Paul Rohrbach was an influential publicist in Wilhelmine Germany. He also routinely used racial justifications to defend brutal policies for managing the indigenous populations of Germany's African colonies. In recent years, scholars have interpreted Rohrbach's promotion of colonialism as evidence that colonial ideas increasingly saturated German political and imperial discourse before and during the First World War. His work has thus been cited to support an emerging narrative of pathological continuity, which contends that Wilhelmine German imperialists reflexively drew upon colonial ideologies, experiences and models to inform increasingly repressive and violent plans to rule ethnically diverse space in Eastern Europe. This article argues that Paul Rohrbach has been misinterpreted. His career represents not the ease with which colonial ideas infiltrated German imperial discourse, but rather the severe reluctance of an ardent colonialist to employ colonial methods in European space. Drawing upon his writings on Africa and his discussions of German war aims in Eastern Europe during the First World War, this article demonstrates Rohrbach's profound unwillingness to structure German imperial expansion in Russia's Baltic provinces and Congress Poland according to colonial precedents. Differences in the perceived cultural and political sophistication of African, Baltic and Polish societies convinced Rohrbach that repressive and brutal colonial models of rule would be inefficient or counterproductive for achieving German objectives in Eastern Europe. Indeed, Rohrbach's studies of colonialism actually reinforced his commitment to decentralization and respect for national diversity as essential instruments for governing politically sophisticated European societies. His experiences in Africa, in other words, steeled his confidence in multinational imperialism.