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"The angel of death has descended violently among them": concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-08

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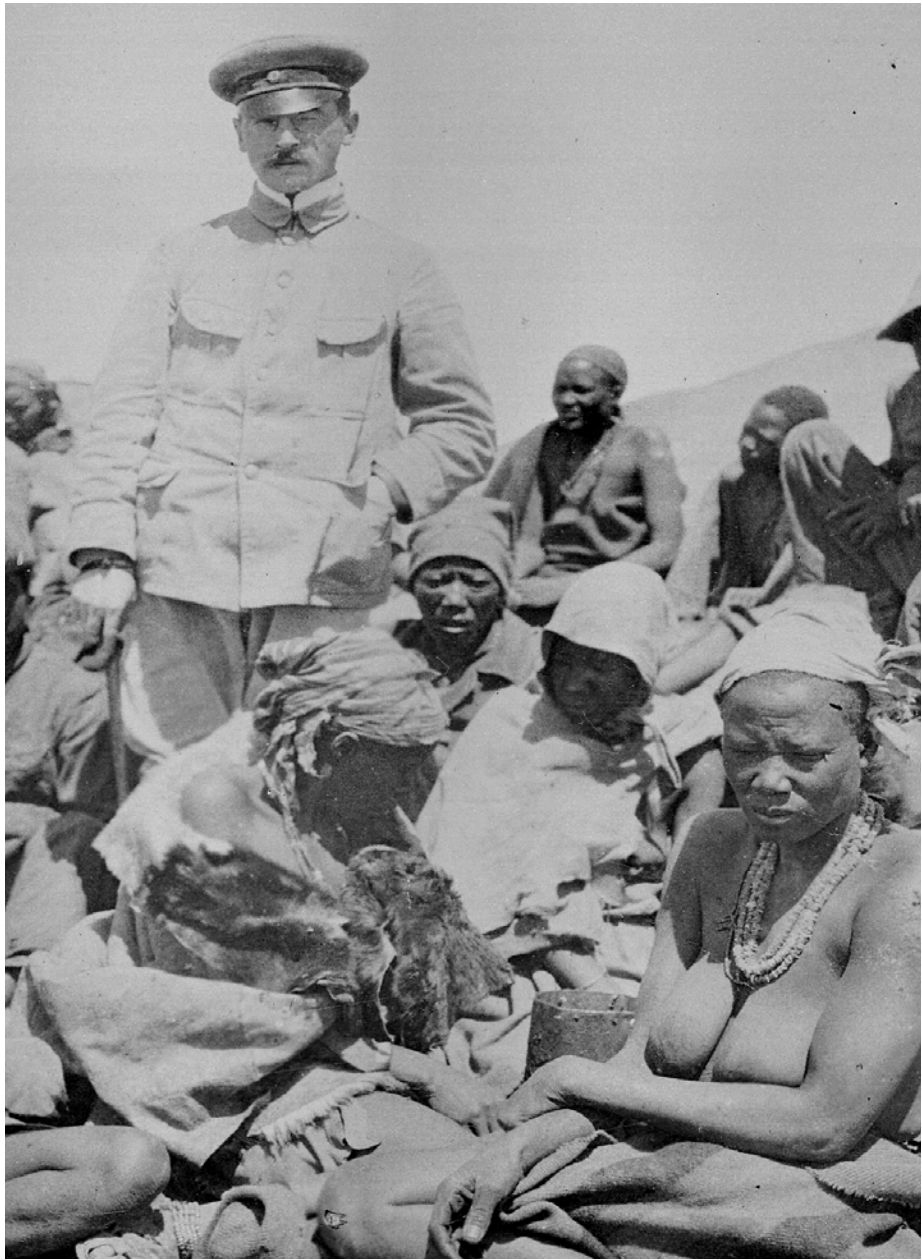
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“The angel of death has
descended violently among them”



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“The angel of death has
descended violently among them”

Concentration camps and prisoners-of-war
in Namibia, 1904-08

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This book is dedicated to

Mira and Sheya

for their patience and love while I wrote this book

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Voices that were silenced long ago are again being heard by a new generation of Namibian historians, who have embraced the chance to write fresh chapters of the country's history. I have been privileged to study among the first generation of historians in post independent Namibia. This book is a product of the 7 years I spent in Namibia and should be regarded in the context of the larger body of work done by the University of Namibia's History Department and the student-run History Society to fill in the Namibian historiography's blank pages. For being able to do this, my fellow students and I owe more than we could ever repay to the tutelage and friendship of Dr. Jeremy Silvester.

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Timeline

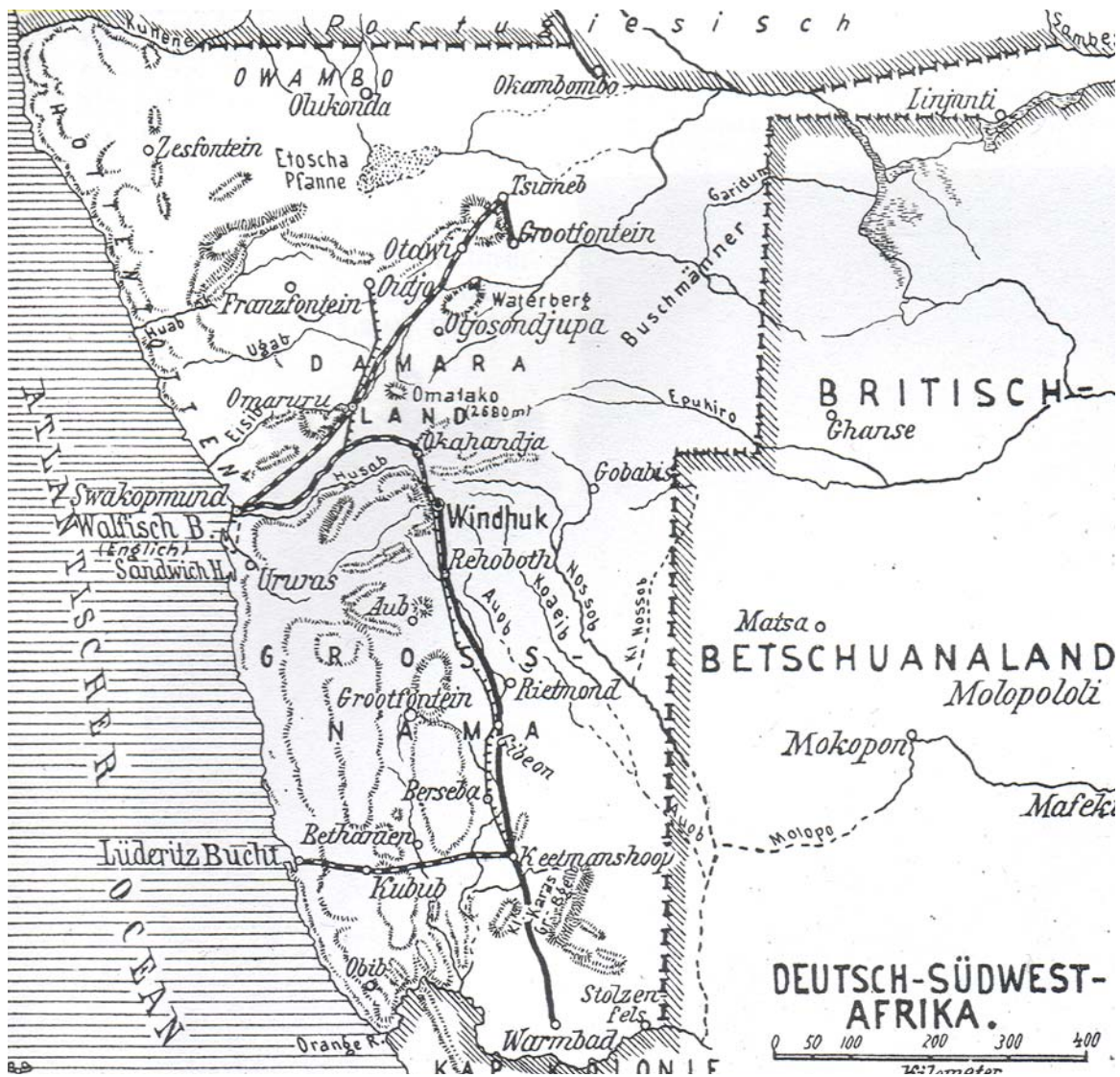
1902	
	<i>Jun 19</i> Opening of the Swakopmund to Windhoek line.
1904	
	<i>Jan 12</i> War breaks out between Herero and German military in Okahandja
	<i>Jan 18</i> The 'SMS Habicht' arrives in Swakopmund
	<i>Feb 11</i> Leutwein arrives in Swakopmund and takes over command after absence
	<i>Jun 11</i> General Trotha arrives in Swakopmund and takes over military command
	<i>Aug 11</i> Kaiser launches the DSWA settler programme
	<i>Aug 11</i> Battle at Ohamakari by Waterberg
	<i>Aug.</i> Marinka start campaign against German colonialism
	<i>Oct 02</i> v. Trotha issues the Extermination Order at Osombo Windimbe
	<i>Oct 04</i> H. Witbooi begins campaign against Germans, v. Burgsdorff killed
	<i>Oct 31</i> v. Deimling takes over military operations in the South
	<i>Nov 15</i> Exit Leutwein, departs for Germany
1905	
	<i>Jan 14</i> Trotha to set up concentration camps, echoing Bülow's orders
	<i>Febr.</i> Begin building of Jetty in Swakopmund
	<i>Apr 22</i> General v. Trotha's proclamation to the Nama
	<i>May</i> Vedder notes around 200 Herero casualties on SI
	<i>June</i> S. Kariko sent to SI on behalf of the mission
	<i>Sep 23</i> Inter-racial marriage illegal
	<i>Oct 29</i> H. Witbooi deadly wounded after skirmish at Vaalgras
	<i>Nov 19</i> Exit General v. Trotha, leaves for Germany
	<i>Nov 19</i> Arrival of v. Lindequist in Lüderitzbucht
	<i>Dec 1</i> Lindequist speech to POWs in Swakopmund, surrender and fair treatment
	<i>Dec 27</i> Begin works on Lüderitz to Kubub/Aus line
1906	
	<i>Jan 17</i> Foundation of Evangelical Lutheran community in Swakopmund
	<i>Mar 3</i> Cornelius Fredericks surrenders to <i>Hauptmann</i> Volkmann
	<i>Aug.</i> First group of Nama to Shark Island
	<i>Oct 9</i> First Government Council meetings, in Windhoek
	<i>Oct 31</i> Opening of Lüderitz – Kubub/Aus line
	<i>Dec 13</i> Shark Island raised in parliamentary debates
	<i>Dec 13</i> v. Bülow and Kaiser dissolve Parliament

1907

- Feb 16* Cornelius Fredericks dies on Shark Island
- Mar 12* Reichstag approve Aus to Keetmanshoop railway project
- Apr 8* Estorff orders POWs on SI moved to Burenkamp
- Nov 30* Local Government take over admin of POWs in Lüderitz

1908

- April* End of Herero POW status
- Jun 21* Lüderitz to Keetmanshoop railway inaugurated



Map 1.1

Map of German South West Africa incl. railways and main roads, 1909

Preface

In 1998 I chaired the student-run UNAM History Society, which was open for all students with an interest in history. We called ourselves ‘history activists’ and travelled the country from North to South where we were lobbying, discussing, convening exhibitions or just indulging in the wealth of personal, social, natural and other forms of history found throughout the country.

In December 2001, the History Society went on a five-day tour of southern Namibia. The trip was part of what we called the ‘Historical Landscapes Tour’, which sought to generate ideas about history as a resource in the Namibian tourism industry. On our travel itinerary was a two-day stay in Lüderitz, the main coastal town in southern Namibia. With their considerable insights, our two chaperones Dr. Jeremy Silvester of UNAM and Professor Robert Gordon of Vermont made our visit exciting and, above all, historical. The two scholars guided us through the rich history of Lüderitz, as we visited the former boomtown come ghost town of Koolmanskop, the mysterious Lüderitz peninsula, with stories of pirates, hidden treasures and *Hitlerjugend*, as well as Shark Island in the Lüderitz harbour.

I knew about Shark Island from Horst Drechsler’s study of the 1904-08 wars, which did not dwell long on the island, yet stated that it had been used as a concentration camp and that many people had died there. It made a profound impression on most of us, knowing that people were imprisoned in such a barren place, where we hadn’t even managed to stay for one night – initially we had considered camping there, a plan abandoned due to the gale-force winds sweeping across the island.

I was particularly uncomfortable with the many monuments planted in the centre of the island that paid homage to just about everything related to Lüderitz, it seemed, except for the many Nama and Herero people who had died in the concentration camp on Shark Island. Instead, the centrepiece of the island was a small circular wall, listing the names of German soldiers who had passed away in the course of the Herero and Nama wars. Knowing that there had not been any battles or even skirmishes in Lüderitz, it struck me as particularly odd to so solemnly remember a group of soldiers who had most probably died of disease; especially venereal ailments were common in those days.

When we later returned to Namibia’s capital, Windhoek, I was still haunted by what I had seen in Lüderitz. I therefore decided to read up on the history of Shark

Island, only to find that there was none. Apart from a few pages in Drechsler that I had already read, there was basically nothing written about neither Shark Island nor the camps in general. As a result I decided to make the forgotten history of Shark Island the topic of my MA thesis.

My research necessarily focussed most of its attention on ‘the privileged historical site’¹ of the archives. The task was not straightforward, however, because files dealing with the administration of the concentration camps, a task that befell the German Army, no longer existed. In 1915, the German Colonial Administration had these files destroyed to avoid them falling in the hands of the rapidly approaching Union troops. German copies of these files are similarly believed to have gone up in flames during the heavy bombardment of Germany in the latter stages of the Second World War. So, there were no files that directly related to the day-to-day administration of Shark Island or the other concentration camps. Moreover, the former head of the archives once claimed not to have seen any substantial evidence of the concentration camps in her alleged research of the archival collection.²

In the end, it took more than eight months to locate the many pieces that eventually made up the puzzle. The always helpful and knowledgeable Werner Hillebrecht, who is currently the Head of the Namibian Archives, played no small part in finding this information. The files of the Central bureau (the ZBU files) and the District files for both Keetmanshoop³ (BKE) and Lüderitz (BLU)) were especially useful. Other collections were also very valuable such as the Criminal Case files of Lüderitz (GLU) as well as the archive’s accession files. It must be said, however, that much of the evidence was found after extensive searching that at times yielded results in the unlikeliest of places. At the outset, I decided to look at everything even remotely related to my search topic, which was time-consuming and often frustrating. The archival files were nevertheless a veritable treasure-trove of information. At the point of writing I therefore had thousands of photocopies from archival files as well as other references and asides relating to Shark Island and the camps in general.

The mosaic of information formed a picture of brutality and human suffering in Namibia’s concentration camps that at times almost defy belief.

¹ Hayes et al. in Hartmann et al., p. 6.

² Lau: 1995, pp.44-45.

³ Initially Luderitz fell under the Keetmanshoop District.

Introduction

Like most other African nations, Namibia has, to use David Soggot's phrase, had a 'violent heritage'.¹ From German colonialism to the decades of South African rule and eventually apartheid, Namibia's history is fraught with atrocities and human rights abuses, war and violence. In many ways the country is still in the process of healing wounds from its violent past.

This book deals with what is here perceived to be the epicentre of colonial malevolence, namely the mass killings of peoples and conquest of land by German colonial forces between 1904-08 in what was then known as German South West Africa (GSWA).

The German State formally began its colonial venture in Namibia in 1884, but the territory and its inhabitants effectively only succumbed to German colonialism following the wars waged against the Herero and Nama societies between 1904 and 1908. These wars resulted in massive loss of African life and in the destruction of socio-political structures throughout central and southern Namibia.

In January 1905, as part of the campaign to beat down Herero and Nama resistance, the German colonial authorities officially embarked on a policy of interning prisoners-of-war in what was labelled *Konzentrationslager*. The concept of the concentration camps was 'borrowed' from the South African Boer War, where four years earlier thousands of people had died as a result of internment in such camps.²

In the Namibian concentration camps, prisoners were forced to perform hard, unpaid labour regardless of gender, age or physical condition. The result was exceedingly high mortality rates in the camps – as high as 70 percent of all interned prisoners in some cases. Overall, deaths among prisoners-of-war between 1905-08 accounted for a third of the total wartime mortality among Herero and Nama.³ It is estimated that the Nama population was decimated by as much as 50% and the Herero by up to 80%.⁴

Following the interment of Nama and Herero combatants and non-combatants in concentration camps, lands and livestock formerly belonging to these communities

¹ Soggot, D. *Namibia: The Violent Heritage*, (London: Collins, 1986)

² Erichsen, C.W. "A forgotten history", *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, August 17 to 23, 2001

³ Erichsen, C.W. "The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently Among Them", Unpublished Masters Thesis (UNAM: 2004)

⁴ Drechsler, p. 214.

were expropriated by imperial decree and declared crown land. Congruent to these events, the colonial and national governments made increased physical colonization of GSWA a priority and facilitated the arrival of several thousands of new German settlers on land formerly belonging to the Nama and Herero.⁵ Apart from small reserves, where communities that had not rebelled against German rule were allowed to live, the lands of central and southern parts of the colony were now entirely in German hands.

Although the 1904-08 events are subject to contemporary debate, this history was silent for half a century⁶ and even today remains highly contentious. There are still a number of historians who argue that numbers are vastly exaggerated and that the concentration camps, inasmuch as they ever existed, did not form part of an alleged genocide.⁷ In fact, Genocide denial has become increasingly visible and generally accepted in academic discourse as well as in public forums.⁸

To avoid generalisation, however, it should be noted that many German-speaking Namibians take emphatic pride in and work tirelessly for the development of post-independent Namibia. There are and have been several German-speakers in the post-independent Namibian government, for example, who have committed themselves to their country for better or worse. The former Deputy Minister Michaela Huebschle speaks annually at the Herero day of remembrance, the Otjiserandu, in recognition of the country's dark history. Former Minister Klaus Dierks is very outspoken about the genocide and regards denial with the deepest antipathy. Although a devout Lutheran, he and his family no longer go to the German Lutheran Church in the centre of the capital Windhoek. The Church contains a list of German war-dead from the 1904-08 wars, but has no mention of the numerous Herero and Nama casualties. Dierks argues that as long as the church does not remove or at least re-contextualise this colonial relic, he will not enter the building.⁹ There are many other German-speaking Namibians who honestly recognise and regret the genocide and they should not be forgotten when reading this text.

⁵ Erichsen: 2004

⁶ In fact the history of the concentration camps has not been dealt with in-depth before now, i.e. close to a century after the camps were first opened.

⁷ See here especially Gert Sudholt, Brigitte Lau, Claus Nordbruch.

⁸ Denialist Claus Nordbruch's books are frontal pieces in Namibian bookshops and at a recent conference in Windhoek, German academic Andreas Eckl called for historians dealing with 1904-08 to incorporate denialist arguments in their work on this history.

⁹ Interview 2003.

‘Konzentrationslager’



Introduction

The history of Namibia's concentration camps has long been overlooked and largely forgotten in the existing historiography about the 1904-08 anti-colonial wars. Most theses or histories dealing with these anti-colonial wars at best only make passing reference to concentration camps and the prisoners kept there.¹ Illustrating this amnesia, the former Head of the Namibian Archives, the late Brigitte Lau, remarked in 1989 that existing records of Swakopmund and Windhoek were 'silent' about the camps thereby posing questions about their existence.

¹ Pool: 1991, p. 251 and 280; Pool: 1979, pp. 411-412; Drechsler, pp. 207-214; Gewalt: 1996, pp. 241-250; Heywood and Lau: 1996, pp. 12-14; Hellberg, p. 120; and many others.

In acknowledging that information about the camps has been scarce in the close to 100 years following their formal closing in 1908, this chapter seeks to retrace the history of the concentration camps and to answer very basic questions about them, more specifically: when, where and what they were. The chapter goes a step further in looking at patterns in terms of treatment of prisoners and what internment in the camps entailed for these people.

Ironically the bulk of the research for this chapter was conducted in what is today known as the Brigitte Lau Reading Room at the National Archives of Namibia and the records were not all that silent.

Context

The herero uprising

On January 12, 1904 the Herero nation rose up against German colonial rule, united under the leadership of paramount chief Samuel Maharero. The fighting began in the small town of Okahandja, approximately 70 kilometres north of the capital Windhoek, a town of both historical and social significance for the Herero.² During these first days of fighting, the German population was under siege in the town's lone fort, while shops and homes were being raided and destroyed. Subsequently fighting spread across central German South West Africa (GSWA) as bands of Hereros sacked German farms and settlements.

There are various theories about the causes of the uprising that mostly recount the main factors as being increasingly evident loss of power and resources to the Europeans.³ More recently, however, a very compelling theory was put forward by Dr. Jan-Bart Gewald, who essentially argued that the paranoid if not provocative actions of the German officer, Lieutenant Zürn, in Okahandja was the actual catalyst for the uprising.⁴ On a similar note, a German settler wrote in her diary in mid 1904 that Zürn had been sent home to Germany because of issue relating to the outbreak of the war. She also recounted Samuel Maharero's letter to German Governor Theodor Leutwein, writing:

² In 1890 Chief Maharero died and was buried in Okahandja. In 1894 Okahandja became the seat of the newly installed paramount chieftaincy under Samuel Maharero and two years later, in 1896, two significant Herero leaders, Nikodemus Kavikuna and Kahimemua Nguvauva, were executed following a mock trial presided over by Hendrik Witbooi, Colonial Governor Lindequist and Samuel Maharero himself.

³ See Drechsler, Bley, Pool, Lau, Katjavivi, Hellberg, Zimmerer and others.

⁴ See Gewald: 1996, pp. 178-191.

“A while back the Governor sent a letter to Samuel...and asked him why he had made war, Samuel answered him: “because of the traders and because of Zürn!”⁵

The initial phase of the Herero-German War was characterised by Herero control and military success, targeting German interests from farms to railway lines. These successes were in no small measure due to the absence a large section of the colonial army. In late 1903 Colonial Governor Leutwein and parts of the army had gone south to quell the Bondelswartz rebellion.⁶ The Herero attack had therefore come at an inopportune time for the colonisers. Yet in spite of their tactical advantage the Herero forces did not fully capitalise on the situation and stopped short of overrunning main German positions, focussing in stead on smaller more sporadic targets. All in all the Herero aggression was short-lived and contrary to German propaganda,⁷ was fought according to a strict policy of seeking out only German men, leaving women, children and missionaries largely unharmed.⁸

The Herero uprising clearly came as a surprise to Governor Leutwein, who had maintained a close alliance with Samuel Maharero since 1891 when the latter had succeeded his father Maharero Tjamuaha to the Okahandja chieftaincy; an alliance that in 1894 had also led to the mutually beneficial creation of a Herero paramouncy.⁹ Because of this close relationship, Leutwein was confident that the war could be ended peacefully, and upon his return to ‘Hereroland’ the governor prepared to settle the conflict through negotiations.¹⁰ However, Berlin did not sanction negotiations as a means of ending the conflict and especially the Kaiser and the military High Command were dismissive of Leutwein’s approach.¹¹ Orders were sent from the Colonial Department on February 20th that only an unconditional surrender would be acceptable. In his subsequent reply, Leutwein voiced fears that an “extermination policy” was being planned for the Herero and that this would have grave consequences for the colony, explicitly mentioning the negative effects this would have on the economy.¹² In the telegram he wrote:

⁵ NAN, Acession 453, pp. 58-59.

⁶ In late 1903 the Bondelswartz community had risen up against German rule.

⁷ Patemann, pp. 111-112; Drechsler, pp. 144-147; Silvester and Gewalt, p. 101.

⁸ Drechsler, p. 143.

⁹ Through the creation of a Herero paramouncy, Governor Leutwein could circumvent the complexities of the various Herero chieftaincies and manipulate and influence Herero politics solely through his relations with Maharero. Samuel Maharero on the other hand gained the paramouncy and got rid of two of his main political rivals.

¹⁰ Pool: 1991, p. 247 and Drechsler, p. 148. To show his resolve in the face of incensed and deeply worried settlers, Leutwein, nevertheless, insisted on executions of any Herero involved in the deaths of Germans.

¹¹ Drechsler, p. 148.

¹² BAB Reichs-Kolonial-Amts, Nr. 2113, p. 89-90 “Leutwein to Kolonial-abteilung” (Windhoek, February 23, 1904).

“...I do not agree with the fanatics who want to see the Herero destroyed altogether. Apart from the fact that a people of 60,000 or 70,000 is not so easily annihilated,¹³ I consider it a bad mistake from an economic point of view. We need the Herero...especially as labourers.”¹⁴

Leutwein had evidently concluded on the basis of unknown information that a mass-extinction of the Herero people was being planned. In fact, Leutwein took the information so seriously that he felt compelled to remind the Colonial Department in Berlin of the labour resource constituted by the Herero. The ‘fanatics’ must have been people of influence and, judging from Leutwein’s reaction, it seems evident that a plan for the extermination of the Herero nation had been tabled in higher circles only months after the Herero uprising first began.¹⁵

Having been the Governor for close to eleven years Theodor Leutwein was arguably the foremost German expert on matters relating to the colony and especially in regard to the Herero nation. Nevertheless, in May 1904, the National Government in Berlin decided to relieve Governor Leutwein of his military duties and instead appointed General Lothar von Trotha new commander; he was a broadsword sent to defeat the Hereros by whatever means, fair or foul.¹⁶ Ostensibly, *Reichskanzler* Bülow, Head of the Colonial Department Dr. Stübel and other high-ranking officials in the National Government had been in favour of allowing colonial veteran Leutwein to retain overall command, but Head of War Cabinet Graf Hülsen-Haeseler with the implicit support of the Kaiser¹⁷ insisted on sending General von Trotha.¹⁸

Born in Magdeburg, Adrian Dietrich Lothar von Trotha grew up in a military environment. His father was an officer in the Prussian Army and the military had a profound influence on the young Trotha to the extent that he eventually followed in his father’s footsteps and became a soldier. Trotha’s military career was successful and at the age of 45 he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant colonel. In 1894 Trotha signed up for military service in the colonies and in the next several years he fought and served in East Africa.¹⁹ In the year 1900, Trotha went to China where he took

¹³ In his letter, Leutwein made an unambiguous distinction between political death and physical annihilation. The term used here clearly refers to mass-eradication of a people, i.e. what is now known as genocide.

¹⁴ BAB Reichs-Kolonial-Amts, Nr. 2113, p. 89-90 “Leutwein to Kolonial-abteilung” (Windhoek, February 23, 1904).

¹⁵ It should here be noted here that Leutwein had known already in 1895 that a German conflict with the Herero would invariably result in a ‘vernichtungskampf’ [an extermination ‘fight’]. Pool: 1991, p. 313.

¹⁶ “The Emperor only said that he expected me to crush the rebellion by fair means or foul.” Trotha as quoted in Drechsler, p. 154.

¹⁷ For more detailed arguments on links between Kaiser and Trotha, see Bley: 1971, pp. 158-163.

¹⁸ According to a report in German newspaper *Der Reichsbote*, Von Trotha’s appointment was the brainchild of Head of the War Cabinet, Graf Hülsen-Haeseler, supported by the Kaiser. Pool: 1991, p.245

¹⁹ Pool: 1991, p. 243.

part in the brutal suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, a campaign that caused uproar in Germany when it was revealed that German troops had been involved in war atrocities. Professionally Trotha was a hardliner, a militarist to the core. In a letter to Leutwein, he laid out his philosophy:

“I know enough tribes in Africa. They all have the same mentality insofar as they yield only to force. It was and remains my policy to apply this force by unmitigated terrorism (translated as ‘crass terrorism’ in *Gewald*) and even cruelty.”²⁰

On June 11, 1904 General von Trotha landed in the coastal town of Swakopmund ready to carry out the new strategy planned in Berlin,²¹ namely to surround the Herero and initiate an attack on their positions.²² The issue was invariably raised when the two leaders met in Windhoek in June 1904, yet Trotha nonetheless shrugged off Leutwein’s suggestions for negotiation and continued his mission.²³

Between June and August 1904, Trotha proceeded to surround the Hereros at the Waterberg plateau, which lies around 250 kilometres north of Windhoek. Following the gradual encircling of the Herero, Trotha’s forces finally attacked on August 11, 1904. Continuous shelling by the artillery sent Herero combatants into a desperate offensive, awaited by the colonial troops and their machineguns. The main part of the battle was fought by the waterholes of Ohamakari, not far from Trotha’s makeshift headquarter from where the general was conducting his troops by aid of mirror signals. A number of heliographs had been placed strategically to inform the general about troop movements and to better direct the fighting.

Smaller battles were taking place all around the Waterberg plateau, where German troops were posted tactically so as to prevent any Herero groups from escaping back into the colony. After less than a day of fighting the Herero nation was defeated and scattered. The large majority of the Herero nation managed to escape into the dry Omaheke desert, leaving behind their belongings and their cattle. In this exodus towards British Bechuanaland, now Botswana, many thousand Herero men, women and children eventually died of thirst.²⁴

²⁰ Trotha to Leutwein as quoted in Drechsler, p. 154 and *Gewald*: 1996, p. 208.

²¹ Pool: 1991, p. 247.

²² Unlike Leutwein, Trotha received his orders directly from the Kaiser and the military command. Pool: 1991, p. 247-248.

²³ Pool: 1991, p. 247-248.

²⁴ NAN, Accession 109, ‘Major Stuhlmann’s Diary’; NAN, Accession 510, Unteroffizier Mahl Zahn’s Diary; Generalstab, pp. 187-88.

encounters, prior to the Waterberg ‘battle’ as a ‘Phoney war’. Gewalt argues that the pretence of war was kept alive to allow what was essentially a punitive expedition against the Hereros to take place.²⁷ Attesting to this view is a letter sent by colonial soldier von Bruenneck at the Waterberg about a month prior to the battle. He wrote:

“Otjoutjoudzou (sic.) 17.VII.1904, Dear Hertha and Georg!

I’m doing well; I’m healthy. Today we received our provision, so that we will be supplied for the next couple of weeks. It was high time too (...) We have been lying here for some time now, [we will be here] until the mousetrap closes - if the Herero do us the favour of not escaping. The blokes seem to have lost their joy in war.”²⁸

Bruenneck’s letter was sent little less than a month before the battle actually took place and clearly refers to a ‘mousetrap’ closing in on the Herero. The letter also noted that the Hereros were not fighting and even mentioned that Chief Salatiel was eager to negotiate. Similarly a German settler was well informed about the planned attack on the Herero. On the same day that Bruenneck had written his letter, Helena Gathemann wrote in her diary that “the attack will take place in August at the earliest”²⁹. She was also aware that many of the Herero chiefs were hoping for negotiations. According to the military sources she had access to: one-third of the Herero were in favour of negotiations; a third wanted to flee; and only the last third wished to fight in response to the gradually increasing deployment of troops around the Waterberg plateau.³⁰ As it happened the entire nation was forced to fight and eventually to flee, albeit without provisions, cattle or other belongings.

Following the battle at the Waterberg and the ensuing skirmishes, the Herero nation had suffered heavy casualties, existing only in scattered, unorganised groups mostly around the eastern parts of the country. Nevertheless the German soldiers continued their search and destroy missions against a defeated enemy. In these first months following the battle at the Waterberg, those who surrendered to the German troops faced execution or, depending on whom they surrendered to, imprisonment.

Trotha’s troops successfully took control of all-important waterholes and thereby forced the Herero nation into an ultimatum. They could either stay in the colony and risk thirst and starvation, or they could seek exile in Bechuanaland, leaving behind land and cattle. On October 2nd, almost two months after the battle at the Waterberg, Trotha decided to make this ultimatum even clearer, reading out the so-called

²⁷ Gewalt: 1996, p. 205.

²⁸ NAN, Accession 583, Gerhardt von Bruenneck letters 1904.

²⁹ NAN, Accession 453, Helene Gathmann’s Diary 1903-07, p. 68.

³⁰ NAN, Accession 453, Helene Gathmann’s Diary 1903-07, p. 69.

‘Extermination Order’. The order would stand for more than two months before being retracted by the German Government.

The extermination order

Two months after the battle at the Waterberg, General Lothar von Trotha, emissary of the German Reich, issued a standing order to his troops, which essentially was a canonisation of murder. The Order read:

“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 Marks. Whoever delivers Samuel [Maharero] will receive 5000 Marks. 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. [Signed: The great General of the mighty Kaiser]”³¹

Trotha’s order was a clear warning to the remnants of the Herero nation that all Hereros found in the colony were either to be shot or pushed into the desert – where an equally malevolent fate would probably await them. This has led some historians to claim that the so-called ‘Extermination Order’ was merely a psychological ploy utilised by the ‘great’ General to scare off the Herero nation.³² But, in as much as there certainly was a psychological factor to Trotha’s order, it is equally clear that the ‘extermination order’ was cynically implemented by the colonial troops under Trotha’s command in subsequent months. What is more, Trotha’s proclamation became the official policy in the colony; a policy unequivocally specifying that no distinction were to be made between combatants and non-combatants, as well as indicating that prisoners would no longer be taken.

Notably the somewhat naïve and infantile tone of the order, using words such the “*Groot Rohr*” and describing himself as the ‘great General of the mighty Kaiser’ were made in a language reminiscent of 19th century western novels, where ‘white

³¹ Gewald: 1994, p. 68.

³² Lau used this idea as her *coup de grace* in *Uncertain Certainties* and accredited this ‘truism’ to American scholar Karla Poewe, who had actually copied the idea from the neo-Nazi affiliate Gert sudholt. Sudholt, Poewe and Lau argued the word extermination to be “a successful attempt at psychological warfare, never followed in deed.” Pool translated the word *Vernichtung* as annihilate, which, although in English it is just as unambiguous as the word ‘extermination’, was downplayed to mean nothing more than military might (?). Pool argued that “Trotha’s choice of words was probably connected to his participation in the Battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War”, where France’s hopes of victory were ‘annihilated’ by the Prussian tactics. Recently a German author with links to the extreme right, Claus Nordbruch, has adopted and is actively promoting these arguments.

men spoke with forked tongues'. Apart from noting the fact that western novels such as Karl May's *Winnetou* saga were immensely popular at the time, it is perhaps reading too much into Trotha's language to say that his perceptions of self and that of 'the native' were somehow influenced by such machismo fantasy – or perhaps not? Regardless, it is of interest that Trotha's order contained information clearly not intended for a Herero audience, such as the specific 'bounty' awarded to people managing to capture and bring in Herero chiefs – in itself a concept reminiscent of the Western novel. Moreover, Trotha's line "they have murdered and stolen" also seems to have been a justification for his extermination policy targeted more at a German or even international audience than the Herero. So, in spite of any psychological effect of the order, it was clearly issued with intent and purpose beyond such an effect. In fact, Trotha clearly meant what he said and to emphasise his point, he followed the proclamation by ordering a series of hangings.³³

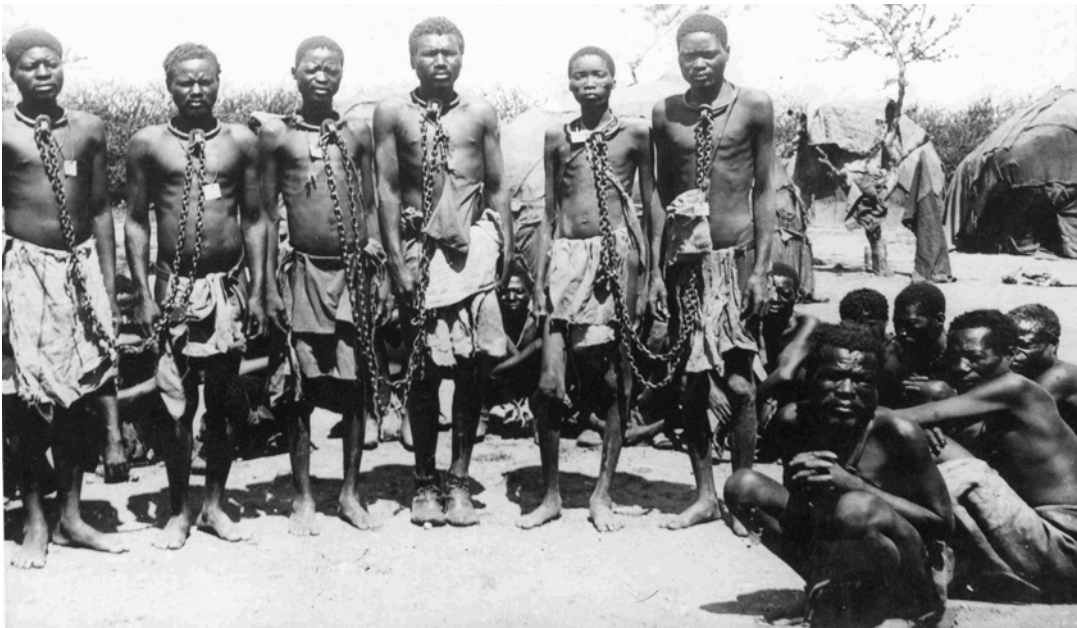


Photo 1.1 Prisoners chained, tagged and humiliated in front of other prisoners.

A reporter from a Cape Town-based newspaper was present following the announcement of the Extermination Order, which was made at the waterhole of 'Osombo-Windimbe' – south-east of the Waterberg. The reporter described that a group of Herero "had been picked up by patrols, to be hanged" and that women were

³³ Drechsler, pp. 164-165, 174, footnote 121; Gewalt: 1994; NAN, Accession 510, Unteroffizier Malzahn.

forced to watch the hangings and then chased away to tell others what they had seen.³⁴ German non-commissioned officer Emil Malzahn was also present, having accompanied General von Trotha to Owisombo-Owidimbo³⁵ [Sic.]. Malzahn witnessed the same event, and added in his unpublished memoirs:

“since then I often saw a Herero dangling from side to side in the branch of a tree.”³⁶

In the paper entitled *The Great General of the Kaiser*, Gewalt also cites evidence that a number of captured Herero men, women and children were forced to witness the executions at Osombo-Windimbe, before being sent back into the bush carrying copies of Trotha's Extermination Order.³⁷ The Extermination Order was therefore not issued in any uncertain terms, or, considering the hangings, under ambiguous circumstances. Any Herero found in ‘German’ territory would be shot. As regards Women and children it was not specified, but supposedly intended that soldiers were to shoot over their heads, so as to scare them back into the bush³⁸ – where they would likely die of thirst and starvation at any rate. However, it is not sure to what extent this later addendum of shooting over women’s heads was made clear to the many thousands of troops nor is it apparent how strictly it was enforced.

The practise of making captured Herero watch executions of other captives seems to have been fairly common under Trotha. In the diary of Seaman Auer the above picture was captioned: “Murderers and spies sentenced to death are paraded in front of their tribal brothers as a warning”.³⁹ There is also substantial oral evidence from Herero sources about executions at the old fort in Windhoek, which were carried out in front of a Herero audience forced to watch the morbid scene.⁴⁰ Indeed under Trotha’s command, and especially in the months where the Extermination Order was in effect, taking prisoners was officially not a priority and executions seem to have been carried out as a means of annihilation. Major Stuhlmann remarked in his diary:

“The motto was: extermination war on the Hereros without consideration for anything else”.⁴¹

³⁴ From *The Owl*, Vol 17, No. 441, 18 Nov. 1904, as quoted in Drechsler, p. 174.

³⁵ The same as ‘Osombo-Windimbe’.

³⁶ NAN, Accession 510, “Emil Malzahn’s Diary”, p.26.

³⁷ Gewalt: 1994, p. 68.

³⁸ Pool: 1991, p. 272.

³⁹ Obermatros Auer, p. 106

⁴⁰ Lau especially refers to evidence from a number of oral sources that executions in the Windhoek Camp were made mandatory for other prisoner to watch. Lau: 1995, p.45.

⁴¹ NAN, Accession 109 “Major Stuhlmann’s Diary”.

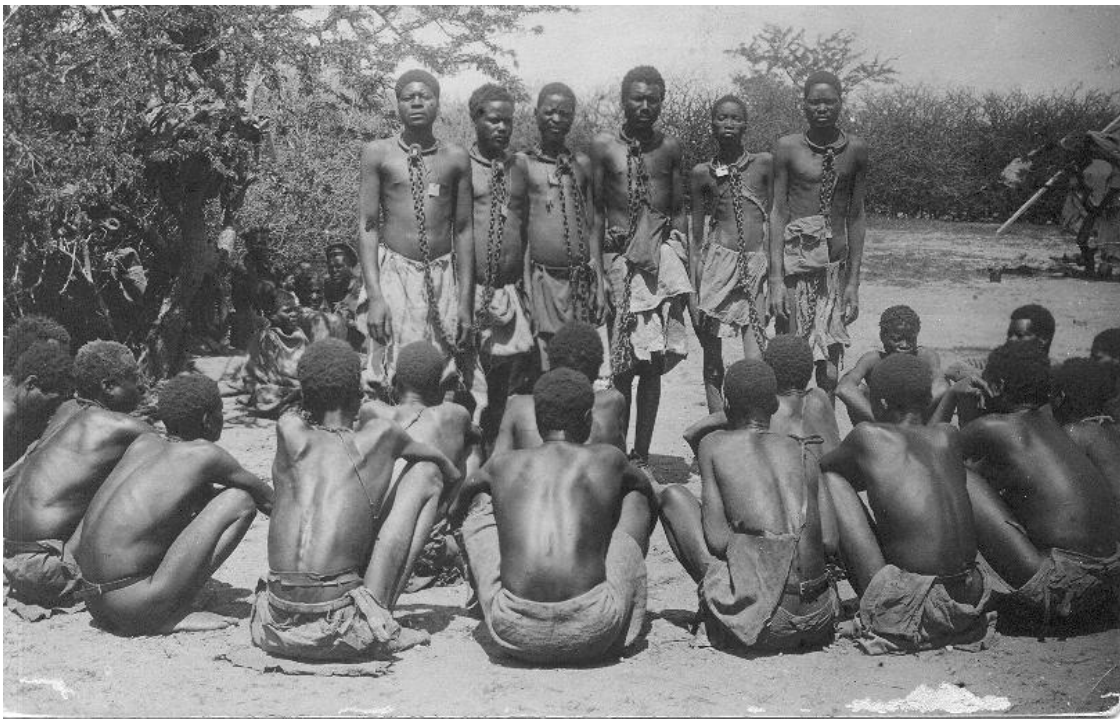


Photo 1.2 A different angle of the same event.

Notably the campaign of executions was not restricted to battles in far-off Omaheke, but seems to have been pursued in towns and villages as well – with little attempt to hide it. One such episode haunted the wife of the Director of the Tsumeb Copper Mines, Helene Gathmann. In her diary, Gathmann shines through as an intelligent person, keenly following the latest events in the war that surrounded her. Gathmann's diary therefore makes very interesting reading, not least because of her honesty. On October 29, 1904, Gathmann heard shots fired in the streets of Grootfontein and noted in her diary:

“Yesterday evening Prions⁴² natives got hold of a Herero who proved to be very insecure; half an hour later we heard the soldier's salvos [guns] that put an end to the Herero's life. We were mercilessly reminded of the state of war.”⁴³

Gathmann was aware of many such incidents where executions by the military were held swiftly and summarily. She describes an incident where a Lieutenant Muther whilst on patrol came across a Herero settlement and reacted by “shooting some of them and capturing some of them”.⁴⁴ The Hereros in the settlement later proved to be peaceful and without any real weaponry. Gathmann's description in her

⁴² Prion was a settler who joined the colonial army in the first months of the war.

⁴³ NAN, Accession 453, “Helene Gathman's Diary”, October 29, 1904 p. 84.

⁴⁴ NAN, Accession 453, Gathmann's Diary, December 15, 1904, p. 89.

diary of such events testifies that there was at least some concern in parts of the settler community about the extreme violence being applied by German forces.

It is perhaps an overstatement to say that prisoners were not taken before and during the first half year of Trotha's reign. But, it is safe to say that whilst the extermination order was in place, and possibly before, Hereros seem to have been executed at any pretext and without much consideration for their potential lack of complicity in the war. And yet, it is perhaps too simplistic to place the blame for atrocities entirely on Trotha's shoulders. There is much evidence to suggest that the Extermination Order in fact made official a style of warfare in practise already before the Waterberg battle.

Gerhardt von Brünneck was a foot soldier at Waterberg and was carrying out orders in the manner he perceived them. His letters from 16 July 1904 (about a month prior to the battle at Ohamakari) is testament to the method in which prisoners were dealt with in the months before Trotha officially announced the Extermination Order:

"Yesterday Herero [taken] prisoners, why not just shot dead. A prisoner Herero who didn't want to come along, killed."⁴⁵

What makes Brünneck's somewhat cynical remark so disturbing is that it seemed rooted in a very clear understanding that prisoners were not to be taken. The sentiment was not, however, atypical of general views on Herero by the colonial troops. Indeed, from the outset of the campaign to pacify the Herero uprising, German sentiments towards their adversaries were characterised by a general belief that the enemy was inhuman and savage. These sentiments were reflected in correspondence from the Magistrate of British-controlled Walvis Bay, dating from a week prior to the arrival of General von Trotha:

"The general feeling among the Germans at present partakes of an unreasoning and vindictive bitterness which is almost as nearly allied to barbarism as the unbridled passion of the Herero themselves. I have heard myself, Germans who were in action describing boastfully how their troopers bayoneted Herero women."⁴⁶

The Magistrates remarks were made in late May 1904 and it is therefore entirely likely that he was referring to the sailors of the HMS Habicht. The Habicht was a warship that had arrived in GSWA to help quell the Herero uprising in early 1904, sending seamen, who were unfamiliar with the territory and its people, into the hinterland. The perhaps most blatant of the many published diaries dealing with the

⁴⁵ NAN, Accession 583, "Brünneck, Letters" July 16, 1904.

⁴⁶ PRO London, PRO FO 64/1645 'Secret Despatch', Mag. Walvis Bay to Sec. Native Affairs, Cape Town, 30th May, 1904.

1904-08 wars was that of *Obermatros* Auer, a sailor from HMS *Habicht*. Auer's somewhat dramatised diary was simply littered with references to gross violence, its gong-ho style celebrating executions, beatings and prostitution (rape). If one takes Auer's words for granted, there seems to have been a tendency to shoot people on the spot, even in the early stages of the Herero War. In one instance Auer described how prisoners-of-war, who he and others from the *Habicht* were escorting to Karibib, were shot simply for the sake of conserving food. In Auer's own words:

"Anyone who as much as made a gesture of attack or who went too far away without being ordered to do so, was shot after a court-martial held on the spot. We were pleased to have one black less to feed, because our supply of food was diminishing."⁴⁷

The naval soldiers started their campaign months before the arrival of Trotha, and judging from Auer's descriptions, Trotha's campaign differed little from the ruthlessness and violence applied by the *Habicht* marines in as much as neither conformed to existing international conventions on warfare.⁴⁸ It would seem that the Extermination Order was but an official approval of the methods that had been applied from the beginning of the campaign to beat down the Herero uprising.

Responsibility for atrocities and what appears to have been an indiscriminate killing of Herero could well have rested with Kaiser Wilhelm II, the head of the German Empire. Many soldiers felt that the Extermination Order in fact emanated from the Kaiser himself, whereby carrying it out would simply have been a duty.⁴⁹ South African transport riders, who in 1905 reported German war atrocities in the Cape Argus newspaper, said that when approached, the colonial troops would usually excuse their actions by saying: "The Kaiser has ordered us to do this".⁵⁰ It was not beyond the Kaiser to give such orders, as know from his Bremerhafen speech, the so-called *Hunnenrede*, given on July 27, 1900 to soldiers departing for China during the Boxer Rebellion. In this speech he said:

"When you come upon the enemy, he will be defeated. No pardon will be granted. Prisoners will not be taken. Whoever falls into your hands should be destroyed [sei verfallen]...Like the Huns did 1000 years ago".⁵¹

The Kaiser was revered by the troops and what seems simple rhetoric was at the time inevitably taken very seriously by soldiers. Subsequently the Boxer Rebellion

⁴⁷ Obermatros Auer, pp. 106-112.

⁴⁸ Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague II), Annex to the Convention: "Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land", (29 July 1899), Section I. Chapter II (Articles 4-20).

⁴⁹ In 1904 Major Stuhlmann wrote about the Extermination Order in his diary calling it the bloody decree emanating from Berlin. NAN, Accession 109, p. 85. See also Bley: 1971, pp. 158-163.

⁵⁰ Cape Argus, September 28, 1905.

⁵¹ My translation from: Goertemaker, p. 357.

was brought down with extreme violence, a cause of much condemnation inside and outside Germany at the time.⁵² Many soldiers arriving to fight the wars in GSWA had been fighting in China⁵³ and on a human level these soldiers were traumatised and psychologically unfit for continued warfare. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not a known condition in 1904, but existed nonetheless.⁵⁴ Coupled with PTSD the prevailing racist paradigm was inevitably a weighty factor in the war crimes that unfolded in GSWA between 1904-08.

Uprising in the South

A large-scale co-ordinated uprising in the South flared up in October 1904, little over a month after the Herero defeat at the Waterberg. The southern uprising was characterised by ardent defiance of German colonial rule, from the Bondelswartz uprising (which had begun already in 1903) to the rising of the Witboois, the Veldshoendragers, Simon Kooper's Franzmanns and eventually also parts of the Bethanie community. Although the resistance consisted of several bands of fighters, spread across the south and south-east of the colony, there seemed to be a common sense of purpose in the fighting.

Having initially stood by the Germans during the Herero uprising, the Witbooi rebellion was perhaps the most surprising to the Colonial Government. Witbooi fighters had fought alongside German forces throughout the campaign against the Hereros, in honouring a ten-year-old mutual treaty of protection, and were deemed 'loyal' by the colonisers.⁵⁵ In fact, at the battle of the Waterberg both Witbooi and Bethanie fighters were actively supporting the colonial army.

⁵² Hu Schong,, p. 144 and Krumbach, pp. 164-165.

⁵³ NAN, Accession 531, p. 9. "Diary of Schutztruppenreiter Richard Christel": "It was of course a great joy to exchange experiences from the Chinese expedition here in Africa."

⁵⁴ The condition was observed following the Boer War, dubbed 'Combat Fatigue' and again in WW I where it was called 'Shell-Shock'. Sandler in Cock and Nathan (eds.), p. 79.

⁵⁵ Kriegsgeschichtlichen Abteilung I des Grossen Generalstabes, Chapter entitled: "The Outbreak of the Rebellion – the fights of Auob and in the Karas Mountains".



Photo 1.3 Witbooi scout at the Waterberg

The battle at the Waterberg and ensuing skirmishes in the Omaheke, which marked the decisive defeat of the Hereros, was an undertaking achieved with excessive and extreme use of violence if one is to believe a group of Witbooi fighters deserting the German ranks following the large battle.⁵⁶ Frightened by the massacre, these fighters left German ranks, and headed back to their homes in Gibeon where they recounted the Waterberg atrocities to their leader, *Kaptein*, Hendrik Witbooi.⁵⁷ Shortly thereafter, Hendrik Witbooi decided to end his peace agreement with the German colonial government.

As is the case with the Herero uprising, there are many theories as to why Hendrik Witbooi chose to fight the German army and in doing so causing most of the South to emulate his example. The most common theory related in German sources contemporary to the event was that Hendrik Witbooi was under the influence of a South African advocate of the Ethiopian Church, the so-called Prophet Sturmann.⁵⁸ The German historian, Horst Drechsler related an additional

⁵⁶ NAN, Accession 507, Missionary Berger, "Witbooi Stories", p.14.

⁵⁷ NAN, Accession 507, Missionary Berger, "Witbooi Stories", p.14.

⁵⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1905, pp. 26-27. Sturmann was one of the more enigmatic characters of the southern war. Like the reward put on Witbooi's head, Trotha also put a reward on Sturmann. He was later killed in the Cape, much to the relief of the GSWA administration. ZBU 2369, 'Witbooi Geheimakten', p. 122. See

reason, namely the call for Witbooi disarmament in the colony and subsequent Witbooi fears that they might soon share the fate of the Hereros.⁵⁹

It is hard to validate any of these theories, but there is little doubt that Hendrik Witbooi's reasons must have been overwhelming. Tactically it would have made more sense to unite with the Hereros in the initial offensive against the colonial presence and fight a united front. Yet instead Hendrik Witbooi and the rest of the South faced an increased German military presence in the colony, mobilised and ready to fight. To take on the near impossible odds of such a war, there must therefore have been a compelling reason for the action of the Witboois.

German sources report the Witboois' first act of rebellion as being the 'assassination' of *Bezirksamtmann* [local commissioner] von Burgsdorff on October 4, 1904.⁶⁰ There is little evidence that Hendrik Witbooi had actually sanctioned such an action, but the event did nevertheless mark the beginning of the Witbooi campaign. The death of Burgsdorff was soon followed by the tactical bombing of the Gibeon church – a building that could have been used for military purposes by the Germans – and from that point onwards there was no turning back.⁶¹ In the following months, the Witboois sacked numerous southern farms although they were careful not to harm women and children.⁶² As related in a proclamation issued by old Hendrik Witbooi, which warned Germans to leave the territory, it is evident that the Witboois, like the Hereros before them, pursued a specific target, namely German men. Hendrik Witbooi wrote:

"... I leave it at your discretion to transport all women and children to Lüderitz Bay in ox wagons so that they may return to Germany. Men without weapons bearing the Witbooi mark are also free to join them. They will not be molested."⁶³

Similar to the Herero war, where women and missionaries had been escorted through Herero territory back to German lines,⁶⁴ German POWs taken by Nama in the southern wars were treated with care and eventually also returned unharmed to German lines.⁶⁵ It should be added that such 'deliveries' of POWs were undertaken

also Tilman Dederling, "The Prophet's War Against the Whites," JAH, 40/1 (1999), pp. 1-20 [In Current Serials].

⁵⁹ Drechsler, p. 182 and echoed in Brigdman, p. 135.

⁶⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1905, pp. 41-43.

⁶¹ Missions-Berichte, 1905, pp. 41-43.

⁶² Drechsler, p. 184.

⁶³ Drechsler, p. 184.

⁶⁴ NAN, Accession 453, Helene Gathmann Diary, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 62.

despite the obvious risk of being shot by German soldiers while returning the POWs to German lines.

Meanwhile the German propaganda machine was busy validating the war efforts and conjuring support at home.⁶⁶ Even though Nama fighters were relatively few in numbers, the war was dragging on because essentially the German army was unaccustomed to fighting guerrilla warfare, a cause of embarrassment for the Kaiser. The situation changed dramatically, however, following October 29, 1905 when Witbooi fighters attacked a German food transport near the station of Vaalgras. The attack was repelled by German troops and in the course of the battle Hendrik Witbooi was wounded in the thigh, eventually bleeding to death.

Two weeks after the death of Hendrik Witbooi, General von Trotha received the news in the harbour town of Lüderitzbucht. He was on his way home to Germany and had just finished a long dinner with the new Governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, who was passing through on his way to Swakopmund.⁶⁷ The news was relayed in a telegram from the German 'ally', *Kaptein* Christian Goliath of Berseba, who recounted the outcome of the Vaalgras shooting. Von Trotha was reportedly overjoyed at the news.⁶⁸

In late 1905 resistance in the South gradually started to cave in to exceeding pressure exerted by the superior force of the German Empire. Hendrik Witbooi's death directly resulted in the surrender of the Witbooi community, yet other communities such as parts of the Bethanie under Cornelius Fredericks and the Bondels under the elusive Jacob Marinka⁶⁹ still continued to fight. Ultimately the last southern community was defeated in 1908 following the expedition against Simon Kooper into British Bechuanaland.

Concentration camps

A new strategy

In late November 1904, Prime Minister Bülow put pressures on the Kaiser to retract the Extermination Order. The Kaiser pondered the issue for over a week yet finally agreed to soften the approach in the colony. Two weeks prior, the Kaiser had secretly asked fellow nobleman Count Georg von Stillfried and Rattowitz, who held the rank of Lieutenant-colonel with the Schutztruppe in GSWA, to draft a report on

⁶⁶ Drechsler, p. 184.

⁶⁷ Nuhn: 2000, p.176. The two shared the voyage to Swakopmund, which according to Lindequist's own notes was very pleasant and Trotha was considered 'lovely' company. BAK, Kl. Erw. 275, pp. 79-80.

⁶⁸ Nuhn: 2000, p. 176.

⁶⁹ AKA Morenga. According to the missionaries, he signed his letters 'Marinka'. Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 25.

his “opinions in relation to the native question and the military situation in South West Africa”.⁷⁰

In the subsequent 55-page report, von Stillfried wrote that any ‘native’ found with a gun should be summarily executed and all others be rounded up and “hired out in large or small numbers to individual farmers, merchants, etc., to perform labour for food.”⁷¹ Stillfried went on:

“All headmen will have to be executed and their families, even if innocent, deported to another colony... all natives ... who have been condemned to a term of imprisonment will have to carry a numbered identification tag... Natives who are not free will be placed in closed settlements near their place of work...”⁷²

The Kaiser evidently took these suggestions to heart. When he therefore finally conceded to retracting the Extermination Order in early December 1904, a new strategy, relying heavily on Stillfried’s suggestions, was ready to replace it. From continued use of deportation of prisoners to other German colonies, to fixing of identification tags and renting out of prisoners, most of the malice described in von Stillfried’s report actually came to pass. It is not unlikely that the ‘fanatics’ mentioned by Leutwein in February 1904 included Count von Stillfried.

The effects of the flight into the Omaheke Desert following Waterberg and the subsequent Extermination Order soon became evident as hundreds and later thousands of Hereros were arriving at the German stations and towns, starved, exhausted and essentially dying.⁷³ These were the remnants of the Herero communities that had escaped Trotha at the Waterberg and had managed to evade German punitive patrols during the time of the Extermination Order.

Conditions in the bush must have been severe for the Herero to walk into the arms of German forces that had until recently conducted an extermination campaign against them. Helena Gathmann wrote that Hereros were coming to Omaruru in large numbers, but only because, as she said, “there is no longer anything to loose out there [in the bush].”⁷⁴ Gathmann had spoken to prisoner, who told her that many of the Hereros still hiding would surrender if their security were guaranteed by the

⁷⁰ BAB, Reichs-kolonil-Amt, File 2117, p 59b (pp. 1-57).

⁷¹ Drechsler, p. 145.

⁷² Drechsler, p. 145.

⁷³ Accession 569, “Memoirs of Pastor Elger” (RMS) in Karibib, 1904-06. “For our field hospital the worst came in 1905 when the suffering Herero were returning from the Omaheke, where more than half of their people had died of thirst and other causes. In one day we received as many as 24 of these people, of whom two died on the same day. In the following week another 10 would die – in spite of our efforts to save them. Nothing could be done; their internal organs had already died. The remaining ten would eventually survive.”

⁷⁴ NAN, Accession 453, Gathmann’s Diary, March 9, 1905, p. 90.

German military.⁷⁵ In Gathmann's estimation there were 1900 Herero in Omaruru around March 1905, most of them entirely starved. Local missionary Dannert suggested a similar number in a letter to missionary Vedder on February 14, 1905.⁷⁶

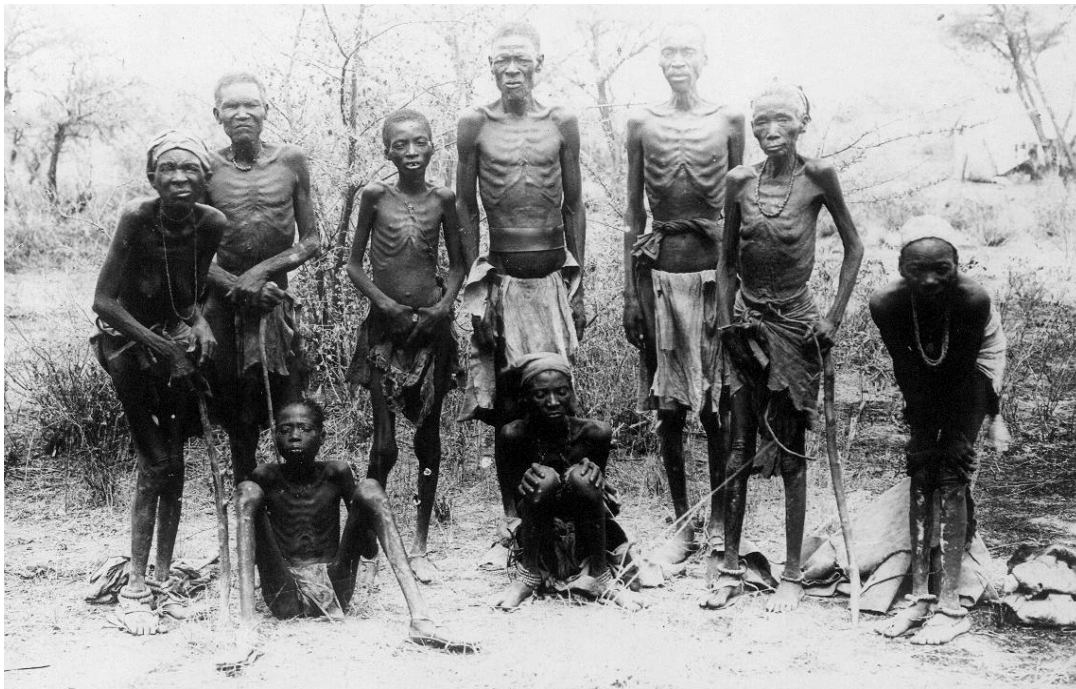


Photo 1.4 Hereros arriving out of the bush and into captivity.
Picture taken by Atelier Ziegler at Karibib ca. 1905

Unbeknownst to the emaciated Hereros in the bush, Trotha's Extermination Order was rescinded little over two months after the General had first announced it at Osombo-Windimbe. On December 9, 1904 instructions to retract the Extermination Order were relayed from Prime Minister Bülow to General Trotha, who backed down, albeit reluctantly, stating that he had ordered the high ranking and very experienced officer Ludwig von Estorff to negotiate with the Hereros. The Military Command in Germany was not altogether in favour of Bülow's 'soft' approach and therefore informed Trotha that negotiations were still out of the question, although adding that the practise of shooting Hereros on sight had to be

⁷⁵ NAN, Accession 453, Gathmann's Diary, p. 90.

⁷⁶ ELCRN, Correspondance VII 31, Swakopmund 1-7, Dannert to Vedder, February 14, 1905.

rethought.⁷⁷ The Extermination Order was therefore no longer officially in effect from this point onwards.

Trotha followed his orders from Berlin by immediately making provisions for the capture and keeping of Herero prisoners, ordering all captured Hereros to be put in chains.⁷⁸ On January 14, 1905, following consultations with the Kaiser,⁷⁹ German *Reichskanzler* Bülow again sent a telegram to Trotha ordered the General to stop enchaining the Hereros. The main concern of Bülow, however, was not humanitarian; rather he was explicitly afraid that the enchaining would be a deterrent for the voluntary surrender of other potential prisoners-of-war.⁸⁰ The *Reichskanzler*'s orders for dealing with the Hereros read:

"I am of the opinion that the surrendering Herero should be placed in *Konzentrationslager* [concentration camps] in various locations in the territory, there to be put under guard and required to work... In order to do this we need to take up the offer of the Mission, as ordered by His Majesty. This arrangement appears not to be done without, especially in regard to the women and children."⁸¹

Two days later Trotha issued a memorandum to all districts relaying the orders, which spelled out the *modus operandi* for the erection of concentration camps.⁸² The General's memorandum marked the beginning of the formal concentration camp policy, which as the immediate successor to the Extermination Order was applied to all Hereros caught in German territory, regardless of gender, age or complicity in the war.

According to Trotha's memo, chains were to come off the prisoners, who were instead contained in restricted and secured concentration camps at existing military installations in Windhoek, Okahandja and Karibib – as well as in Swakopmund and Omaruru. Food was to be provided for the prisoners as long as this did not affect the soldiers' supply,⁸³ and in case of possible outbreaks of disease in the camps – known to have been a major problem in South African camps during the Boer War – the sick would be moved several kilometres away from white settlements and the original camp burned.⁸⁴

As an added measure of control, Trotha put it to the districts that metal tags carrying the inscription G.H. for '*Gefangener* [prisoner] *Herero*' should be fixed to

⁷⁷ Drechsler, p.164.

⁷⁸ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 1. p. 12. "Telegramm des Reichskanzlers an das Gouvernement, January 14, 1905

⁷⁹ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 1. p. 12.

⁸⁰ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 1. p. 12. "I do not approve of your Excellency's order that all surrendering Herero should be enchained, since this would prevent further voluntary surrenders..."

⁸¹ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 1. p. 12.

⁸² BKE 221, B.II.74.c, pp. 33-34.

⁸³ BKE 221, B.II.74.c, pp. 33-34.

⁸⁴ BKE 221, B.II.74.c, pp. 33-34.

prisoners of both sexes – he added that suggestions on how to permanently apply these were to be forwarded to him. Subsequent to Trotha's orders such identification tags were worn by all Prisoners-of-war in the colony. The idea for this practise did not come from Trotha himself, however, but most likely emanated from the mind of von Stillfried, whose suggestions included the notion that all 'natives' should wear "a numbered identification tag". It could also be that von Stillfried got his idea from Swakopmund where in fact as early as August 1904 such tags were already being made. In Swakopmund these tags were introduced to control the large resident populations of 'natives' and to appease fears that local 'natives' might abandon their employment in order to join the rebellion.⁸⁵ Although these early Swakopmund tags differed slightly from Trotha's tags in appearance they were nevertheless the earliest prototype.

The tags were not the only example of an existing practise made official under Trotha. Although the first official concentration camps were set up between January and February 1905, already in January 1904 following the outbreak of the war Hereros working in Swakopmund had been rounded up and interned on two Woermann line 'steamers' anchored off the coastal town's shores.⁸⁶ Another early concentration camp prototype made from barbed wire and thorn-bush was set up in Okahandja on Trotha's orders before he moved on the Waterberg.⁸⁷ The reason behind these early camps would have related closely to the need for labour. With a war going on, Hereros employed by german settlers would have felt compelled to leave their places of work for a number of obvious reasons, including the risk of being shot or hung.

Incarceration not only applied to what would normally be considered prisoners-of-war, but also to those who had not taken part in the anti-colonial wars. In the southern town of Gibeon settler paranoia was such that every night even the so-called 'free natives' were kept under lock and key, a practise brought on by the outbreak of war in the South during the last months of 1904.⁸⁸ The practise was continued for several years, as seen in Bethanie where as late as 1906 the local community was also rounded up every night and locked away till morning.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ BSW 48, August 29, 1904

⁸⁶ KAB, 732: 86, Resident Magistrate, Walvis Bay to Minister, January 20, 1904.

⁸⁷ Pool 1991, p. 251. Pool argues that this camp was proof that Trotha did not intent to exterminate the Herero, but also mentions that the camps could hold only a few thousand; there were around 50,000 Hereros at the Waterberg – what would happen to the rest? This reason for erecting this camp was probably related to settler needs for labour. The later-day official camp at Osona in Okahandja was primarily used as a labour pool for settlers in the town.

⁸⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 44.

⁸⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 34.

Deimling's birthday

Following January 1905 when the Colonial Army once again took prisoners, Hereros were taken south as part of a strategy to reduce security risks. In March 1905, therefore, a large number of Herero prisoners were interned in the southern town of Keetmanshoop. A couple of months later Head of the *Schutztruppe*, Colonel Deimling, arrived in the southern town where he paid a visit to the local Nama community that had not taken part in the wars. Deimling, who had just celebrated his birthday the previous day, took the opportunity to round up a group of female Herero prisoners from the local camp and told them: "Go and tell your men that they should come here and put down their guns. It is not our intention to shot you all dead [totzushiessen]. I would like to make peace; whoever comes, now that we have defeated and scattered [zersprengt] you, will receive a pardon." He then released the women into the bush.

Interestingly, the message given to the women indicated that although the Extermination Order had officially been rescinded in December 1904, Hereros were somehow still not taking any chances with German troops. Deimling also made the specific point that troops did not intend to shooting all Herero dead, a announcement that the Extermination Order was no longer in effect.

Symptomatic of the post Extermination Order era, however, Deimling's freeing of female Herero POWs was also little more than a token gesture. Firstly, Keetmanshoop was miles away from traditional Herero territory and without supplies such a long journey was ill conceived. Secondly, the women would most likely be picked up by the next German patrol and sent back to Keetmanshoop or to another military installation in the South.



Source: Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 137

Photo: German postcard.

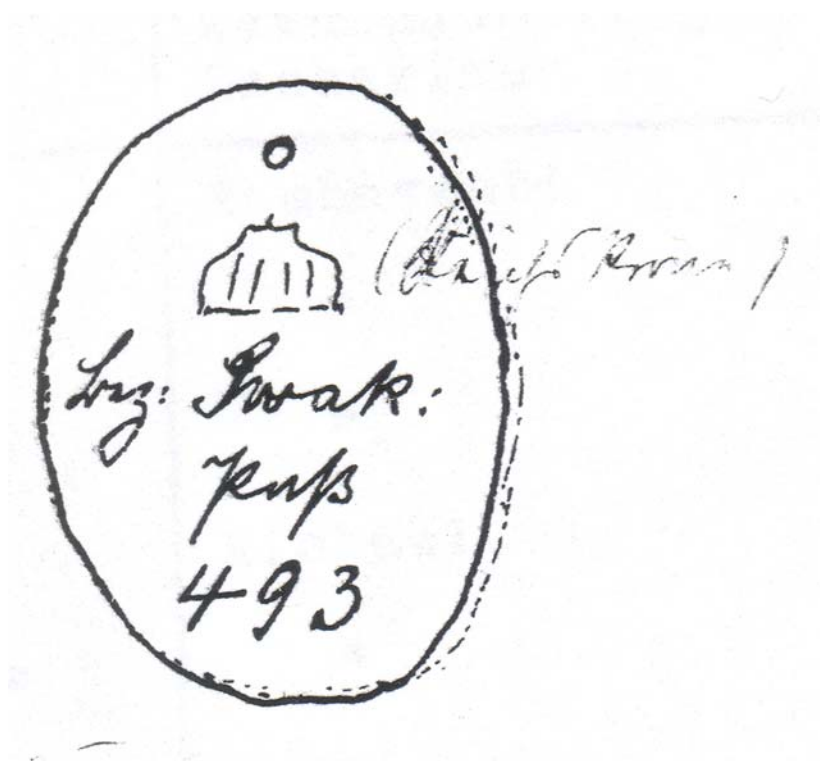


Figure 1.1 Outline of a Swakopmund tag from 1904

The concept of concentration camps was borrowed from South Africa where only four years prior to the Herero uprising, British Commander-in-Chief, Lord Kitchener, had ordered the internment of thousands of Boer women and children as well as several thousand Africans in camps, with morbid consequences. Kitchener's policy had been designed to "flush out guerrillas in a series of systematic drives, organised like a sporting shoot, with success defined in a weekly 'bag' of killed, captured and wounded." Kitchener's camps were primarily designed "to sweep the country bare of everything that could give sustenance to the guerrillas, including women and children".⁹⁰ Eventually, however, Kitchener had been forced to revise this 'scorched earth' policy because of growing opposition in England where Liberal members of Parliament C.P Scott and John Ellis laid down protests and, incidentally, first used the term "concentration camp".⁹¹

⁹⁰ "Concentration Camps during the Boer War", Stanford University Library Collection: <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/boers.html>

⁹¹ Stanford University Library.

Although the ‘sporting shoot’ simile was perhaps not entirely misapplied on GSWA⁹², the reason for and utilisation of concentration camps under Trotha were not the same as in South Africa. Under Trotha, guerrillas, or mostly just unarmed Hereros, were first driven out of the *veld* and then interned in camps, women and men, aged or infant. Another difference was that when Kitchener introduced concentration camps in South Africa he was still fighting a war, whereas Trotha had already defeated his enemy and now used concentration camps as containment centres for those who had survived his campaign.

Whereas the application of concentration camps varied in South Africa and GSWA the outcome of the camps was effectively the same, considering that thousands lost their lives while under internment and being forced to labour. So even though Prime Minister Bülow’s January 14 telegram effectively marked the end of von Trotha’s official and unofficial no-prisoners policy it did not necessarily mark the end of the extermination campaign. In reality the Kaiser and Bülow’s internment and forced labour policy was to prove equally deadly for the Nama and Herero communities and to some extent also for San, Owambo and other indigenous communities, who were either caught up in the war or used for labour purposes by the colonial state.

According to mortality statistics for the camps under von Trotha little had changed since the Extermination Order was rescinded in December 1904. At the end of 1905 Rhenish missionary Heinrich Vedder counted as many as 800 deceased prisoners in the Swakopmund camp⁹³ where on average there had been around 1000 Herero prisoners during that year.⁹⁴ The Swakopmund District Commissioner, who in a mid-1905 report stated that 400 Herero prisoners had died between February and May, inadvertently backed up Vedder’s figures.⁹⁵ Moreover, according to an official report on overall mortality in the concentration camps, the Swakopmund camp claimed 165 victims in June 1905 out of 967 prisoners in total.⁹⁶ The June mortality consequently constituted just fewer than 20% of the entire population of the camp in one month!

From the beginning of the concentration camps policy in early 1905 until November 1905 when Trotha left the colony, the General’s forces were busy capturing Hereros in the bush and sending them to the concentration camps as prisoners

⁹² The collection raids (see below) under Trotha were, for example, undertaken with a very similar brutality.

⁹³ Gewalt: 1996, p. 247.

⁹⁴ Lau: 1996, p. 45.

⁹⁵ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol.1, pp. 58-59.

⁹⁶ In Swakopmund the highest monthly number of deaths was in June 1905 with 165 out of 967 prisoners. BAB, Reichs-Kolonial-Amt, KAII 1181, Eing. 24 March 1908, p. 161.

and labourers. These collection raids were carried out by the same troops that only months before had implemented the Extermination Order. Needless to say, such raids were carried out with brute force.⁹⁷ Nevertheless Trotha's collection campaigns were very 'successful' in as much as the troops managed to capture and imprison at least 13,000 Hereros in a period of 10 months.



Photo 1.5 German patrol shows 'catch' of around a hundred people to the camera. Probably 1905, when the military was still hunting down Hereros.

According to Oskar Hintrager, the Deputy Governor under subsequent Governor Friedrich von Lindequist (Nov. 1905 to May 1907), the last of such 'sweeping' collection missions was carried out in September 1905 and tallied 810 Hereros.⁹⁸ The German historian Horst Drechsler noted on this period that the "number of Herero taken captive – men, women and children – swelled rapidly, attaining 4,100 by early March 1905 and 8,040 by late May."⁹⁹ Accordingly, there were 13,216 Hereros in custody by the end of 1905.¹⁰⁰ These 13,216 were necessarily the prisoners Trotha had managed to gather since the formal end of the Extermination Order – in other words those that had survived the Waterberg, the Omaheke escape, the Extermination Order, starvation as well as the violent collection raids. Of these 13,216 Herero prisoners, 8478 were held by the military and incarcerated in camps. The rest were put to work on various projects around the colony, or sent to smaller camps such as, for example, Keetmanshoop.¹⁰¹ If the mortality figures from Swakopmund were in any way indicative of a general trend, many thousands more Herero

⁹⁷ NAN, Accession 453, Gathmann's Diary, March 9, 1905, p. 90 and RMS Chronicle 23.1, Omaruru, 1906.

⁹⁸ Hintrager: 1955, p. 81.

⁹⁹ Drechsler, p. 207.

¹⁰⁰ ZBU 454, D.VI.1.3, Vol. 1. pp. 187-188.

¹⁰¹ See text box entitled "Deimling's Birthday".

and Nama prisoners inevitably died in Trotha's concentration camps, making overall numbers of prisoners collected in this period much higher.

Trotha left the colony in November 1905. Control of the colony was instead passed on to newly appointed Governor Friedrich von Lindequist; a civil servant who had until that point had been serving as Consul to the Cape and prior to that appointment had been the Deputy Governor in GSWA under Leutwein. It is often held that the Herero and Nama genocides were a direct result of the regime of General von Trotha.¹⁰² This notion falsely negates any direct complicity at the hands of Central Government and the Kaiser in Germany. Indeed the only difference between Trotha's regime and that of his successor, von Lindequist, was a deliberate and significant escalation of the camps policy and related mortalities under the latter's regime, as will be explored later in the chapter.

The Devils Advocate: Mission and government collaboration

“... Father forgive them for they know not what they have done. Our [German] compatriots have evoked certain and plentiful harm on these people, which is so painful because they do not realise it.”¹⁰³

From early on in the War Rhenish missionaries had been eager to mediate between the colonial army and Herero forces. Subsequently the Rhenish Mission Society (RMS) appealed to the *Reichskanzler* in late 1904 that it be consulted as “a go-between for the sake of restoring peace”.¹⁰⁴ In December 1904, *Reichskanzler* Bülow and Kaiser Wilhelm¹⁰⁵ agreed that the mission should play a larger role in the pacification of the Hereros and more specifically in the care for women and children.¹⁰⁶

Reichskanzler Bülow's acceptance of this continuous offer was expressly linked to the fact that it would be easier for the Mission than for any other German institution to gain access to the widely dispersed Herero communities. In Bülow's correspondence with the mission he thanked the institution for its willingness to assist government, adding that because of its long experience with the ‘natives’, the Rhenish mission would be in an ideal position to bring about their subjugation.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² The German ambassador in Namibia put this idea forward in a 2004 interview with David Olusoga of the BBC. Brigitte Lau claimed that no atrocities took place in GSWA, but nevertheless still pointed her finger at Trotha's intent. Lau:1995, p.46 (footnote 10).

¹⁰³ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p.47.

¹⁰⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p.22.

¹⁰⁵ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 1. p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1905, pp. 22-23.

¹⁰⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 23.

Orion the warrior



Lord Kitchener in his most famous pose

The orders to set up concentration camps would in all probability have been welcomed by General von Trotha, who was a professed admirer of the man behind the Boer War concentration camps, namely the infamous Lord Kitchener.

The day before the battle at the Waterberg on August 11, 1904 Trotha's esoteric diary note read: "My responsibility is indeed great, but we are marching towards the Orion and I must trust my star." Ostensibly Trotha was referring to a meeting with Lord Kitchener where he had asked the British military phenomenon what the secret behind his military success was. Kitchener told him: "Be consequent, reckless and trust your star." Kitchener had then supposedly pointed to the constellation of Orion and said to von Trotha: "That is your star."

According to Trotha's diary, Kitchener's advice had proven to be very valuable. Trotha noted that he had been in a state of confusion after the Waterberg battle, which at the time was regarded a failure because the Herero had managed to flee in to the Omaheke Desert. Trotha then remembered the words of Kitchener and at "precisely that moment, almost as though it had been ordained, the clear image of Orion appeared above the horizon of the bush landscape." Trotha was again calm, feeling a new sense of determination in his task.

Trotha's inner monologue draws a picture of a psychologically unstable person, seeking refuge in mystical advice offered to him by a man whose infamy was rooted in ruthlessness and brutality.

Source: Pool: 1991, p. 257 and 262.

This collaboration would essentially facilitate both church and government interests. With the stamp of approval from Bülow, the mission would be able to appease hostile settlers who saw the mission as a lackey of the ‘natives’,¹⁰⁸ yet, more importantly, it would also be able to revive its missionary efforts: its very reason for being in the colony. The government, on the other hand, had a much different agenda that included an increased supply of labour and control over the colony.

Even though the collaboration between Government and mission was mutually beneficial, Trotha was still reluctant to comply with the *Reichskanzler*’s wishes. Trotha did not favour any missionary involvement in his war efforts.¹⁰⁹ As such, the mission only had limited involvement during Trotha’s reign, relating mostly to medical care and conversion of souls. However, there are a couple of grim examples of missionary involvement in Trotha’s war. After mid January 1905, when Trotha’s troops were again taking prisoners, the army called on selected missionaries to act as interpreters and mediators between colonial troops and Hereros in the *veld*. Missionary Dannert of Omaruru recounted an expedition to the Omatako Mountains that ostensibly sought out Herero villages in order to give them Trotha’s ‘message of peace’.¹¹⁰ In the course of the excursion suspicious Hereros shot two of Dannert’s messengers, one of whom was a Herero by the name of Daniel. In spite of these human losses, Dannert still considered the expedition a success because he had managed to persuade a number of Hereros to give up their arms. According to Dannert the expedition’s success rested on the fact that he was a missionary. He quoted a Herero elder, who was trying to calm down his more suspicious colleagues, as saying: “We know our *Omuhonge* [teacher]; he does not engage in trickery. If he has come looking for us, then we have nothing to fear.”¹¹¹ As it were, the Herero elder was wrong. Following their trek with Dannert to Omaruru, the Hereros were sent to directly to the Karibib and Swakopmund concentration camps.¹¹²

Helene Gathmann, who at the time was also residing in Dannert’s Omaruru, wrote about the same incident. According to her, Dannert and his men had been in the bush to recruit Hereros, but the expedition had failed because German troops took the opportunity to “shoot every single Herero down”.¹¹³ The same account was relayed in the Rhenish Mission Chronicle for Omaruru; here it was stated that

¹⁰⁸ Oermann, pp. 107-109.

¹⁰⁹ Drechsler, p. 165.

¹¹⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 80.

¹¹¹ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 80.

¹¹² Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 80.

¹¹³ NAN, Accession 453, Gathmann’s Diary, March 9, 1905, p. 90.

Dannert was involved when a military patrol shot down Hereros at Omatako.¹¹⁴ Remarkably, the story of Dannert's involvement even reached the Hereros working on the mines in Johannesburg, who recited the incident to an incredulous Missionary Bernsmann.¹¹⁵ The source of the information was likely to have been 'School Master' Asser from Omaruru, who had left the mines when he heard of the outbreak of war to join the fighting Hereros in GSWA, and who, according to Missionary Bernsmann, wrote letters to his friends in the mines.¹¹⁶

The Omatako incident was not unique. A very similar massacre took place at Ombahaka where Joel Kavezeri and his people as well as other groups were shot down by German troops even though the Hereros had come in the belief that it was a peace negotiation.¹¹⁷ These 'missions of peace', should have been a forewarning to the Herero not to trust missionaries such as Dannert who clearly prioritised German allegiance before their Christian morals.

The violent collection raids that had at times resulted in wholesale massacres were finally discontinued when Lindequist arrived in the colony. In place of the raids, Lindequist had come to the colony with a ready-made plan that would allow for a more peaceful collection of the Hereros in the bush, a strategy in which the mission would play a vital role. Upon landing in Swakopmund on November 22nd, 1905 the new Governor took the first step towards implementing his new collection plan. He had the local concentration camp prisoners rounded up and made an announcement to them about their future plight. He said:

"... I am not inclined to always treat you as prisoners. You shall again be free, except for those who took part in the murder of farmers and traders. Those people will receive a just punishment. But, I cannot make your fate easier until the your fellow Hereros who are still in the bush give up their resistance and hand themselves over... Fair treatment is guaranteed to them. The sooner they produce themselves, the sooner your imprisonment will be ended. I cannot make specific promises, I can, however, tell you that anyone who shows good conduct shall also be treated well."¹¹⁸

The new governor's speech must have been a beacon of hope for the many Herero prisoners languishing in the concentration camps. The promise that fair treatment would be meted out to all those who would show 'good conduct' must have been especially promising, considering the harsh conditions in the camps under Trotha. Yet, no such special treatment would materialise under Lindequist's reign,

¹¹⁴ RMS Chronicle 23.1, Omaruru, 1906.

¹¹⁵ Mission-Berichte, 1905, pp. 66-67.

¹¹⁶ Mission-Berichte, 1905, pp. 66-67.

¹¹⁷ Drechsler, p. 159. On the body of Kavezeri was found a letter mentioning a group of 300 people that had died of thirst in the Omaheke following the Waterberg battle. Pool: 1991, p. 271.

¹¹⁸ Von Lindequist's proclamation to the Hereros, cited in Missions-Berichte, 1906, pp. 35-36.

on the contrary mortality rates in the camps stayed steadily high and at places such as Lüderitz they increased dramatically.

The supposed link between sustained Herero captivity in the concentration camps and the voluntary surrender of free Hereros in the bush was very similar to the tactics of human blackmail applied by Lord Kitchener during the South African Boer War. Kitchener's tactic had been to hold Boer women and children hostage in concentration camps in an attempt to 'flush out' Boer combatants from the bush. Lindequist had been the German Consul to Cape Town during the Boer War, which provided him with ample insights into Kitchener's application of concentration camps. Moreover, Lindequist like Trotha before him had met and respected Kitchener.¹¹⁹ It is not an overstatement to say that the new governor's promised freedom and good treatment, which clearly did not materialise, rather served to lure Herero out of the bush and into the concentration camps.

The Rhenish mission was to play an essential part in the governor's new collection plans. *En route* between Swakopmund and Windhoek, Lindequist made a point of visiting the Rhenish missionaries one by one. The governor was presenting the mission with his new vision and at the same time declaring that the church was to be the foundation of the colony's "*Deutschtum*", i.e. 'Germanity'.¹²⁰ Moreover, Lindequist declared that his own mission was to bring peace to the colony, a task he needed the missionaries help to fulfil.¹²¹ To replace the military patrols that had been hunting down Hereros in the bush for close to a year, collection was now instead entirely being handed over to the mission. The mission was essentially led to believe that the war was over and in order to win peace for the territory, missionaries would first have to actively collect and pacify the Hereros remaining in the bush.

To implement the governor's wishes the former mission stations at Omburo and Otjihaenena were turned into collection centres. On December 21, 1905 Missionary Kuhlmann arrived at the former mission station at Omburo, which lies north-east of Omaruru, with 20 'loyal' Hereros to help him in his task.¹²² Three days later on December 23rd, Missionary Diehl arrived at the former mission station at Otjihaenena, about 100 Kilometres east of Windhoek, with a large group of loyal Hereros and their families, altogether 93 people.¹²³ Accordingly the Otjihaenena and Omburo collection camps were active from the end of 1905. Half a year later on June 29, 1906 an additional camp at Otjozongombe was added. Missionary Olpp

¹¹⁹ BAK, Lindequist memoirs, KL. Erw. File 275, pp. 121–125.

¹²⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 35.

¹²¹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 35.

¹²² Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 71.

¹²³ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 89.

and 50 militia opened up this new collection camp,¹²⁴ which was situated about 8 kilometres from the present day Waterberg Resort Office.¹²⁵

While the missionaries mostly stayed at the collection camps, the actual collection work was done by a number of 'loyal' Hereros, who were provided with guns and organised into collection militias before being sent on mission in the bush. These militiamen were paid in food – a very attractive wage considering that all other Hereros in the colony were either starving in the bush or forced to labour in the concentration camps. There would typically be ten men to a militia, which would be led by a particularly 'trusted' Herero.¹²⁶

The collection militias were armed with a couple of guns for self-defence and provisions to last them the time (often many weeks) their expeditions into the bush would take. Being the devil's advocate their task would be to locate settlements in the bush, to approach the inhabitants and to explain that the war was over and that they would be free to return unharmed to their former lands. Paradoxically the missionaries dubbed these Herero collection militias: 'peace patrols'. However, not everyone was convinced about the integrity of the militia and it was not uncommon for shots to be fired against them.¹²⁷ Later Governor von Lindequist would boast the ingenuity of a scheme that staked Hereros against Hereros and thus saved German blood.¹²⁸

Apart from their guns, the militiamen were armed with translated versions of a proclamation Governor Lindequist had made on December 1st.¹²⁹ The proclamation was an offer of peace to the Hereros in the bush, promising freedom, peace and that the concentration camps would be closed provided they come peacefully to Omburo or Otjihaenena collection camps. Lindequist also promised the end of Trotha's violent raids as well as food, cattle and paid labour for 'surrendering' Hereros. The proclamation read:

"Hereros! Thousands of your tribal peers have already surrender and are now being fed and clothed by the Government. Every measure is being taken by me to ensure that they are treated justly. I promise the same to you...Come to Omburo and Otjihaenena! Missionaries will be sent there. They will bring provisions with them so that you can satisfy your great hunger. If you have any cattle, you will also be temporarily allowed to keep some of them to provide for your women and children. Those of you, who are strong and able to work, will also receive a small reward, provided you are skilful. There will be no white soldiers stationed at Omburo and Otjihaenena, so that you will have no reason to fear or to think that there will once again be shots

¹²⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 249.

¹²⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1907, p. 35.

¹²⁶ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 2, pp. 120-124.

¹²⁷ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol 2, pp. 120-124

¹²⁸ Deutsches Kolonialblatt no. 12, 1906, p. 402.

¹²⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, pp. 35-36.

fired. The sooner you put your weapons down and come to us, the sooner can be considered to ease conditions for your tribal peers who are prisoners and perhaps later to give them back their freedom ... So come therefore quickly Hereros, before it is too late! ... The Imperial Governor. v. Lindequist¹³⁰

The recruitment militia read this proclamation to the Hereros in the *Veld* in order to facilitate what the governor and the missionaries had termed ‘the work of peace’ [*Friedensarbeit*].¹³¹ However, the unspoken reality was that those who presented themselves to the collection camps, and thereby to the Colonial Government, were to become prisoners-of-war and would eventually be sent directly to one of the many concentration camps. It was therefore a betrayal of trust as missionaries and their Herero assistants went into the Omaheke and the central bush-lands to locate and convince or “lure”¹³² surviving Hereros into surrendering to them. Hereros in the bush were promised peace, freedom, food, blankets and the like in exchange for their ‘surrender,’¹³³ but would eventually be ushered from collection points to the many concentration camps emerging in Windhoek, Okahandja, Karibib, Swakopmund and Lüderitz. The ‘surrendering’ Hereros would probably only have realised the extent of the trickery when German patrols arrived at the collection camps to transport the collected Hereros off to meet their new fate.¹³⁴

It was not a fact unbeknownst to the missionaries that their ‘work of peace’ meant that collected Hereros would be sent to the concentration camps and that they would there be forced to labour for the military and/or the Colonial Government. Remarking on his early collection successes, Kuhlmann in Omburo noted that it was fortunate prisoner did not have to proceed directly to the concentration camps to perform hard labour, considering that they were still too malnourished to work when arriving in the collection camp.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 36.

¹³¹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 165.

¹³² Gewalt: 1996, p. 221.

¹³³ Although the term ‘surrender’ that is applied in the sources is echoed here, the suggestion that all Herero in the ‘veld’ were in some way fugitives is inherently flawed, regardless of the state of war. Neville Alexander in Wood (ed.), argued that the term ‘rebellion’ was erroneous because it implied that the German regime in GSWA was lawful, whereas there was no real legal basis for the German subjugation of the Hereros. The term ‘surrender’ is therefore misleading as Germany was not a legal representative of the Hereros, and therefore could not impose any valid political or legal powers on them. Also, as has been explored by Gewalt, the on-going ‘Phoney War’ was one-sided in as much as the Hereros were not actively part to it, making the word ‘surrender’ even more arbitrary.

¹³⁴ RMS Chronicle 23.1, Omaruru, 1906. See also Drechsler, pp. 208-209.

¹³⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 72; see also Oermann, pp. 109-112.



Photo 1.6 Drawing of POW transport from *Deutsche Reiter in Suedwest*

Despite the relative isolation of the many Herero communities living in the desolate areas of eastern ‘Hereroland’ and to the north and west of Omaruru, information about the concentration camps and the trickery applied by the mission amazingly still filtered through to the scattered Herero communities. The source of the information was prisoners who had managed to escape the camps and return home.¹³⁶ According to Missionary Diehl, suspicion and fear towards the Germans was soon rife among Hereros in the field.¹³⁷ Stories of a conspiracy between the colonial government and the mission were spreading, making collection work very difficult.¹³⁸ The stories were specific, describing both the concentration camps and the labour that people were forced into. Diehl mentioned an incident when newly arrived Hereros had come to the camp ‘shaking with fear’¹³⁹ allegedly believing the Otjihaenena camp to be a trap where soldiers would be on hand to shoot the ‘surrendering’ Herero.

¹³⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91

¹³⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91

¹³⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91.

¹³⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91.

There were also stories in the bush about the concentration camps that described how all men, who were deemed fit enough to fight, were hung by the neck and even how some people were burned alive. There were also stories about old people being put to work and severely beaten.¹⁴⁰ Diehl summarily dismissed these stories as pure lies, exaggerated as they surely were to him. Yet Diehl's relative isolation would have played a part in the formation of his opinion. He had probably not been to the camps in Swakopmund and Lüderitz and might not even have been aware of the many reports in the mission's newsletter, describing the severe conditions suffered there.¹⁴¹ Unlikely as this may be Diehl chose to describe these stories as "lies".¹⁴² The stories were not false however. In fact, old people *were* put to work and prisoners *were* beaten, often severely (see later). Indeed the accuracy of such stories being passed on in the *Veld* attests that some prisoners managed to escape and report to their communities on conditions suffered in the concentration camps.

The spread of information about the collection and concentration camps motivated organised resistance to the collection militia. A certain Andreas of Otjimbingwe¹⁴³ vehemently resisted the militia and travelled to numerous other Herero communities to discourage them, if not force them, not to give in to the promises made by the militia. Eventually resistance and suspicion was of such magnitude that militia kept the surrendering Hereros under heavy guard whilst returning them to the collection camps, an indication that collections were at times still conducted with the use of force.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, the Rhenish Mission acknowledged that only few Herero actually came to the collection camps out of their own free will, remarking: "As good as all had to be taken from the bush, many through use of violence."¹⁴⁵

The colonial government ironically saw resistance against the collection militia as acts of Herero aggression. An official report from April 1906 described resistance as the result of gangs of lawless Hereros with murders on their conscience.¹⁴⁶ The tone and message of the report and others like it were typical of the general attitude among German troops towards the Hereros; soldiers were often consumed by hatred sparked by contemporary concepts of race and were therefore not very sympathetic

¹⁴⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91.

¹⁴¹ See for example Missions-Berichte, 1905 pp. 139-141.

¹⁴² Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 91.

¹⁴³ Missions-Berichte, 1906, pp. 91-92 as well as p. 121. It has not been determined if it is the same 'Herero Andreas' who in 1905 was fighting with the Nama in the South.

¹⁴⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1906, pp. 91-92.

¹⁴⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1907, p. 131.

¹⁴⁶ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol 2., pp. 120-124.

of Herero sentiment.¹⁴⁷ Fear was regarded as highly suspicious and resistance as tantamount to guilt. Fear was nevertheless not unwarranted as noted by Inspector Spiecker of the RMS who in May 1906 visited Otjihaenena on his tour of the colony. Spiecker had already been at the coast and had seen the concentration camps and the horror that was in store for the Hereros in Otjihaenena. He wrote:

“I enjoyed myself in so many ways with these Herero; but again and again my heart was rendered heavy, when I thought about what awaited these people. Admittedly, it is my impression that a hard school will be necessary to bring about the rebirth of these people.”¹⁴⁸

Ironically the success of Lindequist’s collection efforts hinged on the mission’s ability to alleviate Herero fears. It was therefore important that the collection camps had the appearance of safe-havens to those entering the collection camps, as expressly stated by the governor in his proclamation to the Herero: “Don’t be afraid”. The collection camps had food, water, tobacco and blankets which all formed part of a scheme to lure Hereros back into the German realm. People were to feel safe and welcome as they ventured back into the hands of the colony – a fact also evident in Spiecker’s above soliloquy. The plan evidently worked as thousands of Hereros ultimately gave into the ‘peace’ offering and the prospects of food and blankets.¹⁴⁹

An indication that the collection camps were run with less vigilance is the surprising revelation that some prisoners actually returned to Otjihaenena and Omburo after having escaped the concentration camps. A 1907 report confirms that out of a hundred prisoners to have been collected in a period of four months, thirty-six were former prisoners in concentration camps.¹⁵⁰ Although it would seem illogical for someone who had experienced the initial deceit of the mission, and who had managed to escape the concentration camps or work camps to return back to the mission, this was nevertheless the case.¹⁵¹ An example of such returnees was referenced in a letter from Missionary Kuhlmann to Government. The former explained that three Hereros who had recently fled with their families from assigned workplaces in Okazize, were now back in Omburo camp. The Hereros had explained to Kuhlmann how their female partners had been forced to ‘be’ with the soldiers and

¹⁴⁷ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol 2., pp.120-124 or Emil Malzahn’s diary, NAN, Accession 510.

¹⁴⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p.167. A more sinister view along the same lines was expressed by von Trotha: “I destroy the African tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge, which will remain.” As quoted in Gewalt: 1996, p. 208.

¹⁴⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 165.

¹⁵⁰ ZBU 455, D.IV.1.3. Vol 3, pp. 128-129.

¹⁵¹ Missionaries were known to be accommodating and generally treated prisoners well; in fact they were treated too well for Governor Lindequist’s liking, who therefore sent a warning to Kuhlmann about his lax attitude towards the prisoners. Pool: 1979, pp. 271-272.

that they had been generally mistreated.¹⁵² Whether these escapees were seeking Christian sanctuary or whether conditions left them no alternative can only be speculated upon.

Apart from helping to lure Hereros out of the bush, there was also another motive for providing prisoners with ‘peace’ and provisions. Many of the people who surrendered to the militia were sick or starved when they arrived in the collection camps and were as such allowed to stay *in situ* for a while. The reason for this generous act, as Lindequist cynically put it, was that “[their] immediate use for labour was [rendered] impossible” when arriving in the collection camps.¹⁵³ In other words the prisoners were fed and allowed recuperation, simply for the sake of making them better able to perform physical labour.

The false sense of security in the collection camps was short lived. Once out of Otjihaenena or Omburo a much different reality awaited the prisoners. By surrendering to missionaries in the collection camps, the Hereros were inadvertently surrendering their freedom and for many eventually their lives too. In some cases, prisoners were not even allowed respite in the collection camps, before being ushered off to the concentration camps. At Omburo, for example, a missionary source describes how a certain Lt. Helmich and his troops came riding in to the camp at night, rounding up all the collected Hereros and forced them off to Karibib by foot – a journey of almost 100 kilometres.¹⁵⁴ Similarly when the railway between Lüderitz and Kubub/Aus was begun in early 1906, Government informed Missionary Kuhlmann in Omburo to send as many prisoners as possible straight to the southern line; sick, healthy, young and old, it made no difference.¹⁵⁵ These were people, who had surrendered to the militia, by gun or trickery, and now were transported directly to the railway works in the far south of the colony to do hard labour in spite of their condition. Notably it seems that the practise of delivering collected Herero straight to the government or private construction projects was the rule rather than the exception at Omburo. Missionary Kuhlmann also delivered his human ‘stock’ directly from the bush to the geographically much closer Swakopmund-Otavi railway line also under construction at the time.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 1, p. 197. February 28, 1906.

¹⁵³ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 165.

¹⁵⁴ RMS Chronicle 23.1, Omaruru, 1906. Also cited in Drechsler, pp. 208-209.

¹⁵⁵ Pool: 1979, p. 270. “Die owerheid wou soveel arbeiders as moontlik vir die werk aan die Lüderitzbucht-spoorweg hê. Die gewolg was dat die *Distriktsamt* van Omaruru alle nuwe inkomelinge by Omburo, selfs die boodskappers, siekes en oues, na Omaruru ontbied het vir versending na Lüderitzbucht.”

¹⁵⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 71. Arthur Koppel also spoke of a very large number of workers having been delivered to the *Unterbau* by the *Schutzwache* –the protection guards. ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 2, p. 337.

The relative respite allowed prisoner in the collection camps was not popular with the Colonial Government. The author of a 1907 report about conditions at Otjihaenena was clearly angered at the high amount of rations¹⁵⁷ given to prisoners as well as the casual atmosphere in the camp.¹⁵⁸ He was particularly concerned about the fact that full rations were provided to former escapees and made special reference to the lack of punishment meted out to those that returned to the missionary camps after managing escapes from Government concentration camps. His report stated:

“According to the impressions I have gathered here, it is high time the collection work in Otjihaenena takes another shape. I mean, a native that runs away from work deserves a full punishment, not [to be rewarded with] good rations and laziness.”¹⁵⁹

The comments in the report were directed at the mission in charge of the ‘collection work’. It is not difficult to imagine that missionaries were less adept at enforcing disciplinary measures than the army. Subsequent to the strong criticism of the collection camps they were eventually shut down. Otjihaenena was formally closed on September 11, 1906, having been in operation for 9½ months. However, Otjihaenena’s infrastructure and militias were eventually moved to Okomitombe close to Gobabis in a final attempt to sweep the country bare of free Hereros. At Okomitombe collection was continued until March 1907.¹⁶⁰ In part the closing was due to the low number of people recruited, e.g. one hundred in four months.¹⁶¹

In place of the collection camps, the military again began launching raids into the bush whereby no attempts were made to persuade Hereros to come back into the German realm, they were simply taken by force.¹⁶² Already in late July 1906 settlers and parts of the military were getting anxious to resume the raids. A letter from the Outjo district to Government pleaded that mop-up patrols [*Aufklaerungspatrouillen*] should be sent out as soon as the ‘time of dying’ was over. The ‘time of dying’ can only be interpreted to mean the cold winter months, which would invariably account for many deaths among starving Hereros in the bush, i.e. implying that the cold conditions would do the patrol’s work for them in the months to come.¹⁶³ According to the author of the letter, Commander von Wangenheim, communities still resisting

¹⁵⁷ Hereros in collection camps received flour and rice, with the addition of tobacco. *Missions-Berichte*, 1906, p. 166.

¹⁵⁸ ZBU 455, D.IV.1.3. Vol 3, pp. 128-129.

¹⁵⁹ ZBU 455, D.IV.1.3. Vol 3, pp. 128-129.

¹⁶⁰ *Missions-Berichte*, 1907, pp. 34-35.

¹⁶¹ ZBU 455, D.IV.1.3. Vol 3, pp. 128-129.

¹⁶² *Missions-Berichte*, 1907, p. 35.

¹⁶³ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 2, pp. 240a-b.

should be rounded up by the patrols and their settlements burned.¹⁶⁴ The commander added that in case communities were ‘stubborn’ [*ganz Hartnaeckige*], people should be burnt along with their settlements. The military raids were resumed at the beginning of 1907 and continued unabated until Germany lost the colony to the Union forces in 1915.¹⁶⁵

Overall the collection militias were very successful. In Omburo alone a total of 4,497 people had been collected by September 1906 and in Otjihaenena an estimated 4,200 had arrived in the camp in the same space of time.¹⁶⁶ By the end of 1906, missionaries and their militia had collected approximately 8,700 in these two camps alone. Otjozongombe, the third collection camp, was closed by the end of October 1906 and was estimated to have produced 1824 new prisoners.¹⁶⁷ Okomitombe by Gobabis, the fourth collection camp that sprung up in place of Otjihaenena, was closed end of March 1907 and had tallied 1103 collections.¹⁶⁸ Therefore collection numbers for the four camps totalled 11,624 Herero women, children and men.

The mission remained confident that it had done ‘work of peace’, arguing that the efforts in the collection camps served to secure peace in the colony.¹⁶⁹ Yet, if one does not consider the missionary involvement in Trotha’s patrols, e.g. Dannert, close to 12,000 Herero were recruited or forced into collection camps and eventually to the concentration camps as a result of collaboration between Rhenish mission and Colonial Government. The thoroughness of collection and the mission’s efficiency impressed Governor Lindequist. Following a very thorough trip through ‘Herero-land’ in June 1906, he noted:

“... the northern and central parts of the territory, especially what is properly-speaking Herero-land, is as well as denude of Hereros.”¹⁷⁰

Seemingly no Hereros were spared; even the Hereros who had worked with and for the German colonial enterprise in the militias were themselves eventually sent to work on the many construction projects in the colony. In June 1907 ten Hereros, who had been part of the militia, were as such handed over to the Department of Works [*Bauverwaltung*].¹⁷¹

Missionary involvement in the collection of Herero POWs was a betrayal of trust, but just how conscious this betrayal was, is less certain. The general perception

¹⁶⁴ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 2, pp. 240a-b.

¹⁶⁵ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 6, pp. 34 and 183-189.

¹⁶⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 249.

¹⁶⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 269.

¹⁶⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1907, p. 222.

¹⁶⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 128.

¹⁷⁰ Schrank, p. 207.

¹⁷¹ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3. Vol 5, p. 88.

among the missionary was that they were doing the ‘work of peace’.¹⁷² This was a misconception, which rested mainly on an understanding that the colonial government, i.e. Lindequist, intended the colony to return to pre-war relations. This was not the case as prisoners were eventually hauled off to the concentration camps where many thousands would eventually die.

The church could not have been completely surprised by the eventual outcome of the joint venture between mission and colonial government, however. Many of the practises employed in the later-day concentration camps were already in use at the outset of collections in late December 1905, as seen by Vedder’s sharp criticism of the camps already in 1905 – i.e. before the collection camps.¹⁷³ Also indicating missionary knowledge was the fact that as early as mid-1905 the Mission had drafted a report for its Annual General Meeting, wherein it was mentioned that “they [the Hereros] have given up their cattle and their guns yet now have to perform forced labour.”¹⁷⁴ Indeed one missionary exclaimed: “*Ne bis in idem!*” (Don’t punish them twice).¹⁷⁵ Missionaries were well aware of the atrocities committed by the German forces under Trotha and would surely also have known the high likelihood that this behaviour would continue. Furthermore, the Mission did not discontinue its involvement in collection, even after it was evident that atrocities were still taking place and that incredibly high mortality rates were reported from all corners of the colony where prisoners were in the hands of the military.¹⁷⁶ It was therefore surely not an issue of knowledge, or rather the lack of knowledge, that led to the continued assistance given to Government.

Loyalty was an important factor behind the assistance extended to the Colonial Administration by the RMS. The mission was evidently suffering a great dilemma. On the one hand, the mission was a German institution and was obliged to lend help to its government in a state of war; but, on the other hand, missionaries were not blind to injustices perpetrated by the colonial government and understood the reasons behind both the Herero and Nama uprisings against the settlers and the colonial authority.¹⁷⁷ Even though the mission had initially asked to fulfil the role of go-between for the sake of peace, the role of ‘bait’ that was instead bestowed upon the mission could not be turned down. As it were, the role of collecting ‘free’

¹⁷² This is reflected so strongly in missionary sources that Oermann described the collection as a “large-scale humanitarian operation” of ‘great success.’ Oermann, p. 109.

¹⁷³ Missions-Berichte, 1905 pp. 139-141.

¹⁷⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 127.

¹⁷⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 131.

¹⁷⁶ The mission newsletter regularly gave space to stories of misery in the camps. Mission-Berichte 1905, pp. 127, 130-131, 139-143, 189, 238, 260, 274-275, etc. 1906-07.

¹⁷⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 47.

Hereros and invariably also populating the concentration camps had been bestowed on missionaries by the highest German authority and refusal to co-operate would not have been taken lightly by government or by an already antipathetic settler community.¹⁷⁸

There was also another reason for the mission's collaboration with Government. Intense rivalry between the Catholic mission and the Rhenish Lutheran mission meant that both these German institutions were essentially fighting over access to Hereros and Nama in the concentration camps.¹⁷⁹ There was therefore a more calculated element to mission's collaboration with Government, as in fact it was up to the colonial government to decide which mission was to be allowed access to camp prisoners. In the end, Government's solution to this convert conflict was a decree by the colonial administration that access to Herero and now also Nama POWs was to be split down the middle – a Solomonic decision that nevertheless rendered the Rhenish mission somewhat disappointed, considering its efforts in the collection of remnants of the Herero nation.¹⁸⁰

The Windhoek concentration camps

Once Hereros had been taken from the collection camp in Otjihaenena, most would soon find themselves in one of Windhoek's two concentration camps. The first of two camps in Windhoek was also the largest of the colony's concentration camps. It was located in the centre of the capital, roughly where the Rider Statue and the *Kristuskirche* are situated today – ironically these are both monuments to German losses during the War. The other camp lay on "the hills north-west of the railway station"¹⁸¹ or as Werner Hillebrecht described it: "roughly at the site of the empty ... space at the intersection of Okahandja Street and Harvey Street".¹⁸² Hillebrecht added that many prisoners were buried there and that in 1919 the Herero community had tried to get the site fenced in and protected, albeit in vain.¹⁸³

Added together, the two Windhoek camps comprised by far the largest population of concentration camp prisoners in one locality. In mid August 1906, there were precisely 5,183 prisoners in Windhoek¹⁸⁴ and that same year in April

¹⁷⁸ Especially farmer Schlettwein was a nemesis of the mission, lobbying against their involvement in 'native affairs'. See Secret minutes of Government Council, BKE 305, G.A. 8, pp. 30-36.

¹⁷⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 60.

¹⁸⁰ J.B. Gewald, *Towards Redemption*, p. 243.

¹⁸¹ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 141.

¹⁸² W. Hillebrecht, "Where They Lie Buried", in Heywood, A.M. and Lau, B.

¹⁸³ W. Hillebrecht, "Where They Lie Buried", in B. Lau and A.M. Heywood: 1996.

¹⁸⁴ ZBU 454, D.VI.1.3. Vol 2. p. 305.

there had been approximately 7,000 prisoners.¹⁸⁵ Part of the camps' prisoners constituted an ephemeral population that risked being ushered on to other camps or to work in the mines, on the railway, for the military and for settlers at any given moment. Apart from high death rates, this largely explains the relatively high fluctuation in figures in Windhoek.

Below is seen an early view of the first of Windhoek's concentration camps that was placed on the site where the Rider Statue stands today. In the background of the picture one can see the German flag flying over the '*Alte*' Feste. The huts appear cramped and feeble. The camp itself looks to have been broken into sections and in the bottom right-hand corner a person appears to be walking away, out of the frozen frame, next to one of these partitions.



Photo 1.7 The first of Windhoek's concentration camps, probably 1905

A better overview of the camp is found in a later picture, taken from the same angle but from a higher vantage-point. The second picture gives a better idea of the magnitude of the camp yet still underscores the word concentration in concentration camp, as tents and huts appear squashed together behind the thick thorn-bush fence. In the background on the right side a very large white military tent is seen, the kind used to accommodate hundreds of prisoners at a time in the respective concentration

¹⁸⁵ Kommando der Schutztruppen im Reichskolonialamt, Sanitaets-Bericht, p. 129

camps. Round-huts or *Pontoks* in the right-hand foreground are curious, in being unguarded yet in proximity to the concentration camp. An explanation could be that they belonged to some of the 4000-strong indigenous population in the town. It could also be that they belonged to African camp guards, however.

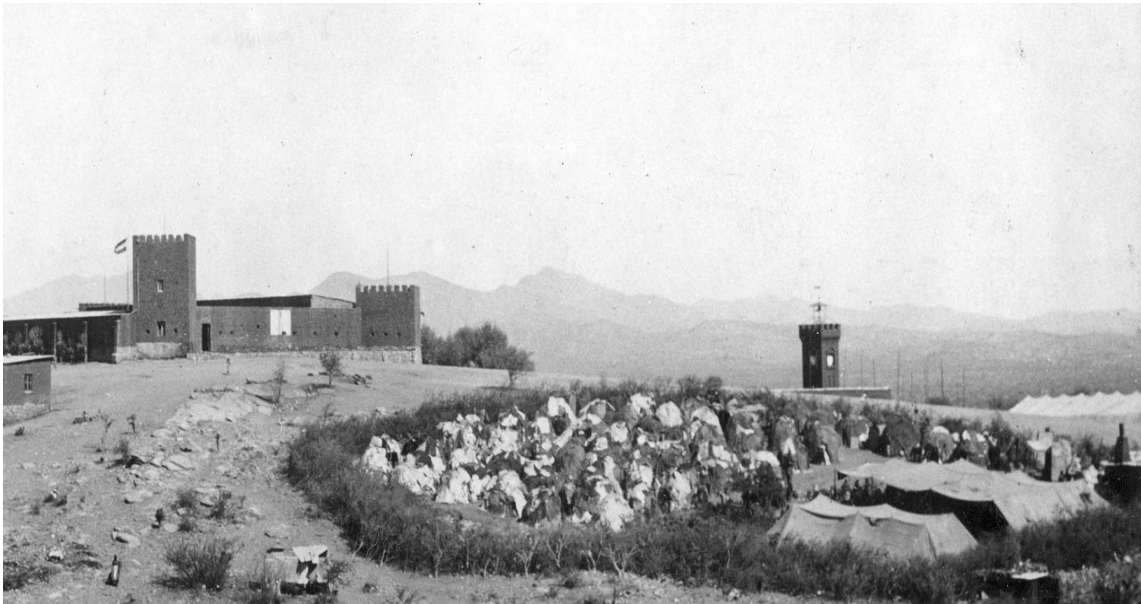


Photo 1.8 The Windhoek camp around 1906/07

The below over-exposed image either shows the Alte Feste Camp from yet another angle, or it is a picture of Windhoek's second camp found close to today's Windhoek Central Hospital.¹⁸⁶ Like the *Alte Feste* Camp, a thick belt of thorn-bushes surrounded the camp. In the foreground was an almost vertical Windhoek aloe tree, indicating that the camp was placed on a slanted hillside, although this does not give any further clues as to which camp this might possibly have been, seeing as both locations are hilly.¹⁸⁷ To the right of the camp appears to have been an open space, which could have been used for assemblies and the like. The thorn-bush continued out of the image and it is therefore assumed that the open space where are seen women and children was part of the closed camp and as such the entire camp is a lot bigger than the section depicted in the image. In the background is seen an entrance with a square structure next to it, which presumably is the structure that housed the camps guards.

¹⁸⁶ As relayed by the father of present Herero Paramount Riruako in an interview with the author.

¹⁸⁷ Had the photographer merely framed the picture skewly, the aloe tree would also have tilted to the left.



Photo 1.9 A Windhoek concentration camp, ca. 1906/07

Another interesting aspect of the picture is the fact that apart from the soldier, only one other man is present; the rest of the image portrays women and children. Suggesting this to have been Windhoek is only the topography and a solid iron spike that is drilled into the ground (bottom right). Such spikes were used as large pegs for military tents like the ones seen on the larger pictures of the *Alte Feste* Camp (photo 1.8).

At its peak, the Windhoek concentration camps housed as many as 7000 prisoners,¹⁸⁸ which was an incredibly high number in a town with infrastructure built to cater for a civilian population of around 2,500 people. The concentration camp population, estimated at an average of 5,000 people,¹⁸⁹ therefore outnumbered the German population in Windhoek by 100 percent and at times more. It would be fair to assume that the infrastructure in Windhoek, especially in term of sanitation, availability of medical facilities and foodstuff, would have struggled to cope with the large amount of people in the colonial capital. It would be equally likely that the local community and military would go to no extra lengths to cater for prisoners – as

¹⁸⁸ Sanitaets-Bericht, p. 129.

¹⁸⁹ Sanitaets-Bericht, p. 129.

already indicated in Trotha's initial memo about the camps.¹⁹⁰ Similarly in the Osona camp at Okahandja, a commander told Missionary Eich that nothing would be done for the bulk of sick prisoners. According to the commander only those strong enough to survive were deemed useful, a form of social Darwinism. Eich wrote: "[the commander] recently told me that he is under orders only to seek out strong people for His Majesty."¹⁹¹ Assuming a similar philosophy was applied in other camps, the facilities in Windhoek would therefore at best have been rudimentary with little or no sanitary facilities or, presumably, any other facilities of mention.

Lack of sanitary facilities, generally miserable living conditions (see photo 1.10) and the large concentration of people in a confined area were among the main causes of the rapid spread of disease in Windhoek's camps – as indeed it were in the other camps around the colony as well. Yet although it is obvious that the spread of disease in the camps could be stemmed, if not averted, by improving conditions and facilities this did largely not happen. Concerns were exclusively directed at the potential health risk posed by the camps for the town's white population.¹⁹² Rather than improving camp facilities to keep prisoners healthy, Government spent its resources trying to reduce contact between the prisoners and Windhoek's white population in order to minimise the latter's risk of infection with contagious diseases.¹⁹³

The initial approaches for trying to stem the flow of disease into white quarters was to further fence in and guard prisoners. This containment policy restricted mobility to and from the camp in order to prevent white infections but at the same time kept sick prisoners in the same compounds as healthy prisoners, causing disease to spread like wildfire. Moreover, the strategy of fencing in sick prisoners did not pay off in terms of preventing white infections. During the day, a number of prisoners were taken in to town, where they were used as washing ladies, domestic helpers and labourers in general.¹⁹⁴ During such interactions it was not uncommon for prisoners to be forced into sexual intercourse with soldiers and settlers,¹⁹⁵ as noted by a concentration camp survivor:

"Many of our in this way deported wives and daughters later returned either pregnant or with a child from a white man. This obligation to go and work for the white man was not a government

¹⁹⁰ BKE 221, B.II.74.c, pp.33-34.

¹⁹¹ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund 1-7, Eich to Vedder, June 19, 1905.

¹⁹² The Colonial Government was seated within immediate proximity of the main camp, which may have influenced this fear.

¹⁹³ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 139.

¹⁹⁴ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 139.

¹⁹⁵ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 140.

ordinance but white men came to the kraals [Camps] and just gave the order – take you blanket and come; and we had no choice.”¹⁹⁶

It should be noted that although it was not initially a government ‘ordinance’ for prisoners to work for the local community, in mid June 1905 it became legal for government and the military to rent out prisoners to local persons and businesses.¹⁹⁷ The casual use of prisoners for purposes of sex, however, was so rife that the official medical report of the war, the so-called *Sanitaets-Berich*, described sexually transmitted diseases as a major threat to Windhoek’s white population. The exhaustive report, which was compiled by the military wing of the Colonial Department, stated that:

“The frequent [occurrence] of sexually transmitted diseases among the ‘natives’ constituted a continuous danger for the troops and consequently numerous victims were claimed by the sexually transmitted diseases in the larger localities with many troops such as, for example, Windhuk [sic.] in spite of the many precautions taken against this [happening].”¹⁹⁸



Photo 1.10 Life inside a concentration camp

¹⁹⁶ Steenkamp, p. 12.

¹⁹⁷ BKE 224, B.II.74.d, Spec. I, Vol. 2, pp. 18 and 26.

¹⁹⁸ *Sanitaets-Bericht*, p. 140.

Okahandja's Osona camp

The Osona camp in Okahandja had initially been set up by General von Trotha before the battle at Ohamakari on August 11, 1904 and remained a major camp throughout the war years. Osona camp was actually comprised of a number of separate camps, all of which were out of bounds for non-military or otherwise essential personnel. In all there were around 2000 Herero prisoners and five different camps in Okahandja around July 1905.

Between January 18 and 29, 1906 Inspector Spiecker of the Rhenish Mission was given access to the Osona camp as part of his tour of the colony. According to Spiecker, Osona camp was now composed of only four different camps, or Kraals as he termed them – a word usually relating to enclosures for cattle. The number of prisoners must therefore have gone down between July 1905 and January 1906, thereby also reducing the number of smaller camps from five to four. The most likely reason for the reduction was, like other camps, linked to labour needs on the railway projects in the colony.

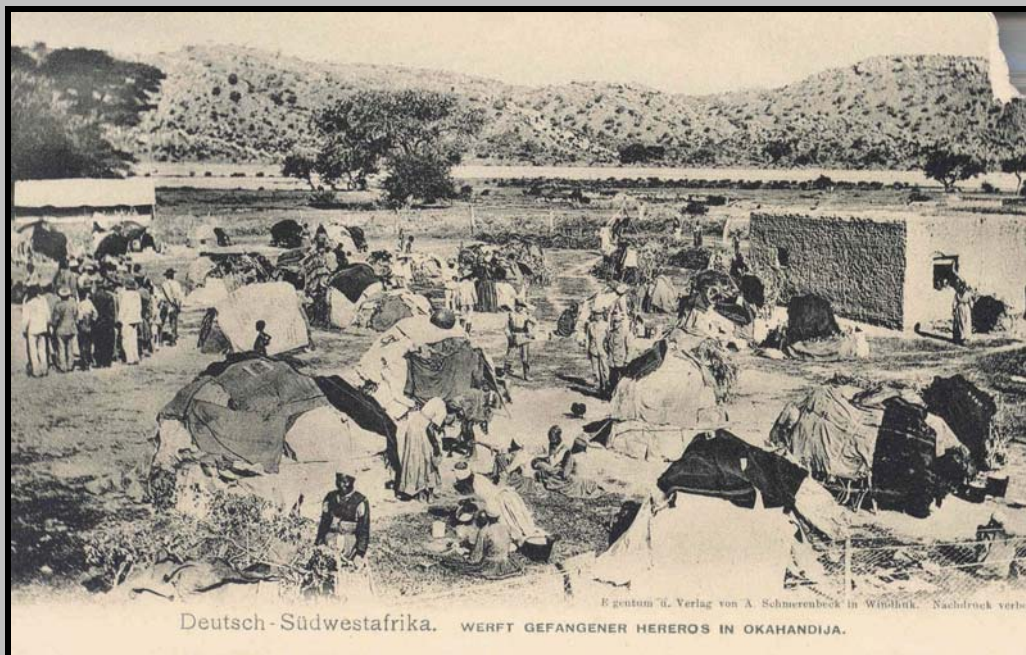
Spiecker described the four camps in the following manner:

Camp 1: was run by the Rhenish Mission and was erected for the *Unfaehige* [the 'unworkable']. This camp contained mainly young children.

Camp 2: was the main POW camp and as such was heavily guarded by the military. The camp had between 800 and 900 prisoners.

Camp 3: was the so-called *Lazarett* Camp, which held sick or dying prisoners. The prisoners were miserable according to Spiecker, who did not mention the presence of any medical staff or doctors.

Camp 4: was the Police Camp and housed a couple of hundred free 'natives', mostly Damara.



Source: Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 73, Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 189.

Photo: German postcard.

There was invariably continuous contact between the German population and the prisoners, which eventually had the much-feared result of diseases spreading – presumably both ways, i.e. soldiers would surely also pass on sexually transmitted diseases to prisoners. Following the predictable failure of the containment policy, the strategy was eventually abandoned in favour of a so-called ‘native hospital’.¹⁹⁹ This quasi-medical facility consisted of a number of kraals that were organised so as to separate prisoners with different types of diseases. It was assembled in November/December 1905 next to Windhoek’s second camp (close to today’s Windhoek Central Hospital).²⁰⁰ The medical facilities comprised mainly of open military tents as well as huts made from wood, sacks or corrugated iron. The entire facility was surrounded with thorn-bush fencing. According to the plan of the ‘native field hospital’, the largest section of the compound was devoted to free ‘native’ women and as such the facility had to be shared with the 4000 strong population of Damara and Owambo workers residing in the town.²⁰¹

In spite of the new medical facilities for the African communities in Windhoek, deaths were still a daily phenomenon. A 1907 mortality statistic pointed out that the highest number of deaths in the Windhoek camps occurred in September 1906, with a human tally of 252.²⁰² In other words, more than eight people would die on a given day in September 1906 in the Windhoek camps.

General conditions in the concentration camps

There were numerous smaller and lesser concentration camps in the colony. Some pertained to private businesses such as the Woermann company and others to government related projects such as railway construction, which saw several thousands of Herero ‘accommodated’ in “Railway Concentration Labour Camps”.²⁰³ The biggest, however, were the military-run government camps that had been placed strategically in the colony, relative to labour needs in five main localities: Windhoek, Okahandja and Karibib in the interior, as well as Swakopmund and Lüderitz at the coast.

Prisoners in concentration camps would typically be fenced in, either by thorn-bush fences or by barbed wire. Just like the word concentration implies, thousands of people were cramped into small areas where they were encouraged to build so-

¹⁹⁹ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 140.

²⁰⁰ Sanitaets-Bericht. pp. 140-141.

²⁰¹ Sanitaets-Bericht. p. 142.

²⁰² Reichs-Kolonial-Amt, File 2140, KAII 1181, Eing. 24 March 1908, p. 161. “In the Windhoek prisoner camp the largest number of deaths occurred in September 1906, with 252 dead in that month.”

²⁰³ South Africa, Union of, p. 103.

called ‘Pontoks’, or round huts, if the material was available; as already seen in the Windhoek Camps, large numbers of prisoners were also accommodated in sizeable military tents.

The German *Sanitaets-Bericht*, which, *inter alia*, dealt with prisoner mortality, noted that scurvy, pneumonia, influenza, syphilis and other STDs were the main causes of death in the camps. The report did not offer any in-depth explanation for this rapid and continuous increase in deadly diseases and, moreover, did not engage with the issue of potential government culpability in the many deaths. Instead the *Sanitaets-Bericht* and other reports often repeated that high death rates were a result of prisoners’ already weakened state, usually caused by disease acquired before entering the camps.²⁰⁴

There is a lot of truth to the claim that people entered the camp in a weakened state. Many months of war, suffering both mental and physical trauma as well as enduring time-consuming and strenuous transportation through dense, arid country would invariably have taken its toll on prisoners.²⁰⁵ Missionary Dannert in Omaruru was clearly shaken at the state of the POWs arriving in the town in mid 1905. In a letter to the monthly newsletter of the Rhenish Mission, he described prisoners arriving as being skeletons covered only by thin film of skin and he wondered how in fact they had ever made it as far as Omaruru.²⁰⁶ Dannert described the misery to be unlike anything he had ever experienced and was deeply moved by dying mothers trying to keep their children alive.²⁰⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that people were in a poor state upon arrival in the camps, the conditions that awaited them were dire to the extent that few would actually recuperate. Moreover, rations were of such insufficient nutritious value that basic self-sustenance, even for healthy prisoners, was difficult. According to an official rations list issued February 1906,²⁰⁸ prisoners were to be given ½ kg of canned meat or flour, ½ kg of rice or flour and 0,030 kg of salt per day – with the addition that meat should only be given twice a week at most, insofar as it was given at all. This meant that POWs, who incidentally were listed just above mules and horse on the ration list, could risk receiving a solid kilogram of flour and 30 grams of salt as their daily sustenance.

Rice was the most common foodstuff provided to prisoners, a fact accountable for a large percentage of overall deaths in the camps. In missionary correspondence

²⁰⁴ *Sanitaets-Bericht*, p. 144

²⁰⁵ *Sanitaets-Bericht*, p. 140.

²⁰⁶ *Missions-Berichte*, 1905, p. 138.

²⁰⁷ *Missions-Berichte*, 1905, p. 138.

²⁰⁸ ZBU 455, D.IC.1.3, Vol. 3, pp. 44-45.

and the mission newsletter rice was repeatedly singled out as one of the main causes of ‘scurvy’²⁰⁹ among prisoners.²¹⁰ The cause and cure of scurvy were not yet known in 1906, and many of the symptoms described, could well have been simple malnutrition. This would correspond well with the fact that rice was a complete enigma to the prisoners, who had no knowledge of how to prepare the foodstuff. The high fibre content of rice was surely also too much for the stomachs of the Hereros who had been starving in the Omaheke and who were accustomed to a diet of milk and meat. To make matters worse, rice was delivered raw and uncooked to prisoners, who, in the case of Swakopmund, had only few pots to cook their rations in -an insufficient amount for the more than 1000 prisoners.²¹¹ In Karibib Missionary Elger reflected on the diet of the POWs, writing:

“... In Karibib [1905]...accommodation was very primitive and the food was also very insufficient... Rice and flour was in abundance, but nothing lighter than that.”²¹²

In Swakopmund, Missionary Vedder wrote to his colleagues that prisoners were unable to cope with the provisions provided to them, stating:

“... people suffer their daily meal of rice, which due to the lack of pots is very difficult to prepare... hundreds are breaking down due to the lack of nutrition and are dying.”²¹³

From the very beginning of the concentration camps strategy, missionary Vedder and his colleagues were actively trying to lobby government for better rations to the prisoners. Although many took the attitude that what can be done is being done, missionary Vedder was more proactive in his approach. He wrote a long letter to the mission headquarters spelling out conditions in the Swakopmund camp, asking for food and clothes to be sent from Germany.²¹⁴ Vedder and his colleagues did, however, not manage to convince government to change provisions for prisoners.

The camps would have been, and according to the statistics they were, the last stop for prisoners who had endured: a) war against a superior colonial force; b) escape and starvation; c) internment in a range of collection or other concentration camps; d) weeks of transport through rough country; e) insufficient provisions; f) and psychological if not physical violence exerted on them by the colonial force. There is therefore every reason to assume that many if not most prisoners arriving in the camps were already in a suppressed physical state.

²⁰⁹ It is not certain that scurvy was the actual cause of death for prisoners, although the Colonial Government often blamed the disease.

²¹⁰ NAN, Accession 569, ‘Memoirs of Pastor Elger’.

²¹¹ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 140.

²¹² NAN, Accession 569, ‘Memoirs of Pastor Elger’.

²¹³ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 140.

²¹⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 86.

Once in the camps, the chances of being infected by new diseases or succumbing to already acquired ones was multiplied manifold. An almost total lack of medical attention, unhygienic living quarters, insufficient clothing and high concentration of people meant that these diseases were given optimal conditions for spreading.

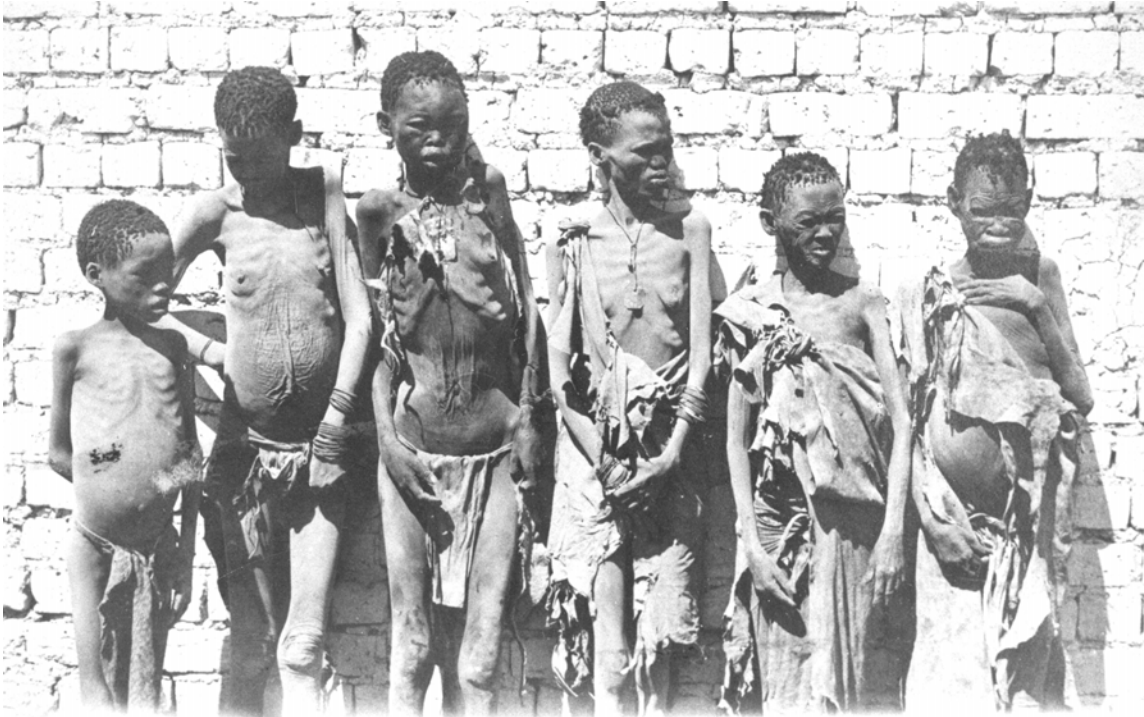


Photo 1.11 San and/or Nama prisoners severely abused and lined up for the camera

The worst cases were the camps in the two coastal towns of Lüderitz and Swakopmund where climatic conditions played an added part in the spread of disease. The southern part of the Atlantic Ocean is known for its rough seas, icy temperatures and strong winds. Even if the wind were to shift and blow from the east it could result in an equally taxing sandstorm and should the wind die down, a humid mist would descend on the coastal towns. Climatic factors could therefore easily have contributed to prisoner mortality.

Climatic conditions were shared with the local German population, but, there was a distinct difference in as much as the prisoners had no access to proper housing, food nor clothing to shelter them from the elements and save them from sickness. Moreover, local Germans were accustomed to the severe conditions that generally were a lot milder than German weather. The vast majority, if not all, of the

Herero, Nama, and San prisoners²¹⁵ had never set foot on the coast before and were simply not used to the cold climate and the high humidity. The average humidity in Windhoek was measured at 30%, which, when compared to Swakopmund's annual average of 80%, would seem significant.²¹⁶ To make things even worse, the coast at Swakopmund was infested with flies in the years of the camps, making life even more unpleasant and spreading of disease that much more likely.²¹⁷

The in-land camps were also prone to disease. Temperatures in the Namibian hinterland are generally higher than at the coast, but even Windhoek experiences temperatures below freezing during the winter. At the time of the camps the average low for the month of June was estimated to be -2.5²¹⁸. This means that temperatures could well have been responsible for deaths in the hinterland too. Overall, however, climatic conditions were a minor contributing factor to the high death rates, as evident in the fact that Africans living and working at the coast before the wars were not in the same way prone terminal illness.

As was the case in the South African camps during the Boer War,²¹⁹ the rapid spread of contagious diseases in the concentration camps was a result of the close contact with fellow prisoners. The fact that prisoners would have brought viral infections with them into the camps meant that those incarcerated were at high risk. Another factor in towns with concentration camps were the ephemeral populations, i.e. the high influx of soldiers, traders and settlers passing through or staying for only short periods of time, who inevitably brought various viral and other diseases with them, a number of these sexually transmittable.

According to most sources dealing with disease in the colony, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) were a major problem. The high number of single men, constituted by soldiers, seamen, and traders were inevitably the main catalysts of the spread of STDs. In Karibib, Missionary Elger described the occurrence of a mystery illness first thought to have been malaria. After numerous laboratory tests, however, it was established that this was a disease of a much different nature, namely venereal

²¹⁵ There is photographic evidence to suggest that a number of San were also being held in the camps. See Zeller in Zeller and Zimmerer (eds.), p. 51. See also photo 1.11 in this chapter. There is evidence that a number of Oshiwambo-speaking migrant workers from the North were also employed in Swakopmund at the time. Eriola, pp. 213-215.

²¹⁶ Having been measured between 1899 and 1905, these figures are contemporary to the camps. Sanitaets-Bericht, pp. 48-49.

²¹⁷ Sanitaets-Bericht, p. 49.

²¹⁸ Sanitaets-Bericht, p. 49.

²¹⁹ Oakes, p. 256.

typhoid.²²⁰ Attesting the sexual interaction between soldiers and prisoners, Elger related that ‘whites’ were at great risk of infection:

“Then the infamous Army Doctor Kuhn came to tell us – as did others – that it wasn’t malaria, but rather the nasty STD venereal typhoid. Sadly, the epidemic soon grew worse and claimed more victims. The situation was very serious. It wasn’t only the native locations that were affected. The whites and the troops passing by were also at great risk of infection... We therefore built *Pontoken* close to our own quarters and took the sick [prisoners] there... At that time we didn’t think that this work fighting against typhoid, dysentery, scurvy, TB, smallpox and other diseases would continue for another three years. Sometimes we had more than forty people to look after at a time. Up to 20 people at a time were placed in the ever-expanding *Pontoken*. Of course the accommodation was very primitive and the food was also very insufficient.”²²¹

According to Elger there was no hospital for the prisoners to be taken to and as such the onus was passed on to the missionaries. Initially missionaries Vedder and Elger worked together in Karibib to help treat and care for the many sick, but Vedder eventually went on to Swakopmund, where he continued his work among the prisoners. As indicated by Elger, conditions in the improvised hospital were far from ideal and subsequently the missionary was fighting a losing battle.

Both Swakopmund and Windhoek²²² had so called ‘native field hospitals’ [Eingeborene Lazarett], which served local native populations, including concentration camp prisoners. These facilities were only introduced in late 1905, i.e. a year after the introduction of the concentration camp system, and as already seen in the Windhoek ‘native hospital’, they were not adequately equipped to deal with the health crises resulting from camp internment and related health risks. In the camps at Okahandja and Karibib, like in the above example, medical facilities usually consisted of makeshift structures and were manned by missionaries with their local assistants. Both would not have had much if any medical knowledge, and would in all fairness probably have been stretched to cope with the severity of the situation (Map 1.3).²²³

Unlike the Windhoek arrangement, where the white hospital and the ‘native’ *Lazarett* sickbay were kept separate, the ‘white’ and ‘black’ hospitals in Swakopmund had shared premises – not facilities. A map of the Swakopmund Field

²²⁰ NAN, Accession 569, ‘Memoirs of Pastor Elger’.

²²¹ NAN, Accession 569, ‘Memoirs of Pastor Elger’.

²²² The Shark Island camp in Lüderitz had its own medical facility, which will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 2.

²²³ “Who would take over the hard work of controlling the epidemic and providing treatment and care for the natives? The missionary of course!” NAN, Accession 569, “Memoirs of Pastor Elger (RMS) in Karibib, 1904-06”.

Notwithstanding that a minute part of the entire compound was allocated to 'natives', which would seem consistent with the overall distribution of resources during and after the war, the placement of the allotted section was highly problematic. First of all, African patients were placed immediately next to the horse stables with no fence to separate the two. Secondly, a sewerage line [*Abwasserleitung*] also flanked this section of the compound. Ironically, the Swakopmund *Lazarett* would probably have posed a high risk of bacterial or viral infections for patients in the 'native' section.

In fact prisoners' health seems not to have had a very high priority altogether. At the coastal towns of Swakopmund and Lüderitz, bacteriological laboratories, whose main purpose was to determine the cause, type and possible cure of the many viruses in the colony, were set up. As Brigitte Lau points out, the German army suffered greatly from typhoid and other viruses,²²⁴ a fact that resulted in increased research of these diseases. Seeking to stem rapid infection of the German troops, colonial authorities imported specialist doctors and medication to research the disease and heal the troops.²²⁵ In Swakopmund the drainpipe of the bacteriological laboratory, which was placed inside the field hospital, led bacteriological waste straight through the 'native' section, adding a further source of possible infection to a growing list of contaminants.

In view of the mortalities in the Swakopmund and Windhoek camps,²²⁶ medical facilities for prisoners, to the extent that there were any, were inadequate and prisoners' health on the whole was evidently not highly prioritised.

Women and children

Neither the Herero nor the Nama wars can be categorised as actual confrontations between conventional armies. Both the Herero and Nama campaigns were characterised by attacks on German interests in the territory, undertaken by small groups of guerrilla fighters, who were trying to fend off what they would have perceived as an alien force in their country. Their guerrilla-style warfare was conducted with small, highly flexible units because mobility was of paramount importance for the success and security of the swift attacks. To be accompanied by a large group of non-combatant women, children, elderly and infirm therefore posed a considerable risk

²²⁴ Lau: 1995, p. 48

²²⁵ Saneitates Bericht, p. 19.

²²⁶ BAB, Reichs-Kolonial-Amt, KAI 1181, Eing. 24 March 1908, p. 161.

Swakopmund

It was altogether unhealthy being a prisoner in Swakopmund. Uncommon climate, general maltreatment and forced labour were all part of daily existence in the Swakopmund concentration camp. The camp, which was operated by the military, was made up of corrugated iron sheets and had at first been placed on polluted soil at the northern entrance of the town, close to the railway station. Later on, however, it was moved to a so-far unknown location nearer to the beach.

In May and June of 1905 large death rates in Swakopmund alarmed missionaries, who started petitioning the Colonial Government. Especially Missionaries Eich and Kuhlmann were very vocal. They wrote directly to General von Trotha, asking him to send back the Hereros to the areas they originally came from before “they are completely destroyed”. Their argument was that the cold climate at the coast would continue to claim victims if action was not taken to move the prisoners. This did not happen. With their limited means the missionaries were instead forced to ease a pain they did not have the cure for. They tried to tend for the sick, offer blessings and, more than anything, conducted funerals.



Child from the military concentration camp lying dead or dying on the beach of Swakopmund, clinging to the raggedy bag that was the camp ‘uniform’

Sources:

Missions-Berichte: June, 1905, p. 131, Sanitaets-bericht: 1909, Vol. 1, Estorff: 1996, Zeller: 2001.
Photo courtesy of Joachim Zeller.

for guerrilla fighters. This was especially true in the Nama wars where fighters often had to leave non-combatants behind. Where possible, the non-combatants would be led into British territory in the Cape or in southern Bechuanaland where it was hoped that they would be safe.²²⁷ When it was not possible to lead families into safety they were left behind, presumably in the hope that the German patrols would treat them as non-combatants.

In spite of the early promise by the Kaiser and von Bülow that women and children should be cared for by the missionaries, this obviously did not materialise. Instead all Herero and Nama, whether man, woman or child, were all sent to the concentration camps. Ostensibly it was done because the Colonial Government was trying not to separate families²²⁸ but in reality it probably had more to do with the labour potential constituted by women and children. Moreover, both women and children were regarded as prisoners-of-war and were treated to the same sub-human conditions and unpaid forced labour as combatant and non-combatant men. Photographic evidence suggests that it was common practise in the colony to have women do hard labour, especially, as described in one source,²²⁹ moving heavy loads with their bare hands:

“The loads ... are out of all proportion to their strength. I have often seen women and children dropping down, especially when engaged on this work, and also when carrying very heavy bags of grain, weighing from 100 to 160lbs.”²³⁰

A statistic describing the total number of *Kriegsgefangenen* on July 25, 1906 gives a total of 17,018 prisoners-of-war, scattered in camps around the colony.²³¹ Incidentally this figure included some of the prisoners employed by the rail companies and the collection camps, but it completely excluded prisoners kept in Shark Island camp, Keetmanshoop and the *Bondelslokation* by Warmbad. The breakdown of the given figures was as follows:

Total number of men	Total number of women	Total number of children
4870	7084	5064

²²⁷ “Perhaps my poor people may come into your country for the sake of water but that is not my meaning for them to come across your line but if they do I ask you to let them have water at Tsana for my poor women and children my intention is to go back and fight again”. KAB [766: 141], Hendrik Witbooi dated 10th May, 1905 to Bechuanaland Protectorate Police in High Commissioner to Mr Lyttelton, 4th September, 1905.

²²⁸ BKE 224, B.II.74.d. Spec. Vol 2, p. 331, p. 18.

²²⁹ South African transport Riders in GSWA interviewed by the Cape Argus, September 28, 1905.

²³⁰ Cape Argus, September 28, 1905.

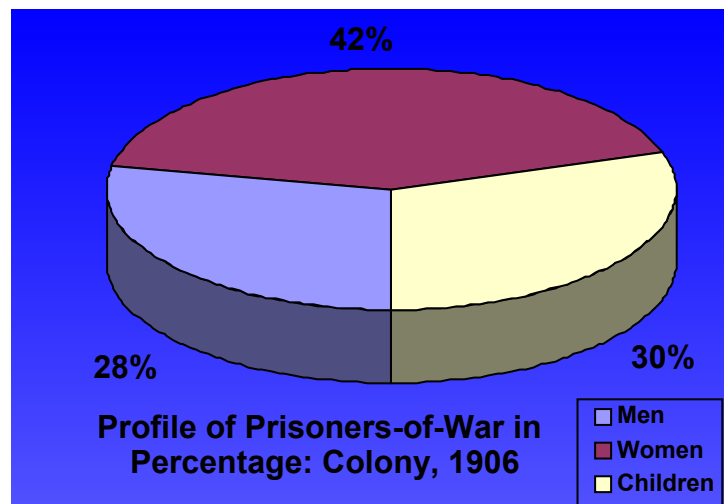
²³¹ ZBU 454, D.IV.1.3. Vol 2, 18 August 1906, p. 305.

According to the figures, more than two-thirds of the total number of prisoners-of-war were women and children. Consequently women constituted the biggest demographic group being held in concentration camps and, in fact, men constituted the smallest demographic group. In the larger camps, according to the same statistic, the margin was even bigger. Windhoek figures described a total of 5183 prisoners in July 1906, with 1325 men against 2221 women – 25% men and 43% women. In Okahandja 1431 prisoners were 51% female and only 16% male.

The obvious conclusion to draw on the gender disparity in the camps would be that men were used more for heavy construction on the railway, and therefore not confined to the camps. This was, however, not the case. The cited number was a total figure of female and male prisoners-of-war, which included prisoners working on government projects and for private companies such as Firma Lenz (the company charged with construction of the embankment for the railroad in the South) as well as the military. It must therefore be the conclusion that gender disparity was a general trend.



Photo 1.12 Women forced to labour



Perhaps the missionaries had recruited more women than men in the collection camps or, even worse, maybe fewer men were actually alive in July 1906. One could speculate that with soaring death rates throughout 1904, 05 and 06, men might have suffered a higher mortality because of supposedly tougher work conditions. Yet in Windhoek the numbers for female mortality in July 1906 were 90 women compared to 59 men.²³² Considering the higher number of women in the camps, these numbers would describe an almost even mortality ratio. For the sake of comparison the official statistics relating to Shark Island prisoners officially registered 460 female deaths and 496 male deaths among the Nama prisoners (excluding children) – also about even figures.²³³ Whatever the reason for the disparate ratio of women and men, the reason for the similar mortality rates must simply have been that women were worked as hard as men and therefore also suffered the consequences equally.

There are numerous accounts of female prisoners as well as children being put to work in the camps. Attesting to the fact are three affidavits from so-called Cape Boys (a derogatory term referring to migrant labourers from the Cape) that were presented to the Cape Governor in August 1906. The three ‘Capetonians’ had worked in Swakopmund for seven months and were evidently shocked at the conditions in the concentration camps. The migrant labourers explained:

“These unfortunate [POW] women are daily compelled to carry heavy iron for construction work, also big stacks of compressed fodder. I have often noticed cases where women have fallen under the load and have been made to go on by being thrashed and kicked by the soldiers and conductors. The rations supplied to the women are insufficient and they are made to cook the

²³² ZBU 454, D.IV.L.3, Vol. 2, p. 305

²³³ ZBU 456, D.IV.L.3, Vol. 5, p. 135.

food themselves. They are always hungry, and we, labourers from the Cape Colony, have frequently thrown food into their camp. The women in many cases are not properly clothed. It is a common thing to see women going about in public almost naked. Have also noticed that ... old women are also made to work and are constantly kicked and thrashed by soldiers. This treatment is meted out in the presence of the German officers, and I have never noticed any officers interfering.”²³⁴

The descriptions are consistent with numerous eyewitness accounts of the camps. One example is from the late 1930's when an interview was conducted with a group of Herero elders, who were described by the interviewer as “men of intelligence.”²³⁵ Memories of the latter were consistent with information related here and irrefutably close to the above affidavits and other sources in its description of women forced to labour:

“... we were placed by the Germans in Kraals. [Here]...our people suffered terribly from cold. No sanitation had been provided for, so that disease soon broke out, especially amongst the women folk... The food especially was very bad. Not only was it insufficient but also consisted of a nature that we did not know and was mostly rice. Then our bodies began to swell ... and our gums started to bleed... Under all this we had to do hard labour, even the women having to pull wagons and carry heavy loads of ammunition on the head.”²³⁶

There is no evidence to suggest that women and children took physically part in the war, apart from possibly shouting words of encouragement at the battle of the Waterberg,²³⁷ and yet it is obvious that the German military did not make any gender distinctions when taking supposed prisoner-of-war. Ultimately the biggest demographic group among POWs in the colony was women, who were subjected to the same conditions in as male prisoners and moreover also had to endure sexual abuse. As a result, thousands of Herero women died as German prisoners-of-war.

Conclusion

The German military under Trotha carried out a stated campaign of extermination against the Herero nation. Central to this campaign was a no-prisoners policy made official on October 2nd, 1904 at the waterhole of Osombo-Windimbe. In December 1904, the no-prisoners policy was changed, forcing the local government to also change its practise of on-the-spot executions. Instead an official policy of setting up concentration camps was implemented.

²³⁴ KAB, GH 23/97, “Statement under oath by: Jack Seti, John Culayo and James Tolibadi”, Ministers to Governor, 22nd August, 1906.

²³⁵ Steenkamp, p. 12.

²³⁶ Steenkamp, p. 12.

²³⁷ Pool: 1991, p. 275.

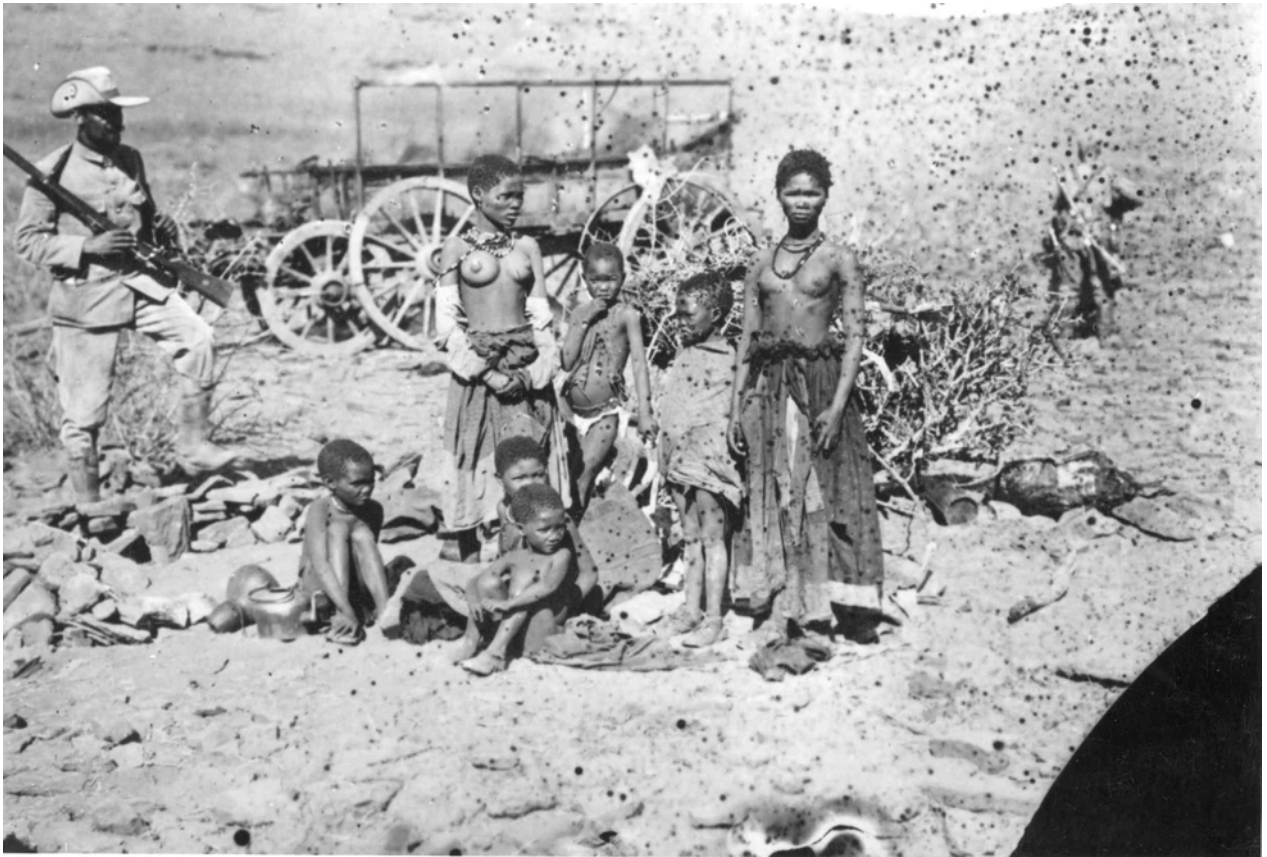


Photo 1.13 Children and young women captured by the *Schutztruppe*. The girls' dresses have been ripped off to expose their breasts. In the background is a burning wagon

The purpose of the concentration camps, *inter alia*, related to the provision of labour for a range of private and government projects and enterprises. Collection raids were therefore launched by Trotha's troops, at times with the aid of local missionaries, to 'flush' out Hereros from the bush. These raids were carried out with excessive force, reminiscent of the implementation of the previous months' extermination order and at times resulted in violent massacres.

With the departure of Trotha and the arrival of Governor Lindequist, the concentration camps policy was escalated. A collection campaign relying heavily on the complicity of the mission resulted in the voluntary and involuntary internment of close to 12,000 Hereros from the bush, all of whom were declared prisoners-of-war, even though they had been collected in the name of peace. These prisoners joined

Bambusen



Although several children stayed and often died in the concentration camps, many were also taken by the troops to serve as menservants. These children in the hands of the army were called *Bambusenkinden* and were mostly made up of boys between the ages of 8 and 14 years. Children of this specific age were preferred due to their work potential. Whereas children below 8 years had no value as menservants, in being simply too young to fully comprehend instructions, older children were considered able to perform hard physical labour and were therefore handed over to government or to settlers.

In November 1906, for example, Deputy Governor Hintrager allocated 32 children between 8 and 12 years of age to the colonial army. These children had all come from Shark Island and were described as members of the Witbooi community. Although the children's lives were probably saved as a result of Hintrager's action, their new lives as menservants would have been both physically and mentally taxing, if not damaging. They were taken away from their parents, who were left to die on the island and instead found themselves in the hands of soldiers, who were not known for their empathy towards prisoners. Also, some of the *Bambusen* were girls and it is impossible not to consider the sexual implications related to this situation. Soldiers were often traumatised men, who were stuck in the Namibian wilderness for months at a time, usually drinking heavily. Moreover, German soldiers were known to take sexual advantage of prisoners in the camps.

Settlers would also make use of the *Bambusen* concept and the popular practise was even continued after the war. Consequently, there was an entire generation of Herero, Nama and also San children in the hands of the troops and settlers between 1904 and 1915.



Sources: ZBU 465, D.IV.m.3, Vol. 1, p. 178.; ADM 137, file 6.c.; ZBU 2024, W.III.a.3; Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 206; Gewalt: 1996, p. 252 ; Hintrager: 1955 (on alcohol). Photos: NAN 04950 and 10861.

the many Hereros, who had been collected under Trotha in the military and private entrainment camps around the colony and who were here forced to live, work and in many cases die under subhuman conditions.

Prisoners, of whom at least 70% were women and children, were deprived of their humanity in being subjected to beatings, rape and in being made to prostitute themselves in these camps. Prisoners were, moreover, forced by barbed wire or thorn bush to stay huddled together like animals in areas without sanitation. Thousands died under these conditions, a fact exacerbated by the rampant spread of disease in the camps, climatic conditions as well as a monotonous and insufficient diet. There are no indications that the Colonial Government had any regard for the general condition among prisoners nor that significant measures were taken at any level to curb the high death rates.

Prisoners were entirely the responsibility of the colonial administration.²³⁸ The POWs were not afforded any means of improving their own respective situations and they were therefore totally at the mercy of the Colonial Government, which must subsequently be singled out as the responsible party in the mass dying of African prisoners between 1904 and 1908.

²³⁸ ZBU 154, A. IV.a.3, p. 203.

“The Island of death”



Introduction

Although the history of the Shark Island concentration camp in Lüderitz is largely unknown, it is often singled out when reference is made to the Namibian concentration camps.¹ Shark Island's main significance to the historiography of the 1904-1908 wars has been its infamy, which almost entirely relies on a few pages devoted to the island in Drechsler's *Let Us Die Fighting*.² In as much as Shark Island already

¹ Oermann, p. 112; Nuhn:2000, pp. 267-269; Lau: 1995, p. 45;
www.fdj.de/infportal/dbz/I_1897_1907.html, p. 9; Patemann, p. 122; Zimmerer, pp. 290-293.

² Drechsler, pp. 211-214.

has a place in the Namibian genocide debate, this chapters seeks to present a more in-depth narrative of Shark Island in particular and Lüderitz in general between 1904 and 1908. What was Shark Island? Who were there and why?

Lüderitz 1883 to 1908

The history of Lüderitz is intrinsically linked to the founding of the colony of German South West Africa. It was in this little anchorage that Heinrich Vogelsang, the emissary of Bremen-based businessman Adolf Lüderitz, first landed on April 10, 1883.³ Apart from the English possession of Walvis Bay, the anchorage, known then simply as Angra Pequena, was the best of few other sizeable natural harbour on the coast of the territory between Portuguese Angola and British South Africa, and therefore a logical beachhead for German colonial aspirations in the territory. Upon arrival Vogelsang sought out local leader Joseph Fredericks, the *Kaptein* of the Bethanie community, and entered into negotiations with him about leasing the land. Ultimately Fredericks was swindled into signing over a territory reaching 20 geographical miles (150 km.) inland, instead of the 20 miles (32 km.) of desert he thought he had leased out.⁴ A year later, (April 24, 1884) Chancellor Bismarck declared that the territory would henceforth be a protectorate under the German Reich.⁵

After having visited the protectorate that he had so slyly facilitated, Adolf Lüderitz perished at sea off the coast of southern Namibia in 1886. Angra Pequena was subsequently renamed Lüderitzbucht (Lüderitz Bay)⁶ in honour of the colonial pioneer.

After formal colonisation of the territory, Lüderitz grew very slowly parallel to the arrival of German officials, soldiers and settlers. Whereas the other main coastal town, Swakopmund, had become the main entry point for arrivals to the more populated centre of the colony, Lüderitz's main importance was as a gateway to the southern parts of GSWA. With the outbreak of the southern War in late 1904, Lüderitz grew in strategic importance and thousands of troops were sent to the south, passing through the Lüderitz harbour. As a result the town, which was picturesquely flanked by desert and ocean, now boasted several hotels, bars, brothels, a mission, railway links to the interior as well as military and administrative installations by 1907. As the first Namibian town, Lüderitz even had its own

³ Baericke, p. 20.

⁴ Drechsler, pp. 22-24

⁵ Drechsler, p. 22.

⁶ The name Lüderitzbucht is interchangeable with the shortened Lüderitz.

generator, but the electric supply was initially reserved for military installations as, for example, on Shark Island and for lighting up the main street.⁷ The town had grown from a small colonial outpost to a sizeable modern turn-of-the-century harbour town in only a few years.

In the wake of war followed opportunists from around the world⁸ and subsequently Lüderitz saw the arrival of entrepreneurs, skilled and semi-skilled labourers, sailors and fortune-seekers, who sought to eke out an existence in the colony. Among them were people, who were either running away from trouble elsewhere or, presumably, looking for trouble anywhere. The Lüderitz records of criminal cases in the first decade of the 20th century bear testimony both to the many different nationalities found in the town, which apart from Germans included Argentineans, Irish and Scandinavians, and the malice they caused.⁹ Most files in this bulky collection of cases related to drunken behaviour, physical violence or sexual assault – all symptomatic of a male-dominated cosmopolitan harbour town in 1905, one would suspect.

In all, Lüderitz was a testosterone-driven town with violence in abundance. Out of a total German population of 836 in 1906, only 94 were women – having increased from 54 women in the previous year.¹⁰ To relieve the rising hormonal tension, women were imported from the Cape and, more popularly, from Germany. Although women arriving in Lüderitz were not all sex workers,¹¹ they were nevertheless objects of male desire. This was especially true for the waitresses in the three hotels “Fürst Bismarck”, Central Hotel” and “Hotel National”. In the words of non-commissioned officer Mohr there was a ‘special treat’ for soldiers arriving in Lüderitz: white waitresses.¹² In Mohr’s description, the bestiality of men coming from battle was somehow subdued when in the company of these white women and, ostensibly, there was no greater joy than to flirt with German women again. He wrote:

“Although war is supposed to make men into beast, it was only in exceptional cases that moral violations occurred. On the contrary, these warriors returning home from the field would treat the white women with respect and courtesy. Only when German women feel at home in the

⁷ Weitzel, p. 131.

⁸ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3, pp. 233-234.

⁹ The place of origin of accused persons were specified on case files found in the Gerichtsammt Lüderitz (GLU) collection held at the National Archives of Namibia (NAN).

¹⁰ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3. Annual Report for Lüderitz District, 1906, p. 207.

¹¹ Lüderitz even had regulations for the conduction of sex work, one of the paragraphs stating that police would at all times have access to sex workers’ living quarters. BKE 192, B.II 5. ye, June 2, 1905, p. 10.

¹² Brepohl, p. 152.

German colony will the men emulate their example. They are, to quote the poet, “heavenly roses in an earthly life.”¹³

In a colonial and inherently racist paradigm, skin colour was of paramount importance. Although essentially a praise poem to German women, the special emphasis on the skin colour given by Mohr suggests that the same respect was not extended to African women. Indeed much evidence suggests that African women were abused and kept as ‘concubines’ by the German troops.¹⁴ Notably, by portraying the behaviour of soldiers when encountering white women as uncommon, Mohr’s writings indirectly offered insight into the self-perception of soldiers, who were, at some level at least, aware of the callousness of their behaviour under ‘normal’ circumstances in the field.



Photo 2.1 Overview of Lüderitz around 1905/06, Shark Island in the top left-hand corner. Notice the construction of a foundation in the foreground

A sizeable core of transport riders, bringing regular supplies to the interior from the coast, further added to the already large pool of testosterone in Lüderitz. Prior to November 1906,¹⁵ there had been no railroad towards the interior and towns like Keetmanshoop and Gibeon were therefore reliant on provisions arriving via the long exhausting *Baiweg* that linked Keetmanshoop with Lüderitz. For this purpose, hundreds of transport riders continually traversed the route between the hinterland

¹³ Brepohl, p. 152.

¹⁴ For example: ADM 137, File C.6., Report on Administration of Protectorate of South west Africa from Date of Surrender to 31st March 1916 or Auer, p. 209.

¹⁵ Bravenboer and Rusch, p. 113.

and Lüderitz. These men spent months at a time on the road and mostly consisted of poor Afrikaners from South Africa, known colloquially as Boers.

At the entrance of the town, squeezed between desert and the small Radford Bay, a camp was set up to house this large constant in-flow of people. Consequently this camp was called the *Burenkamp*, which was an amalgamation of German appropriations of the words Boer and camp. Apart from large tents erected for the transport riders, the camp also contained kraals for livestock as well as tents and houses for 'entertainment'. Essentially the *Burenkamp* was a village of its own on the outskirts of the actual town of Lüderitz.¹⁶

Between 1904 and 1908 the small station of Lüderitz grew to become a sizeable town and therefore played an increasingly important role in turning GSWA into an attractive colony for potential German settlers. The town had extensive administrative and physical infrastructure as well as a relatively healthy economy that was based largely on transportation of people and supplies. However, Lüderitz was highly dependent on the colony's war economy, because the town's rapid physical and financial growth was intrinsically linked to the sizeable military presence. In 1908 this dependency was eased when Lüderitz's economy received a further boost with the discovery of diamonds in the vicinity. The discovery attracted more settlers and fortune-seekers and also had a positive impact on the town's infrastructure that was expanded to accommodate the population growth. In fact there were two successive periods in the early history of Lüderitz that resulted in extraordinary growth of general physical infrastructure, namely 1904-08 and 1908-1915 – one boom fuelled by the war economy and the other by the discovery of diamonds.¹⁷ Incidentally, in 1905 the overall civil administration of Lüderitz fell under the Keetmanshoop Local Government, but due to its growing importance, the harbour town became its own *Bezirk*, i.e. district, in 1906, subordinate only to Central Government in Windhoek.¹⁸

¹⁶ Eventually, however, the transport riders were made obsolete with the creation of a railway line to the interior, erasing all traces of the former *Burenkamp*.

¹⁷ Peters, W.H. et al.

¹⁸ ZBU 154 A.VI.a.3, p. 202.

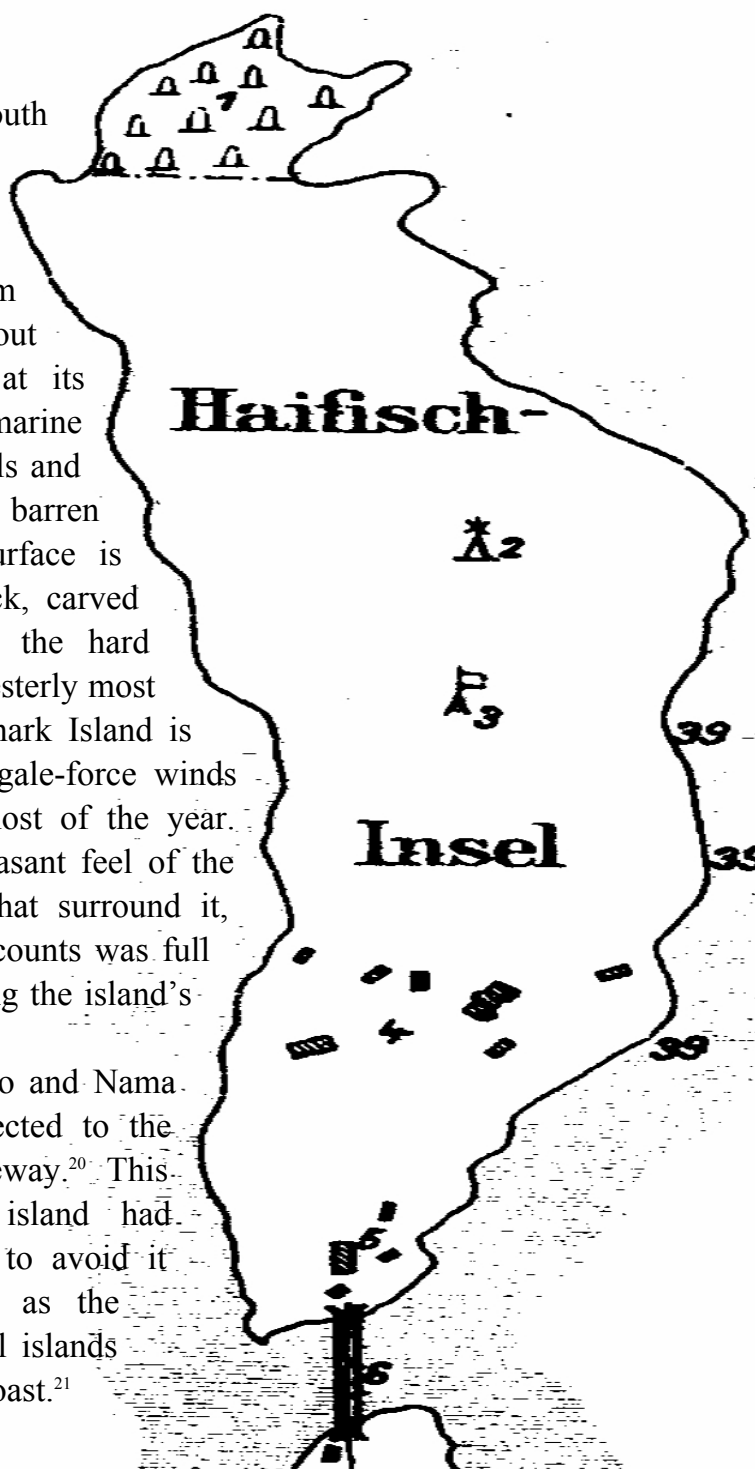


Photo 2.2 German officers sharing a quiet moment in Lüderitz, 1905

Shark Island

Poised on the vast South Atlantic, the inhospitable island known in German as *Haifischinsel* [Shark Island] stretches 1200 metres from south to north and only about 300 metres east to west at its thickest point. Apart from marine life, such as seabirds, mussels and seals, the island is entirely barren and wind-swept and its surface is covered in solid granite rock, carved into surreal formations by the hard ocean winds. In being the westerly most point of the ocean town, Shark Island is completely exposed to the gale-force winds that besiege Lüderitz for most of the year. Adding further to the unpleasant feel of the island are the icy waters that surround it, which according to early accounts was full of sharks,¹⁹ thereby explaining the island's gloomy name.

At the time of the Herero and Nama wars, the island was connected to the mainland by a small causeway.²⁰ This link between coast and island had originally been constructed to avoid it falling into British hands, as the British Empire laid claim all islands and islets off the Namibian coast.²¹



¹⁹ Cornell, p. 42 and Mohr, pp. 152-153.

²⁰ Today the island has been incorporated into the Lüderitz waterfront and forms part of the town's deep-sea harbour.

²¹ KAB, 805"428, Memo dated October 25, 1906, enclosed in Governor to Earl of Elgin, October 29, 1906.

At the highest point, in the centre of the island, a makeshift lighthouse (no. 2 on map) was signalling its presence to ships on the ocean. A few other structures had also been erected, mostly relating to the quarantine station and field hospital (see nos. 4 and 5 on map)²² that were housed on the south-eastern side of the island. The quarantine station was opened as a precaution against typhoid and dysentery. German NCO Mohr remembered arriving in Lüderitz and having to report for examination and possible quarantine on the island:

“After reporting to Military Command everyone who had been sick with either typhoid or dysentery had to cross the narrow bridge to Shark Island, next to the mainland, for [medical] examination. It was not just for examination, but one could also be quarantined here.”²³

Although Lüderitz’s white population was in this way spared potential infection from incoming troops, the same courtesy was not extended to the town’s prisoners-of-war, who were also on the island.

Further north on the island, past the lighthouse, lay the largest of Lüderitz’s concentration camps, the Shark Island Camp (no. 1 on map). It was placed on the far, most exposed, tip of the island where the forces of wind and weather were distinctly felt. The camp faced wide-open ocean on one side and was surrounded by barbed wire on the other. The barbed wire fence was guarded around the clock by the *Schutztruppe*²⁴ and sentries also stood at the entrance to the island (no. 6).²⁵ Apart from small corrugated iron shacks for the guards, Shark Island camp contained no actual buildings offering shelter from the harsh climatic conditions. Instead, it was supplied with a couple of standard issue military tents, accommodating dozens, as well as improvised shelters made from blankets and what little building material was made available to prisoners.²⁶

Imprisonment on Shark Island would inevitably have been both physically and psychologically damaging. To the east, north and south was an almost impenetrable belt of desert and arid country and to the west was the cold South Atlantic. Accentuating their predicament was the fact that Lüderitz was heavily militarised, due to the large continual influx of troops. Marooned on the far end of Shark Island, the prisoners would therefore have felt isolated and forgotten.

²² NAN, Map collection, (No: 669. (1907)).

²³ Mohr, pp. 152-153.

²⁴ NAN, L 338, Author unknown, n/a, p. 189.

²⁵ KAB, 805”428, Memo dated October 25, 1906.

²⁶ See the Düring album discussed below.

Herero POWs in Lüderitz

The exact date for the first arrival of prisoners-of-war on Shark Island can not be pinpointed. However, the first mention of Herero prisoners-of-war in Lüderitz related to a group of 28, who were held by the military administration in the southern coastal town. On June 27, 1904 the Lüderitz civil administration sent a letter to the local military HQ, informing the army that payment for the prisoners' food would have to come from army coffers. The letter did not give any indications as to whether other prisoners-of-war were also found in Lüderitz at the time.²⁷ In spite of the presence of these 28 prisoners already in 1904, most sources indicate that the Shark Island camp was only really begun in early 1905. According to the concentration camp's doctor, the first Herero prisoners came to Lüderitz in the beginning of 1905, at the time when the new concentration camps policy was first introduced by the Kaiser and PM von Bülow.²⁸

According to the doctor, one of the main reason for setting up a concentration camp in Lüderitz was an increased need for labour in the southern town.²⁹ Yet, increased labour was not the only reason for sending prisoners south. The creation of the Shark Island camp was also part of a security strategy that sought to minimise the risk of renewed rebellions by taking Herero prisoners away from a context and environment known to them. This was the expressed reason that large numbers of Herero prisoners were transferred from Keetmanshoop in the interior in March 1905.³⁰

From very early on it was evident that Shark Island was unfit for human habitation. In late May 1905, Missionary Vedder wrote to his colleague Eich about very high mortality figures among prisoners in Lüderitz. According to Vedder's information as many as 59 men, 59 women and 73 children had died on Shark Island in an unspecified space of time.³¹ With 191 dead in this early period one wonders how many prisoners were in fact there. If the figures were at all comparable to death rates for prisoners in the other coastal town, Swakopmund, which had seen 40 percent of prisoners die in four months, there must have been between 400 and 500 Herero on Shark Island in early 1905.³² Seeing as the missionaries found the mortality figure to be 'incredibly high',³³ which would mean that it was in advance

²⁷ BLU 29, E.I.K, Vol 1, 27 June 1904.

²⁸ Bofinger, p. 576.

²⁹ Bofinger, p. 576.

³⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 74.

³¹ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 14, 1905.

³² ZBU 454, D. IV.1.3. Vol. 1, pp. 58-59. See also chapter 3.

³³ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 14, 1905.

of other death figures for prisoners in the colony, the total number of prisoners could also have been lower. At any rate, Vedder's information made such an impact on Missionary Eich that he still referred to it the following week, writing: "Lüderitz lies heavy on my heart".³⁴ As a result, Eich decided to go to Lüderitz himself, asking Vedder to investigate Woermann Lines' boat fares from Swakopmund to Lüderitz.³⁵

Regardless of how many prisoners were already on the island when Vedder first wrote of high mortalities in Lüderitz, the number was evidently increasing. On June 26, 1905, Eich sent another letter to Vedder about a group consisting of 280 prisoners being sent from Okahandja to Lüderitz. According to Eich the reason for their deportation was a lack of food in the interior.³⁶ However, as noted by Camp Doctor Bofinger,³⁷ southern labour needs clearly also dictated the Herero prisoners' fate. With plans to build a line between Lüderitz and Aus, prisoner transports for Lüderitz inevitably increased in the months prior to the beginning of construction due to envisaged labour needs.³⁸



Photo 2.3 Child standing on Shark Island 1905.
Von Düring Album.

³⁴ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 19, 1905.

³⁵ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 14, 1905.

³⁶ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 26, 1905.

³⁷ Bofinger, p. 576.

³⁸ Construction actually began in Luderitz several months before the project was officially accepted by the German parliament in December 1905. KAB, 766: 217-218, Major Berrange, Uington to Commissioner, Cape Mounted Police, Cape Town, 18th November, 1905. (see also Chapter III, Section entitled Labour in Luderitz).

Around four month after asking Vedder to enquire about fares to Lüderitz, Eich eventually went to Lüderitz to inspect Shark Island. There was no official mission in Lüderitz at the time, only a Herero teacher by the name of Samuel Kariko who had been sent by the RMS to win souls in the name of the Rhenish mission. In October Eich was subsequently received by Kariko who introduced him to 487 Herero prisoners sitting on the far end of Shark Island.³⁹ Although Eich found their rations to be adequate, the prisoners were in a terrible condition and the mortality continually high.⁴⁰

Back in Okahandja two months later, on December 16th, Eich was watching yet another group of Herero prisoners gathered for transport to Lüderitz. The missionary wanted to speak to the Herero about their destination, but was prevented from doing so by the colonial troops. Again, he wrote to his friend and colleague Heinrich Vedder in Swakopmund:

“Today or tomorrow another group of prisoners will leave from here to you; [the group] is to be sent to build the railway in Lüderitz. I would have liked first to say a few words, but they are not to know where they are being sent, therefore I am not allowed to [speak with them]. Maybe you can do it.”⁴¹

In all likelihood, the secrecy was designed to prevent prisoners from escaping, which they would probably have attempted out of fear, had they known about the high mortalities at the coast. It has already been seen here that information about the collection camps and the concentration camps found its way to free Hereros in the bush. Similarly information about Shark Island seems to have travelled vast distances in the colony. In fact such information could have come from a number of oral or written sources, bearing in mind that many Hereros were literate and multilingual.⁴²

Herero knowledge about the South was a reality. According to a report cited by German historian Horst Drechsler, Lüderitz was intensely feared by Herero prisoners kept in other camps:

“The Herero are frightened by the idea of being deported there [Lüderitz]. If a sizeable number are sent there, the probability is that many prisoners will escape...”⁴³

Fear and therefore also information about Lüderitz was not geographically specific. Even Hereros in the Swakopmund camp, which also had excessively high

³⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 260

⁴⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 260

⁴¹ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, December 16, 1905.

⁴² “Many [Hereros] could read and write in their own language and some even in German”, Ritter von Epp in Krumbach, p. 198.

⁴³ Drechsler, p. 213

numbers of casualties, associated Lüderitz with a far worse fate. Vedder described one such scene of panic among a group of prisoners, who were being lined up for deportation on the beach in Swakopmund. Shortly after the prisoners were informed that they were to be sent to the South, one of the Hereros fell to the ground, bleeding profusely from the neck. According to Vedder, the prisoner had drilled his fingers into his own neck, committing suicide rather than going to Lüderitz.⁴⁴

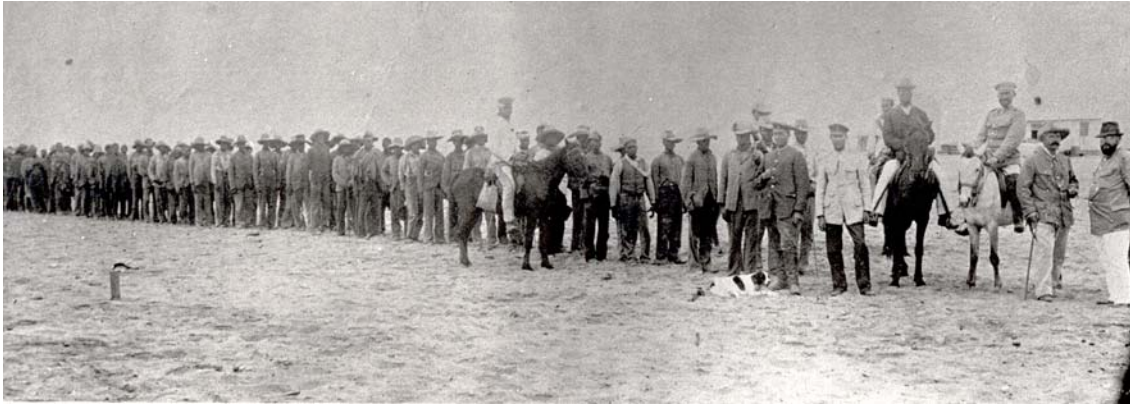


Photo 2.4 Prisoners lined up on the beach in Swakopmund

Similar fear of Lüderitz was also found among Herero prisoners forced to work on the railroad. The main contractor on construction of the Otavi line, Arthur Koppel Company, explained to Government that many prisoners had run away from the railway works “solely out of fear that they might be sent to the South.”⁴⁵ These escapees would rather face the high likelihood of being caught and shoot trying to escape than risk being sent to Shark Island.

The few people who would successfully manage to escape the railway lines, had two possible escape routes. They could either run back into the bush or try to get to British controlled Walvis Bay. Both options entailed perilous journeys through inhospitable and dry landscapes, with high risks of being re-captured by German troops. Those who managed to escape into British Walvis Bay faced a bleak future. They could either sign up with South African mining companies that were actively recruiting among escapees or they could stay and fend for themselves in the small British enclave. A German report suggests that many chose to eke out a living on the street:

⁴⁴ From Heinrich Vedder’s “Kurtze Geschichten, p. 139, as cited in Zeller: 2001, p. 239.

⁴⁵ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3. Vol. 5, June 10, 1907, p. 98.

“Most [escaped Herero] lived of fishing or by begging from the Nama.⁴⁶ Their mood is subdued; in spite of this they would not consider going back into German territory; they declared rather wanting to starve to death.”⁴⁷

It is obvious that conditions under German rule would have been very bad, for escapees to want rather to die of starvation than to go to the concentration camps. However, the English authorities in Walvis Bay did not have empathy with the plight of the exiled Herero. Instead the British authorities in Walvis Bay were eager to get rid of the Herero and proposed that the German police could come and collect the escapees.⁴⁸ These ex-prisoners were thus deprived the little resistance they had been able to offer German colonialism, vis-à-vis their escape, and would again face death in the camps.

In a way, however, the flow of information among prisoners was in itself an act of resistance in the face of German brutality. Communication was an important tool for communities that were trying to reconnect social ties against all odds and, more importantly, in defiance of German efforts to destroy these ties.⁴⁹ This flow of information was inevitably the result of a profound social need for knowledge. Families and friends, who had been separated during the War, were most likely trying to gather data about each other's whereabouts, trying to find out if people were still alive.⁵⁰ The constant traffic of prisoners between the camps would have been an ideal channel for such information.

Due to generations of political, social and economic interactions between communities in south-western Africa, ethnic distinctions were not necessarily always clear cut, in as much as many Herero would speak and understand Khoi-khoigowab and vice versa.⁵¹ Moreover, the *lingua franca* in the colony was an early form of Afrikaans, which was understood especially in the South but also among many Herero and Damara communities. Prisoners would therefore have been able to communicate with one another in spite of different ethnic backgrounds, facilitating the movement of information.

It is evident that Herero prisoners had every reason to fear going to Shark Island. In September 1905, the Cape Argus ran a series of articles about ‘The German

⁴⁶ Most likely the Topnaar community residing in Walvis Bay.

⁴⁷ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3. Vol. 5, May 25, 1907, p. 106b.

⁴⁸ ZBU 456, Vol. 5, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 137. As celebrated, for example, in Deimling's declaration to Herero prisoners at Keetmanshoop in 1905: "... now, that we have defeated and scattered you".

⁵⁰ See textbox entitled 'Samuel Isaak to *Kaptein* Johannes Christian' later in this chapter.

⁵¹ See Lau: 1995, pp. 13-14. Even today ethnic distinctions that often can be traced to the apartheid Odendaal plan are blurred. Many Namibians have a mixed lineage and speak or understand a variety of indigenous languages.

Operations', with special focus on Angra Pequena, i.e. Lüderitz.⁵² The informants were nearly all former transport riders, who had been recruited in South Africa. The South Africans cited remarkably similar accounts relating hundreds of mostly women being slowly starved and worked to death in Lüderitz.

The articles were written in a very descriptive language characteristic of the time and somewhat reminiscent of the tone applied 13 years later in the controversial Blue Book. Similar to the Blue Book, statements given to the *Argus* were detailed and insightful; unlike the Blue Book, however, they were all given contemporary to the events, leaving no possibility for editorial addendum sparked by hindsight. Even more compelling in terms of credibility was the fact that the two main *Argus* articles were based on separate rounds of interviews, which nevertheless yielded very similar details about horrific conditions, general maltreatment and, above all, spoke of women forced to perform hard labour.

The transport riders had been in GSWA at the beginning and middle of 1905, a time when the Shark Island camp housed about 500 Herero women, children and men and when Trotha was still in charge of the colony and its concentration camps. The transport riders said:

"The women who are captured and not executed are set to work for the military as prisoners ... saw numbers of them at Angra Pequena put to the hardest work, and so starved that they were nothing but skin and bones (...) They are given hardly anything to eat, and I have very often seen them pick up bits of refuse food thrown away by the transport riders. If they are caught doing so, they are sjamboked (whipped)."⁵³

The second article, that ran three days later and used different informants, gave more illustrations of events in Lüderitz during early 1905. It read:

"I have seen women and children with my own eyes at Angra Pequena, dying of starvation and overwork, nothing but skin and bone, getting flogged every time they fell under their heavy loads. I have seen them picking up bits of bread and refuse food thrown away outside our tents (...) ... most of the prisoners, who compose the working gangs at Angra Pequena, are sent up from Swakopmund. There are hundreds of them, mostly women and children and a few old men..." "When they fall they are sjamboked by the soldier in charge of the gang, with his full force, until they get up. Across the face was the favourite place for the sjamboking and I have often seen the blood flowing down the faces of the women and children and from their bodies, from the cuts of the weapon. (...) The women had to carry the corpses and dig the hole into which they were placed. They had no burial ceremony of any kind ... The corpse would be wrapped in a blanket and carried on a rough stretcher⁵⁴ ... I have never heard one cry, even when their flesh was being cut to pieces with the sjambok. All feeling seemed to have gone out of them (...) At the end, when they untied [an unnamed *Kaptein*] ... they made him totter for a mile

⁵² Cape Argus, September 25, 1905.

⁵³ Cape Argus, September 25, 1905.

⁵⁴ The same burial practises were used in Swakopmund, as seen in a photograph in Leutwein's "Elf Jahre Gouverneur".

to the hill where he was to be hanged. There is a big iron beacon there, on which they had made a platform. They put a rope over the beacon, he climbed up, put the noose round his neck himself and jumped off... Practically the whole town turned out to see his execution. You could see it from a long way off, as it took place on the hill. A lot of people went out into the bay in boats to see it. And that was the end of him. This is only a sample of what is going on at Angra Pequena.”⁵⁵

The information contained in the two articles, which was brutally detailed, match accounts cited in other sources about extreme acts of violence committed by soldiers and settlers during the 1904-08 period.⁵⁶ Yet on a human level it is difficult to believe that such descriptions of German troops as sadists were grounded in fact. There is, however, an important precedent illustrating that German troops were capable of committing such acts of brutality. Letters and diaries from soldiers part-taking in the four year antecedent Boxer Rebellion in China also described similar incomprehensible acts of violence.⁵⁷ Notably, a number of the colonial troops in GSWA had fought in the Boxer Rebellion and must have been psychologically damaged and traumatised as a result. Moreover, there are many other examples of atrocities, murder and genocide in the 20th century that might be hard to believe or understand, but they took place nonetheless. It is here believed that the above accounts are true, merely because they are entirely consistent with a variety of different German and British sources about events in Lüderitz 1904-08, as well as modern-day memory.⁵⁸

Another eyewitness account from a transport rider was cited in a British Blue Book about German atrocities in GSWA, published 13 years after the fact. The Blue Book contained a number of interviews with survivors of Shark Island as well as testimonies from people who witnessed the event. Johann Noothout was ostensibly a transport rider on the Lüderitz *Baiweg* route in 1907, where, according to his testimony, he witnessed conditions and treatment meted out to Shark Island prisoners. Noothout's information is remarkably akin the Argus interviews. He said:

⁵⁵ Cape Argus, September 28, 1905.

⁵⁶ For example: RMS Annual Reports VII, 31.5, 1st Quarterly Report for Barmen, 1907: Heinrich Vedder described the case against settler Paul Wiehager, who lined up and shot at a number of San to see the penetrative power of a .88 calibre bullet.

⁵⁷ "... you cannot imagine what is going on here [in China]... everything that stands in our way is destroyed: men, women, children. Oh, how the women scream. But, the Kaiser's orders were: no pardon will be granted. We have sworn to uphold our oath.", Hu Schong, *Der Imperialismus und China Politik*, 1959, p. 144, as quoted on: www.zum.de/imperialismus/rums24/rums24_63.php

⁵⁸ The story about a platform on the island used for hangings was relayed in an interview done for Namibian national television in Lüderitz about the Shark Island Camp. A local Lüderitz business woman explained that, according to rumours, a platform on the highest point of the island was the place where people were hanged in those days. NBC: May 2000, in 'Open File'.

“I left Cape Town during the year 1906, and signed on with the Protectorate troops in South-West Africa. I arrived at Lüderitzbucht, and after staying there a few minutes I perceived nearly 500 native women lying on the beach, all bearing indications of being slowly starved to death. Every morning and towards evening four women carried a stretcher containing about four or five corpses, and they had also to dig the graves and bury them. I then started to trek to Kubub and Aus, and on the road I discovered bodies of native women lying between stones and devoured by birds of prey. Some bore signs of having been beaten to death ... If a prisoner were found outside the Herero prisoners' camp, he would be brought before the Lieutenant and flogged with a sjambok. Fifty lashes were generally imposed. The manner in which the flogging was carried out was the most cruel imaginable ... pieces of flesh would fly from the victim's body into the air ...”⁵⁹

Both of the ‘Argus’ accounts were harrowingly similar to Noothout’s testimony, speaking of starving women ferociously whipped by soldiers. Contemporaries, most notably the ‘coloured’ migrant workers from the Cape, cited in Chapter I, also reported identical scenes from other camps.⁶⁰ The ‘Argus’ riders described daily seeing dead prisoners carried off the island on ‘rough’ stretchers, information almost indistinguishable from Noothout’s testimony.

Another overlap between the sources was the description of ‘flesh flying off the bodies’. The Blue Book gave evidence of such whippings by showing photos taken in the German period of a person hospitalised in Gobabis because of severe beatings with a sjambok, which left her whole back without skin.⁶¹ The 50 lashes mentioned by Noothout as a generally imposed punishment, would most certainly leave a person severely injured. However, such a harsh punishment was in contravention of article II.b. of the ‘Regulations of the State of War’ issued by Von Trotha in Swakopmund on June 11, 1904, which specified the general number of lashes to be administered as 25 – although two sets of 25 were also allowed if these were separated by a period of two weeks.⁶² But then again, Trotha’s war regulations also did not allow for severe beating and rape of female prisoners and the sort of general maltreatment that prisoners were actually subjected to in the concentration camps, nor did they specify anything about on-the-spot executions, such as those encouraged by Trotha’s own Extermination Order.

⁵⁹ Union of, South Africa, p. 100.

⁶⁰ GH 23/97, “Statement under oath by: Jack Seti, John Culayo and James Tolibadi”, Ministers to Governor, 22nd August, 1906.

⁶¹ See photo 2.5.

⁶² Regulations booklet found in BKE 220, B.II.74.b.

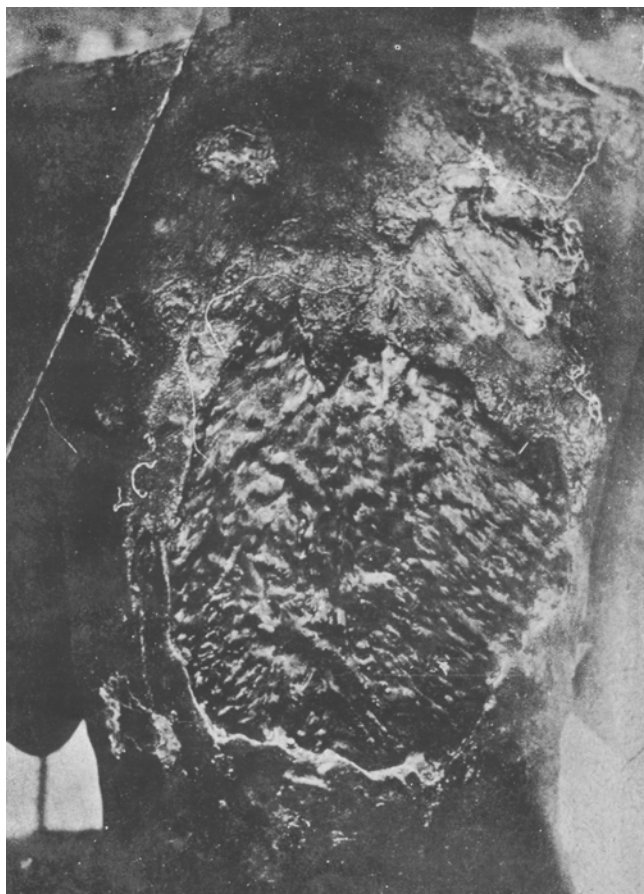


Photo 2.5 Maria from Gobabis, 1912

Indeed, Noothout's testimony was accurate in describing fifty lashes as a generally imposed sentence. A list of Nama deportees to Cameroon from 1910, trivially notes that a person by the name of Samkamp received 50 lashes and 3 months imprisonment for being "disobedient and for lying to his master."⁶³ Samkamp's punishment was not administered in separate instalments, unlike Otto 'Kaffer' on the same list, who had expressly received 2x 20 lashes. Also in 1910, Moses Frenede of Rehoboth received 50 lashes and 2 years imprisonment for theft.⁶⁴

Around the same time in King Leopold's Congo, the local version of the sjambok, the *chicotte*, was also being applied in anger.⁶⁵ As many as 25 lashes with the *chicotte* was known to render its victim unconscious and upwards to 100 could

⁶³ BKE 224, B.II.74.d, Spec. I, p. 114.

⁶⁴ ZBU 466, D.IV.m.3, Vol. 5, p. 142.

⁶⁵ Hochschild, p. 120.

be fatal. Similar to Trotha's war regulations, punishment with the *chicotte* in advance of 25 lashes was therefore given in instalments.⁶⁶

The incredibly close resemblance between the Argus articles and Noothout's descriptions could have two possible explanations. Either the author of the Blue Book, Major O'Reilly, had simply read the old Argus pieces, which of course would not render information untrue, only 'borrowed'; or the Noothout interview was genuine. If Noothout was indeed a real person and had seen the exact same brutalities performed as the transport riders reported in 1905, this would invariably lend further credence to the Argus articles.

In favour of the latter possibility, Noothout's statement contained information not relayed in the Argus pieces, information that is all verifiable. For example, Noothout said that he was trekking on the *Baiweg* towards Aus in 1906, seeing many bodies of dead prisoners. In 1906 the railway line was being built between Lüderitz and Aus, drawing heavily on forced prisoner labour, which resulted in exceedingly high mortality rates.⁶⁷ Noothout also gave reference to around five hundred prisoners on the beach. In October 1905, Missionary Eich claimed that there were 487 prisoners on Shark Island⁶⁸ and in the official report on mortality among POWs, 584 Herero were cited to be on the island in November 1906.⁶⁹ Although these numbers seem fairly constant, it should be remembered that an unabated mortality rate was continuously countered by influx of new prisoners from elsewhere in the colony, especially during the years in question, i.e. end 1905 and early 1907, due to railway construction.⁷⁰

Even if Noothout did not exist, the information in the Blue Book was well researched and based on facts. But Johann Noothout was not Major O'Reilly's invention; he was a real person. The research for this book uncovered a list with names of transport riders in the service of the German troops, dated March 1907.⁷¹ The list was sent from Aus to Lüderitzbucht and the third entry read: "2154. J. Noothout." As such, there really was a Johann Noothout, who worked in Aus and Lüderitzbucht in early 1907.

All of the above sources were especially shocked at the treatment of women in Lüderitz. According to their testimony, women were severely abused and were forced to perform hard labour under the strict supervision of military over-seers.

⁶⁶ Hochschild, p. 120.

⁶⁷ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3. Vol. 5., p. 170.

⁶⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 260.

⁶⁹ BAB, Reichs-Kolonial-Amt, File 2140, p. 161.

⁷⁰ ZBU 454, D. IV.1.3, Vol 2, p. 102, (Lüderitzbucht, 27th April, 1906).

⁷¹ GLU 331, "Listen der im dienste der Truppe befindlichen Buren und Kapboys"

Although the German military archives were lost in the Second World War and the Namibian copies most likely destroyed before the British arrived in 1915, evidence to substantiate the fact that women were forced to labour still exists - as already seen in Chapter I. One source stated:

“Thousands were held on Shark Island, where prisoners lived in fenced enclosures on the beach; women, it is reported, were spanned in teams of eight to pull ‘scotch’ carts.”⁷²



Photo 2.6 Female prisoners pulling a cart on narrow-gauge rails

The above photograph clearly illustrates the claim that women were ‘in-spanned’ like animals.⁷³ At the feet of the women are a set of narrow gauge tracks, as used in both Lüderitz and Swakopmund, a clear indication that these women were pulling a loaded cart.⁷⁴ Judging from the smooth topography, the image was taken in Swakopmund rather than Lüderitz. In fact the building in the background looks somewhat like the Hohenzollern house in central Swakopmund, which was built in 1906. On the right-hand side of the picture, a soldier is watching the women from a small

⁷² Fischer, R. p. 82, as cited in Schrank.

⁷³ In the Blue Book, survivors of the Cameroon deportations, give similar accounts of having been “in-spanned to wagons loaded with railway iron”, Union of, South Africa, p. 99.

⁷⁴ Other examples of the same practise are depicted in *Kolonie und Heimat*, Nov. 22, 1908, p. 4, and *Ibid.* January 31, 1909, p. 6.

shed. The image is harrowing, especially because the woman in front returned the camera gaze with an eerie stare. Her expression was of fatigue and, somehow, defiance. All the other women avoided the confrontation, looking away from the camera.

Forcing women to pull carts as if they were animals was in tune with the treatment generally meted out to the Herero prisoners in Lüderitz as elsewhere in the colony. Missionary Vedder in Swakopmund noted that overall, prisoners were regarded no better than animals.⁷⁵ He said: “Like cattle hundreds were driven to their death and like cattle they were buried.” Moreover, language relating to prisoners, as applied in government files as well as parliamentary debate in Germany, consequently related to prisoners as were they cattle. As an example, prisoner transports and statistics were usually counted in heads rather than people.⁷⁶ Politicians in Germany were also using an animal simile when openly likening the Nama to ‘predators’ that needed to be tamed.⁷⁷ The racist paradigm, although far from being unique to Germany, pervaded the fabric of German colonialism. Notions of savage and animal-like Africans were created and nurtured in the colony. David Blackbourne has described this Wilhelmine preoccupation with race as “an attitude of assumed superiority which made possible a treatment of native peoples then almost unthinkable within Europe itself”.⁷⁸

Lüderitz was a melting pot of old and new in as much as it was the oldest part of the colony yet at the same time the most modern of the towns in GSWA, with electricity and advanced infrastructure. Moreover, it was the place where veteran soldiers leaving for home would meet new recruits as they were arriving in the colony. New recruits to GSWA were full of expectations, fears, hopes and above all questions about the colony. In this amalgamation of new and old, racism flourished. Predisposed to the racist notions and full of ignorance and fear about the colony, new arrivals would have paid attention to veterans, to their stories and their language.⁷⁹ Lüderitz was a small locality with only few places for recreation where soldiers could socialise. It is not difficult to imagine that new recruits soon adopted

⁷⁵ Vedder as quoted in Zeller: 2001, and Gaydish.

⁷⁶ For example: ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3, vol. 5, p. 102.

⁷⁷ Reichstag, 132 Sitzung, December 3, 1906, p. 4096.

⁷⁸ Blackbourne, p. 328.

⁷⁹ The language used by veterans had incorporated many Afrikaans and English words used by Transport Riders and the *Alte Afrikaner* – a term referring to those soldiers in the colony before the war broke out, such as Estorff. Present-day Suedwester deutsch, mainly spoken by German descendants of settlers, in the same way has appropriated many local words.

thinking and customs of their more experienced peers, who were inadvertently ‘coaching’ them in the prevailing racist modalities of GSWA.⁸⁰

An example of new recruits arriving to Lüderitz is found in the diary of an unnamed soldier who arrived in Lüderitz, on June 1907. Upon arrival he and his comrades were amazed at the state of prisoners in the town, describing them as ‘thin like walking sticks’. A few days later the soldiers mocked rather than pitied the Herero, amused at the dried out breast of the women.⁸¹ The Writer noted:

“On July 5th, 200 Hereros were brought to Lüderitz as prisoners. Their kraal was situated in the vicinity of our own camp. The prisoners looked incredibly skinny; their legs looked like tender walking sticks. Men and women were completely naked. At first our men couldn’t help but to stare at the naked figures. But after three days they did not look anymore...Some of the men had a funny expression for the long hanging breasts of the women; they called them “straps.”⁸²



Photo 2.7 German hand-coloured postcard, satisfying male desires

Apart from showing the fast transition from shock to amusement, the cited passage also contains a very heavy sexual undercurrent found in many soldier accounts during the war years. At times such undercurrents came to the surface as illustrated by *Obermatros* Auer, who took pictures of naked black women and

⁸⁰ “the troops receive a re-schooling”. NAN, Accession 529, Busch, O. 1900-1914, no 14, p. 6.

⁸¹ NAN, Accession 460, “Twelve Years in South West Africa 1907 – 1919: Recollections of the Writer”.

⁸² NAN, Accession 460, “Twelve Years in South West Africa 1907 – 1919: Recollections of the Writer”.

published them along with his diary.⁸³ In all, German male fantasies of submissive black women were celebrated in numerous publications including a series of semi-pornographic images of black women in GSWA sent as postcards to Germany and otherwise distributed in the colony.⁸⁴ Apart for their sexual purposes, such images were symbols and affirmations of colonial power exerted over African women, who would physically have been unable to control their own representation. The consequences of failing to comply with male desires would invariably have been very severe, especially for women in the concentration camps.⁸⁵

During the war there was a *de facto* state of lawlessness, a situation that many settlers and soldiers quickly succumbed to. After all, soldiers, who had mostly come from poor backgrounds in ‘overcrowded’ Germany, were now confronted with a reality in which they were undisputed masters of subdued men and women whom they had supposedly ‘conquered’. They could indulge in sexual activity with women who were forced into prostitution as a means of survival (a consideration the soldiers could choose to confront or not), or they could rape largely without consequence to themselves, provided the women were African. In the Windhoek Camp, for example, female prisoners were frequently sexually abused by soldiers, as observed by missionary Wandress:

“Of the free natives, no girl went [to the German fort]... therefore [German soldiers] resorted to making use of girl Herero prisoners-of-war, who voluntarily accepted this dirty business. I personally doubt this voluntariness.”⁸⁶

In 1941 Nigel Farson referred to Herero women as an “everlasting taunt to the lonely white man.”⁸⁷ In Lüderitz there were over a thousand lonely men, and large numbers of soldiers about to embark on a long sea journey or just arriving from one. As already seen, the majority of prisoners on Shark Island between 1905 and 1908 were women. With little regard for the humanity of female prisoners, many of Lüderitz’s white male resident or transient populations satisfied their male desires by force. In the Lüderitz court files from 1906 are found examples of such cases of rape or attempted rape. Notably most cases involving prisoners did not go to court if

⁸³ Auer, p. 189 and 208.

⁸⁴ See Annex I; also Grobler, *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 13-19 March, 1998.

⁸⁵ This is attested in the Lüderitz court files (for example NAN GLU 242), cited below.

⁸⁶ As quoted in Gewald, “Mirrior Images?”, Hartmann et al: 1998, p. 124, footnote 7.

⁸⁷ Farson, p. 41. Farson went on to recite a story of Herero women made to wait naked on German officers during the 1904-08 wars; also, allegedly, at Namutoni, officers would force girls to strip naked and play cards on their stomachs.

it were not for a white champion pushing the case.⁸⁸ As such, the case against Carpenter Schneider for breaking into the locked room of Susanna Gabriel, a black 'Capetonian', was only heard because she was living in the back of her German employer's house.⁸⁹

Many of the cases in the Lüderitz court files from 1904-08 related to attempted rape. In November 1906, following the arrival of Nama prisoners to the concentration camp on the island, two very similar cases appeared before the local court. In the first example a Bethanie prisoner, named only as Jacoba, ran away and locked herself in a storage room because the Chief of Drilling, Franz Kurrent, had come to her hut and demanded that she have sex with him.⁹⁰ Kurrent responded by nailing the door to the storage room shut. Jacoba's testimony is one of few voices of Shark Island prisoners to have survived; Jacoba said:

"[he]...came in to us in the hut and wanted to have me. I was supposed to go with him to his room. I ran straight to the storage room. He closed the door from the outside and nailed the door shut. He then tried to come into the room from [illegible]. There were also others present."⁹¹

A second very similar episode was reported on November 23, 1906 when train driver Pollotcheck entered the hut of a Nama woman called Sarah.⁹² Pollotcheck claimed that he had only entered the hut to look for his lost coat. Whatever his motive, (no testimony from Sarah is in the file), she apparently protested against his action and as a result received a severe beating. Pollotcheck kicked and hit Sarah in the chest and in the face several times for failing to comply with his wishes. Ultimately there was no outcome in the case as Pollotcheck left for Germany and Sarah was dying on Shark Island. In fact the only outcome in the cases looked at here came about as a result of the severe beating of Herero prisoner Eduard by a local Lüderitz citizen called Heilbrunner. Eduard had not been able to finish the task of making a walking stick on time and as a result was ruthlessly beaten by Heilbrunner. Eduard was only saved because a soldier, who had seen the violent castigation, promptly intervened. In the end Heilbrunner was sentenced to a fine of 50 Marks or five days in prison for the violent beating.⁹³

⁸⁸ The only case seen during this research, where a prisoner took up his or her own case, was that of 'Herero Simon' who was ended up in jail on account of 'false accusations'. ZBU 455, D.V.I.3, Vol. 3, pp. 180a-180b.

⁸⁹ GLU 242, "Criminal case against the Carpenter Schneider", case closed 21/12/06.

⁹⁰ GLU 242, "Criminal case against Franz Kurrent", case closed 14/12/06 at 9 1/2 hrs.

⁹¹ GLU 242, "Criminal case against Franz Kurrent", case closed 14/12/06 at 9 1/2 hrs.

⁹² GLU 242 "Criminal case against train driver Pollotcheck", case closed 18/01/07. In the case file she was called Sarah No. 21594, in accordance with the identification tags prisoners were forced to wear.

⁹³ GLU 240, 'Criminal Case against Heilbrunner', case closed 30/10/06.

Photographic evidence

As argued by Hayes et al⁹⁴ the photograph constitutes a ‘language’ of its own and therefore requires more interactions than its usual employment as mere illustration. The photographic medium should in other words be regarded as a source of information as well as a backdrop to textual references. Because images are inherently subjective, like text and a language, reading of images offers a wealth of information to the reader, which reaches beyond the physical imprint. Variables such as angles, composition, and juxtapositions coupled with information about the wider context, i.e. who took the image, when, where and, if possible, why, provide the basis for a much deeper understanding of the medium and its relevance to the subject under study. This method has already been applied here as Images have been scrutinised and analysed on par with textual sources.

Until recently, only two images of the Shark Island Camp were known to exist. This limited photographic catalogue was surprising, in comparison with other camps such as in Swakopmund and Windhoek that seem to have been photographed far more frequently.⁹⁵ The reason for this limited catalogue inevitably has to do with the military nature of Shark Island. During the war years Shark Island was off-limits to all non-military personnel as sentries were posted at the entrance of the island to limit access to and from the site. Apart from the concentration camp, the island also housed a military quarantine station and a hospital, which would make the site further off-bounds for non-essential personnel.⁹⁶

It was therefore a very important contribution to this research when more photographs of Shark Island were found in a private collection in the Sam Cohen Library in Swakopmund.⁹⁷ The uncovered images were taken by Lieutenant von Düring, who documented his journey along the *Baiweg* when travelling from the interior to Lüderitzbucht. The fact that these pictures were taken by an officer could logically also explain their existence. In being a lieutenant, Düring would have had access to the military site, and would have been free to take such pictures. Düring’s photographic series contains a number of new, more detailed, photographs of Shark Island, which not only support many textual references about the camp, but also provide new insights. Moreover the images illustrate a perspective of the camp that

⁹⁴ Hayes et al, “Photography, history and memory”, in Hartmann et al (eds).

⁹⁵ See Zeller: 2001.

⁹⁶ KAB, 805”428, Memo dated October 25, 1906, enclosed in Governor to Earl of Elgin, October 29, 1906.

⁹⁷ In 2000, Dr. Jan Bart Gewald found a collection of photos in Swakopmund’s Sam Cohen Library that he photocopied and showed to me. I was recently able to retrieve copies of the entire collection, with the kind assistance of the Sam Cohen Library.

textual sources are unable to capture, such as faces, expressions, clothes and facilities, all preserved in harrowing detail.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact dates of the photos, but because they portray hundreds of Hereros on Shark Island, they must necessarily have been taken between January 1905, when the camps were first introduced, and approx. January 1907 when the Herero were again taken off the island. Another clue is the appearance of General von Trotha in one of the images, which would date it to before November 1905, when the General departed from the colony. It would be logical that Trotha's presence in the photos coincided with his departure and the images could therefore well be from October 1905.

Silvester et al argue that photos taken in especially the war years were designed to sway public opinion in favour of colonial conquest, a form of propaganda pursued through, for example, postcards. But, there was also another catalogue of photographs from the war years, namely images taken privately, for personal consumption, with a much different dynamic. Such images were not necessarily taken to sway any particular opinion or for a larger purpose, but much in the sense of the later-day 'snapshot' served primarily as an *aide-de-memoir* and also as a self-choreographed narrative of colonial exploits aimed at impressing family and friends. Lieutenant von Düring's photographic diary of the South was in the latter category; and as such described basic values and colonial realities as perceived and related by a *Schutztruppler* in 1905.

Pictures of the colonised, namely the people who were subjected to a new reality dictated and enforced by a foreign power, inevitably formed part of this self-choreographed narrative of colonial conquest. Gewald wrote in his paper on colonial photography that many of the images taken during the War showed "the utter shamelessness of the colonial endeavour."⁹⁸ This is particularly true of the private manifestations of power constituted by the personal photographic gaze on the colonised. On a human level, private pictures of prisoners-of-war such as Düring's revealed a basic irreverence and abhorrence with which prisoners must essentially have been regarded by the *Schutztrupplers*.⁹⁹ Such 'power photos' were crude images of often subdued and humiliated prisoners, prompting Gewald to write: "people being photographed had ceased to exist as people."¹⁰⁰ Indeed these 'power photos' commonly presented an arranged juxtaposition of the powerful and powerless to underscore themes of conquest, racial dominance and personal superiority as well

⁹⁸ Gewald, "Mirrior Images?", Hartmann et al: 1998, p. 119.

⁹⁹ Other such private catalogues are also found. I have in my personal possession a collection of private pictures with similar theme. One of these pictures appears in this chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Gewald, "Mirrior Images?", Hartmann et al: 1998, p. 119.

as, at some level, machismo. The subjects in these pictures were therefore ironically rendered mere objects, a backdrop to the personal power narrative, i.e. they ceased to exist as people. In other words, the real subjects of the photos were not the colonised, but the colonisers at the other end of the lens, or, in some cases, physically present within the picture's narrative.

The 'power photo' did not only exist in the private catalogue, but was also, and perhaps to a larger extent, celebrated in public photography, in images designed for mass-consumption. Diamond prospector Fred Cornell, described with repulsion a series of postcards he encountered while travelling in the German colony:

"I had seen something of this myself, and had heard more from ex-German soldiers themselves who with extraordinary callousness used to show whole series of illustrated postcards, depicting wholesale executions and similar gruesome doings to death of these poor natives. One of these, that enjoyed great vogue at the time, showed a line of ten Hottentots dangling from a single gallows, some still standing on the packing-cases with a noose round their necks, waiting for the soldiers to kick their last standing-place away; some kicking and writhing in the death struggle, for the short drop did not break their necks, but only strangled them slowly, and one having a German soldier hanging on to his legs to finish the work more quickly."¹⁰¹

Düring's catalogue was the epitome of power photography. In this sense Düring's photographic diary was a time-typical representation of German–Herero relations, specifically with reference to the very obvious power imbalance in the years following the Herero War. The juxtapose of power and total submission was a recurrent theme celebrated in Düring's photos, but most pronounced in the below example of coloniser and colonised on Shark Island. Here, standing tall among seated prisoners, the German soldier choreographed his own representation as a coloniser among a defeated, 'tamed' enemy (note the walking stick or cane held by the soldier). The angle of the photo accentuated the desired narrative, depicting the soldier from a slightly lower angle, making him look more imposing. The angle also served to include the Herero women sitting in front of the soldier, submissively looking away from the camera, a pose typical of prisoners 'captured' on film. The image therefore does not only convey a message of colonial power, but also portrays male power exerted over brutalised female prisoners, the camera feeding off their trauma.

¹⁰¹ Cornell: 1986, p. 41.

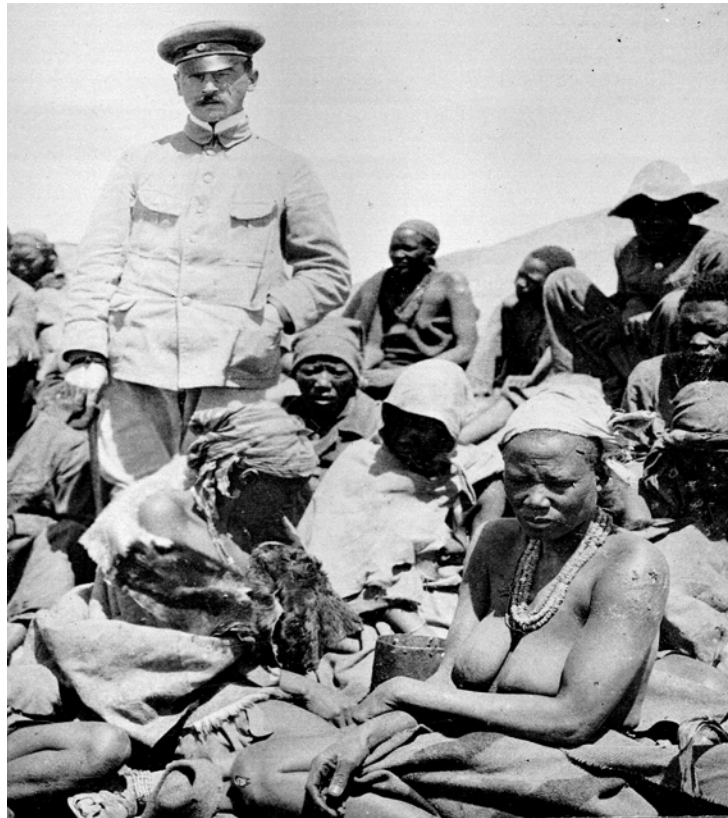


Photo 2.8 Düring album. Shark Island prisoners and German Officer (possibly von Düring himself)

Backing up information given in textual sources, the image clearly shows that there were far more women on the island than men. The image also shows that people only had the possessions they had managed to bring to the camp, for some, like the woman in the foreground, this meant sitting half naked on the barren, wind-swept island, at the mercy of wind and weather.

In the below image, it is evident that the island was not properly equipped to deal with the large prisoner population. A number of children and infants sit huddled together, wrapped in blankets trying to resist the cold winds. One of the infants sits completely naked on the bare rock (bottom left), with arms crossed. These freezing prisoners are backdrops to the actual subject of the photo. A subject under study of an ethnographic gaze, the Herero woman is standing, passively posing for the camera. Such an image could have been taken with a German audience in mind, as an ethnographic illustration of the photographer's colonial adventures – it is not known if Düring was on his way home, but is likely considering his long journey from the interior. The woman looked to be malcontent and uneasy about the clearly intrusive action, yet she still complied with Düring's gaze, because she would not

have had any choice regardless. As with other prisoners photographed by Düring, the Herero woman in this image looked away from the camera, submissive and non-confrontational.



Photo 2.9 Düring album. Shark Island prisoners

Another element in the above image is the colonial symbolism applied to the *mis en scene*. Behind the standing woman, on her right, at the entrance to the camp, the German Imperial flag (black, white and red) was flying high. The inclusion of the flag in the picture again emphasises the power juxtaposition, here replacing the

physical presence of a soldier with the most recognisable symbol of the coloniser, his flag. It could of course also be coincidental that the flag was included, even though it fits well within the constructed narrative in the rest of Düring's pictures. The flag is also included in another of Düring's pictures, with a similar purpose one might add, this time providing an overview of the southern side of the camp. Moreover, when looking at the below picture, the inclusion of the flag in the limited frame of both photos appears to be intended, in as much as there was only the one flag in the entire camp.

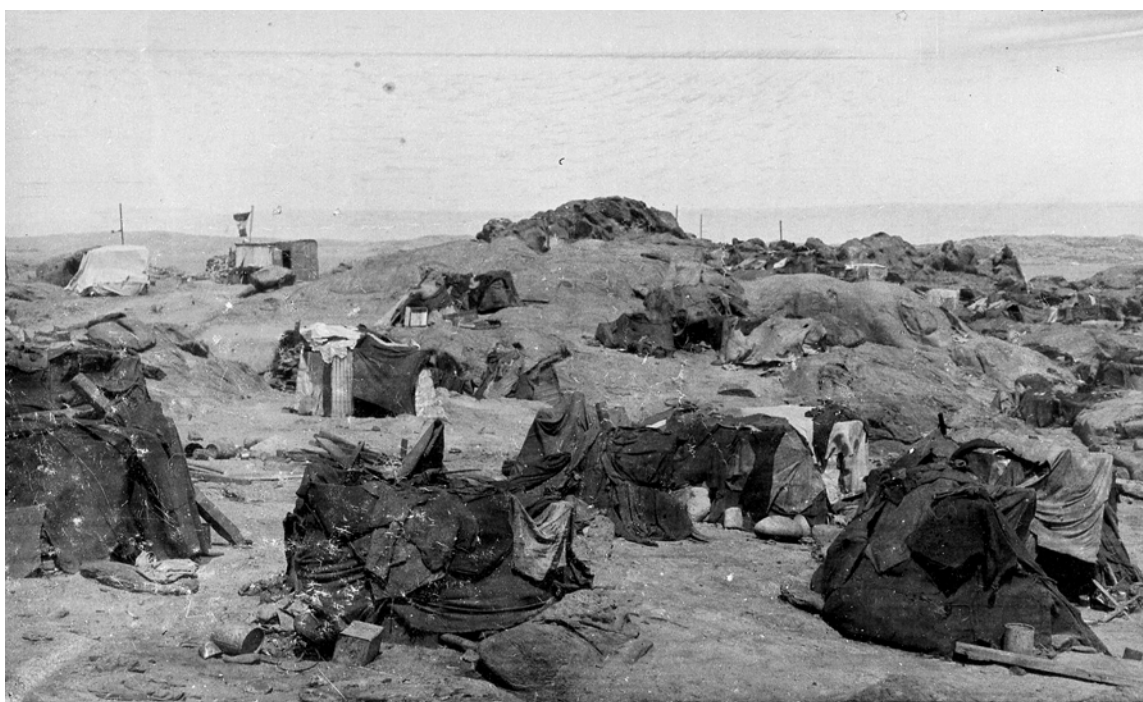


Photo 2.10 Partial overview of Shark Island concentration camp, Düring album

The above image, facing in a southern direction towards Lüderitz Harbour (not Robert Harbour, which was the main harbour with piers), shows the fence running across the island. One clearly sees the German flag flying high, next to an improvised corrugated iron shed that was probably used by the guards to shelter them from the strong winds – notice the flag clearly beating in the strong wind. As seen in photo 2.9, a small tent stood next to the guard's shed. This tent was quite possibly the camp's *Lazarett*, an improvised medical facility for sick prisoners – see later in this chapter for more information about the *Lazarett*. The image also shows the makeshift shelters erected on the island by prisoners, consisting mainly blankets,

rock and pieces of wood. From the photograph it is evident that Shark Island was not a place conducive for survival. When German military officers first chose this location, it must have been equally evident to them that many of the prisoners would die as a result of their incarceration on the barren, wind-swept island.

While on Shark Island, Düring did not refrain from exploring the sexual potential of the Herero prisoners. Forming part of his Shark Island series is an image of a female prisoner photographed naked. The photo was a continuation of the male power theme, applied throughout his tour of the camp. The girl looked in her early or mid-teens, standing uneasy and violated, exposing herself to the camera. Indicating the involuntary nature of the picture, her dress was squeezed between her thighs. Her uncomfortable pose suggests that she was trying to hold on to the dress, as if it had it been ripped off her body. The photo underscores the completely disregard shown for prisoners' humanity. In fact Düring's shot was tantamount to rape. It makes the image even more haunting that the girl had a look of indifference on her face; it almost seems as if this was a daily routine. Notably, the image looks to have been taken inside the guard's corrugated iron shed at the entrance to the camp.

The Düring album is a disturbing testament to the triviality of callousness, as the on-going dehumanisation of Nama and Herero prisoners was recorded and celebrated in minute detail. The camera was used to rape, demean and, moreover, to recapture photographically an already defeated people, who were gradually succumbing to a new colonial reality. Ironically such 'power photos' now form an integral part in the reconstruction of a largely repressed history.

Samuel Kariko

Although there are many German sources that refer to and/or describe Shark Island, few voices and stories from people who actually experienced captivity in the camp were ever recorded. The scary reality of Shark Island is that the majority of people sent there would die in the camp and with them the oral chronicle of their demise. There are therefore no known, credible oral histories about Shark Island in the present. However, in the past a number of voices were inadvertently recorded such as the testimonies of the prisoners Eduard and Jacoba, cited above. Other examples of surviving accounts are those published in the British Blue Book on the treatment of 'natives' by the German state (see the discussion on Johan noothout's testimony earlier in this chapter). The Herero teacher Samuel Kariko, who went to Shark

Island in June 1905,¹⁰² was also interviewed for the Blue Book and his account is probably the most in-depth oral description of life in the camp. The interview was done 13 years after the event, in 1918, yet Kariko vividly recalled the cold, damp climate and the dire consequences incarceration had for the prisoners. Kariko ostensibly said under oath:

“I was sent down with others to an island far in the south, at Lüderitzbucht. There on that island were thousands of Herero and Hottentot (Sic.) prisoners. We had to live there. Men, women and children were all huddled together. We had no proper clothing, no blankets, and the night air on the sea was bitterly cold. The wet sea fogs drenched us and made our teeth chatter. The people died there like flies that had been poisoned. The great majority died there. The little children and the old people died first, and then the women and the weaker men. No day passed without many deaths. We begged and prayed and appealed for leave to go back to our own country, which is warmer, but the Germans refused. Those men who were fit had to work during the day in the harbour and railway depots. The younger women were selected by the soldiers and taken to their camps as concubines.”¹⁰³

Kariko’s testimony is chilling and lachrymose. His description captivates the sensation of disbelief and abandonment that prisoners must necessarily have felt, marooned on the island at the end of the world. Similar to other sources, Kariko also emphasised the plight of women, who were forced to prostitution or subjected to rape. Furthermore, the testimony spelled out the total disregard for prisoners’ health and rudimentary conditions that were to blame for trauma and death on the island. The temperature was uncommonly cold and humid yet prisoners were insufficiently equipped by the authorities to allow them to resist, or even exist under, such conditions.

Based on Kariko’s testimony it seems irrefutably clear that Shark Island was a place of death. But, the testimonies given in the Blue Book are not generally accepted and have come under criticism for being based on selective evidence designed primarily for propaganda purposes in painting a very negative picture of German colonialism.¹⁰⁴ Although clearly the aim of the then British government to declare Germany unfit of having colonies and thereby to take over the colony following the treaty of Versailles, this did (and does) not necessarily render information contained in the book untrue.¹⁰⁵ The information given in the Blue Book was

¹⁰² RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 13, 1905.

¹⁰³ South Africa, Union of.

¹⁰⁴ Lau: 1995, p. 46; and also Rahn, pp. 83-84. Tragically, Rahn refers to Lau’s dismissal of the Blue Book as used in Drechsler, and concludes his rebuttal by accentuating the fact that Drechsler was a ‘GDR Historian!’ It is difficult to see how this fact would even remotely have anything to do with the credibility of information in the Blue Book, which was written in 1918 – as if there was some sort of communist conspiracy to defame German colonialism stretching back to the beginning of the century.

¹⁰⁵ Silvester and Gewald, p. xxii.

subsequently also not officially refuted by the German Government, that instead launched a counter-smear publication, containing a ‘you-did-it-too’ list of British colonial atrocities.¹⁰⁶ The main line of defence employed by Germany in relation to the ‘native’ testimonies was to highlight the fact that they were given by Africans, who, according to the German defence, were inherently prone to lying.¹⁰⁷ Safe to say that this racist notion is as invalid today as it was then and that Blue Book statements are not undermined by such arguments.



Photo 2.11 Herero prisoners on Shark Island 1905, Düring Album

Nonetheless, there are some oddities in Kariko’s statement that merit a deeper scrutiny of the historical data it contains. There are some facts that do not exactly add up. The mention, for example, of a number of ‘Hottentot’¹⁰⁸ prisoners, on the

¹⁰⁶ German Colonial Office: 1919.

¹⁰⁷ German Colonial Office, p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ Derogatory word for Nama.

island in 1905 seems not to correlate with other facts. Indeed this would have been very unlikely at the time Kariko was supposed to have been on the Island, because the Witbooi only surrendered in November 1905 and the Bethanie much later. Kariko left the island in late December 1905 and would therefore not have been on the island at the same time as these Nama prisoners. Furthermore, Kariko ostensibly said: “After being there over a year, those of us who had survived were allowed to return home.”¹⁰⁹ This is a rather curious statement, since the Herero were only given their freedom in 1908,¹¹⁰ many years after Kariko had left the island. Also, Kariko was not on the island for more than six months in total.

In spite of these inconsistencies, most of the evidence found in Kariko’s testimony matches other pieces of information about the camp and the island. It is, for example, a proven fact that Kariko was on Shark Island. From the Rhenish missionaries we know that in June 1905 the learned and respected Herero teacher Samuel Kariko, who was working for the mission, was sent with his family to do missionary work among the prisoners on Shark Island.¹¹¹ His task was to convert prisoners and provide spiritual support to those already converted. When missionary Kuhlmann went to the island in September 1905, it was with the specific purpose of visiting the “evangelist Samuel” and when Missionary Laaf arrived in Lüderitz on Christmas Eve 1905, Kariko functioned as his interpreter, i.e. he was still on the Island.¹¹²

Kariko worked for the mission, but it is nevertheless apparent that no special facilities were provided for him. He had to physically stay on the island along with the prisoners-of-war. In fact Kuhlmann stated that an unnamed camp commander eventually relieved Samuel Kariko of his working duties, so that he instead could perform his missionary work.¹¹³ Kariko must therefore have been working alongside other prisoners for a good couple of months before being allowed to save souls for the mission. Kuhlmann does not suggest that Kariko had any other special privileges and one would assume that Kariko must have been suffering the same conditions as the other Hereros on the island.

Kariko’s experience was most likely true to his testimony if one is to judge from his actions. In December 1905, desperate to get away from the concentration camp, Kariko sent a forlorn appeal to the missionaries asking if he and eight of his family could be evacuated from the island – little over five months after going to

¹⁰⁹ South Africa, Union of.

¹¹⁰ BKE 224, B.II.74.d. Spec. Vol 2, p. 331.

¹¹¹ RMS Correspondence VII 31, Swakopmund 1-7, Eich to Vedder, June 13, 1906.

¹¹² Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 59. This information came from Inspector Spiecker.

¹¹³ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 260.

Lüderitz.¹¹⁴ The reason for his desired departure from the island was cited as health related. One can imagine the torment it must have been to work among friends, family and fellow human beings, dying in scores around Kariko. He would not have been able to offer any kind of help apart from prayer. If the cold climate didn't make him sick, the trauma of his experience would surely have made a physical as well as psychological impact on him, as is evident from his testimony.

Kariko's appeal to be evacuated from Shark Island was initially ignored by his Rhenish missionary colleagues, who would only let him go if another 'native' assistant was found to take his place.¹¹⁵ Eventually, however, a replacement was found, a certain Heinrich Ururua, who was immediately appointed to take the depressing and obviously dangerous position at Lüderitz.¹¹⁶ Because of the large number of Herero souls on Shark Island, the Rhenish Mission had at the same time decided to set up a permanent mission station in Lüderitz.¹¹⁷ The new station was to be headed by Emil Laaf, who before the war had been responsible for the now defunct Veldschoendrager mission in Khoes.¹¹⁸ Ururua spoke fluent Dutch and could therefore also act as an interpreter for the German Missionary Laaf, whose language proficiencies were inadequate.¹¹⁹

Kariko and family was bound for Usakos by early 1906, where the resident Herero teacher, Gottlieb, had defected to the Roman Catholic Church, leaving his position vacant.¹²⁰ As such, Kariko was in fact allowed to leave the island with other Herero and return to their own land, as stated in his Blue Book testimony. In the 1906 Omaruru Missionary Chronicle, Samuel Kariko reflected on his escape. His words contained a deep-felt remorse that he as a Christian did not have the strength to persevere Shark Island, being implicitly ashamed of his departure from the island while many hundreds if not over a thousand of his fellow Hereros remained:

"As a prisoner I travelled by sea to Lüderitzbucht, to do the Lord's work there. People wanted to make me similar to Paul. It was my pity, though, that unlike him I did not have the spirit of holiness in my heart."¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Missions-Berichte, 1906, pp. 9-11.

¹¹⁵ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, November 25, 1905.

¹¹⁶ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 59.

¹¹⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 260.

¹¹⁸ *Allgemeine zeitung* (Windhoek), "50 Jahre Rheinische Mission in Luderitzbucht" (Nr. 27, February 8, 1956).

¹¹⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 59.

¹²⁰ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 11

¹²¹ RMS Chronicle V, 23.1, Omaruru, 1906, as quoted in Gewalt: 1996, p. 246. Also quoted in Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 147.

The author of the Blue Book, Major O'Reilly, could hardly have found a more appropriate subject to interview about Shark Island than Samuel Kariko, who moreover resided in Omaruru where O'Reilly compiled and wrote the exhaustive report.¹²² There is consistent evidence to show that Kariko was on Shark Island and that he suffered from the experience. On closer inspection even the inconsistencies in Kariko's testimony were perhaps not as implausible as first believed. It does seem entirely possible that Kariko's statement were in essence completely factual. In the case of the alleged Nama prisoners found in Lüderitz in 1905, for example, there are several possibilities. It could be that Kariko added his knowledge of the Nama prisoners to his evidence, which in 1918 he would have been well aware of. It could also be that the translators of Kariko's testimony, who did perhaps not know the exact chronology of events in Lüderitz, added this information themselves (possibly even O'Reilly himself). There is yet another option, however: maybe there were in actual fact Nama on the island already in 1905 that have not yet been documented.

When the Nama War broke out, approximately 80 Witbooi men, who at the time had still been fighting with German troops in the Herero campaign, were rounded up and sent to Swakopmund.¹²³ It is a distinct possibility that Nama taken prisoner in the South were in this same manner sent off to Lüderitz. In support of this possibility is a letter sent to the Lüderitz Local Government by the Lüderitzbucht Company in late 1904.¹²⁴ Having heard the news of the Witbooi uprising, the Lüderitzbucht Company requested that the mobility Nama working for the German companies in the South be severely restricted. The company feared that their Nama labourers would leave Lüderitz and possibly join in the fighting.¹²⁵ Although this correspondence did not suggest that the Nama labourers were actually sent to Shark Island, the letter does prove that the War in the South would have had a negative effect on Namas in Lüderitz and surroundings and perhaps even that they would have been arrested.

On a similar theme a letter from District Commissioner Böhmer on April 29, 1907 referred to a group of Nama, mostly from the Bethanie community, who were working on the English Guano islands off the coast of Lüderitz and in Radford Bay at the outbreak of the War.¹²⁶ In light of the Lüderitzbucht Company's request it is very likely that these people were in some way detained or interned.

¹²² Silvester and Gewald, p. xx.

¹²³ The Witbooi fighters were subsequently deported to German Togo in West Africa. Drechsler, p. 185.

¹²⁴ BLU 29, E.1.K. Vol 1, October 11, 1904.

¹²⁵ BLU 29, E.1.K. Vol 1, October 11, 1904.

¹²⁶ ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3, Vol 5, pp. 112-114



Photo 2.12 Cornelius Fredericks' people captured and photographed in around October 1905. Düring album

Returning to missionary sources, Missionary Diehl wrote from Okahandja in January 1905 (i.e. long before the Witboois surrendered) that there were a number of Nama prisoners in the Osona camp by Okahandja.¹²⁷ Similarly, in June 1906 the Rhenish Mission's newsletter mentioned that Missionary Laaf's community comprised predominantly Herero – an indication that other ethnic groups were also present.¹²⁸ Also, in Düring's photo diary, which was most probably taken in October 1905, a number of Bethanie prisoners were photographed in Kubub by Aus (see photo 2.12). The most compelling piece of evidence, however, comes from Missionary Fenchel in Keetmanshoop, who in January 1906 described a group of prisoners, stemming from Cornelius and Morenga's people, who were being held in Lüderitzbucht.¹²⁹ These prisoners are likely to be the same women photographed in

¹²⁷ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 79.

¹²⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 127.

¹²⁹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 33. Morenga had resumed the Bondelswartz uprising in August 1904 and continued fighting the German troops until September 20, 1907 when he was killed by the Cape Mounted Police near Upington, i.e. in British territory. Drechsler, pp. 179, 199-204.

Kubub by Düring. As such Kariko may well have been correct in referring to Nama on the island. Overall, therefore, the Kariko interview in the Blue Book correlated with other evidence and descriptions of the island to such an extent that it cannot be dismissed as simple propaganda.

Nama prisoners-of-war: *Dat Volk is Gedaan*

On July 27, 1905, two months before he died, the leader of the Witbooi community, *Kaptein* Hendrik Witbooi wrote a letter to Keetmanshoop District Commissioner Schmidt. In this letter the old *Kaptein* stated in no uncertain terms that he did not consider surrender to be an option. He wrote:



Photo 2.13 Samuel Isaak and Hendrik Witbooi (right)

“...[your] peace is the same as my death and the death of my people...all I see in your peace is the extermination of all of us and our people”¹³⁰

True to his word, Hendrik Witbooi continued his anti-colonial campaign of attacking German-owned farms with his band of fighters. The campaign came to an abrupt end in late October 1905, when Hendrik Witbooi was shot in the thigh during such an attack and subsequently died from his wounds. Following Hendrik Witbooi's death, the remaining fighters and their families were forced to evaluate their situation. They needed to decide whether or not they should carry on fighting. Contrary to his July letter, Hendrik Witbooi's last words were supposedly: “It is enough now. It is over with me. The children shall have peace.”¹³¹

Leadership befell the old *Kaptein*'s son, Isaak Witbooi. But, when he decided to keep fighting, elder members of the group raised their objections.¹³² Eventually the under-*Kaptein* and Hendrik Witbooi's close friend, Samuel Isaak, decided to split with the late *Kaptein*'s son.¹³³ Samuel Isaak and a number of people, including Hans Hendriks, the *Kaptein* of the Veldschoendragers, reportedly no longer wanted to fight and decided to rather attempt a peace settlement with the Germans.¹³⁴

Before the southern wars had broken out, Samuel Isaak was on good terms with the German authorities. Isaak had never really been convinced about the war, a fact that he had communicated to the German army,¹³⁵ and perhaps therefore expected his peace offering to be greeted with lenience. Moreover, in making his decision to surrender, Samuel Isaak would have had an important frame of reference. In 1894 the Witbooi community had conducted an exhausting campaign against the Germans in the Naukluft Mountains. Although the Witbooi were eventually defeated in the Naukluft, they had managed to negotiate reasonable terms, securing both mobility and tenure for the community. Nevertheless, Samuel Isaak's decision would also have been dictated out of necessity, because the Witboois would have been dispirited by the death of their leader and been physically drained from a drawn-out guerrilla campaign with minimal rations of food and drink.

Before walking into the ‘lion's den’ Samuel Isaak entered into correspondence with the German authorities, hinting at the prospect of peace negotiations. Subsequently, Major von Estorff, who as a veteran in the colony was both known and trusted by Samuel Isaak, assured the Witbooi leader that he and his people would

¹³⁰ BKE 305 , G.A. 10/2, Witbooi to Schmidt, July 27,1905, p. 79.

¹³¹ Weber, p. 162.

¹³² Nuhn: 2000, p. 177.

¹³³ Nuhn: 2000, p. 177 and also Drechsler, p. 190.

¹³⁴ Nuhn: 2000, p. 177.

¹³⁵ BKE 305 , G.A. 10/2, Goliath to Schmidt, July 25,1905, p. 78.

receive life and liberty in exchange for giving up their weapons.¹³⁶ Von Estorff would later describe how he in fact had been given the mandate from central command to make such a promise.¹³⁷ Samuel Isaak's cautious approach had therefore, on the face of it, worked out relatively well. Samuel Isaak arrived in Berseba on November 20, presenting himself to Lieutenant von Westernhagen with a total of 74 men and 65 women and children.¹³⁸ It is worth noting that Samuel Isaak's group only carried a total of 36 guns, which supports the idea that the fighters remained with Isaak Witbooi, as did most of the weapons.

Upon arrival in Berseba, the final conditions of the surrender were negotiated. Lieutenant von Westernhagen and the local Nama *Kaptein* Goliath, who was still 'loyal' to the Germans, conducted terms of the peace.¹³⁹ Samuel Isaak was promised that all personal effects in possession upon surrendering would remain Witbooi property.¹⁴⁰ A week later, Samuel and his people were on their way back home to Gibeon, where, according to the peace agreement, they were supposed to stay.¹⁴¹ Before they left Berseba, though, their possessions were confiscated, to be held in custody for a period not exceeding three years.¹⁴² Other Witboois held at Berseba joined Samuel Isaak's group and when they reached Gibeon on December 2nd, 1905, they were 80 men and 110 women and children.¹⁴³ Soon more Nama groups emulated their example, giving up weapons in large numbers, largely due to Samuel Isaak's appeal.

On December 1st, 1905, newly arrived Governor Friedrich von Lindequist announced that he had annulled any concessions given to the Witbooi, in accordance with orders given to him by the Kaiser.¹⁴⁴ The wheels were set in motion to rectify what Lindequist perceived to have been a grave mistake; according to him the Witbooi should be punished, not promised their freedom. As a result Samuel Isaak's group of Witbooi soon found themselves marching from Gibeon to Windhoek, where they would be interned in the concentration camp next to the *Alte Feste*.¹⁴⁵ On February 25, 1906 there were therefore around 500 Nama in Windhoek's concentration camp of whom the majority were Witboois and Veldshoendragers.¹⁴⁶

¹³⁶ Estorff, p. 123. Estorff's promise was also related in the *Missoins-Berichte*: 1906, p. 68.

¹³⁷ Estorff, p. 123.

¹³⁸ Weber, p. 164.

¹³⁹ Nuhn: 2000, p. 178.

¹⁴⁰ Nuhn: 2000, p. 178.

¹⁴¹ Koessler, pp. 50-53.

¹⁴² Koessler, pp. 50-53.

¹⁴³ Estorff, p. 123.

¹⁴⁴ Drechsler, p. 191.

¹⁴⁵ Nuhn: 2000, p. 265

¹⁴⁶ *Missions-Berichte*, 1906, p. 104.

Before long, Isaak Witbooi and the rest of the Witbooi community joined Samuel Isaak and Hans Hendriks¹⁴⁷ in the Windhoek camp.¹⁴⁸ Ostensibly Isaak Witbooi was later sent to the area between Maltahoehe and Fish River to help secure the surrender of parts of the Witbooi community scattered there.¹⁴⁹ This act of collaboration could explain why he and his immediate family were spared the fate of their fellow Witboois in as much as they were not sent to Shark Island, but instead spent the remanding decade of German colonialism in the small military depot at Okandjande, close to the Waterberg area.

As part of Lindequist's policy of sending southerners north and vice versa, a steady inflow of Nama prisoner kept arriving in the Windhoek camp.¹⁵⁰ The Red Nation from Hoachanas, who had fought under *Kaptein* Manasse until his war-related death had cut their campaign short, arrived in the Windhoek camp around June 1906.¹⁵¹ Members of Hans Hendriks' Veldschoendragers, as well as members



Photo 2.14 Samuel Isaak (middle) with other Witboois proudly wearing characteristic white bandanna in the Windhoek camp. Postcard erroneously captioned: Herero captains and headmen

¹⁴⁷ Hans Hendrik was eventually sent onto the Osona Camp in Okahandja. *Missions-Berichte*, 1907, p. 42.

¹⁴⁸ ZBU 465, D.IV.m.3, vol. 1, p. 76; and *Missions-Berichte*, 1906, p. 104.

¹⁴⁹ ZBU 465, D.IV.m.3, vol. 1, p. 76.

¹⁵⁰ Estorff, p. 134.

¹⁵¹ *Missions-Berichte*, 1906, p. 127. and *Missions-Berichte*, 1907, p. 42. Another of the smaller southern communities, the Groot Doden [Great Dead], also known as the //O-gain, were confined to a minor camp at Spitzkop in the South (not the Spitzkoppe between Swakopmund and Karibib).

of the Bondelswartz community were also sent to the Windhoek concentration camp from the South.¹⁵² The biggest group of prisoners to arrive in central GSWA, however, was the many Bethanie people, who had gradually surrendered to German patrols between January and March 1906.

When Hendrik Witbooi took up arms in October 1904, the Bethanie community was caught in an acute dilemma. On the one hand, Bethanie *Kaptein*, Paul Fredericks appealed to his community not to support the Witbooi uprising. On the other hand the *Kaptein*'s cousin,¹⁵³ Cornelius Fredericks, who was also Hendrik Witbooi's son-in-law,¹⁵⁴ had gone into battle with several hundred fellow Bethanies.

Cornelius Fredericks and his Bethanie fighters embarked on a long, effective campaign against German troops and the young leader's name became known throughout the colony. Among German troops he had a reputation as gentleman of war, because he ostensibly conducted a fair fight and, where possible, avoided killing Germans.¹⁵⁵ Fredericks was even mentioned in the official War History, a document sanctioned by the German Military Command, as being a noble opponent. This accolade stands out in the official history where the Empire's enemies are otherwise regarded as traitors and bandits.

On March 13, 1906, Governor Lindequist went to visit the Nama prisoners in Windhoek. Lindequist, who had served as deputy Governor under Leutwein, knew Samuel Isaak personally from long rides through the South.¹⁵⁶ In spite of any such familiarity or indeed the promises given to the Witbooi and Venldshoendrager communities upon their surrender, the new Governor gave somewhat patronising speech that would leave no illusions about the future plight of the Nama. He said:

"Of course you no longer have *Kapteins* [leaders] among you. However, I trust that you, Samuel Isaak, and you, Hans Hendrik, have so much influence over your tribes-people [*Volksgenossen*] that you will be able to prevent them from further unsound action... You will be put to work; I advise you: be diligent and follow the instructions given to you in my name... Those who behave well, will be treated well. Have you understood this and will you behave accordingly?"¹⁵⁷

True to his word, Lindequist arranged for the respective Nama communities to be distributed to different sites in the centre of the colony, where they were put to work. Hans Hendriks and his Veldschoendragers were sent to Osona Camp in Oka-

¹⁵² Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 145.

¹⁵³ NAW 43, Magistrate Owens, 'Frederiks' Family Tree', Bethanie 3/8/22.

¹⁵⁴ Patemann, p.122. Also, Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 37.

¹⁵⁵ Accession 460, "Twelve Years in South West Africa 1907 – 1919: Recollections of the Writer"; Rahn, p.58 and Baericke, p. 30. Also Trench: KAB, PMO 227 – 35/07, British Military Attaché, Col. F. Trench to British Embassy, Berlin, 21st November, 1906.

¹⁵⁶ BAK, Kl. Erw. 275, Lindequist Memoirs, p. 83.

¹⁵⁷ Nuhn: 2000, p. 266.

handja,¹⁵⁸ Isaak Witbooi and family were taken to Okandjande station close to Otavi,¹⁵⁹ Bethanie prisoners were sent to Karibib via Lüderitz to work on the Tsumeb railway;¹⁶⁰ and the Witboois remained in Windhoek's concentration camp until August 1906.¹⁶¹

While in Windhoek, Samuel Isaak's group of Witboois were ostensibly given preferential treatment.¹⁶² In a memo on February 16, 1906 it was specifically stated that Samuel Isaak's group of 70 were to be given a private 'Kraal' with only limited military supervision. As a means of preventing escapes, Samuel Isaak was to be held personally responsible for any actions taken by this group.¹⁶³ In spite of these supposed privileges, the group was nonetheless forced to work in the town and were even rented out on a daily basis to private people. To rent a Witbooi, it would cost a Windhoek citizen 5 or 3 Marks for men and woman respectively. This lease of labour was a moneymaking enterprise for the colonial Government, since none of the rental fee would end up with to the prisoners.¹⁶⁴

The below photo depicts distribution of food to concentration camp prisoners. There are two pieces of information in the photo that suggests it to be from the period that Nama prisoners were kept in the Windhoek camp. Firstly, in the background, it is possible to make out one of the 'Alte Feste' towers. Secondly, a man standing in the right side of the image, leaning against a stick, was wearing a white bandanna on his head – the symbol of the Witbooi. He wore a broad-brimmed hat, a white blazer and carried a cane; it could therefore well be that this mystery man was in fact Samuel Isaak, who was known to dress in a similar fashion.¹⁶⁵ Notably the image was clearly posed and can be categorised as a propaganda photo designed for mass consumption.¹⁶⁶ It might therefore not be an accurate reflection of conditions in the camp.

¹⁵⁸ Missions-Berichte, 1907, p. 42.

¹⁵⁹ ZBU 2369, Geheimakten, Nr. VIII.g (Vol. 1 to 2), relating to the Witboi-Hottentotten. [sic.] 1905-1909, p. 84.

¹⁶⁰ Nuhn: 2000, p. 266.

¹⁶¹ Missions-Berichte, 1906, p. 251.

¹⁶² ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 56-57.

¹⁶³ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 56-57.

¹⁶⁴ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 56-57.

¹⁶⁵ See photos 2.13 and 2.14.

¹⁶⁶ See Silvester et al in Hartmann et al (eds.): 1998, pp. 12-14.



Photo 2.15 Nama prisoners receiving rations in Windhoek



Photo 2.16 Isaak Witbooi and family in Okandjande

Deportation

When the Witboois first rose up, a number of their fighters were still in German ranks. They had been part of the German campaign at the Waterberg. Although the uprising had presumably happened without their knowledge, they were immediately disarmed, arrested and eventually deported to the German colony of Togo.

More than two years later, the new Governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, gave very serious thought to completely removing the troublesome Witbooi and Bethanie communities from the colony. Although the colony stood to lose a considerable part of its labour pool, this was deemed of secondary importance to the security risk they potentially posed. Moreover, by deporting the prisoners, labour would be lost to the colony but not to the German Empire. Hence, the feasibility of moving around a couple of thousand people from GSWA to either the Cameroon or Togo in western Africa was investigated.

While these discussions were taking place, the initial Togo deportees were repatriated, because the authorities in Togo simply wouldn't take responsibility for their deaths. This brought about strong reactions from the settler community. Lindequist, surely aware that his 'constituency' was unhappy, sent a telegram to the Colonial Department on July 10, 1906 urging that the Witboois be sent to Samoa and the captured Bethanie and Franzmanns be sent to Adamaua in northern Cameroon. The colonial Department did not concur. They dismissed the idea, citing the enormous cost involved in such an exercise. The transport alone would amount to large sums of money that the colonial department was not willing to spend. The failure of the Togo deportees would also have played a part in the proposal's rejection. Instead, Lindequist was told to find a suitable and safe location inside the colony where he could dispose of the Nama. Eventually the Nama communities were sent to Shark Island in Lüderitz.



This picture most likely shows the Bethanie doing work on 600mm gauge Swakopmund to Tsumeb line. Note the *Bambusenkind* on the left.

Sources:

- Alexander in Saunders (ed.), pp. 64-65.
- Hillebrecht & Melber in Mbumba (ed.), pp. 132-136.
- Nuhn: 2000, pp. 265-267.
- Drechsler, pp. 185-186.

Nama prisoners go to Lüderitz

In mid 1906, the increasing number of Witbooi prisoners was becoming increasingly unpopular with German settlers in Windhoek. Both soldiers and settlers were reportedly upset at what they regarded as a far too relaxed approach to security and treatment of the Witbooi prisoners.¹⁶⁷ The anger stemmed in large part from the fact that 13 Witboois had managed to escape from the Windhoek concentration camp.¹⁶⁸

In late June 1906, Colonel Deimling replaced Colonel Dame as the commander-in-chief of the *Schutztruppe*. The incumbent Colonel was an outspoken militarist, who immediately took a hard-line stance on the Nama 'problem'. Soon after taking his position, he advised Governor Lindequist to deport the Nama to other German colonies.¹⁶⁹ When the Colonial Department in Berlin eventually turned down this request, citing costs, Nama prisoners were instead sent to Lüderitz, to the Shark Island Camp.¹⁷⁰

From August onwards, Nama prisoners were gradually transferred to Lüderitz from their various locations in concentration camps and construction sites. They were loaded into cattle trucks and sent to Swakopmund, from where they were transported by sea to Lüderitz.

Samuel Isaak and a large section of the imprisoned Witboois comprised the first consignment of Nama to the South. As such, in mid August 1906, a somewhat bewildered Samuel Isaak found himself in Swakopmund. The Witbooi leader protested fiercely to the local military administration in Swakopmund, insisting that incarceration in Lüderitz had never been part of the peace agreement with Major von Estorff when the Witbooi first surrendered.¹⁷¹ Because of his continued protest, the Swakopmund military eventually sent a telegram back to Windhoek, relaying Samuel Isaak's claims. In short, the Swakopmund military was asking if Isaak's accusations were true and whether the deportation could still go ahead.¹⁷² Colonel Deimling replied personally. His one-line telegram, which sealed the fate of Samuel Isaak and the Witboois, read: "no objections against leaving Samuel Isaak on Shark Island".¹⁷³ At the end of August, therefore, the Witboois were deported to Lüderitz.

¹⁶⁷ "Der Deutsche", August 1, 1906, as cited in Nuhn: 2000, p. 266.

¹⁶⁸ "Der Deutsche", August 1, 1906, as cited in Nuhn: 2000, p. 266.

¹⁶⁹ Drechsler, pp. 210-211.

¹⁷⁰ Drechsler, pp. 210-211.

¹⁷¹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 89-94.

¹⁷² ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 89-94.

¹⁷³ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 89-94.

Apart from Samuel Isaak's people, the biggest group of Witbooi and probably Veldshoendragers, arrived on September 9, 1906 and consisted over 1700 people. All had been sent by sea directly to the Island, where they joined Herero and Nama prisoners already there.¹⁷⁴ More Nama prisoners kept trickling in from different parts of the colony such as a group of 81 Nama arriving from Keetmanshoop as late as October 17, 1906.¹⁷⁵ With the arrival of Cornelius Fredericks and his Bethanies, there were more than 2000 Nama prisoners on the island all together.

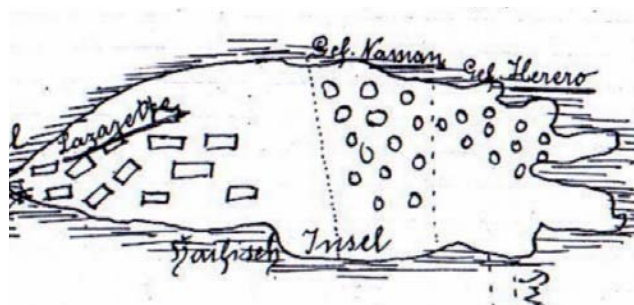


Figure 2.1 Missionary Laaf's map from October 1906, showing the nama and Herero (right)

A German soldier named Hünninger, who was described as being the 'Prisoner Overseer' on Shark Island, compiled figures of prisoners in late November 1906. According to him there were 514 Herero prisoner on the island in November 1906.¹⁷⁶ To accommodate the new arrivals at Shark Island, an extra section was added to the old camp.¹⁷⁷

For unknown reasons, the Nama prisoners were kept separately from the Hereros. It is not know from where the Herero on the island had come, although there is evidence that some of Maharero's people were in Lüderitz.¹⁷⁸ Considering that both Witbooi and Bethanie had fought alongside the Germans at Waterberg, it is not unlikely that some animosity existed, which could explain the split. Perhaps the division was meant to keep the new arrivals from learning the extent of their predicament, i.e. a measure to prevent information spreading about the severity of condition and high mortality rates. Another, more humane, reason for the division

¹⁷⁴ RMS, V.16, pp. 1–31, Chronik der Gemeinde Lüderitzbucht.

¹⁷⁵ Bofinger: 1910, p. 577.

¹⁷⁶ HBS 52, Bautagebuch: Arbeiten auf der Haifischinsel, November 28, 1906.

¹⁷⁷ Archives of Vereinte Evangelische Mission, Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany. RMG/1.656a, B/c II, p. 46–49, October 21, 1906.

¹⁷⁸ BLU 29, E.1.K, Vol. 1, no 2, May 19, 1906, p. 120.

could have related to disease. By preventing contact, there would also be less of a risk of infection with the deadly diseases spreading on the island. However, the most probable reason for dividing the camp would have been increased control with prisoners. The number of prisoners greatly outnumbered that of Lüderitz's white population and by separating the two groups, or perhaps even fuelling animosity between them, the Germans would be able to keep them from joining forces and potentially resist their incarceration.

Notwithstanding the fact that Shark Island was actually split into two camps, there was a second camp in the harbour town. This camp was found next to the stranded English steamer HMS Dunbeth, on the Nautilus side of Roberthafen (the side opposite Shark Island). On Missionary Laaf's October 1906 map, the camp was labelled "Prisoner Hereros", "Firma Lenz". The latter referred to Lenz and Co., which was the company contracted to prepare the railway lines embankment between Lüderitz to Aus. At the time Laaf drew his map, railway construction was no longer in Lüderitzbucht, in fact construction was almost complete. Nevertheless it is clear that Lenz kept a large number of prisoners in Lüderitz, in spite of the increasingly removed site of construction. Indeed the railway company had three different locations for their prisoners: 1. Lüderitz, i.e. the Lenz Camp; 2. The actual line (ephemeral and scattered); 3. The Aus Camp.¹⁷⁹ Most likely Lenz kept its prisoners in the knowledge that the southern railway line's second stretch, between Aus and Keetmanshoop, would still have to be constructed, depending on its final approval by the German *Reichstag*.

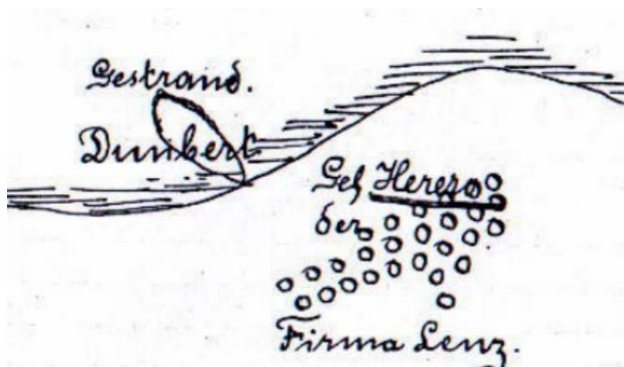


Figure 2.2 Lenz camp on the mainland, next to the stranded HMS Dunbeth

¹⁷⁹ BLU 29, E.1.K, Vol. 1, no 2., July 27, 1907, no page number.

Lenz Camp was not a site of heavenly appeal, much like the concentration camps on Shark Island. A British Mining Prospector, Fred Cornell, who was in Lüderitz at the time, described the Lenz camp. He wrote:

“There were also a large number caged in a wire enclosure on the beach; these were slightly better off, as, although they received no rations from the military in charge of them, a few of their number were let out each morning and went ravenously foraging in the refuse-buckets, bringing what offal they could back to their starving fellow-prisoners.”¹⁸⁰

In Cornell’s estimation, the people kept on the beach were better off than their fellow prisoners on Shark Island, although being given no rations by their captors. Another eerie description of the Lenz camp was given by non-commissioned officer Mohr:

“On February 21 we were ordered out of quarantine and on the same night sent on guard duty. We ... guarded the Herero prisoners, who were placed on the north-side of the bay on the ocean beach... The ice-cold ocean winds were beating ropes against the ships in the harbour, which resulted in us having to sharpen our hearing in order to realise what the POWs were doing in the camp.”¹⁸¹

Although Lenz was effectively a private company contracted by the German Government, Herero prisoners in the camp were still under military administration, explaining why Mohr and his companion would stand guard at the camp and why Cornell described it as pertaining to the army. In fact all prisoners, regardless where they were assigned to work or what camp they were put in, were under the administration of the *Etappenkommando*.

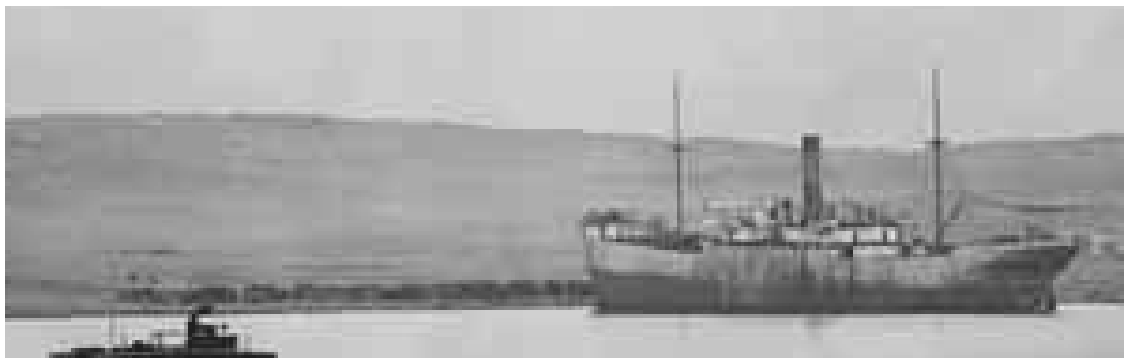


Photo 2.17 The Lenz Camp seen from Shark Island. HMS Dunbeth in the foreground. Dunbeth stranded on June 6, 1906

¹⁸⁰ Cornell, F. *The Glamour of Prospecting* (Clairmont Philip, 1986), p. 42; Mohr, pp. 152-153.

¹⁸¹ Brepohl, pp. 153-154.

The *Etappenkommando* was the division in charge of supplies for the military, providing anything from ammunition to food, clothing, transport or labour. According to the rules and regulations for the use of prisoners, anyone in the colony wanting prisoners for labour purposes would first have to motivate their need with the *Etappenkommando*.¹⁸² Even local governments would have to go through the *Etappenkommando* to get labourers from the concentration camp.¹⁸³ The general motivation behind forced labour, especially in Lüderitz, was to speed up and reduce cost in construction and maintenance of urgently needed infrastructure. It is evident that the military supply division's main interest and mandate would have been to maximise the prisoners' labour potential. Human issues such as prisoner welfare and state of health would have been secondary concerns, to the extent they were considered at all.

Much like the other towns with concentration camps, Lüderitz grew rapidly during the war. Indeed the sudden strategic importance of Lüderitz, resulting from the southern wars, made pressing demands for renewed and expanded infrastructure in the small town. In essence, the outbreak of war in the South meant that Lüderitz became a vital gateway for troops arriving in their thousands, needing corresponding amounts of supplies in their hunt for southern Guerrilla fighters. A mediocre outpost at the turn of the century, Lüderitz was now forced to rapidly adapt to the new demands. As such, there was an imminent and sizeable need for labour to construct and maintain lasting general infrastructure.

The task of dressing Lüderitz for its new role befell the prisoners-of-war. Notwithstanding the fact that these prisoners were in dire physical and mental shape, they were deported to the South against their will and forced to build the infrastructure of Lüderitz, doing hard, unpaid labour. Camp Doctor Bofinger described the main purpose of Herero prisoners arriving in early 1905, as being much needed labour for the expansion of Lüderitz.¹⁸⁴ Whereas the southern railway and local projects in Lüderitz in 1905-06 were largely 'employing' Herero prisoner labour, the Nama, who arrived in September 1906, were forced to work on continued construction and modernisation of the harbour.

In the annual report for Lüderitz district during 1906, compiled by local government officials, it was noted that apart from the two new piers, constructed by Herero POWs, the harbour would need further upgrading.¹⁸⁵ The new project would include a new pier on the eastern side of Shark Island as well as a wave breaker on the

¹⁸² BKE 224, B.II.74.d, Spec. I, Vol.2, p. 18.

¹⁸³ BKE 224, B.II.74.d, Spec. I, Vol.2, p. 18.

¹⁸⁴ Bofinger, p. 576.

¹⁸⁵ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3, p. 220.

northern side. The pier was meant to form part of a deep-sea harbour that would cater for larger long-distance ships. This would make Lüderitz the only other place in the German colony, considering that Walvis Bay was British, where large ship would be able to dock. The second part of the upgrade was a wave-breaker on the northern side of the island, which was designed to protect ships anchored in the harbour against the stormy seas often experienced in Lüderitz. High seas would at times cause ships to run aground in the harbour, as seen on June 6, 1906 when the British steamer HMS Dunbeth stranded following strong gales. The new harbour project was included on a hand-drawn map (Fig. 39) made by Missionary Laaf in October 1906, i.e. exactly at the time Nama prisoners were arriving on Shark Island¹⁸⁶

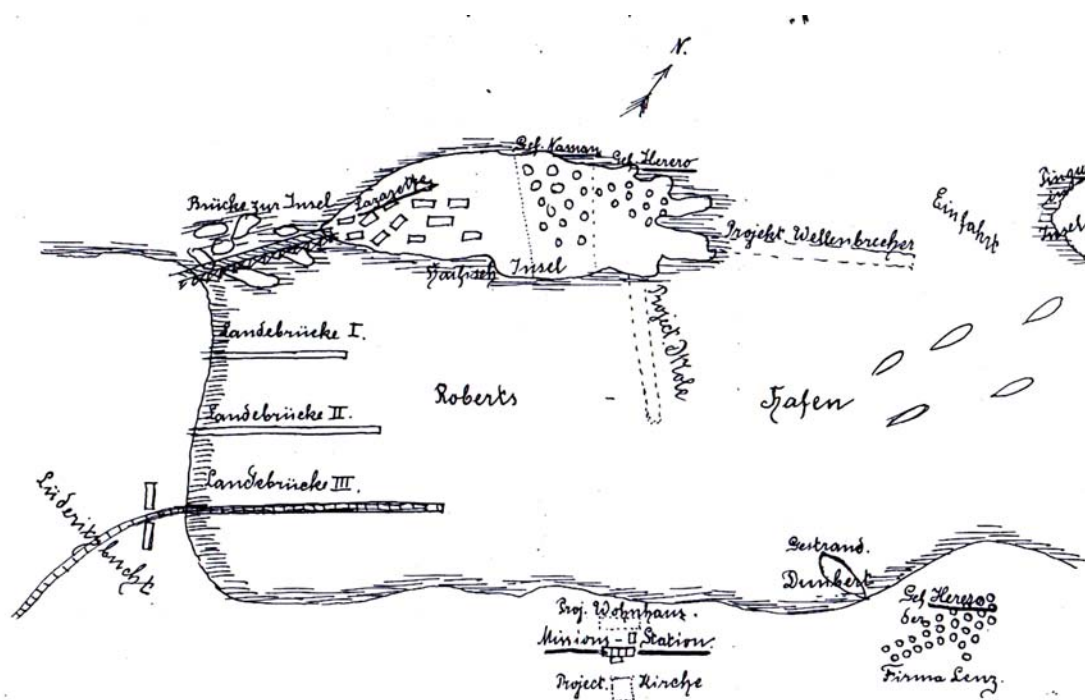


Figure 2.3 Missionary Laaf's hand-drawn map of Lüderitz's main Harbour

¹⁸⁶ Vereinte Evangelische Mission, Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany, RMG 1.656a,B/c II 83, p. 46-49, Laaf to Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft Director, October 21, 1906. Note that Laaf had his directions confused in indicating north-west as being north.

The new pier project was planned to coincide with the arrival of more than 2000 Nama prisoners to Shark Island, who constituted a considerable labour resource. In the words of the 1906 annual report:

“To provide labour for this pier and at the same time make good use of the Hottentot [Nama] prisoners-of-war on Shark Island, the Harbour Division commenced exploding [rocks] and dumping [it] on the eastern shore of the island on September 26, 1906.”¹⁸⁷

The project on Shark Island fell under the Harbour Division in Swakopmund, which sent a German technician to supervise construction. Technician Müller kept a meticulous diary of the works and also sent numerous progress reports to the Swakopmund Harbour Division.¹⁸⁸ All cost incurred was covered by the Harbour Division, although this actually meant that money came directly from Colonial Government coffers.¹⁸⁹ The bulk of costs for the project would however, not relate to provision of labour, seeing as the Colonial Government had promised Technician Müller as many as 1,600 Nama prisoners for the sole use of his project. The fact that the majority of Nama prisoners on Shark Island were assigned to Müller illustrates not only the administration’s desire for harbour expansions but more so underscores the Colonial Government’s willingness to sacrifice human life in the pursuit of cost reduction. Eventually, however, Müller did not make use of his entire ‘consignment’, using only around 300 Nama labourers at a time, although the cumulative number may well have been much higher.¹⁹⁰

The work undertaken by the Nama on Müller’s project was physically draining and undoubtedly quite dangerous. The nature of the work was extreme and consisted mostly of blowing up large boulders on Shark Island. Boxes of dynamite were continually ordered for the works as explosions continued to take place on the island, week after week. In fact explosions were such an integral part of the project that Müller named it the ‘Explosion Project’ [*Sprengearbeit*]. The role of prisoners on Müller’s Explosion Project was to set charges and, when the fireworks were over, to clear away rocks and rubble.

¹⁸⁷ ZBU 154, A. VI. A.3. p. 220.

¹⁸⁸ HBS 52, November 28, 1906.

¹⁸⁹ HBS 52, Report, November 11, 1906.

¹⁹⁰ HBS 52, November. 1, 1906.



Photo 2.18 This, perhaps, best known image of Shark Island clearly shows prisoners collecting rubble into small boxes. In the background are seen the more than a thousand prisoners on Shark Island in early 1907, huddled together for warmth.

It was a thoroughly planned project that sought to maximise the use of labour and resources. The solid rock-face on the island had to be smoothened on the sites of construction, i.e. blown into large and small pieces of rock. The large rocks and boulders would be used for the wave-breaker and pier projects, whereas smaller rock was building material for the proposed Harbour Division houses.¹⁹¹ From the blast site materials were transported to their respective destinations - presumably by hand, with small carts¹⁹² or wheelbarrows, since these were the only methods available on the island.¹⁹³ In November prisoners were subsequently also instructed to construct small roads on Shark Island in order to make the transport of material easier.¹⁹⁴ When the rock and rubble was off-loaded at either the pier, wave-breaker or house

¹⁹¹ HBS 52, November 5, 1906.

¹⁹² Later, when the number of available prisoners were dropping, it was reported that a number of donkey carts were used for transportation of rocks. HBS 53, November 27.

¹⁹³ Müller repeated the fact that only few tools were at his disposal. Moreover there was no infrastructure on the eastern side of the island, apart from roads made by prisoners.

¹⁹⁴ HBS 52, November 5, 1906.

projects, it was handed over to other prisoners who were forced to do the physical parts of the construction under supervision of skilled labourers and soldiers on site.¹⁹⁵

Collecting debris often meant standing in ice-cold water, picking up rocks and clearing the beach of material. The same was true for the pier and wave-breaker construction, where large boulders were dumped into the sea. Camp Doctor Bofinger described how women in the camp would massage and care for the sick men, whose legs were paining severely from the knee down. Although the learned doctor curiously accredited this symptom found in most sick prisoners to rheumatism,¹⁹⁶ It would appear more likely that the leg pains had to do with work performed while standing in freezing ocean waters around Shark Island.

A German *Schutztruppe* diary recounted how Nama women on Shark Island were allowed to cross the bridge every day to work in town, while Nama men were blowing ‘gigantic boulders’ on the beach of the island.¹⁹⁷ Judging from this source alone one would assume that only men were sent to work for Müller, whereas women were spared such hard labour. However, in Müller’s ‘works diary’ [*Bautagebuch*] numbers of prisoners working on Shark Island were given as between 30 and 50 percent female. On November 1, 1906 141 women were working with 165 men and on November 30 there were 66 men and 37 women.¹⁹⁸ In other words, all available ‘manpower’ was mobilised, regardless of gender.

Considering the generally weakened state of prisoners, who had to deal with maltreatment and malnourishment on shark Island, hard and dangerous labour would invariably have had consequences. It did. As early as November 30, 1906 Müller began complaining to the Harbour Division that the number of *Arbeitsfähige* [workable] Nama had shrunk to around a hundred prisoners.¹⁹⁹ According to Müller, the majority of prisoners were either sick or dying. Between November 1906 and January 1907, the situation gradually worsened. More prisoners fell ill and Müller became increasingly frustrated and nervous at the impact this reduction of labourers would have on the project. In a letter to his employers in Swakopmund, written on Christmas Eve in 1906, Müller’s gave a depressing status report. He wrote:

“Contrary to the report of the Imperial Harbour Division of October 6, 1906 (...), in which it is expressly said that 1600 Nama prisoners will be set at the disposal of the *Hafenamt*, I now have only 30-40 men at my disposal. The desired outcome is therefore not achievable. The reason for

¹⁹⁵ HBS 52, December 3, 1906.

¹⁹⁶ Bofinger, p. 570 and 581.

¹⁹⁷ Author Unknown, NAN, L338, p. 189.

¹⁹⁸ HBS 52, Nov. 1, 1906.

¹⁹⁹ HBS 52, Nov. 30, 1906.

the decline [in productivity] is to be found in the fact that 7-8 Nama die daily. On the 7th of this month as many as 17 died in one night. If measures are not actively taken to acquire [new] labourers, I fear the work will not be completed.”²⁰⁰

Müller’s letter bore little hint of empathy for prisoners, who, among other causes of death, were worked until they dropped on his and other projects. Instead of requesting that better care be taken of prisoners working for him, which would ultimately have resulted in a healthier workforce, Müller asked that immediate measures be taken to secure more prisoners from elsewhere. Either Müller had given up hope that the Nama could be saved or he simply didn’t care. The Colonial Government most definitely didn’t care. In a telegram to Müller, he was told that his request for labour could not be met but that he should attempt a “more thorough exploitation of the Nama labour force.”²⁰¹ In other words, the Government thought it a good idea to ‘flog’ the proverbial ‘dead horse’.

At the end of January 1907, the Nama workforce had been further diminished. In the Annual Report for 1906/07, Müller’s harbour works were described as having been abandoned by mid-January due to death and disease, which had reduced the number of *Arbeitsfähige* Nama to around 20 – bearing in mind that in end-September 1906 more than 2000 Nama had arrived on Shark Island.²⁰² In Müller’s report, it was simply noted that only 20 Nama were still able to work, and that these were claimed by the military administration for urgent tasks. On January 30, 1907 the project had officially been terminated. The works diary read:

“January 30. Wednesday morning. Handed over the tools still on Shark Island to technician Heintz of the Railway District”²⁰³

For obvious reasons the military suspended the use of Nama prisoners at the same time as the harbour project was abandoned. Head of the Lüderitz *Etappenkommando*, von Zülow, told Müller that the prisoners would be allowed to rest until April, when they would once again be set at the disposal of the Local Government. In the meantime they were to do only light work for the *Etappenkommando*.²⁰⁴ Even though as good as all Nama prisoners in Lüderitz had already succumbed to the effects of internment and forced labour on the island, there would be only limited respite for survivors. Instead of caring for the exhausted Nama prisoners, von Zülow evidently still expected the remaining 20 *Arbeitsfähige* to do light work for the

²⁰⁰ HBS 52, Dec. 24, 1906.

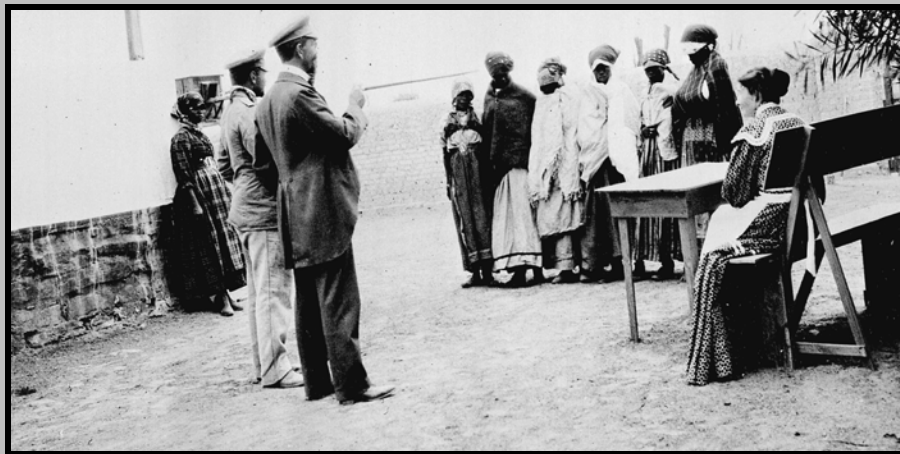
²⁰¹ HBS 52, Report, November 30, 1906.

²⁰² ZBU 1452, A. VI.a.3, p. 220.

²⁰³ HBS 52, January 30, 1907.

²⁰⁴ HBS 52, January 26, 1907.

Private labour



Although the use of prisoners by companies such as Woermann had been common practise since the war began, it only became official policy in March 1905 when Government specified rules and regulations for the provision of prisoners to private individuals. Most prisoners were used on government-sponsored projects, but the new regulations also paved the way for a moneymaking enterprise that would earn considerable amounts of revenue for the colony. Government could in future rent out prisoner to farmers, private businesses, large companies, and individual settlers. In exchange for labour, Government expected a monthly payment of 10 German Marks for every prisoner, whether man, woman or child. This rental fee was sent directly to state coffers, essentially amounting to a sizeable source of income. The collection of revenue on use of prisoners was dubbed 'Head Tax' [*Kopfsteuer*].

In the image above, captioned "It's going to be her", a German soldier is seen pointing his stick at a woman, while a settler lady takes down his choice in her ledger. The picture illustrates a human trade tantamount to slavery that resulted from the 1905 government regulations. Von Düring took this haunting picture on his trip through southern GSWA. Apart from obvious sexual undertones, the image clearly celebrated the theme of slavery.

Following the war, the trade in human labour continued unabated, and although the prisoner-of-war status was formally revoked on April 1, 1908, Herero, Nama and San still found themselves in the hands of the former enemy, building up the colony.



Source: ZBU 456, D.IV.1.3, Vol. 6, pp.34-194; Photo SCL PA08 no. 048

military. One suspects that forced labour would continue to be implemented until the able-bodied shared the fate of those already dead or dying. A contemporary had the same suspicion and noted in an internal British embassy report that:

“The Hottentots [Nama] are poor labourers, though troublesome guerrilla warriors, and I think that there is a general hope that they will soon die out.”²⁰⁵

Death Island

Although the main reasons for sending prisoners to Lüderitz was to prevent their escape and to provide labour for the construction of local infrastructure, there was also a more sinister reason behind the banishment of Nama to Lüderitz. As expressly stated by Governor Lindequist, there was a calculated hope that the prisoners would die out and thereby reduce the cost of a potential, future deportation:

“Since the Hottentots are at present safely confined to Shark Island where they are performing very useful work, I feel that their deportation may still be postponed somewhat. Perhaps one should wait and see first how the situation will develop and whether the numbers to be deported might be reduced so as to cut down the cost incurred.”²⁰⁶

There seemed to be no illusions as to what incarceration on Shark Island entailed for prisoners. The fact that Herero prisoners had died in droves at the island throughout 1905 and 1906, as witnessed by Kariko and others, meant that Lindequist’s government was well aware of the death warrant it had signed for the Nama prisoners. There was a reason the small, barren outcrop was called ‘Death Island’.²⁰⁷

Lindequist was not ignorant about conditions in the main Lüderitz concentration camp, seeing as he had visited Shark Island shortly after the southerners first arrived there. Following a short conference with headmen from the Nama communities, he deduced that “the prisoners were as a whole content with the their treatment and rations”.²⁰⁸ However, Lindequist’s positive memory of the camp was recounted in a 1908 report to the *Reichstag* about the treatment of POWs on Shark Island. Considering that Lindequist was overall responsible for the plight of the Nama, his testimony was perhaps not entirely credible. It was, in fact, one of very few accounts that described conditions in a favourable light. Colonial Director Dernburg, who

²⁰⁵ KAB 868”114-115, Despatch, Colonel Trench, Military Attaché, British Embassy, Berlin to Ambassador, Sir F. Lascelles, 22nd April, 1907.

²⁰⁶ Lindequist as cited in Drechsler, p. 211. See also United Nations definition of Genocide relating to intent. United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, (Resolution 260 (III) a, December 9, 1948).

²⁰⁷ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, “Todesinsel”, Bezirksamtman Zülów to Gov. 6/01/07, pp. 120-30.

²⁰⁸ Reichs-Kolonial-Amts, Nr. 2140, Bl 157ff: “Aufzeichnung fuer den Reichstag ueber die kriegsgefangenen Eingeborenen auf den Haifischinsel”, cited in Nuhn: 2000, p. 268.

visited the camp only in mid 1908, after the camp had been closed, was more direct in his description, stating:

“Sure, Shark Island was no paradise; a prison camp shouldn’t be [paradise]. But, it was adequately equipped for prisoners.”²⁰⁹

Shark Island was no paradise; it was rather the opposite. Conditions on the Island and the consequences these had on prisoners left a lasting impression on many soldiers entering or departing from the colony. This is evident in a number of literary references to Shark Island, particularly in *Schutztruppe* diaries published following the war.²¹⁰ These references all took a very similar form, explaining who was on the island and the misery they suffered. A good example is Schutztruppe officer Mohr, who wrote:

“On the south-western side of the island there was a camp of up to 3000 Hottentot prisoners. This part of the camp was separated from the rest by a barbed wire fence and was also guarded. Apart from the few fires and the huddled groups around it, one could not see much from the camp. The cold nights and probably also the misery of their fate, as well as outbreak of disease resulted in the poor souls dying in large numbers.”²¹¹

These later-day references did little in the way of improving the plight of prisoners. Biographies and memoirs of the colonial troops would typically only be published after 1908, when the Herero and Nama wars were officially over. By that time, most prisoners on Shark Island would already have died. The same retrospective testament to Shark Island was found in the British Blue Book on ‘The Natives of South-West Africa and Their Treatment by Germany’. Yet contrary to the *Schutztruppe* sources, the Blue Book offered a perspective on Shark Island that had not been heard before, namely that of people who had actually been in the concentration camp.

It has already been discussed here how some of the Blue Book testimonies gave evidence that at times conflicted with existing knowledge about Shark Island and the people interned there. One of the more dubious accounts was given by Edward Fredericks, described as “the son of the old Chief Joseph Fredericks and a present Headman of the Bethany Hottentots”.²¹² He ostensibly stated that:

“In 1906 the Germans took me a prisoner after we had made peace, and sent me with about a thousand other Hottentots to Aus, thence to Lüderitzbucht, and finally to Shark Island. We were placed on the island, men, women, and children. We were beaten daily by the Germans, who

²⁰⁹ Nuhn: 2000, p. 268.

²¹⁰ For example: Brepohl, p. 153; NAN, Accession 460, “Twelve Years in South West Africa 1907-1919: Recollections of the Writer”.

²¹¹ Brepohl, p. 153.

²¹² Silvester and Gewald, p. 172. Magistrate Owens’ family tree of the *Frederiks*, compiled in 1922, confirmed that Eduard *Frederiks* was the son of Joseph *Frederiks* by his second wife. NAN, NAW 43.

used sjamboks. They were most cruel to us. We lived in tents on the island; food, blankets, and lashes were given to us in plenty, and the young girls were violated at night by the guards. Six months later we went by boat to Swakopmund, and thence by train to Karibib. Lots of my people died on Shark Island. I put in a list of those who died. (*Note.-* This list comprises 168 males, including the Chief, Cornelius Fredericks, 97 females, 66 children, and also 18 Bushwomen [sic.] and children) ... but it is not complete. I gave up compiling it, as I was afraid we were all going to die. We remained at Karibib six months, and were returned to Shark Island for a further six months, when we were again removed by sea to Karibib and thence to Okawayo, where we remained till 1915, when the British sent us back by train to Bethany. We had to work for the troops and received wages and a good deal of lashes with sjamboks. I received 10s per month, and later 20s per month for a year, but this only commenced in 1911. Lots of my people died in Damaraland...”²¹³

Edward Fredericks’ confused narrative of goings and comings is at odds with existing knowledge about the camp. For example, the research for this thesis has not turned up any records showing that the Bethanies returned to Shark Island for a further six months after leaving Lüderitz in 1907. This did in all probability not happen. In light of the criticism levelled against the Blue Book, inconsistencies such as Fredericks’ inverted narrative hardly serve to prove the validity of statements held in the book. On the other hand, however, any disparity between an event and its historiography, could just as well relate to the former as to the latter, i.e. just because something is not known or written about, this does not mean that it did not happen. It has been seen here that what was initially perceived to be untrue in Samuel Kariko’s account, proved to be a very credible description of events when new evidence was presented that supported the stated narrative.

Keeping the Kariko example in mind, Edward Fredericks’ statement generally correlates with other verifiable facts and events to a surprising extent. First of all, different sources agree that, much like Kariko, Edward Fredericks did indeed go to Shark Island.²¹⁴ In his testimony, Fredericks also said that prisoners were sent to Okawayo, close to Karibib, following their incarceration on Shark Island; this also did happen.²¹⁵

A very specific piece of evidence is Edward Fredericks’ claim that from 1911 onwards, work performed in Okawayo was remunerated at the rate of 10 shillings per month, and later 20 shillings.²¹⁶ The same amounts were mentioned in a report from Bethanie Magistrate Owens in 1922, which was presumably based on local information readily at hand.²¹⁷ It could, of course, be that the Magistrate Owens had

²¹³ Silvester and Gewald, p. 173.

²¹⁴ NAN, Accession 08, Ryksboek bevattende alle wetten en regter van het *Kapiteinskap* te Bethanie, Book 1, p. 6. (March 26, 1916); and ZBU 466, D. IV.m.3. Vol. 4, p. 135.

²¹⁵ ZBU 465, D.IV.m.3, Vol. 2, p. 147.

²¹⁶ The German army did not pay in shillings, so the amount must have been a converted estimate.

²¹⁷ NAW 43.

received his information directly from the Blue Book, although his report also contained descriptions and information about Okawayo (it was a military horse depot) not contained in Major O'Reilly's Blue Book. More convincingly, however, is the fact that German records also support Fredericks' statement about these payments. In mid 1910 Major Haydebruch asked Government for clarification on whether to start paying the Witboois and Bethanies at Okawayo for their labour.²¹⁸ This would indicate that the prisoners at Okawayo had not been paid up until that point. These almost random pieces of information are therefore consistent with other information about the Nama and Okawayo, adding at least some credence to the Blue Book statement.

Looking at the more contentious aspect of Fredericks' statement, i.e. the return to Shark Island, it should be considered that Fredericks did not speak English and that the statement would have been translated. The language and wording applied were therefore not Fredericks', but those of an unknown interpreter and the author of the Blue Book, Major O'Reilly. It is entirely possible that either (or both) the interpreter and/or O'Reilly misrepresented Fredericks' narrative. It should also be considered that Fredericks' narrative is very similar to events already described here, even though the chronology is slightly different.

In the discussion about Kariko's sworn statement to the Blue Book it was shown that a group of Bethanies were indeed sent to Shark Island in 1905,²¹⁹ a period known for its brutality and abuse of prisoners. It is also true that in mid 1906, Cornelius Fredericks and his group of Bethanies were sent via Aus to Lüderitz and from there to Karibib, as stated by Edward Fredericks. In all probability the group of Bethanies already sitting on Shark Island at that time would have accompanied the larger group going to Karibib. After approximately six months, the Bethanies were sent back to Lüderitz where the majority would die in the subsequent six months. After Shark Island, all the Nama communities on the island, or what was left of them, were sent to the Burenkamp in Lüderitz for five months and eventually from there to Okawayo horse depot near Karibib. As also reflected in Fredericks' statement, the surviving Nama staid at Okawayo until the British troops arrived in 1915.²²⁰

²¹⁸ ZBU 466, D. IV.m.3. Vol. 4, p. 135.

²¹⁹ However, according to the mission source the group consisted of women.

²²⁰ Koessler, p. 61. Koessler cites a number of letters from 1919 by the Witbooi community to the English military authorities, providing information about Shark Island and Okawayo; and ²²⁰ NAN, Accession 08, Ryksboek bevattende alle wetten en regter van het *Kapiteinskap* te Bethanie, Book 1, p. 6.



Photo 2.19 Retouched photo of Nama prisoners on Shark Island; probably one of the first groups arriving in late 1906. The topography matches Laaf's map, showing the Nama camp on the middle of the island. In the background are seen shelters and the entrance to the Nama camp. The beacon on top of the island would have had an eerie watchtower-like effect in the camp.

Silvester and Gewald have stated that although the Blue Book was propaganda, this did not necessarily mean that information contained in it, and here especially the sworn statements, were untrue.²²¹ The Blue Book was written in only two months, which is a very short time to 'fabricate' very precise information about real events and real people, thirteen years after the event. In view of O'Reilly's time constraints it would have been much easier to actually take statements about events than to construct or fabricate evidence, which could effortlessly be denied by Germany. In fact, Germany never denied the Blue Book claims.²²²

Information in Blue Book statements corresponded closely with information in German and British sources from the time. Consequently it would be fair to consider

²²¹ Silvester and Gewald: 2003.

²²² German Colonial Office: 1919.

the Blue Book statements both plausible and credible, in spite of the document's use as post-World War I propaganda.

Edward Fredericks' and Samuel Kariko's evidence about mortality on Shark Island, as presented in the Blue Book, was certainly not exaggerated. In the Colonial Government's secret files on the Witbooi community there are copies of letters sent by Lüderitz missionary Laaf and Keetmanshoop missionary Fenchel. The letters had been sent to the Rhenish Mission Society headquarters in Germany from where they were taken to the Colonial Department in Berlin and presented to officials.²²³ The re-typed copy, which was sent back to the colony as proof of claims made by the mission, was marked: Top Secret. One can speculate as to whether this label was applied because of the truths about Shark Island contained in the letters. On October 6, 1906 Laaf wrote:

"Large numbers of the people are sick, mostly from scurvy, and every week around 15 to 20 [people] die ... of the Herero just as many are dying, so that a weekly average of 50 is counted."²²⁴

The same 'Top Secret' file also contained a letter from Laaf, dated two months later. He wrote:

"The dying among the Nama is frighteningly high. There are often days where as many as 18 people die. Today Samuel Izaak (Sic.) told Brother Nyhof²²⁵: "The community is doomed" [Dat Volk is Gedaan]. If it continues like this, it will not be long before the entire people has completely died out."²²⁶

Laaf and Samuel Isaak's ominous predictions were to prove correct. In spite of repeated petitioning of the colonial and military administrations by the missionaries, Nama prisoners were not moved from Shark Island, with disastrous consequences. By March 1907, 1203 Nama prisoners had died on the island, of these 460 were women and 274 were children.²²⁷ In the month of December 1906 alone, 263 prisoners died, which was an average of 8,5 per day – this number did not include the Herero prisoners kept on the island, who Laaf claimed to have died in similar numbers, although the few existing statistics do not support this claim.²²⁸ Of the people still alive, the following breakdown was provided:²²⁹

²²³ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 103-104.

²²⁴ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 103-104.

²²⁵ In response to the large number of prisoners sent to Lüderitz and the southern railway line throughout 1906, the RMS sent Nyhof to assist Laaf with his work.

²²⁶ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 103-104.

²²⁷ ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol 5.

²²⁸ ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol 5.

²²⁹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 116.

	Men	Women	Children	Total
Witbooi	82	160	83	325
Bethanie	69	119	60	248
Total	151	279	143	573

Furthermore, out of the 573 survivors, 123 were deemed to be so ill that they would most likely die in the near future and an additional 100 described as sick yet believed able to survive. If the German statistics were correct (one would only assume them to be on the conservative side if incorrect), there were only 450 survivors in March 1907 out of a total of more than 2000 Nama prisoners.²³⁰

A general lack of nutrition was one of many factors that resulted in high mortality on the island. Provisions given to the prisoners consisted largely of rice, which was a foodstuff most were unaccustomed to and did not know how to prepare – provided they had pots or even firewood (not many trees in Lüderitz). Coupled with insufficient shelter from the cold ocean climes, the lack of proper nutrition gave prisoners few chances to build up their resistance to diseases. The lack of nutrition was illustrated in an appeal from Witbooi under-*Kaptein*, Samuel Isaak to the missionaries, emphasising the need for proper food.²³¹ Samuel Isaak remarked that in order to survive, the prisoners had been forced to eat all the mussels and other sea-life (presumably anything edible) found on the island. Since all marine nutrients had now been eaten, the situation was becoming even more desperate.²³² It should also be added that most Witboois in 1906-7 would never have been at the sea and that none of them would ever before have eaten mussels, seaweed or the like.

One of the island's many casualties was Bethanie *Kaptein* Cornelius Fredericks, who had been regarded by German troops as a Gentleman of war. A telegram to the Colonial Government from Colonel von Deimling, coldly noted Cornelius' passing on February 16, 1907.²³³ When Cornelius died he left behind his wife to endure Shark Island on her own.²³⁴ His cousin Paul Fredericks, who staid loyal to the Germans, had died about two months earlier on December 21st, 1906 in Bethanie.²³⁵ And, on June 4, 1907, four months after Cornelius' passing, Paul Fredericks' brother, Lazarus Fredericks, also died in Lüderitz.²³⁶ In a matter of six month,

²³⁰ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 116.

²³¹ RMS, V.16, pp. 1–31, Chronicle for Lüderitzbucht.

²³² RMS, V.16, pp. 1–31, Chronicle for Lüderitzbucht.

²³³ ZBU 465, D.IV.M.3, Vol. 2, p. 211 (February 19, 1907).

²³⁴ Patemann, p. 122.

²³⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1907, p. 43.

²³⁶ ZBU 2369, Witbooi geheimakten, p. 124 (June 5, 1907).

therefore, an entire generation of Bethanie leaders had perished as a result of the Nama -German War and its aftermath.

The German non-commissioned officer Mohr was in Lüderitz on February 16, 1907, the day Cornelius Frederick's died. His eye-witness account is the only evidence that Cornelius was actually given a proper funeral. He wrote:

"On February 16, we saw the burial of the deceased Hottentot *Kaptein* Cornelius Fredericks. In captivity he soon faded away and was now buried with a substantial funeral procession."²³⁷



Photo 2.20 German postcard depicting funeral

Sources describing funerals of prisoners relate very unceremonious events of bodies being carried on makeshift stretchers and thrown into shallow graves.²³⁸ One source even described bodies being buried in sand on the beach, later to be washed out to sea when the tide came in.²³⁹ Today there is no memory or any markers of the thousands of prisoners who died in Lüderitz's concentration camps, their remains forgotten like their history. It is therefore not sure where prisoners were buried. Missionary Laaf referred to burials taking place in the Burenkamp, but did not

²³⁷ Brepohl, p. 153.

²³⁸ Cape Argus, 28th September, 1905 'In German S.W. Africa: Further Startling Allegations: Horrible Cruelty: British Subjects as Combatants, Cape Argus.

²³⁹ Cornell, p. 42; Mohr, pp. 152-153.

specify whether these were prisoners' funerals.²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in accordance with Mohr's diary, we know that there must have been at least one prisoner grave in Lüderitz, namely that of *Kaptein* Cornelius Fredericks. It must moreover be assumed that the remains of Fredericks still lie buried somewhere in the coastal town.

A possible clue about this funeral is a postcard (photo 2.20) from the German colonial period that is captioned: "At the burial of a heathen native". The hard, rocky landscape on the picture hints that the image could well have been taken in Lüderitz, which has a very similar topography. The people in the image were clearly Nama, a fact further underlined by the cloth worn around the pallbearers' hats.²⁴¹ Such insignia typically related to southern communities such as the Witboois, who wore white armbands or bandannas around their hats. Moreover, uniforms worn in the photo look very similar to those worn by Nama on Shark Island, as seen in Figure 41 above. The fact that the depicted body was carried on a piece of corrugated iron, further hints that this might have been a picture of a Shark Island funeral, because this would not have been done unless circumstances rendered a more dignified transportation of the body impossible. It is therefore entirely likely that the above postcard actually depicts Cornelius Fredericks' Funeral or that of another Shark Island prisoner.

Approximately two months after Cornelius' passing, the Shark Island concentration camp was finally closed down. Ironically, the same person, who had facilitated the Witboois' surrender in late 1905, was now responsible for closing down Shark Island. In early 1907, Major Ludwig von Estorff, who had originally signed the peace treaty with the Witbooi and who had promised them fair treatment, was named new commander-in-chief of the *Schutztruppe*. While escorting Governor Lindequist to Lüderitz, Estorff had for the first time witnessed the actual situation on Shark Island.²⁴² As a result, after weeks of negotiation with the Colonial Department in Berlin, Estorff finally ordered 'Death Island' closed.²⁴³ The few survivors were transferred to the open area below Radford Bay in Lüderitz, the so-called Burenkamp. After relocating to the Burenkamp, mortality figures eventually dropped, although they were still relatively high. In the course of July, August and September, 46 Nama died in the Burenkamp, which at that time still accounted for between 10-20% of the entire Nama prisoner population in Lüderitz.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ RMS, V.16, pp. 1–3, Chronicle for Lüderitzbucht.

²⁴¹ A similar bandanna was worn around the hat of Cornelius himself. See picture in Rahn, p. 60.

²⁴² Estorff, p. 134.

²⁴³ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 112.

²⁴⁴ ZBU 2024, W.II.b.2, p.14, October 12, 1907.

*Samuel Isaak to Kaptein Johannes Christian
Lüderitzbucht, June 18, 1907*

I write to you to let you know that I am still alive, although I am not able to walk, but I hope that I soon will be.

The teacher Nyhof will tell you all about the conditions here, because he has lived through everything here with us in the time of dying. My God, how he helped us ... we were always happy with him, but now he is going to Warmbad to you. That is why I got the idea of writing this letter.

My dear old Kaptein, I would like for you to inform me about Joseph Thimotaus Frederiks. Where is he? His daughter Martha Elisabeth would like to know and she thought it a good opportunity to ask the teacher [Nyhof] through me.

I hereby finish this letter with heartfelt greetings,

I am
Samuel Isaak,
Kapitein



Samuel Isaak under healthier circumstances

Source: ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 131-132; Photo: NAN 1876.

From the Burenkamp the survivors were eventually sent back into the hinterland. The main group of Witbooi and Bethanie were transported to Swakopmund on September 23, 1907, having spent an additional five months in Lüderitz since being taken off the island. In all the Nama prisoners had spent little over a year in Lüderitz and were nearly exterminated as a result. One of the Nama who survive both Shark Island and the Burenkamp was the Witbooi leader Samuel Isaak. He was sent to the military horse depot in Okawayo²⁴⁵ with other Witboois and Bethanies, among them his son Fritz Isaak, who was later interviewed for the Blue Book.²⁴⁶ Samuel Isaak would never again leave Okawayo, as he died while still a German prisoner-of-war in June 1915.²⁴⁷ Tragically his passing came only one month before British Union troops took over the colony. Under British military administration the colony's last prisoners-of-war were finally allowed to return home, where they would find out if their families had survived the last decade of German colonial rule. At the end of February 1916 Edward Fredericks returned to Bethanie, where he was 'allocated' the chieftaincy by the British and instated in the presence of his community on March 26, 1916.²⁴⁸

A fitting summary of the Nama prisoner's plight was inadvertently given by the British Military Attaché to GSWA, Colonel Trench in 1906. He wrote:

"The Witboois were promised their freedom, when they surrendered, and (as I reported at the time from Windhuk) this was explained to the Home Authorities as meaning only freedom to build their shelters as they liked, but not where they liked – still less to dispose as they liked of their time and persons. [Sic.] From the south they were moved to Windhuk, etc, after six months – several of them having run away – they were moved to Shark Island at Lüderitz bay. I have already – from Lüderitz Bay – reported on the exposure and lack of sanitation obtaining here; if they [the Witboois] still exist, it is not easy to avoid the impression that the extinction of the tribe would be welcomed by the authorities. The hardness of their fate (anglice, harshness of their treatment) excited even the sympathy of two officers who had known them, and who reminded me that they had never murdered or ill-treated civilians or prisoners, but waged war without cruelty..."²⁴⁹

Overall the Witbooi, Bethanie and Veldschoendragers communities were not only decimated but also almost entirely annihilated as a result of the concentration camps. Apart from the between 1500 and 1900²⁵⁰ (Estorff's estimate) Nama that died on Shark Island, a further 517 Witboois had died between the time they left Gibeon

²⁴⁵ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, September 23, 1907. p. (N/A)

²⁴⁶ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 82-83.

²⁴⁷ NAW 43.

²⁴⁸ NAN, Accession 08, Book 1, p. 6 (March 26, 1916).

²⁴⁹ KAB, PMO 227 –35/07, Col. F. Trench to British Embassy, Berlin, 21st November, 1906.

²⁵⁰ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 152b-153.

in early 1906 and when they arrive in Luderitz in mid September, 1906.²⁵¹ It is highly probable that the same happened to the Veldschoendragers and Bethanie communities. Accordingly, *at least* 2000 Nama died in little over a year whilst in the hands of the German Colonial and Military Administrations.

It was estimated before the War that the entire Nama population, including communities such as the Bondelswartz and the Berseba community, tallied about 20,000.²⁵² The Nama population was therefore decimated, in the true sense of the word, solely as a result of deaths among Witboois, Bethanies and Veldschoendragers, in a one-year period. Although deaths were drastically reduced after the closing of Shark Island Camp, many more also died in the Burenkamp and in Okawayo.²⁵³ If the German and/or Colonial Governments had intended to kill off the Nama people, as Colonel Trench suggested was the case, the numbers show that the objective was being achieved. Major von Estorff made a similar point when he informed the Colonial Government that only one single Feldschoendrager had survived the concentration camps, leaving them virtually exterminated as a people.²⁵⁴

Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi's words in July 1905, as already cited, were almost prophetic. He wrote:

“... all I see in your peace is the extermination of all of us and our people.”²⁵⁵

The numbers

In mid 1907, the Lüderitz District Commissioner, Böhmer, sent central administration in Windhoek an official statistics on mortality among POWs in the Lüderitz District between April 1906 and March 1907. According to the statistic, which included Herero on the railroad as well as Nama on Shark Island, a total of 2,219 POW fatalities were reported during this period.²⁵⁶ However, the figure did not accurately describe the total number of deaths resulting from incarceration and forced labour in Lüderitz during the Herero and Nama wars. The real number would invariably have been much higher.

For example, in September 1907 Böhmer received a revised mortality statistic from the railways which claimed that as many as 1359 Herero prisoners died

²⁵¹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 103.

²⁵² Drechlsler, p. 181.

²⁵³ A tally of Nama prisoners-of-war in 1909, a term referring to the former Shark Island prisoners now held in Okawayo, counted among the Witboois: 39 men, 65 women and 52 children, i.e. a total of 156 people, and a further 92 Bethanies. All together: 248 people. ZBU 465, D.IV.m.3, pp. 147a-b.

²⁵⁴ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 152-153.

²⁵⁵ BKE 305, G.A. 10/2, Witbooi to Schmidt, July 27, 1905, p 79.

²⁵⁶ ZBU 456, D IV, 1.3. Vol 5. p. 134

between January 06 and June 07.²⁵⁷ According to these figures, 67,48% of prisoners working on the line in that period, died as a result.²⁵⁸ The revised figure also had a much higher death toll than Böhmer's original statistic, counting as many as 1190 Herero deaths on the line between March 06 and April 07. There were therefore more POW casualties in Lüderitz than Böhmer's original 'official' numbers indicated.

It was not only the railway mortality numbers that were wrong. Böhmer's numbers for Nama deaths on Shark Island were equally skew. From end October 1907, when the last contingent of prisoners arrived in Lüderitz, there had been in advance of 2000 Nama prisoners on Shark Island.²⁵⁹ Moreover, according to Böhmer's own records there were only around 450 survivors in April 1907.²⁶⁰ Relying on these figures alone, there would in fact have been as many as 1550 Nama deaths between September 06 and April 07, notwithstanding the fact that Head of the Schutztruppe, Major von Estorff, in late October 29, 1907 claimed that more than 1900 Nama had died on Shark Island.²⁶¹

When the revised figures for Nama deaths and railway mortalities are added, it is evident that Böhmer's original numbers were far from accurate. There were, at least, 1550 Nama deaths in Lüderitz and as many as 1190 railway mortalities between March 06 and April 07, which comes to a total of 2740 prisoners dying in Lüderitz District in this period. A further 167 Hereros died on the railroad in May and June 1907, thereby bringing the total to 2907 dead prisoners in Lüderitz.²⁶²

However, this number can also not possibly be an accurate description of total mortality among prisoner-of-war in Lüderitz, because there are a number of other factors that have not yet been considered. For example, the official mortality count only began in April 1906, whereas the camp had been in existence since early 1905 at the latest. In fact, there had been more than a thousand Herero prisoners on the island in the 15 months preceding Böhmer's official death-count, and fatalities among these prisoners were not included in his statistic.

According to the transport riders cited in the Cape Argus, 1905 was a time with rampant mortality rates in Lüderitz. The doctor on Shark Island, Bofinger, also emphasised that there had initially been a very high death rate among Herero

²⁵⁷ ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol. 5, p. 135.

²⁵⁸ ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol. 5, p. 170.

²⁵⁹ Rounded down from a higher estimate of around 2200 Nama prisoner.

²⁶⁰ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 116-118.

²⁶¹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 152-153.

²⁶² ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol. 5, p. 170.

prisoners on the island.²⁶³ The same information was shared between missionaries Vedder and Kuhlmann, who in their correspondence from early 1905 wrote about ‘incredibly high’ mortalities in Lüderitz.²⁶⁴ When Missionary Kuhlmann, later visited Shark Island in September 05, he described a group of 487 Herero imprisoned on the island who were in a sad state.²⁶⁵ It is not possible to put exact figures on mortality between early 1905 and mid 1906, but judging from Vedder’s knowledge that 191 prisoners had died by May 1905, fatalities must have been in the high hundreds at best.

Other factors not properly accounted for by Böhmer were the Hereros still on shark Island during 1906 as well as the Nama, who were in Lüderitz sometime during 1905, as seen in Edward Frederick’s and Samuel Kariko’s respective testimonies. It should also not be forgotten that whereas Böhmer’s statistic was compiled in April 1907, Nama and Herero prisoners would continue to suffer casualties in Lüderitz beyond this date. In fact, Herero prisoners would remain on the railroad until mid 1908 and although Nama prisoners were eventually shipped out of Lüderitz, hundreds more Herero prisoner would continue to arrive in the town.²⁶⁶ In January 1908, therefore, there were 1122 Herero prisoners in the Lüderitz district.²⁶⁷ Mortality was also still quite high, with 80 Herero prisoner dying between July and September 1907.²⁶⁸

In summation, the total number of prisoners dying in Lüderitz between 1905 and 1908 must necessarily have been well in advance of 3000 people and could even be as high as 4000. In comparison, the entire German population of Lüderitz in January 1907 totalled 979 people (children included).²⁶⁹

Mortality percentages on the railway were in the high 60s and an estimated mortality rate of around 70 percent for Nama prisoners on Shark Island would probably even be moderate. It would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the vast majority of people, who were sent to Lüderitz as prisoners-of-war, died as a result.

²⁶³ Bofinger, p. 576.

²⁶⁴ RMS Correspondence VII 31.1, Swakopmund, Eich to Vedder, June 14, 1905.

²⁶⁵ Missions-Berichte, 1905, p. 130.

²⁶⁶ “... on the 5th of July, (1907) around 200 Herero prisoners came to Luderitzbucht.”, NAN, Accession 460, “Twelve Years in South West Africa 1907 – 1919: Recollections of the Writer”.

²⁶⁷ ZBU 2024, W.II.b.2, January 24, 1908, p. 43.

²⁶⁸ ZBU 2024, W.II.b.2, January 24, 1908, p. 14.

²⁶⁹ “German population in Lüderitz as of end-1906: 836 men, 94 women and 49 children under 15 years. ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3, p. 207.

Concentration camp causalities

In spite of the high mortalities among prisoners in Lüderitz there have been apologetic voices raised about the fact that many German troops were dying from diseases such as typhoid, thereby implicitly suggesting that mortality in the camps were a result of a general epidemic rather than German neglect and/or maltreatment.²⁷⁰ This argument is not new as in fact, most official contemporary references to the Lüderitz mortality figures described outbreak of disease such as typhoid, syphilis or scurvy as the main cause of death on Shark Island.²⁷¹



Photo 2.21 POW burial in Swakopmund. Possibly missionary vedder on horse

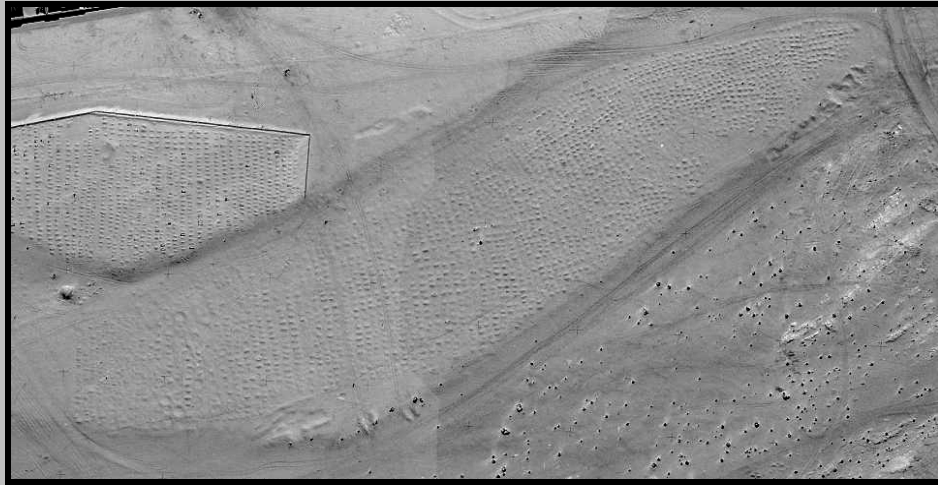
In 1910, the former Shark Island doctor, Bofinger, similarly charged that the concentration camp prisoners were responsible for their own demise. In the doctor's narrative, prisoners fell victim to their own supposedly inherent lack of personal hygiene, which resulted in massive spread of diseases.²⁷² This generalised notion did not at any level engage with the regime of violence and general maltreatment so liberally meted out to prisoners. Neither did the doctor's argument deal with the fact that minimal rations and general conditions in the camp, including a lack of sanitary

²⁷⁰ Lau: 1995, p. 48.

²⁷¹ For example: ZBU 154, A. VI. a.3. Annual Report for Lüderitz District 1906, pp. 211–212.

²⁷² Bofinger, p. 575.

A final resting place

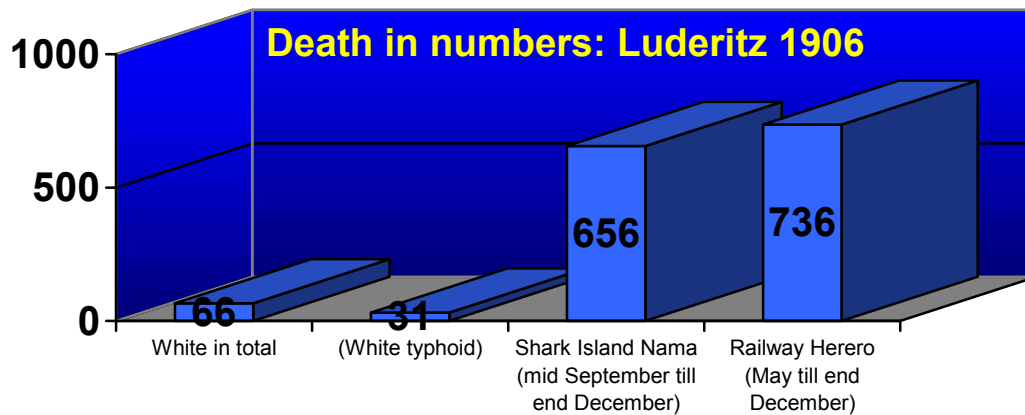


Above is seen an aerial photo of the Swakopmund concentration camp cemetery, ‘where hundreds were buried like cattle’ to paraphrase Missionary Vedder. Hundreds turned into over a thousand dead prisoners whose graves are the only existing testament to their existence. Disturbingly, however, the site has not been officially recognised, and is still used as a playground for local dune buggy enthusiasts. Standing at the site it is difficult to see the thousands of little mounds, worn by time and elements, but this photo clearly shows row upon row of human graves.

Less than a century ago, more than 3000 people died in the Lüderitz District, and most of those in Lüderitz town itself. Where did a small locality like Lüderitz with a white population of around 1000 people put more than 3000 bodies of dead prisoners? It would be incredible if in the last 100 years, no one ever came across the remains of buried prisoners or perhaps built on such sites in an expanding town. A mass grave was recently discovered behind the hills of Lüderitz. Since its discovery the Namibian Police has declared the site a no-go-zone. Nonetheless, pictures exist of the site, showing hundreds of bones scattered among the dunes. The former State Archaeologist, who visited the site, has said that the people buried here were most likely of Khoi origin, i.e. Nama. According to the curator of the Lutheran mission archives in Namibia, Pastor Pauli, who himself lived for many years in Lüderitz, it was well-known in the small town that these bones are the remains of those who fell victim to Shark Island’s concentration camp.



Photos courtesy of Jeff Barbee and Jeff Gaydish.



Reference: ZBU 154 & 456 (vol. 5)

facilities or appropriate medical assistance, were main factors in the spread of disease and the resulting mass deaths in the camp. In effect the argument conveniently exonerated the German authorities as well as the doctor himself of any complicity or responsibility for these deaths.

Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to examine whether the high number of deaths on Shark Island were in some way related to a general epidemic in the colony as suggested by genocide sceptic Brigitte Lau, who held that the Germany army was also struck by disease during 1904-08.²⁷³ To accurately establish whether a general epidemic was responsible for the mass deaths among prisoners, it must first be seen how disease among prisoners compared to deaths in the Lüderitz district.

Prisoners are known to have been working in town, on the rails and in the harbour. Women from the camp were also forced into prostitution and raped by soldiers who had access to the prisoners. There was therefore a fair amount of contact between prisoners and the white population, and if it is supposed that an epidemic killed close to 70% of all Nama prisoners on the island, how then did white deaths compare? Based on Böhmer's inaccurate official statistic on prisoner deaths in Lüderitz²⁷⁴ (cited above), showing too few deaths,²⁷⁵ and the Lüderitz

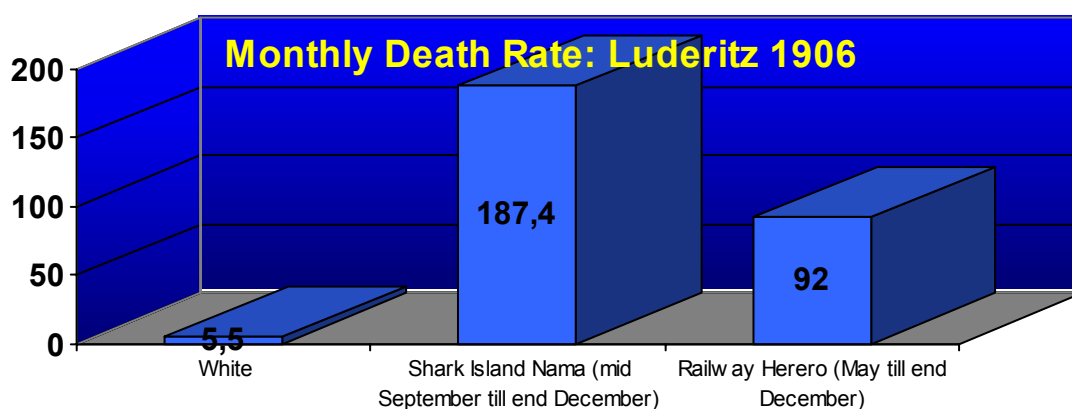
²⁷³ Lau: 1995, pp. 48-49.

²⁷⁴ ZBU 456, D IV, 1.3. Vol 5, p. 135.

annual report²⁷⁶ showing white deaths, the following comparison on mortality in 1906 was made.

According to Böhmer there were ‘only’ 66 White deaths in the entire year of 1906, and of these 31 were attributed to typhoid. Even when the ratio difference between the white population and the prisoner population is evened out, there is still no comparison to be made. The 31 typhoid deaths amount to approximately 3 percent of Lüderitz’s white population, which hardly compares to a mortality of 33 percent among Nama prisoners on Shark Island in the course of only 3½ months. It should also be considered that the Shark Island and Railway mortality figures used here are far too low.²⁷⁷

The different mortality rates become even more polarised when deaths are described as a monthly figure. Accordingly, an average of 187.4 Nama died monthly between mid-September and end December, compared to a monthly average of 5.5 Lüderitz ‘whites’ based on deaths in the entire year. As seen below, not even railway prisoners, forced to construct a track through harsh desert landscapes, died at a rate comparable to Shark Island Nama.



Incidentally, the fact that an average of 2.6 white people died of typhoid in Lüderitz every month, resulted in the adoption of very strict measures by the District Commissioner Böhmer’s office to combat the disease. On February 1, 1907

²⁷⁵ The real number of Shark Island and railway deaths were, as already described, much higher than official figures. These are nevertheless applied here for the sake of argument.

²⁷⁶ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3. p. 209.

²⁷⁷ There were more than 1000 white people in the town, not counting the high number of soldiers coming and going. There were more than 2000 Nama.

Boehmer issued an order [*verordnung*] about the “fight against typhoid and other infectious diseases”.²⁷⁸ Accordingly it would in future be punishable by law not to report typhoid related deaths, not to keep streets clean and not to provide roofed shelter and sanitary facilities for ‘natives’ in domestic service.

Apart from the revelation that a number of African deaths seem to have gone unreported (considering that meticulous records were kept on white deaths) and that prisoners ‘employed’ by Lüderitz residents where in some cases forced to live without shelter or sanitary facilities, there was no mention nor measures in the order that dealt with the two concentration camps and their fading populations. Indeed the only parts of the order that was directed at Africans, specified that any ‘native’ found relieving him or herself outside of designated facilities, i.e. toilets, would be liable to receive 6 months hard labour and/or corporal punishment.²⁷⁹ The ‘natives’ referred to here must therefore inevitably have excluded the concentration camp prisoners, seeing as these were already subjected to forced labour, corporal punishment and imprisonment (without toilet facilities, one might add).

Consequently it is evident that although efforts were being made to halt the spread of disease in Lüderitz town, no such provisions were made for prisoners on the island, who were simply allowed to continue dying.

Below is a statistic of all registered deaths in Lüderitz between May and December 1906, that makes it abundantly clear that white and African mortality in the Lüderitz district were in no way comparable. The graphic gives a basic understanding of general mortality trends in the coastal town by specifically comparing prisoner mortality with white mortality. The difference is pronounced, and again it should be remembered that the numbers used here for African mortality are much to low.²⁸⁰

Total prisoner deaths were dramatically higher than white population deaths and totally disproportionate to white typhoid deaths, rendering the argument of a random typhoid epidemic wide of the mark. In fact, it would seem more logical that factors such as housing, nutrition, variation of food, confinement, concentration, exposure to forced labour, physical and psychological effects of violence, sanitary facilities and protection from climatic conditions would have been underlying reasons for the incomparable mortality rates in the relatively small locality.

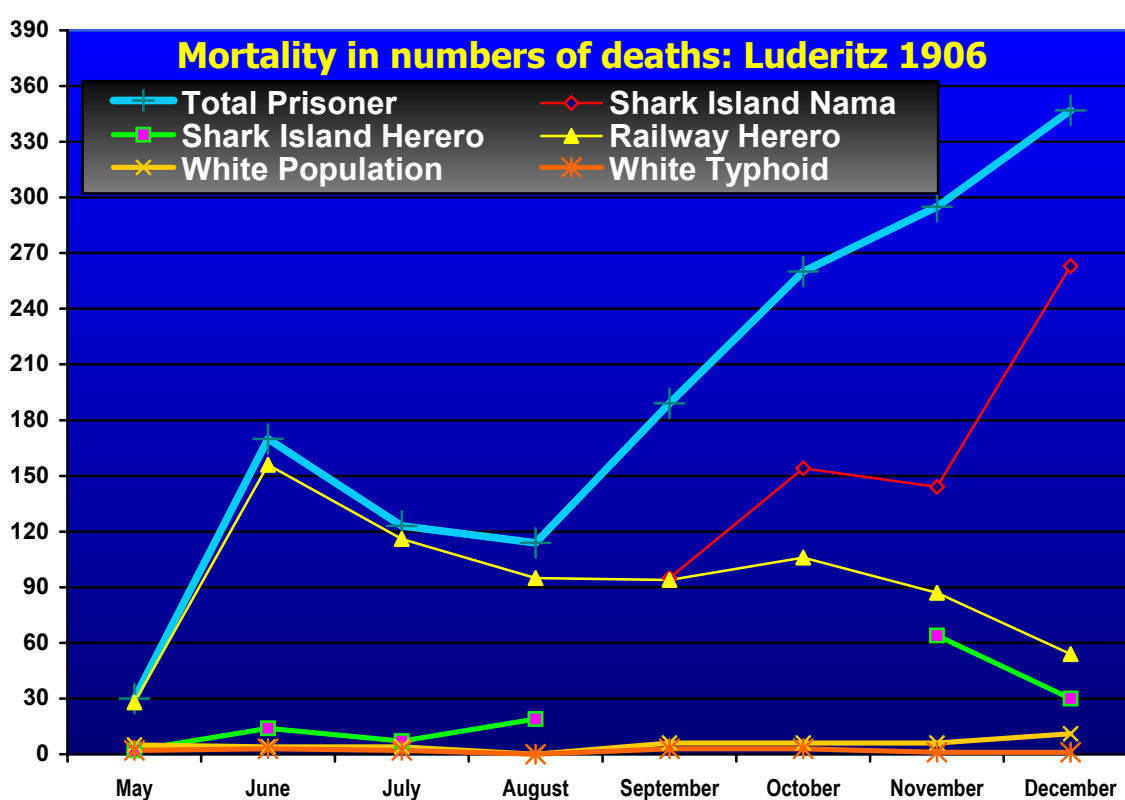
The below graph also clearly shows the almost exponential increase in total prisoner deaths following the arrival of Nama prisoners on the island. There is no

²⁷⁸ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3 Vol 15, p. 252, “Order on the fight against typhoid and other infectious diseases”.

²⁷⁹ ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3, p.252 “Order on the fight against typhoid and other infectious diseases”.

²⁸⁰ The numbers used here all relate to official German statistics. ZBU 456, D IV, I.3. Vol 5, p. 135 , 170; ZBU 154, A.VI.a.3. p. 209.

doubt that the island had a severe impact on overall prisoner mortality. No comprehensive figures are available for Herero mortality on the island, and the low death rate recorded in the above graph should be seen in this light. Indeed, the numbers are from Böhmer's official figures that are both inconsistent and implausible. Death rates on the railroad testify that imprisonment in Lüderitz district had deadly consequences for the vast majority of people sent there. Moreover, confinement on Shark Island also resulted in soaring mortality rates for the Herero who sat on the island from early 1905, because, truth be told, Shark Island was not in any way conducive for the survival of concentration camp prisoners.



Anatomy of evil

Although there can be little doubt that disease was a major killer on Shark Island, medical facilities provided for prisoners were both insufficient and inefficient. The very limited medical assistance provided for prisoners, in the face of an apparent epidemic, was entirely unsuccessful, in as much attempts were even made to prevent or treat prisoners' diseases. In stead, bodies of dead prisoners were evidently seen as

a resource for medical experimentation and pseudo-scientific racially prejudiced research.

In 1910 Shark Island's camp doctor published a medical paper on the death the Shark Island prisoners, which among other curious observations speculated that the extreme fatalities were caused by a *viral* or even bacterial spread of scurvy in close quarters.²⁸¹ The basis of this ill-informed theory was a series of autopsies conducted on the bodies of diseased prisoners. Doctor Bofinger cut the bodies open and looked at cadavers for traces of bacteria, professing that the supposedly unhygienic nature of the prisoners and a subsequent spread of germs were to blame for deaths. The overly general description of Nama prisoners as totally lacking an understanding of personal hygiene²⁸² was typical of the paradigm of racial intolerance and 'cultural illiteracy' that German colonial troops, settlers and bureaucrats hailed from. For example, Bofinger's detailed depiction of dirt peeling off the face and hands of prisoners in large crusts explained more about the doctor's inability to understand the situation forced upon prisoners than it did about the 'nature' of Nama norms and values.

The camp doctor did not limit his research to bacteria, but also investigated the possibility that malnutrition could have been a factor in the high number of prisoner fatalities. Ultimately, however, he concluded this to be improbable since the rice and flour given to prisoners would, in his opinion, have been of sufficient nutritional value to sustain the prisoners. He added that prisoners were allowed a small ration of chocolate and *Fruchtmos* (crushed fruit) and twice a week an additional small portion of meat – usually from old transport animals.²⁸³ Bofinger's paper was written before it had been elucidated that lack of ascorbic acid²⁸⁴ [vitamin c] was the real cause of scurvy. With the benefit of hindsight, one tends to question Dr. Bofinger's truthfulness, because had prisoners really been given crushed fruits on a daily basis, they would surely not have been suffering from scurvy.

Many other points in the doctor's paper also fail to convince. Bofinger argued that forced labour was healthy for prisoners, and that the Herero who were working in town, were less sick as a result. Indeed Bofinger's concluding remark in his paper stated that an important factor in combating scurvy among concentration camp prisoners was that they be increasingly subjected to labour. The doctor's logic

²⁸¹ Bofinger, p. 581.

²⁸² Bofinger, p. 575.

²⁸³ Bofinger, pp. 577-579.

²⁸⁴ Only in 1928 did Charles G. King elucidate that the lack of vitamin c (now also known as ascorbic acid, which literally means anti-scurvy acid) was the reason behind scurvy.

related to the fact that the Nama prisoners, who were largely confined to the island, suffered more from the supposed scurvy epidemic than Herero prisoners.

Bofinger's knowledge of scurvy was limited in as much as the disease was still an enigma, but there are also indications that the abilities of the doctor on the whole left a lot to be desired. Indeed Doctor Bofinger was not known for a high success rate. In his paper, Bofinger referred to the lack of co-operation showed by prisoners to aid him in his research. The medical facility provided to Shark Island prisoners consisted of a tent located inside the camp, and it was often the case that prisoners tried to sneak out of the tent at night, hiding themselves among their families in the crowded camp. This was not without reason, as noted by the missionaries:

“... the medical care was inadequate. The people were only with difficulty to be convinced to go to the Lazarett [field hospital], because they maintained that, “who goes in, will not come out alive”. And in fact, it was never the case that even a single person recovered in the Lazarett.”²⁸⁵

Little wonder that prisoners feared the ‘hospital’ intensely, when no one ever came out alive and the bodies of the dead were cut open and studied.

German medical experimentation with the bodies of prisoners (in rich supply) was not uncommon. In the early part of the 20th century there was an upsurge in studies based on racial theories. Fischer and Birkner were among a number of scientist in Germany who theorised and postulated on eugenics and social Darwinism in terms of a perceived Caucasian physical and mental superiority to other races. The studies were empirical and quantitative to the point of the ridiculous. Weighing brains to compare intelligence or analysing the muscular system to place races on different steps of the evolutionary ladder were the *modus operandi*.²⁸⁶

It is within this discourse that an article in a medical journal on ‘17 Hottentot heads’ appeared. The article was written by Christian Fetzer, who, with the assistance of Dr. Bartels, proceeded to study dissimilarities between Europeans and seventeen decapitated heads of Shark Island prisoners.²⁸⁷ As a comparative template for the research, the Doctors used studies by Fischer, Forster, Eggeling and Birkner, who in their respective works investigated anatomical similarities of different (non-white) races with that of the anthropoid Ape.²⁸⁸

Before being shipped to Germany the skulls of the 17 dead prisoners had been cracked open for the removal and preservation of their brains. The heads were then preserved in *formalin* and sent in tins to Germany where Dr. P. Bartels and Christian Fetzer received the body parts. The two scientists scrutinised the heads in meticu-

²⁸⁵ RMS, V.16, Chronik der Gemeinde Lüderitzbucht, pp. 28-29.

²⁸⁶ Fetzer, p. 143.

²⁸⁷ Fetzer, pp. 143-144.

²⁸⁸ Fetzer, pp. 143-144.

lous detail, trying to find proof that the Hottentot were a more primitive race than ‘whites’. They took pictures and made plaster casts, and observed every last muscle on bone and skull.



Photo 2.22 Severed head of former Shark Island prisoner

In accordance with the Lineaen principle, the study had two points of reference: apes known to be on a lower evolutionary level than human beings and, secondly, Europeans believed by Fetzer et al to be on a higher evolutionary plane than non-Europeans. The deductive ‘logic’ of the exercise was therefore that traits found to be similar with apes and not with ‘whites’ would sustain racial theories and furthermore provide proof of the *Hottentot* niche on the evolutionary ladder. Accordingly, Fetzer’s study scrutinised the heads to locate differences between the Nama and the white ‘type’ in order to catalogue them. The bizarre rationale even included facial traits such as a double chin, “never observed in the Hottentot” or curious observations like “poorly developed cheeks” – one wonders what sort of criteria were used to establish whether cheeks were poorly or well developed.²⁸⁹

Many other examples exist from GSWA of morbid research of prisoners’ cadavers or body parts. In Swakopmund, female prisoners were forced to boil the severed heads of concentration camp inmates and then scrape them to the bone with

²⁸⁹ Fetzer, pp. 143-144.

shards of glass.²⁹⁰ The result of their horrific labour is seen in this German postcard from GSWA. One shudders to think of the emotional impact it would have had on these women, who were forced to scrape severed heads clean of flesh, to remove brains, scalp and eyes that could easily have belonged to friends or family members.



Photo 2.23 German postcard showing colonial soldiers putting skulls in boxes

Following the cleaning process the skulls were sold off to German universities and schools to be scrutinised by learners and scientists. Moreover, the image was mass-produced and sold as a post card. It was therefore clearly not deemed inappropriate to show this inhumanity to the entire world – a ‘quaint’ greeting from a German colony. As seen here in photos 2.23 and 2.24, the soldiers took time to pose and smile for the camera and even to meticulously turn the skulls around, to get a more sinister effect of empty eye sockets starring straight at the camera.

In Lüderitz, the British diamond prospector, Fred Cornell, had seen a similar series of German postcards depicting hangings of Nama and Herero prisoners. He wrote about it in his travelogue of GSWA, where he noted that:

“... each and every German soldier in the photo was striking an attitude and smirking towards the camera in pleasurable anticipation of the fine figure he would cut when the photo was

²⁹⁰ Zeller: 2001, p. 241.

published. This, I repeat, was only one of many that enjoyed a big sale in German South-West for the delectation of admiring friends in the Fatherland."²⁹¹



Photo 2.24 Same picture as above. Note how the skulls have been turned in this pose

The profiteering of Herero body parts was not unique to Swakopmund or Lüderitz. In fact, one of the contributing factors to the outbreak of the war was a morbid trade in Herero skulls, supplied by a number of German soldiers, who dug up Herero graves, stealing the skulls.²⁹² Incidentally Gerhard Pool, who cited this information, apologetically explained this practise to be bound in cultural misunderstandings!

There was no misunderstanding in 1914 when Dr. Eugen Fischer sent a telegram to the colonial authorities in Windhoek requesting a consignment of Bushman penises and ears sent to him at the University of Freiburg.²⁹³ Fischer, who had also inspired Fetzner's study on the Shark Island heads, was an avid eugenicist, who sought to prove the supposed genetic dangers of inter-racial sexual relations. His ideas gained broad acceptance internationally and during the 3rd Reich, Fischer played an important role in the formation and implementation of Nazi policies on racial hygiene.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Cornell: 1986, p. 41.

²⁹² Pool, 1991, p. 195.

²⁹³ BKE 80, W.10.a, vol.1, Fischer To Colonial Government, Feb. 3, 1914.

²⁹⁴ Heyden, Ulrich v.d. and Zeller, J. *Kolonial Metropole Berlin: Eine Spurensuche* (Berlin, Berlin Edition, 2000).

Report on administration of protectorate of South west Africa from date of surrender to 31st March 1916

On July 9, 1915 German troops finally surrendered to the Union of South Africa, following a ten month engagement that formed part of World War I. Between July 9, 1915 and December 17, 1920, when the German colony was formally entrusted to Britain by the League of Nations, GSWA was in a state of martial law under British military administration. It is in the files of this administration that the below report is found. It was the first report of its kind and primarily sought to inform South African Prime Minister Louis Botha about the state of the former German colony, providing chilling evidence about events in the preceding decade.

To General [Sic.]

The honourable Louis Botha, P.C.,

Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, Cape Town.

17. *Gaols*

The late German Colonial Administration devoted very little attention to its penal institutions... Prisoners were prevented from escaping by neck chains, handcuffs, chains fastened to rings in the cell floors, and other barbarous methods of a bygone age...Needless to say all irons have been removed; some to the Departmental Museum in the Union.

18. *Native Affairs*

The shooting of natives on the most trivial pretexts seems also to have been very prevalent under the German regime, and also for the most part to have gone unpunished.

20. *Native Affairs Cont.*

The history of the treatment of the natives in this Protectorate by the Germans makes bad reading. Their policy during the last great rebellion was one of extermination, as is evident by the reduced numbers of some of the Tribes... Von Trotha and his myrmidons... openly boasted that they had accounted for 30,000 Hereros. The unbridled licentiousness of the Soldiers [Sic.] and police in their relations with the native women regardless of objections on the part of the natives to the intercourse of their women with white men contributed in no small degree to the causes which led to the last rebellion.

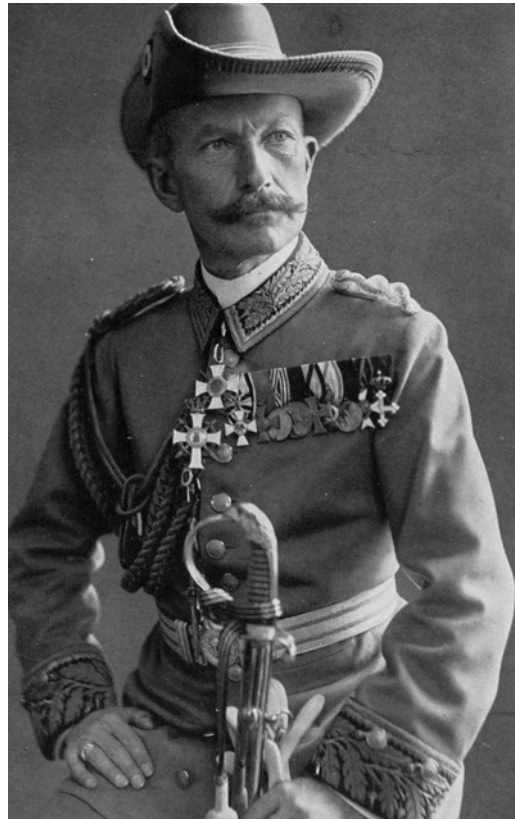
With the destruction of the tribal system... the rapid demoralisation of the Native set in, so much so that concubinage with Europeans became almost a general practise in the Protectorate with the inevitable result that the natives have now the most supreme contempt for their Masters [Sic.], who in turn have endeavoured, by a policy of severity (often amounting to brutality) to maintain their prestige.

The German moreover seems to have regarded his native servants purely as slaves, and besides exercising "parental authority" (as described by them in their defence before our Magistrates), showed extreme reluctance to pay them wages contracted for.

Source:

ADM 137, File C. 6.

Responsibility



Where to place the blame

Inasmuch as prisoners were already severely weakened and fatigued due to the wars and their aftermath, they were allowed no respite in the camps, where they were forced to perform unpaid physical labour, given few rations and generally allowed to die without recourse to medical assistance. But, to what extent were the colonial

Government and, by extension, the German National Government aware and/or actively complicit in the concentration camp mortalities? Were, for example, the high death rates among prisoners-of-war merely the result of neglect or coincidence?

A report sent to Windhoek by a very frustrated Swakopmund District Commissioner in early 1905, i.e. soon after the concentration camps were introduced, attests the degree of knowledge that the Colonial Government in Windhoek had about conditions and mortality in the military-run concentration camps. The Swakopmund Commissioner was horrified at death rates in his town, which he described as ‘disturbingly high.’¹ Indeed 40 percent of the entire prisoner population in Swakopmund’s concentration camp had died between February and May 05.² These figures prompted the Swakopmund Commissioner to complain that the rapidly increasing number of deaths was a direct result of poor food and a general lack of clothing. He compared the situation with Africans detained under his own (Local Government) supervision, of whom “as long as I have been here [since September 15, 1903] not even a single one has died.”³ The concerned District Commissioner proceeded to explain what was needed to keep prisoners alive, such as shelter, sufficient space, warm clothes, shoes and a variation in food⁴ as well as recourse to medical attention.

The Swakopmund report is evidence that climatic conditions at the coast were less to blame for soaring mortality under Trotha than were treatment and lack of rations and otherwise provisions for prisoners. The report also testifies that lack of knowledge was not the reason behind mass dying of prisoners. The District Commissioner clearly outlined very specific measures that needed to be implemented and underscored the implication that it would have to ignore these specifications. Trotha’s military and the colonial government nevertheless chose to disregard the commissioner’s suggestions and prisoners subsequently kept dying in the concentration camps for another 3 years.

¹ ZBU 454, D. IV.1.3. Vol. 1, pp 58-59.

² Deaths in the military concentration camp, which was begun early February 1905, until May 29 were 399 prisoners out of 1100 – 111 of these died in the last two weeks of May. ZBU 454, D. IV.1.3. Vol. 1, pp. 58-59.

³ ZBU 454, D. IV.1.3. Vol. 1, pp. 58-59.

⁴ Here he went on to list a number of foods required to keep prisoners alive. Incidentally, these were the same foods that the Government claimed they were giving prisoners – judging from the report this was not the case.

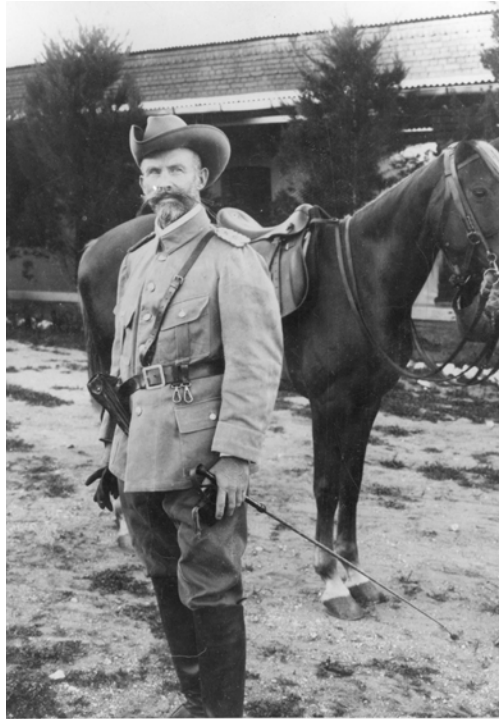


Photo 3.1 Ludwig von Estorff, known as “The Old Roman“

Overall, the camps under Trotha were not conducive for survival as particularly evident in the General’s notification to the army not to prioritise provisions for prisoners. Firstly, he said, prisoners were to be fed to the extent it did not interfere with supplies for the troops and secondly, medical attention was to be granted only where possible; if, however, diseases were to break out among the prisoners, they were to be removed from the ‘white’ settlements by a couple of kilometres and the old camp burned.⁵ These orders marked the beginning of the concentration camp policy. Inevitably the military, which had recently been ordered to kill on sight, did also not make special arrangements to keep prisoners alive in the camps, especially in the light of the above orders relayed by Trotha.

There was also no respite to prisoners under the Lindequist administration, which essentially allowed mortality rates to soar by not improving conditions in the camps while at the same time stepping up collection efforts and the use of prisoners as free labour. Perhaps the continued and persistently high mortality figures under Lindequist had to do with the fact that a precedent of brutality had been set under Trotha, which was only to be halted by strict intervention from the new Colonial Govern-

⁵ BKE 221, B.II.74.c, January 16, 1905, p. 33

ment. Yet no such intervention was made; instead the use of forced labour was escalated. Lindequist's brief from National Government and Kaiser could not possibly have been to counter the abuses of Trotha's rule, because had it been, he would clearly have been in contravention of such an order. Major von Estorff, who accompanied Governor Lindequist on his last journey of the colony, later pointed out in his memoirs that Lindequist was directly responsible for the disastrous outcome of the concentration camp policy. He wrote:

"His insights were not all equally profound and he therefore often went down the wrong road and the more wrong it proved, the more he went down it with immense stubbornness. His worst mistake was his policies concerning native affairs. He had decided in Germany, that he would move the Hereros to the south and the Hottentots to the north, so that in future it would be easier to keep them in line. To that end, the Herero, who had surrendered, were kept in concentration camps in Windhoek. This measure is even less understandable in light of the fact that Lindequist had seen the horrible effects of the concentration camps on the Boer families in South Africa. The same happened here (...) Because of the War, the pursuit in the desert and this last irrational measure [the concentration camps], the Herero people were almost exterminated (...) Trotha had begun the evil work and Lindequist had finished it. I could only stand aside, sad but powerless to do anything about it..."⁶

Estorff was a much-respected officer among fellow soldiers⁷ and as such was appointed leader of the GSWA *Schutztruppe* in 1907. In being a contemporary with influence and insights into Colonial Government strategies applied during the war, Estorff's very honest descriptions of events and his own feelings of betrayal are evidence of the extreme nature of the measures applied by Trotha and Lindequist respectively. It is quite clear that Estorff thought the campaign in the desert, the Extermination Order and the use of concentration camps as excessive and unnecessary. Essentially, Estorff considered the colony's first civilian Governor as being nothing more than a natural continuation of Trotha's genocidal campaign – a further indication that Lindequist was under no instruction to halt the extermination of Herero or Nama. Estorff specifically saw the concentration camps under Lindequist as an intricate part of the extermination plan, on par with the Waterberg battle/massacre and the pursuit in the *sandveld*.

In spite of the continuously high mortality rates, mass dying of concentration camp prisoners was not actively sought stopped or reduced anywhere in the colony, neither by Trotha nor Lindequist. Large numbers of prisoners were dying from the moment the camps were set up and mortality rates never subsided. Judging from

⁶ Estorff, p. 134.

⁷ "... called the 'Old Roman', [he was] a skilful and a just soldier to the core. The troops really cherished him." NAN, Accession 531, "Diary of Schutztruppe private Richard Christel", p. 8.

General to Governor



General von Trotha and Friedrich von Lindequist

In November 1905, General von Trotha finally departed from GSWA. He had just finished a meeting in Lüderitz with the new incumbent Friedrich von Lindequist, who was on his way to Swakopmund to take over command of the colony. Trotha's last view of the colony before departing would therefore have been the marooned prisoners on the far end of Shark Island; the same view that had 'greeted' the new Governor on arrival. Friedrich von Lindequist was the former Deputy Governor under Leutwein and previous to his appointment as Governor had served as the German Consul in Cape Town. He was therefore familiar with the colony and the situation he was to inherit.

Lindequist and Trotha sailed together to Swakopmund and the Governor later noted in his memoirs that Trotha had been an amicable travelling companion and that the two had got along fabulously on their short sea journey.

Described as a 'darling of the German settlers' and "admired and supported by the right-wing in the *Reichstag*", Lindequist was handed responsibility of a colony that needed restructuring following Trotha's military rule. Lindequist was therefore appointed as a coloniser, as opposed to a soldier.

In November 1906, Lindequist was recalled to Germany in order to lobby parliament for a large grant that was needed to convert GSWA into a settler colony. While in Germany, he was appointed Deputy Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs and only returned for a brief visit to GSWA before again departing from Lüderitz. Like Trotha, his last view of the colony was the prisoners dying on Shark Island. Although Lindequist's period as Governor was the shortest in the history of the colony, it had a pronounced impact.

Sources:

Nuhn: 2000

Schrank: 1974

Drechsler: 1986

BAK, Kl. Erwb. 275.



Photo 3.2 An unknown prisoner standing in front of a tent, such as commonly used in the concentration camps. Could be Shark Island

existing records, no official efforts were made by Lindequist or his colonial government to prevent the very obvious mass dying in the camps. It must therefore be concluded that the mass dying was, at some level at least, an acceptable outcome.

The Lüderitz example

Shark Island in Lüderitz was undoubtedly the worst of the concentration camps, in terms of treatment, conditions and general mortality. Notwithstanding the many prisoners who succumbed to Shark Island before August 1906, the camp 'accommodated' approximately 2000 Nama and 6-700 Herero prisoners between mid 1906 and mid 1907. Considering the fate of these prisoners, of whom the vast majority were to die within a six months period, it is important to note that mortality on the island was not only much too high but entirely preventable. Why, for example, were

prisoner sent to Shark Island in the first place, when it was evident from death rates among prisoners in 1905 and early 1906 that death was the most likely result of incarceration on the wind-swept island? As reflected in Estorff's memoirs and the Swakopmund district commissioner's 1905 report, it seems entirely likely that prisoner deaths on Shark Island was a desired outcome for the colonial Government. Moreover, looking at the Government 'paper trail' prior to and following the closing of the camp, it is evident that responsibility for the continued use of Shark Island related directly to Colonial Government and indirectly also to National Government.

Between October and December 1906, the Rhenish Mission Society lobbied intensely to have prisoner removed from Shark Island, asking that they be relocated to a less death-prone location. It was not only a humanitarian concern, however, seeing as Lüderitz missionary, Emil Laaf, told the Mission Head quarters in Germany that labour demands in the colony would not be able to bear losing the prisoner labour force.⁸ Laaf's letter was dated October 5th, only a few weeks following the arrival of most Nama prisoners to Lüderitz, indicating that almost from the time of their arrival the missionary thought it obvious that the Nama would not survive imprisonment on the Island.

In December 1906, Missionary Fenchel in Keetmanshoop approached the Head of the Schutztruppe, von Deimling, about the fate of the Nama prisoners in Lüderitz. It was Deimling who had first conceived of the idea to send the Nama to Shark Island, so it was especially appropriate to confront him about the dire situation in Lüderitz.⁹ Fenchel asked Deimling to reconsider his stance on Shark Island and to instead move the prisoners to a secure location on the mainland, especially the women and children.¹⁰ Deimling was apparently very open to the idea, telling the Keetmanshoop missionary: "It had never dawned on me that there are more women than men there [Shark Island]. I will make arrangements immediately."¹¹ Over a month later, the Lüderitz missionaries had also convinced the head of the Lüderitz *Etappenkommando*, Commander von Zülow, to lobby Deimling for a relocation of prisoners to a more benign environment. According to Missionary Nyhof, Deimling answered Zülow with the words: "as long as I am in power, the Nama will not be removed from the island."¹² In the mind of the mission, the latter remark made

⁸ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 102-103.

⁹ Nuhn: 2000, pp. 267-268.

¹⁰ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 102-103.

¹¹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 102-103.

¹² Archiv der Vereinten Evangelischen Mission Wuppertal-Barmen, RMG 2.509a, C/h 23a, Bl. 348, letter the Rhenish Mission Society in Barmen, Inspector Spiecker by hand.

Deimling responsible for the deaths on Shark Island.¹³ The anger ran so deep that Deimling was singled out in the Lüderitz Mission Chronicle for his role in the Nama decimation. The same blame was levelled at Deimling in recent German publications, echoing the missionary source.¹⁴

Unbeknownst to the mission, however, Deimling had in fact heeded the call of Zülów and the missionaries. In mid February, Deimling had ordered 230 women and children off the island and into the *Burenkamp*, from where it was the intention that they be shipped to Okahandja and Windhoek via Swakopmund.¹⁵ On February 19, 1907 Deimling sent a letter to acting Governor Hintrager, asking for final approval of his orders.¹⁶ Hintrager's response sums up top-level strategies relating to Shark Island. He replied:

"I sincerely ask that the relocation of Nama women and children to Damaraland [central GSWA] be cancelled and also that the women and children removed from Shark Island be taken back ... it will leave an impression of inconsistency and half [serious] regulations on the natives and the white population if the important measures taken in the last few months go begging ... must also not lose sight of the security of the territory. Those prisoners transferred to Shark Island through trickery will not likely forget their time of imprisonment on the island any time soon; [if] they are let loose they will spread their stories of hate and mistrust against us. It will not be possible for them to return to their homes and to tell others of their treatment there [in Lüderitz]."¹⁷

In Hintrager's emphatic dismissal of Deimling's measures, it was clear that security of 'whites' was prioritised far above the health and almost certain death of several thousand women, men and children. The mere suggestion that survivors would speak badly about German colonialism was enough to effectively sentence them to death; a curious argument considering that Nama and Herero sentiments towards the German coloniser were inevitably already very negative, irrespective of what stories Shark Island survivors might tell. More importantly, however, Hintrager's letter to Deimling clearly shows that responsibility for the continued internment and death of Nama prisoners on Shark Island rested with the Colonial Governor's Office. Both Zülów and Deimling were willing to transfer prisoners off the island already in February, a measure that would have saved many lives. This did not happen, however, due to an inflexible policy applied by the civil authority that sought to ensure white safety against a hypothetical threat by a defeated and broken people.

¹³ Archiv der Vereinten Evangelischen Mission Wuppertal-Barmen, RMG 2.509, Bl. 348.

¹⁴ See Zimmerer: 1999, p. 292.

¹⁵ ZBU 2396, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 96a-96b.

¹⁶ ZBU 2396, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 96a-96b.

¹⁷ ZBU 2396, Witbooi Geheimakten, pp. 97-98.

National Government may also have been directly complicit in this strategy; from the consideration that the Governor's office was not autonomous. One would assume that information on a matter such as the dying of hundreds and eventually thousands of prisoners in Lüderitz would have reached Berlin. It has been seen above that the Colonial Government was well aware of the dying from an early date, and it must be assumed that word was passed on to Colonial Director Dernburg's office as well. As such, National Government apparently did nothing to intervene in the on-going mass dying on Shark Island, simply allowing or even accepting the status quo.

The Shark Island camp was only closed when von Estorff gave the order in April 1907, contrary to what he later wrote in his book about being powerless to do anything about the measures applied by Trotha and Lindequist. In early April 1907, Estorff communicated with Colonial Director Dernburg in Berlin, protesting at the state of prisoners in Lüderitzbucht, ordering the camp closed and prisoner removed to a less dangerous location. The German historian Drechsler described Estorff's telegram as hitting the Colonial Department 'like a bolt out of the blue', insinuating that Dernburg was oblivious to the fact¹⁸ – this notion has also been echoed in other sources.¹⁹ Drechsler's phrasing referred to the subsequent telegram to Windhoek by Dernburg, questioning Deputy Governor Oskar Hintrager about the state of affairs. He asked: "Was Government not informed about the situation on Shark Island by the Lüderitz local government?"²⁰ Hintrager's answer was scribbled below the letter, confirming that he had indeed been informed by Lüderitz. Central to the polemic between Colonial Department and Colonial Government following the 'bolt out of the blue', therefore, was the issue of knowledge.

In spite of Dernburg's supposed surprise, he was nevertheless already informed. On February 21, 1907 following a meeting with the Rhenish Mission in Berlin, Dernburg sent copies of missionaries Laaf and Fenchel's letters about mortalities on Shark Island (cited above) back to Windhoek. Dernburg finished the letter off urging the Colonial Government to take suitable precautions in future.²¹ In other words, Estorff's telegram did not come as a bolt out of the blue; Dernburg had known since mid February and had not actively sought to interfere, but rather encouraged Colonial Government to be careful in its endeavour.

Dernburg's reaction two months later, when the camp was finally closed down, must have had other reasons. The most obvious reason would have been the

¹⁸ Drechsler, p. 212.

¹⁹ Drechsler, p. 212. Nuhn: 2000. 'Hit like a bombshell'.

²⁰ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 113.

²¹ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, p. 101.

potential scandal that could have come about as a result of the ‘revelation’. It was important for National and Colonial Government to plead ignorance about Shark Island, because the mass dying could become ammunition for the German left wing, who did not refrain from exposing colonial atrocities in parliament. Indeed already in December 1906 Ledebour of the Social Democrats had brought up the issue of Shark Island in parliament. Somebody in Lüderitz had foreseen the very foreseeable outcome of deportation of Nama POWs to Shark Island and had raised the issue in the German media. This concerned German settler in Lüderitz had sent a letter dated September 20, 1906, i.e. almost upon arrival of the Nama, to the *Koenigsberger Volkszeitung* in Germany, protesting the Nama banishment to the island. The article was picked up by Ledebour, who recited it in parliament:

“Around 2000 are presently under German imprisonment. They surrendered against the guaranty of life, but were nevertheless transferred to Shark Island in Lüderitz, where, as a doctor ensured me, they will all die within two years due to the climate.”

Present in the auditorium were Prime Minister Bülow and Colonial Director Dernburg, who were both agitating for a bill that would allow more funds for the development of DSWA. The letter was read as part of a campaign by left and centre parties to block this proposal and in the subsequent vote, which incidentally fell on the same day as Ledebour’s Shark Island speech, the bill was defeat. The defeat prompted the *Reichskanzler* and the Kaiser to dissolve parliament. More importantly, however, both Bülow and Dernburg had heard about the island in GSWA already in December 1906. Ledebour had even posed the question directly to them:

“I direct a question to the gentlemen dealing with colonial administration about what they know about Shark Island. It is self-evident that they have been receiving information about conditions in the prisoner camps, and I demand that you communicate this information to us about the extent of mortality rates on Shark Island and in other camps.”²²

Shark Island equalled death; the author of the *Koenigsberger Volkszeitung* article knew this already in September 1906. The missionaries also knew what imprisonment on Shark Island meant, and by October had started lobbying for the removal of prisoners. Moreover, as stated by Ledebour, the situation on Shark Island was inevitably known by High Command. In fact, it was known in all tiers of colonial decision-making, from Bülow to Dernburg to Hintrager to Deimling to Zülow and Böhmer. Everyone knew about Shark Island and the consequences of imprisonment there. When the many deaths were sought halted by Zülow and Deimling, Hintrager blocked it with no interference from Dernburg or Bülow. Lindequist was in Germany at the time, but had before he left expressed hopes that Shark Island would

²² Reichstag, 140 Sitzung, December 13, 1906, p.4366.

serve to reduce the number of Nama, thus lowering the price of deportation elsewhere should this become necessary.

Events on Shark Island were not accidental. In January Commander von Zülow had pointed out that most prisoners were incapable of escape due to their condition, thus arguing that a removal of prisoners would be in order.²³ Regardless, the Colonial Government insisted on keeping the camp open under the guise of security and to prevent potential escapes. Had it not been for von Estorff, the Colonial Government would in all likelihood not have closed down the camp, leaving prisoners to die out entirely, as the British military attaché to DSWA, Colonel Trench, believed was the desired outcome by the German authorities.²⁴ Not coincidentally Kaiser Wilhelm issued a decree on May 8, 1907, a few weeks after Shark Island Camp had finally been closed, expropriating all Nama lands, apart from Berseba and parts of the Bondelswartz' territory.²⁵ Consequently, GSWA had been largely rid of any, if even hypothetical, Nama threat and also gained a total of 46 million hectares of crown lands that had previously belonged to Nama, Damara, Herero and San communities.²⁶ Had the prisoners been allowed to return home instead of being deported to Okawayo in Karibib, they would not have had a home nor any belongings to return to – contrary to promises made to them by Estorff on behalf of the Government when they surrendered in 1905.

²³ ZBU 2369, Witbooi Geheimakten, Lüderitz, von Zülow to Gov. January 6, 1907.

²⁴ KAB, PMO 227 –35/07, Col. F. Trench to British Embassy, Berlin, 21st November, 1906.

²⁵ Schrank, p. 212.

²⁶ Schrank, p. 212.

Conclusion

It has been claimed by a number of authors that the word ‘extermination’ [*Vernichtung*] meant a military pacification rather than a total onslaught resulting in Herero mass deaths. Lau cited Poewe who had argued the word extermination to be “a successful attempt at psychological warfare, never followed in deed.”¹ Pool translated the word *Vernichtung* as annihilate, which, although in English it is just as unambiguous as the word ‘extermination’, was downplayed to mean nothing more than military might (?). Pool also argued that “Trotha’s application of the word ‘annihilate’ was probably connected to his participation in the Battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian War” where France’s hopes of victory were ‘annihilated’ by the Prussian tactics.²

A seen, however, the longest sitting governor in GSWA, Theodor Leutwein, warned about an extermination of the Herero months before Trotha ever arrived in GSWA. Leutwein made a very clear distinction between being ‘political dead’ and what he defined as ‘annihilation of 60,000 or 70,000 people’.³ Trotha, who Lau incidentally referred to as a nascent fascist and a necrophiliac fanatic,⁴ wrote in his diary on October 3, 1904, the day after releasing the Extermination Order: “the Negro does not respect treaties but only brutal force”.⁵ The result of the regimes of Trotha and Lindequist resulted in a severe decimation of the Herero population; approximately 75 percent of the Herero nation no longer existed in 1911 according to official census figures. In the face of this irrefutable outcome of the Herero War, suggestions of ‘psychological extermination’ and semantics relating to the Franco-Prussian War are not so much ludicrous as they are indefensible.

¹ Lau: 1995, p. 46.

² Pool: 1991, p. 252.

³ As translated by Drechsler, p. 148, and used in Pool: 1991, p. 246.

⁴ Lau: 1995, p. 46, footnote 10.

⁵ Pool: 1991, p. 273.

Leutwein's letter to Government, cited above, is also proof that there was a plan to annihilate the Hereros, which more than suggests German intent. Similarly, Count von Stillfried's report to the Kaiser, which was a virtual blueprint for subsequent events, is also evidence of intent. Trotha's actions from arrival to departure, including Ohamakari, the pursuit in the *sandveld*, the Extermination Order, military 'collection' patrols and the concentration camps show a persistent *modus operandi*, consistent with professed objectives of exterminating the Hereros – rather than any psychological ploy or annihilation of hopes of victory. Trotha's regime invariably amounted to mass murder, planned and executed.

Lindequist's year-and-a-half in power was equally deadly for both Hereros and Nama. Using missionaries to lure Hereros out of the bush, Lindequist escalated the application of concentration camps and the use of prisoners as forced, unpaid labourers. In spite of high mortality figures under Trotha, Lindequist did not represent a new line, but instead allowed many thousands to die in the camps as well as forcing other POWs to work and die on government and private projects. As seen here the Witbooi, Bethanie and the Veldschoendragers were nearly exterminated as a people. Had it not been for the conscionable actions of *Schutztruppe* Head von Estorff, all the island's prisoners would have died there. Lindequist's horrific statement, vis-à-vis Shark Island, that for reasons pertaining to cost, the deportation of the Nama could be postponed until their numbers had been somewhat reduced,⁶ makes it abundantly clear that deaths were both planned and accepted. Lindequist also continued the *de facto* slave trade, actively seeking payment for prisoners rented out to settlers. Such actions were just as unjustifiable and illegal in 1906 as they are today.

Internationally there were already laws relating to warfare that specified how prisoner combatants were to be handled. The second Hague agreement of 1899,⁷ which Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II was a signatory to, plainly stated the exact regulations concerning confinement, treatment and provisions allowed prisoners-of-war. According to Chapter Two, Article Five, Six and Seven: the confinement of combatants in camps could only be done 'as an indispensable measure of safety'; prisoners put to work had to be paid regular wages for the work they were to do and, moreover, work should not be excessive and should under no circumstances be related to military operations. As regards food, quarters and clothing "prisoners

⁶ Drechsler, p. 211.

⁷ Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague II), Annex to the Convention: "Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land", (29 July 1899), Section I, Chapter II (Articles 4-20).

should be treated on par with the ‘troops of the Government.’⁸ These points were all clearly stipulated in the agreement, but were not implemented in GSWA.

On February 3, 1909 Trotha remarked in a German newspaper: “It goes without saying that war in Africa cannot be waged according to the Geneva Convention”.⁹ The same views were clearly applied to the antecedent Hague Agreement, because none of the Hague articles were fulfilled in respect to the GSWA prisoners-of-war, although the agreement had entered into effect (September 4, 1900) only little more than three years before the outbreak of the Herero War. The well being of prisoners was the responsibility of the Colonial Government, who according to The Hague Convention was accountable for prisoners in its custody. It is nevertheless evident from information relayed in this thesis that: a) prisoners were not a present threat; b) that they were forced to work until they died; c) they were not paid wages; d) non-combatant women and children were forced to work; and e) prisoners were not treated on par with German soldiers as regarded clothes, food and quarters. Instead, prisoners died in droves while in the hands of the German Government by way of its subsidiaries, namely the colonial army and the Colonial Government.

Moreover, the Colonial Government and its military counterpart referred to concentration camp prisoners as *Kriegsgefangenen*, meaning, prisoners-of-war. The prisoners must therefore have been regarded as combatants considered to have posed a military threat or were captured in a war situation. This would be the most basic definition of a prisoner-of-war. However, the so-called *Kriegsgefangenen* comprised a large majority of women and children, who were not combatants and their confinement in camps was not ‘an indispensable measure of safety’. In fact, as has been shown in previous chapters, the Herero prisoners were in many cases mere skeletons upon arrival in the collection camps. There are also questions as to whether the Herero were still at war, seeing that socially they had been destroyed and no longer existed as a homogenous people, or whether they were rather scattered in, for the large part, unorganised groups in the eastern and central parts of the colony. Another consideration is the fact that most so-called prisoners-of-war were gathered in collection camps where they voluntarily surrendered to missionaries, thinking that the war had ended – as did the missionaries initially. Indeed Lindequist had stated that the war was over and Trotha was on his way home.

The Nama ‘prisoners-of-war’ and especially the Witboois, Veldshoendragers and Bethanies, had actually made agreements with German officers, allowing them

⁸ Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague II), Annex to the Convention: “Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land”, (29 July 1899), Section I, Chapter II (Articles 4-20).

⁹ Pool: 1991, p. 274.

freedom and rights to retain livestock, yet they were also sent to camps (women children and elderly included). Deputy Governor Hintrager later insisted that the Nama prisoners continued to be imprisoned on Shark Island despite soaring death rates, because they might otherwise go and tell others of the German trickery.

In early 1906, District Commissioner Böhmer wrote in the Annual Report for the Lüderitz District that the ‘Angel of Death’ had ‘descended violently’ among the many Nama and Herero prisoners in Lüderitz.¹⁰ Böhmer’s descriptive metaphor somehow implied that responsibility for the deaths rested elsewhere. The many deaths were, however, not the work of angels, but related directly to non-compliance with Hague II, Annex I, Section I, Articles 4-20. In Lüderitz, therefore, the Kaiser, Bülow, Lindequist, Hintrager, Deimling, Zülow, Hunniger, Bofinger, Muller and Böhmer all in some way represented this ‘Angel of Death’.

Having gone through a wealth of German and British sources relating to 1904-08 in GSWA, this research has inadvertently come to much the same conclusion as O’Reilly’s Blue Book did in 1918, namely:

“After von Trotha had left and surrenders were once more possible, the Germans decided to use their prisoners (men and women) as labourers on the harbour works at Lüderitzbucht and Swakopmund, and also on railway construction... Probably 60 per cent. of the natives who had surrendered after von Trotha left perished in this way. True indeed the cold and raw climate of the two coast ports contributed greatly to this huge death-toll. But for this the Germans who placed these naked remnants of starving humanity on the barren islets of Lüderitzbucht and on the moisture-oozing shores of Swakopmund must take the fullest blame and submit to the condemnation of all persons with even an elementary feeling of humanity towards the native races.”¹¹

¹⁰ ZBU 154, A. VI.a.3, pp. 211-212.

¹¹ South Africa, Union of, P. 98.



Photo 4.1 Adolescent prisoners working in the cold waters at the coast



Photo 4.2 Shark Island concentration camp 1905 (SCL PA08 no. 143)



Photo 4.3 Shark Island Campsite 2004 – the site of the former concentration camp today accommodates camper vans, barbeques and sanitation blocks. Notably the topography of the island has been flattened to allow cars onto the island. (Casper W. Erichsen)

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