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Impossible Missions? German Economic, Military, and Humanitarian Efforts in Africa (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Impossible Missions? German Economic, Military, and Humanitarian Efforts in Africa. By

Unlike many scholars who have entered the field in recent years, Nina Berman is no newcomer to German colonial studies. Almost a decade ago, Berman published an important study of German Orientalist scholars and writers in the early twentieth century, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus, und Moderne: zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), which addressed the limited coverage of German-language sources in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Berman's book appeared in the same year as Susanne Zantop's influential study of post-Enlightenment German colonial discourse, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and the Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) and one year prior to Russell A. Berman's provocative critique of postcolonial approaches to the study of German cultural encounters with the non-European world, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). With the publication of *Impossible Missions*, Berman solidifies her reputation as an assiduous documenter and keen critic of the diversity of German cultural and textual encounters with the non-Western world.

In the process, Berman shifts emphasis – and geographic location – by advocating a more historical approach to German cultural representations of colonial and postcolonial Africa that pays attention to the complex “material realities” of the German-African encounter beyond questions of race, ethnicity, and national identity (6–7). Berman argues that a postcolonial fixation on questions of biological racism, Social Darwinism, and Western imperial rivalry has led scholars to underestimate the importance of economic, technological, and cultural discourses of shared Western superiority that informed the thinking of a number of German citizens who had the “good intentions” (1) of modernizing Africa by improving the material and spiritual wellbeing of its indigenous inhabitants, with decidedly mixed (though usually negative) results.

To illustrate the potential of her approach, Berman assembles a series of five “particular case studies” (2) between the years 1860 and 2003 that “leap” (16) over the Imperial German colonial time period (1884–1919) and twelve-year period of Nazi rule (1933–1945) in favor of actors and locations who are not marked by discourses of Germanic or Aryan racial dominance. Each case study is devoted to someone whose actions embody a specific German “mission” (18) to Africa: Max Eyth, the aspiring young engineer in 1860s Egypt; Albert Schweitzer, the crusading medical doctor in French Equatorial Africa; Ernst Udet, the flying ace turned celebrity stunt pilot in Tanganyika; Bodo Kirchhoff, the testosterone-driven novelist and travel writer in 1990s Somalia; and socially-conscious German male and female tourists in Diani Beach, Kenya. Each chapter contains extended sections of textual analysis, primarily of autobiographical accounts or (in the case of the tourists) questionnaires and memoirs, which are bracketed by historical context subsections of varying depth and chronological breadth. On occasion, Berman’s decisions on what to include in her historical subsections appear targeted primarily at German literary scholars, not historians of colonial or postcolonial Africa. The background material in the Schweitzer chapter, for example, includes information on fifteenth century Portuguese exploration of Gabon as well as Imperial Germany’s anti-Catholic and anti-Socialist laws from the 1870s and 80s, when her presentation might have benefited more from a comparative perspective on colonial medical and missionary practices by referencing the historical scholarship of David Arnold, Philip D. Curtin, Wolfgang Eckart, Pascal Grosse, Klaus Bade, or Jean and John Comaroff.

It is in the textual analysis sections, however, where Berman’s approach really shines. Because the case studies are carefully chosen with an eye to the rich layers of meaning that complicate the eventual outcomes of the individual German-African encounters documented, each chapter makes for extremely rewarding reading. Thus Eyth is a budding poet who writes evocatively of the interaction between man and machine in the Nile delta; Schweitzer is a religious zealot who defends the merits of the “civilizing mission” as late as the 1960s; Udet is

an amateur ethnographer who documents Masai culture using photography, film, and the written word; Kirchhoff is an eyewitness to...



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