

German Genocide in Africa and the Third Reich

By Elizabeth R. Baer

In late May, *The New York Times* carried a startling headline: “[Germany Officially Recognizes Mass Killings in Colonial-Era Namibia as Genocide](#).” The Herero and Nama people have been waiting more than a century for this admission of the truth. Between 1904-1908, the German military exterminated 80,000 indigenous people from two groups, the Herero and the Nama, in their African colony. These people died in battle, and from starvation, sexual violence, medical experiments, forced labor, hanging, and disease. You may wonder why the Herero and Nama genocide is unfamiliar. One reason is that when Germany lost its colonies after WWI, the government and military archives were closed and the genocide was not only NOT discussed, it was hidden. The term “colonial amnesia” describes such willful forgetting of an ignominious chapter of history.

During the Nazi era, the colonial files remained closed and then many of them were captured by the Soviets at the end of WWII. It was not until the 1960's that the files became available, this time in the German Democratic Republic, controlled by the USSR. A young historian by the name of Horst Drechsler used the files to write his doctoral dissertation which later became a book, entitled LET US DIE FIGHTING. For the first time, this book told the truth about the genocide committed in Africa. While Germany has fully admitted its responsibility for the Holocaust, in a gesture called *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, until May 2021 it had yet to do so for the Herero and Nama genocide.

Germany came late to colonization. While France, England, Portugal and Spain had already devoted resources to exploration and colonization, Germany did not establish its first settlement in Africa until 1885. Germany established colonies in several African locations, China, and the Pacific but only German Southwest Africa (present day Namibia) was a settlement colony. German colonizers endeavored to acquire arable land in the country which is largely desert. Various strategies such as deceptive treaties and brute force were used to make these acquisitions. But eventually, the Herero and Nama peoples began to push back, tired of having their land and cattle stolen, shocked at the sexual violence visited upon indigenous women.

In 1904, the Herero staged an uprising and this was followed by the Battle of Waterberg, fought between the Herero and the Germans in a mountainous area of northern Namibia where water could be found. Herero who survived the stronger

firepower of the Germans in this battle were forced into the Omaheke Desert to die of thirst and starvation. The German troops followed the Herero into the desert to poison waterholes and continue the slaughter. The few Herero who survived eventually returned from the desert in desperate condition and were promptly imprisoned in concentration camps.

Lothar von Trotha, a German general there, issued an extermination order, an explicit call for genocide: “I will DESTROY the AFRICAN tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing will something new emerge.”

When the Herero had been vanquished, another ethnic group, the Nama, rose up against the Germans. Rather than meeting the Germans on a battlefield, the Nama staged a guerilla war which lasted for three years. They, too, were ultimately conquered by the Germans. In the aftermath, they, too, were imprisoned in concentration camps and the prototype of a death camp, called Shark Island. Here the indigenous people were raped, starved, provided no medical care or shelter, and the death toll was enormous.

Two decades after this genocide, Adolph Hitler came to power and initiated another genocide, the Nazi Holocaust. Scholars point to several links between these two genocides. In both cases, the paradigm of racial hierarchy was used as a justification for genocide: the ideology that Africans, and then Jews, the Roma and Sinti, gay men, the disabled were somehow less than human, or as the Germans put it “life unworthy of life.” It was deemed acceptable to “cleanse the land” and make it available for Germans: *Lebensraum* is a term invented during the colonial era. Similarly, the term *Rassenschande*, or racial shame, originated in the late 1800’s to describe sexual contact with indigenous people and the mixed race offspring. The use of concentration and death camps in both genocides is another important parallel. Eugen Fischer undertook medical experiments in the colony and then returned to Germany to train Josef Mengele. Hermann Göring’s father was the first governor of the colony. Military men returned to the Fatherland to write memoirs of their “glorious exploits” in Africa. The ground was prepared in German society to accept the idea of extermination of “subhumans.”

Dr. Elizabeth Baer’s book, *The Genocidal Gaze: From German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich* (Wayne State UP, 2017, University of Namibia Press, 2018) tells the story of this genocide and analyzes texts which have represented the genocide, both from the colonial era and from the later twentieth century. The concept of the “genocidal gaze” is an original intervention in the theory of the

gaze, a trope of perspective. The Germans gaze upon the indigenous people thrust them into the position of being expendable, a perspective that permitted the Germans to achieve their goal of domination and possession of the land.

Now, after more than a century of denial, Germany has finally acknowledged that the murder of the Herero and Nama was a genocide. The admission was accompanied by an offer of money, though the Germans would not use the term “reparations.” The announcement has been hailed as a breakthrough, after nine rounds of negotiations since 2015, but the statement triggered divided responses. Some descendants of the Herero and Nama victims have called the offer of \$1.3 billion dollars in aid for development over 30 years “an insult,” while other indigenous people stand ready to accept this offer, saying it restores their dignity even if the offer is not enough. Others see it as a potential template toward postcolonial reconciliation for other countries and their former colonies.

Certainly, the devastating consequences of genocide can never be compensated. Much of the most desirable land, stolen from indigenous people a century ago, is still in the hands of German descendants. But Namibia is in a deep depression and the cash inflow is tempting. And Germany’s offer is less generous than it may seem: Berlin’s 2021 budget for personnel costs alone is E10.5 billion. The offer is also contingent upon an agreement that this is the final amount—no further negotiations or requests are possible.

On June 4, despite the protestations of many Herero and Nama people, the government signed the agreement with Germany. A bare outline of how the funds will be spent, over 40 years is: 50 million euro for reconciliation, 130 million for renewable energy, 150 million for vocational training, 100 million for rural roads, 130 million for water supply and sanitation, and 540 million for land acquisition.

It is particularly galling to Namibians that they must purchase land that was originally stolen and thus the money goes right back to Germany! There is also widespread fear of government corruption in Namibia. The government is dominated by SWAPO, the party which helped Namibia gain its independence in 1990. The Herero and Nama, decimated by the genocide, have a weak voice in government. Indeed, some comments on Facebook suggest that Germany should oversee the distribution of funds!