

BOOK REVIEW

Steven Press. *Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021. 352 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Index. \$35.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780674916494.

In *Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa*, Steven Press shows that the diamond wealth flowing from German Southwest Africa was crucial to both the development of German colonialism in Africa and Germany's broader global engagement. The scholarly consensus has generally held that German colonies never contributed significantly to the finances of the metropole. Press convincingly dismantles that argument by demonstrating that a properly global approach to German Southwest Africa's diamond industry reveals a far greater economic impact than has been previously acknowledged. At the same time, he illuminates how different constituencies in Germany and Southwest Africa fought to control the flow of diamond wealth, fueling tensions that encouraged expressions of nationalism and antisemitism. Meanwhile, the diamond fields of Southwest Africa were rife with violence and abuse, as European settlers exploited African laborers in conditions Press likens to Nazi concentration camps.

The processes through which diamonds from German Southwest Africa entered the global market were complex; this may help explain why scholars have often missed the diamond industry's importance to German colonialism. A central feature of diamond extraction in the colony was the role of the German Colonial Corporation for Southwest Africa, controlled by a group of wealthy German elites who purchased land claims from the businessman Adolf Lüderitz. Lüderitz in turn had swindled a regional Nama leader, Josef Frederiks, out of lands that would turn out to be rich in diamonds. Although initial hopes for mineral finds proved elusive, a diamond strike in the territory was confirmed in 1908. From that moment, Southwest Africa's diamonds—and those who controlled them—became crucial not only to German Southwest Africa, but also to domestic politics and to Germany's place in the world.

Press identifies Bernhard Dernburg, who was in charge of German colonial affairs from 1906 to 1910, as a key figure in transforming Southwest Africa's diamond fields into a source of global economic might. First, shortly after the diamond strike, Dernburg created the "Forbidden Zone," a vast,

diamond-rich area under the control of the Colonial Corporation, in order to encourage heavily capitalized operations to supplant inefficient small-time miners. Second, he established the Regie, an organization run jointly by the Colonial Corporation and major German banks that controlled colonial mining by rigorously regulating every aspect of the diamond industry in Southwest Africa. Dernburg viewed these steps as necessary to combat the power of the Cape Colony-based De Beers Consolidated Mines, which effectively monopolized the global diamond supply at a time when demand was surging, driven largely by the emerging popularity of engagement rings in the United States.

Dernburg brought order to Southwest Africa's diamond industry and boosted Germany's position in the global diamond trade, but at a cost. Press charts the opposition to Dernburg's consolidation schemes, demonstrating how they created conflict and dysfunction in Southwest Africa, internationally, and in Germany. In Southwest Africa, settlers felt excluded from a system that privileged the biggest mining concerns. Above all, African workers, a great many of them Ovambo migrant laborers from the distant north of the colony, suffered violence and brutal conditions that recalled the genocidal internment camps of the war against the Nama and Herero that had only just ended. Internationally, the Regie's activities generated friction with De Beers, and German officials struggled to crack down on diamond smugglers. In Germany, parliamentary debates erupted over whom Southwest Africa's diamonds should benefit. To many Germans, the colonial diamond industry appeared to enrich a consortium of German elites, not ordinary Germans. Nationalists were offended when the Regie sent rough diamonds to Belgium for cutting and polishing, and both conservatives and socialists agreed that Germany's diamond bonanza benefitted the few at the expense of the many. Perhaps predictably, anti-semitic tropes connected to finance and the diamond industry flourished among the embittered Germans. Dernburg's Jewish ancestry proved a ripe target for antisemitic vitriol.

Press demonstrates convincingly that diamonds were critical to both the extension of German colonial rule in Southwest Africa and its violence against Africans in the colony, and he shows how colonial mineral extraction stamped German colonialism in ways both similar to and different from other European colonial systems in Africa. Moreover, Press shows that the problem of "blood diamonds" is at least as old as the colonial diamond industry. He also seeks to connect the story of diamonds in Southwest Africa to the rise of the Nazis and the Holocaust by comparing the treatment of African workers to Nazi labor camps and the antisemitic attacks on Dernburg to later support for National Socialism. Other scholars have argued for a substantial link between German colonialism and Nazi Germany, but Press's particular contribution to this argument, however intriguing, remains too underdeveloped to be convincing.

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