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The Herero genocide: German unity, settlers, soldiers, and ideas

Jan-Bart Gewald

Wer hier kolonisieren wollte, mußte zuerst zum Schwert greifen und Krieg führen - aber nicht mit kleinlichen und schwächlichen Mitteln, sondern mit starker, Achtung gebietender Macht bis zur völligen Niederwerfung der Eingeborenen. Erst dann war eine wirkliche Kolonisierung des Schutzgebietes möglich (Großer Generalstab 1906/1907:4).

Gewalt mit krassem Terrorismus und selbst mit Grausamkeit auszuüben, war und ist meine Politik. Ich vernichte die afrikanischen Stämme mit Strömen von Blut und Strömen von Geld. Nur auf dieser Aussaat kann etwas Neues entstehen, was Bestand hat (General Lothar von Trotha, cited in Kühne 1979:211).¹

Introduction

Between 1904 and 1908 Imperial German troops committed genocide in German South West Africa (GSWA), present-day Namibia. African survivors of the war, irrespective of age or gender, were cruelly treated, placed in camps, and put to work as forced labourers for the civil and military authorities, as well as private enterprises.

This paper has been long in the making, and yet, it started from a very simple idea, or rather query; why did German soldiers and settlers commit the atrocities that they did in GSWA? This seemingly simple question has led me ever further into the profane intricacies and depths of military history, through to the history of Germany, Europe, the enlightenment, racism, colonialism and a host of other subjects related to the manner in which we deal with the world and justify our actions.

In part this paper was inspired by the work of Suzy Newton-King (2000), who seeks to explain the consistent and extensive brutality that characterised the eastern Cape frontier of South Africa in the eighteenth century:

Why should a relatively weak and thinly spread European population whose settlement in a strange and inhospitable land depended at least initially on the co-operation of the indigenous people, treat these people with what can only be described as unrelenting and provocative harshness? (Newton-King 2000:43)

¹ These two statements reflect a tendency that existed within the German military at the time, derived from romantic thought, which envisaged that it was only through the total and utter annihilation of that which was deemed to be incorrect, could something new, good, and proper come into being. Indeed, a cult of war existed within romantic thinking which argued that war alone could cleanse the world of the self-centred materialism of the new age industrialisation. Coupled to social-Darwinist thinking, excessive materialism, or any other unwanted condition, could only be "cured" through war. The great German general Helmuth von Moltke the elder gave expression to these ideas when he stated: "Der Krieg ist ein Element der Weltordnung, beabsichtigt von Gott, ohne ihn würde die Welt stagnieren, sich im Materialismus verlieren" (Koch 1973:101). For a full text of von Moltke on the nature of war see Pross (1959:29-31).

This quote is equally relevant to GSWA, and begs the question, why did representatives of a culture that prided itself on its high levels of economic, cultural, philosophical, scientific, architectural, and musical development allow themselves to perpetrate the Herero genocide.

In seeking to find some explanation for the violence perpetrated by Zimbabwean soldiers on civilians in Matabeleland in the early 1980's, Alexander et al. suggested that, "perhaps the only reasonable explanation is that the Fifth Brigade was simply acting under orders" (2000:222). In the context of history such an explanation, which in itself absolves the perpetrators from blame, has been advanced often enough. However, in the context of GSWA, such an explanation would quite simply be an easy way out of a question, which is deserving of more than a mere damper. What is needed is more insight into what motivated the German soldiers and settlers into committing the atrocities that they did.

The war

On 11 January 1904 war broke out in the small central Namibian town of Okahandja. Self-fulfilling fantasies, misunderstandings and fear led to the outbreak of a war, the likes of which had never before been witnessed in southern Africa. In a conscious policy of genocide German soldiers and settlers sought, shot, beat, hung, starved, and raped Herero men, women, and children. The war and its aftermath were characterised by extreme acts of violence and cruelty. Indiscriminate shootings, hangings and beatings were the order of the day. The diaries and letters of German soldiers and settlers in Namibia at the time are littered with references and photographs that relate to these events. When the war finally ended in 1908 no less than 80% of the Herero had lost their lives. The majority of the Herero who remained in Namibia, primarily women and children, survived in concentration camps as forced labourers employed on state, military and civilian projects (Pool 1979; Nuhn 1989; Bley 1971:142-169; Drechsler 1966:132-167; Gewald 1999:141-230).

Orders of the Kaiser

For Paul Johnson the modern world began in 1815 following the defeat of Napoleon and his final banishment to a diet of Namibian beef, and an early death on the south Atlantic island of St. Helena (Johnson 1991; Wilmsen 1989). Johann Gottlieb Fichte died in the year that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo by an alliance of Prussian and Anglo-Dutch forces. Before his death, Fichte held the chair of Philosophy at the University of Berlin. For Fichte the Germans were an *Urvolk*, who had an obligation to teach the rest of the world of their own natural civilisation. To do so, Germany needed to unite and become the great nation which its God-given natural aptitudes would make possible. History was, as described by Fichte, a never ending struggle between nations - inseparable from states -, with the victor being the nation-state which most controlled the lives of its people. For Fichte a nation-state, in this instance Germany, was naturally expansive:

Every nation wants to disseminate as widely as possible the good points which are peculiar to it. And, as far as it can, it wants to assimilate the entire human race to itself in accordance with an urge planted in men by God, an urge on which the community of nations, the friction between them, and their development towards perfection rest. (cited in Johnson 1991:810)

As Johnson states, "This was a momentous statement because it gave the authority of Germany's leading academic philosopher to the proposition that the power impulse of the state was both natural and healthy, and it placed the impulse in the context of a moral world view" (ibid.).

Fichte's chair of philosophy in Berlin came to be occupied by Germany's greatest philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who developed and continued Fichte's struggle for a unified German national state. Hegel attempted to Euclidize philosophy, and fulminated against the mere pursuit of "thinking for oneself". Hegel's notion of dialectical progression, from the lowest to the highest forms, came to influence every academic discipline. Of particular relevance here is the impact of Hegel's thinking on the discipline of history. For Hegel there was an irresistible dynamic force, which he called the "world-spirit", that propelled the march of progress from lower to higher forms. Hegel believed that, following the defeat of Napoleon, Germany had become the "nation of world-historical consequence". Paraphrasing Hegel, Johnson (1991:813) states:

Such a nation, *for that time*, is entitled to absolute privileges over all the others. It should behave as the spirit willed it and will be dominant in the world.

When the highest form of human institution, the state, embodied the world-spirit, it had the right to pursue its interests by any means, including war (ibid., 814).² Needless to say, that nation was now Germany. The world-spirit could not be opposed. Those foolish enough to oppose it were deemed by Hegel to be "powerless vermin" (ibid.). The frightening aspect of this philosophy was, quite simply, that it was the cutting edge of 19th century philosophy. It was, for want of a better term, hip, and as cannot be emphasised enough:

This philosophy was what intelligent young Germans were to be taught, throughout the 19th century and beyond. A new force had entered the world: the force of history. Whether you called it a world-spirit or described it as a colossus giving not just people but entire epochs "marching orders," ordinary men and women, however many of them there were, could not stop history pursuing its predetermined course, and the great men of the time, however powerful they seemed, were merely puppets stuck in the swaying howdah on the vast back of the advancing elephant. (ibid.)

We may wish, in the present, to claim that Hegel's ideas of a dialectical progression from lower to higher forms, or ideas relating to "world-spirit" and destiny, are incorrect. However history, or rather historical interpretations both scholarly and lay, do most definitely have an impact on the world in which we live. In this manner history most certainly does have power. History has power and force in that it lets people act in ways which they believe to be in keeping with history.

² Commenting on this Johnson (1991:814) notes: "This was the first time that a leading German philosopher, and one who had made a point of attempting a general rationalisation of how the world behaves and progresses, had thrown the whole weight of his academic reputation behind the proposal that war had the unqualified and definite sanction of history and a place in the world-view."

One of the many intelligent young German students taught in the 19th century was none other than Kaiser Wilhelm II. Georg Ernst Hinzpeter, Wilhelm's civilian tutor up to his 18th year, subjected the prince to a rigorous schedule of lessons, that started at six in the morning and ended at six in the evening, in Latin, history, religion, mathematics and modern languages (Clark 2000:4).³ Under Hinzpeter's tutelage Wilhelm successfully completed his secondary schooling in Kassel and entered university in Bonn. Wilhelmine biographer, John Röhl describes how at university Wilhelm's *Weltanschauung* developed:

In Wilhelm's mind, a distorted Prussian-dynastic view of history merged with a mystical pietism to form a heady view of his position as the sole, divinely chosen leader of the nation (...). (Röhl 1998:275).

The alarming aspect is that Kaiser Wilhelm believed the myths which he had been taught as history. He truly believed that the world operated in the manner in which he had been taught in the course of his schooling. Not only did he believe the myths and clichés that had been told to him by historians, he acted in accordance with these beliefs, and expected his followers to do so too. An address given by Wilhelm in September 1907 in the Rathaus in Memel, is characteristic of his providential belief. After urging his audience to remember the "hand of divine providence" at work in the great historical achievements of Germany, he stated:

And if the Lord God did not have in store for us some great destiny in the world, then he wouldn't have bestowed such magnificent traits and abilities upon our people. (Clark 2000:165)

Biographers of Wilhelm have emphasised his belief in destiny, the progress of nations, and the role of Germany and himself within this. Beliefs that were supported and developed by the men with whom Wilhelm chose to associate himself. Particularly relevant here, is the man, whom from the early 1880s onwards Wilhelm chose to associate with ever more, General Count Alfred von Waldersee (Röhl 1998:617). Waldersee, quartermaster-general of the Prussian army and deputy chief of the general staff, has been described as being:

Anti-Semitic, narrowly zealous in religion, and reactionary in domestic politics, the quartermaster-general was the personification of everything Wilhelm's parents most detested, (...). (Clark 2000:13)

Waldersee's anti-semitism, reactionary politics, warmongering and persistent intriguing met with Wilhelm's support, but proved to be the catalyst for the eventual break between Wilhelm and Chancellor Bismarck. However, what is important to note here is Waldersee's belief in war as the solution to issues of policy. As Röhl has commented dryly, "Count Waldersee's obsession with war is unparalleled in German, if not world, history" (Röhl 1998:617).⁴ In contrast to Waldersee, Wilhelm was a "military dilettante" who may have "adopted the external trappings but not the values and

³ Hinzpeter was later appointed by Wilhelm as a privy councillor, a position within which he assisted Wilhelm in his dismissal of Bismarck.

⁴ Röhl (1998:814) describes how a letter written by Wilhelm, but probably drafted by Waldersee, to Bismarck in May 1888, in which Wilhelm criticised Bismarck's foreign policy and advocated war against Russia, led Bismarck to comment: "Woe upon my poor grandchildren".

mental habits of a Prussian officer" (Clark 2000:6). However, in keeping with Waldersee, Kaiser Wilhelm was a man who had a mystical fascination with and belief in the alleged nobility of war. In addition, he believed that Norsemen, or for that manner, Chinamen, acted in particular ways and that, as with all "peoples" of the earth, they had specific historically determined destinies in which war was a given.

It has been noted before, under Chancellor Bismarck the fiction existed that in Germany the Kaiser gave the orders and the empire obeyed. Constitutionally speaking this may have been the case, however, the truth was that Chancellor Bismarck determined the course of government. Wilhelm II's biographer, John Röhl, has noted that:

After Bismarck's dismissal, all that Kaiser Wilhelm II needed to do was to transform Bismarck's political fiction into fact, though this could not be accomplished overnight, nor without severe internal crisis. Yet in the course of the 1890s a new system of power relationships was created, a genuinely monarchical régime in which the Kaiser and his court, rather than the Chancellor and 'his men', exercised political power and decision-making authority and thus laid down the fundamental guidelines of domestic, foreign and armaments policy. (Röhl 1997:4)

In other words, initially Kaiser Wilhelm II began his reign with a strong state filled with checks and balances. A state, which carried the myth of the Kaiser as the supreme determinant in German affairs, whereas in actual fact the Chancellor determined what was to happen. Piece by piece, starting with the deposition of Bismarck Wilhelm II dismantled the carefully crafted and balanced state erected by Bismarck, until he came to be surrounded by yes men who were prepared to fulfil his whims and dreams as a divinely inspired leader. This transformation of the German state, went hand in hand with, and did no damage to what was then the world's most effective bureaucracy.

German ideas for Colonies

The establishment of German unity in 1871 is one of the most historically debated milestones in world history. Yet, the manner in which this unity should have come to be intimately linked to the establishment of a German empire with colonies is sadly under-researched. It is clear though that within Germany the desire for colonies was a long sought after ideal that was intimately linked to the establishment of German unity. To be sure Carl Peters' position was a partisan one, nevertheless, his words express ideas that were prevalent in Germany at the time:

The German colonial movement is the natural continuation of the German struggle for unity. It was natural, that the German people (*Volk*), after it had established its European position of power on the battlefields of Königgrätz and Sedan, immediately felt the need, to now also end the terrible, and in part also disgraceful, position of our nation overseas, and at the same time to partake of the benefits of a material nature, which the establishment and development of power (*Herrschaftsfaltung*) in great style has at all times brought with it. (Peters 1885)

Similarly, the official report of the Rhenish Missionary Society of 1884 linked German unity to the establishment of a Germany with colonial possessions:

For the mission clearly a new, significant era has begun due to the fact that a strong and unified Germany has recently started to take its share in the ever expanding and final race of the European nations to dominate the world, in other words: that Germany starts to claim colonial possessions (Oermann 1998:57).

It has been suggested that colonialist thinking is deeply embedded in the mind-set of colonising nations. It manifests itself in a variety of ways: as the construction of an inferior otherness, of a colonising "mission" and mandate of guardianship, and as the utopian notion of a natural order to be achieved through "cultivation" (Friedrichsmeyer et al. 1998:18). Recent work has outlined how deep-seated the desire for colonies and empire were within German popular culture long before German unity actually became a reality in 1871. In addition, and more importantly so, Zantop has described a long tradition within German literature which she linked to the construction of a "bourgeois, male German identity" which lay at the basis of German unity. For Zantop, - in an echo of Carl Peters -, German imperialism was inextricably linked to German national identity and unity. As such, Zantop, Lennox, and Friedrichsmeyer et al. would, "propose that a colonialist mindset existed before the desired object, the colonies, came within Germans' reach" (ibid., 19). For Zantop the creation of imagined colonial societies, in which everything was as it should be, compensated for the "lack of national territory, unity, identity", and provided an impetus for change in Germany itself:

Indeed, the foreign soil onto which these fantasies are projected becomes the testing ground for the development of a distinct sense of national self and a national identity. (Zantop 1997:99)

Bereft of colonies, Germany was a colonial innocent in more than one sense, without colonies Germans were not to be found guilty of the slaughters perpetrated elsewhere:

As fantasies of German difference they reinforced the posture of the "disinterested", "objective" observer whose colonial abstinence entitled him to criticize the excesses of others. Moreover, predating German colonialism by centuries, colonial fantasies generated a colonialist predisposition and the "colonial legend" of the moral, hard-working German colonizer of superior strength and intelligence who - unlike other colonizers - was loved like a father by his ever-grateful native subjects. As stories of benign patriarchal relations, these colonial fantasies reflected the fantasy of the *Vater Staat* who - through the *Landesvater* - would take care of his obedient "children". (Friedrichsmeyer et al. 1998:20)

Within Germany the belief developed that Germany, bereft of guilt, had a natural destiny to have colonies and would be a peerless coloniser. These fantasies, substantiated in a belief in itself, and the absence of colonies, allowed for the establishment of a self-image which emphasised good colonial order. When reality struck and this did not turn out to be as expected, colonial subjects were seen to be acting against the natural order. In addition, if we extend Zantop's line of reasoning, opposition or unrest in the colony would not only be a threat to the colonial order but also to national German identity as a whole. Following Zantop's line of reasoning, Herero, or for that matter any colonial subjects' opposition to German rule struck at the very essence of German identity.

Throughout western Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century the exploits of explorers in the heart of Africa formed the source for a very profitable publishing sideline in explorer literature. The published accounts of the exploits of Mungo Park, Burton, Speke, Livingstone, and Stanley, were popular reading for large numbers of

would-be explorers and adventurers. The published accounts of Stanley's search for David Livingstone, and later, Emin Pasha saw large runs in German translation. Indeed his exploits, as they did elsewhere in Western Europe, entered into the realm of popular culture and imagination in Germany. The role of fearless white men bringing the light of civilisation into the darkest realms of Africa is a trope that continues to find strong resonance with people in Western Europe in the present. One merely needs to look at popular films, television programmes, advertisements, books, games and so forth that relate to Africa. The currently popular adventure safaris, along with all the clothing and gadgetary accoutrements that are deemed necessary in Africa, continue to play upon this theme. That this is not confined merely to popular culture, is emphasised by the manner in which Belgium's brutal colonisation of Congo continues to this day to be presented at the royal central Africa museum in Tervuren, Belgium.⁵ In addition, the self-perception, presentation and popular perception of foreign aid workers, be it for UN agencies, development agencies, and so forth continues within the tradition of great Whites bringing succour and civilisation to Africa.

The first German troops to land in German South West Africa, did so wholly within the parameters that had already been established beforehand in the popular and official mind with regard to what was necessary within Africa. The first German troops to land in German South West Africa did so under the command of Curt von François, who, in the words of the German Foreign Office, was "the well known African explorer". Wearing uniforms, the design of which had been inspired by Rhenish missionary director Fabri, the soldiers immediately brought about a diplomatic incident. Regarding the illegal importation of arms via a British port by von François and his men, the German foreign office official, in replying to the British Ambassador in Berlin simply lied when he stated:

I had no idea that these men who carried no arms and were landed like all other passengers, could be described as a 'debarcation of a German military force.' The embarkation of this military force took place in Liverpool and the munitions of war, mentioned in your note, were consigned to the Imperial German Commissioner,(...) Before proceeding to the interior the men were armed, as it is invariably the case with travellers in that part of the world.⁶

In a separate document the German Consul General for Great Britain and Ireland referred to von François and the soldiers under his command as a "party of scientists". In addition, "that each member of the expedition carries for his personal use abroad one rifle and one revolver unloaded, but (sic) has no ammunition with him".⁷ That these terms were used by the German foreign office to deceive their British counterparts is not to be denied, nevertheless it must be remembered that this deceit took place within a specific paradigm, which was not only understandable, but also deemed acceptable

⁵ One of the walls in the museum bears a plaque listing the names of white mercenaries who lost their lives in the Congo basin in the late nineteenth century. Prior to embarking with the German Schutztruppe to Namibia Hugo von François had been recuperating from his activities with Major Wissmann in the Belgian Congo (NAN, Accession 547, A. Henker, 25/1/1890). On Belgian exploits in the Congo see Hochschild (1998).

⁶ BAB 1001/2107, Draft reply 22 October 1889 to note from the British embassy in Berlin 21 October 1889 inquiring about the debarcation of a German armed force in W. Bay.

⁷ BAB 1001/2106, Folio 37, Draft certificate, London, May 1889.

to western European powers at the time. It was to be expected that European travellers to "that part of the world" should carry arms with them.⁸

China

The Kaiser's ideas regarding the workings of the world and history are epitomised in his speeches. *Der Reise-Kaiser* (the travelling Kaiser), as Wilhelm was popularly known, continually travelled all around his realm. Between January 1897 and December 1902 he made 233 visits to no less than 123 German towns and cities, and in most of these instances Wilhelm addressed his subjects (Clark 2000:162). Until at least 1908 his speeches were not set-pieces prepared by professional writers, but the products of his own intellect. Wilhelm's biographers note that he rarely prepared his speeches beforehand, indeed, "They were consciously performed as impromptu, unmediated acts of communication (...)" (ibid.). As such they reflect what was keeping him occupied, what he was thinking, and what he believed at the time. Technically Wilhelm appears to have been a very good public speaker, however it was the "content of his public utterances (that were) often catastrophically misjudged" (ibid.). Writing of Wilhelm's speeches Clark had the following to say:

(...) it must be said that Wilhelm was singularly ill-suited to the communicative tasks of his office. He found it virtually impossible to express himself in the sober, measured diction that the politically informed public clearly expected of him. His more flamboyant speeches were like nineteenth century history paintings - charged with heavy-handed symbolism, in which tempests alternated with shafts of redeeming light where all about was dark and sublime figures floated above the petty conflicts of the day. (ibid., 165)

They were speeches that expressed very clearly the way in which Wilhelm thought about the world, and how he expected his subjects to behave. Undoubtedly, his most famous speech was the *Hunnenrede*, the speech that would tarnish German soldiers for the rest of the 20th century as "Huns".

In 1900 a substantial number of Chinese militants sought to rid China of foreigners, and to free China from the shackles of foreign control. Large numbers of German soldiers volunteered to be part of the western powers expeditionary force which was dispatched to China to re-assert western control.⁹ In July of 1900, as German volunteers prepared to set sail from Bremerhaven, the Kaiser, resplendent in a full dress uniform, addressed his soldiers from a raised platform:

When you come before the enemy, let him be struck down; there will be no mercy, prisoners will not be taken. Just as the Huns one thousand years ago (...) made a name for themselves in which their greatness still resounds, so let the name Germany be known in China in such a way that a Chinese will never again dare even to look askance at a German. (ibid., 169)¹⁰

⁸ The collusion between science and colonisation has been emphasised and explored by Pratt (1992) and Said (1993).

⁹ For a brief introduction to the "Boxer Rising" see Harrison (2000) and Bickers (2000).

¹⁰ "Kommt Ihr vor den Feind, so wird er geschlagen, Pardon wird nicht gegeben; Gefangene nicht gemacht. Wer Euch in die Hand fällt, sei in Eurer Hand. Wie vor tausend Jahren die Hunnen unter ihrem König Etzel sich einen Namen gemacht, der sie noch jetzt in der Überlieferung gewaltig erscheinen lässt, so möge der Name Deutschland in China in einer solchen Weise bekannt werden, daß

Though the bulk of German forces arrived in China after peace negotiations had started, they participated in no less than 50 punitive expeditions. The highly respected and nuanced German weekly *Die Zeit* has noted that these expeditions entailed the straightforward mass murder of the Chinese civilian population by the German troops involved. It is apparent that what they saw, and had been ordered to do, shocked many of the German soldiers. Some wrote letters home in which they described in graphic detail their activities; "On this day I looked more akin to a butcher than a German soldier".¹¹ Large numbers of these letters were published in German newspapers, where they became known as *Hunnenbriefe*. Letters that the opposition parties within the *Reichstag* made grateful use of. In parliamentary debates regarding costs incurred during the Boxer rebellion, the leader of the Social Democrats, August Bebel, quoted from one of the *Hunnenbriefe* that had been published in the newspapers:

The way in which we won the first battle. You should have seen how we advanced into the town. Everything that came across our way, be it man, woman or child, everything was slaughtered (abgeschlachtet). Now, how the women screamed! But the Kaiser's order stated: Show no mercy! - and we have sworn allegiance and obedience and that is what we are doing.¹²

It is clear that the boundaries of correct behaviour in war were transgressed in China. However, what was fundamental in this instance, was the fact that for many German soldiers this had been sanctioned by the highest authority. That is, the boundaries of correct behaviour had been transgressed with the official sanction of the Kaiser. A large number of the German soldiers who had volunteered to fight in China would later volunteer again to fight in the war against the Herero. Indeed, the man personally chosen by the Kaiser to lead German troops in Namibia, General Lothar von Trotha had served in China.

Before in Namibia

Yet even before the Kaiser had sent his troops to China, atrocities had been committed in his name in Namibia. In June of 1888 Kaiser Wilhelm II became the emperor of an empire, which at that stage included a South West African protectorate abandoned by its three man German administration. Chancellor Bismarck seriously considered jettisoning the protectorate, an option that was unacceptable to the new Kaiser. Consequently in June 1889 a detachment of 21 German soldiers led by Curt von François landed in Walvisbay and marched inland to establish a colonial presence in Namibia (Dierks 1999:37-39).¹³

Curt von François, who was accompanied by his brother Hugo, and would later be joined by yet another brother, Alfred, had made a name for himself in 1888 when he had successfully led a German colonial expedition in Togo, and prior to this he had been active in the Congo on behalf of King Leopold of the Belgians. Within two months of his

niemals wieder ein Chinese es wagt, etwa einen Deutschen auch nur scheinbar anzusehen." Internet: http://www.zeit.de/2000/31/200031_hunnen.html.

¹¹ Internet: http://www.zeit.de/2000/31/200031_hunnen.html. JBG's translation of, "Ich sah an diesem Tag eher einem Metzger als einem deutschen Soldaten ähnlich".

¹² Internet: http://www.zeit.de/2000/31/200031_hunnen.html.

¹³ BAB R 1001/2106, Ausrüstung einer Expedition unter Führung des Hauptmanns von François, 14. März 1889 bis 4. September 1889.

arrival in Namibia, François had so irritated and exasperated the inhabitants of the territory that he and his troops had been forced to withdraw to a waterhole on the edge of the Namib desert. With the passing of time, the arrival of further troops from Germany, and a successful blockade of the arms and ammunition trade routes to central Namibia, von François began exerting an ever greater control upon developments in the territory. Throughout the first three years of his presence von François, and his brothers, travelled throughout the territory gaining information.¹⁴ In 1891 Lieutenant Hugo von François, and his brother Alfred, reconnoitred Hoornkrans, the settlement of the Oorlam leader Hendrik Witbooi. "Under the mask of a friendly visit", François noted and sketched the layout of the settlement, and noted:

In the dry season the favoured route of attack would be from the South, during the rainy season, in contrast, the route would be from the North...

The huts are very well placed for quick occupation...

Therefore the only way to take the place, without artillery, is through an attack, in which one would have already crossed the terrain at night, and already occupied the first breastworks at the dawning of the day. However, even in these circumstances a guarantee for total destruction (*völlige Vernichtung*) cannot be given.¹⁵

Two years later, on the basis of this information, German soldiers, surrounded and attacked Hoornkrans. In the aftermath of the attack, a badly shaken Hendrik Witbooi wrote:

(...) I knew of no war which would shoot me, therefore I was completely at peace and unsuspecting with my men, therefore the few guns we had were not carried in slings on our bodies but everything had been put away into the chests. In this condition the *Hoofman* (von François) shot us early in the morning as we still lay unsuspectingly asleep, I left with all my men, without offering them resistance, in this way the *Hoofman* captured our place, and destroyed the place in the most terrible manner, as I had never imagined from a white civilised nation, which knows the laws and conduct of war, but he robbed me, and small children, which still lay at their mother's breast, and bigger children and women and children he shot them dead, and many corpses, which he had already shot dead, he placed in the grass houses which he lit and burnt the bodies to ash. Sadly and terrifyingly the *Hoofman* did his work in disgraceful war.¹⁶

In all, according to Witbooi's own account, 10 men and 75 women and children were killed. The remaining women were captured and taken to Windhoek. Far from ending Witbooi's presence, the attack on Hoornkrans unleashed a guerrilla war against German forces and settlers in the territory, which was only ended following the dismissal of Curt von François and the arrival of a new German governor in the territory, Theodor Leutwein.

Thankfully the enigmatic and opium addicted hero of German settler historiography Victor Franke has left a substantial record of writings which to some extent allow us as

historians to re-construct his attitudes, ideas and approaches with regard to the colonisation of Namibia.¹⁷ Victor Franke arrived in Namibia just as war with the Khauas-Khoi in eastern Namibia was coming to end in 1896 (Gewald 1999:102-109). His diary, which bore the motto *Mit Gott für Kaiser und Reich!* notes his intense disappointment at arriving too late to be able to take part in the action. Nevertheless upon arrival in Windhoek Franke got the opportunity to view the surviving Khauas-Khoi. In his diary, as an aside between describing his joy at being amongst fellow officers and his over indulgence in alcohol, Franke mentions his impression of the captured Khauas-Khoi:

I feel very contented with my good colleagues, I would however not wish to be stationed in Windhoek. The prisoners (Khauas u. Buschmänner) present an image that inspires revulsion. Distasteful thing creatures (*entsetzlich dürre Gestalten*) with unseemly stomachs and chimpanzee-like long limbs. Cosy drunkenness, once again, after a long period of time, in a so-called *Kasino*.¹⁸

Franke's words find an echo in Uwe Timm's novel *Morenga* in which the main protagonist *Oberveterinär* Gottschalk describes a sign attached to one of the Herero concentration camps in Windhoek, which read: *Bitte nicht füttern* (Please do not feed) (Timm 1978:24). The inhabitants of Namibia, and most certainly those held within the control of the German soldiers, had become, to all intents and purposes for the German soldiers, no better than animals in cages. Stationed in Otjimbingwe, and later Omaruru, Franke literally exercised the power of life and death over the African populations under his formal jurisdiction. People who fell into his hands could be assured of the most sadistic of treatment. More than a hundred years on, the descendants of women raped by Franke recall the callous and casual way in which he raped their ancestors.¹⁹ Perhaps Franke's feeling is best reflected in his ambivalent attitude to the children he fathered.²⁰ It was perhaps his passionate dislike for missionaries, that caused him to treat Herero missionary evangelists in the most cruel manner. Yet his cool descriptions of meting out punishment to people reflect, I feel, an intense conviction, on the part of Franke, that the "native" should know his position within the colonial dispensation, and not seek to rise beyond it:

Trouble with the Herero school teacher Gustav from Omaruru. Have the rascal beaten (*Lasse dem Hahnen eine Tracht aufbrennen*), which he receives smiling sweetly; finished - he bows to me. As he is now lounging in the cells, I have him locked to a pole in a crouching position. (then the chap sings spiritual songs!).²¹

In the superficial culture and reactionary politics of settler society Franke, as an *Alter Afrikaner*, was and is the hero of German settlers in Namibia. Other colonial officials of a less populist bent, such as governor Leutwein, were assured of constant settler opposition. For his part, Leutwein knew that his policies did little to endear him to the ever increasing settler population, and noted of them that they:

¹⁴ BAB R 1001/2080, Rapportage von Südwest Afrika, gemacht durch von François, mit Landkarte.

¹⁵ BAB R 1001/2109, Bericht über eine vom 5. bis 19. März 1891 ausgeführte Reise nach Heusis, Hornkrans und Rehoboth. For a published account of the scouting of Hoornkrans see von François (1896:137-142).

¹⁶ ELCRN, Politische Briefe etc. 1876-1893, letter Hendrik Witbooi at "Hoornkrans den 18 April 1893" to Kapt. H. van Wijk. JBG's translation.

¹⁷ NNAW, Accessions 560. Regarding Victor Franke's opium addiction see Krüger (1999:80).

¹⁸ NNAW, Accessions 560, 4/12/96.

¹⁹ Franke's diaries make regular mention to his sexual activities, but no direct mention of his rapes. Interviews conducted with Mrs. Katjioungua, August 1999.

²⁰ For published material with regard to Franke, women, and his children, see Krüger (1999:92-95).

²¹ NNAW, Accessions 560, 19/4/98.

(...) were inclined, with their inborn feeling of belonging to a superior race, to appear as members of a conquering army, even though we had conquered nothing. The majority of settlers had no knowledge of the protection treaties signed with the Herero. (Bley 1971:139-140)

The failure, on the part of the settlers, to respect the formal free status of the African inhabitants of the territory contributed in no small measure to the break out of the Herero-German war. German settlers, imbued with a belief in their inviolable position as Germans allowed themselves liberties which would never have been tolerated in Germany itself.

However, it was not just the rough and ready protectorate soldiers who believed that violence was an effective and necessary solution to all manner of problems. German missionaries operating in Namibia were not above expressing the most extreme of attitudes, and thereby sanctioning extreme abuse.

In the 1880s the Rhenish missionaries were extensively involved in the establishment of Germany's presence in Namibia. This support was engendered by the Berlin conference, and the acquisition by Germany of Southwestern Africa as its sphere of interest. However, but for a handful of German missionaries and traders, German presence in the territory was effectively non-existent. Missionaries provided houses and properties to the incoming German officials, mediated on their behalf, acted as translators, and supported the establishment of a German presence in the territory. The first three German officials to arrive in Namibia were entirely dependent on the services of the mission. Consequently, when the German officials were initially expelled by the Herero of central Namibia, the missionaries were called to account for their actions by the Herero chief, Maharero, and his council. The mission church in Okahandja was ordered to be closed and the missionaries resident on the out-stations in Hereroland were summoned to Okahandja. Here, the missionaries were accused of being *Ovazepa* (people of murder), conspiring with the colonial officials, desecrating and exhuming Herero graves, establishing trade routes that bypassed Okahandja, and, perhaps most importantly, of assisting chiefs opposed to Maharero's authority.²² Following lengthy discussions, the missionaries were permitted to remain in the territory, but the bonds of trust and friendship that had existed beforehand had been destroyed. Henceforth missionaries were consciously excluded from all *Otjira*, council meetings. Though the missionaries publicly lamented their previous actions, privately they thought and acted differently. Epitomising this two-faced sham, Brincker, the then head of the Herero mission, wrote the following letter to the German foreign office:

(...) Kamaherero is a negro chief who offers anyone who is prepared to pay him, even a Turk, concessions and rights on paper. Which on the following day he will cheekily nullify and provide the same on paper to another. To conclude treaties with Kamaherero is as good as concluding treaties with a small child. (...)

²² ELCRN, I 1.21, 1888-1890, "Besondere Angelegenheiten", Briefwechsel zwischen Maharero u. den Missionaren Diehl u. Eich sowie Schreiben der Konferenz an die Gemeinden über die Vorgänge in Okahandja 1888. ELCRN I 1.3, 1873-1905, "Protokollbuch der Konferenzen in Hereroland", Bericht über die Verhandlungen zwischen der Herero Konferenz und Maharero gehalten zu Okahandja am 17-18 Dec 1888.

Morally Damaraland belongs to the German fatherland as our Rhenish mission, and it alone, has spent thousands on this. Here lie the graves of her fallen missionaries. (...) Damaraland cannot be held by treaties and chiefs, but by explicitly presented European power (etablierte europäische Macht) in the form of a detachment of at least 400 men and at least 2 artillery batteries.²³

Acting on information

(...) fantasy produces social realities, and that social realities in turn create their own fantasies. (Friedrichsmeyer et al. 1998:18)

The activities of von François and his men, most notably his attack on the settlement of Hendrik Witbooi in Hoonkrans, did little to bring about peace in the territory of German South West Africa. Nonetheless the reports and subsequent books written by the von François brothers, along with the published accounts of the Rhenish Missionary Society, formed the basis upon which future German colonial administrators, officers and soldiers acted. Most notably, Theodor Leutwein, the man who replaced Curt von François following the debacle of Hoonkrans, acted upon the information contained in the earlier intelligence reports of the von François brothers.²⁴ A man of exceptional talent, Leutwein was dependent on texts, such as the following, which was composed by Hugo von François and contains a description of some of the inhabitants of the Witbooi settlement at Hoonkrans:

The men were savages, mostly small creatures, many gallows- and rascal faces amongst them, a collection of throat cutters such as one would hardly ever find again. (François 1896:137)

It requires very little reflection to note that Edward Said's much quoted work on orientalism, on how the west has produced knowledge and other forms of representation about the "Orient", is equally applicable in this instance (Said 1994). Of course Leutwein was dependent on the information produced by his predecessors, but in so doing he also acted in accordance with their perceptions and prejudices.

Following the outbreak of the Herero-German war, the information that German soldiers had access to determined in large measure their attitude vis-à-vis their victims. The work of the von François' brothers would have greatly influenced the thinking of the *Schutztruppen* officers. These works, *Deutsch Südwest-Afrika* and *Nama und Damara* created a world within which German soldiers could place and rank the inhabitants of Namibia as they came across them; thus the Herero as a master race, the Damara as their enslaved subjects and so forth. The novelist Uwe Timm had one of his protagonists reading works by the Anarchist author Kropotkin, yet it was far more likely that German soldiers would have been reading the works of Karl May (Timm

²³ BAB R 1001/2105, H. Brincker as superintendent of the Rhenish mission in Damaraland, 13. March 1889, to Reichskanzler Bismarck. Brincker's remarks regarding Germany's moral obligation towards Damaraland also referred to the extensive relations that existed between the Rhenish mission and the Kaiser, going back to the King of Prussia. German missionary societies emerged from a wave of pietism that had come about as a reaction to the secularising modernism of the French revolution, and were therefore politically acceptable to the establishment. See Elbourne & Ross (forthcoming).

²⁴ Prior to his embarkation for GSWA Leutwein had been a lecturer at the military staff college in Freiburg. In 1898 Leutwein became Governor of the territory (Leutwein 1906).

1978:301). We do know that these works deeply influenced the thinking of those who read them, none the least their author and creator May himself, who when confronted with the reality of the colonial situation suffered two nervous breakdowns and took to writing texts that ceased to glorify the colonial venture. Nevertheless most soldiers would have garnered their knowledge of Africa from the popular *Völkerschauen* and vaudeville stage productions of Wilhelmine Germany (Greenhalgh 1988).

Essentially, upon arriving and travelling in Namibia the German soldiers would have experienced and seen the territory on the basis of the three following broad categories:

- a.) Pre-conceived ideas built up in Germany and on the trip to Namibia.
- b.) Stories and reports of those already there.
- c.) For want of a better term, "reality check".

Elsewhere the contents of six diaries kept by German soldiers in the course of the Herero-German war have been described and summarised (Krüger 1999:82-109). Particularly striking is the set structure, partially induced through the route travelled, Hamburg, Las Palmas, Monrovia, Swakopmund, of these and other diaries. However, apart from the set structure that relates to the changing scenery, there is the structure that relates to the changes that take place in the perceptions and understandings of the soldiers. It must not be forgotten that the majority of the German soldiers who participated in the Namibian campaigns were volunteers. Volunteers who, in large part, were motivated, by the chance to finally be able to prove themselves in war in the continent of Africa and all that this entailed. Indeed, it has been suggested that the campaigns became a veritable advertising campaign for settlement in the territory, and that, many soldiers did not travel to strange lands "for the fatherland and in defence of the colony, instead they fought for their own *Heimat* (fatherland), which was to be established in Africa" (ibid., 74).

The case of soldier Henker, who entered the colony in 1890 fourteen years prior to the outbreak of the war, is representative for the experiences of the other German *Schutztruppler* who later entered the territory. In his diary Henker described how prior to his departure his contingent had been inspected and spoken to by Kaiser Wilhelm II in the gardens of Sans Soucci in Potsdam, where after, in an effort to gain some understanding as to where they were going, Henker and his comrades attended a show at the Viktoria Theatre in Berlin. The show that they attended was, "an African piece, *Stanley in Afrika* (we) were very satisfied with the beautiful jungles and the ample water, but when we later landed in Sandwich harbour we were very disappointed".²⁵ The case of the *Schutztruppler* who was shocked to discover that what he had believed existed as Africa, was something totally different to that which he found upon his arrival on the windswept sandy desert shores of German South West Africa, is a theme that consistently runs through the diaries, letters and literature of those who travelled to Namibia. Describing this disappointment it has been noted that:

'Africa' meant exotic, animals, 'savage Natives', 'beautiful Natives' and in particular palm trees. Often therefore the landing in Swakopmund was associated with crass disappointment: 'But this is not Africa'. This disappointment with the first impression of Africa is a stereotypical

theme, which, up to the present, is to be found in nearly all novels, autobiographies, children's books, right up to magazine articles dealing with Namibia (Krüger 1999:76).

The soldiers arrived in a land that was in no way comparable to their imagined views. Instead of jungles and greenery they saw desert, instead of fertile lands they travelled through deserted landscapes into settlements in which people and cattle were stocked in large Kraals surrounded by the dead and decaying corpses of stock that had died of starvation (Haak 1996:20-23). It was an atmosphere in which the authority and statements of the "Alte Afrikaner" counted for very much. They were the men who had an understanding, however clouded, of events and developments in the territory. In addition, in conditions where typhus amongst German soldiers was rife, the advice and counsel of older experienced men was literally a question of life and death. In the absence of these men the issues of the camps, death and dying, dust, heat, and smell found no mediation.

A recurring theme in the texts of German soldiers en-route to Namibia is their willingness to "fight the good fight". Oberleutnant Haak describes the joy of fellow officers who have been chosen to accompany a wagon train to the front (Haak 1996:23). Franke describes his frustration at having arrived in Namibia just as the Mbanderu Khaas-Khoi war ends, and Oberleutnant Stuhlmann is described as fearing that he might arrive too late to take part in the war.²⁶ However, not only was the country not what they had expected, but the war was not what they had anticipated either. The soldiers experienced intense disappointment, frustration and alienation with what they found. In part, these conditions led to the absence of norms, and the venting of frustration upon those deemed to be responsible for the disappointment and fear being experienced by the German soldiers. The German marine Auer, who arrived with the S.S. Habicht in Swakopmund within a few days of the war having started, provides explicit descriptions of his abuse and hanging of people who claimed not to be Herero. Auer's bland and brutal descriptions of killing and abuse mirror those of his comrades in arms. On the basis of recently acquired knowledge, people were deemed to be Herero, and as such, participation in the abuse and murder of these people was considered acceptable behaviour (Auer 1911:105-107). The absence of any sanction enforced by commanding officers on the indiscriminate killing and abuse of all those deemed to be Herero led to ever greater brutality, indeed, the accepted nature of their own brutality.²⁷

²⁶ NAN, Accession 560, Franke 25 June 1896, "Die brennende Frage: ist Krieg oder nicht, wird gelöst. Der Aufstand ist erdrückt". For Stuhlmann see Krüger (1999:83-84).

²⁷ In the most eloquent manner, J.M. Coetzee (1998:17), writing about American involvement in Vietnam, has described the anger engendered in colonial wars. Undoubtedly there will be many who believe that this is not fitting, yet, from a personal point of view, I believe that Coetzee's words most tellingly sum up what also occurred in Namibia: "These poisoned bodies, mad floating people of the camps, who had been - let me say it - the finest of their generation, courageous, fraternal - it is they who are the occasion of all my woe! Why could they not accept us? We could have loved them: our hatred for them grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked only that they acknowledge us. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew of between ourselves and our objects. From this tragic ignorance we sought deliverance. Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist; that since whatever we embraced wilted we were all that

²⁵ NAN, Accession 547, A. Henker, 1890/1904, Manuscript of *Schutztruppler* with François.

Intensely disconcerting in the present is the blithe manner in which descriptions of hanging, abuse, slaughter and the like are juxtaposed with images of naked women and children. The photographic albums of Leutnant von Duering are to be found in the Sam Cohen Library in Swakopmund, these contain unique photographs of the infamous concentration camp on Shark Island in Lüderitz. Amongst the photographs of dying women and children, Duering has placed a pornographic photograph of a young naked Herero woman.²⁸ Similarly the published works of Max Belwe, Erich von Salzmann, Georg Auer, and others contain photographs of naked Herero women alongside descriptions of the most terrible atrocities. Undoubtedly many soldiers believed that they would find tropical beauties in Africa. However, the women that they found in Namibia are not the beauties of South America, or the South Sea Polynesia as glorified by Paul Gauguin, instead they turned out to be ghastly creatures (*hessliche gestalten*).²⁹ Similarly Oberleutnant Haak's observations of Herero women prisoners are anything but romantic:

Recently approximately 50 women and children prisoners were transported to the camp. Their condition was indescribable, half starved, full of parasites (*Ungeziefer*), they ate the last remnants of meat from the half dirtied thrown away oxen bones. (...) Twice a day the women were driven through the camp. They had to collect shards, tins and so forth. Some of them, by the way (*allerdings*) could hardly crawl (Haak 1996:29).

Conclusion

The introduction to this paper noted that the simple answer to the question, as to why German settlers and soldiers committed the atrocities which they did, was, to paraphrase Ranger et al., "Because they were ordered to do so". However, German soldiers and settlers were never directly ordered to commit the atrocities committed. Instead a social space was created in central and southern Namibia of 1904-1908 in which the atrocities committed were deemed acceptable.

In keeping with the earlier work of Zantop, this paper has argued that within Germany the concept of a German Empire with colonies developed to such an extent that the necessity and legitimacy of a German empire with colonies came to be seen as the "natural" destiny of Germany and its people. As such opposition to colonial rule did not only call into question colonial rule, but the German nationalist project as a whole. The reality of colonies and colonial subjects was not in keeping with the idealised and internalised image of German settlers and soldiers. In addition, events in China had indicated to German soldiers that the transgression of the limits of correct behaviour in

existed. We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality: if you will prove yourself, we shouted, you will prove us too, and we will love you endlessly and shower you with gifts. But like everything else they withered before us. We bathed them in seas of fire, praying for the miracle. In the heart of the flame their bodies glowed with heavenly light; in our ears their voices rang; but when the fire died they were only ash."

²⁸ Sam Cohen Library, PA 8/138.

²⁹ NAN, Accession 549, Affahrt, letter to parents, Gertrud and Eduard, Windhoek 12 March 1905. Arrived in Okahandja and was billeted at the Sanitätsamt: "Zum Transport meiner koffer gab mir die Kommandantur vier gefangene Hererofrauen mit, die zugehörigen Männer waren schon Arbeit eingeteilt. Die Frauen waren entsetzlich alt und hässlich."

war was justified and legitimated by the very highest authority, the Kaiser. These factors, combined with the truly dreadful circumstances in which German volunteers found themselves in Namibia between 1904-1908, all contributed to, but do not excuse, the crimes committed

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