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Capturing 'Judeo-Bolshevism': SS Photographs of Soviet POWs in Concentration Camps

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The Nazis' war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was accompanied by genocidal policies ranging from the Holocaust and Porajmos, the 'ethnic cleansing' of vast parts of Eastern Europe and the systematic mass murder of Soviet Prisoners of War, amongst others. Ideologically, these mass crimes were united by Germanic supremacism and an all-explanatory antisemitic worldview that interpreted communism as a Jewish ideology targeting Europe and Western civilization. Plans for restructuring 'the East' after a German victory were designed according to colonialist planning and based on historical interpretations of German settlements.

However, to achieve this goal, 'Judeo-Bolshevism'¹ had to be exposed and eradicated. This paper analyses visual strategies by the Nazis to achieve this aim. The focus of interest are series of pictures that SS photographers took at concentration camps of deported Soviet POWs deemed to be murdered and indeed killed in the days after the photos were taken. The paper claims that by analyzing these highly ideological images it is possible to uncover their meaning and consequently function for the perpetrators: To visually construct the antisemitic image of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' and therefore serving as a legitimization for exterminating it. Photographs are therefore presented not only as visualizations of ideology but as tools in the process of defining targets for mass killing and justifying their murder.

The paper argues that the pictures resemble colonial photos and are set in the genre of anthropometric photography. The concentration camps as the specific places where these photos were taken are constructed as colonial spaces in which the deported Soviets are visually turned into representatives of the 'Judeo-Bolshevist' state and ideology and therefore destined to be exterminated. The ideological link between the concentration camps and the colonial project in 'the East' as illustrated by the photographs raise new perspectives about the meaning of the concentration camp system beyond its core functions.

¹ For a recent study of the myth of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' and its impact on Nazi policy see: Hanebrink, Paul, A Specter Haunting Europe. The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism, Cambridge 2018.