
Reviewed by Walter L. Hixson

In this closely analysed comparative history Edward Westerman examines the similarities and differences between the Nazi genocide and the violent American conquest of the West. He ultimately argues for a sharp distinction between the two, despite many foundational similarities.

This study builds on previous accounts notably Carroll P. Kakel III’s *The American West and the Nazi East: A Comparative and Interpretive Perspective* (2011) and my own *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (2013). In his determination to eschew “theoretical constructs” (7) in deference to a narrow empiricism, Westerman declines to engage with a growing discussion of colonial genocide. That framework recognizes the distinctions and similarities that Westerman draws while simultaneously placing such violent removal policies in transnational and global perspective.

Westerman’s book is otherwise thoughtful, well researched and illuminates both the Indian wars and the Nazi campaign to annihilate the Jews and other minorities. It will be read alongside Kakel as the two primary comparative works on the Nazi East and the American West. While, to his discredit, Westerman caricatures Kakel’s work and attempts to dismiss it as overly theoretical, their ultimate findings are much the same. The major difference is that while Kakel called attention to the similarities between the two projects, Westerman highlights the differences. Despite his putative resistance to “theoretical constructs”, Westerman’s analysis reveals its own inevitable subjectivities and “logics” for which he ungenerously condemns Kakel (7).

Comparative scholarship stems from Adolf Hitler’s own linkage of the two removal projects. The Fuhrer derived inspiration from his reading of American history, as the violent removal campaigns against the “Red Indians” paralleled his own quest for *lebensraum* at the expense of the *untermenschen* of Eastern Europe. Just as the Americans had built a powerful empire by removing the “Redskins”, Hitler would do the same by removing the Slavs, with the added fanatical flourish of exterminating the Jews.

Like Kakel and others, Westerman notes that the drives to conquer the American West and the German East blended nationalist ambitions with racial exclusion leading to indiscriminate violence and removal operations. While acknowledging the similarities in drives and motivation, Westerman emphasizes the differences between the two projects notably the issue of temporality. While American continental conquest transpired over the course of centuries, the Nazi campaign lasted only a few years.
In addition to the divergence in time span, Westerman emphasizes distinctions in the scope of the violence. While a few thousand US cavalry troops chased down the various indigenous American tribes, Hitler dispatched a mass army, a modern war machine and established industrial-style annihilation camps. Thirdly, the author argues, “The nature and objective of government policy and actions stands as another major difference between the two cases” (11). Whereas “the core principles of enslavement, exploitation, and extermination guided Nazi actions in the East” (11), the Americans despite myriad massacres and efforts to destroy the Indian way of life also sought to provide for the lives of Indians on reservations and to assimilate them into society.

Westerman lays out his research and argument in five chapters between an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter 1 compares Manifest Destiny and Lebensraum; Chapter 2 analyses the comparative conceptions of race and space. Chapter 3 homes in on strategy and warfare comparing Hitler’s assault on Eastern Europe with the American Indian wars. Chapter 4 focuses on massacre and atrocity, while Chapter 5 offers a comparative history of guerrilla warfare, specifically the German campaign against partisans and the US Army effort to rein in the Southwestern Apaches. The book contains 13 well-chosen photographs and is typically cleanly designed and produced by the University of Oklahoma Press.

Following the introduction, Westerman, who is Professor of History at Texas A&M University–San Antonio, argues in his Chapter 1 that despite the similarities in their “visions of conquest”, manifest destiny and lebensraum were not analogous. Chapter 2 identifies the similarities in “national policies of race and space” but argues that economic motives drove US policies as opposed to the Nazi drive for annihilation of lesser peoples. Westerman acknowledges both similarities and differences between the Nazi establishment of ghettos and the US deployment of reservations.

While both the Germans and the Americans perpetrated massacres and atrocity, the scale and scope in the Nazi East were much greater than in the American West. Moreover, Westerman emphasizes that intent and premeditation, while not nonexistent in the American West, were a much stronger driving force in the Nazi East. Similarly, Westerman argues that while the Nazis sought to annihilate Soviet partisans, the US Army sought to round up the Apaches not to exterminate them. Whereas the US Army often condemned massacres and sought to rein in settlers, the Nazi government and military pursued an unrelenting policy of annihilation.

Westerman is certainly correct about the intensity and top-down exterminatory mentality that characterized the Nazis in contrast with the Americans, where many condemned settler violence and dissented from federal Indian policy. It is important to note, however, that these dissenters failed to block the relentless American expansion and cleansing operations. Moreover, even the well-meaning American Indian reformers orchestrated child removal policies, which today would be
considered a crime against humanity if not an act of genocide. Similarly, Westerman alludes to the benevolence of Christian reformers and missionaries but does not point out that demanding people abandon their own spirituality and designated gender roles to adopt those of the invader and usurper undermine the way of a life of a people, which in turn may be considered genocidal. Further, as Westerman does note, many Americans did voice genocidal intent over many centuries, including the American “East” since the arrival of Columbus, not just the American West. Excluding the East and the by now well-chronicled history of the genocidal wars of Indian slavery produces a myopic perspective on the history of Euro-American and indigenous relations.

It is generally accepted that no other episode of cleansing or genocide compares with the intensity and industrial style of the Nazi onslaught, hence the American comparison like all others will not measure up. The broader context of World War II – the most destructive conflict in human history – certainly plays a role in the intensity of the German annihilation campaigns, which also inhered in Nazi ideology, to be sure. While Westerman rightly emphasizes the intensity of the Nazi campaign, one could just as well argue that the long-term, relentless American campaign of Indian removal, while not uniformly exterminatory, was no less insidious and in its own way equally relentless. This level of comparative analysis requires theorization and engagement with colonial genocide studies, and this Westerman eschews.

Westerman sums up,

The comparison between the Nazi East and the American West reveals key points of congruence but equally important points of dissimilarity. In both cases the dynamic of conquest and subjugation entailed ominous consequences for the defeated, and both national projects shared similar processes involving isolation, expropriation, and mass killing. (259)

As there is nothing new within this summary conclusion, Westerman ultimately contributes little conceptually. That said, any serious student of the histories of the Nazi East and the American West will need to consult this well-researched and closely argued analysis, which makes a notable contribution to the evolving discussion of comparative mass violence and colonial genocide in world history.

Walter L. Hixson, Department of History, The University of Akron, USA.