

# The First Genocide of the Twentieth Century: The German War of Annihilation in South West Africa (1904–1908) and the Global History of Genocide

I followed their tracks, which led me to a number of wells where I beheld terrible scenes. All around them lay heaps of cattle that had died of thirst, having reached the wells with their last remaining strength, but not having being able to drink in time. The Herero continued to flee before us into the *sandveld*. The terrible spectacle was repeated over and over again. The men had worked with feverish haste to dig wells, but the water had become more and more sparse, the waterholes scarcer and scarcer. They fled from one to the next, losing almost all their cattle and very many people. The nation was shrunk to meagre remnants which gradually fell into our hands, though both then and later some escaped through the *sandveld* into British territory. The policy of shattering the nation in this way was as foolish as it was cruel; many of them and their wealth of cattle could still have been saved if they had now been shown mercy and received back; they had been punished enough. I proposed this to General von Trotha; but he wanted them completely exterminated.<sup>1</sup>

This eyewitness account by Major Ludwig von Estorff provides first-hand documentation of the German policy of annihilation in South West Africa. Major Estorff was the commander of one of the cavalry units that pursued the Herero into the *sandveld* of the Omaheke desert after the Battle of Ohamakari (Waterberg) in August 1904. Although Estorff, as a career officer, had very probably seen his fair share of violence and cruelty, he was noticeably disturbed by what he had experienced on this occasion. When he wrote about cattle succumbing to thirst, he was writing in code: what he meant were dying human beings, men and women, children and old people. As we know from other sources, thousands of Herero died in the cruellest manner imaginable in the desert. They cut the throats of their cattle to quench their thirst with the blood and tried to squeeze the last drops of liquid out of the contents of their livestock's stomachs.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Ludwig von Estorff, *Wanderungen und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika und Südafrika 1894–1910*, ed. Christoph-Friedrich Kutscher, Wiesbaden 1968, p. 117.

2 For an introduction to the various aspects of the wars against the Herero and Nama see Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin 2003. References to further literature can also be found there. See also Jan-Bart Gewald, “Imperial Germany and the Herero of Southern Africa: Genocide and the Quest for Recompense”, in Adam Jones, ed., *Genocide, War Crimes & the West, History and Complicity*, London 2004, pp. 59–77; Dominik J. Schaller, “Ich glaube, dass die Nation als solche vernichtet werden muss’: Kolonialkrieg und Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904–907”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6/3 (2004), pp. 395–430; Dominik J. Schaller, “Kolonial-

Von Estorff's is a remarkable testimony to one of the darkest chapters in German history: a chapter that has largely been expunged from Germany's public consciousness, having been overlaid by memories of the two World Wars with their millions of victims and, above all, by the inconceivable crimes of the Holocaust. But there was an additional reason why this chapter fell victim to collective colonial amnesia: namely because many Germans sought to set against the horrors of the Third Reich a more positive, indeed an immaculate picture of German history in the period prior to the monumental crime against humanity that the murder of the Jews represented. Yet events in German South West Africa, today's Namibia, during the years 1904–1908 reveal much about the destructive forces and the potential contempt for humanity that was already to be found in the military and bureaucratic institutions of Imperial Germany before the Nazis came to power.

In the minds of many people, however, no connection may be admitted to exist between colonial and Nazi practices of murder, since the thesis that the crimes of the Nazis were unprecedented can be used to exculpate German national history prior to 1933. Indeed, for a long time – before people came to forget that there had ever been such a thing – German colonial history had been held up as exemplary, humanely focused on 'educating' the 'Natives' to adopt civilisation. How and why it was possible for this false assessment (which appears to have been a late fruit of the resistance against the so-called 'colonial guilt lie', resistance which sought to counter and reject criticism of Germany's colonial record voiced by the victors of the First World War in the Versailles Peace Treaty) to be upheld for so long even in the Federal Republic after the Second World War, is an interesting phenomenon in itself.

Does examining the German genocide in Africa contribute to an understanding of the Holocaust? Anyone who is seeking simple answers to this question will be disappointed. There is no monocausal explanation for the crimes of the Nazis, nor is there any kind of straight line leading more or less automatically from German colonialism to the murder of the European Jews. Auschwitz was neither the logical consequence of the events in South West Africa, nor was it, viewed from a Windhoek perspective, inevitable. Auschwitz, to use that name as shorthand for the crimes of the Nazis, happened because the Nazis were in power in Germany and

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krieg, Völkermord und Zwangsarbeit in Deutsch-Südwestafrika", in Dominik J. Schaller, Boyadjian Rupen, Hanno Scholtz and Vivianne Berg, eds, *Enteignet-Vertrieben-Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung*, Zürich 2004, pp. 147–232; Reinhart Kößler and Henning Melber, "Völkermord und Gedenken. Der Genozid an den Herero und Nama in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904–1908", in Irmtrud Wojak and Susanne Meinl, eds, *Jahrbuch 2004 zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust*, Frankfurt/New York 1996, pp. 37–75.

because the majority of Germans clearly shared the antisemitic and racist attitudes of their leadership, or at least did not find it necessary or worth their while to oppose those attitudes. But nevertheless, a connection does exist between the colonial adventures of the Wilhelminian Empire and the crimes of the Nazis, both the Holocaust and the war of annihilation in the East. In the first place, colonial policy provides a clear illustration of the genocidal potential already present in parts of the bureaucracy and the military establishment. And secondly, colonialism in its culture of domination established a reservoir of practices that Nazi thugs were then able to draw on. Even where they did not adopt elements taken from this cultural reservoir directly (I have analysed elsewhere three lines of transmission of a colonial mindset: personal experience, institutional memory, and collective imagination),<sup>3</sup> Nazi perpetrators could, to a certain degree, subjectively feel legitimised in their actions by pointing to similarities with colonial practice. Intellectual familiarity with genocidal policy, racist thinking and ideas about population control and management derived from such practice was key to enabling a relatively large number of Germans, apparently without any great mental reservations, to play their part both in the Nazis' territorial occupations and in the war of annihilation. In particular, the positive connotations attached to European colonial rule at the time (and until well beyond the middle of the twentieth century) may well have helped to conceal the criminal nature of German rule from contemporaries. Intellectual familiarity with the expulsion and destruction of entire peoples, with resettlement and slavery to the benefit of German 'masters', and with the most brutal methods of 'combating partisans' and of annihilation through neglect, allowed perpetrators to contextualise events 'in the East' during the Second World War as a process of colonisation that was normal in a historical perspective. Anyone who so desired could therefore legitimise what he was experiencing.

The fact that in reality European colonial rule was not at all monolithic but took on a wide variety of forms does not affect these findings in any way. In the first place, the most important factor was not 'the reality', however defined, of colonialism but the ideas that people had of it during the Third Reich; and furthermore, German colonialism above all, and colonial rule in German South West Africa in particular, was marked by a terrible brutality. This brutality was widely known about in Germany, since one of the most conspicuous features of the genocide committed against the Herero and Nama was undoubtedly the fact that at the time nobody sought to conceal it. On the contrary, the events were popular-

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3 Jürgen Zimmerer, "The Birth of the 'Ostland' out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39/February (2005), pp. 197–219 (pp. 230–261 in this book).

ised through countless memoirs, official reports and novels. They were, for example, presented quite openly in the official German military chronicle:

This bold undertaking casts a brilliant light on the relentless energy of the German leadership during the pursuit of the defeated enemy. No effort, no deprivation was spared in order to rob the enemy of their last will to resist; like wild animals harassed half to death in the hunt, they were pursued from watering hole to watering hole, until they finally fell into a state of complete apathy, victims of the nature of their own country. The waterless Omaheke was to complete what German arms had started: the annihilation of the Herero nation.<sup>4</sup>

No words of pity, no words of regret. 'Mission accomplished', the reader was probably supposed to think. But the report is not entirely accurate. Though the Germans did indeed act extremely brutally, the campaign was not quite as victorious as the official historiography suggested.<sup>5</sup> The Herero had been successful in their resistance and several thousand of them survived the horror of the Omaheke. They managed to preserve the Herero nation and were able to restore or else build anew the political and cultural structures that had been destroyed. The image that the official chronicle conjures up of a German military machine proceeding with absolute precision and power is therefore misleading.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I des Großen Generalstabs, *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika*, 1, Berlin 1906/07, p. 211.

5 Isabel Hull has recently depicted in great detail the many problems the German army faced in South West Africa. She provides empirical data to support the hypothesis of the 'weak' German army first put forward by Brigitte Lau. See Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca 2005, and Brigitte Lau, "Uncertain Certainties. The Herero-German War of 1904", in Brigitte Lau, *History and Historiography – 4 Essays in Reprint*, ed. Annemarie Heywood, Windhoek 1995, pp. 39–52. Although there can be no doubt that the image of the all-powerful German military machine is misleading and itself a product of colonial myth-building, I disagree with this argument in two respects: the question of ideology and the genocidal intent. Hull's argument neglects the ideology that influenced von Trotha's decisions in particular. And she ignores new archival evidence which shows that the genocidal policy was launched independently of military developments and logistical problems. See: Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid. Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen and Michael Bollig, eds, *Namibia – Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*, Köln 2004, pp. 106–121. For a summary of the debate between Hull and myself see *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Washington 37/Fall (2005).

6 When Brigitte Lau argued against this misinterpretation, she threw out the baby with the bathwater. Completely misunderstanding the concept of genocide, she denied that it had occurred in Namibia, because she equated genocide with absolute power. Because of this, she regrettably came to be advanced as a key witness by all revisionists and representatives of the extreme right, who were only too keen to accept her denial that genocide had taken place. There is no

In addition, not everyone considered the policy of annihilation to be either successful or sensible. As is shown by the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Major von Estorff, for example, was not of the opinion that the strategy of ‘exterminating’ the Herero had been successful, let alone sensible. Estorff stood out from among his fellow officers in that he was an ‘old Africa hand’, i.e. a soldier who had already been living and serving in German South West Africa prior to the war. The first governor, Theodor Leutwein, was such an ‘old hand’ as well, and he too criticised the strategy of his successor, Lieutenant General von Trotha. Leutwein was not, however, able to prevail with his views. Only a few months after the outbreak of the war he was more or less forced to resign, as he was seen as being too lenient toward the African population. Leutwein commented with great bitterness that several hundred million *Reichsmark* had been spent and several thousand soldiers deployed in order to ensure that of the three pillars of the German colonial economy – mining, cattle, and the African workforce – the second had been completely and the last-mentioned two-thirds destroyed. What had brought things to this catastrophic situation?

## Causes of the War

Germany had made its entry onto the stage of formal colonial rule very late, because prior to 1871 it had lacked the national framework to do so. After the foundation of the Reich in 1871, however, an enthusiastic public demanded that Germany too must have its share in the partitioning of the globe. These voices eventually became so loud that in 1884 Chancellor Otto von Bismarck declared himself prepared to support the formal acquisition of colonies<sup>7</sup> – an idea that until then he had always rejected. Within only a few years, territories roughly corresponding to the present-day African states of Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Namibia, as well as a few smaller possessions in the South Seas, were declared German *Schutzgebiete*, although this designation was a misnomer: they were colonies in all but name.<sup>8</sup> In view of the climatic conditions, only German South West Africa was considered suitable for the establishment of a settler colony, i.e. for permanent occupation by German settlers. This latter cir-

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doubt that German troops committed genocide in Namibia, though without simultaneously exercising absolute power. Lau, “Uncertain Certainties”.

7 For the various interpretations of Bismarck’s decision to establish a formal colonial empire see Horst Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, 3rd edn, Paderborn 1995, pp. 51–62.

8 For an initial introduction to the histories of the various colonies see Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*. Later, Kiaochow in China was added to the list.

cumstance fired the imaginations of a whole generation in Germany, and would prove decisive in shaping the further history of Namibia.<sup>9</sup>

Imperial Commissioner Heinrich Göring took formal possession of the colony with two fellow officials in 1885. However, this was little more than a symbolic act. It must have been clear to those responsible at home that they would never be able to establish a functioning administration in this vast territory with only three officials: a territory that towards the end of the nineteenth century was inhabited by an estimated 90,000 to 100,000 Ovambo, 70,000 to 80,000 Herero, 15,000 to 20,000 Nama, 30,000 to 40,000 Berg Damara and San and 3,000 to 4,000 Basters. Not until the first governor, Theodor Leutwein, took office in 1893 did the systematic establishment of German rule and the methodical build-up of a German administration commence. The increasing sophistication of the bureaucratic structures amply illustrates this process: In 1894 the colony was divided into three *Bezirke* (regions or districts), namely Keetmanshoop, Windhoek and Otjimbingwe. By 1903 this number had already doubled, and by 1914 there were sixteen *Bezirke* and autonomous *Distrikte*, which in their turn were divided into police station areas or 'police wards'.<sup>10</sup>

It was also Leutwein and his young administrative team who embarked on the implementation of a utopian vision for colonial rule, with the ultimate goal of building a model colonial state based on a racial ideology. Through a series of shifting alliances with African rulers such as Samuel Maharero and Hendrik Witbooi, to name only the two most important, the colonisers superficially secured the territory for the short term in an effort to convert the African societies into a 'black working class'; a status in which the Africans, though not completely without rights, would nonetheless face severe discrimination. It was the aim of the constant expansion of the German bureaucracy to establish White domination, the process being accompanied by the arrival in the colony of larger and larger numbers of settlers who regarded themselves as the 'master race'. Repeated in-

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9 Regarding the fantasies connected with 'South West' see for example Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten. Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2003.

10 On this gradual intensification of the administrative presence see Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia*, 3rd edn, Hamburg 2004, pp. 13–31, 112–118 [English edition: *German Rule, African Subjects. State Aspirations and the Reality of Power in Colonial Namibia*, New York 2021]. On the history of the bureaucracy see also Udo Kaulich, *Die Geschichte der ehemaligen Kolonie Deutsch Südwestafrika (1884–1914). Eine Gesamtdarstellung*, Frankfurt 2001. For a comparison of the history of colonial power structures from an African perspective see Jan-Bart Gewald, *Towards Redemption. A Socio-political History of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923*, Leiden 1996; and Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußtsein: Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia 1904 bis 1907*, Göttingen 1999.

stances of Africans being defrauded, together with the murder and rape of individual Africans and increasing seizures of Herero land, ultimately led to war.<sup>11</sup>

## The Course of the War

Academics are still at odds about who fired the first shot in 1904.<sup>12</sup> Much evidence, however, points to the escalation having been contributed to by provocations on the part of Lieutenant Zürn, the district chief of Okahandja. What is certain is that the attack by the Herero on 12 January was unexpectedly successful, partly because the German *Schutztruppe* was engaged in another, limited conflict in the south of the colony. Within only a few days the Herero had occupied the whole of central Namibia, with the exception of the military bases, and had plundered settlements and farms. Rumours that hundreds of German men, women and children had been murdered and mutilated spread like wildfire, and contributed to no small extent to the radicalisation of the war. It was later established that a total of 123 Germans had lost their lives during these initial raids; but that the Herero, following the orders of their leaders, had in fact deliberately spared women and children as well as missionaries and in some cases even conducted them to other German settlements.

The Herero did not, however, exploit their early successes to complete a quick victory over the Germans, who had taken refuge in their fortified positions. Instead, the latter were able to rally and summon reinforcements from Germany. Thanks to the rapid deployment of these troops the impending defeat was averted. A series of small skirmishes followed without a decisive victory on either side. The auxiliary forces arriving from Germany and also individual incensed settlers engaged in acts of retaliation and committed massacres that drove those Herero who had not yet been involved in the war to take up arms as well. Everywhere there was talk of

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11 I have already, on multiple occasions, comprehensively analysed this vision of colonial rule and its consequences in more detail in Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft* [English edition: *German Rule, African Subjects*, New York 2021]; Jürgen Zimmerer, “Der totale Überwachungsstaat? Recht und Verwaltung in Deutsch-Südwestafrika”, in Rüdiger Voigt, ed., *Das deutsche Kolonialrecht als Vorstufe einer globalen ‘Kolonialisierung’ von Recht und Verwaltung* (Schriften zur Rechtspolitologie), Baden-Baden 2001, pp. 175–198; and Jürgen Zimmerer, “Der Wahn der Planarbeit: Vertreibung, unfreie Arbeit und Völkermord als Elemente der Bevölkerungsökonomie in Deutsch Südwestafrika”, in Michael Mann, ed., *Comparativ*, 13/4 (2003), Special Issue: *Menschenhandel und unfreie Arbeit*, pp. 96–113 (English version: “Planning Frenzy: Forced Labour, Expulsion and Genocide as Elements of Population Economics in German South West Africa”, pp. 57–76 in this book).

12 For a brief account of the course of the war see Jürgen Zimmerer, “Krieg, KZ und Völkermord in Südwestafrika. Der erste deutsche Genozid”, in Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Völkermord*, pp. 45–63.



“clearing up with them, hanging them, shooting them down to the very last man, with no mercy”.<sup>13</sup> However, these were still uncoordinated individual actions, not a systematic strategy.

Nevertheless, a certain style of rhetoric was already developing that anticipated the forthcoming genocide. It was clearly reminiscent of Emperor Wilhelm II's infamous *Hunnenrede*, his ‘Hun Speech’, in which he had admonished troops on their way to China to crush the ‘Boxer Rebellion’ to act with particular brutality, drawing their inspiration from Attila's Huns. In the first few months of the war this kind of agitation became so strong that Leutwein was forced to step in to defuse the situation. Even though he too demanded the unconditional capitulation of the Herero, he warned against the “ill-considered voices [...] that now want to see the Herero completely annihilated”. In his opinion, there were not only humanitarian considerations standing in the way of this. Apart from the fact that a nation of sixty to seventy thousand people “could not be exterminated just like that”, Leutwein believed that the Germans still needed the Herero as “small-scale cattle breeders and particularly as labourers”. He did, however, view it as a legitimate aim of the war for them to be rendered “politically dead”, their social structures destroyed and their people forced into reservations that would be “only just sufficient for their needs”. Individual “guilt” was not a decisive factor in these “punitive measures”: even Africans who had not been involved in the war were explicitly to be forced to submit to disarmament and to “confinement in reservations”.<sup>14</sup> Although Leutwein did not demand mass murder, it was his view as early as 23 February 1904, a mere forty days after the outbreak of hostilities, that the Herero no longer had any future as a people with political or social structures of their own. Though they had not (yet) been physically eliminated, in German planning the Herero were already “politically dead”.

It is necessary to draw attention to a few misunderstandings that crop up repeatedly in interpretations of the history of the war and the postwar period. Political and military aims do not instantly become reality, and the giving of instructions and orders must not be confused with their actual execution, let alone their effectiveness. Just as the German settlers, soldiers and bureaucrats were not merely passive victims of their African adversaries during the first days of the war when the Herero had seized the initiative, but rather developed defensive strategies, so the Herero too reacted flexibly to developments once the colonial forces had started to

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13 The missionary August Elger to the Rhenish Mission, 10 February 1904, quoted according to Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus 1884–1915*, 2nd edn, Berlin 1984, pp. 146ff.

14 Governor's Office Windhoek to Colonial Department Berlin, 23 February 1904, quoted according to Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, pp. 149f.



gain the upper hand. Neither the Herero nor the Nama were at any time passive victims. Nonetheless, the German forces displayed such brutality in South West Africa that they reduced the Herero's ability to act autonomously to a minimum. Though they continued to react in a skilful and indeed thoroughly successful manner to increasing German pressure, thus securing the survival of their nation, it is not admissible to play down the extremely repressive nature of German policy in an effort to emphasise this measure of autonomy.

Colonial rule is characterised, as post-colonial authors rightly stress, by a multitude of possible interactions, and relationships of power and domination certainly were the object of negotiation on occasions. A genocidal war of annihilation such as that waged in South West Africa by Imperial Germany, however, sought to eliminate the colonised Other. It represents one of the most extreme forms of inequality in domination relationships to be found anywhere in history. It is important, not least to preserve the victims' dignity in commemoration, to call a spade a spade and not to obscure the genocidal nature of these events by overemphasising a few individual cases of successful survival strategies or of flexible interaction on the part of some of the victims. The war meant death for tens of thousands of people. There was nothing to negotiate.

## The Decision for Genocide

The decision by the authorities in Berlin not to allow the local commander of the *Schutztruppe*, Governor Theodor Leutwein, to lead the campaign was to prove decisive in the escalation of the war into the first genocide in German history. Instead, the task was conferred on Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, a protégé of the influential Chief of the General Staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen. Von Trotha had already acquired a reputation for being a particularly ruthless officer during the colonial wars in German East Africa (1894–1897) and China (1900–01). He had no knowledge either of the country or of the people of South West Africa, but was obsessed with the idea of a coming 'race war'. Africans, he believed, would "yield only to force", and he was willing to exercise such force "with blatant terrorism and even with cruelty" and to "annihilate the rebellious tribes with rivers of blood."<sup>15</sup> Thus when von Trotha set foot on South West African soil he may not have known yet in precise detail how he would conduct the war from a tactical point of view; he did, however, already know how it would end: with destruction of the Herero. Local factors such as a situational radicalisation in re-

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15 Trotha to Leutwein, 5 November 1904, quoted according to Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, p. 156.

sponse to military developments like the Battle of Ohamakari (Waterberg) or the hostile natural conditions that took their toll on the German troops were merely of secondary importance.<sup>16</sup>

Even while he was still on his way to the colony, Trotha had declared martial law in South West Africa and empowered his officers to have all armed 'rebels' summarily shot. In his words:

- a. Every commanding officer is authorised to have coloured inhabitants of the territory who are caught in the act of carrying out treasonable activities against German troops, for example all rebels who are found under arms with belligerent intent, shot without any prior court proceedings, as has been customary practice in this war up to now.
- b. All other coloured inhabitants arrested by German military personnel on suspicion of having undertaken punishable activities will be sentenced by special field courts.
- c. The troops are to be instructed that any punitive measures against coloured people inflicted by troops acting on their own initiative will be met with the most severe punishments provided for under the general legal provisions on bodily harm, unlawful killing and murder, and that – outside combat situations – they are only permitted to make use of their weapons in self-defence or to prevent attempts to escape.<sup>17</sup>

The intention of this order was twofold. Firstly, von Trotha was attempting to impose order on the spontaneous illegal actions that had been occurring since the beginning of the war and that had led to downright massacres of Herero at the hands of incensed settlers and soldiers, i.e. to get the executions carried out by his soldiers under control. Secondly, while von Trotha's order did put a stop to the arbitrary actions of individuals, it instead turned massacres and terror into planned instruments of German warfare: whoever resisted the Germans would be shot. Without doubt, this represents an important step in the direction of radicalisation: where any prisoner was seen merely as a rebel acting illegally, rather than as an opposing belligerent of equal and equally honourable status, there was no imperative requiring that he should be afforded protection or fair and humane treatment. Such attitudes, types of behaviour and courses of action were typical of colonial wars.

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<sup>16</sup> This seems to be the decisive difference between my interpretation and Isabel Hull's; she ignores ideology and intention in order to focus on the situational dimension, combined with structural characteristics of the German army's military organization. See Hull, *Absolute Destruction*.

<sup>17</sup> Proclamation made by von Trotha from on board the steamship *Eleonore Woermann*, June 1904. National Archives of Namibia, Windhoek (NAN) Zentralbureau des Gouvernements (ZBU) (Government Central Office): Geheimakten (Classified Documents) (IX.A.Vol.1, 1b).

When von Trotha arrived in Windhoek, Leutwein tried to dissuade him from pursuing his policy of annihilation. He attempted to persuade him to enter into peace negotiations with the Herero instead. Leutwein cited economic reasons for this course of action and pointed out that the Herero would be needed in the colony as labourers. Von Trotha merely replied that South West Africa was supposed to be a white settler colony, in which case the whites should do the work themselves. The opposing natures of two men's fantasies of colonial rule – Leutwein's colonial-economic vision and von Trotha's military-genocidal one – could not be more pointedly illustrated. Von Trotha prevailed. It is revealing that this discussion took place even before the Battle of Ohamakari (Waterberg). It shows that even at that point in time genocide was already a conceivable aim for von Trotha. Thus military developments did not give rise to his genocidal visions, but merely enabled him to make them a reality.

The battle that von Trotha was so longing for finally took place on 11 August 1904 at Ohamakari, where a large section of the Herero nation, apparently anticipating an offer of peace in the spirit of Leutwein's accustomed policy, had gathered with women, children and herds of cattle. Although this battle brought military victory to the *Schutztruppe*, the greater part of the Herero broke out of the encirclement and fled into the largely waterless *sandveld* of the Omaheke semi-desert in the east of the colony. At that point, the war had essentially been decided in military terms and the truly genocidal phase began, because the German troops now initiated a pincer movement, driving the Herero ahead of them in the direction of the Omaheke. Already at this juncture, terrible scenes must have unfolded: as the official history of the campaign reports, "Masses of sick and helpless men, women and children, having collapsed from exhaustion, lay parched with thirst [...] in the bush, apathetically awaiting their fate."<sup>18</sup> The German officer Captain Maximilian Bayer wrote that wherever the pursuing German units came upon Herero, summary executions took place: "Now and then, whenever our patrols came upon stragglers, shots were to be heard among the thorn bushes to the right and left."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I des Großen Generalstabs, *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen*, 1, p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> Maximilian Bayer, *Mit dem Hauptquartier in Südwestafrika*, Berlin 1909, p. 162.

## Von Trotha's 'Annihilation Proclamation'

To the German military leadership it now seemed possible that the Omaheke could indeed "complete what German arms had started: the annihilation of the Herero nation", as was stated in the passage from the official war chronicle quoted above. German troops therefore systematically occupied all the known watering holes along the edges of the desert, and at the beginning of October, in his infamous Proclamation, von Trotha ordered that all returning Herero were to be shot:

The Hereros have ceased to be German subjects.

They have murdered and robbed, have cut off the ears and noses and other bodily parts of wounded soldiers, and are now too cowardly to want to go on fighting. I say to that people: Whoever delivers one of their *Kapteins* to one of my posts as a prisoner will be given 1,000 marks; whoever brings Samuel Maharero will be given 5,000 marks. But the Herero people must quit this country. If they do not, I will compel them to do so with the *Groot Rohr* [cannon].

Within the borders of German territory, any Herero, with or without a firearm, with or without livestock, will be shot; nor will I give refuge to women or children any more. I will drive them back to their people or have them fired upon.<sup>20</sup>

Von Trotha then clarified that, for the sake of the reputation of the German soldier, this order to fire upon women and children was "to be understood in such a way that shots are to be fired over their heads, in order to force them to run away." He "definitely assume[d] that this Proclamation" would "lead to no further male prisoners being taken", but would not "degenerate into atrocities against women and children". They would "doubtless run away, if shots are fired over their heads a couple of times".<sup>21</sup> But there was nowhere they could run to except into the Omaheke, where thousands died of thirst as a consequence of this order.

Considering the military situation and the geographical location where this Proclamation was issued, it becomes obvious that genocide was indeed the objective. Though the talk was of 'driving out' or 'expelling' the people, the only possible escape was into the waterless area. This in itself would have been a particularly brutal course of action to adopt, even in a colonial war; but it would not yet have amounted to genocide. However, the passage in question serves merely as camouflage. If the Annihilation Proclamation is read in conjunction with a letter von Trotha wrote to the General Staff in Berlin two days later, its intentions are made plainer:

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<sup>20</sup> Proclamation by von Trotha, Osombo-Wind[imbe], 2 October 1904. Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch) Reichskolonialamt (Imperial Colonial Office) R 1001/2089, sheet 7af.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

The only question for me now is *how* the war with the Herero was to be brought to an end. The opinions on this subject of the Governor and some of the 'old Africa hands' on the one hand and myself on the other are diametrically opposed. For quite some time, there has been a desire on the part of the former to enter into peace negotiations, and they describe the Herero nation as being essential as labour for the future exploitation of the Territory. I am of a completely different opinion. I believe that the nation as such must be destroyed, or, if that should prove not to be possible by tactical actions, they must be expelled from the country operationally and by means of further individual actions. With the watering holes from Grootfontein to Gobabis having been occupied and the military convoys being constantly on the move, it is bound to be possible to track down those small groups of people who have begun moving back westwards and gradually finish them off.<sup>22</sup>

Researchers into genocide have established that in order to set in motion a war of annihilation, and in particular an act of genocide, certain processes of exclusion are necessary in order to prevent the perpetrator from coming to identify in any way with the victim. The potential victims must be dehumanised, they must be robbed of their human dignity and placed outside the sphere in which moral responsibility applies. They must be banished from the circle of those "whom we are obligated to protect, to take into account, and to whom we must account".<sup>23</sup> In the colonial situation, the ground was already prepared for this process by the racism that underpinned the system. It was further strengthened by the atrocity propaganda that accompanied the outbreak of the war: thus immediately after 12 January 1904 it was being said that the Herero had 'slaughtered' women and children and mutilated their victims. In his Proclamation von Trotha specifically made reference to this accusation in order to justify his policy of murder and expulsion. According to this logic, the Herero themselves were responsible for what was happening to them, due to the allegedly inhumane way they had conducted the war: they were the 'barbarians' and 'savages' standing opposite the 'civilised' and 'disciplined' German forces. The fact that almost without exception the Herero spared women and children, while many German soldiers deliberately waged war against them, may be pointed out here without any need for further comment.

Von Trotha's Annihilation Proclamation did not mark the beginning of the genocide, which was already in progress at that point. But it did help to legitimise it, and it provides proof that genocide was the intention of the German colonial forces. Von Trotha was serious about the need to annihilate the Herero. It was a

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<sup>22</sup> Von Trotha to the Chief of Staff of the Army, 4 October 1904, quoted according to Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> Helen Fein, "Definition and Discontent: Labelling, Detecting, and Explaining Genocide in the Twentieth Century", in Stig Förster and Gerhard Hirschfeld, eds, *Genozid in der modernen Geschichte*, Münster 1999, pp. 11–21, here especially p. 20.

matter not just of breaking their military resistance, but of the mass murder of men, women and children, of combatants and non-combatants, of old and young; a mass murder that the responsible military leaders in Berlin looked upon as normal – as is shown by the quotation from the official war chronicle – and one that nobody even attempted to cover up. It is this deliberate waging of war against women and children as well, this intentional physical destruction of an entire people, that makes what happened in the colony genocide – the first genocide in German history.

After the Second World War, the United Nations established a legal definition of the term *genocide* as follows:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>24</sup>

Using this definition as the basis of a historical analysis, the actions of von Trotha and the German forces must unambiguously be classified as genocide. Even the fact that Emperor Wilhelm II revoked von Trotha's Annihilation Proclamation a few weeks later does not change this finding. By that time, the crime had already been committed.<sup>25</sup>

Von Trotha's order was overturned in December 1904; but not because of humanitarian concerns. Rather, Berlin was afraid other countries could use it against the German Empire for propaganda purposes. But above all, military considerations demanded a change in strategy: the existing one was failing, defeated in the last instance by the sheer vastness of the land and by the epidemics of typhus and malaria that were rampant among the colonial troops, making it impos-

<sup>24</sup> Article 2, United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 9 December 1948, printed in Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies*, New Haven 1990, pp. 44–49, here p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> For an in-depth debate on the issue of the occurrence of the genocide see Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid"; and Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kolonialer Genozid? Vom Nutzen und Nachteil einer historischen Kategorie für eine Globalgeschichte des Völkermordes", in Dominik J. Schaller, Boyadjian Rupen, Hanno Scholtz and Vivianne Berg, eds, *Enteignet-Vertrieben-Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung*, Zürich 2004, pp. 109–128 (English versions: "The German Empire and Genocide: The Genocide Against the Herero and Nama in (German) History", pp. 154–174 in this book, and "Colonial Genocide? On the Use and Abuse of a Historical Category for Global History", pp. 175–197 in this book).

sible for the whole of the desert perimeter to be kept under observation for any length of time. Again and again, small groups of Herero managed to get through the German lines and secretly return to the *Schutzgebiet*. The danger they represented could only be eliminated by the procurement of their voluntary submission, linked to their internment until the end of the war.

## The War of Annihilation Against the Nama

In the meantime, while actions against scattered pockets of Herero and “the whole misguided operation against that unhappy people” continued to “keep strong military forces tied down in a thankless task”, as von Estorff wrote,<sup>26</sup> German troops had long been required elsewhere. In the south of the colony the Nama had now also taken up the struggle against the Germans. Some parts of the Nama nation had been bound by ‘protection treaties’ to provide military assistance to the Germans right up to the time of the Battle of Waterberg, but now turned against them.<sup>27</sup> In view of this new development, even the Chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen ultimately pleaded for a revocation of the Annihilation Order, though he did so without distancing himself from von Trotha’s strategy, as he wrote to the Chancellor:

His [Von Trotha’s] intention to annihilate the whole nation, or to drive it out of the country, is a matter in which one can agree with him. [...] The race war that has broken out can only end with the annihilation or else the complete subjugation of the one party. But the latter course is one that cannot be sustained in the long term, given current attitudes. One is therefore able to approve of General v. Trotha’s intentions; the only thing is that he does not have the power to implement them.<sup>28</sup>

One reason why he did not have this power was that the Nama were waging an extremely successful guerrilla war. They had recognised how difficult it had been for the colonial forces to pursue the fleeing Herero. Consequently, the latter avoided a set-piece battle and initiated a guerrilla war. Knowing the country better than the Germans did and possessing greater mobility, they were able to offset the advantages enjoyed by the more numerous and better equipped colonial troops. They were able to keep hostilities dragging on, tying down large forces and eventually wearing them out and overcoming them by attrition.

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<sup>26</sup> Estorff, *Wanderungen*, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> On the history of the Nama War, see also Andreas Heinrich Bühler, *Der Namaaufstand gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft in Namibia von 1904–1913*, Frankfurt 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Schlieffen to Bülow, 23 November 1904, quoted according to Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, p. 166.



Against the Nama, as against the Herero, the Germans adopted a strategy of annihilation, systematically occupying watering holes in order to kill their opponents by thirst as they had done in the Omaheke. The deliberate destruction of the livelihoods of those who supported the guerrillas was a tactic that had been tried out in the time when von Trotha was serving in German East Africa. As early as the 1890s, when punitive expeditions were carried out against the Wahehe people, burning villages and crops and “to devour Mkwawa’s [the leader of the Wahehe] land”, as Governor Eduard von Liebert called it,<sup>29</sup> were regarded as promising tactics. Likewise in the war against the Maji-Maji in German East Africa, which took place almost contemporaneously with the war against the Herero and the Nama, it was part of the colonial forces’ tactics “to confiscate the opponent’s possessions (livestock, provisions) and to devastate his villages and crops”, as a military memorandum stated. The goal was to erode the crucial support for the guerrilla fighters among the population by destroying people’s livelihoods and their infrastructure.<sup>30</sup>

As in the war against the Herero, so also in that against the Nama, the Germans exploited the hostile natural environment found in parts of the colony as a tactical instrument. As a result, the campaign once again turned into a war against women and children, whose deaths were at least accepted and condoned, if not positively pursued, as part of the strategy of annihilation.

## Concentration Camps

At the same time, the Germans decided to set about ‘cleansing’ the country by means of mass internment. Thus von Trotha called on the Nama to surrender, because otherwise they might expect to meet the same fate as the Herero:

To the rebellious Hottentots.

The great and mighty German Emperor would like to show mercy to the Hottentot people, so that those who surrender of their own accord will be granted their lives. Only those who at the beginning of the rebellion murdered whites or gave orders that they should be

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<sup>29</sup> Eduard von Liebert, *Neunzig Tage im Zelt – Meine Reise nach Uhehe Juni bis September 1897*, Berlin 1898, p. 33, quoted according to Martin Baer and Olaf Schröter, *Eine Kopffagd. Deutsche in Ostafrika*, Berlin 2001, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> *Militärpolitische Denkschrift über die Auswirkungen des Aufstandes*, Dar-es-Salaam, 1 June 1907, quoted according to Detlef Bald, *Afrikanischer Kampf gegen koloniale Herrschaft. Der Maji-Maji-Aufstand in Ostafrika*, in *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 19/January (1976), pp. 23–50, here p. 40. On the Maji-Maji Rebellion see also Felicitas Becker and Jigal Beez, eds, *Der Maji-Maji-Krieg in Deutsch Ostafrika, 1905–1907*, Berlin 2005.

murdered have, in accordance with the law, forfeited their lives. This I proclaim to you, and I further tell you that those few who will not submit will suffer what the nation of the Herero has suffered. In their delusion they believed they could wage a successful war against the mighty German Emperor and the great German people. I ask you, where is the Herero nation today, where are their chiefs today? Samuel Maharero, who once called thousands of cattle his own, has fled, hunted like a wild animal, across the British frontier. He has become as poor as the poorest of the *Veldherero* and no longer has any possessions. The other Big Men have fared the same, most of them having lost their lives, and so has the entire Herero nation. Some died of hunger and thirst in the *sandveld*, some were killed by the German cavalry, others were murdered by the Ovambo. The Hottentot people will meet no other fate if they do not surrender voluntarily and give up their weapons. You are to come to us with a white cloth on a stick and with all the inhabitants of your *werfs* [African settlements], and no harm shall befall you. You will be given work and food until the war is over, when the great German Emperor will order the territory anew. Anyone who from now on believes that this offer of mercy will not be applicable to him shall emigrate, because wherever he is found within German territory he will be fired on, until all such people have been annihilated. For the handing over of those guilty of murder, dead or alive, I set the following rewards: for Hendrik Witbooi 5,000 marks, for Stürmann [*sic*] 3,000 marks, for Cornelius 3,000 marks, for all other guilty leaders 1,000 marks.

Signed Trotha.<sup>31</sup>

Only from a superficial point of view can this call to capitulate be seen as representing an abandonment of the policy of annihilation. The decisive factor in judging the military leadership's intention is the fate that awaited the Nama in captivity. And in this respect it is completely justified to talk of a continuation of the existing murderous policy, because the camps the Nama were deported to themselves represented a further instrument in the war of extermination. They were part of a system of camps established across the whole *Schutzgebiet* immediately following the revocation of the Annihilation Proclamation. This system included 'collection camps', operated by the Missionary Society and used to bring scattered Herero and those who had been living in hiding under control, and concentration camps, established and operated by the military administration. As well as effecting the actual 'concentration' of the Herero and Nama to prevent them from supporting the combatants, these latter also served as labour camps, providing urgently needed labour to both private employers and state institutions. At the same time, it was hoped that the prisoners, by being 'educated to work' in the camps, could be disciplined and prepared for their new 'role' as labourers in the post-war period, as Governor von Lindequist wrote in 1906:

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31 Von Trotha, Proclamation to the Hottentots, 22 April 1905. Printed in: Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I des Großen Generalstabs, *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen*, 2, p. 186.

Getting the Herero to work while they are prisoners of war is a very salutary matter for them, indeed they may regard themselves as being very fortunate in that they can learn to work before full freedom is restored to them, since otherwise they would probably continue to wander around the country avoiding work, and, since they have lost their entire cattle stocks, lead wretched lives.<sup>32</sup>

This conviction was accompanied by the idea of retribution. With regard to the conditions prevailing in the concentration camp at Swakopmund – which were by no means exceptional – Deputy Governor Hans Tecklenburg declared in 1905:

The more the Herero people now experience the consequences of rebellion in terms of their own physical suffering, the less desire they will have to seek to repeat the rebellion for generations to come. Our military successes in themselves have made less of an impression on them. I expect the time of suffering they are now having to endure to have a more sustained effect, though in expressing this view it is by no means my wish to take up cudgels on behalf of Lieutenant General Trotha's Proclamation of 2 October of last year. From an economic point of view, though, the death of so many people does represent a loss.<sup>33</sup>

## The Camp on Shark Island and Annihilation through Neglect

Conditions were even worse on Shark Island off Lüderitzbucht, which was the biggest of the prison camps. Both Herero and Nama were interned there and left to their fate, and once more the threshold to genocide was crossed. An eyewitness, the missionary Emil Laaf from Lüderitzbucht, described the conditions as follows:

At that time there were about 2,000 Herero prisoners of war interned at the very far end of Shark Island. [...] As long as the people were in good health, they were given work by the forces or by other whites who lived nearby. They were allowed to leave Shark Island to go to work, but came back every evening. [...] As a result of the great hardships and deprivations that the prisoners had suffered while they were out in the *veld* they were very weak, and there was great misery and much sickness among them. And in addition to all that, they found the wet, harsh sea climate hard to endure at first; and in any case they had been completely taken away from their accustomed way of life. It was mainly scurvy and intestinal catarrh that people went down sick with, and a certain percentage died at that time. [...] On 7 September 1906 yet another large transport of prisoners of war arrived in Lüderitzbucht from the north. This time they were Hottentots of various tribes, predominantly Witboois and Bethany people who had surrendered to the Germans at Gibeon under the

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<sup>32</sup> Governor's Office Windhoek to Colonial Department Berlin, 17.4.06, BArch R 1001/2119, sheets 42a–43b.

<sup>33</sup> Governor's Office Windhoek to Colonial Department Berlin, 3.7.05, BArch R 1001/2118, sheets 154a–155a.

leadership of Samuel Isaak, the deputy of *Kaptein* Hendrik Witbooi. Altogether, including women and children, they totalled 1,700 persons. Regrettably, a grave injustice was done to these people in transferring them to Lüderitzbucht, since it had been mutually agreed that these prisoners should be settled in Gibeon District once they had surrendered their weapons. So it was no wonder that they, and Samuel Isaak first and foremost, harboured a great grudge against the German government in their hearts. A period of great suffering and misery now began for these people. They were settled on the furthest tip of Shark Island.

Above all they did not get the food that the conditions demanded. The refined German flour they received was unsuitable for baking bread, and no unrefined flour from the Cape was brought in. They were given plenty of pulses, but had no way of cooking them. Fresh meat was an extreme rarity. When Samuel Isaak complained to the missionary Emil Laaf that they got so little meat and the latter advised him to look for the very popular shellfish on the beach, he replied: "We have collected them all already, there are none left."

But even more than these miserable conditions, their isolation at the very far end of Shark Island played its part in destroying the people's will to live. They gradually became quite apathetic in the face of their wretched state. They were separated from the outside world by three high barbed-wire fences. [...]

The number of the sick increased day by day. In order to keep the people profitably occupied, the tribes had initially been put to work on a major blasting operation, with a view to building a quay on the side facing Roberts Harbour. At first, almost five hundred men were employed on this blasting work. But within a short time this number had dwindled to such an extent that the blasting work had to be suspended. There was scarcely a *pontok* [hut] without one or more sick people in it. A hospital unit was set up in a few large rooms, created by hanging up sacks. But the rations provided were in no way adapted to the needs of the sick. The food was simply put down in front of the people suffering from scurvy, and then it was a matter of 'Eat it or die!' If a sick person had no sympathetic relative to help him, he could easily starve to death. [...] The mortality rate was horrifyingly high at that time. Sometimes as many as 27 people died on a single day. The dead were taken to the cemetery by the cartload.<sup>34</sup>

Not even the need for labour could move those responsible to see that the prisoners were better provided for; rather than do that, the risk was accepted that construction work might have to be suspended. The fact that there was also murderous intent lurking behind all of this is confirmed by a statement attributed by Emil Laaf to the responsible regional commander Berthold von Deimling. Replying to charges that conditions on Shark Island were unbearable and that the camp should be transferred to the mainland, where the climatic conditions were better, von Deim-

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<sup>34</sup> *Lüderitzbucht Chronicle* (Report on the period from the foundation until 1920, by the missionary Emil Laaf), Archives of the Evangelical Church in the Republic of Namibia, V 16, sheets 1–31, here sheets 21–26.

ling only declared cynically “that as long as he [Deimling] was in charge, no Hottentot would be allowed to leave Shark Island alive.”<sup>35</sup> Thus although the Annihilation Proclamation had been revoked and von Trotha had been recalled to Germany in November 1905, there were clearly at least some parts of the officer corps who clung to his policy of extermination.

Conditions on Shark Island did not improve until Ludwig von Estorff was appointed commander of the *Schutztruppe*. Even before he assumed this position, he had been one of von Trotha’s critics. He felt that his honour as an officer had been besmirched and therefore did not want to continue to take responsibility for ‘executioner’s duties of this kind’, particularly as there were some among the prisoners whom he himself had promised when they had surrendered that they would be better treated.<sup>36</sup> In April 1907, therefore, he ordered the camp to be moved to the mainland, whereupon the mortality rate immediately declined sharply due to the better climatic conditions.

In the camp on Shark Island murder was committed through deliberate neglect. Victims were ‘selected’ solely on the basis of their actual or assumed ethnicity; ‘crimes’ or acts of resistance carried out personally by any individual played no role in the motives for internment. The intent was to destroy entire ‘tribes’, which in the view of the Germans were ‘racial groups’. Therefore, this policy can be categorised under Article 2, Letter (c) of the United Nations Genocide Convention (“deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”) – to say nothing of the killing of individual members of the group (Letter (a)) or of the “causing of serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” (Letter (b)) that also left their mark on the survivors. This widespread murder already displays the initial signs of a bureaucratisation of the process, because the inmates of the camp were counted and kept under surveillance. This bureaucratisation is also recognisable in the way deaths were handled administratively, for example in the death certificates with the entry “death by enfeeblement” filled in in advance.<sup>37</sup>

Even if conditions in the concentration camp on Shark Island were particularly horrific, prisoners died in massive numbers elsewhere as well. According to statistics collected by the colonial forces, a total of 7,682 inmates died between October 1904 and March 1907. This represents between 30 and 50 per cent of the total number of people interned. Even though the ending of the State of War had been declared on

<sup>35</sup> *Lüderitzbucht Chronicle*, sheets 26ff.

<sup>36</sup> Estorff to the Colonial Forces, 10 April 1907, BArch R 1001/2140, Sheet 88a ff.

<sup>37</sup> Jan-Bart Gewald, “Herero and Missionaries. The Making of Historical Sources in the 1920s”, in Wilhelm J. G. Möhlig (ed.), *Frühe Kolonialgeschichte Namibias 1880–1930*, Köln 2000; pp. 77–95, here p. 78.

31 March 1907, the captivity of prisoners of war was not formally ended until 27 January 1908, *Kaisers Geburtstag* (the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm II), when the last of the Herero and Nama were released.

## Colonialism, Racism and Genocide

Studying the genocide committed on the Herero and the Nama is not an end in itself. Nor is it merely a contribution to Namibian history: it goes beyond that. It is significant both for German history and for the history of genocide in general.<sup>38</sup> When von Trotha spoke of a ‘race war’ that could end only with victory for one side and the destruction of the other, he was adopting a position within an area of discourse and concepts that was profoundly influenced by the colonial tradition: a view of the world in which genocide was no alien concept.

It is difficult to summarise the five-hundred-year history of European colonialism in just a few lines. Research conducted from a postcolonial standpoint in particular has in recent years drawn increased attention to the differences between various regions of the world and various periods of time, and has emphasised the importance of the situational context for the way relations between colonisers and colonised developed. Nonetheless, the history of colonialism is also a history of violent crimes committed on a mass scale.

However diverse the ways in which individual European colonial structures evolved over time, fundamental to them all was a binary coding of the world. Even though the justifications for European expansion and for European rule<sup>39</sup> over the indigenous peoples of the newly ‘discovered’ and conquered territories changed, whether it was the missionising of the ‘heathen’, the ‘White Man’s Burden’ or a ‘Manifest Destiny’ that was advanced as legitimation, the emphasis on the rightness of one’s own beliefs or on the conviction of having been chosen to fulfil this mis-

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<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately the issue can only be discussed in a very cursory manner here. For a more detailed discussion and a more critical look at the literature on the topic see my arguments presented elsewhere: Jürgen Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust. Towards an Archeology of Genocide”, in A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, New York 2004 (a revised version appears in this book on pp. 125–153); Zimmerer, “Birth of the ‘Ostland’” (pp. 230–261 in this book).

<sup>39</sup> The use of expressions such as ‘Europeans’, ‘colonial masters’ etc. should not be allowed to obscure the fact that these by no means formed a homogenous group with identical goals either. See also Stoler’s instructive essay: Anna Laura Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule”, *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, 31 (1989), pp. 134–161.

sion always played an important role in the ideological preparation for exercising domination. True equality between the Europeans and the various 'Native' populations hardly ever existed. The pattern of binary opposition that underlay the perceived dichotomy between colonisers and the colonised, Christians and 'heathens', 'Blacks' and 'Whites', humans and 'less-than-humans', also brought about a homogenisation of the inherently disparate groups of both the rulers and the ruled. At the same time it established the distance between these two groups that was essential to the asymmetrical – i.e. colonial – exercise of power.

Social Darwinism, which became increasingly influential in the course of the nineteenth century, placed direct emphasis on the hierarchy among peoples and their competition with each other – in respect of both the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised and relations between the colonial powers themselves. It is within such a mindset that the concept of a 'race war' as envisioned by von Schlieffen, von Trotha and other members of the German colonial forces can be localised. The most drastic consequences of this dichotomy were manifested in the settler colonies, where the newly arrived Europeans – if they did not in the first place imagine the land to be empty of any human inhabitants at all – were of the opinion that they could embark on organising the land as they saw fit in order to bring 'order' to the 'chaos', without regard for indigenous settlement areas and economic spheres. The indigenous peoples who, contrary to the idea that was prevalent among Europeans, already lived there, only stood in the way of this endeavour. And if they were not willing to allow their labour to be exploited, they were either expelled or murdered. In the racist world view, this was the 'normal' course of events in world history. The existence of 'higher' races was taken for granted, and for these to occupy such a position logically required the existence of 'lower' races as well. And right at the bottom of this racial hierarchy were to be found those peoples who, according to the immutable laws of history, were doomed to perish. Helping this process along merely accelerated the inevitable.

## **Genocide on the Frontier, Colonial Wars of Conquest and Annihilation**

Before indigenous people became victims of violence, they were dehumanised and robbed of their human dignity. How this dehumanisation of the 'Natives' manifested itself in individual perpetrators is illustrated by the practice, known from Australia, of 'shooting practice' – with Aborigines as targets. As an eyewitness reported in 1889: "There are instances when the young men of the station have employed the Sunday in hunting the blacks, not only for some definite pur-



pose, but also for the sake of the sport.”<sup>40</sup> This was possible because the Aborigines were not regarded as belonging to human society, as the description of this practice published in the newspaper *The Queenslander* also confirms:

And, being a useless race, what does it matter what they suffer any more than the distinguished philanthropist, who writes in his behalf, cares for the wounded half-dead pigeon he tortures at his shooting matches. ‘I do not see the necessity,’ was the reply of a distinguished wit to an applicant for an office who remarked that ‘he must live;’ and we virtually and practically say the same to the blacks and with better reason.<sup>41</sup>

From this attitude it was but a small step to the murder of women and children. Placing Aborigines on the same level as animals that could be ‘shot down’ for sport was the plainest possible evidence of dehumanisation. In other cases, this function was fulfilled by the propagation of atrocity stories: Africans, Native Americans and Aborigines were accused of raping women and of (sexually) mutilating men. Thus the indigenous nations themselves were made to bear the blame for their own fate, because they had allegedly shown themselves to be ‘animals’ that it was therefore permissible to ‘slaughter’. The Herero War and von Trotha’s Proclamation are classic examples of this attitude.

Mass murder found even broader acceptance if individuals were able to justify it by claiming that they were protecting their own property. In 1889, for example, it was said of an Australian squatter: “He shot all the men he discovered on his run, because they were cattle killers; the women, because they gave birth to cattle killers; and the children, because they would in time become cattle killers.”<sup>42</sup> Applying this logic, the murdering could only end with the complete extermination of the Aborigines. Similar arguments seeking to justify genocide are also known from North America: H. L. Hall, for example, an infamous murderer of Native Americans, rationalised the murder of small children with the saying that “nits make lice”,<sup>43</sup> which had been well-known and applied to Native Americans since the time of King Philip’s War (1675–1677).

Whereas the aforementioned squatter was a lone murderer, others went hunting together. In 1867, for example, readers of *The Queenslander* learnt about an act of reprisal carried out by several settlers jointly in retribution for real as well as imagined attacks by Australian Aboriginal People:

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted according to Alison Palmer, *Colonial Genocide*, Adelaide 2000, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *The Queenslander*, 8 May 1880, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/20332884>, accessed 12 Jul. 2023, see Palmer, *Colonial Genocide*, p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted according to Palmer, *Colonial Genocide*, p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted according to Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492-Present*, San Francisco 1997, p. 229.

[...]in the present system by which blacks are shot down most ruthlessly for weeks and months after a case of murder or theft has been reported, and when many innocent are either killed in order that the guilty may possibly be included in the number, or so hunted about that the spirit of revenge is aroused in them[.]<sup>44</sup>

Numerous examples of the slaughter of men, women and children by gangs of settlers or local militia can be found in North America as well as in Australia. The perpetrators justified such acts by pointing to real or imagined attacks by the ‘savages’.<sup>45</sup> Especially on the frontier proper, it was private actions at the local level that predominated, precisely because this was by definition a mixed zone where the newly arrived settlers came into contact with the indigenous population, but where the Whites were initially not yet in the majority and official structures were lacking. In the course of time, however, specially recruited troops such as the Native Police of Queensland came to be deployed, which functioned as death squads with the task of ‘cleansing’ the frontier of Aborigines.

The genocidal wars of conquest and ‘pacification’ represent a further escalation of such frenzies of extermination, since they were more extensive military operations and accordingly required more organisation. The war that Imperial forces waged against the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa is the most important example of this. The fact that camps appear, and serve as spaces of death on a large scale underscores the degree of organisation of this genocide. Even if it has not been possible to clarify whether Kaiser Wilhelm ordered the genocide – von Trotha merely indicated that the Emperor had commissioned him to crush the ‘rebellion’ by whatever means – von Trotha was nonetheless unambiguously acting in the Emperor’s name. He was the Kaiser’s representative, and therefore the crimes committed in that context must be viewed as having been committed officially in the name of Germany. Von Trotha represented the German state, and this makes the war of annihilation into a criminal act perpetrated

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44 The Queenslander, 23 February 1867, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/20312053/>, accessed 12 Jul. 2023, see Palmer, *Colonial Genocide*, p. 43.

45 Most of the few studies that exist on this topic seek to fervently enlighten readers about the suffering of a particular group and they lobby for the recognition of that suffering: see, for example, Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide*, and David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust. The Conquest of the New World*, New York 1992. A. Dirk Moses demonstrates what an objective, scientific debate can accomplish: see A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, New York 2004. See especially his introduction to the problem of an activist vs. scientific perspective and the problem of the singularity of certain victims’ experiences and the connected problems for scientific treatment. Lastly, also see A. Dirk Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36/4 (2002), pp. 7–36; and Zimmerer, “Colonial Genocide?” (pp. 175–197 in this book).

by the state, which is one of the generally acknowledged identifying characteristics of genocide. Not least for this reason, the destruction of the Herero and Nama represents an important stepping up of the degree of radicalisation, lying between the genocides committed by settlers in the colonial context and the crimes of the Nazis.

## The Second World War as a Colonial War

Compared to the gigantic battles and the millions of victims of the Second World War, the colonial war in South West Africa seems but a minor prelude to the barbarisms of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, the colonial war's numerous structural similarities to the Nazi "war of annihilation in the East" reveal that it is an important event not only in Namibian history, but in German history too. Many things that appear, when we look back at the Second World War, to be unimaginable breaches of taboos had already been common practice in German South West Africa.<sup>46</sup> If the underlying structure of the 'war in the East' – in other words, the grand design that lay behind the modern weapons and the armada of tanks and aircraft – is exposed, this 'war of annihilation' displays elements clearly reminiscent of colonial warfare, of "war[s] of destruction" incorporating "campaign[s] of annihilation", to use a term that is already to be found already in reports on the fighting in German East Africa, as it was pursued by, among others, the German colonial forces.<sup>47</sup>

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46 I have treated the structural similarities between colonialism and the German policy of occupation and extermination in the 'East' during the Second World War in depth in Zimmerer, "Birth of the 'Ostland'"; Jürgen Zimmerer, "Im Dienste des Imperiums. Die Geographen der Berliner Universität zwischen Kolonialwissenschaften und Ostforschung", *Jahrbuch für Universitätsgeschichte*, 7 (2004), pp. 73–100 (English version: "In the Service of the Empire: Berlin University's Geographers from Colonial Sciences to Ostforschung", pp. 262–293 in this book); Jürgen Zimmerer, "Von Windhoek nach Warschau. Die rassische Privilegiengesellschaft in Deutsch-Südwestafrika — ein Modell mit Zukunft?", in Frank Becker, ed., *Rassenmischen—Mischlinge—Rassentrennung. Zur Politik der Rasse im deutschen Kaiserreich*, Stuttgart 2004, pp. 97–123 (English version: "From Windhoek to Warsaw: The Society of Racial Privilege in German South West Africa – a Model with a Future?", pp. 201–229 in this book). A connection between colonial rule in German South West Africa and the Third Reich had already been alluded to in Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894–1914*, Hamburg 1968; Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*; and Henning Melber, "Kontinuitäten totaler Herrschaft. Völkermord und Apartheid in Deutsch-Südwestafrika", *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung*, 1 (1992), pp. 91–116.

47 Liebert, *Neunzig Tage im Zelt*, p. 33, quoted according to Thomas Morlang, "Die Kerls haben ja nicht einmal Gewehre." Der Untergang der Zelewski-Expedition in Deutsch-Ostafrika im August 1891", *Militärsgeschichte*, 11/2 February (2001), pp. 22–28, 27.

Because although in formal terms the war against the Soviet Union was a regular war between European powers, it was the case right from the start that the Germans did not conduct it as such but as a war of plunder and destruction, which owing to the deliberate non-application of the international rules of war by the aggressor more closely resembled a colonial war than an 'ordinary' war inside Europe. Features of this were the denial to the adversary of the status of a legitimate belligerent of equal and equally honourable status, who even in defeat and captivity was entitled to a minimum of rights, and the racially driven willingness to let prisoners of war perish or to murder them outright. One only needs to think of the practice known as 'annihilation through neglect' by which millions of Russian prisoners of war were murdered during the Second World War.

Heinrich Himmler's order of the day of 1 August 1941 reads almost like a quotation from von Trotha's Proclamation. In it, Himmler ordered the massacre of the Pripet Marshes: "All Jewish men are to be shot, Jewish women driven into the swamps."<sup>48</sup> The intention was clear: very much like the Herero women and children who perished in the Omaheke, the Jewish women too would die, without any German soldier even having to lift his weapon. The attitude that paved the way for this crime also entailed a binary view of the world: there were only 'Aryans and Jews', 'Germans and Slavs', 'humans and subhumans'. Without this dichotomous opposition, identical in function to the colonial categorisation as 'civilised people' or 'savages', it would not have been possible to treat other human beings in such a cruel and inhuman way as then occurred.

## Holocaust and Colonialism

However it would also be erroneous to view Nazi crimes, and particularly those of the Holocaust, as mere copies of colonial events, as postcolonial authors and activists have repeatedly maintained them to be, and continue to do so. In this respect the debate has taken on aspects of a competition between degrees of victimhood. It has been emphasised that in the process of colonising the Americas, multiple Holocausts occurred, an estimated hundred million deaths being manifoldly worse than six million deaths.<sup>49</sup> This emotionalised and politicised approach has damaged

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted according to Christian Gerlach, "Deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen, Besatzungspolitik und der Mord an den Juden in Weißrußland 1941–1943", in Ulrich Herbert, ed., *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945. Neue Forschung und Kontroversen*, Frankfurt 1998, pp. 236–291, here p. 278.

<sup>49</sup> For an extreme example see Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide*; and Rosa Amelia Plumelle-Urbe, *Weisse Barbarei. Vom Kolonialrassismus zur Rassenpolitik der Nazis*, Zürich 2004.

rather than advanced research into the connection between colonialism and the Holocaust. To suggest such an equivalence is also an oversimplification, since the differences between events in the colonies and those in central and eastern Europe in the 1940s also demand to be clearly stated and defined.

One important difference, for example, is that the Jewish victims were drawn from the midst of German and European society, while the colonial victims had been viewed by their killers as subordinate from the onset. Basically, the Jews had first to be transformed into that 'absolute Other' that the colonised peoples already appeared to be, simply on account of the colour of their skin. The process of Othering, of binary coding, was similar, but in the case of the Jews the process of determining who were to become victims was completely different: centuries-old antisemitism allied itself with exterminatory racism of the colonialist pattern.

A further difference lies in the bureaucratisation of murder and thus in the role the state played in genocide, on the one hand in the colonial context and on the other hand in the Third Reich. It is precisely this systematic, almost industrialised murder – symbolised in an iconic fashion by barbed wire, heaps of discarded eye-glasses and mountains of bodies – for which the name Auschwitz stands, so that it has become a universally recognised chiffre for absolute evil. In the colonial state, which was far less centralised and bureaucratised, murder could not take such forms.

Nonetheless, bureaucratised and state-orchestrated killing is less a matter of a fundamental structural difference than of a difference in degree that is linked to the level of the state's historical development. Thus the massacres perpetrated by settlers and militias on the New England frontier were congruent with the weakness of state institutions there. As the State became more established, the instruments of genocide expanded in parallel; in Queensland and in the United States, for example, they were augmented by the Native Police or by military forces, through which the state itself committed mass murder. In the modern bureaucratised state, such as was beginning to take shape in South West Africa, concentration and prisoner-of-war camps were introduced as places of extermination. Active 'industrial' killing may not have been practiced there yet; but murder through neglect was already prevalent.

The crimes of the Nazis cannot be ascribed monocausally to the tradition of European colonialism: National Socialism was too complex and too eclecticist in its ideology and its policies for that. Nonetheless, to express the relationship in terms of the archaeology of economic population management and genocide, it must be said that colonialism served as an important source of ideas. Even the murder of the Jews, which – as already mentioned – sets itself off in many ways from other genocides, would scarcely have been possible if the ultimate breach of taboo that consists in thinking that other ethnic groups can simply be eliminated,

and then acting accordingly, had not already occurred. And it had occurred in colonial times.

In the tradition of genocidal thought, another reason why colonialism occupies such a prominent place is because the themes of the 'discovery', conquest, 'opening up' and 'settlement' of the world had positive connotations, were disseminated throughout society and offered role models for the ambitious to emulate. At the same time, the similarity to colonialism helps us to understand why the expulsion and resettlement of Jews and Slavs, and in the last instance their murder, were perhaps not even perceived as being breaches of taboo. At the very least, colonial history offered the perpetrators of the Nazi crimes the possibility to exonerate themselves, and to deceive themselves in respect of the monstrosity of their own horrific acts.

Auschwitz marks the perverse culmination of state violence directed against both the state's own and also alien populations. The war against the Herero and Nama was an important step in this development and offered a portent, right at the beginning of the twentieth century, of what was yet to come. The genocide in German South West Africa is therefore neither simply a local event in the history of Namibia or of Germany, nor an isolated incident in colonial history. Rather, it is an event that stands out in a global history of violence that was to escalate and reach its zenith in the two world wars. It has often been asked whether there is a path connecting Windhoek and Auschwitz. I think there are many paths. Viewed from the Windhoek perspective, the Third Reich was by no means an inevitable consequence. But to pursue the same metaphor: of the numerous feeder routes that converged in the criminal policies of National Socialism, one originated in the colonies; and it was by no means an obscure or minor path.