

“Before Lebensraum meant Genocide: Autarky, Ethnic Diversity, and German Imperialism in WWI.”

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Abstract

What has motivated ethnic cleansing historically? More particularly, what is the relationship between settler colonialism and genocide? These are questions of perennial concern for scholars and policy-makers hoping to understand, predict, and arrest ethnic violence.

Lebensraum (living-space) refers to the imperial enclosure of large territories to achieve economic autarky and sustain national demographic growth. As one of the core ideological and policy aspirations of the Nazi regime, the acquisition of *Lebensraum* has been causally associated with Germany's campaigns of brutality and ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during WWII. However both the concept of “*Lebensraum*”, and the anxieties and aspirations which it expressed, were first articulated in the late nineteenth century, leading some scholars to suggest that a widely-shared obsession with resolving the German Empire's resource insecurity and bolstering its demographic growth nurtured an increasingly genocidal impulse in German imperial discourse decades before WWI or the emergence of National Socialism.

This talk will complicate the link between *Lebensraum* and genocide by closely examining influential proposals for establishing German imperial rule in Eastern Europe during WWI. German intellectuals and policy-makers in WWI were keenly interested in using the conquest of Eastern European territory to sever the German Empire's dependence on foreign imports and boost national demographic growth. However, few who sought to acquire new German “colonies” or *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe endorsed the use of ethnic cleansing in these spaces. Moreover, German imperialists who did condone ethnic cleansing as an instrument of imperial policy typically proposed it for projects or reasons unrelated to the acquisition of *Lebensraum*. Imperialists' desire for economic autarky and national demographic growth played a relatively small role in their preference for, or aversion to, the enactment of ethnic cleansing during imperial expansion.