

THE MEASURE OF ATROCITY: THE GERMAN WAR AGAINST THE HEREROS REVISITED

Symposium at the GHI, December 6, 2004. Convener: Christof Mauch (GHI). Participants: Isabel Hull (Cornell University), Gesine Krüger (University of Zurich), Meredith McKittrick (Georgetown University), Jürgen Zimmerer (Coimbra University).

On December 6, the GHI held a symposium that took another look at the German war against the Hereros in the former German colony of German South West Africa. The capacity audience included Namibians and representatives from the German embassy. Isabel Hull began the panel by summarizing the 1904–07 revolt against German rule on the part of the Herero peoples of central Namibia (then German South West Africa), joined later by Nama peoples from the southern part of the country. Initially placed on the defensive, Germany ultimately committed 14,000 troops to the field and spent 40 times the annual budget for South West Africa to suppress the uprising. Two thousand German troops died, most due to disease, with a far smaller number of battle deaths, as was usual for colonial campaigns. The Herero and Nama paid a far higher price: the death of as much as 80 percent of the Herero population and 50 percent of the Nama population through the killing of male combatants as well as women and children, forced exile in a waterless desert with no possibility of surrender, and internment of survivors in camps where the death rate was about 45 percent.

Hull then turned to the military aspects of this war, addressing the question of whether this was a genocidal campaign planned in advance, and thus whether the events in Namibia were in some ways a direct precursor to the Holocaust. Hull argued that the way the war was fought by German troops in Namibia was in some ways a typical European military campaign, and in other respects very much in keeping with an emerging Wilhelminian military culture. Within Germany at the time, enemy civilians were seen as legitimate military targets, the army was emerging as a punitive institution that embodied state authority, civilians and prisoners of war were routinely neglected or mistreated, and negotiated solutions were giving way to an insistence on complete and absolute victory over the vanquished at any price.

Jürgen Zimmerer, too, tackled the issue of the direction that ideas and precedents flowed, with a somewhat different set of conclusions. After arguing that the Herero War fits the definition of the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide and was thereby “the first genocide of the twentieth century and the first genocide in German history,” Zimmerer drew a

conceptual linkage between colonial wars and genocide, arguing that they were similar in their motives and execution. Hitler explicitly drew on colonial analogies (largely from British India) in outlining his ambitions to gain *Lebensraum* in Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish territory, and it was not uncommon within Germany to view the campaign in the East as a colonial project. Further, the concepts of race and space underpinned both colonial wars and Germany's World War II campaigns: people were dehumanized through "binary encoding" in order to justify removing them through deportation or murder to make space for those classified as the higher races. The biggest distinction traditionally drawn between colonial wars and the Holocaust – the dominance of state bureaucracy in the violence of the latter – was rooted not in a qualitative difference, Zimmerer argued, but rather simply in the differential capacities of the state in each context. He concluded by saying that the link between European colonialism and Nazi campaigns is not "monocausal"; nevertheless, "the Namibian War is on the one hand, the culmination of colonial genocide and on the other hand the first step towards the bureaucratized murder of the Third Reich." For this reason, the Herero genocide has "world historical significance."

Gesine Krüger considered contemporary debates about the war. The centennial has brought some renewed attention to the event within Germany; also in 2001, a group of Herero filed a claim for reparations in a U.S. court. After expressing some doubts (as did Isabel Hull) about whether the Herero War meets the intentionality test of genocide, Krüger focused on the implications of the symbols chosen in people's quest for an official German apology and material reparations. The explicit link the claim makes between the 1904 war and the Holocaust "places the claim in the center of a worldwide, global debate on justice and history, on human rights and memory." But it also, Krüger contended, takes the Herero War out of African history, insisting on its fundamental difference from other colonial wars, and allows Germans to avoid contemplating their broader colonial guilt. At the same time, the Hereros' ethnically based claim has tapped into a broader pattern of ethnicizing Namibian history.

The lively discussion that followed addressed the nature of the German government's recent apology to the Herero and the extent to which Germany's colonial behavior was unique. It also noted the difficulty of determining linkages between colonial violence and the Holocaust.

Meredith McKittrick