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OPINION

The Colonial Genocide in Namibia: Consequences for a Memory Culture Today From a German Perspective

Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber

Introduction

The Stockholm International Forum 2004 brought together a wide range of government delegations, representatives of international institutions, state agencies, NGOs and other civil society actors from many parts of the world. From January 26th to 28th they discussed upon invitation of the Swedish Prime Minister the topical issue of "Preventing Genocide. Threats and Responsibilities." As heartening as this noble effort is, as striking was the fact that hardly any reference was made to the earliest genocide of the 20th century, which took place in then "German South West Africa" (now the Republic of Namibia) a century ago.

This essay intentionally goes a step further back than the participants in the Stockholm International Forum did during their relevant deliberations. It recollects one of the initial stages in the sad track record of genocides during the 20th century by assessing the implications of the genocide committed by the German colonial army among local Namibian inhabitants resisting colonial subjugation. It suggests that this undertaking is not merely an attempt to deal with old history, but a relevant part of current efforts to come to terms with a past, which left its impact in the present.

German colonialism and Herero resistance

During January 1904 the German colony of South West Africa, seethed with the repercussions of the greatest resistance movement against colonial rule the country had yet witnessed. The German colonial administration had gradually been implanted after the partition of Africa amongst European powers at the Berlin conference in 1884. In Germany itself, a new brand of radical nationalism began to echo the young emperor Wilhelm II's proverbial quest for a "place in the sun," calling for Germany to establish herself as a world power on par with Britain, complete with a powerful fleet and an array of overseas colonies. Germany was able to grab only a few colonies in Africa and Oceania, and these were dismal and costly commercial failures. These colonies were considered indispensable and shining proof of the country's greatness by nationalist circles. Alone amongst the colonies acquired by Germany during the closing years of the 19th century, Namibia was considered as suitable for extensive settlement by Europeans. Settler ideology envisaged creating a "New Germany." Under such circumstances, any challenge to colonial rule, therefore, was tantamount to disparaging national honour and grandeur.

Meanwhile, within less than two decades, colonial rule in what is today Namibia had taken the form of a sustained drive to subdue the various indigenous communities by formal protection treaties and by a policy of divide and rule. In the words of the colonial governor of the day, Theodor Leutwein, this policy was designed to further the settlement project and to "gradually accustom the natives to the new dispensation. Of their former independence, nothing but memories would be left for them."

The lands occupied by the Herero in the eastern and central parts and by the Nama in the central and southern regions of the country would be alienated and turned into farms for settlers, the herds of Africans would

gradually pass over into the hands of those settlers, and the people themselves would be turned into hired farm hands on the lands they had formerly considered their heritage. Since Leutwein had at his disposal only a very limited armed contingent, he relied on treaties with the indigenous chiefs to supply auxiliaries when the need arose to quell risings against the fledgling colonial power, which happened quite frequently. Still, the most severe challenge to date had been disposed of by the Germans when they had succeeded in pressing into submission Hendrik Witbooi, the charismatic Nama chief who clairvoyantly, if in vain, had tried to unite the different chiefs of the region threatened by colonialism. He could be dislodged from his mountain fastness and forced to sign a so-called protection treaty in 1895 only after a surprise raid in which the German army massacred inhabitants taken unaware, mainly women and children.

The rising of the Herero in early 1904 was the most formidable challenge to colonial control after the formal submission of the country had thus been completed. For a long time, the Herero had been able to keep colonial encroachment largely at bay. However, the combined effects of huge losses in their herds by the Rinderpest, a locust invasion and a malaria epidemic and above all, the consequences of the fraudulent practices of traders which led to the taking away of cattle and alienation of land, plunged the Herero communities into crisis. Progressively, alienated land was appropriated by settler farmers. Further encroachment loomed with the proposed railway, which was to cut through the Herero heartland to reach the copper mines of Tsumeb at its far-north eastern fringe. On either side of the railway, a strip of European settlement was envisaged, thus to speed up further land alienation and European settlement.

At the commencement of the rising, paramount chief Samuel Maharero (ironically promoted to such a new position by the colonial administration in return for earlier collaboration) told his followers strictly not to attack women, children, missionaries or members of other

indigenous groups. When in January 1904 the rising spread rapidly over night (catching the authorities and settlers by total surprise), the insurgents observed these provisions. While male farmers were frequently killed when their farms were attacked, as a rule, women, children and missionaries were escorted to the German forts. This did not prevent the spread of propaganda about horrendous atrocities committed by the Herero. The insurgent Herero initially succeeded in securing control of most of central Namibia, with only the German forts resisting the onslaught.

The colonial power started to pour in reinforcements, along with a new commander-in-chief, General Lothar von Trotha. This army officer had earned his credentials as a member of the international expeditionary force that ravaged North China in retaliation of the *Ihetuan* rising in 1901 and later, by suppressing risings in then German East Africa, now Tanzania. From the beginning, von Trotha was quite outspoken about his mission, which he saw as involvement in a "war of races." His conviction was that "African tribes ... will only succumb to violent force. It has been and remains my policy to exercise this violence with gross terrorism and even with cruelty. I annihilate the African tribes by floods of money and floods of blood. It is only by such sowings that something new will arise which will be there to stay" – meaning of course, settlement of the country, thus made devoid of competitors, by Germans. This strategy was approved and endorsed by the army headquarters (General Staff) in Berlin, and under von Trotha's command it was implemented faithfully.

The Herero were defeated in a major battle at the Waterberg on 11 August 1904. They had assembled there as a people, men, women and children with their cattle herds. After the battle, the great majority of the Herero made their escape in an easterly direction into the waterless Omaheke – a vast dry land with no surface water bordering to then Bechuanaland (now

Botswana). The German colonial army had scored a major military success. However, this was according to their doctrine not considered a final and decisive victory. Thus, they followed the fleeing Herero in hot pursuit, cutting off access to waterholes and poisoning those they came across. More than seven weeks later, on October 2, von Trotha proclaimed his infamous extermination order and openly called on his troops to ensure that the Herero would perish in the semi-desert; the proclamation stated: "Within the German [South West Africa] borders, every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot."

By today's standards, according to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, this was a considerate order for genocide, as part of an overall strategy to secure the country for European, in particular, German settlement. The numbers of those that died a horrible death as a consequence of that order may never be fully ascertained, it is widely accepted as a rough estimate that the various Herero groups might have numbered up to 100,000, of whom only around 20,000 may have survived the ordeal. The concept of genocide, however, is not predicated on such number crunching and its surrounding speculations and controversies lasting until today. This pseudo-debate is at best misleading and deviates from the actual issue at stake. According to the UN Convention of 1948, genocide is not defined along numerical proportions but as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." That this was the imminent aim and character of the warfare conducted by the German colonial troops is borne out amply by the pronouncements of von Trotha and his superiors.

While the extermination order was eventually rescinded by the Emperor, the genocide had already been perpetrated. Moreover, the official military account of the General Staff in its concluding paragraphs still summarised as a major achievement of the war that the

Herero nation was annihilated and had ceased to exist, and it celebrated the prowess of the German troops. The late change of policy may be seen, on the one hand, as a fruit of representations by missionaries who witnessed the carnage, and also of heated public debate. Thus, August Bebel, founder and parliamentary leader of the Social Democratic Party, worked strenuously to oppose budget appropriations for the colonial war and castigated von Trotha's strategy as one that also "a vile butcher" might pursue. Bebel reminded his audience of the Emperor's infamous call for the expeditionary corps sent to China there to behave in a way to make a name for themselves as did the Huns 1500 years ago in Europe and surmised there might have been a similar order given in private, "otherwise it would be wholly inconceivable for me that a general could issue such an order which contravenes all principles of martial law, civilisation, culture and Christianity." The Catholic Centrist Party also questioned colonial policy at this time. On the government's side, there were considerations also of expediency: The genocidal strategy of suppression was cutting the ground from beneath the settlers' feet by killing off potential labour power as well as the better part of the Herero's herds the settlers meant to appropriate for themselves.

Nama resistance and further genocidal consequences

On October 4, 1904, things took a new turn with the rising of the Nama in southern Namibia. This was probably instigated by witnessing the fate meted out to the Herero. The various Nama groups avoided a large-scale battle and managed to hold out much longer than the Herero. General von Trotha responded by transferring his strategy of genocidal suppression also to this region, explicitly citing the Herero experience in his proclamation to the Nama. Larger Nama groups capitulated after Hendrik Witbooi, by now an octogenarian, had died in action more than a year after the commencement of the

rising, others carried on as late as 1908.

Those who gave themselves up to the Germans met a similar fate as did the surviving Herero. All of these were made prisoners and placed into concentration camps. Irrespective of promises made to Nama groups to elicit their surrender, the Nama were deported to concentration camps and conscripted into forced labour. These concentration camps were located largely in the two port towns of Swakopmund and Lüderitz in a rather cold and moist climate. Unaccustomed to these conditions, underfed, ill-clothed and badly accommodated, thousands of prisoners died from sheer neglect, or from the exertions of forced labour. Groups of Nama were transported, even after the war had officially been declared terminated, to other German colonies in Africa, to Togo and Cameroon. Of these groups of deportees, many also died before they were repatriated shortly before the beginning of World War I. It is estimated that of more than 20,000 Nama who lived in southern Namibia before the rising, less than 10,000 survived these various forms of savage repression. One of the more appalling features of this mass destruction of human lives is that it may be said the open publicity demonstrated an almost relishing by the perpetrators. Picture postcards were produced displaying concentration camps. Even though this did not carry quite the meaning the term acquired through the Nazi holocaust some 40 years later, these postcards still show an appalling disregard for human suffering which could be conveyed as it were as a greeting to one's loved ones at home. The same is true of coloured pictures showing scenes of prisoners being hanged or of the inclusion of forced labour scenes into representations of "native life," as though this were a quasi normal feature in the lives of so-called natives – as it were, natural for Africans to be subjected to inhuman treatment and regular application of brute force.

This public projection of atrocities committed did not even shun from representing openly how specimen for the burgeoning racial science were procured: human

skulls being packed in crates. The image was commented to inform readers that the skulls of Herero prisoners had been cleaned of their flesh by Herero women using broken glass. It may be noted that such skulls became the stuff from which some academic careers were built in Germany, and that such racial science became a mainstay of Nazi ideology and discriminatory practice.

In other respects as well, the first genocide of the 20th century may arguably be considered one of the most publicised. There were popular novels, memory books and literature of colonial propaganda, all of which extolled the exploits of the German troops. Very much in tune with sentiments that are available today from private documents of German soldiers involved in mass murder during World War II, the hardship valiantly endured which was recounted in this way included the hard work of killing not only fighters, but old people, women, and children as well. The experience of the colonial genocide in Namibia, therefore, eventually fed into Nazi ideology and propaganda.

More contemporary to the events, the incumbent Chancellor von Bülow used the atmosphere of national hysteria that was being whipped up around the colonial war in Germany to engineer a grand political realignment ("Bülow-Block") and organise an election campaign, still known to history as "Hottentot Elections." By this means, a centre-right majority was returned which ensured the passing of the budgets needed to further pursue the quest for world power.

Officially, the military authorities declared the war terminated in March 1907, a timely move in the run-up to the elections just mentioned. Herero prisoners of war were released only in early 1908, while Nama prisoners never were set free during German rule. In fact, transportation to the Cameroon took place only after the formal end of the war. Moreover, the colonial administration pursued a grand design of further uprooting the populations of central and southern Namibia, shifting Herero to the South, while transporting

Nama to the centre, the northern portion of the white zone of settlement.

Those survivors who were released found themselves in dramatically changed circumstances. Above all, they were expropriated from their land and their livestock. This meant the clearing of land for settlement by white farmers, and the appropriation of African herds as far as they still existed. Moreover, Africans were legally barred from owning land and large livestock. In this way, they were prevented systematically from reconstructing a basis for an independent life for themselves, and the Herero in particular also from resuming the symbolic reproduction of their communities, which largely hinged on cattle. Further, Africans were forbidden to settle in larger groups, even when employed on a settler farm. Above all, they were subjected to a strict obligation to enter waged labour and to comprehensive administrative control. To ensure the smooth and comprehensive working of this system as well as to foreclose any new attempt at rebellion, all Africans over seven years of age were subjected to the labour obligation, registered and required to carry a token around their necks. This token could be checked by any white person to make sure that the African was entitled to be in any particular place; otherwise, the African could be turned over to the police. To this was added a system of strict racial segregation. This system was marked by systematic discrimination, linked to harnessing the labour power of dispossessed Africans in the interests of the new colonial economy centred on white settlement. In many ways, this presaged what four decades later would be called Apartheid.

Why do we need to deal with the past?

Why is it so important to commemorate today genocidal atrocities such as those committed in Namibia early in the 20th century? There are a number of reasons, which may be understood if grouped along two interrelated

logic of genocide as it unfolded during the entire course of the 20th century. The distinction between these two trajectories also refers to the hotly debated issue of the singularity of the holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany against European Jewry as well as against further groups such as Sinti and Roma. This also implies the further issue whether the wars and mass crimes emanating from the German state during the first half of the 20th century are rooted in some specifically German path of historic development, fundamentally different from the West.

It is not possible to exhaust these questions here. Attempts to answer fill up whole libraries. However, it may be said that the Namibian genocide contributed towards establishing a specific routine among the military and also amongst civilians to look at war and specific acts of war. This meant, in particular, to see the enemy not as another human being but as a member of an alien, inferior race that is best annihilated, like vermin, in the language of the Nazis. Dehumanising whole groups or categories of humans in this way is widely considered an important precondition for actors to perpetrate mass killings, be it in direct personal confrontation with the victims or in the seemingly abstract settings of saturation bombing and even more, of today's cyber war where soldiers no longer confront those they are killing. In very different ways, all those situations are structured so as to shield the perpetrators from fully confronting the implications of their murderous acts.

In a colonial situation as it prevailed in Namibia in the early 20th century, the negation of the full human worth of the persons colonised is predicated in the structurally racist set-up of colonialism. This is even more the case when the aim of colonial rule is not simply control and exploitation of the country, its resources, and inhabitants, but rather, settlement by members of the colonising society. The inherent racism of settler colonialism has worked to lower the threshold of mass killings in appalling ways, as particularly demonstrated in many cases found in the Americas, Australia and southern Africa. In the Namibian case, this links up with

the German trajectory, when we observe continuities in: (1) accounts and novels read by a mass readership; (2) in military practice; (3) in the activities of specific persons; and (4) in military doctrines and routines that link strategic ideas of decisive battles to the concept of final solution and extinction of the enemy.

It has to suffice to merely mention these problems here. Another dimension concerns active remembrance. Here again, it may be appropriate to refer to the German case where a specific form of public repentance and remembrance may be said, at least in retrospect, even to have been incorporated into the founding myth of the second German republic. Even though today Anti-Semitism unfortunately is not a thing of the past in Germany, the holocaust is the object of regular remembrance on the part of officialdom as well as of civil society. It should be noted, however, that such remembrance and repentance, along with the material redress associated with it, has been highly selective. Former forced labourers from Eastern Europe have been indemnified, on a rather paltry scale, only more than 50 years after the end of World War II, and this could only be achieved by a combination of persistent civil society action in Germany and the menace faced by German corporations from possible law suits in the United States.

In the case of the Namibian genocide, which now marks its sorry centenary, consecutive German governments, regardless of their political hue, have consistently evaded even a formal apology. This has been declined on the grounds that this might constitute an argument for the descendants of the survivors to sue for damages. In ignominious ways, state visits to independent Namibia have contrasted cordial relationships with German-speaking Namibians to dealing short shrift with calls to respond to the consequences of colonial genocide, whose survivors have remained a rather small group with little voice on a world scale. Germany's chancellor Gerhard Schröder during his first series of official visits to African countries in January 2004 – at a time when the genocide turned a century – studiously avoided to set foot onto the

former colony and thereby simply skipped the part of German-Namibian history at the centre of this essay.

There are powerful symbolic ways for the admission of (historic) guilt, devoid of any glamour and pompous ceremonial rituals. They can be at the same time public and dignified, with a lasting wider impact. The bent knees and bowed head of the then German chancellor Willy Brandt in front of the Warsaw War Memorial certainly was such an act. There are other ways of less public gestures of reconciliation, followed by practical policies. The exact modalities of remembrance and redress may be subject to debate. But there exists a responsibility and obligation to stand up, also by our scholarly endeavour, against the clamorous calls for doing away with the past by a final stroke, thus repressing and, in the words of Theodor Adorno, to "defraud those murdered even of that only gift with which we, powerless, are able to provide them: remembrance."

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