MOBILIZING GERMAN WOMEN AGAINST ‘CULTURAL DRUNKENNESS’: Rassenhygiene and Colonial Discourse in the Prussian-Polish Provinces, 1890-1914
A Research Agenda

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Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference, August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Historiographical Context: “The Colonial Turn”

The growing field of postcolonial and poststructural studies during the last few decades has made an important impact on the analysis of German colonialism notwithstanding the fact that Germany formally held overseas colonies during a short period of time, from 1884-1918. Contrary to Fischerite, Bielefeldian, and East German interpretations of the Kaisereich period (the first two being major exponents of the so-called “social imperialism” thesis), this cultural approach to imperial and colonial studies has given us the opportunity to investigate the effect that the colonial encounter had on Germany’s own cultural productions. Using the tools provided by cultural studies, a mounting literature on German colonialism and the “imperialist imagination” has begun to question the construction of a closed, white, German identity that has largely ignored the impact that the overseas colonies had shaping and contesting not only Germany’s national imaginaries, but also gender and class relations.¹

Moving away from considering empire as merely economic and social modes of production to seeing the colonial process in its entirety as the production, consumption, and reconstitution of culture itself has epistemologically transformed the histories formerly told about the German overseas colonies and has resulted in fruitful analyses tackling questions intersecting categories of gender, class, and race. Previous discourses on German colonialism (both West and East German schools of thought) not only failed to recognize the importance of the colonial experience in the
construction of subjectivities, but also tended to establish sharp distinctions between political and cultural transformations in Germany and the works of Germans abroad. German imperialism was understood as a one-sided process, either as “the result of endogenous socio-economic and political forces, and not as a reaction to exogenous pressures…” or as the inevitable result of capital interests. Thus, the idea of “marginal colonialism” (i.e. that “German colonialism was of but marginal importance to the Wilhelminian Reich”) was very prevalent in the literature of the 1980s and it is still a main point of contention these days.

The turn to colonial studies, in German historiography, has not only represented a major methodological shift in the way recent literature reevaluates Imperial Germany, but has also brought back important debates about continuities/ruptures between this period and Nazi Germany. Contrary to early approaches that explained the rise of Nazism as the persistence of “pre-industrial” power in the political system (the Sonderweg or “special path” that Germany took in comparison to other “healthier” Western societies), new analyses tend to locate the origins of the Final Solution in the scientific ideas of social engineering and population policies that were advanced during the imperial era. Being the colonies “laboratories of knowledge,” where extreme violence, discriminatory, and exclusionary policies went hand in hand with discourses of progress and “civilizing mission,” scholars are drawing special attention to the emergence of racialized discourses and how these reverberated into metropolitan societies.

On the one hand, due to the great emphasis that colonial authorities placed on issues of race and population policies, the (post)colonial framework has proven to be very useful inserting women’s subjectivities into the history of Imperial Germany. The question of race opens up venues to investigate a whole array of debates around notions of masculinity and femininity and sexual inequalities that not only affected the management of the colonies, but that had a tremendous effect mobilizing men and women at home. On the other hand, by pointing out at the complex interrelations between the overseas colonies and metropolitan societies, the (post)colonial framework also helps us put into perspective the social conflicts experienced by minority groups in the continental realm of empire and gives us tools to understand the ideology and images that people used at the time to describe these cultural tensions.

My research interests could be situated in the “colonial turn” that I have described for the German historiography of the Kaiserreich. The purpose of my research project is to look at issues of health—especially discourses of Rassenhygiene at the turn of the century— related to the
Prussian-Polish provinces in order to uncover similarities and differences in the colonial constructions of subjectivities in the German borderlands and overseas colonies. I would like to examine these two geographical spaces together not seeking to locate “ideological origins” of Nazi Germany, but to better understand the complexity of colonial othering, the politics of exclusion/inclusion, and the specific power effects of class, gender, and race. I argue that as part of the Enlightenment process (i.e. the search for knowledge through the systematic ordering and mapping of peoples and the natural world), colonial images and stereotypes tended to read onto Polish-German cultural and political relationships in the nineteenth century.

The purpose of my presentation is to outline a research agenda for the history of the Prussian-Polish provinces that will allow us to take into account the desires, cultural anxieties, and paradoxes of German/Polish political incursions and people’s actions. Moving away from a nationalist approach (i.e. the study of how distinct nationalities were produced), I want to use the theoretical insights of colonial/imperial studies to understand the cultural dynamics that took place in these territories during a period of rapid transformation in German history. The study of imperialism, insofar as it transcends the confines of nation-state historiography, helps us understand the diverse and overlapping political interactions between the so-called “metropole” and colonies, and amongst the colonies themselves. This approach opens up the possibility of establishing comparative analyses between territories that may seem unrelated, but that are brought together through investigating the ambivalent discourse of civilizing projects.
Colonial Discourse in the Eastern Borderlands

‘Whatever may have led me individually here, I stand here now as one of the conquerors who, in the behalf of free labor and civilization, have usurped the dominion of the country from a weaker race. There is an old warfare between us and the Slavonic tribes; and we feel with pride that culture, industry, and credit are on our side. Whatever the Polish proprietors around us may now be...every dollar that they can spend, they have made, directly or indirectly, by German intelligence. Their wild flocks are improved by our breeds...’

-Anton Wohlfart in *Debit and Credit*, 1855

Well he [Count Gustav Adolph] knew from what proud race had sprung the little plant he was about to engraft upon the ancient oak of the Dynars, and well he knew also the strange wild nature of the little germ he was about to blend with his own race. ‘Polish blood! Bah! This but a fable drawn from the poison of the story teller, who maintains [sic] ‘blood will tell.’ Polish blood that circles through German veins will cool itself and forget its source. It is not blood, but education, that creates a nationality. Not the past, but the present, that dominates the character.

-Count Gustav Adolph in *Polish Blood: A Romance*, 1889

In *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870*, Susanne Zantop studies the participation of Germans in colonial projects, calling into question the time frame that historians have traditionally demarcated for German colonialism (1884-1918). The purpose of the book is to explore the colonialist subjectivity as it was manifested in the literature prior to Germany’s national unification. Zantop analyses German colonial discourse through stories of sexual conquest, love, and domestic relations that Germans produced reacting to other European nations’ colonial projects. Despite Zantop’s contribution to our understanding of colonial images and how they helped shape German colonial and national identity, throughout the period that she labels “precolonial,” she does not even take into account possible “colonial fantasies” developing in the Prussian/German Eastern borders.

One of the novels that perfectly fit into Zantop’s framework of German “colonial fantasies” is Gustav Freytag’s *Soll und Haben (Debit and Credit)* published in 1855. The novel not only provides us with an interesting view on the cultural interactions among different social and ethnic groups, but it also gives us a racialized account of Polish subjects in which the Eastern borderlands are portrayed as a primitive, chaotic, wild space, begging for German colonial incursion.

Set for the most part in the borderlands between the Kingdom of Poland and Germany, *Soll und Haben* tells the story of a merchant (Anton Wolhfahrt), who, in the name of a downtrodden noble family, helped to defend a German settlement amidst the Polish revolution of 1848. By portraying the Slavs as members of a “weaker race” and the borderlands as a symptomatic place in need of German political intervention, Freytag’s novel gives currency to a set of stereotypes about the Poles that allows us to better understand later nineteenth-century German fears of
“polonization,” which were triggered by urban explosion and the inflow of Polish migrant workers. It also helps us understand some of the political debates that were brought up within the same colonial movement: political groups favoring the founding of colonies for economic purposes and those favoring settlement colonies for German cultural advancement.18

Moreover, Gustav Freytag’s novel represents an important source to look at issues of subjectivity. Throughout the novel, the border represents a space where identities can be challenged and redefined. For example, it is in the German settlement, amidst Poles, where Lenore (the daughter of a German noble family) becomes masculinized, removed from the domesticity that German women found at home.19 The values of domesticity are represented through another character: Sabine, the daughter of a merchant that Anton chooses over Lenore to marry after returning from his adventures in the East.

One of the most important elements of Soll und Haben is that, in the author’s attempt to define a German identity and what the German “home” is, the hero of the story, Anton Wolhfart (Wolhfahrt= welfare), constantly displaced himself from the capital to the peripheral lands, even going beyond the frontier. Along Anton’s way and in his multiple metamorphoses, spaces and subjects turned out to be both ambiguously differentiated and interrelated. Through this interrelationship of spaces and subjects (some of the characters even represented main colonialist interests20) one can see how these geographies played a primary and interactive role defining the boundaries of German subjectivity and political imagination.

A more complicated colonial discourse regarding Polish subjectivity is presented in Nataly Baroness von Eschstruth’s Polish Blood: A Romance. This novel predates the literary movement of the Ostmarkenromane, which became very popular after the 1890’s in response to government’s relaxation of the Germanizing policies of the Prussian-Polish provinces.21 Different to the post-1890 novel addressing the Eastern frontier, Von Eschstruth’s novel does not represent a conservative anti-Polish program calling for a stronger Polenpolitik, but it is an ambiguous discourse between admiration and rejection of Poland’s national cause.

The story of Polish Blood takes place in East Prussia during the Polish uprisings of 1830 and 1860. It is about Janek/Hans, a Pole raised by a German count, and his struggles winning over his foster sister’s acceptance and love. Contrary to Gustav Freytag’s novel in which the image of the Pole is negatively fixed around notions of backwardness and treachery, in Von Eschruth’s
novel the Pole is more like a noble savage, good hearted and able to be culturally regenerated. The novel vacillates between discourses of biology and education in determining a subject’s racial and national belonging (“Polish blood never denies itself” vs. “German education will not deny itself”). At the end, there is a happy medium between the two: Janek/Hans does not renounce to either Polish or German identity. However, the somewhat incestuous love of his sister forbids him from joining the Polish uprising. Interestingly, while German men conquer the Eastern frontier with weapons as Freytag suggests, German women conquer with more civil manners: love.

In the post-1890 Ostmarkenromane, marriage would not serve as a viable option solving political/colonial tensions in the Eastern borderlands. According to Kristin Kopp’s work, most of these novels tended in fact to use the topic of marriage, normally to a Polish woman, to underline the threat against German cultural values. German men were portrayed as victims of the Polish national cause, which used the Polish women to emasculate them. These novels coincided with an emergent discourse in the sciences of racial degeneration—aux particularly by the then recently established Rassenhygiene—that was common at the turn of the century and that would target especially women in the experts’ quest to culturally and biologically uplift Germany. In this context, the “horrors” of mixed marriages, so universal in the overseas colonies, were being echoed in the descriptions of German-Polish national struggles.

**Colonial Pathologies at Home: Rassenhygiene, Gender, and Innere Kolonisation**

Splendid men still assume that our job lies beyond terrestrial goals; others think that they would find it in far oceans, in Africa or eastern Asia. We have recognized the deception of such illusion; we understand that it is valid to dress up in daily tedious habits and do service here, where we are, on the old motherlands and even more on their inhabitants!

> -Willibald Hentschel, Vom Aufsteigenden Leben: Ziele der Rassen-Hygiene, 1910. 32

Outlining the goals of the new “scientific spirit” in Germany at the turn of the century, Willibald Hentschel—a radical racial propagandist—advocated for the innere Kolonisation (internal colonization) of the Eastern Borderlands as a way to halt the Slavic demographic explosion that was threatening to weaken the cultural soundness of Germans in these territories. Instead of embarking on colonial projects abroad, he proposed that Germans should remain in the motherland and become engaged in the uplifting of their race.
In Hentschel’s utopia for renewing the German race, women played a crucial role for their biological function of reproducing Germaneness. In his view, the nation’s greatest danger was the propagation of “lower” ethnic/racial groups, especially Poles and Jews. Referring to the “Slavic east,” Hentschel stated that:

[The] so-boasted birth surplus [that people notice] comes from, as one recognizes through exact examination, the lowest ethnical stratum of the people; the Slavic east is strongly involved in it. German women go crazy and rave instead of giving birth [more literal: lying in the pain of giving birth]; they sway in it, in our ruin, in the increasing cultural drunkenness.23

By referring to German women and not men in this quote, Hentschel was clearly assigning guilt to women for the level of decadence that Germany was in; but, at the same time, he was declaring them the redeemers of the nation.

Hentschel’s solution to the demographic problem was to create breeding colonies in rural areas. In 1904 he published his book, Mittgart, ein Weg zur Erneuerung der germanischen Rasse, advocating for the establishment of communities in which polygamy would be practiced to better the German race.24 The Mittgart colony was envisioned as a type of archaic society in the sense that sexual practices would be more akin with the natural order (i.e. marriages would be temporary, just for the purpose of conceiving), but it would be under the supervision of medical experts. The population of the colony would be selected according to desirable biological traits, the number of women outnumbering the number of men by ten, and communal work would be divided by gender.

It is interesting to mark here the importance of the overseas colonies framing Hentschel’s project of race renewal, especially in light of the colonial debates in Togo over polygamy, which intensified at the beginning of the twentieth century.25 The colonial government and missionary groups had in many cases very different and competing agendas over colonial subjects. While the colonial state tolerated some local customs, such as polygamy, as long as they did not interfere with public order, the missions—more concerned with issues of morality— wanted to eliminate or curtail these cultural forms.26
Following the idea that polygamy would increase the chances to create more biologically apt progenies, Willibald Hentschel favored the sexual practices (Vielehe) of African peoples, especially the Togoneger. In his view, a combination of polygamy and the reintroduction of slave hunting would ideally put a halt to the physical decay of certain African groups. Nevertheless, without the necessary measures to control the “superior conditions” of selective breeding (heroische Auslesebedingungen) polygamy represented a worse evil than monogamy.

Despite the claims of cultural superiority of the Aryan race, which is overtly present in Hentschel’s discourse, the Naturvölker still provided the basic tools for the Mittgart utopia. The Kulturmenschen should learn from the Africans that the main biological function of sexual relations is procreation and that following Togolese (and Massai) woman’s custom of sexual abstinence during pregnancy and lactation period would be ultimately better for childrearing. In Hentschel’s discourse of Rassenhygiene, the ideal woman was desexualized, relegated to the domestic sphere of motherhood, while the ideal man was hyper-virile(ized). On the one hand, he intended to politically mobilize women by portraying them as victims of Germany’s social mores, in which men’s natural sexual drive vilified women as objects of pleasure; but on the other hand, he assigned guilt to women, not men, for not understanding their partner’s nature.

Although Hentschel’s ideas of uplifting German “race” were highly criticized at the time, especially by other members of the Racial Hygiene Society, the fact that women were portrayed as national redeemers vis-à-vis the so-called “inferior races” opened up spaces for their political participation. Responding to the perceived state of “cultural drunkenness” that Germany was in, völkisch thinkers such as Willibald Hentschel, were ready to co-opt the feminist movement for their own national and masculine utopias. Therefore, analyzing debates over the “Slavic/Polish question” not only gives us interesting insights on Germans’ fears and anxieties, but also allows us to see the political tensions between competitive colonial projects and the tensions of defining German subjectivity in relation to Imperial Germany’s multiple others.


For example, H. Glenn Penny, in his book about ethnology and museums in Imperial Germany, argues that scholars examining late-nineteenth-century anthropology are primarily concerned about either “locating antecedents to the racial and biological theories promoted by German anthropologists during Weimar and Nazi periods, or they have sought to expose ethnologists connections to imperialist desires and colonialist policies.” In doing so, many works have failed to pay enough attention to the local context and the people in Germany, to whom ethnologists were presenting these cultural and colonial artifacts. Colonialism was important, but not the most important factor in developing the field. H. Glenn Penny, Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 3.


Lora Wildenthal, German Women for Empire, 1884-1945 (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2001) and Marcia Klotz, “White Women and the Dark Continent: Gender and Sexuality in German Colonial...
Discourse from the Sentimental Novel to the Fascist Film” (Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 1994).

One of the first people to point out the interrelationship between colonial projects and “inner colonization” is Woodruff D. Smith. In his study about the ideological origins of Lebensraum, Woodruff D. Smith shows how in the 1890s the ideas of “migrationist colonialism” in the overseas colonies became intertwined with the concept of “inner colonization” against multiethnic populations (especially the Polish threat) in eastern Prussia. See Smith’s article, “Friedrich Ratzel and the Origins of Lebensraum,” German Studies Review 3 (1980): 51-68. See also, The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

I am referring specifically to the territories that Prussia annexed from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after it was partitioned three times in the eighteenth century (1772, 1793, 1795) and after the Napoleonic defeat in 1815: Danzig (Gdansk), Thorn (Torun), Posen (Poznan), Pomerania (Pomorze), and Silesia (Slask). These territories were multiethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual, composed of Poles, Germans, Kashubians, Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century, a majority of Polish communities could be found especially in the provinces of Poznan and eastern Silesia, and a majority of Kashubians in Pomerania. See Richard Blanke, Prussian Poland in the German Empire (1871-1900) (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1981) and William W. Hagen, Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772-1914 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

An important work, analyzing gender issues and colonial discourse in the Prussian-Polish provinces, is Kristin Kopp’s dissertation, “Contesting Borders: German Colonial Discourse and the Polish Eastern Territories.” Using literary works, especially the Ostmarkenromane (novels set in the Eastern frontier), Kopp studies the rhetorical strategies that were used in constructing the Polish territories as a colonial space. Kopp’s analysis represents a key intervention in Polish-German studies for two main reasons. First, it analyzes the tensions in which the Eastern border was reinvented as a colonial space in the nineteenth century, and second; it brings interesting conceptual parallels between Germany’s Polenpolitik and the works of Germans in the overseas colonies. See Kristin Leigh Kopp, “Contesting Borders: German Colonial Discourse and the Polish Eastern Territories” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001).

I agree with Mary Louise Pratt when she asserts that “Academic scholarship on the Enlightenment, resolutely Euro-centered, has often neglected Europe’s aggressive colonial and imperial ventures as models, inspirations, and testing grounds for modes of social discipline which, imported back into Europe in the eighteenth century, were adapted to construct the bourgeois order.” Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 36.


19 For example, interacting with some Poles in a festival, Anton remarked how “[t]he rapid movements and strong excitements that were natural to the Polish girls made Lenore wild, and Anton regretted to see, unfeminine…” Freytag 347.

20 There are two characters directly attached to the colonial enterprise abroad: Herr von Fink, a true agriculturalist, whose uncle in America sent for him to learn the merchant duties when he was fourteen years old and Baumann, a true missionary, whose duties at home made him stay in Germany. Towards the end of the novel, both characters ended up fulfilling their dreams symbolically right after Anton completed his own colonial experience in the Polish border. Fink took charge of Anton’s agricultural colony in the Eastern frontier and Baumann left to the overseas colonies. Upon leaving, Baumann stated, “I can no longer delay…my conscience protests against it. I go from hence to the London Training College, and thence wherever they choose me to send me. I confess that I have a preference for Africa: there are certain kings there…that I cannot think wholly ill of. There must be some hope of conversion among them. I trust to wean them from that heathenish slave-trade. They may make use of their people at home in planting sugar-cane and cultivating rice. In a couple of years I will send you, by way of London, the first sample of our produce.” Freytag 533.

21 For a very insightful analysis of the Osmarkenromane, see Kopp.

22 "Noch immer währen treffliche Menschen, unsere Aufgabe läge jenseits aller irdischen Ziele, andere glauben, sie in fernen Ozeanen, in Afrika oder Ostasien gefunden zu haben. Wir erkannten das Trügerische solcher Wolkenspiegelungen; wir begriffen, daß es gelte, die graue Alltagskutte anzuziehen und Dienst zu tun, hier, wo wir stehen, an der alten mütterlichen Erde und mehr noch an ihren Bewohnern!“ See Willibald Hentschel, Vom Aufsteigenden Leben: Ziele der Rassen-Hygiene (Leipzig: Fritz Eckardt Verlag, 1910) 107. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

23 „Jener vielgerühmte Geburtenüberschuß stammt, wie man bei genauem Zusehen erkennt, aus der ethnisch untersten Volkschicht; der Slawische Osten ist stark daran beteiligt. Germanenfrau schwärmt und rast, statt zu kreißen; sie taumelt in ihr, in unser Verderben, in die zunehmende kulturelle Besoffenheit.“ Hentschel 45.


25 Arthur J. Knoll briefly describes the political tensions between the colonial state and the missions over polygamy and Islam in his historical survey of German imperial rule in Togo. See Togo under Imperial Germany, 1884-1914 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978) 112-117.


28 For Hentschel, Islam had an important role teaching Togolese these conditions.

29 See Roger Chickering, “‘Casting their Gaze more Broadly’: Women’s Patriotic Activism in Imperial Germany,” Past and Present 118 (February 1988): 156-185.