

Steven Press: Blood and Diamonds. Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2021, 336 pp.

Reviewed by
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The merit of Press' study lies clearly in the general contextualisation of the role of diamonds from the Namib desert in the colony Southwest Africa (SWA), particularly in the era Dernburg and his policy. As he concludes: "statistics have misled historians into thinking that the economic reach of German colonialism was brief and minimal". As he claims, "tracing flows of labor, violence, capital, politics, and commodity chains related to German diamonds in Southwest Africa", shows how "German colonialism became entangled in ways that made a deep impact not only at home, but on the relationship between the German Empire and the world" (p. 231). The findings presented clearly achieve much of this. In contrast, what remains too cryptic is the local contextualisation within the dynamics of settler-colonial rule unfolding, with diamonds playing an important but most likely less decisive role than Press suggests. It therefore is a pity that he does not properly engage with any other aspects of German rule in the territory in any detail.

As Press rightly stresses, the discovery and exploitation of diamonds marked a tur-

ning point in the process of proletarianization of the local communities (in particular so from the northern regions under indirect rule). Discovered in the vicinity of Lüderitzbucht in 1908, deposits stretched along the coastal Namib desert to the banks of the Orange river, the natural border to South Africa's Cape Province. Under the colonial secretary Bernhard Dernburg the area was after an initial rush declared a restricted "Forbidden Zone" (*Sperrgebiet*), denying access by individuals and handing the control and rights for exploitation to a German Colonial Corporation owned by a small group of influential members of mainly financial capital. To further entrench monopolistic structures in direct competition with the South African mining giant De Beers, a central selling organisation (the "Regie") was established in 1909. Run by the Corporation and German banks, it seized control through firm regulations of the sector. Business relations for the cutting and polishing of the rough diamonds and their access to international markets (at the time mainly the USA) were entered with Antwerp. The diamond bonanza was to the benefit of few and added to nationalist as well as antisemitic sentiments cultivated by both the political right and the left in Germany.

This all is shared in much detail and deserves recognition as a hitherto neglected focus on the role diamonds from SWA played in the overall German economy and as global player of the *Kaiserreich*, highlighting international resource politics in competition with other producers. But at times this leads to negligence when it comes to other factors and aspects in the local dynamics unfolding, narrowing perspectives, and risking distortions. Press'

eagerness to trace the track of diamonds as a decisive singular factor in German colonial history leads to the abstruse claim that “Germany’s history with diamonds offers a new insight about possible continuities between German colonial violence and the Holocaust” (p. 232). Such exaggeration based on a selective view illustrates the weakness of the study.

A few more examples might suffice: That the parliamentary elections of 1906 – dubbed *Hottentottenwahlen* – were triggered by the dispute over the increase of military expenditure for the colonial warfare in SWA (a budgetary allocation refused by the opposition parties) is not mentioned at all (p. 35). Rather, while at the time beyond mere speculations no convincing evidence for the discovery of diamonds existed, Press uses reference to diamonds as the ultimate motive for any activity in the colony since the days of the Bremer merchant Lüderitz created the formal precondition for its proclamation as “protectorate” through fraudulent land deals. Press’ suggestion, that the small but growing number of German settlers felt unduly neglected because of the administration’s focus on diamonds also merits some doubts. After all, there were investments in infrastructure to their benefit too, as well as that of the further exploitation of the rich copper deposits elsewhere (on which Lüderitz had cast his eyes more explicitly than on the possible discovery of diamonds).

Some statistics on the export from SWA during German colonial times and thereafter might illustrate the point: diamonds indeed dramatically increased total exports (before the war with the Ovaherero and Nama the highest at 3.4 million German Mark in 1903). According to Press (p. 89),

the export of diamonds amounted in 1912 to 50 million German Mark and in 1913 to 59 million. This, however, contrasts with figures offered by Hope,[1] according to whom total exports in 1912 amounted to 39 million and in 1913 to 70 million German Mark. Hope also presents figures on total exports for 1924 to 1945. These show, that diamonds never exceeded 50 percent of total exports (highest in 1924), with base metals having a higher proportion than diamonds in 1931 and karakul pelts ranking higher than diamonds in 1938 and 1945. [2] Notably, Germans had transferred karakul sheep from the Uzbekistan region of Bukhara to SWA. The negligence of such economic characteristics therefore creates a slightly misleading impression, as if everything in SWA – after all the only settler colony in Germany’s “overseas collection” – was just about diamonds. Press quotes the infamous statement of General von Trotha (the military and administrative commander in charge of the genocide) to exterminate the indigenous communities with “streams of blood and money” and associates the use of the word money with diamonds (p. 53) – at a time, when these were not yet discovered. But for Press “Germans slaughtered Nama and Herero [...] partly with an eye toward finding and monetizing diamonds” (p. 246). Such carelessly created linkages correspond with a tendency to prefer readability to accuracy and sacrificing factual nuances in the treatment of the subject. When he declares that Lüderitz benefitted in his undertakings by the German navy’s backing to shut out rivals (p. 19) no reference is offered to back this surprising observation. He also claims motives by ignoring chronological sequences when he declares

that “diamonds [...] were a catalyst for German formal colonization and the subsequent maneuvers and acquisitions of this foreign power” (p. 9) and that the history of the Forbidden Zone – institutionalised in 1908 – “adds to our understanding of *why* Germans pursued such brutal routes to colonial power” (p. 9, his italics) – really?! Based on such tunnel vision, it is not surprising that he categorises “genocidal violence and diamonds as the defining traits of Germany’s short-lived overseas colonies” (p. 10). That invites to contemplate what the interests were in all the other colonial territories.

Similarly, his treatment of the institutionalisation of a contract labour system offers valuable insights but also distortions. Claiming that the mortality rates among contract workers, who were indeed exposed to appalling conditions of ruthless exploitation on the diamond fields, equated to those in the concentration camps in which Ovaherero and Nama (including women and children) were decimated in exorbitant numbers is an undue exaggeration.[3] It also ignores that access to the diamond fields offered some of the contract workers against all odds and despite tight control and inhuman treatment a window of opportunity for own enrichment.[4]

While Press offers a wide panorama on diamond related aspects and activities both within the context of the colony as well as internationally, he is particularly informative on the policy of the banker Bernhard Dernburg as secretary for Colonial Affairs and head of the Imperial Colonial Office from May 1907 to June 1910, highlighting his crucial role in the institutionalising of monopolistic structures. He also captures the end of his diamond system and the

entry of the South African magnate Ernest Oppenheimer through the De Beers cartel and its consolidation as the global diamond empire. But the book’s title already offers an indication that less might have been more: by the over-emphasis on the connection between blood and diamonds for Germany’s imperial ambitions in Africa, Press promises insights which at a closer look do not pass scrutiny when it comes to the far-reaching interpretations and claims. Creating less expectations would have benefitted the credibility and strengthened the recognition if not praise, which parts of his insights clearly deserve. Press suggests in passing, that scholars engaging with Germany’s colonial history have neglected the importance of diamonds, and the results of his research might prove him right. But for all the minor flaws presented as an indication of his own shortcomings in the adequate treatment of the subject, one is tempted to add that he has missed out to engage more properly with other scholarly work on the German colony of Southwest Africa.

Notes

- 1 C. Hope, *Developmentalism, Dependency, and the State. Industrial Development and Economic Change in Namibia Since 1900*, Basel 2020, p. 23.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 3 See for details J. Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco: Colonial Concentration Camps in Southern Africa, 1900–1908*, New York 2019 (German original Hamburg 2015).
- 4 See J. Amupanda, *Diamond Warriors in Colonial Namibia: Diamond Smuggling, Migrant Workers and Development in Owamboland*, Basel 2022.