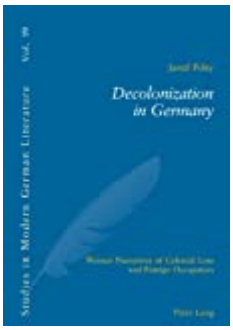
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jared Poley. *Decolonization in Germany: Weimar Narratives of Colonial Loss and Foreign Occupation.* Bern: Peter Lang, 2005. 281 pp. $54.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-03910-283-9.

Reviewed by Robbie Aitken (SOCLAS, University of Liverpool)

Published on H-German (September, 2006)

Weimar through the Lens of Decolonization: Hanns Heinz Ewers and German Postcolonial Fantasies

In this original and thought-provoking work (a published version of his doctoral thesis), Jared Poley investigates the impact of German colonial loss upon German culture, in particular upon metropolitan society. Poley's work owes a degree of debt to the theoretical framework provided by Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1996), which considers the reshaping of French culture in the period immediately before and after Algerian independence. Much like Ross, Poley works from the assumption that the severing of the relationship between colony and metropole had an important impact upon the latter. Following the Versailles settlement, Germany became the first European power to experience decolonization–in a world still dominated by colonialism. This transformation took place against a backdrop of military defeat, political collapse and foreign occupation. In particular, Poley (again, like Ross) argues that the abrupt ending of this relationship affected the way that citizens of the former colonial power viewed the world. New circumstances forced a reconsideration of numerous issues such as race, gender and power structures on behalf of metropolitan society. In examining the historical legacies of imperialism in the Weimar Republic, Poley sets about to trace the German postcolonial imagination. It is revealed to have been dominated by conceptual categories established by imperialism and full of complex, inverted and threatening images such as the African imperialist and the colonized German or the whipped German and men who had become women.

The book is split into two distinct sections, the first of which examines the work of the relatively forgotten writer Hanns Heinz Ewers (1871-1943). Five of the book's eight main chapters are devoted to discussing Ewers's work from the German colonial period through Germany's decolonization. A literary analysis of the (post)colonial fantasies in Ewers's texts is an intriguing choice, given that Ewers was not a writer of colonial literature. Today, he is perhaps best remembered for his fantastic/horror works or his biography of the Nazi martyr Horst Wessel. Although he never visited nor set his texts in the German colonies, Ewers (as Poley demonstrates) was nonetheless interested in imperialism without actually being directly involved. Elements of his work contain what can be read as colonial fantasies. In his di-

achronic analysis of Ewers's literature Poley picks out a number of recurring themes to establish the content of Ewers's colonial loss. He argues that by extension, Ewers's response to colonial loss was reflective of that of the large numbers of people who read his books. Through analyzing shifts in Ewers's philosophies and depictions of, among other things, voodoo queens, whipping, hybrid human forms and colonial disease and travel, Poley convincingly illuminates Ewers's wholly negative experience of colonial loss.

Prior to decolonization, Ewers depicted the colonial environment as a sexually liberating arena in which Europeans could exercise mastery and experience self-empowerment, free from the oppressive and stifling nature of European society. Foreign travel, of which Ewers was a proponent, was seen as a cure for the nervousness and anxiety afflicting Europe. Although tropical diseases existed they could be controlled by metropolitan medicine. Colonial meetings, although sometimes described in horrific terms, remained pleasurable and satisfying for Europeans. In the postwar aftermath of colonial loss, however, Ewers's mental world underwent a dramatic revision, and positive and pleasurable fantasies were now replaced by complex inversions. One particularly effective example of the shift in Ewers's fantasies that Poley develops relates to representations of Haiti as a colonial arena. Particularly in *Die Mamaloi* (1907), Haiti is established as a sexual fantasyland for Europeans in which the main character F.X. can escape the norms of European sexuality and engage in pedophilia. He participates in a sexual orgy in which he is "pleasurably engulfed by the black mass" (p. 34). This image of sexual ecstasy undergoes a radical inversion in Ewers's postcolonial fantasies. Thus, in *Ameisen* (1925)–a scientific account of ant life–Ewers utilizes language previously used to describe the Haitians in order to describe ants and an ant attack. This language establishes a representational link between Haitians and ants. The physical threat of the ant attack becomes symbolic of feared racial swamping and a perceived dangerous gendered black sexuality. This time when the main character is swarmed by black bodies–the bodies of the ants–the effect is one of terror.

Ewers's postcolonial fantasies produced sexually threatening images of the colonial environment and betrayed an underlying fear that the colony was infiltrating the metropole in the form of disease and hybrid forms. At a time when travel was safer than ever before, in *Vampir* (1920), Ewers now imagined a new terrifying tropical disease spreading from the colonies. Travel was rendered dangerous, breeding anxiety and posing a physical threat to the metropole as well as symbolizing a loss of mastery over the colony. Poley's detailed discussion of hybridity in chapter 5 demonstrates that it is also in *Vampir* that Ewers began to imagine dangerous colonial hybrids capable of passing through the metropole unrecognized. Hybrid forms, including the German-Jewish hybrid personified by the character Lotte Lewi, previously viewed in a positive manner, were now envisaged as threatening and destabilizing. This problematic mixture also included the occupation-area Rhineland, seen as both French and German at the same time. For Ewers, the forceful reestablishment of boundaries was central to the elimination of any confusion over once stable categories. As a response to hybrid states, incest was imagined as an extreme means through which hybridity could be made safe and purity restored. This catastrophic reaction to colonial loss in Ewers's work is not simply highlighted by the strange and horrific fantasies he imagined in the postcolonial period, but as Poley shows, it is evidenced by changes in the author's literary style. For instance, in the postwar period, Ewers increasingly resorted to exercising authorial control by placing himself within his texts as a response to threatening and destabilizing moments.

Although this monograph is neither a biographical work nor an exploration of fantastic/horror literature in Germany, it is nonetheless noticeable that Poley's bibliography omits a number of recent works that have signaled a quiet rediscovery of Ewers in German literature studies.[1] The reader is also left without a sense of the literary context in which Ewers was productive. Although Poley rightly points out that Ewers employed a number of literary styles in his work, he remains primarily associated with the genre of the fantastic/horror. It would have been of interest to know whether colonial loss had a similar effect on the work of contemporaries such as Karl Hans Strobl and Alfred Kubin. The works of both spanned a similar time scale as that of Ewers and in the pre-1914 period at least their fiction often treated similar themes. Instead, the reader is left wondering to what extent Ewers's response to colonial loss was representative within German cultural representations.

In the shorter second section of the book, comprised of three chapters, Poley turns his attention to the occupation of the Rhineland. As he notes, although Ewers was a Rhinelander, he did not critically comment upon the occupation until it was over. Poley provides a synchronic investigation of the effects of decolonization and occupation on nationalist groups involved in promoting nationalist culture. In particular, he focuses on the government-

sponsored Rheinische Volkspflege, which was responsible for producing and analyzing propaganda material relating to the occupation. He considers a range of archival materials, including speeches, pamphlets, novels and illustrative stamps. Here, it is clear that all the authors discussed, like Ewers, were working within the same conceptual system, which was shaped by the language of imperialism. This they employed to help understand and criticize occupation. Drawing upon the writings of a number of key figures in the propaganda campaign such as Margarete GÃ¤rtner, Paul RÃ¼hlmann and Alfred von Wrochem, Poley demonstrates the inverted images presented in their works.

Initially, occupation was viewed in terms of sexual violence and the "Schwarze Schmach" campaign, which depicted German women being raped by syphilitic, dominant black soldiers. Poley argues that this image provided a "photographic negative" of the European colonists who enjoyed the sexual fantasyland of the colonial sphere (p. 160). Such a depiction, excluding any form of free will or sexual desire on the behalf of German women in regards to the African soldiers, did not exist unchallenged. Poley points to theatrical performances like *Harem Nights* (1920) in Berlin to demonstrate that eroticized images of pleasurable black-white sexuality were also being produced. GÃ¤rtner, in particular, sought to control these images. Rape became a powerful metaphor employed not only to describe sexual relationships between African soldiers and German women, but also to stand in for the political fate of Germany. From 1922 onwards, occupation was increasingly viewed as a form of colonization. The former colonial power Germany had been reduced to the ranks of the colonized. Worse still, it suffered the humiliation of being occupied by African colonial soldiers, a situation that destabilized and inverted colonial racial hierarchies and called into question concepts of racial difference. The African troops, however, were frequently denied the status of active subjects and were conceived of as mere instruments of French power. This state of affairs led to a critique of French colonialism, rather than criticism of the system of colonialism itself. In comparison with Germans, the French were thought to be poor colonial rulers, unable to discipline and civilize their colonial subjects. Their employment of African soldiers in Europe led to charges that they were endangering existing power structures in the metropole.

Poley's book is a fascinating read and has much to offer students and researchers of German culture and literature as well as those interested in the effects of colonialism upon metropolitan society. Aside from the author's novel interpretation of Ewers's literature, a particular strength of the book is its readability, which is highlighted by Poley's ability to lay out his main arguments succinctly at the beginning and end of each chapter. Both sections provide many examples of what Marcia Klotz has referred to as the "lingering power of ideology of empire."[2] In the postwar period, Germans continued to conceptualize their world in terms of colonialist categories–in spite of the fact that Germany was no longer a colonial power. A consequence of this transformation was the disappearance of rigid distinctions between colony and metropole. At the same time, however, distinctions between the self and the other were reinforced. Inverted fantasies resulted in such images as a Germany colonized by Africans. They also led to a reassessment of (among other things) racial categories. What disrupts the flow of the book, however, is the format. Although each section of the book works well on its own, Poley appears reluctant to make connections between them; instead he often leaves readers to draw their own conclusions. It is only in the all-too-brief concluding remarks that form the final chapter that Poley makes an effort to unite the two sections. The end result is that *Decolonization in Germany* remains split into two distinct and, ultimately, uneven parts.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Marion Knobloch, *Hanns Heinz Ewers. Bestseller-Autor in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: Tectum, 2002); Stefanie Stockhorst, "PopulÃ¤re Kulturvermittlung nach 1900. Selbst- und Fremdbilder in den Reiseberichten von Hanns Heinz Ewers," in *Fallstudien zu Wegen ins deutschsprachige System*, ed. Florian Krobb and Sabine StrÃ¼mper-Krobb (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 2001), pp. 167-181; Ulrike Brandenburg, *Hanns Heinz Ewers: (1871-1943). Von der Jahrhundertwende zum Dritten Reich–ErzÃ¤hlungen, Dramen, Romane 1903-1932. Von der Genese des Arioheros aus der Retorte: Die Gestaltwerdung einer 'deutschen Reichsutopie'* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003).

[2]. Marcia Klotz, "The Weimar Republic: A Postcolonial State in a Still-Colonial World," in *Germany's Colonial Pasts*, ed. Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz and Lora Wildenthal (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 135-147, quote on p. 145.

Citation: Robbie Aitken. Review of Poley, Jared, *Decolonization in Germany: Weimar Narratives of Colonial Loss and Foreign Occupation*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12302