and later brutalities still warrant further investigation.

In terms of contributions to the ongoing debate over the continuity of antisemitism, Press makes connections between colonialism and the bigotry and brutality of the later Nazi regime when he discusses the continuities of antisemitism. He does so extensively in the analysis of Dernburg’s career. In chapters 7 through 9, Press very deftly notes the link between colonial diamond trade and extraction and bigotry driven by settlers’ economic frustration and conspiracy theories concerning Jews and the diamond trade that were circulating widely in the colonies, the German metropole, and the global diamond market. This connection between the commodity culture, colonialism, and conspiratorial bigotry—so relevant for our own time—is only briefly mentioned in the introduction when it is perhaps one of the more significant contour lines in the argument of the text that should have been highlighted early on as the author maps out his work for readers. The focus on antisemitism becomes fairly central to Press’s book—especially given the connections to Dernburg who, if anyone does, serves as the main character of the monograph. Unlike Press’s arguments concerning commodity colonialism, which are marked out early, clearly, and repeatedly at the outset, his core arguments on matters related to German colonial historiography, particularly debates on continuity and contingency, are not. There is greater depth in later chapters of the book that should spark new debates and discussions; they warrant much time and attention.

The final chapters outline how Dernburg’s elaborate diamond system, which had been intended to compete with the British and DeBeers and to stand the test of time, collapsed in on itself the 1910s. Growing populism and settler resentment, along with underground markets for diamonds flowing from the colony of Southwestern Africa, which was run by and large by those same settlers, undermined the state-controlled cartel and wreaked a fair amount of economic havoc on metropolitan Germany. Chapters 9 through 11 are of particular interest as they point to an intriguing new angle on the role that diamonds played in the wartime inflation period through both licit and illicit markets in Imperial Germany’s economy. The strong streak of economic self-interest, often at the expense of the colonial regime and metropolitan plans that Press points to among the settler population in Southwestern Africa definitely held well into the 1920s, as I have written about in my own work.8 It is fascinating to see this play out in the earlier period as well with smuggling and constant criticisms of German oversight of the diamond fields à la Dernburg ultimately contributing to a large-scale economic crisis. Press makes a strong case here that, as he says from the outset, in economic terms German colonialism was far from inconsequential and this is the aspect of Press’s work that is itself the most consequential.

Press has produced a well-written commodity history of German colonialism’s participation in the global diamond market. The transnational and transimperial are central to the work and indicative—in many ways—of where not only commodity histories, but many works on imperialism and post-imperialism/postcolonialism, have been headed in recent years and continue to do so. The book contributes to that growing literature given Press’s skillful and effective use of a comprehensive number of archival resources. This volume adds to and hopefully prompts further, more in-depth veins of inquiry from sub-specialty experts of German colonial history, imperial commodity histories, and those working more extensively on the connections between colonialism and antisemitism.

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Response by Steven Press, Stanford University

I would like to start by expressing my thanks to John P. Short for writing the introduction, as well as to the reviewers who have generously engaged with my work: Saima Nakuti Ashipala, Jack Guenther, Sean Wempe, and Jean-Michel Johnston. Thanks also to Diane Labrosse, Frank Gerits, and the entire team at H-Diplo for arranging this roundtable.

The formal German overseas colonial project lasted roughly from 1884 to 1918. Historians examining it have tended either to ignore economics or to keep economic considerations siloed from subjects such as culture, politics, and warfare. Conventional wisdom supports such a move. Official trade statistics suggest that the German overseas colonial empire encompassed territories that at best proved economically marginal to Germany, and at worst became unidirectional drains on its treasury (4).

_Blood and Diamonds_ seeks to revise such an understanding. Putting economics “front and center,” as Guenther notes, the book is interested in tracing flows of people, value, and ideas around diamonds. The effect is twofold. First, the book demonstrates a much greater historical importance for colonial economic exchanges than has hitherto been appreciated.1 Second, and in keeping with the implications outlined by Ashipala, the book suggests that current German discussions about reconciliation with Namibians should consider specific economic dimensions to colonial violence.

Looking at Imperial Germany through the prism of a commodity, _Blood and Diamonds_ sees a society in which the prospect of colonial expansion in Africa held an allure of great riches for many, but delivered only for a select few. The allure grew stronger between 1908 and 1918, as the German state became a major player in a dynamic retail diamond market that included the United States as a ravenous consumer. In Germany, sudden colonial economic clout brought social consequences for antisemitism, stock markets, political maneuvering, inflation, and the postwar articulation of grievances. “German” diamonds even had lasting consequences abroad, for the people and land that would eventually be called Namibia, and for the world’s less wealthy consumers of diamond engagement rings. Small, high-quality stones flowing from Namibian sands through German hands came to be treated as a cultural fixture over the course of the twentieth century. At the same time, the horrors behind the stones’ extraction largely went unseen by consumers in a secretive fashion that evokes more recent (late-twentieth and twenty-first-century) discussions about the sourcing of so-called conflict minerals from Africa.

The reviewers express general agreement with my case for reassessing the significance, and impact, of German colonial capitalism. There is less consensus about my book’s points concerning some larger themes in modern German history. In a journal outside this forum but mentioned by Wempe, Thaddeus Sunseri alleges that _Blood and Diamonds_ “revives the Sonderweg.”2 I reject this interpretation. In the paragraphs to follow, I will explain why and, in the process, address the respective remarks of the roundtable participants.

Sunseri defines the Sonderweg as “the idea that modern German history leads inevitably to the Holocaust.” In fact, there have been multiple iterations of the Sonderweg thesis, each more complex than this definition allows. Only some iterations involve German colonial history. And only some iterations take 1941, rather than 1933, as their ultimate subject of inquiry. Finally, no iteration maintains that anything was “inevitable” as a result of “modern German history.”3 Guenther rightly notes that, in my book, I do not espouse any version of the

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1 For a recent, excellent commodity-based work in relation to French colonial history, see Owen White, _The Blood of the Colony: Wine and the Rise and Fall of French Algeria_ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

2 Thaddeus Sunseri, review of _Blood and Diamonds: Germany’s Imperial Ambitions in Africa_, by Steven Press, _The Economic History Review_ 75:3 (2022): 981-982.

One permutation of the *Sonderweg* concerns Germany’s political development in the era of industrialization. In the late nineteenth century, the German state supposedly remained dominated by a feudal elite east of the Elbe, and thus (so it is argued) deviated dangerously from more liberal, and more thoroughly democratizing, British and French political models. Whatever one makes of this interpretation, the notion of German exceptionalism finds no support in my first book, *Rogue Empires*, which describes an assortment of Germany’s foreign policy makers, bourgeois businessmen, civil servants, and jurists as thoroughly “normal” European actors when it came to the Scramble for Africa. Under a wayward Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s treaty-making with African leaders in the 1880s proved duplicitous and vacillating, but, by inspiration and design, broadly remained consistent with that of its peers. Germany was not just a co-participant in the intellectual precedents, agents, economics, and approach underpinning international law as embraced by such contemporaries as Belgium, Britain, and the United States. Indeed, Germany was a meaningful co-creator in the era of new imperialism, which saw many examples of herd behavior at the level of expansion. To a significant extent, Germany, like Britain and France, was driven into African colonization by fear of missing out, as well as by aggressive claims made by fringe operators in search of mineral riches and glory. Crucially, moreover, Germany’s leaders largely decided to expand overseas as, when, and how other Anglo-European great powers did—first, in the key moments of 1884’s African Scramble; and second, in 1898’s carve-outs from the Qing and Spanish empires. This landscape in no way resembles that of a conventional *Sonderweg* thesis.

As Wempe notes, Germany’s abuse of colonial treaties resurfaces in *Blood and Diamonds*, only this time in relation to a potential, then real, pot of diamond wealth in the Namib Desert. From 1884, the legal architecture around Southwest Africa’s precious stones rested on a highly dubious foundation. Key political figures worked to bend this law to their own purposes, including banks, rich (and relatively liberal) businessmen like Bernhard Dernburg, and a Catholic Reichstag deputy, Matthias Erzberger, who was interested in increased parliamentary control over the military and foreign policy. Meanwhile, these same figures, who were frequently from middle class backgrounds, sought to monetize and industrialize delivery of a “modern” commodity: the diamond. In the process, they provoked what Johnston and Wempe accurately regard as “fairly typical” settler-metropole antagonism. Precisely because this German case was typical in colonial settings, nothing about it fits with any classic notion of a *Sonderweg*, in which Germany should not have been typical, and in which nobility, not the bourgeoisie, should have predominated in crafting the policy and law of the German state.

*Blood and Diamonds* portrays German Southwest Africa in 1908 less as an aristocratic, pre-modern playground than as a conflicted, modern offshoot of the German Empire. When it came to the diamond business, German operations were foremost in the hands of the bourgeoisie, but they were also subject to populist impulses—another characteristic, I should add, that is not typical of a *Sonderweg* depiction. Here, Germany clearly functioned as a dynamic competitor of, and intellectual cousin to, the British Empire. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, to consider certain developments after 1918, when the British Empire’s offshoot, the Union of South Africa, inherited German colonial authority in Southwest Africa. Post-Versailles, this same state

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substantially left the colony’s German mining laws intact and built on its own (longstanding) dismal record with indigenous and migrant workers.\(^7\)

Later chapters in \textit{Blood and Diamonds} evaluate additional ways in which Germany both resembled, and differed from, Anglo-European imperial peers. One important continuity concerns flows of goods, people, and ideas. As Johnston writes in his review, pre-Great War Germany was as potent and willing a participant in economic globalization as its geopolitical rivals like Britain and the United States. The history of German activity around Namibian diamonds bolsters this finding of non-exceptionalism. Further, Johnston notes, the “modernization” debates about the diamond business that unfolded within Germany after 1908 challenge classic \textit{Sonderweg} notions of a German Empire whose economic course supposedly proved “backward” relative to that of its peers in France and Britain. As I argue, institutions like banks wielded veritable shares of sovereignty to craft governmental policy just as much as, and sometimes more than, East-Elbian aristocrats did. Readers searching for a \textit{Sonderweg} thesis will thus not find it in my analysis of German colonial capitalism. They will instead find further support for refutation of Sonderweg arguments as achieved by David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley in their classic book, \textit{The Peculiarities of German History}.\(^8\)

Johnston rightly notes that Germans sometimes charted a different course in imperial economic policy—for example, when it came to the diamond monopoly designed by Colonial Secretary Dernburg. Added to this area of divergence, I would like to address a related point about violence. \textit{Blood and Diamonds} argues that the German colonial diamond business interacted in disturbing ways with the genocide of Nama and Herero—spatially, chronologically, and in terms of personnel. Notwithstanding that these links constitute a new kind of continuity, I do not argue German colonialism was fundamentally more murderous, genocidal, or rapacious than were rival imperial variants in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.\(^9\) Likewise, I do not maintain that German colonial violence or processes “led” to the Holocaust, \textit{pace} Sunseri. What I show—and what seems impossible to deny as of 2023—is (a) that there were links between violence, capitalism, and ideology during the period of German overseas colonialism, and (b) that there was ideological spillover from the German colonial period, and European colonialism generally, into the Third Reich. As part of this mix, I demonstrate interactions between economic motivations and military activity in Southwest Africa before, during, and after the genocide of the Nama and Herero. Finally, by way of a central actor, the hitherto under-scrutinized Dernburg, I draw certain connections between German colonialism, German antisemitism, and German political culture. Some of these connections transcend assumed chronological divides between the Wilhelmine, Weimar, and Nazi periods. As a result, they represent another thread that ties German colonial history to the Third Reich’s propaganda—though, crucially, without saying that one thing “led” to another, and without denying that there is much more to think about when it comes to the evolution of, say, popular antisemitism.

Wempe is justified in wanting more when it comes \textit{Blood and Diamonds}’ engagement with the secondary literature on German colonial atrocities. The discussion of such scholarship is undoubtedly briefer than that offered by most works on German colonialism. Nonetheless, I concluded in the course of writing the book that the relevant debates have grown so voluminous and multifaceted that non-specialists would find them overwhelming, if I conveyed them in their full scope. In any event, I do not believe that my study of German colonial diamonds offers a corrective to conversations taking place about potential links between the Holocaust and the genocide of the Nama and Herero. Instead, I like to think of my contribution as Ashipala


does: as enriching conversations underway and helping to add something to the picture we historians have. In this vein, Guenther astutely finds that I do not intend for those links which I identify to function as a final word.

_Blood and Diamonds_ unfolds from a European perspective. It is also based almost entirely on written European sources housed in Germany, Namibia, England, and South Africa, with all the fictions, deletions, and selectivity that such repositories entail. Still, chapter 6 tries to give a voice to Africans who labored in the diamond fields of the Namib desert. After all, these were the people most affected by, and most frequently working in, the sites for German colonial diamond wealth. From the earliest stages of my research, attempting to get around the structural limitations of my European archives always presented a challenge.\(^\text{10}\) Recovering African experiences through oral history did not seem like an operation for which I was qualified, still less one in which I was likely to succeed. The rather large gap in time between the early 1900s and the present does not allow for the kind of witness interviews conducted by, for example, Caroline Elkins or David Anderson in Kenya.\(^\text{11}\) Accordingly, I opted to read “against the grain” wherever I could—if only in a partial measure, as Wempe fairly observes. In the process, I did avoid a uniform portrayal of Africans as passive victims (125-126). I also captured moments of African agency in cases involving, among other things, mobility, resistance to colonial control, and skillful response to economic incentives. I regret that I did not go far enough, in the view of some critics. But the book as conceived could not have been written had its perspective not been European, with a focus on Germany and German history. I agree with Wempe that _Blood and Diamonds_ functions as an invitation to do more in recovering the experience of African diamond workers in Namibia. I look forward to reading such scholarship when it emerges.
