

## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST

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The one-hundredth anniversary of the Herero uprising in the year 2004 prompted a newly shaped debate on colonialism and especially colonial war crimes in Germany. Already in the 1960s a group of scholars and activists opposed the widespread myth of an alleged German colonial innocence, without much effect. Among them were the historians Horst Drechsler, an East German scholar, and Helmut Bley, a scholar from West Germany.<sup>1</sup> Their well-known and highly controversial books on the colonial settler society in South-West Africa were soon followed by other academic and popular works in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the colonial period seemed to be a rather short and already closed chapter of German history with regard to schoolbooks, university curriculum, public discourse, and politics. In the late 1950s, to mention but one example, with the beginning of development policy, a Foreign Ministry official stated that Germany, free from any colonial obligations, should play a mediating role between Africa and the colonial powers. Today, Germany is rather unexpectedly confronted with the duty to take responsibility for its *own* colonial past and its postcolonial repercussions. The reason is not only the centenary of the brutal war but a restitution claim issued in 2001 by the Herero People's Reparation Corporation. Spokesman for the plaintiffs is Paramount Chief and former Member of Parliament Kuaima Riruako. The class action claim was first pending with the Superior Court in Washington. In 2003 it was transferred to New York.<sup>3</sup>

In campaigning for reparations, Chief Riruako is using two very powerful symbols: the land question in Namibia and the Holocaust. I say that the land question is symbolic because the redistribution of land—even if possible—would never solve the social and economic problems in the country. Experts unsuspecting of rubbing shoulders with the group of white commercial farmers that is still dominating the agricultural sector have analyzed this repeatedly. But the land question locates the claim for restitution and reparation in an African postcolonial context, whereas the reference to the Holocaust places the claim in the center of a global debate on justice and history, on human rights and memory.<sup>4</sup>

The memory of colonial violence has a long history in Namibia. Unnoticed by the German public, a touching commemoration ceremony takes place every year in the small town of Okahandja in the center of Namibia. This town is central to Herero memory and was in the nineteenth century regarded as the "Herero capital." In 1923, Samuel Maha-

rero, the leading chief during the war, was buried there, his body brought home from Botswana, where he had lived in exile. Since that time, people gather every year at the graves of Samuel Maharero and other important chiefs to celebrate and commemorate the past. For decades, Herero leaders have asked the government of West Germany and its representatives in Namibia to take part in the remembrance of a shared history. They demanded an official apology for war crimes committed by the so-called *Schutztruppe*. But former president Roman Herzog, chancellors Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder, and other high ranking politicians until recently always refused to apologize officially, and especially to adopt the term genocide. If Todd Bentsman from the *Dallas Morning News* writes about “a dirty little secret” or “forgotten victims” concerning the colonial war, this clearly refers to the perspective of the German public. In Namibia the war was never either a secret or forgotten.

Sadly enough, colonial history is a history of colonial violence and exterminatory warfare. What makes the Namibian case so special today is not the wars’ length, intensity, or aim. Forced labor, a scorched-earth policy, the expropriation of land and cattle, and the dehumanization of the enemy were part and parcel of most colonial wars in Africa. But the Herero restitution claim does not compare the war of 1904 with other colonial wars and massacres, but explicitly connects the war with the Holocaust. The indictment reads for instance: “Foreshadowing with chilling precision the irredeemable horror of the European Holocaust only decades later the defendants and Imperial Germany formed a German commercial enterprise which cold-bloodedly employed explicitly-sanctioned extermination. . .”<sup>5</sup> This argument is not only questionable because it reduces the colonial massacre to a prelude of the Holocaust, but it is also inconsistent. One might well ask why the colonial commercial enterprise should destroy the base of its success: the African workforce. Background to von Trotha’s policy of extermination was not an economic consideration, as many German colonial settlers had already realized to their alarm during the war; instead, his approach was based on the ideology of a “race war” that could only end with a “final solution.” Comments made by settlers and by colonial army officers demonstrate clearly that his policy was no secret, and was at least partly opposed. But should this colonial massacre be termed genocide? We know that genocide is a process, and therefore definitions are difficult to apply. One can hardly talk about an intentional plan to exterminate the African population backed by the German government and conducted by the *Schutztruppe*. In von Trotha’s view, colonial rebellion foreshadowed an unavoidable race war to be fought without mercy, and he was given plenty of leeway from the German Emperor until December 1904. At the same time, von Trotha had strong opponents among his own officers, not

to mention the missionary societies, as well as the Social Democratic Party, the Center Party, and influential intellectuals in Germany.

Precisely because the Holocaust became a matrix for the Herero restitution claim (as well as for other claims), historical facts tend to be oversimplified in public and academic debates.<sup>6</sup> The images are already there, and are difficult to ignore or to set aside. Some newspaper articles and academic papers describe medical experiments in the concentration camps and systematic sterilization of Herero women without offering any historical proof. Certainly, even if no Mengele tortured prisoners in the name of science, the conditions in the camps cannot be described as being anything other than horrible. Plans for a complete destruction of the sociopolitical organization of Herero, Nama, and other communities regarded as rebellious were discussed and partially implemented. But one has to also realize the delusional nature of and the limits to all the planning of the colonial officers and politicians. The idea of destroying a culture and of transforming the African population into a mere workforce with no memory, no historical or cultural ties, could never have been successfully implemented, of course. Already during the war, Herero and other people tried to escape the camps and to survive outside controlled areas, and they started to reorganize themselves. Endless complaints about “idle” workers—either forced or free laborers—tell stories of disobedience and resistance to bad treatment, violence, and dehumanizing practices.<sup>7</sup>

To discuss contradictions of colonial policy and history and the resulting difficulties of definition is not in any sense to judge the reparation claim as such. From my point of view, the Namibian population has every right to expect German officials to apologize and German-speaking Namibians and the German public to be willing to engage in a process of coming to terms with the past and of acknowledging history as shared history in the double sense of the word—divided and conjoint. With all the new public awareness around the year 2004, it is quite obvious that African history is still ignored, or at least is of little interest in spite of the ongoing debate on colonialism and guilt. In newspaper articles as well as in radio and television features, African men and women tend to appear as voiceless victims and not as historical subjects with a history before and after the war. At conferences in Germany organized by churches and other organizations in 2004, almost all discussions ended up debating German history and the meaning of the colonial genocide for *Germans*. The term genocide was often easily adopted and German colonialism reduced to exterminatory warfare in one country. This focus results in a paradoxical reinvention of colonial innocence: Apart from the Herero war, Germany still seems to be free from any colonial and postcolonial entanglement and responsibility.

The strong images that immediately appear when we associate colonial war with genocide prevent further interest in African history. And obviously, contemporary political debates in Namibia are not of much interest to the German media either, not even concerning the context of the reparation claim. Chief Riruako, who in the German media is showcased as a rather picturesque traditional leader of a small “cattle herding tribe,” is a powerful and controversial politician running for the presidency of Namibia in 2004. Without at least some knowledge of Namibian politics, the full impact of the claim is hardly understandable. The Namibian government until recently did not back Chief Riruako’s campaign. There are several reasons for this. First, German development aid is officially regarded as a kind of compensation for historical injustice. Second, and even more important, a general debate on any past violation of human rights was not on the agenda of the newly elected government after independence in the year 1990. Such a debate, or even the initiation of a truth commission like in South Africa, could have evoked questions about the violation of human rights by the former independence movement—the People’s Liberation Army—itsself.

Another problem points to the ethnic bias of the reparation claim. Although all communities in central Namibia were severely affected by the colonial war and postwar policy, the reparation claim was issued only on behalf of the Herero, and moreover was issued on behalf of the Herero as a “tribe, ethnic, and racial group.” Aside from all theoretical and historical critiques of concepts like “tribe” and “race,” it is important to note the tendency in Namibia to reorder history and politics based on ethnic terms. This holds true not only for Herero politics. Already around the time of Namibian independence, a remarkable movement started. Free from apartheid oppression, pre-colonial kingdoms emerged overnight in all parts of the country. Traditional leaders and royal houses reclaimed inherited pre-colonial rights. Many communities reinaugurated kings, and what seemed to be a mystical step back was in fact a rational move forward. The Namibian constitution provides the institution of traditional leadership with certain special rights regarding especially the rural areas. No wonder that future participation in a democratic state was partly organized around a decisive concept of the apartheid past: the firmly established category of ethnic or tribal identity. Very complicated negotiations concerning traditional leadership followed, among and within communities and between traditional leaders and the government. The conflicts remain unresolved today. Although the Traditional Authorities Act explicitly excludes party politicians from any officially recognized post, Chief Riruako is playing in both fields: as party politician and at the same time as traditionally legitimized leader. In this

context, the reparation claim has a clear political dimension, apart from all self-explanatory demands for compensation for a traumatic past.

The government, on the other hand, has cast the history of the independence movement in "Hero's Acre," a monument outside Windhoek. The monument relates the story of anticolonial resistance as a national epic. Many critics mused about the pompous architecture and the heroic symbolism of the site. What is overlooked is the integrative power of such invented traditions. The heroic resistance of the Herero community and the suffering of the surviving people is part of the figurative representation of "Hero's Acre." The restitution claim is opening a new and multifaceted debate on history and the past violation of human rights. It might contribute to a debate that is driven neither by nationalistic rhetoric nor by ethnic exclusiveness. Besides the political usage by politicians like Chief Riruako, the claim is part of a generation-long struggle dealing with dignity, trauma, history, and justice.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Horst Drechsler, *Südafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* (Berlin/DDR, 1966); Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894–1914* (Hamburg, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Peter Schmitt-Egner, *Kolonialismus und Faschismus: Eine Studie zur historischen und begrifflichen Genesis faschistischer Bewusstseinsformen am deutschen Beispiel* (Gießen, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Sidney Haring, "German Reparations to the Herero Nation: An Assertion of Herero Nationhood in the Path of Namibian Development?" *West Virginia Law Review* 104, no. 2 (2002): 393–417.

<sup>4</sup> Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (New York, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Superior Court of the District of Columbia, Civil Division, Case No. 01–0004447, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Birthe Kundrus, "Grenzen der Gleichsetzung: Kolonialverbrechen und Vernichtungspolitik," *iz3w* 275 (2004), 30–33.

<sup>7</sup> Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Zur Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia 1904–1907* (Göttingen, 1999), 183–264.

<sup>8</sup> Gesine Krüger and Dag Henrichsen, "'We Have Been Captives Long Enough. We Want to be Free.' Land, Uniforms & Politics in the History of Herero in the Interwar Period," in *Namibia under South African Rule. Mobility and Containment 1915–46*, ed. Patricia Hayes and others (Oxford, 1998), 149–174.