

German Rule, African Subjects: State Aspirations and the Reality of Power in Colonial Namibia

Jürgen Zimmerer

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Review by Mohamed Adhikari

This landmark work is a most welcome addition to my bookshelves, as I am sure it will be for those, who like myself, have an abiding interest in the history of German colonial rule in

Namibia – but do not read German. The book, which is based on Zimmerer's doctoral thesis of 1999, first appeared as *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: Staatlicher Gewaltanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* in 2001. Though its translation into English has been two decades in the making, this volume nonetheless remains of wide-ranging scholarly interest not only because of the continued relevance of its content, but also because of its enduring impact on historical writing on German colonialism in Namibia, as well as on re-assessments of Wilhelmine imperialism.

Though lasting merely three decades – from 1884 when Germany laid formal claim to the colony, through to 1915 when it capitulated in the face of the South African invasion as a result of the outbreak of World War One – German dominion over Namibia was extraordinarily destructive of indigenous societies. Between 1904 and 1908 the colonial state, with the full backing of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the German High Command, unleashed genocidal warfare, first against the Herero and then against the Nama peoples in response to their respective rebellions in January and October 1904. An estimated 80% of all Herero and 50% of all Nama perished as a consequence. Though not directly targeted, perhaps as much as a third of the Damara community also died.

After the wars, ongoing state-sponsored and settler violence that would likely have resulted in the genocide of the San peoples, who were concentrated north and northeast of Hereroland, was averted by the South African invasion.

The book is not a study of German colonialism in Namibia as such, but rather of a particular phase – the last eight years, when the administration finally had sufficient control over the surviving indigenous population to try to realise its utopian vision of how this settler society should function. It focuses closely on the endeavours of the bureaucracy with limited reference to the settler and indigenous sectors of German South West Africa (GSWA). The volume is essentially about the stark disjuncture between the idealism that informed "Native Policy" and the realities of German rule.

It was only after the concentration camps had been closed and the war against the Nama had wound down by 1907-08 that the administration was able to implement in any meaningful way its ideal of the "model colony" of agricultural settlement that had animated the imagination of the governing elite from the mid-1890s onwards. In this fantasy, GSWA would operate in terms of a strict racial hierarchy, in which a fully privileged German settler

establishment would dominate a rightless, landless, indigenous population living in reserves, with these distinctions inscribed in law.

Zimmerer explains that this “vision of dominance” included: ... universal registration and policing of the African population who should be integrated into the economic system of the colony as a cheap workforce and, by a process of social control, re-educated to become compliant workers. In this way the economic development of the colony could be accelerated... (Zimmerer, 2008).

The German nation would then have acquired significant new *lebensraum*¹ as followers of prominent geographer and originator of the term, Friedrich Ratzel, had predicted from the late nineteenth century; and the colony would become “our new Germany on African soil” in the words of Clara Brockman, who settled in Namibia in 1907 and soon after wrote two booster volumes to attract immigrants to GSWA (See Wildenthal, 1993:68, 70).

The first three chapters are contextual and narrative, and the latter three thematic in nature. The first chapter provides broad context by sketching relevant aspects of the colony’s history from the establishment of the *Schutzgebiet* (protectorate) in 1884 through to the exterminatory wars and the genocidal conduct of concentration camp policy. The ending of hostilities was a phased process because Germany unilaterally declared an end to the war in March 1907, but Zimmerer correctly asserts that the war only ended with the closure of the concentration camps by mid-1908 because the policy of incarceration was implemented so harshly as to be war by another means.

The second chapter details the creation of the legal framework in terms of which the colonial utopia was meant to operate. Leading bureaucrats set about enacting a code of “native law” to regulate the lives of indigenes in the interests of the settler establishment and to ensure that they would never become a threat to the colonial order again.

At the centre of this code stood three notorious “native ordinances” passed in September 1907. In terms of the Control Ordinance, no indigene was allowed to own land, cattle or horses without the permission of the governor, to ensure that they would not be economically independent and therefore would be available to the colonial economy as cheap labour. Land formerly occupied by the Herero was confiscated by the state, mainly to be sold off to colonists. The names of all Herero were to be entered into a central register that would record their location and details of employment to optimise the exploitation and control of this resource.

The Pass Ordinance decreed that all Herero over the age of eight had to carry a visible pass at all times. They were to be issued with metal disks embossed with the emblem of the Second Reich on one side and on the other a number that was to be used to control them as units of labour. They were required to wear their passes around their necks, without which they would not be able to obtain work, food or lodging. Any settler could demand to see their pass and hand offenders over to the police. Anyone leaving their place of residence needed a travel pass, without which they would be prosecuted as vagrants.

The Masters and Servants Ordinance stipulated that no more than ten

indigenous families would be allowed to live on the property of their employer. This measure was meant to ensure efficient distribution of scarce labour, to promote effective surveillance and to prevent any resurgence of organised resistance or ethnic solidarity. The main aim of these laws was to create an amorphous class of indigenous helots that would serve settler labour needs in perpetuity.

The conspicuously short chapter three – it is less than a quarter the length of the longest chapter – outlines post-war demographic, economic and institutional developments and provides context for the thematic chapters that follow. Chapter four, titled “Securing Colonial Control”, discusses the logistical challenges faced in the implementation of “Native Policy” and the failures that resulted, while the next chapter, “The Labour Market”, focuses on the debacles of the system of servitude the bureaucracy tried to enforce.

The final chapter deals with the administration’s vaporous ideas of instilling into Africans a regimen of social discipline through which they were expected to accept their status as landless, rightless and deracinated drudges. Here Zimmerer specifically analyses the education and taxation policies.

The implementation of “Native Policy” presents readers with a litany of failures as the state did not have the capacity to enforce the regulations anywhere near the desired extent, nor to impose them in the face of mass defiance given Namibia’s low population density, poor infrastructure and inhospitable terrain.

The colonial bureaucracy was small, inefficient, riven with rivalry, and the policing system inadequate to ensure compliance. Some Herero absconded, preferring to live as fugitives off a combination of hunter-gathering and stock pilferage. Others threw away their passes and worked for employers of their choice. There were also not enough metal badges to go around, and maintaining the labour register posed insurmountable obstacles.

Many settlers themselves undermined the regulations because earlier exterminatory policies as well as the post-war economic boom resulted in fierce competition for labour. The opening of the Otavi copper mine after the completion of the railway line to Swakopmund in 1907, the discovery of diamonds near Luderitz in 1908 and the more than doubling of the settler population after the war exacerbated the labour shortage.

Despite this fiasco, there is nonetheless a strong argument to be made that German post-war rule remained genocidal. Although the overt killing of indigenes had dramatically tapered off and German policy had shifted from intentionally inflicting mass death to one of extreme exploitation by 1908, the attempts at suppressing any form of ethnic affiliation or cultural attachment among indigenes displays continued genocidal intent – especially when viewed in the light of preceding exterminatory practices. Because genocide is not simply about killing, but about the destruction of social groups, systematic cultural suppression under such dire circumstances is clearly genocidal.

In this, and other ways, the book is likely to raise questions in readers’ minds about linkages and continuities between genocide in GSWA and the Third Reich’s depredations in eastern Europe less than four decades later. It is thus

fortuitous that Zimmerer will next year be following up this volume with the translation into English of another of his major works, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz: On the Relationship between Colonialism and the Holocaust*.

My biggest gripe with this book is not one of commission but of omission. I feel that English language readers would have benefitted greatly from a more substantive update on historiographical and political developments relating to German colonialism in Namibia than what is offered in the four and a half page "Preface to the English edition". Much of this historiography is not available in English, and responses to *Deutsche Herrschaft* was a major stimulus to debate in German-language writing on the genocides of the Second Reich.

Also, brief commentary on critical issues such as ongoing court cases, negotiation around reparations and activism relating to the return of human remains would have been welcome, especially given Zimmerer's involvement in these matters as a public intellectual. These could easily have been accommodated in an extended "Preface" or a post-script of some kind.

This is nonetheless a volume I would strongly recommend to anyone interested in the history of Germany, Namibia, or southern Africa in general. Scholars in the fields of genocide, settler colonial, and indigenous studies will also find much on which to ruminate.

REFERENCES

- Lora Wildenthal, 1993. "She is the Victor": Bourgeois Women, Nationalist Identities and the Ideal of the Independent Woman Farmer in German Southwest Africa, *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social Anthropology*, 33, September, 68, 70.
- Jürgen Zimmerer, 2008. The Model Colony? Racial Segregation, Forced Labour and Total Control in German South-West Africa in Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (eds.), *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904-1908 and its Aftermath*, London: Merlin Press, 24.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Literally meaning "space to grow", referring to a German notion of nationalist expansionism popular at that time – *ed*.