

FORUM

THE MEASURE OF ATROCITY: THE GERMAN WAR AGAINST THE HEREROS

THE MILITARY CAMPAIGN IN GERMAN SOUTHWEST AFRICA, 1904–1907

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The military campaign in Southwest Africa in 1904–1907 was the largest and in every respect the costliest undertaken by Imperial Germany before World War I. It began in response to a revolt by the Herero people begun on January 14, 1904. Angered by the taking of their land, the death of their cattle in a series of epidemics, and their treatment at the hands of settlers and colonial officials, the united clans of the Herero rose up to overthrow German rule. Contemporary estimates numbered the Herero at between sixty and a hundred thousand people. Between six and eight thousand warriors targeted adult German male settlers, sparing German women and children, German missionaries, and non-German Europeans. The Herero killed about 125 men.

Germany had colonized Southwest Africa only in 1883. Its rule did not extend to the north, where the Ovambo lived, and only 4500 Germans lived in the center, Hereroland, and in the south, populated by the Nama people. Before the discovery of diamonds in 1911, German Southwest Africa (SWA)—arid, sparsely populated, and impoverished—was little known or valued in Germany. Nonetheless, the Herero uprising challenged German state authority and the Kaiserreich's recently adopted *Weltpolitik*. Consequently, SWA became an issue of national security, and the Kaiser placed the military response under the command of the General Staff, exactly as if it had been a European conflict.

The war had four phases. In the first, Governor Colonel Theodor Leutwein led the colonial troops (*Schutztruppe*) and marine reinforcements in a fairly standard colonial campaign that drove the Herero back from towns and the unfinished but strategic railroad. In April 1904 at Oviumbo, Leutwein succeeded in pushing the Herero out of the colony's center toward the Waterberg at the edge of the Omaheke desert. Because

his troops ran short of ammunition, Leutwein cautiously retreated, an action that horrified the distant General Staff, which interpreted Leutwein's military success as a defeat. The colonel was removed and the Kaiser and his Chief of the Military Cabinet chose Leutwein's successor, Lt. General Lothar von Trotha, over the objections of the Colonial Office and the chancellor. By reputation an obdurate commander who reckoned in "purely military terms," Trotha had developed pronouncedly racist views during an earlier military stint in German East Africa in the 1890s.¹

Trotha arrived in June and set about phase two, the attempt to surround the Herero at the Waterberg and defeat them all in a single battle. Trotha poured the ill-trained German reinforcements into the trackless desert, and attacked on August 11. The Herero warriors and the entire Herero people, who were with them, broke through to the southeast, following the dried riverbeds farther into the desert. Trotha ordered the few mobile units he had to pursue the fleeing people, hoping they would turn and give him the opportunity to defeat them in another battle. Instead, harassed and shot at, they struggled farther and farther into the desert, where most of them died of thirst.

In December 1904 a third phase of the war was inaugurated after pressure from the civilian government in Berlin: the internment of Herero who gave themselves up. Collected at first by missionaries, Herero prisoners (men, women, and children) were shipped to prison camps run by the military. Some were then sent on to forced labor camps run by private companies or farmers. A military report in 1908 estimated that 45 percent of Herero prisoners in military custody died there.

A fourth phase of the war began after October 1904, this time against the Nama, when they, too, rose in revolt. They conducted a skillful guerrilla war that made a pitched battle like Waterberg impossible. But their subsequent internment produced death rates even higher than those of the Herero.

For the Germans, the war in SWA was a huge embarrassment. It went on far too long; it required sending almost 19,000 volunteer troops from home, of whom about 1,500 died (many of disease); and it cost almost 600 million Reichsmark, or 40 times the annual peacetime budget of the colony. For the Africans, the war was catastrophic. It is estimated that 75 to 80 percent of the Herero died, and 50 percent of the Nama (whose population was around 20,000 in 1904). SWA was the first genocide of the twentieth century. Survivors were stripped of their rights, condemned to forced labor, and subjected to an openly racist and paranoid regime until 1915, when the colony fell to Allied troops from South Africa during the First World War.

The war in SWA has come to typify the genocidal potential of colonial conflicts. Many scholars have assumed that the genocide was planned in

advance. That view was first given by the East German historian Horst Drechsler, whose work cited for the first time primary documents held in GDR archives. Drechsler called Trotha's aims at Waterberg "a well-thought-out plan that the Herero should break through towards the south[east] and perish in the desert there."² One of the abiding puzzles of the war, however, was that the putative "order" for genocide, Trotha's proclamation to the Herero of October 2, 1904 came *after* most of them had already died.

When I began researching the revolt in SWA, I expected to find that the experience of colonial war had taught metropolitan troops and their leaders genocidal practices. My expectations came from Hannah Arendt's brilliant insights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she writes that imperialism is the link between racism (anti-Semitism) and totalitarianism with its genocidal outcomes.³ I was surprised to discover instead a typical European war in which genocide developed out of standard military practices and assumptions.⁴ Trotha's plan at Waterberg was the typical single, concentric battle of annihilation preached as gospel by Chiefs of Staff Helmuth von Moltke (the elder) and Alfred v. Schlieffen. Indeed, it had also been Leutwein's plan, though he aimed not for a military knockout blow, but rather a defeat strong enough to force negotiations. Trotha was more conventional. He intended a crushing victory of military force. No negotiations, which tacitly implied equality between belligerents, would be necessary. When the Herero escaped (through the Germans' lack of logistical preparedness and the mistakes of a unit commander), Trotha immediately ordered the next default operation: pursuit, in order to re-create the conditions for the battle of annihilation. When at the end of September pursuit also failed, Trotha issued his infamous proclamation, in which he ordered the Herero banished from SWA forever on pain of immediate death for males or death by thirst for women and children, whom he forbade his soldiers to aid. The proclamation did two things. First, it prevented negotiations (which some Herero clans had been offering since July and which civilian leaders in Berlin and SWA advocated in order to remove SWA from military hands). Second, it provided the *ex post facto* justification for the genocide that had already occurred. It also stamped male Herero as dangerous, dishonorable outlaws (and thus *vogelfrei* [fair game] and unworthy of negotiation). In a letter to Schlieffen, Trotha claimed that the welfare of his own troops required the deaths of Herero women and children: "I think it better that the nation perish rather than infect our troops and affect our water and food."⁵

Trotha's undeniable racism and his previous experience in colonial African warfare (which routinely targeted all men as potential warriors) was responsible for his apparent order in late June 1904 that German

troops should fire on all adult male Herero. That blanket order, together with poor logistics, lack of training, and frustration at lack of success against “mere” Africans, led to a massacre of African stragglers at Waterberg. In an effort to regain discipline, Trotha issued several orders forbidding the killing of women and children, but his ruthless leadership surely encouraged the breaking of taboos. Nevertheless, most Herero died of thirst, not shooting, and it was the act of pursuit itself more than its manner that led to mass death. Trotha’s racism was most evident in his willingness to announce the “disappear[ance]” or deaths of the Herero, *ex post facto*, as the necessary goal of operations. And later it reinforced his punitive and degrading treatment of the Herero prisoners forced on him by Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, who wrenched repudiation of the October Proclamation from the Kaiser in December 1904.

In some ways, it is comforting to think that racist beliefs are primarily responsible for genocide, for that enables us to distance ourselves from the perpetrators and to imagine that only ideological fanatics could produce this kind of mass death. I think it is wiser and more accurate, however, to retain Arendt’s distinction between race-thinking, the widespread but vague presentiment of differences among races, on the one hand, and racism, the full-blown ideology and explanation/prescription for history and politics, on the other. Like Arendt, I have often observed in the history of SWA and elsewhere how the experience of extreme situations in the colonies, and especially the need to justify them, led race-thinking to become racism. Racism is often the product rather than the cause of colonialism and its horrors.

The genocide in SWA was in any event not the product of ideology, but of institutional action. It was produced by the military campaign itself, which was organized and conducted according to principles worked out in Europe for European wars. These standard military practices and assumptions were embedded in Imperial German military culture. They were developed in the wars of unification in 1864, 1866, and especially 1870–71. The resulting configuration shows clearly that Germany’s military was part of the spectrum of European (and American) military cultures: it was more like them than different. But the differences were salient nonetheless, and for a variety of reasons, they increased in scope and importance up to World War I.⁶

The conflict in SWA and the ensuing genocide exhibited several important patterns of imperial military culture. First, the Imperial German military defined victory much more stringently than did other militaries of the time: demonstrative, complete defeat of the enemy’s armed forces. Governor Leutwein explained this principle to a member of his staff: “In Germany [meaning the General Staff] what counts as a success is not a simple victory, but only the destruction [*Vernichtung*] of the enemy.”⁷

That is why Leutwein was not to be permitted to attack Waterberg himself; Trotha and a further massing of troops would be necessary to achieve a pure military victory. That also explains the aversion of military commanders to negotiations, which were regarded as a species of defeat.

A second defining aspect of Imperial German military culture related to the techniques that the General Staff had developed to achieve this sort of complete victory: the mobile, offensive, concentric, single battle of annihilation (the “Schlieffen Plan” of World War I) and, when that did not succeed, the energetic pursuit to force the enemy to provide another opportunity for its annihilation. Schlieffen called these techniques “prescriptions for victory.”⁸

These techniques, which were so difficult to employ, encouraged a further set of patterns of training and behavior, one of which was embodied in the model officer. The General Staff set this standard, which called for tremendous initiative, independence, risk-taking, self-sacrifice, and complete relentlessness in the fulfillment of the mission. This was the behavioral aspect of “mission tactics” [*Auftragssystem*], which distinguished the Imperial German army through the latitude it granted to junior officers in fulfilling their orders. This system rewarded officers who went beyond the usual limits, and it promoted actionism tending to a high level of destruction, even self-destruction. Trotha matched this model better than Leutwein did; so did his successor, General v. Deimling, as well as Captain Klein, a much-sung hero of SWA, to name a few examples.

The emphasis on swift, complete military victory meant that the interests of combat eclipsed everything else, including the welfare of civilians or prisoners of war. Indeed, the German armies had learned in 1870–71 that (French) civilians *were* the enemy, both in terms of their contribution to the foe’s war economy and their nationalist solidarity with him. That modern principle, which seems to have been first recognized by the German General Staff, was merely reinforced in the colonies, where warfare frequently involved the whole population. In the Imperial German military view, civilians were dispensable; their needs should be totally subordinate to military aims. Their instrumentalization was thought to be essentially unlimited by international law, which in any event most Europeans believed did not apply to the colonies. The erasure of the line separating combatants from non-combatants contributed greatly to increased death rates.

At best, prisoners of war and civilians (in Africa that meant the native population) were subjected to neglect and affected by poor logistics. Racism may have enhanced this effect, but even logistical support for German troops was scandalously bad, especially regarding rations and medical care. The readiness to sacrifice everything for military victory

included sacrificing Germany's own troops; this readiness automatically worsened the treatment of enemy civilians and prisoners.

A final characteristic of Imperial Germany's military culture that can be mentioned here was one shared by other European countries: The army represented state authority. But this was nowhere truer than in Germany, where the army had been the instrument of national unification and where Kaiser Wilhelm had elevated it to the chief bulwark of the monarchy. In the context of *Weltpolitik*, the revolt in SWA assumed national security dimensions that only reinforced the symbolic importance of military success and the use of the military to punish offenders against state authority. This punitive aspect of the German military was significant in determining the lethal conditions in the prison camps. For example, Trotha himself set the original starvation ration, justified by a high colonial administrator "as retaliation for the uprising."⁹ But officers who took over from Trotha after his departure in December 1905 and who set out to ameliorate conditions repeatedly ran up against the principle that enemies of German authority merited exemplary punishment. This was yet another link in the chain of mass death.

Even this brief discussion will have indicated how the standard practices of Imperial German military culture tended to produce absolute destruction. In SWA (and in German East Africa from 1905 to 1908), they achieved this. The same military practices came very close to doing so again in the First World War.

Notes

¹ Colonial expert Heinrich Schnee, cited in Helmut Bley, *South-West Africa Under German Rule, 1894–1914*, trans. Hugh Ridley (1968; reprint, Evanston, Ill., 1971), 159.

² Horst Drechsler, *"Let Us Die Fighting": The Struggle of the Herero and the Nama Against German Imperialism (1884–1915)*, trans. Bernd Zollner (1966; reprint, London, 1980), 155.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951).

⁴ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

⁵ Trotha to Schlieffen, 4 October 1904, Bundesarchiv-Berlin, Reichskolonialamt R 1001, Nr. 2089, 5–6.

⁶ For an extended discussion of the concept of "military culture," see Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

⁷ Leutwein to Major Estorff, 16 June 1904, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, Landstreitkräfte der Kaiserlichen Marine 121 I, Nr. 431, 50–51.

⁸ Jehuda L. Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht: Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen* (Frankfurt, 1967), 129.

⁹ Deputy Governor Tecklenburg to Colonial Office, 4 July 1905, Bundesarchiv-Berlin, Reichskolonialamt R 1001, Nr. 2090, 22.