

**COLONIALISM AND THE 'JEWISH QUESTION':  
HANNAH ARENDT AND THE TRANSFORMATION  
OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN NS-LITERATURE**

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In his notorious autobiography and political manifest *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler raged against the so called “Black disgrace” (“Schwarze Schande”), referring to the so called Rhineland Bastards. These were derogatory terms used to describe Afro-German children of mixed German and African parentage. Allegedly most of them were fathered by Africans serving as French colonial troops occupying the Rhineland after World War I. According to Hitler, they represented a contamination of the white race ‘*by Negro blood on the Rhine in the heart of Europe*’. In reality, most of these children were actually fathered by white German colonialists who had brought their African families back home from the colonies, which Germany had lost after World War I. But Hitler had another ready answer to this problem, claiming that the “*Jews had been responsible for bringing Negroes into the Rhineland, with the ultimate idea of bastardizing the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate*”:

“Juden waren es und sind es, die den Neger an den Rhein bringen, immer mit dem gleichen Hintergedanken und klaren Ziele, durch die dadurch zwangslüfig eintretende Bastardisierung die ihnen verhaßte weiße Rasse zu zerstören, von ihrer kulturellen und politischen Höhe zu stürzen und selber zu ihren Herren aufzusteigen.” (Hitler 1940: 357).

Hitler’s conspiracy theory of Judaism and Afro-German race-crossing was twisting the true historical connection between colonialist racism and the German Jews and between the colonizers and the colonized. In her major work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt tried to explain the organization of the Holocaust as an import of practices which had already been tested and carried out in the colonies. Setting off from Hannah Arendt’s view of the

Holocaust as an import of already established colonialist practices to Europe in terms of a “bureaucratic mass-murder” (Arendt 1985: 186), I will focus on the transfer of racial science from the colonies and its impact on the so called “Judenforschung” (“Jew research”) in pre- and inter war Germany and, in turn, on the justification of genocide. In particular, I will discuss the contributions of the racial anthropologists Eugen Fischer and Hans Günther to this scientific and ideological transfer. Finally, I will discuss the literary and ideological justification of genocide and evocation of hatred in a colonialist novel of the German nationalist conservative writer Gustav Frenssen.

Both Frenssen and his friend and admirer Hans Günther may be considered representatives of the spiritually “homeless” generation of the Weimar Republic, as described by Hannah Arendt. In her analysis of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt saw the mythological universe of anti-Semitism and nationalist socialism as a symptom of the lingual and cultural “homelessness” of a generation of right wing intellectuals during the Weimar Republic. The identity of these national conservative intellectuals was largely attached to the virtues of the prewar Wilhelmine authoritarian state (“Obrigkeitsstaat”), that is: duty, obedience, order, hygiene and self-discipline. Many of these nationalist conservatives regarded the French occupation of the Rhineland as a disgrace, referring to an even bigger disgrace, namely the humiliating conditions of the treaty of Versailles, where Germany was required to take the whole responsibility for the outbreak of the World War, to give up all its colonies and parts of its Eastern and Western main land.

To cover up their own failures, parts of the German army head quarter encouraged the distribution of the so called “stab in the back legend” (“Dolchstoßlegende”), claiming that the German army had not been military defeated but betrayed by Jews and communists from their own ranks. This legend soon after became the main tenor of the nationalist socialist propaganda, offering the Weimar generation of homeless intellectuals a fictional homeland of mythological Germanic heroes and Jewish betrayers. In the works of the nationalist conservative (“völkisch”) writer, and later on nationalist socialist professor and NS-ideologist, Hans

F. K. Günther (1891-1968), the Jews were conceived of as agents of modernization, urbanization, industrialism, liberalism, Marxism and modernist aesthetics (cf. Günther 1924: 11 ff.). According to his “Racial anthropology of the Jewish people” (*Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes*) (1929) the so called “Jewish question” was defined as a twofold question, namely as a both cultural and racial challenge to the Europeans (Günther 1930: 292 ff.). But what was the “Jewish question” originally really about?

According to Hannah Arendt, the literary friendship and cooperation between Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing initiated a temporary climate of Jewish-German cultural exchange. For the German Jews however, this educational humanist recognition turned out to be rather illusive, taking place only at an individual cultural level, and not at a political one (Schönherr-Mann 2006: 44 ff.). The human equality between Jews and Europeans in the educated private saloons was thereby restricted to an aesthetic of recognition, which could not be lasting without a public politics of recognition. Arendt’s critique could in fact also be applied on present multicultural practices: To which extent does the recognition in our time of cultural authenticity and survival on an aesthetic level also promote social inclusion and political freedom and equality?

The social position of the pariahs, recognizing their own social exclusion, was in most cases the only option for the majority of the Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews, living in poverty in their ghettos or on the country side. According to Hannah Arendt, the rich minority of the Jews were, however, given the opportunity to play the part of the social parvenu, thereby receiving a certain ambiguous social recognition at the cost of conversion or repressing one’s Jewish identity. In this sense, being Jewish or non-Jewish, was in principal a matter of choice: Conversion was always an option.

In several European countries, the Jewish-European assimilation strategy turned out so successfully that Friedrich Nietzsche declared that the “Fatherland of the Jews was really Europe” and that the Jews were the true Europeans (Schönherr-Mann 2006: 27). But this was just at the time when the assimilation process was back-clashing and a new kind of racist Anti-Judaism emerged. In the wake of social-Darwinist racism and imperialism,

the question of being Jewish or European was turned into a question of biology and of the fatal laws of history. Anti-Semite thinkers like Houston Stewart Chamberlain conceived of history as a battle between the creative Germanic and the destructive Jewish blood, where only the strongest “race” would prevail (Chamberlain 1922: 353 ff.). Hence a new kind of racist anti-Semitism, leaning on biological arguments, seemed to partly replace the older religiously motivated anti-Judaism. According to the modern anti-Semite world view, conciliation and dialogue was no longer an option, and the aesthetics of recognition and Jewish emancipation thus turned out to be insufficient. Even though the German Jews had received civil and political rights during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was only during the short cultural and political blooming of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) they were considered as citizens.

Yet there were also tensions amongst the Jewish writers and intellectuals regarding the so called “Jewish question”: Where should the Jews really belong? According to Arendt, the assimilationists were deceiving themselves, when believing that they were just as German as the Germans, or just as French as the French. But also the Europeanist strategy, believing that Europe was the true fatherland of the Jews, turned out to be deceitful. In fact it could be turned against the Jewish minorities, questioning their patriotism and throwing suspicion on them as potentially spies. A third position was advocated by the Jewish Zionists, claiming that Palestine was the only true and safe homeland of the Jews. According to Günther, however, the Jewish question ought to be solved by racial hygiene measures and enforced Jewish emigration.

Before I get more closely into Günther’s argumentation, it might be useful to interrogate what kind of colonial experiences the NS-ideologists could draw on with regard to their interpretation of “The Jewish question” as a racial and cultural matter. Until the end of World War I, Germany had conquered four African colonies: Togo, Kamerun, Kenya (German Southeast Africa) and Namibia (German Southwest Africa). The natives suffered from the brutal regime of the German colonizers, in many cases out-cast of the modern capitalist society and its ‘superfluity of men’. As perpetrators and mass-murderers ‘without a cause’, homeless in their own language

and world view, they became fore-runners of the kind of “Banality of Evil” which Arendt later on would ascribe to the bureaucratic mass-murderer Adolf Eichmann:

“But gifted or not, they were all ‘game for anything from pitch and toss to willful murder’ and to them their fellow-men were ‘no more one way or another than that fly there.’ Thus they brought with them, or they learned quickly, the code of manners which befitted the coming type of murderer to whom the only unforgivable sin is to lose his temper.” (Arendt 1985: 189).

Accordingly, excessive physical abuse and punishment nourished the discontent and rage among the native Namibian ethnic groups Hereros and Namas who eventually rebelled against the German colonizers (cf. Zimmerer 2004: 26 ff.). In her brief discussion of Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Heart of Darkness*, Arendt even suggests that the brutal German governor of German Southeast Africa, Carl Peters, could have been the model for the sinister character Mr. Kurtz:

“They were no individuals like the old adventurers, they were the shadows of events with which they had nothing to do. Like Mr. Kurtz in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”, they were ‘hollow to the core’, ‘reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage’. [...] For the only talent that could possibly burgeon in their hollow souls was the gift of fascination which makes ‘a splendid leader of an extreme party’. The more gifted were walking incarnations of resentment like the German Carl Peters (possibly the model for Kurtz), who openly admitted that he ‘was fed up with being counted among the pariahs and wanted to belong to a master race.’” (Arendt, 1985: 189).

But also general von Trotha, the German administrator of German Southeast Afrika, was notorious due to his reckless conduct towards his subjects. The actions of these and other colonial administrators were not governed by the more or less public and democratic procedures of their European mainlands, but by bureaucratic decrees, as Arendt highlights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. According to Arendt, these politics were in turn carried out by a strategic association between elite of officials and the mob:

“While race, whether as a home-grown ideology in Europe or an emergency explanation for shattering experiences, has always attracted the worst elements in Western civilization, bureaucracy was discovered by and first attracted the best, and sometimes even the most clear-sighted strata of the European intelligentsia. The administrator who ruled by reports and decrees in more hostile secrecy than any oriental despot grew out of a tradition of military discipline in the midst of ruthless and lawless men: [...]” (Arendt 1985: 186).

To this mixture of European adventurers and outcasts, the colonial world appeared almost like a “phantom world”, which they could rearrange according to their own desires without taking normal ethical or legal considerations: “*But what, after all, took decades to achieve in Europe, because of the delaying effect of social ethical values, exploded with the suddenness of a short circuit in the phantom world of colonial adventure*” (Arendt 1985: 190). Setting aside the procedures of pluralist democratic decision making and the ideals of an open public debate between free individuals, colonial administration also set the standards for the later totalitarian regimes in Europe herself. How does Hannah Arendt’s description of the colonialist origins of totalitarianism apply to German colonialist novels, such as Gustav Frenssen’s bestselling novel *Peter Moors Travel to the Southwest* (*Peter Moors Fahrt nach dem Südwest*)?

Today Gustav Frenssen (1863-1945) is an almost forgotten German novelist, whose name appears most frequently in foot notes on Knut Hamsun (cf. Krömmelbein 1997: 386 ff.) and the young Thomas Mann (cf. Stein 1997: 78 f.), who both inspired and were inspired by Frenssen. But in 1912, Frenssen was suggested as a candidate to the Nobel Prize in literature. When the Nobel committee, however, preferred to give the reward to Gerhart Hauptmann, Frenssen was convinced by his publisher that he had been back stabbed by a Jewish conspiracy (cf. Frenssen 1940: 270 ff.; Griese 2011: 107 f.). Frenssen, who was born as the somewhat fragile son of a poor Northern German craftsman, had first studied theology and served as a vicar, but found himself uncomfortable with his own gospel. During the epoch of the Weimar Republic (1918-33), Frenssen spent half a year in the USA, raising money to

help starving German children in the wake of the French occupation of the Rhineland.

Both with his first “Heimat” novel *Die Sandgräfin* (1896) and his first and only colonial novel *Peter Moor*, published in 1906, the nationalist conservative Frenssen experienced such a tremendous commercial success, that he eventually could give up preaching and live as a full time writer. And yet in his naturalist “Heimat” novels, Frenssen frequently combined his role as an author with that of a vicar and spiritual adviser (cf. Griese 2011: 8). As the nationalist socialist regime offered the fainting star writer Frenssen the status of a pagan NS-prophet and spiritual educator, Frenssen grasped his opportunity to become a preacher again, now advocating Nordic paganism, NS-eugenics and Darwinist philosophy of culture and history (cf. Frenssen 1940: 320 ff.) To Frenssen, being an autodidact in these fields, the particular mixture of pseudo-science and demagoguery signifying the NS-propaganda, turned out to be both seductive and persuading. Accordingly, in his 1940 published *Life story (Lebensbericht)*, Frenssen advocated the “Nordic race” ideology of his admirers Hans Günther and Heinrich Himmler and defended both nationalist socialist anti-Semitism (Frenssen 1940: 249 ff.) and euthanasia. As I will try to demonstrate, some important aspect of modern racist anti-Semitism was transferred and transformed along this particular colonial axis of racist pseudo-science and ideological hate propaganda.

With regard to its genre, *Peter Moor* may be regarded as an educational colonialist novel (“Entwicklungsroman”) (Schneider 2011: 116), where the war experience during the Herero upheaval 1903-4 is depicted as an initiation of traditional Wilhelmine values, such as braveness and emotional self-control, sexual abstinence, order and hygiene, obedience and loyalty. In Frenssen’s novel, many historical details of the so called Herero and Nama upheaval (1904) appear authentic, such as the re-enforcement of the retreating German troops by the 2 Navy regiment, setting off from Kiel. In Frenssen’s novel, the main character Franz Moor, like Frenssen himself a son of a Northern German craftsman, joins the navy regiment and goes by ship from Kiel to Namibia to fight against the military successful Hereros, who had so far been underestimated:

“*They said that they had not expected such braveness from the enemy [...]*” (Frenssen 1906: 89). The turning point of this colonial war was the battle of Waterburg, where the native troops were defeated and 60.000 out of 80.000 Hereros were driven into the Omaheke desert in an attempt to escape the German troops (cf. Zimmerer 2004: 50 ff.). More than 7.000 surviving Hereros and Namas were now bureaucratically registered, forced to slave labor and left to die in German concentration camps like the Haifischinsel (Shark Island).

Both parallels and differences have been established between the Herero genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, for instance the extension of bureaucratic planning and the organization by non-democratic decrees. Like the Jewish and Roma prisoners, the Herero captives were also subjected to medical experiments, and the skulls of decapitated prisoners were sent to the anthropological institutes in Germany and examined by anatomists and racial anthropologists like Eugen Fischer (1874-1967). On the other hand, the Jewish Holocaust was planned and organized over a much longer period than the more improvised Herero genocide (Zimmerer 2004: 62 f.).

As Gustav Frenssen wrote his novel *Peter Moor* in 1906, the foundations of modern scientific racism had already been established by writers like Arthur Joseph Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Aspects of this racist pseudo-science are also reflected in Frenssen’s novel and ideologically extended by the novelistic rhetoric of ideological hatred, marked by dehumanization, racial alienation and the ethnocentric view of the African colony as an expansion of the German “Heimat”. In Frenssen’s novel *Peter Moor* the colonial world is depicted as a phantom world, which therefore seems replaceable with the norms and features of the German homeland. And, as described by Hannah Arendt in her analysis of race and bureaucracy, the natives are depicted as ghost-like creatures between humans and animals. “*Not far ahead I could see a black half naked shape, like a monkey, with hands and feet and the rifle between his jaws, climbing up a tree, and pointed at him and cheered out of joy as I saw him fall down.*” (Frenssen 1906: 85). Accordingly, the native Hereros in Frenssen’s novel are depicted partly as ghosts, partly as animals, without capacity for human caring and empathy.



The main character is also convinced that any communication between Germans and Hereros is bound to fail due to the mutual racial distance and alienation. He is therefore upset about some of his fellow Germans trying get in touch with the colonized Hereros:

“On the square in front of the fortress, there were also some enemy women, among whom some were young and not ugly. Most of them, however, were wizened and disgusting. They were fetching the laundry from the soldiers and hanging around, smoking their small pipes. I strongly disliked the fact, that some us were approaching them with a few facetious words in English or Plattdeutsch” (cf. Frenssen 1906: 46).

This anxiety of racial contact was later scientifically confirmed by the writings of the German anatomists and racial anthropologist Eugen Fischer (1874-1967), who later on became a nationalist socialist rector of the University of Berlin. Fischer experienced his international scientific breakthrough by his study of so called “Rehoboth bastards”, referring to German-African children in German Southwest Africa, who were fathered by white German colonialists and mothered by black Herero women, frequently as results of rapes. In his famous study *Die rehobother Bastards und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen*, Fischer asserted that the “racially mixed” children were less intelligent than their “racially pure” parents (cf. Fischer 1913). In the terminology of racial hygiene, this was an example of so called “dysgenesis”, in the sense of an evolutionary intellectual decline of the population. Preventing this kind of degeneration was one of the main tasks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenics movement in Germany and Europe. In his Namibian case study, Fischer seemed to have established the fact, that so called race-crossing or miscegenation, would lead to mentally and morally defect offspring. And this was one of the main reasons why his study became so influential all over Europe until the 1960ies. In 1934 Fischer advocated discriminatory measures against the German Jews in order to prevent the contamination of the creative Nordic-Germanic race from alien races, which could damage its spiritual evolution. His students and colleagues at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institute, Otmar van Verschuer, Karin Magnusson and Josef Mengele would later on commit crimes against humanity

with their medical experiments on Concentration Camp prisoners in Poland.

The presumed racial gap between Jews and Germans as a Jewish threat was the main tenor of Hans Günther's Jewish anthropology. Also he a colleague and former student of Eugen Fischer, Hans Günther applied Fischer's theory of the "Rehobot bastards" to the case of the German Jews. According to Günthers "Racial anthropology of the Jewish people", the Jews were representing two different races of their own, which in fact were a mixture of seven or eight other races (cf. Günther 1929: 68 ff.). But as a consequence of the Jewish marriage laws, the Jews had developed racial hall-marks on their own through genetic isolation. So what would be the problem with mixing human "races" which were already historically mixed up?

According to Günther, the Jews were signified by a particular racial and cultural alienation towards the "Nordic race" (cf. Günther 1929: 295 f; 305 f.). Jewish assimilation was hence representing a threat against both German culture and the "Nordic blood", which had to be prevented by means enforced sterilization or migration to Palestine. Günther also interprets racial alienation ("Artsfremdheit") between the Jews and the Germans in terms of a Darwinist philosophy of history, conceiving of history as a battle between "the two bloods", where the Jews already had the upper hand due to their purist "politics of the blood". Finally the Jews were representing a spiritual threat, taking control of German finance, press, theater, critics and German culture in general. And as scientific evidence to his manicheanist world view, Günther explicitly refers to Eugen Fischer's study on the *Rehoboth Bastards* (cf. Günther 1929: 198 ff.).

Like Frenssen, Günther was a best-selling author, and in his popularized "Racial anthropology of the German people" (*Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes*), he expressed his concern about the so called "Black Shame", referring to the children of mixed parentage in the Rhineland. Since they were the offspring of marriages before the racial Nuremberg laws of September 1935, which prohibited miscegenation, the NS-authorities had no legal measures to use against them. Instead the so called "Commision

Number 3” was appointed to solve the problem. Both Günther and Fischer were appointed as experts of this committee, which eventually decided that the children should be sterilized under the 1933 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring. Eventually some 400 Afro-German children were arrested and sterilized in a “Nacht und Nebel” action by the secret German police (cf. Pommerin 1979: 49 ff).

In Frenssen’s novel the racial gap between the white colonizers and the black colonized is also demonstrated by the murdering Hereros’ disinterest in the books of their white victims. How could passages like these be interpreted as rhetoric of fanaticism and ideological hatred? Descriptions like these are serving the purpose of convincing the reader about the inevitability of the racial conflict and the massacre against the Hereros which is about to take place in the last part of the novel. To prepare the mental ground for this shocking event, emotions like anger and crave for revenge must be raised as a reader’s response to the novel.

According to Sternberg’s psychology, the complex emotion of hate is dependent on certain narratives about the hate object, depriving him or her of any individual or human feature. Most of all it is necessary to imagine the hate object as incapable of sharing human qualities and emotions like caring, compassion or respect (cf. Sternberg 2005). Asserting that hate is an emotional withdrawal from love and solidarity, ranging from cold to burning hate, Sternberg also tries to apply this model on hatred on a collective level. The kind of hate which the main character and his fellow soldiers share against the enemy in Frenssen’s novel, is, however, not identical with the kind of “burning hatred”, which Robert J. Sternberg has describes as a response to a violation on an individual level.

The collective forms of hatred must be distributed through different kinds of media and discourses. In the case of colonial hatred towards the colonized, Frenssen’s novel appears to be an example of such mass mediation, the more so as the novel sold more than 74.000 copies in the first year it was published. Its main address was the readers of mass literature in Germany, whose imaginaries of the colonized peoples were later on also confirmed by the authority of racial science. Together with numerous

newspaper articles and colonial publications, these discourses made a massive contribution to the colonial mind set and eventually to the justification of genocide. In this way the “imagined communities” of nationalism, that is a community of people who feel connected without knowing each other by face-to-face meetings (cf. Anderson 1991: 6 ff.), could be turned into an imagined community of hatred towards an imagined group of hate object, whom they had likewise never even met. The character of this kind of ideologically and medially distributed hatred could not be reduced to a single or complex emotion, but must be regarded as a set of dichotomies, stereotypes and narratives, that is as a particular mind set.

In Frenssen’s novel this mind set is expressed and justified in the speech of the field vicar, preparing the soldiers for the massacre on the Hereros by rhetorically turning mass-murder into a moral virtue: “*We have to remain tough and kill; but as individuals and people we still have to seek for high thoughts and noble deeds, so that we can contribute to our future brotherly humanity*” (Frenssen 1906: 201). Also in this novel, Frenssen’s own view is represented by a vicar, serving as a spiritual adviser. According to his twisted logic, killing the enemy means eliminating a negative factor and is therefore agreeable with ‘high thoughts and noble deeds’. Frenssen’s novel *Peter Moor* soon became compulsory reading at the high schools of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, and one of Frenssen’s most prominent admirers was the future commander of the SS, Heinrich Himmler. In his infamous Poznan speech in October 1942, Himmler appealed to a staff of higher SS-officers to keep themselves tough, and yet morally decent, facing the self-inflicted but necessary horrors of the Holocaust:

“Most of you here know what it means when 100 corpses lie next to each other, when there are 500 or when there are 1.000. To have endured this and at the same time have remained a decent person – with exceptions due to human weaknesses – has made us tough, and is a glorious chapter that has not and will not be spoken of.” (<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/h/himmler-heinrich/posen/oct-04-43/ausrottung-transl-nizkor.html>).

In this speech, Himmler imitates both the logic and the rhetorical style of Frenssen’s novel, be it unconsciously or not, turning his Black Death squads into white knights.

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