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ON THE MARGINS
OF GERMAN VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG
GERMANY'S COLONIAL PAST REVISITED

The Second German Empire was a latecomer in many aspects. When Bismarck solemnly declared the Empire's foundation in Versailles in January 1871 after a victorious war against France, he united the biggest part of the population which identified with German culture and German nationalism. Austria still remained outside that Empire, but the bigger part of the "German Question" had been solved – Germans and Germany now overlapped more than ever since the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. However, Germany was a late nation – France, Britain, Russia had managed to create their nation states centuries before. While the German principalities had been divided and feuded against each other, against internal opposition or external enemies, Britain, France, Portugal and Belgium were already busy dividing Africa. The status of a double latecomer – as a nation state and as a coloniser – was a constant concern of German politicians and intellectuals in the second half of the 19th century and a never ending object of concern about Germany's role in the world and its alleged right to a "place in the sun" (*Ein Platz an der Sonne*).¹ The claim to "a place in the sun" was often compared to the British Empire's possessions in the world and to France's position in Africa. Equal rights with the British or the French were, however difficult to achieve – the scramble for Africa was in full swing and the biggest share of the territories, which were still available, had just been claimed by the Belgians in the Congo.

As opposed to the internal situation in France and Britain, colonialism in Germany never had a strong lobby. Germany's most senior and influential politician of the time chancellor Otto von Bismarck opposed colonial expansion to other continents. Colonial associations remained weak and their influence on the government of the Reich marginal. In 1882 a number of politicians, industrialists

¹ The quote "*Ein Platz an der Sonne*" stems from Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow in the Reichstag 1897. W. Speitkamp, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2005, p. 36.

and intellectuals founded the first umbrella organization for Germany's small and scattered colonial associations, the *Deutscher Kolonialverein*.² Two years later, an association (rather than a lobby) for practical colonisation emerged, the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation*. Both merged 1887 into the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* in 1887. Up until the outbreak of World War I the new umbrella's units never had more than 42 000 members and was dominated by the petite bourgeoisie and lower middle class as well as state bureaucrats, all of whom had no direct personal interest in colonisation and were rather unlikely to emigrate overseas. They supported the idea not for ideological, but rather economic reasons.³ The first attempts to establish a colony was undertaken by a small number of traders who one could call venturesome or even audacious, who had appeared in the south-western part of Africa in the footsteps of missionaries of the *Rheinische Mission*. The latter's attempt to get protection from the Reich's government (or from the British, who maintained permanent posts in Walvisbay, Bechuanaland – the later Botswana – and the Cape Colony) had failed, most probably because of the German government's reluctance to engage in any kind of colonial endeavour. A tobacco trader from Bremen, Adolf Lüderitz was more successful. He managed to sign several contracts with local chieftains which brought a vast territory under his control, but since he never succeeded in finding valuable commodities and did not have the capital to finance effective control of the territory, he went bankrupt, sold his possession to the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwestafrika* (DKGSWA) and later drowned in the river Oranje. Furthermore, the DKGSWA was incomparably weaker than the British colonial associations as well as the West Indian and East Indian Companies (companies set up by the Dutch centuries before), although the DKGSWA enjoyed slightly more support from Bismarck than Lüderitz had been given.

The government in Berlin oscillated between rejection and hesitance, but it was confronted with an incremental trend in German society which favoured colonial adventures. As time went by the leadership of the Reich came under subtle pressure from this bottom-up call for expansion, driven by economic interests of a relatively small but vociferous trade lobby, which did its best to encourage popular support for national expansion. One of the main figures of that lobby was the Woermann trading house which, by the end of the nineteenth century had established a vast network of ship connections to and from Africa. It is paradigmatic that German colonialism was advanced and promoted by economic interests linked to transport rather than the search for labour, commodities or trade surpluses. This was in stark contrast to the official claims, which the colonial lobby emphasised in its propaganda. There, four main motives were put forward: First of all – population growth. According to the colonial lobby this had to be channelled into colonies overseas for two reasons: in order to prevent overpopulation and in order to prevent emigrants from assimilating

² H. Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, UTB, Paderborn 2004, p. 44-45.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46-47.

in their new home countries. Colonies were seen as places where Germans could emigrate to, but at the same time keep their national identity. The second justification for colonialism was less popular – the colonies were regarded as a means to allocate the production surpluses of the German industry, and – the third component of colonial propaganda – to provide cheap labour for German manufacture and industry. The fourth argument for colonialism was also frequently quoted by its opponents from the left – colonies were meant to ease social tensions in Germany proper by diverting public attention away from social problems to issues of national pride and honour and Germany's alleged "mission of bringing civilisation" towards under-developed regions and by channelling the social cost of overpopulation and unemployment to other continents. Creating colonies, to which frustrated workers could emigrate was expected to ease social tensions and the revolutionary potential of the Social Democrats. The latter quickly detected this idea and its potential impact on their political basis and rejected colonial expansion as an attempt "to export the social question."⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century Germany had established trade posts, secured by armed forces and acknowledged internationally through a number of agreements with neighbouring colonial powers (mostly France and Britain) in what later became Togo, Cameroon, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and Namibia. These were not the only German colonies; additionally to these places, Germany maintained intensive trade as the consequence of agreements with local chiefs, secured by armed forces and later recognised by the other colonial powers in the Pacific Islands of Polynesia (Samoa, Tonga) and New Guinea and in Kiautschou (China). Especially the latter was a more promising territory than the African possessions, at least with respect to labour which could be recruited for the German manufacture industry and with respect to the potential demand for German trade surpluses.⁵

*Deutsch-Südwestafrika*⁶ became the first German colony in Africa and in comparison with Cameroon, Tanzania and Togo, which were later taken under

⁴ The notion of "exporting the social question" stems from Karl Liebknecht, who talked about the "Export der sozialen Frage" in a speech in the Reichstag in 1885. Liebknecht later was among the founders of the German Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD). H. Gründer, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵ S. Conrad, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte*, C.H. Beck, München 2012, p. 28-32.

⁶ Throughout this article, the notion of *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* and the more colloquial notion of *Deutsch-Südwest* will be used concurrently for describing the country, which was then a German colony. Whenever Namibia is mentioned it describes the country which became a South African colony after 1915 and in 1990 became independent. Throughout the text, Herero, Nama and other groups, which at the time were labelled "natives", or "tribes" will be called "ethnic groups". It is the author's opinion that these groups were (just like ethnic groups in other parts of the world) based on a common understanding of the past, joint traditions, customs and habits, had a common language and a parastatal internal organisation, lacked territoriality (due to their nomadic lifestyle) but had much a broader social basis than kinship alone. The latter was due to frequent contacts with different African and non-African groups in the Cape Province. They used to conduct their own diplomacy and their politics, to engage in agreements with other groups and their elite was often better educated and literate than their colonisers.

German “protection”, remained an exception for many reasons. The first and most important one, which has had consequences until today, was the relative strong presence of German settlers. In all other German colonies, settlers were rather the exception than the rule of German presence and native power structures were used in order to maintain control over the country. In *Deutsch-Südwest* control was imposed through settler colonies, the military (the so called *Schutztruppe*) and the *Rheinische Mission*. The strong German presence created tensions with the native ethnic groups (mainly the Damara, Nama and Herero) over land, trade, taxes and security. The expansion of the German settlements threatened the native, mostly nomadic ethnic groups with marginalisation and even starvation, as more and more territory was occupied by the settlers, which deprived the natives of pastures for their cattle and access to water.

The frugality of the land was the origin of a paradoxical tension: Due to the fact that a settler needed a relatively vast territory (as compared with European agriculture) in order to make a living, a relatively low number of settlers sufficed to deprive native cattle holders of their pastures and waterholes. To some extent, this explains the different perceptions of native groups and the German public about the significance of *Deutsch-Südwest* as a colony: Compared to the overall German population, only a few Germans were present in *Deutsch-Südwest*, and their voice was hardly ever heard in Berlin. For the native groups in the colony, however, the German settlements became more and more suffocating.

This was different in Cameroon, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Togo where German settlers were so scattered across the land that they did not pose any demographic threat to local ethnic groups. German posts were scarce and power was exercised indirectly through local chieftains. Colonialism changed the balance of power among the different groups because it used existing power structures and favoured certain chiefs over others (but also could be used by some locals to obtain preponderance over other groups⁷), but it did not change the structure of the population. In *Deutsch Südwest* at the beginning of the 20th century tensions over land had already increased to the extent that the German administration considered the establishment of population reserves (*Reservate*) for the Herero.⁸ Yet there was another exception in *Deutsch-Südwest* to the German colonial rule – the *Schutztruppe*. Different from Togo, Cameroon and East Africa, German military power rested on German soldiers in *Deutsch-Südwest* and not on local recruits, who fought under the command of German officers. After the outbreak of the Herero uprising, the number of German soldiers rose to 17 000. In East Africa even the rise of the Maji-Maji did not trigger an increase to more than several thousand German

⁷ Examples can be found in Timothy Musima’s article on the impact of German colonialism on the Bakuma region in Cameroon in this issue.

⁸ O. von Weber, *Geschichte des Schutzgebietes Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, 10. Auflage, Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft Namibia, Windhoek 2010, p. 137.

soldiers and the main burden of the fighting was carried by local recruits, called *Askari*. This means that atrocities during and after the battles were likely to be conceived as a conflict between different ethnic groups in East Africa, whereas in *Deutsch Südwestafrika*, they were seen as inflicted by the Germans on the Herero and later the Nama.⁹

DEUTSCH-SÜDWESTAFRIKA 1904-1907:
THE EXCEPTION TO THE GERMAN COLONIAL RULE

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the German colonies were shattered by several waves of uprisings of local ethnic groups against the colonial authorities. The immediate causes of those violent protests were economical. In East Africa, the Maji-Maji rose against colonial rule because of the harsh conditions under which the Germans intended to extend the use of cash crops, or more specifically, of cotton. The German authorities had implemented a two-track strategy to turn local farmers into a labour force which could be used in order to connect the colony to the German market, which would create production surpluses which could be sold and make the colony's economy sustainable. They imposed a relatively high head tax which forced local farmers either to produce surpluses and sell them (rather than use them for their own consumption) or to work off their tax debts in commercial cotton plantations run by Germans. Immediately before the uprising the German authorities had started to disarm the rural population, something which caused additional outrage. The situation was similar to the one in *Deutsch-Südwest* – here and there local ethnic groups tried to resist attempts to integrate them into the logic of a capitalist market as workforce.¹⁰

In Namibia there were two main reasons for the Herero uprising in 1904, the first was a mid-term development and the second an immediate cause of outbreak of hostilities. The Herero were a nomadic pastoral group for which the German notion of land ownership was impractical and obscure. Prior to German colonisation there had been no market for land. When the Germans arrived they started to buy land from local chieftains, but due to the specific German interest to keep the price down and to the fact that land was abundant – land was and remained quite cheap. The arrival of industrial consumer goods, alcohol and fire weapons from Germany and the development of money-based trade together with the paternalist structure of Herero society created opportunities for German settlers to take over land from the Herero at a low price and to indebt the Herero leaders more and more. They then could pay off their debts by giving land away – enriching themselves (or getting rid

⁹ This does not alter the fact that the source of systemic violence was situated in Berlin, but it was likely to affect the social construction of the conflict at a later stage.

¹⁰ W. Speitkamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-132.

of their debts) to the detriment of their constituents, who were incrementally deprived of good pastures for their cattle. This whole mechanism, which in some aspects resembled the peasant clearance carried out after the abolition of serfdom among the European peasantry, damaged the authority of traditional leaders among their people and pressed the Herero into a more and more narrow territory (whose land quality was lower than the soil taken over by the Germans). The development of the railway was another blow to Herero interests, since it brought even more settlers to the country and enabled the *Schutztruppe* to dislocate its troops and canons very quickly through the desert.¹¹ A specific momentum was created when the colonial authorities set a deadline for the paying off of Herero debts owed to German traders. This was done in good faith – in order to relieve the Herero from their debt burden and to slow down the process of pushing the Herero in to de facto reserves, but it exacerbated the already existing tensions in the country. Once the deadline was imposed, German traders used all means in their possession to make their Herero debtors pay at any rate, even with the use of soldiers and physical violence. The results were violent clashes between traders and Herero, protests and outrage from the Herero leadership¹² and finally, when Herero leader Samuel Maherero's authority appeared to be in peril, an uprising against the German authorities started, led by Maherero.¹³ It came as a complete surprise to the settlers and the *Schutztruppe*¹⁴, who appeared to be understaffed to deal with the uprising efficiently. Initially the *Schutztruppe* was helped by groups competing with the Herero, among them a part of the Nama and the Basters.¹⁵

It is undisputed that the initiative to start hostilities came from the Herero, who attacked German settlers, farms, offices and military posts, taking over a large number of weapons, which then were used against the *Schutztruppe*. It is also undisputed that the Herero spared the lives of women and children. Although they

¹¹ G. Pool, *Die Staatsbahn in Duits-Suidwest-Afrika, 1897-1915*, University of Stellenbosch (PHD) 1980.

¹² See for example Samuel Maherero's letter to governor Theodor Leutwein in: O. von Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-116.

¹³ On the role of Samuel Maherero, see: G. Pool, *Samuel Maherero*, Gamsberg MacMillan, Windhoek 1991, pp. 191-210, and idem, *Die Herero-Opstand 1904-1907* (Master Thesis at the University of Stellenbosch in 1976), pp. 60-80.

¹⁴ For the *Schutztruppe*, see: T. Bühner, *Die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Ostafrika. Koloniale Sicherheitspolitik und transkulturelle Kriegführung 1885-1918*, Schriften des Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes, Oldenbourg Verlag, München 2011, pp. 278-286. (The book also deals with the *Schutztruppe* in Deutsch-Südwestafrika).

¹⁵ The Basters (also called *Baasters* from Dutch) are a distinct ethnic group in the South of Namibia, a mixed-race population formed by the descendants of Dutch settlers and black natives. During the second part of the 19th century, they moved to the north in search for better pastures. Due to their cooperation with the German colonizers, they were able to keep their land until World War I. Their actual cultural centre today is Rehoboth. They kept the originally denigrating name (Basters meaning "Bastards") and turned it into a name of pride, like the Canadian *Métis* or the *Kanaks* or *Canaques* in New Caledonia. (I am grateful to the direction of the Basters Museum in Rehobot for these information).

had never been party to the Hague Conventions of 1899 which regulated armed warfare on the land¹⁶, the Herero stuck to its provisions until the bitter end. On the German side there were no such qualms. The Herero were regarded as illegal fighters who had risen against their natural authority and had to be taught a lesson. They were regarded as subjects who did not enjoy equal rights with the Germans and could be eliminated. On the German side the strive to punish or even eliminate the Herero as a political and demographic factor in the country was however constrained by important group interests. The settler community, despite being outraged about the assaults on farms, the killings of farmers and soldiers and the abduction of women and children, needed the Herero as workers, due to a large labour shortage in the developing agricultural economy of *Deutsch-Südwest*. The *Rheinische Mission* saw the uprising as illegitimate, while the priests and missionaries wanted to convert the Herero to Christianity, not to exterminate them. Finally, political calculations made in Berlin (but also by the local German governor Theodor Leutwein) pointed to the fact that exaggerated cruelty against the Herero could lead to finding solidarity by other groups, would prevent the Herero from surrendering and expose Germany to international protests and destabilise politics at home.

Despite the *Schutztruppe's* supremacy in logistics and weaponry the German troops failed to beat the Herero decisively. On Waterberg, a huge mountain massive in the Northern part of the country, which provided enough water to withstand a long siege, they circled the main bulk of the Herero fighters (who were accompanied by their families, who moved after them behind the front line). At this point Governor von Leutwein was replaced as commander in chief by Lothar von Trotha, a reckless professional soldier with quite a lot of battle experience in East Africa, but no feeling for the conditions in *Deutsch-Südwest*.

The Herero had the advantage of better orientation, the Germans had superior weapons and technology, they could move quickly and communicate over large distances. After fierce fights, the Herero withdrew to areas where the German troops were weakest. They broke through the north eastern part of the front line to the large desert which separated the German controlled territory from the British colony of Bechuanaland (today Botswana). Deprived of water and food, the Herero tried to survive in the desert and to make their way to Bechuanaland. Some managed to get there, others, together with their families, died in the desert, often leaving behind deep holes, which they had dug in order to retrieve water. On 2 October 1904, standing in front of his soldiers and some Herero, German commander Lothar von Trotha issued what later became infamous as the "extermination order": He ordered his soldiers not to make prisoners (a clear contravention of Act 23 of the Hague

¹⁶ Hague Convention of 1899, the Convention of 1907 was not applicable to the conflict in 1904.

The Hague Conventions can be retrieved from a large database of Yale University, which assembles the entirety of international treaty law from ancient history to our days: <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/>.

Convention of 1899), to shoot at Herero men who would come to the waterholes (which were beleaguered by the German troops) and to shoot over the heads of women and children, who approached the waterholes in order to make them escape, rather than drink.¹⁷

During the months and years to come, Herero fighters returned from the desert, surrendering with their families, and were kept in primitive concentration camps behind barbed wire and forced to work for nothing on German farms. Some were incarcerated on Shark Island, near the coastal town of Lüderitz, where the death toll was highest due to the harsh conditions on the island, which was exposed to high waves, fog, cold winds and therefore was an extremely unhealthy place for people, who were used to live in the savannah. The Herero were used as forced labour to extend the railway that ran from Windhoek to Lüderitz. Disarmed, scattered across the land, imprisoned in camps and used as forced labourers, they ceased to be a political factor. The number of casualties on the German side was modest, the number of Herero killed in action, starved to death and exhausted in the camps is unknown, and until today there is a lot of controversy in literature about the precise number of Herero victims.¹⁸

It is undisputed that the German campaign against the Herero was the decisive factor for the shift of the balance of power between the different ethnic groups – to the detriment of the Herero, but to the advantage of the Ovambo (who remained untouched by the conflict, since the German troops had sealed off their territory in

¹⁷ The latter order was probably meant to relieve the German soldiers from the stress and moral pressure of shooting women and children, but nevertheless was intended to achieve the same goal – the death of unarmed civilians. Under these circumstances, the Herero (no matter whether armed or unarmed) had the choice to die in the desert, to be shot at waterholes or to surrender and become forced labourers. See: O. von Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 169. “The Extermination Order”, which was withdrawn later, can be found in almost every publication dealing with the Herero uprising.

¹⁸ For the different calculations about Herero casualties (and the degree to which they may be attributed to people killed in action or exterminated in concentration camps) see: J. Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero. Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers*, UCT Press, Capetown 2011, pp. 136-141. Sarkin claims that the lowest estimate of the number of Herero casualties in the literature was 15 000 and the highest 100 000 (basing on English-language literature) and finds a range of 60 000 to 100 000 realistic. There seems to be quite a consensus that whatever the precise amount would have been, about 75 per cent of the pre-conflict Herero population had vanished after the German campaign. The Nama were apparently slightly better off, their number is said to have diminished by half as a result of the fights against Germans. These estimates are usually brought forward in the context of the debate of whether the Herero campaign was a genocide. Apart from the fact that in 1904 genocide as a crime was not yet part of international customary law, it must be mentioned that the number of casualties is irrelevant for establishing whether Germany committed genocide or not. According to recent jurisprudence of international criminal tribunals, a protected group like the Herero only need to incur significant losses as the result of a genocidal campaign in order to satisfy the genocide requirement. For deciding whether genocide occurred or not, it is more relevant to assess whether a specific genocidal intent (*mens rae*) can be attributed to the perpetrators. It is this context, in which von Trotta's order gains specific relevance.

the North during the conflict), the Nama, Damara, Basters and Bondelzwarts in the South. Shortly after the Herero uprising the Nama also launched a fight against the colonial authorities, but their leader, Hendrik Witbooi, avoided challenging the German troops openly and conducted a quite successful campaign of partisan warfare which inflicted many losses on the *Schutztruppe*¹⁹, increased the cost of the war and made support for the colony in the mainland a less and less popular issue.²⁰

All the political considerations which had constrained von Trotta's radical military plan proved valid. Due to protests in Germany and from the missionaries, the "extermination order" was withdrawn after a short time. However, camps and forced labour for the captured Herero continued to exist. Back home in Germany, the parliamentary opposition took up the topic of German cruelties committed against the Herero and in 1907, the colonial issue even triggered a political crisis. The Reichstag refused to underwrite additional loans whose purpose was to support the war effort against the rebellious Herero and Nama and this had the consequence that the Kaiser dissolved the Reichstag. The election which followed were so strongly dominated by the colonial issue that they were nicknamed "Hottentotten-Wahlen".²¹ The parties supporting the government (called Bülow-Block after the ruling chancellor, Bernhard Fürst von Bülow) managed to reduce the scope of the Social Democrats and the Roman Catholic *Zentrumspartei* in the upcoming Reichstag by conducting a campaign which aimed at mobilising nationalist resentment and putting into doubt the patriotism of those who had criticised the government's colonial policy. It was the only occasion when the colonial issue shaped the patterns of German partisan competition before World War I. The election result enabled the government to continue its colonial expansion unabated. In *Deutsch-Südwest*, support for the *Schutztruppe*, more money for the administration and the defeat of the Herero led to an unprecedented influx of German settlers. Before the Herero uprising merely 4640 settlers had been registered in the *Schutzgebiet* whereas in 1913 their number had risen to 14 830.²² This was the peak of German colonialism in this part of the world. Germany was never prepared to defend its colonies efficiently during the World War I because the latter would have required a large and modern navy, which, at the outbreak of the war, had been in

¹⁹ An impressive account of the way the Nama fought against the *Schutztruppe* can be seen in the memoir of one of the soldiers, who wrote letters to his parents from the battlefield: *Liebes Väterchen... Briefe aus dem Namaaufstand 1905-1906 von Oberleutnant Erich von Schauroth*, hrsg. von B. Kroemer, Verlag Glanz und Gloria, Windhoek 2008.

²⁰ The memoirs and correspondence of Hendrik Witbooi are available in a translation, which has been published in several editions in Namibia.

²¹ Hottentotten was actually a Dutch word for the Khoisan people (also called Khoi-Khoi), the originally autochthon settlers in the Cape Province, which later became dominated by Dutch and British settlers and Bantu groups from northwestern parts of southern Africa. In German discourse, the name, which until today is denigrating, was also used for the Nama.

²² W. Speitkamp, *op. cit.*, p. 135-136.

preparation, but never managed to exceed the capability of the British military fleet.²³ Colonial armies were built in order to distract French and British troops and to tie them to Africa in the hope of preventing them from joining the European war theatre. The British and to a lesser extent the French could mobilise not only their navies but also an impressive number of locally recruited fighters, who, due to the geographical connectedness of their colonial territories were easier to dislocate than the German fighters, who had been recruited from the scattered area between South-Western Africa and East Africa.

Deutsch-Südwestafrika fell in 1915 into the hands of South African Union troops. In East Africa German officers, supported by native fighters managed to mount a partisan warfare defense against British troops which lasted until 1917 and helped create another heroic German myth about the commander Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who had resisted the allied advance for years and surrendered only after the Armistice in Compiègne in 1918.²⁴ The German authorities in Togo had given up in 1914, and in Cameroon German colonial authority ended in 1916.

As Speitkamp has pointed out, German colonial policy was stuck in contradictions and far from being consistent and homogenous. In *Deutsch-Südwest*, settlers strove for self-government (something which was incrementally granted by Berlin), whereas the German rule in East and West Africa relied mostly on the dispersion of trade post, military strongholds and fragile administrative offices which were vulnerable to violent protests and organised riots. At the same time, German rule exacerbated tensions between local leaders and ethnic groups, something which complicated attempts to integrate the colonies into a larger German market. The tricky problem of the colonies' legal status was never solved. As a consequence the colonies were regarded at the same time as a German possession, but as foreign territory (*Ausland*); they were subordinated to German state law (*Staatsrecht*), but were not regarded as subjects of international law (*Völkerrecht*) because the latter would have required Germany to recognize them as sovereign. The German colonial lobby strove for the integration of the colonies into a larger, intra-German market, but until the outbreak of World War I they were separated from Germany by customs tariffs.

At no point in time was colonialism in Africa profitable for Germany. None of the popular justifications for colonialism ever proved realistic. As a market for German production surpluses, the colonies played no role – they accounted for less than 3% of Germany's external trade and only 0.5% of its imports.²⁵ The colonies

²³ On the arms race in naval warfare between Germany and Britain see: R. L. Massie, *Dreadnought. Germany, Britain and the coming of the great war*, Random House, New York 1991, pp. 693-712.

²⁴ W. Speitkamp, *op. cit.*, p. 155. On Lettow-Vorbeck see: U. Schulte-Varendorff, *Kolonialheld für Kaiser und Führer. General Lettow-Vorbeck*, Ch. Links, Berlin 2006, *passim*.

²⁵ Even after the discovery of diamonds in 1908 in *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, the value of exports from the colony remained below the value of its imports. Of all African colonies, only Togo had no unfavorable trade balance. W. Speitkamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-90.

imported most of their goods from neighbouring countries, rather than from Germany. Due to the strong restrictions on mixed marriages and immigration they never provided a significant labour force for German industry and German industry never dislocated to Africa. In East and South West Africa the German authorities tried to impose cash crops in order to enable the colonies to export agricultural goods to Germany, but this never created any particular competition for German farmers. The colonies spilled rather than created value in the form of subsidies from Germany's state budget. The number of almost 15 000 German settlers in *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* before World War I may have been impressive for the local Herero and Nama but it was hardly a sensational number compared with either the entirety of the German population or with the number of Germans who emigrated from their home country. Against this backdrop it is easier to explain German colonialism in Africa by pointing to irrational nationalist and expansionist concepts than to economic or demographic calculations. This is supported by the fact that colonial expansion was more popular among the Kaiserreich's *petite bourgeoisie* than among industrialists, big trading houses and finance. At the end of the day, Germany's African empire collapsed due to the inability of the German governments to solve the economic and political tensions, which colonialism had created. Only in *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* did those discrepancies lead to genocide.²⁶

GERMANY'S AFRICAN COLONIES IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The colonial past played a relatively important role in interwar politics and public discourse of the Weimar Republic, when it contributed to a widespread feeling of injustice and humiliation which stemmed from the provisions of the Versailles Treaty, the loss of Germany's eastern provinces, Alsace-Lorraine, the two Belgian duchies of Eupen and Malmedy and the imposition of harsh disarmament conditions for the German Army. The colonial issue also became an issue of "treason literature", whose authors (and often readers, too) cultivated conspiracy theories, blaming internal enemies (the Social Democrats, Jews and democratic civilian politicians who had supported the destitution of the Kaiser in 1918) and external machinations of the victorious powers for the hardship which post-war Germany had to endure. The loss of the colonies – and the alleged necessity to reconquer them – was a minor issue compared to the controversies which the losses

²⁶ This is the main reason, why the case of *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* has triggered such controverse discussions and such an extraordinary amount of literature about the Herero case. However, it should not go unnoticed, that not only the war against the Nama (which is labelled genocidal by some authors) but also the fights against the Maji-Maji, during which the German troops caused a huge amount of civil casualties by resorting to a totally disproportional use of superior weaponry, reveal traces of genocidal intent.

of Upper Silesia and the old Prussian provinces had triggered. The lobby linked to those territories was much more influential in post-war German politics than was the relatively weak and meagre pressure group of African settlers and tradesmen who had fled from the African colonies. Africa was far away and exotic, whereas the lost Germany Eastern territories seemed to be physically in reach and their loss had contributed to a stream of refugees and people who had chosen to move from the Polish part of Upper Silesia to Germany, once they had been given that option.²⁷

The propaganda of the Third Reich almost ignored the colonial issue. The National Socialist movement had grown because of the social consequences of economic depression and exploited the feeling of grief and the longing for revenge as well as the reversal of the Versailles peace conditions, but it failed to exploit the loss of the colonies. The early generations of NSDAP members and SA activists had been socialised by the great myths of the German eastern territories, the battles of World War I and the fights in its aftermath in Upper Silesia, where many later SA members had obtained their military and ideological formation as members of the *Freikorps*, nationalist militia formed in order to suppress the three uprisings which had been launched by Upper Silesians who wanted their homelands to adhere to the Polish rather than the German state. In the *Freikorps* culture there was no space for colonies and in the developing National Socialist propaganda the East totally dominated any Southern issue. The National Socialist movement's discourse was racist, just as the colonial discourse before World War I had been racist, but it never extended its ideological demands for *Lebensraum* to Africa. *Lebensraum*, according to Hitler and his men, was to be conquered in Eastern Europe, in the vast lands of eastern Poland and the Soviet Union. The unresponsiveness of the National Socialist propaganda for colonial revisionism also constitutes a strong argument against claims about a far reaching continuity between the massacre of the Herero and Nama in *Deutsch-Südwest* and the extermination policy of the Third Reich in Central and Eastern Europe during World War II.²⁸

²⁷ H. Gründer, *op. cit.*, pp. 253-278. The article of Jeremy Garsha in this issue demonstrates, how much even opponents of colonial expansion in Germany were caught in the trap of colonial stereotyping.

²⁸ These continuity claims, which have been supported by authors of academic and non-academic publications, are usually based on personal careers and intergenerational connections between colonial officers and later National Socialist leaders (like, for example, the Göring family), on the similarity of methods applied by the authorities (concentration camps, mass murder through the application of forced labour) and racism as a common element linking colonial mass murder with the Holocaust and the mass murder of Slavs, Jews and Roma in Eastern Europe after 1939. Whereas Olusoga and Erichsen emphasise personal continuity (which however, even according to their account, was rather weak), Zimmerer, Langbehn and Salama stress first and foremost the similarity of methods and the importance of racism.

D. Olusoga, C. W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust. Germany's forgotten genocide*, Faber and Faber, London 2010; J. Zimmerer, J. Zeller (Hg.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin 2003; V. Langbehn, M. Salama (ed.), *German Colonialism. Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011.

The relatively early loss of the colonies and their almost entire absence from collective German memory during the post-war period had two important consequences. First, it inclined public opinion, media and political discourse to concentrate on the damages and losses which World War II had inflicted on the German state and the German nation, dismembering the German nation state into two main countries (the GDR and the FRG) and subduing them to the will of the Allied Powers. Second, it allowed the German public to criticise and blame the policies of Western powers in their respective colonies in order to retain power or delay decolonisation. Not having any colonies became the moral high ground for forming solidarity with movements which strove for decolonisation, even if they were sponsored by the Soviet Union and communist China and fought against the troops of Germany's new allies in NATO and the European Economic Community.

During the Cold War, the colonial issue was exploited by the West German left and by the propaganda of the GDR, which put blame on the alleged continuity between "German imperialism" in the past (in Prussia, the Kaiserreich, the colonies and during World War II) and "German imperialism" in the present (in the form of the FRG's adherence to NATO and its approval for the dislocation of US troops on German soil). It was during the sixties when a number of publications from GDR academics appeared on the market, which stimulated and supported the beginning tendency in the FRG, to "deal with the past" with respect to the colonial past.²⁹

Despite the ideological phraseology which sometimes permeates these studies, they remained quite influential long after the GDR had disappeared. Their influence was mainly due to their authors' extensive knowledge of the relevant archives and sources (which were situated on the eastern side of the Berlin wall).³⁰ West Germany's 'dealing with the past' (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) was mostly confined to debates about World War I, and, to some extent, an élite continuity between the political and economic establishments of the Third Reich and the Federal Republic of Germany. Only during the 80s did the scope of the controversies gradually enlarge to the Third Reich and the Holocaust. The colonial past remained at the margins of these controversies.

The same is true for the academic debate about German colonialism, post-colonialism and the past of the German colonies. Only a few researchers have dedicated their carriers to this issue. The first prominent and influential work on the Kaiserreich's colonial expansion stems from the sixties, when Hans-Ulrich Wehler published a book on Bismarck's relation to Germany's expansion³¹ in which he

²⁹ H. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* (2 volumes), Steiner, Stuttgart 1984 and 1996; idem, *Let us die fighting*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1985.

³⁰ Many later publications have strongly relied on Drechsler's works. For D. Olusoga and C. W. Erichsen, Drechsler's English version on the Herero uprising (*Let us die fighting*, see footnote 28) remained almost the sole source of their chapters concerning the German side of the Herero conflict (apparently, both authors did either not have access to German archives and literature, or lacked the necessary linguistic competences).

³¹ H.-U. Wehler, *Bismarck und der Imperialismus*, Kiepenheuer und Witsch, Köln 1969.

outlined the “diversion hypothesis” according to which the colonial issue had mainly served to divert internal tensions and social conflicts beyond the Reich’s borders.

After the notion of the Holocaust had become firmly established in German and western historiography during the eighties, more and more authors also started to ask questions about links between the colonial past and the Third Reich and whether the extermination policy against the Herero had been a precursor or example for the National Socialist policy toward Jews, Roma and Slavs in Eastern Europe.³² Such comparisons became more popular and widespread after a group of Herero had filed a lawsuit for compensation (usually called “reparations”) in a district court of Columbia (USA) against Germany as a state, the Deutsche Bank and several other enterprises, among them the alleged legal successor of the Woermann company.³³ With their lawsuit the Herero group jumped into the food steps of the Jewish Claims’ conference’s previous (and largely successful) legal action against German enterprises, which during World War II had taken advantage of slave labour and agreed to pay compensation during the late 90s. However in 2001 and beyond the German government, which had established a compensation fund in several Central and East European countries and the US, rejected the Herero claims. The latter was not supported by the Namibian government. In 2004, German Social-Democratic Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, apologised in a speech in Windhoek and admitted Germany’s guilt, but declined reparations.³⁴ The debate about Herero compensation, which has been closely linked to the one concerning the genocide issue have also helped to posit historical research on German colonialism into the wider realm of genocide studies and have triggered comparisons with other cases of 20th century genocide, genocidal dynamics and genocide prevention. This has not only stimulated comparisons with the extermination policies of the Third Reich but also with other forms of colonial violence and later cases of extermination policies.³⁵

In Namibia, which in 1990 changed from a South African colony into an independent country in 1990, not only the German colonial past, but also the Herero compensation claims have remained controversial. During the German rule, the Herero were one of the dominant ethnic groups, but they lost most of their relative power after the genocidal campaign, whereas other groups, like the Nama (who had

³² K. Kopp, *Arguing the Case of a Colonial Poland*, in: V. Langbehn, M. Salama (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 146-163; R. A. Berman, *Colonialism and No End. The Other Continuity Theses*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 164-190.

³³ *Germany urges Herero to drop lawsuit*, Deutsche Welle, 5.8.2004, <http://www.dw.de/germany-urges-herero-to-drop-lawsuit/a-1287663-1>.

³⁴ Speech by Federal Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul at the commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the suppression of the Herero uprising, Okakarara, on 14 August 2004; Germany Embassy in Windhoek http://www.windhuk.diplo.de/Vertretung/windhuk/en/03/Commemorative__Years__2004__2005/Seite__Speech2004-08-14__BMZ.html. See also: BBC: *Germany regrets Namibia ‘genocide’*, 12.1.2004 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3388901.stm>.

³⁵ Kirsten Dyck deals with these issues in her article in this volume.

first sided with the *Schutzgruppe* against the Herero and then engaged in a more successful partisan war against the Germans) and other groups, who had remained neutral or assisted the German forces in the fights against the Herero, saw their influence rising. The fight against the apartheid which had tormented the southern and south-western part of Africa and which was inextricably linked to Namibia's anticolonial battle for independence from South Africa³⁶, was dominated by the Ovambo, which had played no role in the fights between 1904 and 1907, but due to their demographic growth had become the dominant ethnic group in post-colonial Namibia. The strong Marxist and pro-Soviet orientation of Ovambo dominated the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) which led the struggle for independence, drove the Herero and Namibia's white (and often German speaking) settlers toward each other. Subsequent governments, led by SWAPO politicians, were interested in financial assistance from Germany³⁷ but tried their best to prevent this assistance from becoming earmarked for one ethnic group only. Direct compensation, as Germany had transferred to individual citizens in the framework of the forced-labour compensation scheme, ran contrary to the political interest of the Namibian government because it would have reduced the influence the government could have on the distribution of these payments among the ethnic and political groups, and because it would have favoured the Herero (and potentially also the Nama) over all other groups, thus reshuffling the political balance in the country. Windhoek therefore preferred German development aid (channelled through the state budget) over reparations for Herero and Nama only.³⁸

The intra-Namibian conflict over the consequences of German colonialism and the debates in Germany concerning the moral lessons of the 1904 massacres have foregrounded Namibian-German relations in the dealing with the German colonial past. The relative prominence which the Herero issue enjoys in Germany's public discourse can hardly be compared to any other colonial or post-colonial issue. In the Namibian collective memory the Herero uprising has been integrated into an extremely inclusive interpretation of the past, which comprises colonisers and colonised, collaborators with the Germans and those who withstood them, but also those who stayed away from the conflict. This is due to the fact that colonial times

³⁶ The anti- and post-colonial notions, which often have their relevance in other parts of Africa, fail to describe events in southern Africa properly. The Namibian struggle against apartheid was certainly one for Human Rights and independence, but it is difficult to conceive of it as being an "anticolonial" one since Namibia was a colony of South Africa, but the tiny white South African minority, which ruled the country in an authoritarian manner, had been the winner of an anticolonial struggle against the British.

³⁷ Similar to the ANC in South Africa, the South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) had been supported by communist Eastern Europe and even North Korea in the struggle against apartheid and for independence from South Africa. After the breakdown of the communist system, SWAPO could no longer count on financial and military support from communist states and adopted to the new situation by seeking support from Germany and the US.

³⁸ J. Sarkin, *Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21 century. The Social-Legal Context of Claims under International Law by the Herero against Germany for Genocide in Namibia 1904-1908*, Praeger Security International, London 2009, pp. 55-56.

did not only create competing and exclusive but also integrative identities, for example in cases when mixed marriages between Germans and natives (which the authorities in Berlin forbade after the Nama and Herero uprisings) led to offspring. A large part of the German settlers' community survived southern African colonisation and the anti-apartheid struggle and today often takes a moderate stance in the Herero-German controversy (sometimes supporting Herero reparation claims on moral grounds), and still exerts influence on how the colonial past is commemorated. Due to this melange of conflicting and overlapping interests Namibia has remained the country, where street names praise Bismarck, Fidel Castro and Nelson Mandela at the same time, and monuments erected to honour the leaders of the German colonial administration and soldiers of the *Schutztruppe* were not destroyed after independence, but supplemented by new monuments, revelling in Herero leaders like Samuel Maherero and Hendrik Witbooi, the Nama leader, who commanded the uprising against the German administration.³⁹

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Słowa kluczowe: polityka kolonialna, Trzecia Rzesza, Afryka, pamięć zbiorowa

Keywords: colonial policy, Third Reich, Africa, collective memory

ABSTRACT

The colonial policy of the German Empire, which brought large parts of West, East and South-Western Africa under German rule, remains a puzzle. It was initiated for ideological reasons and supported mostly by the nationalist, expansionist strand of Germany's petite bourgeoisie which used to justify colonial expansion pointing to the alleged necessity to find space for emigrants, production surpluses, scarce commodities and cheap labor for the German industry. None of these objectives were ever achieved and colonialism remained a short-lived and loss-making adventure, which ended during World War I, when the German colonies were mostly taken over by Entente troops. Even as an attempt, to export social tensions by directing the attention of the working class to nationalist, expansionist issues, colonialism proved unsuccessful. Instead, the tensions between social, political and economic constraints in the colonies inclined German troops to commit large scale atrocities in East Africa and German South-West Africa against the Herero, Nama and Maji-Maji peoples. In German collective memory, colonialism never played an important role, because it was marginalized by the debates about German guilt for the outbreak of World War I, the Holocaust in World War II and last but not least, because the Third Reich directed expansionism toward Central Eastern Europe and downplayed the colonial adventure of the 19th century in propaganda.

³⁹ On the inclusive collective memory in Namibia today see: W. Speitkamp, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-178 and K. Bachmann, *Jak Niemcy w Afryce przygotowali Holokaust*, „Gazeta Wyborcza” 27.4.2012.