If one were looking for a German equivalent to Cecil Rhodes, Carl Peters would be an obvious candidate. There were few individuals, either in Britain or Germany, who placed their political influence, and ultimately their own lives, so exclusively in the service of the imperial idea as these two. To quote Rhodes’s well-known sentiment, also cited by Hannah Arendt: ‘Expansion is everything. I would annex the planets if I could.’¹ For Peters, who had a much smaller colonial empire to deal with, the idea of reaching out beyond the globe would perhaps have been too fantastic, literally.² But in fact, real and imagined, and thus irrational, motives for colonial expansion were not so far removed from each other. On the contrary, colonial fantasies played an important part in the global expansion of the imperial powers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

In Economy and Society, Max Weber had already pointed out that imperialism, by definition, was a chronic process of conquest, consisting of continuing annexation. The establishment of new colonies, the re-conquest of old ones, and the wars that constantly flared up as a result turned out to be ends in themselves. Ostensibly about trade, access to raw materials, Christian mission, political and economic domination, and military bases, colonial expansion also met a need to seek out the familiar among the alien, a lost home abroad. Carl Peters repeatedly hinted at this in his writings, even if only implicitly, and Cecil Rhodes’s idealization of South Africa had no equal. In this sense, the imperial propagandists around 1900 clearly recognized that a relationship existed between nation and expansion, one to which recent research has been paying more attention, namely, the relationship between national, if not regional, ties, and the ‘natural’

¹ Hannah Arendt, Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft (Munich, 2001; first edn. 1951), p. 286.
will for imperial conquest. National affiliation, which, in the case of Peters was cultivated by exaggerating local ties—for example, by having a colonial monument to himself erected on Heligoland—was directly related to imperial identity. Hegel’s world spirit thus found its counterpart in those world-political concepts which the European balance of power system had already perceived as too narrow, and politically too inflexible.

National history and colonial history complemented each other. They were equally parts of what Peters called the ‘titanic struggle’ for ‘enough elbow room’. These quotations are taken from the penultimate issue of the journal Deutsche Kolonialzeitung, which ceased publication in the spring of 1943. It referred to Peters in order to equate Nazi Lebensraum policy, which preached the need for territory for natural expansion, with colonial policy. This was by no means completely far-fetched. Walter Frank, President of the Reichsinstitut für Geschichte, edited a three-volume edition of Carl Peters’s collected works, published between 1943 and 1944. The most celebrated representative of Nazi historiography, he considered the discipline as an ideologically heightened ‘fighting science’. Frank praised Peters as the pioneer of Lebensraum. The dashing colonial hero fitted only too well into the image that Nazism had of colonial rule: an empire was to be created because the logic of a consistently thought-out nationalism demanded it. It was no coincidence that Africa’s indigenous population saw Peters as a man with blood on his hands, an anti-hero who could have provided the model for any number of anti-colonial novels, such as Multatuli’s Max Havelaar (1860) or Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902).

Yet, for all their contemporary fame or later notoriety, it was other colonial propagandists who, from the start, captured the attention of posterity, the general public as well as the academic world—Friedrich Fabri, Heinrich Schnee, Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden, and Ernst von Weber, to name just a few. Peters, by contrast, was, and frequently still is, described in the literature as a psychopath. However, this is the man who wanted to bring to Germany what he had seen France and Britain as having long since achieved: a national colonial policy which was taken for granted, and which required no justification for its function of transcending national borders through imperial expansion, and thus created an imperial mentality. Peters believed this was necessary for Germany in order first to overcome
the peculiarities of the German Empire, and secondly, to give it a realistic chance in the struggle of the powers to secure a place in the sun. In short, colonial policy, as Peters saw it, was not a project which, like so many others of its time, looked back to the past. Instead, it aimed directly for the future. The dream of a German empire was, to some extent, a colonial fantasy that was not totally separated from reality.

But how does one write the biography of an imperial propagandist of this sort, whose life was the subject of a film made during the Third Reich with Hans Albers in the leading role, but who has held little interest for historians in the years before and since? Arne Perras, whose study is based on an Oxford dissertation of 1999, takes a traditional approach, following strict chronological order in recounting personal and political events, and including the most important professional stations of the subject’s life. Any other approach would presumably not have allowed him to do justice to the complex networks in Carl Peters’s life, if his book is to be measured by the standards of a political biography. And this is clearly the author’s intention, for he could have put other criteria, such as institutional history ones relating to the Alldertse Verband (Pan-German League), or the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft (German Colonial Society) at the heart of his rich and well-sourced study. For Perras, however, Peters as a person is the crucial factor.

Born in 1856 as the son of a clergyman, Peters studied history and political economy, finishing his studies with a thesis on Schopenhauer. Willenswelt und Weltwille (1883) pays homage to the metaphysics of what can be done, and later found an equivalent in colonial policy, in particular, in considerations of settlement policy. After founding the Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation (Society for German Colonization) in 1884, Peters, on behalf of the Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft (German East Africa Company) which grew out of the Society for German Colonization, acquired many of the coastal areas which were to form the basis of the later colony of German East Africa, covering an area of about 140,000 square kilometres. Bismarck, like the majority of the German population, was not at first enthusiastic about, or prepared for, such imperial adventures. But in 1885 Bismarck obtained for Peters an imperial letter of safe-conduct for the new colonial areas, which Peters attempted to extend to Uganda in connection with the spectacular liberation of
Emin Pasha. This, of course, failed because it was contrary to the terms of the Heligoland–Zanzibar Treaty of 1890. Unlike Britain and France, Germany became a colonial power overnight, so to speak. The following years were marked by a constant up and down in Peters’s political fortunes. German Imperial Commissioner in the Kilimanjaro region from 1891, he was dismissed two years later because of strong criticism of his arbitrary and often cruel administration. On the instigation of August Bebel in particular, the Reichstag considered these accusations in 1896, whereupon Peters was permanently relieved of all duties and dismissed from the service of the state.

When Peters was forced to resign from the presidency of the German Colonial Society he moved to London, where he established a society for the exploitation of Rhodesia’s goldfields. He did not return to Germany until after war broke out in 1914. The years out of Germany, spent partly in Britain and partly in Africa, certainly contributed to Peters’s view of British imperialism as a model, but mostly as a rival. It was not too late for his successful rehabilitation in Germany, but this did not happen until the Weimar Republic, and especially the Third Reich, when a revisionist view was taken of the colonial period. Peters died in 1918, before he could take part in it personally. Walter Frank, however, took on the task of declaring Peters to be the greatest German pioneer of colonialism, in spite of his wholly unacceptable colonial administration and policies, and of the fact that he had several native villages burned down and his African concubine hanged.

The following could, in fact, well be the most interesting chapters in Carl Peters’s biography: first, the continued survival of his imperial ideas after his death; secondly, his incalculable significance for the revisionist view of colonialism between 1918 and 1945; and thirdly, the duration of German imperialism, which, for a long time, scholars have not restricted to the core period of between 1884–5 and the First World War. Important waymarks of imperial thinking have been discovered before 1866. And in addition to the politically motivated revisionist ideas of colonialism after the loss of colonies in 1918, colonial fantasies, as mentioned above, which are interesting from a sociology of culture point of view, have also been identified after the Second World War. The children’s song ‘Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger’ is just one of many examples of the long-term impact of the
imperial period. But what part does Peters’s political biography play in this context? Arne Perras, whose book only touches upon this question in a few places and in two brief concluding chapters, would have made his study even more attractive if he had placed it into a larger context, examining Carl Peters and the problem of German imperialism as a whole, as well as his place in modern and current German and international research on imperialism.

Carl Peters was characterized by a restlessness which is frequently found in fictional colonial heroes, to mention only Kim in Rudyard Kipling’s eponymous novel (1901), and Mr Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Thus the colonizer, in his own life, reflected the nature of imperialism, which for its part was no less restlessly greedy for ever new expansion. In her book *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, Hannah Arendt described this phenomenon as a structural feature of both imperialism and its exponents. Both, she suggested, were obsessed with the notion that the rhythm of life could be found only in the constant acquisition of new colonial regions, and that saturation equaled death. On this point Peters was by no means purely a practitioner, even if he saw colonial practice as the only agency with the right to judge the essence of imperialism and its value. This was directed largely against the critics of colonialism, whom he accused of following what was happening on the periphery from the distance of the metropolis, and thereupon developing theories which had little to do with everyday life. On the other hand, in countless books and essays, newspaper articles and lectures, Peters repeatedly expressed his conviction that practical imperialism required a theoretical justification. It was simply a matter of the correct order.

And here the restlessness, sometimes recklessness, for which the propagandists of colonialism were criticized, was a distinct advantage, as they could present a *fait accompli*, thus de facto making imperial policy. A theoretical justification simply had to be provided afterwards, although this actually took care of itself. After all, if the law of movement, which saw every colonial expansion as fulfilling a principle preordained by nature and history, was a core element of imperial thinking, then the colonizer was merely acting as the total process of life required, indeed, demanded, of him. According to this view, imperialism was pursued for its own sake. Peters, in Schopenhauerian mode, placed imperialism in the total context of the world as an expression of the will on the one hand, and of the idea on the other,
seeing it as a consequence of the natural, sometimes metaphysically heightened, urge to approach salvation more closely by the recognition of both. In short, for Peters, imperialism was a project of modernity which was dynamically directed at the future, not the past, and expansively at the world, not integratively at the nation.

The intellectual biography of Peters, therefore, provides solid evidence to refute Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s concept of social imperialism as a vehicle for integrative nationalism. This is not the first criticism to be made of Wehler’s thesis, but it is a substantial one. Colonial expansion could, but did not necessarily, unify the nation; it could also split it. Reichstag debates at times of colonial crisis and scandal provide a convincing example, as the case of Peters shows. Arne Perras’s intention in writing his political biography of Peters may have been not to push beyond the bounds of the explanations currently accepted for the nature of German imperialism and Wilhelmmine Weltpolitik. Instead, it puts back into the foreground something that, in Heinz Gollwitzer’s words, could be called ‘world-political thinking’. Gollwitzer’s important study of the same name, which has not yet been superseded, shows where the radicalism of this thinking could lead. He quotes the words of Peters, who claimed that he knew three goals ‘which it is worth running the risk of a world war to achieve’.3 Carl Peters, however, kept these goals to himself.


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