The Genocide in Namibia (1904-08) and Its Consequences
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Analysis

The repatriation of human remains more than a century after they were taken to Germany from Namibia has evoked painful memories of colonial wars in which primary African resistance was crushed, and genocide perpetrated (1904-08) in what was then the colony of German South West Africa. This contribution situates the current issues and practices of memory politics between Namibia and Germany within their historical context.

GERMAN COLONIALISM AND AFRICAN RESISTANCE

From January 1904 the German colony of South West Africa (since 1990 the sovereign state of Namibia) seethed with the repercussions of the greatest resistance movement against colonial rule the country had yet witnessed. The colonial administration had been gradually implanted after the Berlin conference in 1884 which had sealed the partition of Africa among the European powers. A new brand of German radical nationalism began to echo the proverbial quest by the young Emperor William II for a 'place in the sun', calling for Germany's establishment as a world power on a par with Britain, with a powerful fleet and an array of overseas colonies. But Germany managed to grab only a few colonies in Africa and Oceania after 1884, which turned out to be dismal and costly commercial failures. Yet in nationalist circles, colonies appeared indispensable to prove the country's status as a world power. Amongst the colonies acquired, Namibia was the only territory considered suitable for extensive settlement by Europeans. Settler ideology envisaged the creation of a 'New Germany'. Under such circumstances, any challenge to colonial rule was tantamount to disparaging national honour and grandeur. At the same time, the quest for settlement translated into a sustained drive to expropriate Africans from their lands and from their livestock.

After the formal establishment of colonial rule in 1884, it took years to assert full or proper control. Only in 1895 did the Khowesin (part of the Khoikhoi or Nama, referred to as 'Hottentots' in discriminating colonial jargon), under the leadership of Hendrik Witbooi, succumb to the colonial troops. The charismatic chief had clairvoyantly, but in vain, tried to unite the leaders of the different local communities threatened by colonialism. The decade that followed was marked by Governor Leutwein's strategy to advance the settlement project and, in his own words, to 'gradually get the natives accustomed to the new dispensation. Of their former independence, nothing but memories will be left.' Leutwein pursued this by a policy of divide and rule and almost constant warfare, pitting different African groups against each other. Since he had at his disposal only a very limited armed contingent, Leutwein relied on treaties with the indigenous chiefs to supply auxiliaries when the need arose to quell uprisings against the fledgling colonial power.

The Herero-German war that began in early 1904 was the most formidable challenge to colonial control once the formal subjugation of the country had been completed. The Ovaherero had largely been able to keep colonial encroachment at bay but the combined effects of the huge losses of their herds through the rinderpest, a locust invasion, a malaria epidemic and, above all, the consequences of the fraudulent practices of traders which led to the sequestration of cattle and alienation of land, plunged the Herero communities into crisis. Progressively, alienated land was appropriated by settler farmers. Complaints were rife about the Ovaherero, women in particular, being mistreated by the colonists. 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 very beginning of the war, Paramount Chief Samuel Maharero (ironically promoted to such an invented new position by the colonial administration in return for earlier collaboration) gave strict orders to his followers not to attack women, children, missionaries, non-German Europeans or members of other indigenous groups. In January 1904 fighting spread rapidly (catching the authorities and settlers by total surprise), but Ovaherero fighters observed their leader's instructions. 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 Ovaherero. In their campaign, the Ovaherero 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. He had earned his credentials as a member of the international expeditionary force that ravaged North China in retaliation for the Ihetuan ('Boxer') uprising in 1901 and, prior to that, by breaking African resistance, in particular that of the Wahehe, in then German East Africa, now Tanzania. From the beginning, von Trotha was quite outspoken about his mission. He considered the confrontation as a 'war of races'. He claimed superior knowledge 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, German settlement of the country, thus devoid of competitors. This strategy was, despite the opposition of Leutwein, approved and endorsed by the army headquarters (General Staff) in Berlin. Under von Trotha's command it was implemented faithfully.

Based on a mindset guided by a 'total war mentality' and extermination strategy, von Trotha was looking for a decisive battle. The military actions marking a turning point took place at Ohamakari (Waterberg) on 11 August 1904. The Ovaherero had assembled there as a people, men, women and children, with their herds of cattle. After the military encounters, the majority of Ovaherero broke through the German encirclement in an easterly direction, going into the waterless Omaheke - a vast dry land with no surface water, bordering on Bechuanaland (today Botswana). To this day, historians are not agreed whether this was actually a military victory for the German colonial army. In any case, to secure a final and decisive victory, units of German soldiers followed the fleeing Herero in hot pursuit, cutting off access to waterholes and poisoning those they came across. More than seven weeks later, on 2 October, von Trotha proclaimed his infamous extermination proclamation and publically called on his troops to ensure that the Herero would perish in the semi-desert: 'Within the German borders,' the proclamation stated (meaning the borders of German South West Africa), 'every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot.'

The proclamation also stressed that neither women nor children would be spared; they would be denied refuge. While colonial apologists are eager to point out that an 'internal' order by von Trotha instructed the soldiers to shoot above the heads of women and children to force them to flee, they ignore that this command served the purpose, namely to chase them back into the waterless Omaheke to die of thirst and exhaustion. Their fickle indicator, intended to water down the extermination order and thus the intent to destroy, makes the actions an even more gruesome way of 'exterminating the brutes' (a phrase coined by Emperor William II in his speech when dispatching the soldiers to North China to mercilessly suppress the insurrection in 1901).
By today's standards and in accordance with the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, von Trotha's proclamation was a purposeful order for genocide, as part of an overall strategy to secure the country for European, in particular German, settlement. The numbers of those who died a horrible death as a consequence of that order may never be fully ascertained. It is generally accepted that the various Herero groups might have numbered up to 100,000, of whom, according to some estimates, as few as 20,000 survived the ordeal. The concept of genocide, however, is not predicated on such number crunching. According to the UN convention of 1948, genocide is not defined by numerical dimensions 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.

When the extermination order was eventually rescinded by the emperor, the genocide had already been perpetrated. Moreover, the official military account of the ‘Great General Staff’ in its concluding paragraphs summarised it as a major achievement of the war that the Herero nation was annihilated and had ceased to exist. It celebrated the prowess of the German troops. The late change of policy may be seen as the fruit of representations by missionaries who witnessed the carnage but also of heated public debate in Germany. 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 that of 'a vile butcher'. Bebel reminded his audience of the emperor's infamous farewell speech (as already quoted above) to the expeditionary corps sent to China when he called on the troops to act in ways to make a name for themselves in the same way the Huns did in Europe 1,500 years earlier. Bebel surmised that 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 the time. On the government's side, there were considerations of expediency: the genocidal strategy was cutting the ground from beneath the settlers' feet by killing off potential labour power as well as the better part of the cattle herds of the Ovaherero which the settlers meant to appropriate for themselves. Paul Rohrbach, the commissioner for settlement affairs in German South West Africa, bemoaned after the war that the workforce, urgently required as the most important asset for building the colonial economy, had short-sightedly been destroyed.

NAMA RESISTANCE AND FURTHER GENOCIDAL CONSEQUENCES

On 4 October 1904, things took a new turn with the start of the Nama-German war in southern Namibia. This was probably occasioned 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 Ovaherero. General von Trotha responded by transferring his strategy of genocidal suppression to this region as well. His proclamation to the Nama explicitly cited the Herero experience. Larger Nama groups capitulated after Hendrik Witbooi, by now an octogenarian, died in action more than a year after the commencement of the uprising, but some carried on until 1908.

Those who gave themselves up to the Germans met a similar fate to the surviving Herero. Contrary to earlier promises, they were made prisoners. Men, women, children and elderly people, indiscriminately, were detained in concentration camps. They shared this fate with the surviving Ovaherero. These concentration camps were located largely in the relatively cold and moist climate of the two port towns of Swakopmund and LĂ汉堡teritz. Unaccustomed to these conditions, underfed, ill-clad and badly accommodated, thousands of prisoners died from sheer neglect, or from their exertions as forced labour. Even after the war had officially been terminated, groups of Nama were transported to other German colonies in Africa, 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 uprising, 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 the kind of open publicity the perpetrators may be said almost to have revelled in. Picture postcards were produced displaying in particular the concentration camps. The term concentration camp emerged shortly before the turn of the century during the Spanish-American war on Cuba and got wider currency in the course of the Anglo-Boer war in South Africa, when British strategy employed such guarded camps to defeat settlers of Dutch origin. While the term did not carry quite the same meaning it acquired through the Nazi Holocaust some 40 years later, the element of destruction both in South Africa and Namibia was quite obvious and undeniable. The postcards from the German colony 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 colour pictures showing scenes of prisoners being hanged, or of forced labour scenes representing ‘native life’ as though this was a quasi normal feature in the lives of the so-called natives - as if it were natural for Africans to be subjected to inhuman treatment and the regular application of brute force.

The recent repatriation of human skulls has focused attention on the ways in which the German public of the early 20th century was informed, including about the transportation of human remains from the colony to the metropole. One image, reproduced on postcards and in book illustrations, shows soldiers packing a crate with human skulls with the caption that these had been cleaned of their flesh by Ovaherero women using shards of glass. Participants in the Namibian delegation who went to Berlin in September 2011 to receive the skulls also recalled stories they had heard from their parents and grandparents who had gone through these ordeals. In Germany, these skulls became the material upon which academic careers were built. Such racial science became a mainstay of Nazi ideology and discriminatory practices.

In other respects as well, this first genocide of the 20th century may arguably be considered to be one of the most publicised by the perpetrators themselves. There were popular novels, books of reminiscences and literature filled with colonial propaganda, all of which extolled the exploits of the German troops. In line with sentiments that recent research has traced amongst German soldiers involved in the mass murders during World War II, this literature conveys praise for the hardship valiantly endured whilst killing not only opponent fighters, but old people, women and children. The experience of the colonial genocide in Namibia, therefore not surprisingly, eventually fed into Nazi ideology and propaganda. The most popular novel on the ‘civilising mission’ of exterminating the Herero, originally published in 1906, was ‘Peter Moors Fahrt nach Suedwest’ by Gustav Frenssen. It attained a print run of over 400,000 copies and was reprinted for the last time in Germany by the German army headquarters for distribution in the trenches on the ‘Eastern Front’ in 1944, when it was referred to as Schuetzengrabenliteratur (Trench literature). In Namibia, stalwarts put out a new edition very recently.

The nationalist and colonial hysteria came to a head when incumbent Chancellor von Bülow used this atmosphere to engineer a grand political realignment (‘BAA¼low-Block’) and to organise an election campaign in 1907, still known in history as ‘Hottentot Elections’. By this means, BAA¼low managed to break the former majority of the Social Democrats and the Centre, and 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 mentioned above. But Ovaherero prisoners of war were released only at the end of May 1908, while Nama prisoners were never set free during German rule. In fact, deportation of Nama communities to Cameroon took place even after the formal end of the war. Moreover, the colonial administration pursued a grand design to further uproot the populations of central and southern Namibia,
shifting Herero to the south, while transporting Nama to the centre, the northern portion of the white settlement zone.

Those survivors who were released found themselves in dramatically changed circumstances. Above all, they were expropriated of their land and their livestock. This meant the clearing of their land for settlement by white farmers and the appropriation of their herds in so far as they still existed. Moreover, Africans were legally barred from owning land and large livestock. In this way, Africans were systematically prevented from reconstructing a basis for an independent life for themselves, and Ovaherero in particular were prevented from resuming the symbolic rebuilding of their communities, which largely hinged on cattle herds. In terms of the UN genocide convention, measures to break up and destroy the communal life of the target group or, as in this case, to systematically prevent its reconstruction, also amount to an act of genocide. Furthermore, Africans were forbidden to settle in large groups, even when employed on a settler farm, and above all, they were subjected to a strict obligation to enter into waged labour which was subjected to comprehensive administrative control. To ensure the smooth and comprehensive working of this system and to foreclose any new attempt at rebellion, all Africans over seven years of age were subjected to a labour obligation, registered and required to carry a token, the so-called pass mark (Passmarke) around their necks. This token has turned into a much sought after collector's item, a dubious modern kind of 'memory culture'. In its time, the token served as the means by which any white person could check to make sure that the African was entitled to be in any particular place and otherwise could be turned over to the police. To this was added a system of strict racial segregation. The systematic discrimination was linked to harnessing the labour power of dispossessed Africans in the interests of the new colonial economy, centred on white settlements. The Native Ordinances, strictly regulated and ruthlessly enforced after 1905, in many ways presaged what four decades later would be called Apartheid.

THE NEED FOR, AND THE FORMS OF, DEALING WITH THE PAST

Why is it so important to commemorate genocidal atrocities such as those committed in Namibia early in the 20th century today? There are a number of reasons, which may be understood if grouped with two interrelated trajectories. The first of these trajectories is that, despite the ongoing tendency towards denialism, the Namibian genocide is an integral part of the development of political society and culture in Germany. The second trajectory concerns the overall dynamic and logic of genocide as it unfolded during the entire course of the 20th century. The distinction between these two trajectories also relates to the hotly debated issue of the exceptionality of the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany against European Jewry as well as against groups such as the Sinti and the Roma. This also leads to 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.

In brief, it may be said that the Namibian genocide contributed towards establishing a specific routine among the German military and also amongst civilians and the way they looked at war and specific acts of war. This meant, in particular, seeing 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. Or, in more recent terminology, like 'cockroaches' or 'rats'. 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 in today's cyber wars where soldiers no longer have to face or see those they are killing. In very different ways, all those situations are structured 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 of the 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 in many cases and is to be found particularly in the Americas, Australia and southern Africa. In the Namibian case, this links up with the more specifically German trajectory, when we observe continuities of this in accounts and novels read by a mass readership, of military practice as well as in the activities of specific persons, and in military doctrines and routines that link strategic ideas of decisive battles to the concept of final solution and extinction of the enemy.

Such concepts of brute force had an incubation period in the German colonies. While use is made here of the example of German South West Africa, the extermination strategy used in German East Africa in response to the Maji Maji rebellion, triggered in 1905, where the policy of scorched earth was applied, should not be forgotten. Famine was used as a deliberately created weapon, as a result of which an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 people were starved to death. In 1905 one of the leaders of German troops in the colony, Captain Wangenheim, wrote: 'Only hunger and want can bring about a final submission. Military actions alone will remain more or less a drop in the ocean.' Such a mindset was fertiliser, if not the seed, for the reactionary ideology of selection based on the claim of the superiority of the Aryan race emerging during the Weimar Republic among those who constituted the Nazi regime, and which culminated in the Holocaust perpetrated in the 1940s.

It has to suffice here merely to mention these problems. Another dimension concerns active remembrance. Here again, it is 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 anti-Semitism unfortunately even today is not a thing of the past, also in Germany, and despite the initial post-war tendency of denialism, the insistence by a younger generation since the 1960s has born fruit: the Holocaust is the object of regular remembrance on the part of officialdom as well as civil society, bordering on a cult of mea culpa, denying any critical engagement with radical Zionism and the Israeli policy of occupation and Apartheid, which is all too easily accused of and stigmatised as anti-Semitism.

It should be noted, however, that such late but eager remembrance and repentance, along with the - always and necessarily completely inadequate - material redress associated with it, has been halting and highly selective. Former forced labourers from Eastern Europe have been indemnified, on a rather paltry scale, 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 German corporations fear of incurring law suits in the United States. Other victim groups managed to secure some kind of compensation even later.

In the case of the Namibian genocide, consecutive German governments, regardless of their political hue, have consistently evaded a formal, official 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 a cordial relationship with German-speaking Namibians (among them many who continue to consider themselves as 'South Westers') but dealing short shrift when called upon to respond to the consequences of colonial genocide. It must be said that the former minister of economic cooperation and development, social democrat Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, stands out strongly by actually offering an apology in her speech at the central commemoration of the centennial of the battle at Ohamakari on 14 August 2004. However, subsequent experience has shown that this was a somewhat personal rather than an official act - even though today German officials sometimes claim that Wieczorek-Zeul has apologised and that thereby the chapter could be conveniently
considered as closed. The contrary is borne out generally, by the so far unsuccessful quest of Namibian victim groups to reach a dialogue with German officials, and of course more specifically by the way the German government (mis)treated the Namibian delegation who had come to Berlin for the repatriation of the skulls in September 2011.

There are powerful symbolic ways for the admission of (historical) guilt, devoid of any glamour and pompous ceremonial rituals. They can be public and dignified at the same time, and have 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 making less public gestures of reconciliation, followed by practical policies.

One central demand, which the German government's behaviour in the genocide question has demonstrated by default, is first and foremost to listen to the victim groups, instead of decreeing what must be done. The exact modalities of remembrance and redress may be subject to debate but there is a responsibility and obligation to stand up, also through 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, 'defraud[ing] those murdered even of that only gift with which we, powerless, are able to provide them: remembrance'.

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