

# Colonial Policy, Colonial Conflicts and War before 1914

By [Jonas Kreienbaum](#)

**While there were no major wars between European great powers in the decades preceding 1914, their militaries were constantly engaged, fighting in their expanding colonial empires in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. This article explains why violence and wars were a necessary by-product of colonial rule and what distinguished these so-called “savage wars”. It argues that a shared transimperial culture of colonial warfare evolved that only provided few lessons for the First World War.**

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## Introduction

For nearly half a century before the outbreak of the First World War, great powers did not engage in major wars on the European continent. Outside Europe, it was only [Tsarist Russia](#) that faced a military confrontation with another great power, [Japan](#), in [1904/05](#). Nevertheless, Europe’s militaries were gathering plenty of fighting experience between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the last conflict between two large European powers, and August 1914. While European [empires](#) were scrambling over colonies in Africa and trying to consolidate their hold over possessions in Asia, Oceania, and the Caribbean, they were constantly engaged in punitive expeditions, police actions, and outright colonial wars.

However, contemporaries rarely believed that experiences in colonial campaigns had any relevance for warfare in Europe. In its official history on the Herero and Nama war in German Southwest Africa (1904-1907), which was published immediately after the war had ended, the German General Staff, for instance, concluded that any lessons learnt would be of “very limited significance” for “European circumstances”.<sup>[1]</sup> In his 1896 “bible” of colonial or small wars British Colonel [Charles E. Callwell \(1859-1928\)](#) had likewise opined that “[t]he conduct of small wars is in fact in certain respects an art by itself, diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare”.<sup>[2]</sup> And also modern histories of colonialism and colonial warfare often assume that colonial wars are different from “conventional”, mainly understood as European inter-state wars, that they form a category of their own.<sup>[3]</sup>

Two reasons have greatly contributed to a surge of interest in studying colonial warfare in the past decades. The first is the latest round of “small wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq that spiked a new interest in learning from past experiences of fighting on the periphery.<sup>[4]</sup> The second is the more general boom in historiography on colonialism and empire since the 1990s that has also

stimulated a great deal of work on colonial warfare and violence. This is especially true for France, with its focus on its violent history of warfare in Algeria, and for Germany, where debates on genocidal violence in Namibia and its possible relations to Nazi crimes dominate recent scholarship.<sup>[5]</sup> For the British Empire, some historians have recently complained that the role of violence is not sufficiently acknowledged in accounts of British colonialism except for some prominent cases like the Indian Mutiny (1857) or Mau Mau (1952-1960).<sup>[6]</sup> However, there exist hundreds of publications, mainly by military historians, on the larger wars of the British Empire, like the Anglo-Zulu (1879) or the South African War (1899-1902).<sup>[7]</sup>

In this article I deal with colonial conflicts and war in the period from roughly 1870 to 1914 which has often been dubbed the era of high imperialism. I start with a brief introduction into the colonial situation in order to explain why violence and war were such a vital part of colonial policy. Subsequently, I try to chart out the characteristics of this special and often particularly violent form of warfare using examples from different empires. Finally, I address the question of what kind of war cultures evolved out of colonial warfare and whether lessons might have been learnt for warfare after 1914.

## Colonial rule and violence

The four decades before the beginning of the First World War saw a major extension of colonial rule. Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal already possessed colonies prior to 1880 mainly in Asia, Oceania and the Caribbean, but in the years to come practically the whole African continent would be split up by European powers. In these years, Germany, Belgium and Italy as well as Japan and the United States joined the established colonial powers.

Colonial wars were a natural consequence of this process of expansion as military conquest often stood at the beginning of establishing colonies overseas. Major examples would be the French expedition to Madagascar in 1895 leading to the annexation of the island, or the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 which soon erupted after the United States had officially taken over the archipelago from Spain the year before.<sup>[8]</sup> Some authors even suggest that colonial wars “in the classic sense of the word” were “wars of conquest”.<sup>[9]</sup> However, for the period in question here, many of the largest colonial wars were not strictly speaking wars of conquest, but only occurred after protectorates or colonies had been established for several years or even decades. They were a consequence of the specific nature and intensification of colonial rule.

As a matter of fact, the colonial state was a weak state. Two reasons were crucial. First, it lacked legitimacy in the eyes of those over whom it was supposed to rule. Despite all the talk about the “civilizing mission”, of developing or modernizing colonial territories and societies most colonized people perceived “colonial rule” as “foreign rule” which they rejected. Of course, this was especially true where the colonial situation meant a deterioration in living conditions – for instance through additional taxes, regimes of compulsory labour or settler violence.<sup>[10]</sup> Second, the colonial state was unable to permanently enforce its rule over large parts of its territory. It could, as historian Michael Pesek has called it, only create “islands of rule”.<sup>[11]</sup> In 1889, to give one example, Imperial Germany’s *Schutztruppe* in Southwest Africa, a colony 1.5 times the size of the imperial metropole, consisted of twenty-one white soldiers.<sup>[12]</sup> With this number of troops colonial rule was a chimaera. Even as the number of Europeans grew in the years to come, the colonial state was unable to enforce the monopoly on violence beyond the immediate coastline and the administrative centres.<sup>[13]</sup>

Notoriously, the colonial state resorted to violence to counter its weakness. Everyday forms of violence in the form of corporal punishments like beatings and floggings were to ensure the cooperation of the colonized and to constantly underline the difference between colonizers and colonized.<sup>[14]</sup> Also, the colonial military regularly dispatched expeditions to the hinterland, where the “weak fingers of empire”<sup>[15]</sup> could rarely be felt, simply as a show of force. In Africa it became common for colonial troops to fire their Maxim Guns on these trips in order to impress the local population with their superior fire power. Frequently, however, these expeditions had a punitive aim. Then colonial forces used excessive violence, burning down whole villages and killing indiscriminately as a punishment for disloyal behaviour or transgressions often committed only by individuals.<sup>[16]</sup> Foreshadowing what Michel Foucault (1926-1984) has famously attested to regarding early modern logics of punishment, the colonial military resorted to excessively violent reprisals to instil fear in the colonized to make them play by imperial rules even when there were no troops around to enforce them.<sup>[17]</sup> And although “punitive expeditions” were very frequent, with sixty-one alone in German East Africa from 1891 to 1897, colonial troops were almost always absent in the hinterland.<sup>[18]</sup> This form of

violence was thus a direct result of the scant resources at the disposal of the colonial state.

As years went by, however, the imperial presence became more perceptible with additional administrators, military men, missionaries, traders, and settlers entering the colonies. The colonial state now introduced new taxes, it intervened in economic structures, and compelled the colonized to work for them. These measures sparked further resistance and led to a number of wars that contemporary Europeans labelled “rebellions” insinuating that the colonized were revolting against a legitimate and acknowledged government. The so called 1898 “Hut Tax Rebellion” in Sierra Leone, or the attack on railway lines by the Ivorian Abé in 1910 as a reaction to harsh French labour policies are cases in point.<sup>[19]</sup> In settler colonies like Rhodesia or German South-West Africa, it was primarily conflict over land between a growing number of settlers and African communities that led to war. The Herero-Nama-War (1904-1908) is a prime example and one of the biggest and most brutal colonial campaigns of the period.

## Characteristics of Colonial Wars

What distinguishes colonial wars that have so often been described as a kind of their own?

The first characteristic of colonial wars, that we can deduce from the above examples, is that it is hard to say when it starts and when it ends. As colonial rule is inherently violent, going from the everyday violence of corporal punishment, over individual settler violence at the frontier, to small “punitive expeditions” and finally to larger campaigns with several thousand soldiers, it is difficult to identify the point where the “real” colonial war begins. As historian Dierk Walter has put it perceptively: in the colonies there is “hardly ever no war”.<sup>[20]</sup> Or in Henk Wesseling's (1937-2018) words: The “shift from less to more violence [...] was fluid”.<sup>[21]</sup> In contrast to the situation in Europe, there was no clear distinction between war and peace. This becomes especially clear if we acknowledge that the fighting did not stop when a peace treaty was signed, or the imperial power declared the war over. In 1895, the French expedition to Madagascar resulted in a treaty ending the official war. But guerrilla war and the “real military conquest” continued for several years.<sup>[22]</sup> Likewise, Imperial Germany officially ended the war against Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa on 31 March 1907, but the final skirmishes with two of the most important guerrilla groups under Jakob Marenga (ca. 1875-1907) and Simon Kooper (?–1913) would only take place several months later!<sup>[23]</sup>

Secondly, colonial wars usually were highly asymmetrical affairs. This was true on the general level of resources that, say, the British Empire could mobilize compared to the Zulu kingdom in their war in 1879. However, colonial powers were only rarely willing to mobilize but tiny fragments of their capabilities. Only when their prestige was at risk or a territory was of special strategic importance, were they willing to employ large numbers of troops overseas.<sup>[24]</sup> The asymmetry was probably most obvious in the field of [weapon](#) technology. While Europeans hardly had a decisive advantage in weaponry in the early modern period, except for the high-seas, this changed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of breech loading [rifles](#) and later the Maxim Gun. These new weapons multiplied the fire power of imperial troops who, combined with their specific training and discipline, became nearly invincible in pitched battles even against much larger enemy armies. Probably the most iconic example can be found in the Sudan where, on 2 September 1898, an Anglo-Egyptian army under Horatio Herbert Kitchener (1850-1916) met the forces of the Mahdi outside Omdurman. Officially, 11,000 Mahdist fighters died in the rapid fire of the imperial army that day. Another 16,000 were seriously wounded, in what war correspondent G. W. Stevens (1869-1900) famously described as “not a battle, but an execution”. Kitchener’s troops on the other side lost only a few dozen men.<sup>[25]</sup>

Given this stark discrepancy in fire power, the foes of empires typically learned fast to avoid large battles, opting for guerrilla warfare instead. For instance, in the Philippines, the independence movement led by Emilio Aguinaldo (1869-1964) initially met U.S. troops in open battle in early 1899. In November, after a series of defeats, Aguinaldo finally dissolved his regular army which subsequently split up into smaller, regionally operating groups of guerrilleros. These groups ambushed isolated U.S. columns only to disappear as soon as stronger enemy forces arrived. Their aim was not to vanquish the U.S. army, but to keep the war going, inflict constant losses and thus drive up the cost of occupation until Americans would reconsider colonizing the archipelago. For the colonial power this kind of war against an elusive enemy was frustrating and hard to win. US forces reacted with a “carrot-and-stick approach”.<sup>[26]</sup> On the one hand they tried to convince the civilian population that they had come with benevolent intentions, for instance by building schools and hospitals; on the other, they systematically destroyed whole provinces using what has often been called a “scorched earth policy”. U.S. columns burnt down all shelter, destroyed or confiscated all food and even relocated the whole civilian population of certain areas into guarded “zones of concentration” in an

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attempt to starve the guerrillas into submission. The result was very high civilian casualties with estimates ranging from 250,000 to 750,000.<sup>[27]</sup>

While resorting to ruthless measures themselves, American officers complained about the unfair and, in their eyes, uncivilized way Filipinos waged war. A particular bone of contention was what they dubbed “Amigo warfare”. During the day or when confronted, Filipinos acted as friends of the Americans, “but at night”, as historian Reynaldo Ileto has described it, “or when no one was looking, they were guerrillas. When the *cavalry* approached, most of the enemy disappeared, or their uniforms were shed for peasant gear”.<sup>[28]</sup> This behaviour was in violation of the customs of European warfare with its clear distinctions between combatants and civilians, and points to a third important characteristic of colonial wars: they were transcultural conflicts.

Both sides, the imperial military and the colonized fighters, had their own specific military culture, their own rules and standard operating procedures. Although, Europeans would usually deny that their foes were adhering to any rules at all. But colonial wars were also transcultural in the more general sense that at least the imperial actors were convinced that they were dealing with a culturally and/or racially distinct and inferior opponent. Were Africans and Asians not in need of being “uplifted” and was that not why Europeans were there in the first place? This is an important point, because not every war in a colony should be counted as a colonial war. When the German *Schutztruppe* and troops from the British Empire engaged in Africa after 1914, this was rather a European war in the colonies as it followed a different logic. And the South African War (1899-1902) between Britain and the Boers, ancestors of settlers who had arrived from Europe since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is at least a borderline case. On the one hand, Kitchener, who was then acting as Commander-in-Chief in South Africa, famously stated the Boers were “uncivilized Afrikaner savages with only a thin white veneer”, which certainly suggests he perceived them as culturally, if not racially, degenerate.<sup>[29]</sup> On the other, the British treated Afrikaners far better than Africans and accepted them as part of the ruling class in the post-war [Union of South Africa](#).

Apart from the radicalizing dynamics of guerrilla warfare, the conviction of fighting racially inferior “savages” certainly contributed most to the extremely violent conduct of colonial wars. One of the central racially informed dogmas was that “natives” would always interpret clemency as weakness, that brute force was the only language they understood. We can find formulations of this belief from the infamous German General [Lothar von Trotha \(1848-1920\)](#), who led the genocidal campaign against the Herero in 1904, to the already mentioned British Colonel Charles Callwell. The logical conclusion for Callwell was “not merely the defeat of the hostile forces but their destruction”, while Trotha announced he would “destroy the rebellious tribes by shedding streams of blood and streams of money”.<sup>[30]</sup> A second discursive trope was to compare the colonized to animals and shooting them to hunting game. A U.S.-soldier fighting in the Philippines professed for example:

“[...] we all wanted to kill ‘niggers.’ This shooting human beings is a ‘hot game,’ and beats rabbit hunting all to pieces. We charged them, and such a slaughter you never saw. We killed them like rabbits; hundreds, yes thousands of them. Every one was crazy. ... No more prisoners”.<sup>[31]</sup>

A third, frequently expressed, racist narrative was that “savages” would even keep on fighting when seriously wounded. The British Surgeon-Major J. B. Hamilton explained in an article for the *British Medical Journal*: “As a rule when a ‘white man’ is wounded he has had enough, and is quite ready to drop out of the ranks and go to the rear; but the savage, like the tiger, is not so impressionable, and will go on fighting even when desperately wounded”.<sup>[32]</sup> The solution was to use expanding ammunition, so called Dum-Dum bullets, that caused horrible wounds and had the necessary “stopping power” and often also to kill wounded enemies instead of making them prisoners. Dum-Dum bullets were also used at Omdurman and certainly one of the factors that added to the extreme death toll among the *dervishes*.<sup>[33]</sup>

The use of expanding bullets also refers to a fourth characteristic of colonial warfare that contributed to its high degree of violence. Colonial wars were not regulated by the laws of war codified in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the 1899 [Hague Conference](#) the use of Dum-Dum bullets was banned, rules on the treatment of prisoners of war were decided as well as for the protection of civilians. But all this applied only for warfare among so-called “civilized” nations, only for conflicts among the signatories of the Hague Convention. In “savage warfare”, fighting Africans, Asians or Native Americans, who were supposedly not following any rules and regulations, colonial armies were not bound by any rule. They were for example under no obligation to make prisoners and often they did not.<sup>[34]</sup>

they usually consisted of only a few white officers, while non-Europeans filled the rank and file, mainly because they were cheaper and better accustomed to the local climate. Preferably these were recruited from what imperial actors perceived as “martial races,” like Nepalese Ghurkhas, that were supposedly natural born soldiers.<sup>[35]</sup> In German East Africa, to name one example, 200 European officers and non-commissioned officers commanded a force of 1,700 askaris and a police force of another 700 Africans when the Maji Maji War began in 1905.<sup>[36]</sup> That their numbers would usually remain rather limited had a lot to do with the lack of infrastructure in the colonies. Without efficient transport systems like railroads, it was often impossible to supply larger bodies of troops. Occasionally, and mainly in settler colonies, empires resorted to white troops which at times, during the Cuban War of Independence from Spain (1895-1898) or the South African War, even outnumbered the enemy fighters. But even in these instances, the imperial military remained the minority, often by far, compared to the local foreign population. They were the colloquial “thin white line” operating among an adverse population in a country, with its deserts, swamps or jungles, its extreme climate and deadly pathogens, that was also perceived as hostile and often caused many more deaths than battle.<sup>[37]</sup> Fear was a common natural reaction to this situation and it combined with another emotion, namely frustration, not to be able to catch and crush the supposedly inferior, but elusive enemy. Both emotions tended to turn into rage and contributed to the escalation of violence in colonial wars.<sup>[38]</sup>

All factors specified – the asymmetry of colonial wars with its tendency to (counter)guerrilla warfare, its transcultural dimension accompanied by racist ideologies, its lack of rules, and the precarious situation of the “thin white line” with its emotions of fear, frustration and rage – figured into the excessive violence of the phenomenon in question. Also, the elements were linked and often reinforced each other. For instance, Filipinos fighting as guerrillas, laying ambushes and blurring the distinction between combatants and civilians, would confirm racist convictions of U.S. soldiers that they were fighting “savages” that ignored the rules of “civilized warfare”.<sup>[39]</sup> Given the multitude of “delimitating moments”, Dierk Walter concludes, the “brutality of imperial wars was overdetermined in almost every respect”.<sup>[40]</sup> And sometimes, as in the German campaign against the Herero in 1904 or Italian warfare in Libya in the early 1930s, colonial warfare even crossed the border to genocide!<sup>[41]</sup>

## Colonial War Cultures and Lessons Learned

In her well-known book *Absolute Destruction*, Isabel Hull argues that the German military developed a specific military culture in the wake of its success against France in 1870/71 that was key both to understanding German colonial warfare after 1884 as well as its conduct in World War I. This military culture was characterized by a tendency to produce “final solutions”, even genocide, as she specifically argues for her main example, the Herero War of 1904. There the *Schutztruppe* had first unsuccessfully tried to crush the Herero in a decisive battle at the Waterberg. The commanding general subsequently followed standard military procedure and pursued the fleeing Herero into the desert. But as they did not stop to fight, he decided to destroy them by sealing the desert and shooting anyone who tried to escape. While Hull concedes that European military cultures were closely related and all tended towards extreme measures, Germany appears as a special case, because Imperial Germany’s political system lacked the necessary safeguards to stop that process through civilian intervention.<sup>[42]</sup>

Other historians contest Hull’s approach. While they agree that German warfare against the Herero turned genocidal, they do not explain this process of radicalization (alone) with German military culture running its course. To them referring to a culture brought from the metropole does not suffice. Instead, they stress the importance of what happens in the colony – the interactions between Herero and German soldiers, the particularity of the “theatre of war”, the emotional experience of fighting an elusive enemy.<sup>[43]</sup> A second point is of equal importance: comparing German violence in Southwest Africa to the methods employed by other empires at the time reveals notable differences in degree rather than in kind and a lot of similarities. Colonial warfare generally had the potential to develop in genocidal ways, not only German.<sup>[44]</sup>

Similarities in colonial warfare certainly were a result of similar structures of colonial conflicts, but they also were a product of the entanglements of empires, of lessons learned from the wars others fought. The spread of policies of “concentrating” civilians around the turn of the century is a case in point. Spain pioneered the technique during its wars in Cuba, especially during the War of Independence (1895-1898), forcing over 400,000 civilians into guarded towns in order to effectively prevent them from supporting the guerrillas fighting for a *Cuba libre*. By 1901, the United States experimented with similar methods in the Philippines, while Britain interned some 250,000 people in newly built concentration camps in South Africa. And when Germany faced a situation of protracted colonial war in neighbouring Southwest Africa in 1904, it decided to emulate the British example

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and to establish its own *Konzentrationslager*.<sup>[45]</sup> More generally, all empires seemed eager to closely monitor each other's colonial wars and to learn what they perceived as valuable lessons. There was an active exchange of military attachés in colonial campaigns, and newspapers and military journals regularly reported on foreign "small wars". Callwell's book that became the semi-official British manual for conducting colonial campaigns was based on the recent experiences of all empires, not just the British. And tellingly, *Small Wars* was also read in France or the United States.<sup>[46]</sup> Finally, imperial armies sometimes cooperated militarily to overcome local resistance. The best-known example certainly is the Boxer War (1900-1901) when eight imperial powers teamed up to intervene in China.<sup>[47]</sup> Given all these entanglements and exchanges it makes more sense to think of a single military culture of colonial war shared by all empires in the decades preceding the First World War, than to distinguish between a British, a French, or a German way.<sup>[48]</sup>

In how far did these shared experiences of colonial warfare impact the war in Europe that started in the summer of 1914? Were the lessons learned in Africa or Asia now applied to metropolitan warfare? Again, Hull's interpretation is an interesting starting point, because to her "small wars" were not "of an entirely different character from 'real,' European conflicts".<sup>[49]</sup> She even holds that the "military history of German imperialism shows clearly and early how the First World War would be fought".<sup>[50]</sup> However, given the dominant conviction of most contemporaries, cited in the introduction, that there was nothing to learn from colonial wars for the conflict between the great powers this seems hardly convincing. At best, they were willing to concede, as a German soldier noted in his memoirs, that the war in Southwest Africa had shown that the power to fight (*Wehrkraft*) of the German army was still preserved for a war in Europe.<sup>[51]</sup> Moreover, in view of the stark difference between the mostly tiny asymmetric guerrilla wars on the periphery and the gargantuan battles between regular armies on the Eastern and Western fronts or the Dardanelles it is not easy to see what could have been learned.

Some points might however be raised. The first is that colonial wars served as laboratories for new weaponry and techniques of rule. The machine gun would be the prime example that was extensively deployed in the colonies before its application in the Great War.<sup>[52]</sup> The above-mentioned use of camps as an instrument of warfare is another. Jonathan Hyslop argues that it was particularly the British success in reforming its South African camps, making them sanitary after an initial phase of high mortality and bitter public criticism, that "enabled people to imagine a 'good' or 'well-run' concentration camp, thus respectabilising the idea". In this way the British administration "may have rescued the idea of the camp as a legitimate technique of managing populations".<sup>[53]</sup> Whether the prisoner of war camps or those for foreign civilians that were erected throughout Europe and beyond between 1914 and 1918 drew on experiences with colonial camps has, however, not been sufficiently researched yet.<sup>[54]</sup>

A second point is that "savage warfare" seems to have validated or even reinforced one of the central doctrines of Western military cultures: the assumption that the key to victory was a ruthless offensive with the goal to encircle the enemy in a decisive concentric battle and annihilate them militarily.<sup>[55]</sup> Following German colonial officers, the official French guidebook to colonial warfare or again Charles Callwell's treatise "the offensive leading to total victory was an unquestioned maxim".<sup>[56]</sup> Ultimately, colonial experiences might have strengthened the "cult of the offensive" that compelled European commanders in 1914 to send wave after wave of soldiers against defensive positions despite mounting casualties.<sup>[57]</sup> Looking at one particularly uncommon conflict in the colonies, the South African War, could have taught them a very different lesson though. In the initial phase of the war, and especially in the lost battles of the so-called "black week", the British army had to learn the hard way that even a small force, dug in and equipped with modern rifles and artillery could defend a suitable position against a much bigger advancing army and inflict considerable losses. To military historian Thomas Pakenham "this Armageddon in the trenches under the African sun" was a precursor "of a greater one, fifteen years later, in the mud of Flanders". In his assessment it was from the humiliating defeats that the British "nineteenth-century army – G[eneral] O[fficer] C[ommanding], generals, officers and men – were all learning how to fight a twentieth-century war".<sup>[58]</sup> And eventually the experience of South Africa led to some reworking of tactical doctrines, for instance more dispersed infantry formations, both in Britain and on the continent.<sup>[59]</sup>

The third aspect of colonial warfare that gained relevance for the First World War was the tendency to target whole populations and not only combatants. The atrocities against civilians committed by the German army in Belgium and Northern France in 1914 as reprisals for alleged attacks by "franc-tireurs", are a case in point. Much like colonial guerrilla fighters, the occupants complained, these citizens were ambushing German troops without wearing uniforms.<sup>[60]</sup> In 1915, Tsarist Russia expelled and

deported a million German and Jewish inhabitants from the border regions to the inland or Siberia.<sup>[61]</sup> Deportations had long been an established technique in imperial wars. Russia itself had expelled several hundred thousand Circassians at the end of a protracted colonial war in the Caucasus in the early 1860s, while Imperial Germany, to name a second much smaller example, had deported several Nama groups from Southwest Africa to Togo and Cameroon in 1904 and 1910.<sup>[62]</sup> The most radical attack on an entire ethnic group during the World War was the [annihilation of the Armenians by the Ottoman state](#) beginning in the spring of 1915 costing more than 800,000 lives.<sup>[63]</sup> This genocide, at least if we follow historian Jürgen Zimmerer, “would probably not have been possible if the idea that ethnicities can simply be wiped out had not already existed and had not already been put to action” from the North American frontier to Hereroland.<sup>[64]</sup>

## Conclusion

A shared, transimperial culture of colonial warfare evolved in the decades preceding 1914. However, contemporaries were rather sceptical whether these “small wars” could provide any insights for European warfare. And, indeed, given the obvious differences between the usually small, racially charged, asymmetric conflicts, not regulated by any rules of war in the colonies and the gigantic battles between mainly regular armies of the First World War, lessons to be learned were only few and far between.

Highlighting the impact of traditions of colonial warfare and violence for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recent scholarship has rather looked beyond the Great War. A major debate has ensued over the colonial roots of Nazi genocide and population policies in Eastern Europe, and [Adolf Hitler's \(1889-1945\) war against Poland and the Soviet Union](#) has been labelled the “largest colonial war of conquest in history”.<sup>[65]</sup> While it certainly exhibited several characteristics typical for the “savage wars of peace” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the conviction to fight a “race war”, the willingness to target whole populations, the disregard for the laws of war – at least the symmetry of the war in Russia has to be counted as a major difference. Not surprisingly, the wars of decolonization in Malaya, Kenya or Algeria, some proxy wars of the Cold War like Vietnam, and the recent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq show a greater affinity. Here we find all the ingredients of the typical colonial war including the dynamics of guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare and the use of large bodies of local troops. Studying colonial warfare is not only a thing of the distant past.

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## Notes

1. ↑ Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I des Großen Generalstabes: Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika. Zweiter Band. Der Hottentottenkrieg, Berlin 1907, p. 300.
2. ↑ Callwell, Charles E.: Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice, London 1906, p. 23.
3. ↑ See for instance Wesseling, H.L.: Colonial Wars: An Introduction, in: Moor, J.A. / Wesseling, H.L. (eds.): Imperialism and War. Essays on Colonial Wars in Asia and Africa, Leiden 1989, p. 2; or Walter, Dierk: Organisierte Gewalt in der europäischen Expansion, Hamburg 2014, pp. 25-26.
4. ↑ An early example is Boot, Max: The Savage Wars of Peace. Small Wars and the Rise of American Power, New York 2002. For the rediscovery of its colonial war in the Philippines by US publicists after 9/11 see Schumacher, Frank: „Niederbrennen, plündern und töten sollt ihr“: Der Kolonialkrieg der USA auf den Philippinen (1899-1913), in: Klein, Thoralf / Schumacher, Frank (eds.): Kolonialkriege. Militärische Gewalt im Zeichen des Imperialismus, Hamburg 2007, pp. 142-144.
5. ↑ Particularly important in France was Le Cour Grandmaison, Olivier: Coloniser, Exterminer. Sur la guerre et l'état colonial, Paris 2005; see also Howe, Stephen: Colonising and Exterminating? Memories of Imperial Violence in Britain and France, in: Histoire@Politique. Politique, Culture, Société 11 (2010). For an overview of the debate on German colonial violence and Nazi policies see Kühne, Thomas: Colonialism and the Holocaust. Continuities, Causations, and Complexities, in: Journal of Genocide Research 15/3 (2013), pp. 339-362. There also are several recent German language publications on colonial or imperial wars in general: Klein / Schumacher (eds.), Kolonialkriege 2007; Bühner, Tanja / Stachelbeck, Christian / Walter, Dierk (eds.): Imperialkriege von 1500 bis heute, Paderborn et al. 2011; Walter, Organisierte Gewalt 2014.

6. ↑ Bell, Duncan: A Roundtable on John Darwin's *The Empire Project*. Comment: Desolation Goes Before Us, in: *Journal of British Studies* 54/4 (2015), pp. 987-993; Wagner, Kim A.: *Savage Warfare. Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 85 (2018), pp. 1-22.
7. ↑ See the bibliographies of Raugh, Harold Ernest: *Anglo-Zulu War, 1879. A Selected Bibliography*, Lanham et al. 2011; van Hartesveldt, Fred R.: *The Boer War. Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*, Westport 2000. On British colonial warfare more generally see also Vandervort, Bruce: *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830-1914*, London 1998.
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