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Review of Robert L. Nelson's *Frontiers of Empire*

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Frontiers of Empire:
Max Sering, Inner Colonization,
and the German East, 1871–1945

By Robert L. Nelson

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024

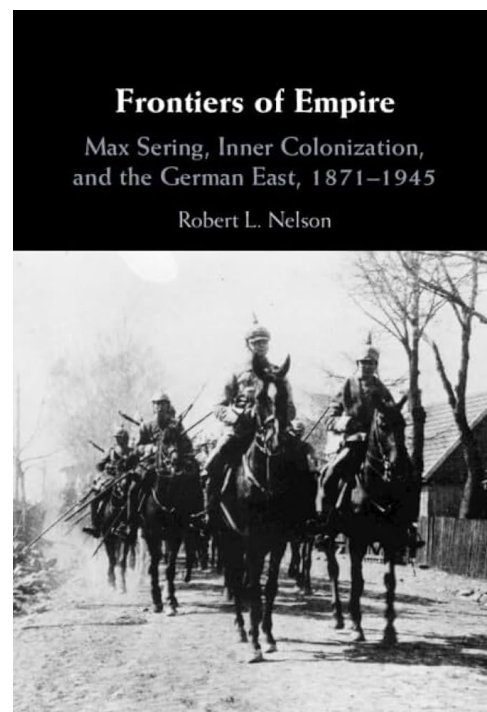
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European colonization is characteristically understood as external exploration, conquest and settlement of Europeans in other world regions, namely the Americas, Africa, and the Antipodes. The process of “inner colonization” by Europeans, that is the settlement of farmers in threatened borderlands within the nation-state’s boundaries, is less well understood. In part this is because inner colonization complicates the standard thesis of separation between the colonizing country and colonized space. Also, inner colonization blurs the typical boundaries between the colonizer and colonized subjects. Inner colonization, then, has evaded critical scrutiny by border scholars because it occurs within boundaries rather than beyond borders.

In *Frontiers of Empire*, Robert L. Nelson relates how Max Sering, a world-famous agrarian settlement expert from Germany, influenced Germany’s evolving relationship with its eastern frontier, and inspired the country’s political Right, to transform the notion of *lebensraum* from the Bismarckian 1880s to the



Hitlerian 1930s. Although Sering’s grand scheme of frontier settlement in Eastern Europe was not the only component in this transformation of territorial vision and imperative, Germany’s settlement of farmers in threatened borderlands within the nation’s boundaries contributed substantially to the consolidation and control of territory.

What motivated Max Sering to champion inner colonization? Where did he get his ideas? Nelson argues that “there were global continuities in the

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transnational world of settler colonial thinking, and that Sering's study of various settler practices, most notably what he learned on the North American frontier as a twenty-six-year-old in 1883, crucially informed how he thought Germans should settle their land, both in terms of what they should and very much should *not* do" (1). Sering's eight-month journey to North America took him first to the east coast where he conferred with American agrarian experts, then across the country to California, up to Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, across the Rockies into the plains and prairies of both the United States and Canada, and finally back to New York City from where he sailed back to Germany. This formative experience of first-hand observations of homesteads, ethnic group settlements, Indigenous reservations, and of conquered and purchased territories, much of it farmland in an extensive bi-national and transcontinental inner colonization, was a continual influence on how Sering envisioned Germany's eastern borderlands.

In this richly detailed and illustrated book, Nelson guides the reader through an intellectual biography of Max Sering to tell the story of German settler colonialism in East Central Europe. Chapter one outlines how to tell such a story. Chapters two through four follow Sering and the formation of the concept of inner colonization from Sering's youth and trip to North America, to his career beginnings and development of Eastern interests, to his growth to prominence and the institutionalization of inner colonization. Chapter five treats the radicalization of inner colonization during the First World War whereas chapter six addresses the collapse and rebirth of the idea during the years of

the Weimar Republic from 1918 to 1933. With the Third Reich, the triumph of race science, and the extremism of inner colonization, Sering's journey comes to an end. Chapter seven traces the decline of the person and his ideas, and chapter eight assesses the legacies of both Sering and inner colonization.

Nelson concludes that the story of Max Sering offers important insights into the transformation of the German Right, not only in its biological racial turn, but also in its discard of the idea of a German overseas empire. After World War I, the German East became the "one and true site of a German Colonial Empire" (275). Yet, National Socialism in Germany honed a "radical, conquering, genocidal" (276) approach to German imperialism that would reverberate around the globe. Moreover, the story, Nelson argues, helps us to realize the continuum of colonization "from spaces inside one's own borders, to adjacent lands, to distant, often overseas, territories" (276), and that the people being colonized varied from neighboring Poles to Indigenous Africans. According to Nelson, this continuum complicates the history of colonization, and it should do so. Also, the focus on post-1500 subjugation of distant peoples of color by Europeans in the study of settler colonialism renders non-European peoples as having no history, as the colonizers claimed. The inner-colonial perspective balances our view of the colonial process and offers a broader template for comparison of settler colonialism. It enables a new lens for viewing the alienation of Indigenous territory. Finally, inner colonization reveals the border and inhabits borderlands from the inside and the outside, thus enlarging our comprehension of *Frontiers of Empire*.