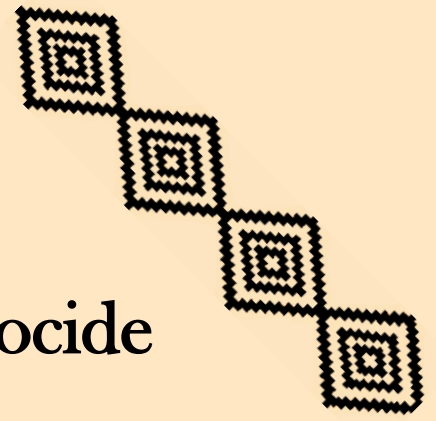
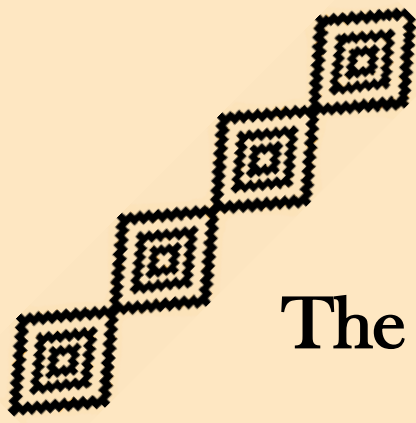




In Memorial

The Herero & Nama Genocide

1904-1908

I

In 2021, Germany became the first colonial government to officially name its own genocide.

But even then, it was over **100 years** after the genocide took place.ⁱ

Germany officially condemned what it did in Namibia between 1904-1908 and pledged €1.1 billion in development funding.ⁱⁱ

Germany called its efforts “reconciliation”.



Figure 1: Germany agrees to pay Namibia €1.1bn over historical Herero-Nama genocide | The Guardian



The Apology

I

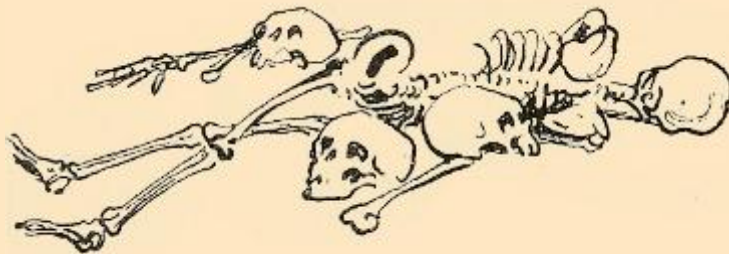
Germany did not use the word “reparations”.ⁱⁱⁱ Germany was careful about that distinction, and we should be too.

The negotiations took place between Berlin and the Namibian government – but not the Ovaherero and Nama people, whose great-grandparents were brutally killed during the genocide.^{iv}

There were no Herero or Nama representatives in the room. As a result, when the deal was announced, their response was that it was not enough, and that Germany needed to talk to them directly.

That disagreement hasn’t been resolved.

This is a story of a genocide which is still, over 118 years later, unsettled.



The Context

—

To understand why this apology still isn't enough, it helps to go back to a single night in early 1903, before anyone called it a war:

A German trader named Dietrich was walking the road to the town of Omaruru when a wagon caught up with him.^v The wagon was driven by the son of a Herero chief, travelling with his wife and a young child. The chief's heir offered Dietrich a ride, who took it gladly. When night fell, the German and the Hereros made camp together.

In the very early hours of the morning, the young Herero man was woken by screams and a gunshot. He found his wife dead. Dietrich had shot her after she resisted him.^{vi}

The German colonial governor, Theodor Leutwein, filed an official report on what happened: a drunk man had fired blindly in the dark, he wrote, and a Herero woman happened to be killed. Historian Jon Bridgman later noted that the account, “while not actually mendacious, leaves out a good deal”.^{vii} He left out Dietrich's name, the rape, and the fact that the woman was sleeping next to her husband and child.

Germany called it a drunk accident. Not a rape. Not a murder. A misunderstanding.

The official record didn't lie outright, but it left out everything that mattered.

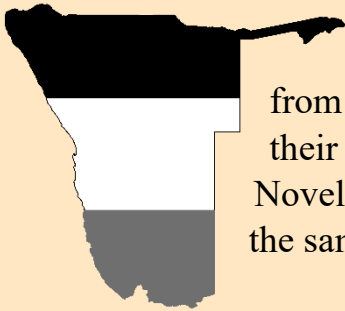
This story is worth noting because it summarises everything Germany has said about the war – including in 2021. Despite Germany's reparations for the Holocaust and national guilt over the Second World War; Germany still held an insistence to soften, omit, and reframe the narrative. This tendency began before the war had even started.

The Genocide

I

Much of the historical record of what happened unfortunately comes from German colonial files and historians who have studied them.^{viii} But the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama still carry their own accounts – though far fewer of those accounts have been recorded, translated, or preserved than the German colonial record that even this piece draws on most heavily.^{ix}

Germany acquired Namibia (then called *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*) in the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in 1884.^x



By January 1904, Germany had enacted decades of land seizures from the indigenous people, along with broken treaties which restricted their rights, and incidents like Dietrich’s going completely unpunished.^{xi} Novels about foreign colonial lands became popular in Germany, all telling the same story of the “uneducated” African.^{xii,xiii}

“White settlers normally referred to black Africans as “baboons” and treated them accordingly.”^{xiv}



Figure 2: Ciarlo, David, ‘Picturing Genocide in German Consumer Culture, 1904-10’, p. 82.

The Herero people could not stand the way they had been treated, so they rose up.^{xv}

The German response to the uprising was fierce.

By August, at a place called *the Waterberg*, the German commander General Lothar von Trotha had the Herero almost encircled – and deliberately left one route open, forcing them into the Omaheke desert.^{xvi}

The Hereros were left with no water and nowhere to go.^{xvii,xviii}

The Germans chased them into the desert, firing gunshots at them.

“We hesitated to kill Herero women and children, but the Germans spared no one. They killed thousands and thousands. I saw this slaughter for day after day.”^{xix}



Figure 2: Le génocide des Herero et Nama - Mémorial de la Shoah Mémorial de la Shoah

Concentration Camps

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In late 1904 to early 1905, those who didn't die in the desert were rounded up into concentration camps.^{xx}

28 years before Germany would use this same concept during the Holocaust.^{xxi}

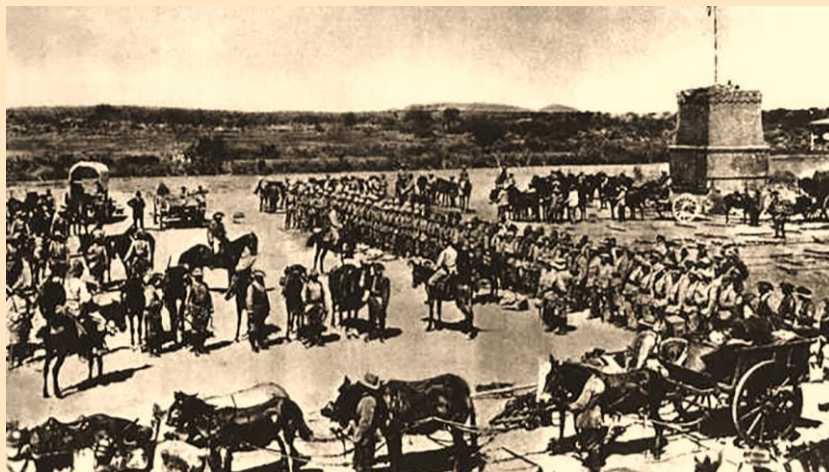


Figure 3: The Herero and Namaqua Genocide – The Holocaust Explained

The Germans had their own word for these camps, they called them *Konzentrationslager*.^{xxii} This was used in official reports years before the term took on its more familiar twentieth-century meaning.

Five camps operated in the territory between 1904 and 1908.^{xxiii} An official report in 1908 put the death rate inside them at 45.2%.^{xxiv}

“Many members of my own family died in a concentration camp in Swakopmund. Because, in Swakopmund, the weather is extremely cold. And they were not used to that cold weather. They were given only maybe one blanket or so. Many of them died, the food was limited.”
- Katuutire Kaura.^{xxv}

Shark Island, off the coast at Lüderitz, was the worst of the five. Roughly 80 percent of prisoners never left.^{xxvi} Rations were a handful of uncooked rice, salt, and water. Most of the prisoners had never eaten rice before and led to digestive problems and disease.^{xxvii}

They were held until 1908.^{xxviii}

Of a population of around 80,000, by 1906 only some 15,000 remained alive.^{xxix}

“The Herero people, as such, had been annihilated.”^{xxx}



The Result

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Some writers, including legal scholar Jeremy Sarkin, have argued the concentration camps were essentially a deliberate practice run of the holocaust.^{xxxix}

Others, including Jürgen Zimmerer, argue that historians treat the genocide in Namibia as less about continuity to Nazi policy as its own horrific moment in history.^{xxxix}

Both perspectives have their place, but they both risk undermining the Herero Genocide as a less consequential moment. When, in reality, it killed almost three quarters of a population.^{xxxix}

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Stripped of their cattle, land, and the sacred fires that founded their social structure,^{xxxix} the remaining survivors ‘became cowed and disoriented’.^{xxxix}

In 2006, more than a century after the killings, the Namibian parliament endorsed a motion brought by a Herero chief demanding reparations. The Nama made the same demand.^{xxxix}

Both are still waiting for a negotiation that includes them as parties, rather than just subjects.

While the 2021 announcement is a step in the right direction, it would be a disservice to pretend that the chapter has ended. Calling it a breakthrough would repeat the same problem from Leutwein’s report: smoothing over the horror of the real story, just to act like it’s been resolved.

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- ⁱ 'Namibia Pushes for German Reparations on First Genocide Remembrance Day', *The Guardian*.
- ⁱⁱ 'Namibia Pushes for German Reparations on First Genocide Remembrance Day', *The Guardian*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zimmerer, 'Colonial Genocide', p. 338.
- ^{iv} 'Namibia Pushes for German Reparations on First Genocide Remembrance Day', *The Guardian*.
- ^v Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, pp. 62-63.
- ^{vi} Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, pp. 62-63.
- ^{vii} Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, p. 61 (quoting Leutwein directly).
- ^{viii} Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, p. 4.
- ^{ix} Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies*, p. 2.
- ^x Taylor, *Germany's First Bid for Colonies*, p. 2.
- ^{xi} Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, pp. 20-21, 57.
- ^{xii} Lehmann, 'Fraternity, Frenzy, and Genocide in German War Literature', p. 115 (on *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* as a long-time bestseller).
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- ^{xvii} Zimmerer, 'Colonial Genocide', p. 327.
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- ^{xxxvi} Zimmerer, 'Colonial Genocide', p. 338.