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Debattenbeitrag / Debate

Henning Melber

How to come to terms with the past: Re-visiting the German colonial genocide in Namibia¹

There are different ways and views to distort the past. One of them is the simple denial of what had happened. More elaborate are the attempts to selectively analyse and interpret. History will in this sense always be a contested territory and political minefield, since its message is of high ideological relevance for the societies affected by the retrospective. In that sense, this debate article seeks to provoke further reflections concerning current ways of (not) dealing with the past. These are part and parcel of – among others – a nation building discourse and a matter of identity. The selectivity of (non-) commemoration of the colonial genocide starting 1904 in today's Namibia is just one particular case to illustrate the point.

In the light of the available facts and the scholarly work based on historical evidence one might assume that what took place at the beginning of the 20th century in the German colonial territory called South West Africa would be part of a widely established and shared common understanding. Two doctoral theses researched and published during the mid-1960s by historians from the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany respectively laid a solid foundation and point of reference ever since (cf. Drechsler 1980, Bley 1971). Their different though somehow similar approaches, analyses and conclusions however turned into a contested area resembling certain similarities to the infamous „Historikerstreit”.² In the

1 This article is a combined summary of presentations to the following events: „Vergleichbarkeit von Völkermorden”, Workshop on 16 December 2004 at the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, organised in collaboration with the Institut für Afrika Kunde; „Genocides: Forms, Causes and Consequences. The Namibian War (1904-08) in historical perspective”. International Conference from 13 to 15 January 2005 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. I am grateful to the organisers for the opportunities to formulate, present and discuss my views. See Schaller (2005) on the Berlin Conference, during which a European Network of Genocide Scholars (ENoGS) was established. Further information on ENoGS offers the domain <http://www.enogs.com>.

2 The „counter position” was brought forward ironically enough most prominently and with lasting impact by a historian who had been generally critical of colonialism. Maybe also because of this she was turned into a „crown witness” by colonial apologists since as the

meantime, more recent publications add considerable further value to the established body of knowledge and insights into what can be termed – despite the ongoing ideological contestation regarding this classification – as genocide.³ The „Whitaker Report” confirmed in the mid-1980s already such conclusion by listing the German war against the Herero as the first genocide of the 20th century. It is the so far most explicit document produced within a United Nations body on the notion of genocide as a relevant definition with far reaching implications also in terms of international law. It therefore represents to some extent an official international frame of reference.⁴

The most striking phenomenon in dealing with the events in „German South West Africa” a century later is therefore, that in public perception as well as scholarly and political discourse the analysis and conclusions drawn still differ fundamentally.⁵ For large parts of collective memory in Germany this chapter is either closed or even forgotten. In contrast to this wide spread amnesia or indifference the trauma lives on among parts of the Namibian population. It keeps the generations of descendants to the victims in demand for recognition of and compensation for the crimes committed. This also forces those considered as off springs from the German settlers of the colonial days to deal with the historical facts (or deny them) and poses a challenge to both the German and Namibian governments. Be as it may, the legacy and its treatment remain a battlefield (though luckily one in non-military dimensions), on which there are often uncompromising exchanges (and „hidden mines”) on how to come to terms with the past in the present.

main source of reference (cf. Lau 1989/1995). For indirect and direct responses to her misguided intervention see Melber (1992) and Dederig (1993).

3 Major studies of relevance include Gewalt (1998), Krüger (1999), Zimmerer (2001), Bühler (2003), and summarising contributions to both Zimmerer/Zeller (2003) and Förster/Henrichsen/Bollig (2004). For an overview to the current ‘state of the art’ see also Kössler/Melber (2004b).

4 Drafted by the special rapporteur Ben Whitaker upon request by and submitted to the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities/Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, the document was adopted as „Revised and Updated Report on the Question of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” (Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/1985/6, 2 July 1985).

5 For debates about and reflections upon efforts to come to terms with this aspect of German history and its impact on current German-Namibian relations see more recently Zeller (2000), Böhlke-Itzen (2004) and several contributions to Zimmerer/Zeller (2003) and Förster/Henrichsen/Bollig (2004), as well as the essays by Kössler/Melber (2004a and 2004b) and Melber (2004a).

Selective commemoration in Namibia

At the Herero Day in Okahandja in late August 2002, the Paramount Chief Riruako undertook the effort to justify the private claims for reparations from the German government and a few German companies, which upon his instructions were presented to an US-American Court during late 2001. He was carried away to the extent that he declared the land question to be solely a Herero issue. As well intended as it might have been, this is a discriminating statement and tantamount to blatant denial of the sacrifices made by other communities like the Nama. It also makes a mockery of the suffering of the Damara and San. To all these other – even more marginalized – groups this adds insult to injury and is certainly not conducive to concerted efforts of those, to whom justice had been denied for generations. At the same time, it implicitly also undermines the legitimacy of the Herero claims, which otherwise ought to be undisputed and beyond any doubt relevant for any sincere and honest effort to address the historic injustices – also in terms of some forms of material compensation.

Herero-led interventions dominated the events during 2004. A spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee for the First Official Commemoration of the Ovaherero Genocide stated as late as in August 2004 that the term genocide would in Namibia only apply to what happened to the Herero.⁶ Members of the group tend to brush aside the concern expressed over such monopolisation of the victim status. They abuse their „biological authenticity“ as successors to the victims in a way, which excludes any serious debate over dissenting views. Instead, accusations of racism and Eurocentrism come handy to dismiss any discourse on how best an advocacy might be pursued in the interest of more than just one among those groups.⁷ The claims to genuine identity create an aura of exclusivity and consequently a we-they divide with the rest of the world. This prevents any meaningful dialogue. The motives of those, who in such reduced way seek the recognition so far denied to them, might be perfectly understandable. They want to pursue and achieve in their own view only historical justice. But this prevents wider coalitions and seems to happen at the expense of others, who remain outside of any public interest and are therefore even more denied their recognition as victims. This phenomenon of a „competition among the victims“ (Chaumont 2001), resulting in claims for a monopoly over a status, is certainly not confined to the Namibian

6 Quoted in „Whose Genocide? Why are only the Herero taking the bull by the horns?“, *Insight* (Windhoek), September 2004, p. 20.

7 See for this line of argument in particular and explicitly directed against the (misconstrued) position articulated by the author of this essay the polemical intervention by Kandetu (2005).

case but illustrated under the particular circumstances simply once again in a rather obvious way.⁸

The Namibian government did not undertake any efforts to address the matter in a more constructive perspective. It kept a demonstratively low profile on the general issue. As Ngavirue (2003: 39) pointed out, no government-sponsored initiative took upon itself to prepare any coordinated event to commemorate the occasion (and by doing so flag the recognition of the primary resistance during these days as early part of nation building). Namibia's Minister of Information and Broadcasting announced during late 2003 the government's decision to honour the century of genocide with the issuing of a special commemorative stamp on Independence Day (21st March) 2004. He was eager to emphasise that this would not single out particular groups. Instead it should be seen as an effort to contribute to a wider and general reconciliation (as a result, the motive chosen was a white dove). Namibia's government, as he explained further, does also not subscribe to the initiative by a group of Herero to seek reparations from Germany.

In complementing the claim for national emphasis in a slightly different perspective, the Minister of Higher Education expressed on occasion of a panel debate the opinion that the commemoration of the genocide should be a matter of involving all Namibians and be looked at as part of the Namibian struggle for liberation. Despite this all-embracing view, the President and other senior government officials did not follow an invitation by the traditional Herero leaders to attend the ceremonies in Okahandja, which marked the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Herero war against German colonial occupation in January 2004. In mid-August 2004, Hifikepunye Pohamba, then already designated successor to Sam Nujoma as Head of State, however, did attend the ceremony commemorating the battles in the Waterberg plateau area at Okakarara.⁹

When the Herero gathered for their annual commemoration activities end of August at the graves of their ancestors in the centre of power of former Hereroland, government representatives attended the commemoration of the

8 See on the various dilemmas of commemorative policies the review article by Kössler (2003b).

9 It will remain mere speculation, to which extent this might have been necessitated by the fact that the German Minister for Economic Cooperation, representing the biggest single donor country (for exactly the historical reasons, which required this ceremony) was one of the main speakers. Pohamba's presence might as much have been motivated by the fact that the most influential traditional leader from the Northern area previously called Ovamboland – the decisive base and stronghold of SWAPO – was among the invited guests too. His presence underlined the willingness to acknowledge the historical dimensions for early nation building of the primary resistance and its sacrifices a century ago (I owe this observation on the relevance of the Ovambo chief's attendance to Reinhart Kössler).

beginning of the armed struggle by Swapo in the North. The parallel activities illustrated more than any words the contrasting traditions of resistance in a case, where – differently from neighbouring Zimbabwe – the first „chimurenga” related to other groups than the second one (Namibia is blessed with the absence of a third „chimurenga” so far).¹⁰

Germany’s lack of commitment

The Namibian government seemed to be almost in silent agreement with those among the German-speaking minority in Namibia and those representing the official position of the German government. The German ambassador to Namibia on occasion of the commemoration ceremony in Okahandja on 11 January 2004 reiterated his government’s position on the reparation issue raised by the Herero by stating: „It would not be justified to compensate one specific ethnic group for their suffering during the colonial times, as this could reinforce ethnic tensions and thus undermine the policy of national reconciliation which we fully support.”¹¹ While this might be a sensible approach, it should not serve as a convenient excuse for no compensation of all those descendants, who were suffering from the defeat and subsequent treatment through the German colonial authorities. Many of these local communities in the Eastern, Central and Southern parts of Namibia have never recovered from the setbacks.

If there is any obvious justification for affirmative action related preferential treatment, for example with regard to a redistribution of the land taken under German colonialism, then it should be in the first place with the aim to benefit these communities, who were robbed of their land as a prelude and aftermath to the genocide. But the land issue is treated as if the historical connotations would not offer a direct frame of reference to the guiding principle as to who should be entitled to claims and compensated accordingly.¹² The German government has so far not pushed the matter towards such an obvious direction. Instead, it has chosen the more convenient avenue of playing along with the government policy, which seems to define preferential treatment under affirmative action schemes also when it comes to resettlement on land according to a different rationale. This benefits more its main clientele in

10 See on this particular post-colonial nation building discourse Gewald (2003), Kössler (2003a) and Melber (2002a, 2002b and 2003).

11 Quoted from Petros Kuteeue, ‘No apology, no payout for Herero’, *The Namibian* (Windhoek), 12 January 2004.

12 See on the land issue and in particular the policy with land Melber (2004b and 2004c).

the former Owamboland, but neither Herero nor Nama, Damara and least of all the San.

Germany's Foreign Minister had formulated as late as 2003 the official political position along the lines that no apology will be offered, which might be considered of relevance for compensation. Chancellor Schröder during his first official visits to African countries in January 2004 – at a time when the genocide turned a century – had the former colony not on his travel schedule. He thereby preferred to simply ignore the historical part of German-Namibian relations at the centre of the debate in 2004.

Rather unexpectedly, the German position took a turn from the previous official denial during a year, in which an unexpected number of local, regional and national NGO initiatives raised the issue in Germany by means of public lectures, seminars, exhibitions and related events. The German Minister for Economic Cooperation attended the commemoration of the battle at Ohamakari near the Waterberg during August 2004. In an emotional speech she admitted on behalf of her government guilt and remorse. She stated that the German colonial war a hundred years earlier would qualify from today's perspective as genocide. Asked for an apology (the word did not appear in the text she read out), she expressed the understanding that her whole speech was an apology. This provoked harsh criticism back in Germany mainly by members of the opposition parties, who accused the Minister of risking an expensive bill for being carried away. There remains, however, so far a lack of visible subsequent consequences, which would indicate that this has resulted indeed in a direct change of policy towards the issues of compensation.

From colonial genocide to the Holocaust?

There are powerful symbolic ways for the admission of (historic) guilt, devoid of any glamour and pompous ceremonial rituals. They can be at the same time public and dignified, with a lasting wider impact. There are other ways of less spectacular gestures of reconciliation, followed by practical policies. The exact modalities of remembrance and redress may be subject to debate. The speech by the German Minister in August 2004 at the site where the genocide surfaced a hundred years earlier was possibly a step into the right direction.

But interesting is the fact, that the treatment of the issue (intentionally or not) avoids any references to the subsequent developments in Germany. After all, to reflect upon genocidal atrocities is more than dealing with guilt and remorse, though this in itself would be a perfectly legitimate and sufficient motive to do so. In the Namibian case, this links up with the more specifically German trajectory. The question to be asked is, if and to what extent the colo-

nial genocide paved the way for the particular concept of final solution and extinction of the enemy, culminating in the war crimes and the holocaust in the 1940s.

In a colonial situation as it prevailed in Namibia in the early 20th century, the denial of human value to the „uncivilised natives” is predicated in the structurally racist set-up of colonialism. This is even more the case when the aim of colonial rule is not simply control and exploitation of the country, its resources and inhabitants, but rather, settlement by members of the colonising society. The inherent racism of settler colonialism has worked to lower the threshold of mass killings in appalling ways in many cases. Racism and fascism developed along side the similar contexts.¹³ The infamous parole „exterminate the brutes” (issued by Emperor Wilhelm II in his „Hunnenrede” when seeing off the German soldiers to fight the resistance in China, termed the so-called „Boxer-Aufstand”) is a simple illustration of this. In Namibia, the ideology and strategy of the extermination strategy applied links up with the challenges to explore the degree of a specifically German „Sonderweg”. As evidence shows, we can observe continuities in accounts and novels read by a mass readership, in military practice as well as in the activities of specific persons, and in military doctrines and routines that link strategic ideas of decisive battles to the concept of final solution and extinction of the enemy, which came into full effect under the Nazi regime.

Colonial racism was a fertile breeding ground for further radicalising anti-Semitism. The concept of „cultural narcissism” as developed in psycho-analytical schools of thought (cf. Brainin et.al. 1993: 96) might be able to offer additional explanations for understanding the phenomena. Their impact on the mindset (with the devastating results in applied politics) did not start only after World War I. This fatal development had its roots earlier on in the particular combination between the German petit bourgeoisie and other members of the „middle class” with the expansionist chauvinist national drive cultivated, as it radicalised already during the consolidation of a German empire towards the end of the 19th century (cf. Elias 1979).

13 The late Peter Schmitt-Egner (1975 and 1976) offered – inspired by Marxist theory and Hannah Arendt’s studies on the origins of totalitarianism – fruitful and stimulating analytical insights into this fatal combination, which have since not been pursued further rigorously enough. Most recently, Le Cour Grandmaison (2005), taking the example of the colonial conquest of Algeria, developed similar theses on the origins of the European concept of the „total war” which are perhaps to be looked for in Africa. (I owe this hint to Dirk Kohnert).

Unfinished business?

Such approach within a wider context implies the journey into the belly of the beast - „the horror”, as visualised by Mister Kurtz with his last words on his deathbed in Joseph Conrad’s novel „Heart of Darkness”. It was inspired at the end of the 19th century by the excessive atrocities of colonial oppression in the Congo. Such interrogation requires accepting in principle the possibility of a connecting line that might exist in the history of violent expansionism. It demands an exploration, if and to what extent there are more than simply accidental coincidences between the colonial genocide in then „German South West Africa” and the holocaust unfolding „back home” in Germany over thirty years later. Depending on the outcome of such explorations, we need to readjust not only our minds, but also our historical understanding. Maybe the potentially scary implications of such insights are a contributing factor to the fierce resistance among large parts of the German public, to (re-)open the chapter and have another look.¹⁴

Another dimension concerns active remembrance both among the generations following the perpetrators and the victims. Here again, it may be appropriate to refer to the German case where a specific form of public repentance and remembrance with reference to the holocaust contributed to the consolidation of the second German republic. Though Anti-Semitism unfortunately continues to remain virulent even in Germany, the holocaust is the object of regular remembrance on the part of officialdom as well as of civil society. It should be noted, however, that such remembrance and repentance, along with the limited material redress associated with it, has been highly selective and neglected or even excluded other victims. - Certain parallels to the current discourse in and on Namibia seem all too obvious.

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14 This includes scholars of a colonial-critical school of thought, who otherwise share the fundamental insights to the lasting effects of colonialism upon German society, but are reluctant to accept that there might indeed exist a stronger connecting line between the colonial genocide and the holocaust than hitherto conceived (cf. Kundrus 2004, Wolter 2005). While - subject to the results of further scrutiny - they might have a valid point, their dismissive attitude and rhetoric against those suggesting closer affinities is the most disturbing aspect of the difference in opinions.

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