

AHR Reviews of Books: 42K

DIERK WALTER. *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force*. Translated by Peter Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. vi, 441. Cloth \$26.95.

Understanding the history of colonial violence as a global experience seems particularly pertinent amid present-day religious extremism, Western interventions, populism, migrant crises, and racism, all of which come with complex colonial baggage. While not a chronological history of colonial violence, Dierk Walter's *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force* (first published in German in 2014) presents a global synthesis of the characteristics of organized violence, its form and logic, in Europe's imperial wars during the past five hundred years. The book's purpose is identifying overarching patterns, or interpretative common ground outlining the "family resemblance of all the violent conflicts that have ensued within the scope of European imperialism since the sixteenth century" (5). Arguing that imperialism forms a coherent structural phenomenon with its own logic of violence—which, as Walter suggests, still characterizes Western military interventions in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere today—the author sets an ambitious goal to "put forward an interpretative framework for future researchers" (11).

On the one hand, Walter deserves to be applauded for his bold undertaking. And yes, he successfully nails down several of the key common traits of colonial violence. In the first chapter, Walter maps the essentials: difficult terrain and extreme climatic conditions favoring the natives; small imperial armies controlling vast spaces and being hampered by logistical problems and poor mobility; the primacy of Western dominance, not native destruction, as the main goal; the often necessary indigenous cooperation; and the scarcity of standing battles and quick victories. In the second chapter, he moves to war aims in more detail, making a case for limited economic objectives, enforcement of obedience, and situational escalation, among other things. In the third chapter, Walter describes what happens when asymmetric military cultures face each other. This includes an interesting examination of

fear and frustration and colonial discourses of retribution, which contributed to the pedagogical nature of colonial violence and to the predisposition where the colonizers viewed the natives as unruly children in need of a lesson. Walter ends with a chapter on adaptation and learning, demonstrating that there existed many forms of tactical borrowing and transformations; he also acknowledges that the West showed a tendency for not taking imperial wars seriously, and that learning was limited and hampered by institutional negligence.

Most of the core themes that Walter makes representative of colonial violence are already familiar to military historians, but it is the global scope and the chronological depth of his discussion, as well as his drawing of examples from Spanish America, the U.S. West, the West Indies, Africa, Asia, Australia, and pretty much around the world, that sets this book apart. In some way this is also what makes it susceptible to critique, as some of the arguments appear questionable or overgeneralizing. For instance, Walter declares that there were rarely prisoners taken in colonial wars (151), thus overlooking widespread captive taking and slave trading, as well as the creation of reservations and camps wherein colonial powers forced the indigenous peoples they fought against. I also found unconvincing the claim that colonial armies' dearth of knowledge pertaining to their enemies and the operational environment was due to "wilful ignorance" (238) and a "lack of interest" (236), as it is well known that numerous army officers, and colonizers in general, possessed a fervent drive to explore, map, categorize, rename, gather artifacts from, and study the colonial domains they operated in. Also, the assertion that genocide "only came at the end of a long series of clashes over other aims," and that it was "dysfunctional and too costly" (136), poorly applies to U.S. California, German South West Africa, or to most other settler colonies. The author seems unwilling to differentiate between various types of colonialisms, lumping together exploitation colonies like the Dutch East Indies or the British Raj with settler colonial situations, where replacement of natives and the capture of their land fueled violence.

It also may bother some readers that Walter leaves out settler-driven massacres, mob lynching, labor violence, or smaller, more intimate threads of conflicts involving families and communities—colonial violence of liminal spaces and the blurring of the boundaries between “us” and “them.” Furthermore, while indigenous expansionism and empires are rightly recognized, Western armies still dominate the analysis at the expense of indigenous military cultures and logic. This may have something to do with the kinds of sources used. While it is understandable that this kind of study relies heavily on printed secondary sources, some of the choices Walter has made can be questioned. For the U.S. West he relies nearly exclusively on two of Robert M. Utley’s classic studies (which are over forty years old), while omitting the revisionist works by Juliana Barr, Ned Blackhawk, Brian DeLay, Pekka Hämäläinen, Karl Jacoby, and others.

Most likely this book will find its audience among military historians working on questions of colonialism, violence, and global history, while students may find the writing difficult to follow, especially when sentences sometimes run for ten lines or so. Despite its shortcomings, Walter’s study provides an intriguing framework for understanding the histories of colonial violence on a global scale. Walter strives to show that in colonial situations, factors such as asymmetric cultures, war aims, organization, resources, and ways of fighting produced conditions where violence was often endemic and chronic, and where war and peace proved pretty much inseparable.

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