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Citation

Gewald, J. B. (1994). The great General of the Kaiser. *Botswana Notes And Records*, 26, 67-76. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4819>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Great General of the Kaiser

by JAN-BART GEWALD*

During the Herero German war, of 1904 - 1908¹, the *Vernichtungsbefehl* or extermination order, was issued, in terms of which all Herero in German territory were to be shot or expelled. Authors have recently sought to deny or downplay the existence of the order. Research conducted in Botswana and elsewhere has brought to light documentary evidence which conclusively proves the existence of the order and a commitment on the part of German colonial authority to ensure its implementation.

The Botswana National Archives is in possession of one of the most valuable historical documents of this part of Southern Africa. The document concerned is probably the sole extant original copy, in Herero, of the controversial *Vernichtungsbefehl* or extermination order which was issued by German military authorities during the German Herero war of 1904 - 1908. It was the issuing of this order, and the rationale that lay behind it, that can be said to have led directly to the migration and permanent settlement of the bulk of the Herero in Botswana. The existence of this document effectively refutes arguments, presented by revisionist historians, that seek to question the authenticity of the extermination order and downplay German military activities in colonial Namibia. The importance of this document and the controversy surrounding it are discussed in the following article.

On the 12th of January 1904 a full scale war broke out, in what was then German South West Africa (GSWA), present day Namibia, between the Herero-speaking people of Namibia and Imperial Germany. The war culminated in the issuing of the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, extermination order, by the supreme commander of German troops in GSWA, General Lothar von Trotha, in October 1904. The order stated that within German territory Herero men with or without guns were to be shot and that no more Herero prisoners would be taken. Of late a number of authors have sought to deny the existence or at least downplay implications of the *Vernichtungsbefehl* (Sudholt 1975, Poewe 1986, Spraul 1988, Lau 1989). Research, recently conducted in the Botswana National Archives, as well as other places, has brought to light evidence which conclusively proves the existence of the *Vernichtungsbefehl* and a conscious commitment on the part of German colonial authority to ensure the implementation of this order.

Seven months after the outbreak of the Herero German war the bulk of the Herero were encircled at *Otjozondjupa*, Waterberg, in northwestern Namibia. In the ensuing battle, at the waterholes of *Hamakari* on the 11th of August 1904, the Herero were able to break out of their encirclement and withdraw, to the southeast, into the *Omaheke* Sandveld². Von Trotha's troops pursued the fleeing Herero into the *Omaheke*. On the 16th and 26th of August von Trotha issued orders which, by placing a cordon along the waterholes, cut off all escape routes to the west, south and northwest, and forced the fleeing Herero further into the *Omaheke*. (Pool 1979: 245ff) On 21 August, von Trotha placed a price of 5000 marks on the head of the Herero paramount chief, Samuel Maharero, and 1000 marks on the head of any Herero headman (Pool 1991: 269). In a series of follow-up skirmishes, during August

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and September, the German troops pursued the fleeing Herero ever deeper into the *Omaheke*.

By the first of October von Trotha, who was actively taking part in the pursuit, had reached the waterhole *Osombo-Windimbe*. During the afternoon of the following day, Sunday 2 October 1904, after the holding of a field service, General von Trotha, addressed his officers (Rust 1905: 384). In his address von Trotha declared that, the war against the Herero would be continued in all earnestness, and read out the following proclamation:

"I, the great General of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero people. The Herero are no longer German subjects. They have murdered and stolen, they have cut off the ears, noses and other body-parts of wounded soldiers, now out of cowardice they no longer wish to fight. I say to the people: Anyone who delivers a captain will receive 1000 Mark, whoever delivers Samuel will receive 5000 Mark. The Herero people must however leave the land. If the populace does not do this I will force them with the *Groot Rohr* [Cannon]. Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at.

These are my words to the Herero people.

The great General of the mighty German Kaiser"³.

At dawn the following morning, Herero prisoners, who had been sentenced to death by a field court-martial, were hung in the presence of about 30 Herero men, women and children prisoners. Following the hanging von Trotha's proclamation was read out to the prisoners in Herero. Printed copies of the Herero text were distributed amongst the Herero prisoners. The prisoners were then turned loose and driven out into the *Omaheke* (Rust 1904: 386 & Nuhn 1989: 282)⁴.

Gunter Spraul queries the authenticity of the *Vernichtungsbefehl* and concludes that even if it did exist then its intentions have at best been misunderstood. (Spraul 1988) Throughout his text Gunter Spraul insinuates that the *Vernichtungsbefehl* is a forgery⁵. At one stage in footnoted text Spraul goes to the extent of stating that, "...at present no authentic copy of the text exists" (Spraul 1988: 723). Through the selective use of sources Spraul implies that the proclamation is no more than a fabrication. To further this end the texts of known contemporary opponents of von Trotha have been selectively appropriated by Spraul. Texts which would appear to imply that the incident at *Osombo-Windimbe* never occurred and, by virtue of this, that the *Vernichtungsbefehl* is a fabrication. Thus Spraul, in referring to the memoirs of the German officer, Major von Estorff, attempts to deny the occurrence of the incident at *Osombo-Windimbe* by stating:

Amazing is the fact that, Major von Estorff, who was present at the named waterhole with his detachment and therefore surely privy to the orders issued, failed, even with his official and personal opposition to Trotha, to refer with even one word to the "Proklamation" (Spraul 1988: 737 fn 87)⁶.

Karla Poewe, basing herself on the colonial apologist Gert Sudholt (1975), argued along similar lines, and claimed that there was a fundamental misunderstanding among commentators, regarding the *Vernichtungsbefehl* (Poewe 1986: 58). Indeed Poewe reduced

the argument down to semantics and stated that:

The use of the term 'vernichten' which unknowledgeable people translate as *extermination*, in fact, meant, in the usage of the times, 'breaking of military', 'national', or 'economic resistance' (Poewe 1986: 60).

Having established that 'vernichten' was not to be equated with extermination Poewe then concluded that:

"The diction and tone of the proclamation,..., clearly shows it to be an attempt at psychological warfare" (Poewe 1986: 65)⁷.

In due course Karla Poewe's conclusions were picked up by Brigitte Lau who in turn stated that:

"Von Trotha's famous 'extermination order' as proof of German 'genocide' of the Herero has been adequately challenged by Karla Poewe, who problematised the word 'extermination' which at the time referred to 'breaking the enemy's power to resist', not killing them off one by one... and who demonstrated that it was a successful attempt at psychological warfare, never followed in deed" (Lau 1989: 5).

However General Lothar von Trotha's own words, in his diary and elsewhere, indicate that Trotha knew full well what his proclamation entailed. On the day that copies of Trotha's proclamation in Otjiherero were issued to the prisoners at the hanging in *Osombo-Windimbe*, Trotha wrote in a letter:

"Now I have to ask myself *how* to end the war with the Hereros. The views of the Governor and also a few old Afrikaners ("alte Afrikaner") on the one hand, and my views on the other, differ completely. The first wanted to negotiate for some time already and regard the Herero nation as necessary labour material for the future development of the country. I believe that the nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this was not possible by tactical measures, have to be expelled from the country by operative means and further detailed treatment. This will be possible if the water-holes from Grootfontein to Gobabis are occupied. The constant movement of our troops will enable us to find the small groups of the nation who have moved back westwards and destroy them gradually (Pool 1991: 272 - 273).

"My intimate knowledge of many central African tribes (Bantu and others) has everywhere convinced me of the necessity that the Negro does not respect treaties but only brutal force. (Pool 1991: 274)

"...I find it most appropriate that the nation perishes instead of infecting our soldiers and diminishing their supplies of water and food. Apart from that, mildness on my side would only be interpreted as weakness by the other side. They have to perish in the Sandveld or try to cross the Bechuanaland border" (Pool 1991:274).

A number of months after the issuing of the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, and its condemnation by large sections of the German parliament which led to its repeal, the Rhenish missionary

Kuhlmann wrote to von Trotha asking for leniency with regard to Herero prisoners of war. In reply the general answered:

"My position is a brusque [schroffes] one, one that is based on many years of dealing with black tribes and the study of them. Here [in GSWA] I have also gone to great lengths to study the Herero and I have found that they are the same self-centred, faithless and barbaric people, as are all Bantu people. His majesty the Kaiser and King has, through his order, forced me to temper my position so that the lives of the Herero who voluntarily surrender, with the exception of the instigators and leaders, be spared. The Reich's Chancellor has lifted my order that all captured Herero be enchained and forced to labour. Further orders affecting mine I do not know about and therefore they remain in force, namely that:

- 1 all cattle of the Herero be confiscated,
- 2 the men and women fit for work be put to work with food without salary at those places where they are needed,
- 3 that a court martial, appointed by myself, investigate the cases of murder"⁸.

At a later stage Trotha enthused:

"The exercise of violence with crass terrorism and even with gruesomeness was and is my politic. I destroy the African tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge, which will remain (Kühne 1979: 211)⁹.

German contemporaries of Trotha also understood full well what the General meant. In September of 1904, a month after the battle at *Hamakari*, Major Ludwig von Estorff had urged von Trotha to enter into negotiations with the Herero. At that stage Von Trotha had answered "No, my friend, I will have nothing of that, only that we have to start all over again. We will fight for as long as possible. Basta!" (Pool 1991: 270)

From 1904 and through into 1905 von Estorff, along with the divisions of van der Heyde and Mühlenfels, "...had the thankless task to chasing after the refugees in the Sandveld and preventing their return" (Estorff 1979: 117)¹⁰. Von Estorff's own words describe clearly what he did and what his commanding officer, von Trotha's intentions were:

"..., I followed their spoor and found numerous wells which presented a terrifying sight. Cattle which had died of thirst lay scattered around the wells. These cattle had reached the wells but there had not been enough time to water them. The Herero fled ahead of us into the Sandveld. Again and again this terrible scene kept repeating itself. With feverish energy the men had worked at opening the wells, however the water became ever sparser, and wells evermore rare. They fled from one well to the next and lost virtually all their cattle and a large number of their people. The people shrunk into small remnants who continually fell into our hands [unsere Gewalt kamen], sections of the people escaped now and later through the Sandveld into English territory [Present-day Botswana]. *It was a policy which was equally gruesome as senseless, to hammer the people so much, we could have still saved many of them and their rich herds, if we had pardoned and taken them up again, they*

had been punished enough. I suggested this to General von Trotha but he wanted their total extermination" (Estorff 1979: 116 - 117)¹¹.

The diary of Major Stuhlman indicates clearly that the policy of extermination was one which had been embarked upon by von Trotha for some time prior to *Osombo-Windembe*. Stuhlmann, describes in his diary entry, for the eleventh of August 1904, a scene from the battle of *Hamakari* on that day. Stuhlmann muses on the horrors of war and of a wounded Herero child lying next to his cannon:

"...the little worm had flung his arm around the wheel of the cannon, which had possibly destroyed his other family members. ... *we had been explicitly told before hand, that this dealt with the extermination of a whole tribe, nothing living was to be spared...*"¹²

Stuhlmann's diary describes how on the following day they marched through what had been the Herero encampments at *Hamakari*. All around them lay the evidence of the hasty Herero retreat; scattered household goods and children, with staring eyes, abandoned and sitting at smouldering camp fires. As they moved on they came across milling cattle, goats and sheep, doomed to die, as their herds had been shot by the German troops. In his diary Stuhlmann mused on how easy it would have been to save this livestock, as water and pasture were amply available. But, as he noted in his diary, "*... the orders were an extermination war waged on the Herero with no turning back*"¹³.

The German Schutztruppe officers knew full well what *vernichten* meant. The Herero witnesses at the summary court martial and execution at *Osombo-Windimbe* understood what *vernichten* meant.

On 30 October 1904 the authorities, at Tsau, the administrative capital of Ngamiland, in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, received a letter from the Herero paramount Samuel Maharero asking for permission to enter British territory.¹⁴ On 15 November Samuel Maharero arrived in Tsau and made a renewed application to stay.¹⁵ Since the outbreak of the war groups of Herero refugees had crossed over into the Bechuanaland protectorate.¹⁶ Following the battle of *Hamakari*, at the *Otjozondjupa* Waterberg, and the sealing of the *Omaheke*, a large number of Herero refugees sought refuge in the Bechuanaland protectorate. Amongst those who made it to the Bechuanaland protectorate were some witnesses of the hanging at *Osombo-Windembe*.

In November of 1905 Lt. Merry, the acting resident magistrate in Tsau wrote a letter, dealing with the condition of Herero refugees living in Ngamiland, to the Resident Commissioner in Mafeking. Lt. Merry ended his letter as follows:

"I enclose a circular letter signed by General von Trotha, which may be of interest to your Honour, it was, I understand, distributed amongst the Damaras [Herero] about the beginning of the year"¹⁷.

The circular letter referred to by Lt. Merry is no less than the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, in Otjiherero, which was distributed amongst the 30 prisoners who were forced to watch the hanging at *Osombo-Windimbe*. The existence of this extremely valuable document, which

is stored in the Botswana National Archives, is further proof that the incident at *Osombo-Windimbe* did take place and that the *Vernichtungsbefehl* was given.

The *Vernichtungsbefehl*, in Otjiherero, is printed on the reverse side of stationery which bears the letterhead, "*Kommando der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppe in Windhoek*" (Headquarters of the Imperial protection troops in Windhoek). The printed document, which would appear to have been roneoed, is a little smaller than an A4 and was folded four times. The script on the document is cursive. The text, which is in Otjiherero, is not punctuated and contains a number of spelling and grammatical mistakes.

In conclusion it must be said that it is extremely disheartening though illuminating that we, as historians, have been debased to such an extent that we are forced to debate the authenticity of something as inhumane and basal as the *Vernichtungsbefehl*. Wars, and the depersonalisation of the enemy, were and are horrific. An authentic text of the *Vernichtungsbefehl* exists and its intentions are clear. Between 1904 and 1908 there was a conscious policy on the part of Imperial Germany to destroy, by whatever means necessary, whatever aboriginal resistance there was to its authority in what is now Namibia.

Appendix A

Literal transcription of document found in Botswana National Archives R C 11/1, with translation provided by Kovihende Kaotozu.

- a) Ouami Omuhona omunene ongenerala jo vadeutschi. Metumuembo indi kovaherero ene mbumuri ovaherero kamutjiri mo vandeotji muavaka nu muazepa nu muazepa ozondja nezovavapa mua konda omatui no majuru nu nambano muato umumandu nu Kamunokurua Ami mutja kuene ko vaherero kuene kovahona ngua kambura omuhona umue na eta masninu ovi pona 50 vindano nutjinene ingui ngua eta vimiuhona Samuel Maharero mapeva ovi pondo omasere jevari nomi rongo 50 ene vaherero nambano ehi etheje orovandoitji nu tjimuhino kuvanga okutjita otji otji naihi ami meverura kizjatjinene nondjembo onene omundu mehi ro vandoitji matu no ndjembo hino ku kambura ovakazendu no vavere korukua meve rambere kovahona vao poo meve zepa nondjembo. Ono mambo vandje komuhoko uovaherero. Omuhona omunene ongenerala jomukesere.
Trotha.
- b) I am the great General of the Germans. I am sending a word to you Hereros, you who are Hereros are no longer under the Germans. You have stolen, killed and owe white people. You have cut ears and noses, but now out of cowardice say you will not fight. I am saying to you Herero, you who are great, anyone who catches and brings a chief will be paid 50 pounds, especially chief Samuel Maharero shall get 250 pounds¹⁸. You Hereros must now leave this land it belongs to the Germans. If you do not do this I shall remove you with the big gun. A person in German land shall be killed by the gun. I shall not catch women and the sick but I will chase them after their chiefs or I will kill them with the gun. These are my words to the Herero nation.
The Great General of the Kaiser
Trotha.

Polizeitruppe in SWA vom 22 April, 1911 bis 9 August, 1911). The case of the Herero Kandiapu, who was to be deported to Cameroon and died whilst in police custody in Swakopmund, is a case in point (NNAW, BSW 74, Windhuk, 9/8/1911, Deportation order for Kandiapu on the grounds that he had participated in an armed band in the *Omaheke* Sandveld). Hostilities against the aboriginal inhabitants of Namibia were still in progress in 1915 when Namibia was occupied by troops of the Union of South Africa (See in this case particularly the work done by Robert Gordon on social banditry in Northwestern Namibia in *The Bushman Myth: the Making of a Namibian Underclass*, Conflict and Social Change Series. Westview Press (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford 1992).

- 2 Thus far the most reliable day by day account of the war is that by Gerhardus Pool, *Die Herero-Opstand 1904-1907* (Cape Town, 1979).

Omaheke is the Otjiherero name for the sandveld area east of the Waterberg.

- 3 Author's translation of NNAW, ZBU D 1a Band 3-4, leaf 165. With thanks to Mr W Hillebrecht for finding it at such short notice.

Ich, der große General der deutschen Soldaten, sende diesen Brief an das Volk der Herero. Die Herero sind nicht mehr deutsche Untertanen. Sie haben gemordet und gestohlen, haben verwundeten Soldaten abgeschnitten, und wollen jetzt aus Feigheit nicht mehr kämpfen. Ich sage dem Volk Jeder, der einen Kapitän abliefert, erhält 1000 Mark, wer Samuel bringt erhält 5000 Mark. Das Volk der Herero muß jedoch das Land verlassen. Wenn das Volk dies nicht tut, so werde ich es mit dem Groot Rohr dazu zwingen. Innerhalb der deutschen Grenzen wird jeder Herero mit oder ohne Gewehr, mit oder ohne Vieh, erschossen, ich nehme keine Weiber, Kinder mehr auf, treibe sie zu ihrem Volk zurück oder lasse auch auf sie schießen. Dies sind meine Worte an das Volk der Herero. Der große General des mächtigen deutschen Kaisers.

- 4 Rust was ordered by the military authorities to write an history of the war and was given access to all relevant material (Rust, 1905: V).

Nuhn, for this section, is based on the diary of Ritter von Epp, who later became General and 'Schattenminister für Kolonien' under the Nazis.

- 5 Spraul's insinuations are many and varied. Spraul's text is littered with rhetorical questions and the consistent use of inverted commas on the words *Vernichtungsbefehl* and Proklamation. It is indeed indicative that Spraul should have gone to the extent of submitting a photocopy of the *Vernichtungsbefehl*, to the Criminal Investigation Department of the federal state of Saarland for a *Kriminaltechnische Untersuchung*, or criminal technical examination (Spraul, 1988 p 737 fn 88).

- 6 Author's translation of (Spraul, 1988, 737 fn 87):

Erstuanlich ist die Tatsache, daß Major von Estorff, der sich mit seiner Abteilung an der genannten Wassertelle befand und deshalb sicher zumindest zu der Befehlsausgabe befohlen worden war, trotz seines sachlichen und

persönlichen Gegensatzes zu Trotha, ...mit keinem Wort auf die "Proklamation" eingeht.

- 7 It is of interest to note that as factual historical source Poewe cites extensively from the jingoistic novel, Peter Moor's *Fahrt nach Südwest*, written by Gustav Frenssen. Druing WEI the Kriegspresseamt Auslandstelle made use of Frenssen's novel in its own propaganda campaign. BP, RKA 2101 Letter from Kriegspresseamt to the Reichskolonialamt 5/1/1918.
- 8 Author's translation of United Evangelical Mission Archives, Wuppertal Germany (VEMA), A/q 11 Korrespondenz mit dem Auswä Amt Berlin über Angelegenheiten SWA/Owambo 1901-1924. Letter von Trotha, Windhuk 18/2/05 to Kuhlman.
- 9 Author's translation.
- 10 Author's translation.
- 11 Author's translation and emphasis added.
- 12 NNAW, Acquisition, A109, Major Stuhlmann, 1904, 1905, Donor: Major Stuhlmann, 1956; 0,08m; 1 vol, p 49. Author's translation and emphasis added.
- 13 NNAW, A109, p 50, Author's translation.
- 14 Botswana National Archives (BNA), RC11/1, *Correspondence regarding Hereros (and flight to Ngamiland after rebellion in German South West Africa)*. Letter, Tsau Camp Ngamiland Oct 31st, 1904. Magistrate M G Williams to the Acting Resident Commissioner in Mafeking.
- 15 BNA RC11/1. Letter Tsau Ngamiland Nov 21st, 1904. Magistrate M G Williams to Resident Commissioner, Mafeking.
- 16 BNA, RC10/18, *Proposal to allow Hereros to settle in the Protectorate (following rebellion in German Souther West Africa. And 1914-15 papers on entry into Ngamiland of the Herero Chief Joseph and his followers)*. 786 1904-15. Letter March 2, 1904, Tsau Ngamiland, Magistrate M G Williams to Resident Commissioner.
- 17 BNA, RC11/1 Letter from Acting Resident Magistrate, Merry, to Resident Commissioner 8/11/05.
- 18 The use of pounds as legal currency for monetary transactions in GSWA was widespread. Unlike German east Africa no local currency was minted, though the German authorities did prohibit the use of foreign copper coins after 1893. It was only following 1 February, 1905 that German Marks became the sole legal currency in Germany's protectorates and thus also in German South West Africa. Dr Heinrich Schnee, *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*, Verlag von Quelle & Meyer (Leipzig, 1920). With thanks to D Henrichsen for finding this reference.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank G Seibert, D Henrichsen, W Hillebrecht, K Kaotozu and B Morton for inspiration, help and editing; the staff of the Botswana National Archives for assistance; as well as the Netherlands Foundation for Tropical research (WOTRO) for funding.