

Press, Steven. *Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2021. 1-336 pages. Hardback, \$35.00.

Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa is one of the latest books to investigate German imperialism in Southwest Africa as it centers on the importance of the diamond industry to the German colonial economy before and during World War One. Steven Press examines the development of Lüderitz Bay, German policies towards Africans, stock markets, American consumption of diamonds, German use of Antwerp for cutting and distributing diamonds, smuggling, and the German competition against De Beers. Press seeks to challenge the notion that “German colonialism was brief and minimal” (p. 231) by centering on Germany’s role in the diamond industry and arguing that it “shaped the German outlook on overseas imperialism and globalization before the First World War” (p. 9). Press recognizes that the issue of “*how* German violence unfolds” has been explored in previous academic studies, so he interrogates “*why* Germans pursued” such policies with a focus on diamonds and Southwest Africa (p. 9). Although not the primary focus of the book, Press also explores the connections between German colonization in Southwest Africa and Nazism and the Holocaust. This is done by examining German perpetration of colonial violence and manifestations of anti-Semitism that surfaced over concerns of smuggling and criticism directed at Bernhard Dernburg and others for their respective handling of the diamond industry.

One strength of *Blood and Diamonds* relates to its ability to chart the transnational nature of the diamond industry and some of the nuances of German colonial practices as frictions developed both within Germany and between the metropole and Southwest Africa. Press identifies the ways colonists were at odds with German colonial policies such as the development of the Regie and restricting access to a designated area known as the Forbidden Zone. Press demonstrates the changing perception of Lüderitz Bay that came with “diamond fever” and

subsequently shows how diamonds affected the dynamics of the settlement as it led to population growth and the development of infrastructure. He notes the racial and ethnic composition of the settlers consisted of many non-Germans and explains how reliant the colony was on Indigenous labor. This allows for an examination of discourses surrounding cultural outsiders, which is important when examining the narratives that developed around smuggling. Press also characterizes the German partnership with De Beers as “short-sighted” as it “undermined their own vision of a ‘German diamond empire’” (p. 208). This point on short-sightedness is further exemplified through a discussion of World War I, as high diamond prices provided an incentive for the Regie to sell those in its possession, which created diamond shortages for German military purposes.

Press presents a strong case that revisions need to be undertaken to assess the importance of the colonial economy to Germany as he acknowledges that historians in this field have failed to fully recognize this. To support his point, Press utilizes an assortment of newspapers from across the United States to show how diamonds, marriage engagements and rings were discussed, which helped fuel American consumption of diamonds. Press also devoted a chapter to the trading of colonial stock shares, which had a transformative effect on the German stock market for a brief period as people got caught up in the rush to buy shares. This trading had “selective benefits” for only a few while many others fell victim to fraudulent schemes, which resulted in dire social and financial consequences for them (p. 150). This connects to one of the larger issues Press repeatedly returns to regarding who benefitted from German colonialism in Southwest Africa, as he notes it “did not so much create wealth for average citizens as channel it away from, and around, them” (p. 6).

Press also focuses on German policies in the diamond industry to uncover “a new insight about possible continuities between German colonial violence and the Holocaust” (p. 232), although the use of the word *possible* suggests this is more exploratory than firm conclusion-making. Press attempts this by outlining some of the harsh conditions and indignities the Ovambos experienced in extracting diamonds that contributed to high death totals. He notes this labor was overseen by those who had engaged in genocidal violence against the Herero and Nama, and subsequently outlines some of the abuse the Ovambos were subjected to by focusing on the experiences of a male named Juvera. Press also draws correlations between criticisms of policies in the diamond industry and anti-Semitism, which subsequently shaped a discourse in which “many of the diamond business’s non-Jews *became* Jewish” (p. 159). This point is further fleshed out by analyzing the attacks on Dernburg as “his identity [was] reshaped in the public eye” to that of a Jew despite his baptism (p. 159). This is an interesting component to studies on the Holocaust and German colonialism in Southwest Africa, although a greater discussion of the continuity thesis is needed in the text and, although outside of the bounds of Press’s main period of investigation, a greater examination of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s is required. Nevertheless, this presents an engaging avenue for further research and the concluding section of the book establishes some connections between German colonialism and Nazism in Lüderitz Bay and Germany.

Overall, *Blood and Diamonds* presents an engaging examination into an important aspect of German colonialism in the pre-WWI period that has required revisions as it masterfully weaves together different facets of German colonialism and its involvement in the diamond industry. Although the use of American newspapers was mentioned above, Press engages in a significant amount of research in archives and libraries in Germany, the United Kingdom, South

Africa, Namibia and the United States to uncover some of the nuances and dynamics of the diamond industry and colonialism in Southwest Africa. Press notes that Germans did not receive the same international criticism, particularly from the United States, that Leopold II and his administration received for its perpetration of colonial violence in the Congo. Adam Hochschild would agree and contends the Congo offered “a safe target” for international criticism since “it [did not] entail the diplomatic, trade, or military consequences” of critiquing Germany or other powerful nations perpetrating colonial violence.¹ Although both scholars offer brief explanations as to why that was the case, it invites further research as it can uncover additional layers of the German colonial experience in Southwest Africa.

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NOTE

1. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 282.
