

ANNIHILATION IN AFRICA:
THE “RACE WAR” IN GERMAN SOUTHWEST AFRICA
(1904–1908) AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR A GLOBAL
HISTORY OF GENOCIDE

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In August 2004, Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul, the German minister of economic cooperation and development, apologized in Namibia for colonial crimes committed a century before, in the era of the Kaiser. Negotiations on compensation and reconciliation were set to begin in 2005 between the Namibian and German governments, as well as representatives of the Herero people. This striking development in the politics of memory focused attention on German colonial history, a part of the German past that had disappeared from most Germans' recollection, obscured by the great catastrophes of two world wars and the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust. The official recognition that the events that occurred in what is today Namibia were in fact genocide inevitably raises the question of how this takes its place within a global history of genocide. It thereby also raises the question of the relationship of the massacre of the Herero to the Holocaust, which was carried out only one generation later.

A thorough discussion of the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust is not possible here because of space; it would involve five hundred years of the history of European expansion as well as an entire library of literature on the crimes of the Third Reich. I refer readers to my essays on this subject in the bibliography, which go into these issues in greater detail. But I would like to outline here the meaning of this war for a global history of genocide. The war in German Southwest Africa erupted after twenty years of colonial rule (which began in 1884), in an era of relative quiet. The indigenous peoples seemed to have accommodated themselves to German rule. Leaders of the Herero and Nama, who along with the Ovambo and Damara formed the largest sociopolitical groups in the region, collaborated with the Germans, manipulated them for their own purposes, and were in turn manipulated by them. Beneath a veneer of indirect rule, the country did not noticeably change, but the increasing numbers of white settlers—and this was a German policy in Southwest Africa, which was imagined as a settler colony—steadily exacerbated conflicts between newcomers and the African population. The fact that the settlers exhibited a pronounced “master race” attitude and often deceived their African trading partners did not contribute much to peaceful coexistence. But above all it was an increasing incidence of rape

by white settlers—it was almost exclusively single young men who came to the colonies—that embittered the Africans and undermined the Herero's social and political structure because traditional leaders were unable to protect their people.

Relations between Africans and “whites” were increasingly determined by a climate of violence. At the same time, many individual German authorities pushed for an energetic, i.e. brutal approach to the Herero and a more rapid expropriation of their land. As more recent studies have shown, one German district official in particular, a certain Lieutenant Zürn, was in large measure responsible for the outbreak of war. Even if he may not have personally made the first hostile move, at the very least he provoked the Herero into doing so. The standard presentation of the events, which holds that the Herero staged a planned “uprising” against the Germans and thus were themselves responsible for their later fate, is in need of correction. Whatever the case may be, the first exchange of shots on January 12, 1904 escalated into one of the most brutal colonial wars in history, and the first German genocide.

It was characteristic of the war in German Southwest Africa that the German commander Lothar von Trotha understood it as a “race war,” part of a world-historical struggle between “whites” and “blacks” that would end with the complete destruction of the latter. With that sort of ideological zeal, von Trotha arrived in the summer of 1904 to take over from Theodor Leutwein, who was considered too mild. Under von Trotha, a limited war became a war of annihilation and genocide. Obsessed with his idea of “race war,” while still onboard ship on his way to Africa, he ordered that all African resisters should be shot immediately. There was no longer any room for compromise. The mere act of resistance was transformed into a capital offense. The notion that war could be governed by rules and conventions, that prisoners and the wounded could be spared and that an honorable end to hostilities could be sought, was totally discarded. Von Trotha's ideology of race war distinguished the war in German South-West Africa from the other colonial conflicts of the era. Race war meant a war of annihilation: Women and children were seen as legitimate targets, too. Race war is war without limits, a life-or-death struggle against an “absolute enemy.”

If one is searching for the point at which the decisive step toward genocide was taken, then the appointment of von Trotha must be considered it. When von Trotha first landed on South-West African soil, he perhaps did not know exactly how he would conduct the war tactically, but he certainly knew how it would end: with the destruction of the Herero. Local factors—such as a situational radicalization as a consequence of military developments like the Battle of Waterberg or the difficult conditions in the country that German troops had to endure—are of

secondary importance here. All of von Trotha's orders, starting with the suspension of the laws of war while he was still aboard ship, reveal the same underlying theme: Whoever resists forfeits his life, and because the Herero have resisted as a group, a "tribe," a "race," they must be annihilated as such. Von Trotha would not let the arguments of those who knew South-West Africa dissuade him from pursuing war aims rooted in racist frenzy. When Theodor Leutwein appealed to von Trotha before the Battle of Waterberg to spare the Herero for utilitarian reasons, i.e. that their labor was needed, the latter replied sharply that it was his impression that Southwest Africa was a white colony and that whites should work there themselves. There is no more pointed example of the two men's diametrically opposed domination fantasies: Leutwein's plans for colonial-economic exploitation versus von Trotha's military-genocidal dream. Von Trotha prevailed.

By stressing the importance of von Trotha in the genocide against the Herero, and later against the Nama, I do not want to downplay the importance of structural developments in the German colonial and military models. The decisive questions here—how a "race warrior" of the magnitude of a von Trotha could emerge, how he could rise in the military hierarchy, how he came to be entrusted with this very mission, and why he could not be stopped before it was too late—lead us directly to an analysis of the basic military and ideological structures of nineteenth-century German society. This helps to correct the erroneous view that the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama was somehow inevitable, rooted in the colonial situation itself.

As a consequence of this ideology of a race war, the German army shot men, women, and children, prisoners of war, and non-combatants; it forced thousands to die of thirst in the Sandveld of the Omaheke or in Southern Namibia during the anti-guerrilla war against the Nama; and it killed hundreds through deliberate neglect in the concentration camps.

According to the United Nations Convention on Genocide of 1948, genocide is any act, such as "killing members of the group" or "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part," "committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such." I think the German policy to drive the Herero into the desert, to destroy their means of life through anti-guerrilla warfare and in the concentration camps, qualifies as the latter.

This makes the Namibian War the first genocide of the twentieth century and the first genocide in German history. Studying the Herero and Nama genocide therefore is not simply an end in itself, but is of interest for a general history of genocide. It is also an important link between colonialism and the Nazi policy of extermination. After all, the

German war against Poland and the Soviet Union can be seen as the largest colonial war of conquest in history. Never before were so many people and resources mobilized by a conqueror, and never before were war aims so expansive. Millions of people were to be murdered in order to conquer "living space" in the East and to establish a colonial empire that would reach far beyond the Ural Mountains.

To Hitler it was obvious that if there was any historical precedent, then only the history of colonialism could possibly provide an example for his plans. As he himself said in September 1941, "The Russian territory is our India and, just as the English rule India with a handful of people, so will we govern this our colonial territory. We will supply the Ukrainians with headscarves, glass chains as jewelry, and whatever else colonial peoples like . . ."

This perception of "the East" as colonial land was not restricted to the upper echelons of the Nazi movement. Normal soldiers, the much-quoted "ordinary men," also perceived Russia as a primitive, primordial world. One eyewitness noted, "As marvelous as the successes are, as great as the advance . . . Russia is on the whole still a huge disappointment for the individual. No culture, no paradise . . . the lowest level, filth, a humanity that shows us that we will have a huge task of colonization here."

Was this a misunderstanding, a misperception? Can the racial war of extermination really be seen as part of a colonial history? Are there parallels that exceed the rhetoric of a few Nazis? There are indeed striking similarities between extra- and intra-European colonial projects. On the forefront are similar notions of "race" and "space." Like Nazi expansionism, settler colonies rest on the control, exploitation, and settlement of huge territories by a new population next to an indigenous one. In both cases, this was not to involve a partnership of equals but the subjugation, on occasion even the extermination, of the original inhabitants. In both cases, this policy was motivated and justified by racism, by humanity's division into higher races destined to rule and lower races destined to be ruled. At the lowest end of the scale were groups that were doomed to destruction or that were to be deliberately murdered.

Of course, European colonialism experienced various stages of development and assumed different forms in its five-hundred-year history. Even the justification for European expansion and rule over the indigenous populations of the newly "discovered" and conquered areas changed. Yet belief in one's own righteousness or destiny was always the ideological prerequisite for the expansion of power. Social Darwinism, which gained influence in the course of the nineteenth century, directly emphasized a racial hierarchy and competition among the races. In this way of thinking, the indigenous population was at best at the disposal of the new settlers; at worst, it was to be removed.

The ideological basis for such events was provided by worldly or millenary utopian thinking. The dream of the promised land, of the white settler colony, of the unpopulated tabula rasa that was to be developed anew according to one's understanding of civilization, or the identification of one's own life with a godly, historical, or civilizing mission, could create the readiness to commit mass murder if necessary. In the nineteenth century, the religious justification for one's destined role was gradually replaced by a Social Darwinian racial-biological view of history. Von Trotha's concept of a racial struggle and his opinion that Africans would "only give in to brute force," which he wanted to employ "with crass terrorism and even with cruelty" in order to destroy "the rebellious tribes with streams of blood," was deeply rooted in this tradition.

In all this, the indigenous population was placed outside the "universe of obligation" (Helen Fein), outside humankind. In the Australian frontier in Queensland for example, it was viewed as sport to go hunting the "blacks," i.e. the indigenous people, who were not regarded as human. And in the Namibian War, lies about Herero atrocities that supposedly proved that they indeed were not human paved the way for their murder. As von Trotha wrote in his infamous genocide order of October 2, 1904:

The Hereros are no longer German subjects. They have murdered and stolen, have cut off the ears and noses and other body parts from wounded soldiers, and in cowardice no longer want to fight. (. . .) Within the German border every Herero, armed or not, with cattle or without, will be shot, I will not shelter any more women or children, will drive them back to their people or let them be shot at.

The history of genocide is also a history of ever increasing state involvement: In the history of colonization, genocidal massacres first occurred on a local level. Examples of the butchering of men, women, and children by bands of settlers and local militias can be readily found in the settler colonies. These local murders were quickly transformed into punitive expeditions. Over time, army and police units were established for this purpose. A heightened form of these campaigns of annihilation was genocidal war of conquest and pacification, a larger military action requiring a correspondingly higher level of organization, of which the most important example was the Herero and Nama war.

Here, in terms of time and perpetrator, we are in close proximity to the Nazi policy in Eastern Europe. Although the war against the Soviet Union was formally a "normal" war between European powers, the Germans did not fight it as such, waging instead a war that in its conscious

disregard of the laws of warfare resembled a colonial war. Various military ordinances such as the commissar order transformed the military opponent into the enemy, the absolute other: something no longer human. The mechanisms of binary encoding employed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe are very similar to the ones that can be observed in the Namibian war, as indeed in most colonial wars.

Auschwitz is also a symbol of the highly bureaucratized and state-organized murder of the European Jews. It has often been argued that due to the state's role, the Holocaust differs from all other mass murders in history. This is a rather abbreviated and unhistorical view. The state certainly played a different role during genocides in the colonies compared to the Holocaust. This does not come as a surprise, as the colonial state in America and Australia was far weaker than in Germany between 1933 and 1945. If one historicizes the meaning of "state" and applies a concept of the state appropriate for colonial contexts, then the differences between colonial and Nazi genocides do not appear so great. Thus the Nazis' bureaucratized and state-organized murder was less a fundamental structural departure than a gradual variation dependent upon the degree of development of the state.

To be sure, the crimes of the Nazis cannot be traced back monocausally to the tradition of European colonialism. Nazi ideology and policy were far too complex and eclectic for such a straightforward reduction. Yet in the sense of an archeology of the idea of population economy and genocidal thinking, colonialism provided important precedents. Even the murder of the Jews, which was distinguished from other genocidal instances by the fact that the victims came from the midst of German society and that a century-long tradition of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism helped prepare the way for them, would probably not have been thinkable if the idea that ethnicities can simply be wiped out had not already existed and been put into action. This had been done in the colonies. And genocides in the colonies had proven that it was possible to murder entire peoples and get away with it.

It has been doubted whether there is a road from Windhoek to Auschwitz. I would say that there are many roads to Auschwitz, starting at many places. One of these roads ran by way of the colonies, colonial warfare, and genocide, and I would argue that this road was not the least significant one. The Namibian War is on the one hand the culmination of colonial genocide and on the other hand the first step toward the bureaucratized murder of the Third Reich. Providing this link constitutes the world historical significance of the war in Namibia.

Colonialism assumes such an important place in the development of genocidal thought because through it, notions of "discovery," conquest, annexation, and settlement were positively coded, popularized, and held

up as a model. At the same time, parallels with colonialism help us to understand why the expulsion, resettlement, and ultimately the murder of Jews and Slavs was perhaps not perceived as it is today, as the radical breaking of a taboo. At the very least, colonial history offered perpetrators a way to excuse themselves, a means to deceive themselves about the monstrosity of their own deeds. Auschwitz was the perverse apex of state violence against foreign and domestic populations. The war against the Herero and Nama was an important step in this development, the writing on the wall for what the twentieth century had in store.