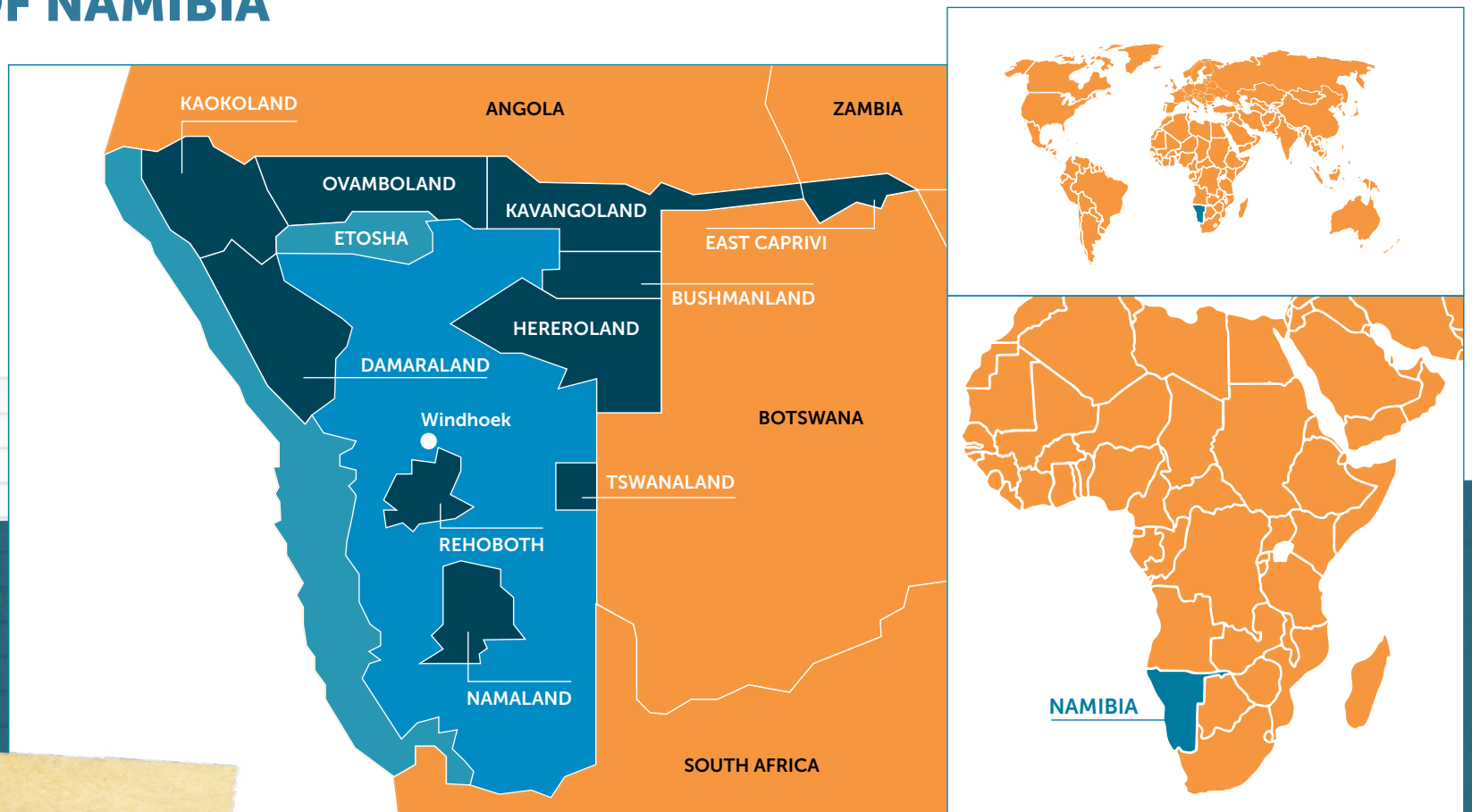
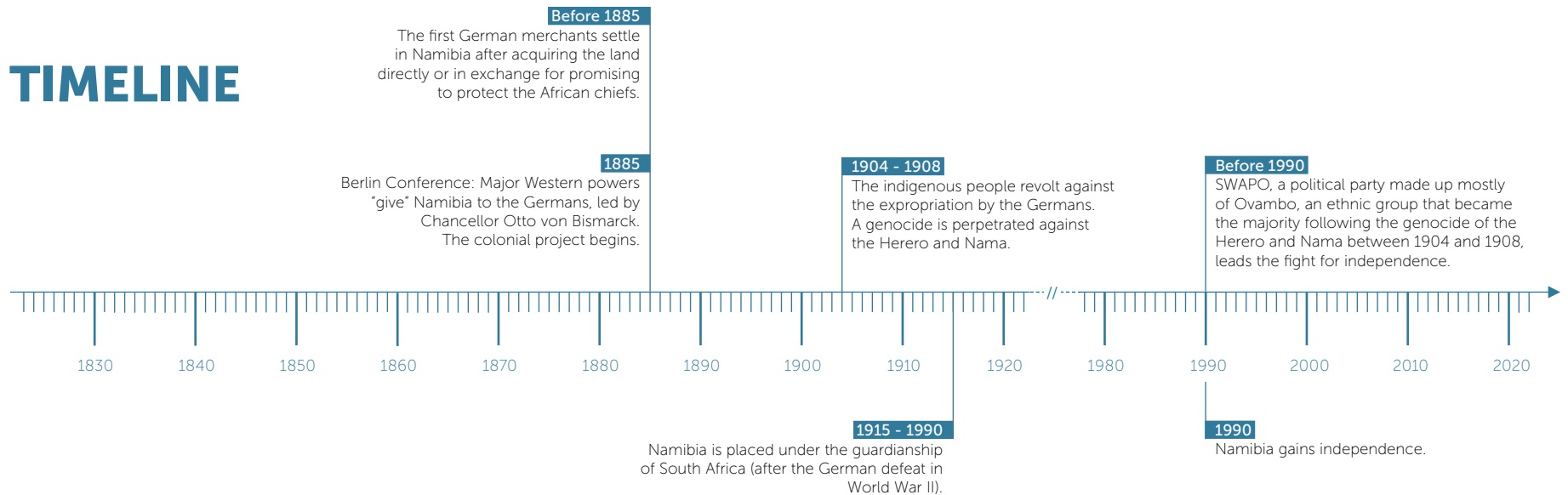


# GENOCIDE OF THE HERERO AND NAMA IN NAMIBIA

## MAP OF NAMIBIA



# TIMELINE



# HIGHLIGHTS

## What?

- // Expropriation and colonization of indigenous lands
- // Massacre of indigenous populations (Herero and Nama) by Germans in retaliation for their revolt

## Where?

- // Namibia
- // South West Africa

## When?

- // Tensions between the Germans and the Herero and Nama started in 1885.
- // The Herero and Nama revolted in January 1904.
- // The genocide of the Herero and Nama took place between 1904 and 1908.

## Who?

- // The perpetrators were the German authorities.
- // The victims were the indigenous populations of Namibia: the Herero and the Nama.

## EXCERPT FROM AN ACCOUNT

“The new German governor promised the few thousand survivors who were hiding in the bush, most of them walking skeletons, that they would be safe. They would be sent to Lüderitz Bay, under extremely precarious conditions. . . There, people dropped like poisoned flies. The children and elderly first, followed by the women and the weakest of the men. . . . Able-bodied men were forced to work at the ports and railroad depots. Young women, even those who were married, were taken by the soldiers as concubines.”



CONFIRMED ACCOUNT BY HERERO TEACHER SAMUEL KARIKO  
(KOTEK 2008, 187) TRANSLATION

Nama or Herero soldiers in traditional garb

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

## ISSUE

In 1902, German Namibia was inhabited by 4 500 settlers (2 600 Germans, 1 400 Afrikaners and 450 Britons) and some 200 000 Africans (80 000 Hereros, 60 000 Ovambos and 20 000 Namas).<sup>1</sup> Less than 10 years later, in 1911, according to a census conducted by the German authorities, there were an estimated 15 130 Hereros, and the Nama population had decreased by 50%.<sup>2</sup> The drastic decline in these two populations was the result of massacres perpetrated by the German authorities between 1904 and 1908. Wishing to colonize South West Africa at any cost, the Germans adopted strategies to dehumanize the local indigenous populations, appropriated their land and stifled any revolt. This remained unknown to the general public for a long time. It was only in 1985, following the publication of the United Nations' Whitaker report, that the crime and its genocidal nature were recognized.<sup>3</sup> This was the first recorded genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why did it take so long for the crime to be recognized as a genocide?

### Afrikaners

Descendants of Dutch, German and French settlers

### Herero et Nama

Indigenous populations of Namibia who practised intensive cattle rearing, a material and spiritual activity that defined their identity.



Herero in official attire

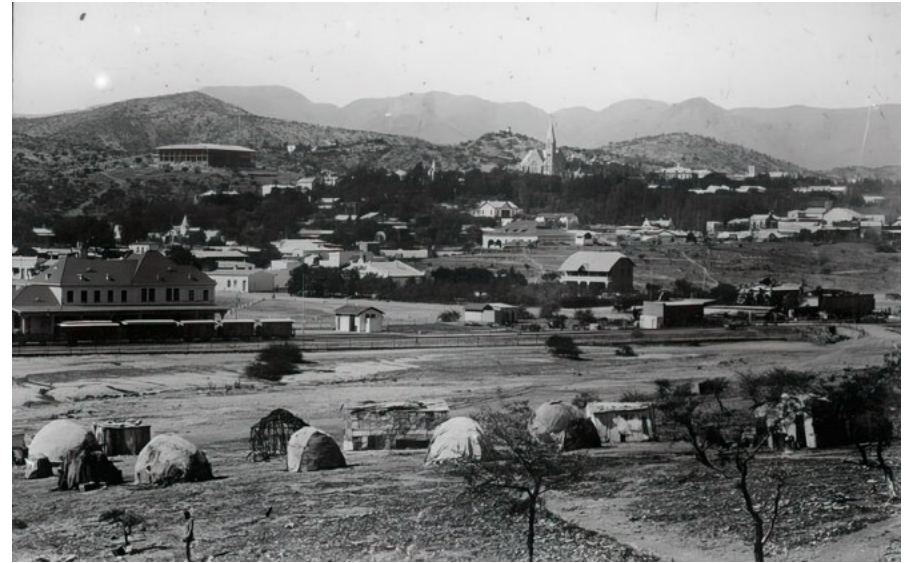
Credit: Otto Neumeister, Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

From prehistory to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cattle rearing was the material and spiritual activity that defined the identity of the Herero and Nama.<sup>4</sup> The land on which the cattle were reared was “the inalienable property of the entire tribe” [*translation*].<sup>5</sup>

The German colonization of South West Africa (now Namibia) was a result of the partitioning of the African continent by European powers. German merchants were the first to settle on Herero and Nama land.<sup>6</sup> Land purchase contracts and contracts ensuring the protection of African chiefs were signed.<sup>7</sup> Based on these contractual documents, Herero and Nama lands were claimed by Bismarck and renamed “German South West Africa” at the 1885 Berlin Conference, whose purpose was to partition the African territory among the European powers. This decision facilitated the immigration of German settlers to the territory for the purpose of farming it.

One of the Germans’ objectives was to transform “South West Africa (SWA) into a colony of whites” [*translation*].<sup>8</sup> As a result, it



View of the city and train station, Windhoek, German South West Africa. Notice the contrast between the Nama and Herero section in the foreground and the German colonial constructions beyond.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

was imperative to quash any resistance to the colonization project by the Herero and Nama. While, at first, more diplomatic strategies (sabotage of alliances between the groups) were adopted to facilitate the concession of larger and larger tracts of land, brutal military tactics soon became the preferred method of suppressing the revolts of the Herero and Nama. The latter contested the expropriation of their lands and condemned the poor treatment they received at the hands of the Germans.

The desire to expropriate the indigenous peoples' lands led to the massacre of the Herero and Nama between 1904 and 1908 under the orders of General Lothar von Trotha, approved by Emperor Wilhelm II.<sup>9</sup>

Following the genocide of the Herero and Nama and after a few years of German control, the territory fell under the control of South Africa in 1915, until Namibia's independence in 1990.<sup>10</sup> The League of Nations approved

the South African occupation of Namibian territory in the Treaty of Versailles. The fight for independence was led for the most part by SWAPO,<sup>11</sup> a political organization made up mostly of Ovambos, the ethnic group that became demographically larger in the Namibian population as a result of the genocide of the Herero and Nama. The Herero population, which formed the majority before the genocide, now represented only 9% to 10% of the population.<sup>12</sup>

#### SWAPO

South West African People's Organisation, a political organization made up mostly of Ovambos, the ethnic group that became demographically larger in the Namibian population as a result of the genocide of the Herero and Nama.



Franz Adolf Eduard Lüderitz near Orange River in 1884. The German shipowner gave his name to Lüderitzland, the future German South West Africa.

Credit: Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt

## STAGES OF THE GENOCIDE

### TO CLASSIFY

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during Germany's colonization of South West Africa, the whites were separated from the indigenous populations (Herero, Nama, San, Damara, Ovambo). The Germans, probably influenced by the scientifically unsubstantiated ideas of German anthropologists at the time,<sup>13</sup> felt superior to the indigenous peoples in the region and saw themselves as more "civilized." They also believed that the indigenous peoples were incapable of developing the territory, for example by farming. They relegated them to a lower social status or simply marginalized them. This quotation from German doctor Eugen Fischer concerning biracial children born of Black and white parents in this region of the world illustrates the flawed ideas of that period:

"Let us ensure them the exact degree of protection they need as an inferior race, no more, and only while they are still useful to us. Otherwise, let fair competition prevail, in other words, in my opinion, let them disappear" [*translation*].<sup>14</sup>

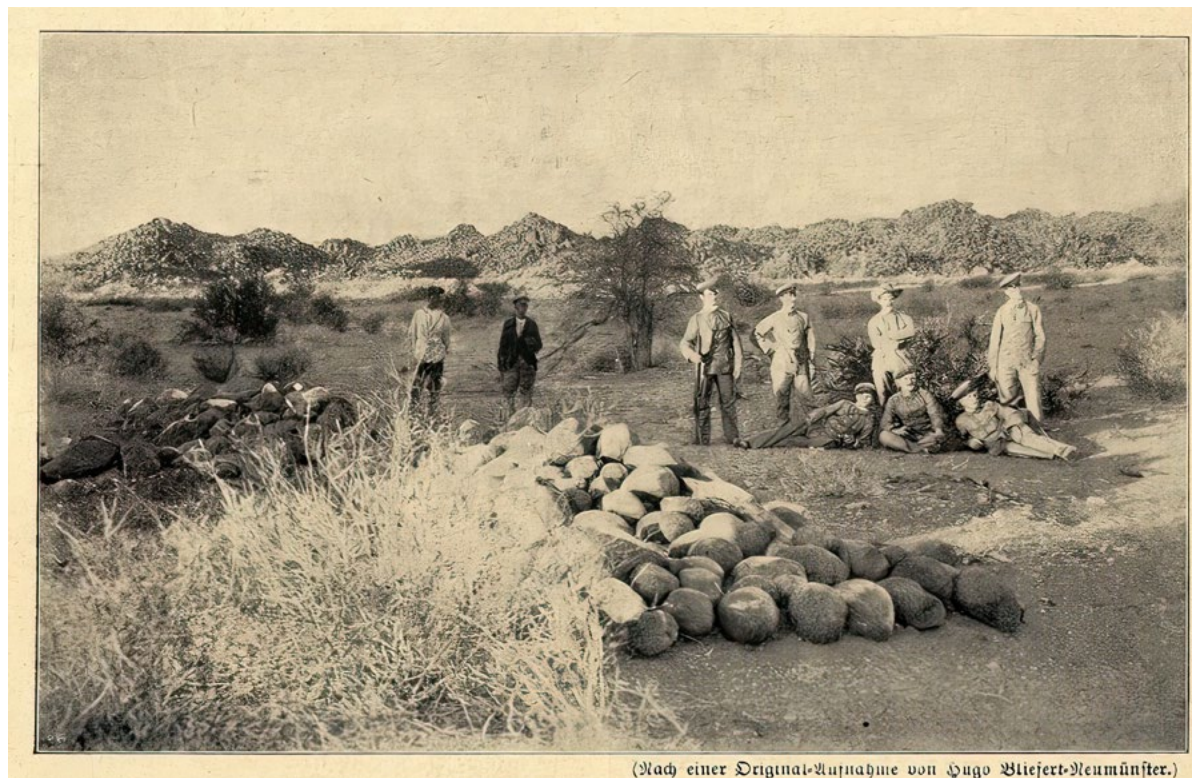


Herero chief's mother on the Waterberg Reserve

Credit: Otto Neumeister, Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt

## TO DEHUMANIZE

Several practices dehumanized the Herero and Nama. The creation of human zoos, in which Africans were displayed like animals, was a common practice. According to Kotek (1995), “one of the most spectacular exhibitions was the Colonial Exhibition in Berlin: more than one hundred people from the German colonies were on display in Treptower Park in the summer of 1896” [translation].<sup>15</sup> The Germans also used the corpses and skulls of Herero and Nama prisoners for scientific experiments.<sup>16</sup> According to Namibian historian Casper Erichsen, “in the camps, some prisoners were forced to boil the heads [of those who had been tortured], which might have been those of their family members or friends . . . and then scrape the flesh off with bits of glass. They had to clean the skulls so that they could be sent to Germany” [translation].<sup>17</sup>



German soldiers pose in front of a Nama mass grave in 1904.

Credit: Hugo Bliefert-Neumünster, Wikimedia



## TO POLARIZE

The revolt of the Herero, which erupted on January 12, 1904,<sup>18</sup> after several years of colonial oppression, exacerbated the existing polarity between the Herero and the settlers, and was used as a pretext by General Lothar von Trotha to strip them of the German citizenship granted in a protection treaty between Commissioner of German South West Africa Heinrich Göring and Herero Chief Samuel Maharero.<sup>19</sup> General von Trotha said of the rebels: “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, and now, cowards that they are, they no longer fight” [*translation*].<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in a message dated April 22, 1905, von Trotha threatened that the Nama would meet the same fate as the Herero if they failed to surrender. “Any Nama who chooses not to surrender and lets himself be seen in German territory will be shot, until all are exterminated” [*translation*].<sup>21</sup>



Samuel Maharero, head of the Herero resistance, taken between 1895 and 1905

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

This rigid distinction between Germans and indigenous peoples was entrenched in law. Measures were taken to prohibit or annul interracial marriages between indigenous peoples (Herero and Nama) and Germans, and to proclaim the loss of civil rights for any German who broke this rule.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Herero were prohibited from resettling their native land (Hereroland).

This distinction was also based on a racist vision: “The German people (*Volk*)’s fear of racial degeneration finally led to the prohibition of mixed marriages on September 23, 1905. Ideas of racial difference were based on late 19<sup>th</sup> century German anthropology, which made a distinction between so-called ‘civilized’ peoples and ‘primitive’ peoples” [*translation*].<sup>23</sup> The Germans believed that they were engaged in a racial war, “a struggle between two peoples for the right to exist” [*translation*].<sup>24</sup>



Heinrich Göring, Commissioner of German South West Africa in Namibia, 1885

Credit: Anonymous, Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt



## TO ORGANIZE

The genocide of the Herero and the Nama took place in several phases. First, “the Germans’ goal was to transform South West Africa (SWA) into a colony of whites and to relegate indigenous peoples to reserves” [translation].<sup>25</sup> To achieve this end, the German authorities expropriated the Herero and Nama’s lands and relocated them to smaller territories.

The authorities, fearing a guerilla movement, then decided to put an end to the threat posed by the Herero and the Nama and sent General Lothar von Trotha to Namibia to execute the plan. General von Trotha’s genocidal intentions and strategies were validated by the military high command in Berlin: “The racial struggle currently under way can only end with the annihilation of one of the parties. . . . As a result, we can approve General von Trotha’s intention” [translation].<sup>26</sup> As planned by von Trotha and approved by the authorities in Berlin, there was no place for cohabitation between Germans and indigenous peoples.



German colonial army headquarters in German South West Africa. The troops were known as the “imperial protection forces.” Seated, third from the left is Lieutenant-General Lothar von Trotha, commander in chief.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

German students in the army corps of volunteers against the Herero uprising

Credit: Anonymous, Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt



The establishment of concentration camps was another phase in the organization of the genocide. The camps were meant to incarcerate the Herero and Nama and subject them to forced labour. The idea of reducing the indigenous peoples to “a sort of slavery” [translation]<sup>27</sup> took hold in 1904. In a letter dated November 23, 1904, von Schlieffen wrote to Chancellor von Bülow:

**“We can accept his plan for extermination or deportation outside the territory. It is very unlikely that whites and Blacks will be able to live in peace after what happened, unless we subject the Blacks to forced labour, a sort of slavery. Such an intense racial war can only end with the destruction or total submission of one of the parties. . . . However, the first solution no longer seems viable.”**

Kotek 2008, 184 [translation]

Slavery was also a means of mitigating the labour shortage and ensuring the continued operation of German companies.<sup>28</sup>

## TO PERSECUTE AND TO MURDER

A few facts substantiate the persecution and murder of Hereros and Namas. The Germans had a two-pronged strategy: the military and the concentration camps.

The Battle of Waterberg on August 11, 1904, between German troops and five or six thousand Herero ended in a loss for the indigenous peoples. It was followed by a period

in which survivors, in particular supporters of the Herero soldiers, were systematically and summarily executed.

There are records of hangings of indigenous peoples and “spontaneous” murders. The order given by General Lothar von Trotha on October 2, 1904, confirms the genocidal nature of his military offensive:



Herero prisoners in a concentration camp at Swakopmund

Credit: Kurt Streitwolf, Das Bundesarchiv

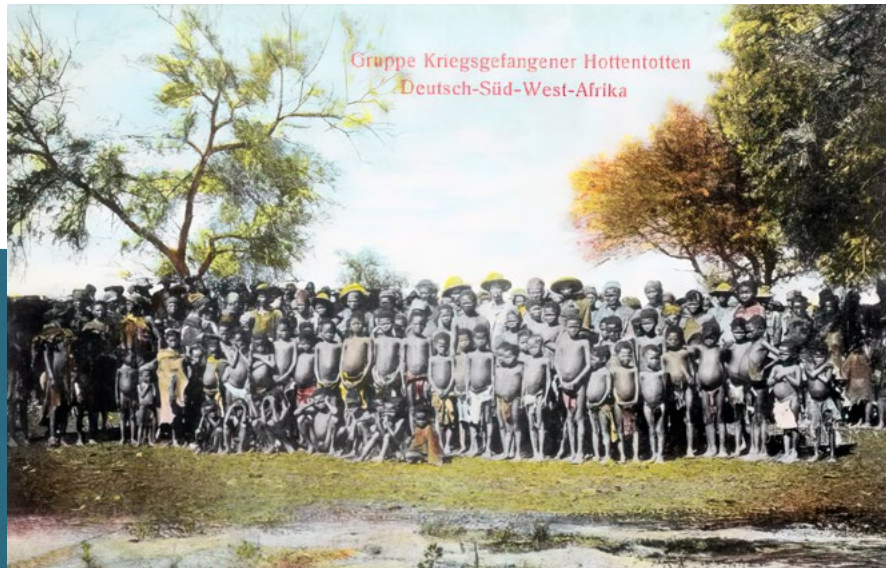


Herero and Nama prisoners during the genocide

Credit: Der Spiegel, Wikimedia

**“I, the great general of the German soldiers, send this letter to the Hereros. . . . I announce to the people that whoever hands me a Herero shall receive 1000 marks. Whoever hands me Samuel Mahahero [leader of the revolt] shall receive 5000 marks. The Herero nation must now leave the country. If it refuses, I shall compel it to do so with my cannons. Any Herero found inside the German frontier, with or without gun or cattle, will be executed. I shall spare neither women nor children. They must leave or die. Such are my words to the Herero people.”**

Kotek, 2008, 181 [translation]



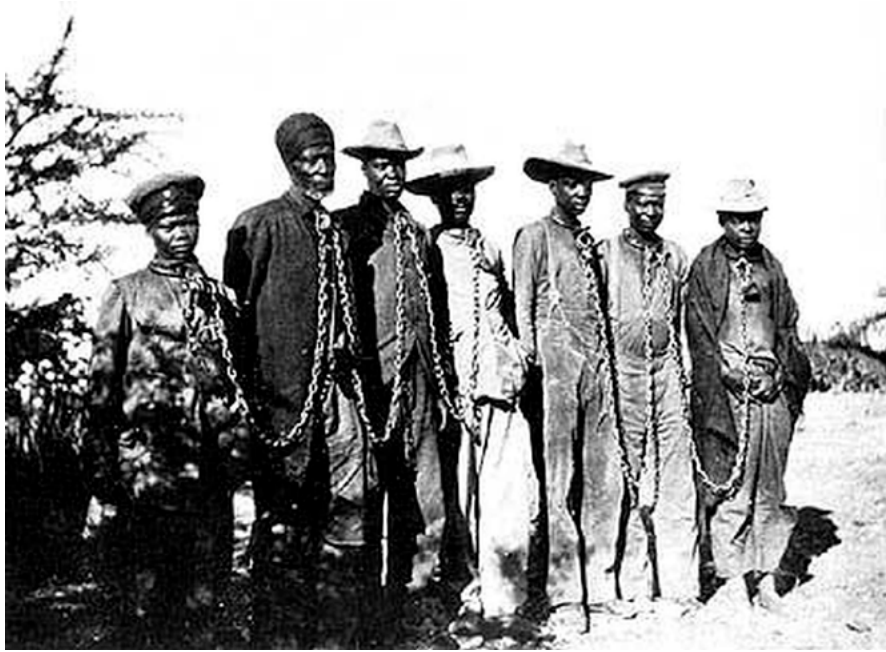
German propagandist postcard showing Herero and Nama prisoners, 1904. The Germans used the term "prisoners of war."

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

Lothar von Trotha's war diary also records his genocidal intentions against the indigenous population:

**"Now I have to ask myself how to end the war with the Herero. The views of the Governor and also a few old colonials on the one hand, and my views on the other, differ completely. The former have wanted to negotiate for some time already and regard the Herero nation as necessary labour material for the future development of the colony. I believe that the nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this is not possible by tactical measures, it has to be expelled from the territory by any means possible. . . . The exercise of violence by any means possible, including terrorism, is my policy. I destroy the African tribes with streams of blood and money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge, which will remain."**

Kotek 2008, 182 [translation]



Herero men in chains, 1904

Credit: Wikimedia

Long presented as allies of the Germans, the Nama, outraged at the treatment of the Herero, met the same fate. This is what von Trotha had to say after the Nama rebellion on April 22, 1905:

**“Any Nama who chooses not to surrender and lets himself be seen in German territory will be shot, until all are exterminated. Those who, at the start of the rebellion, committed murder against whites or gave orders that whites be murdered have, by law, forfeited their lives. As for the few not defeated, they will fare as did the Herero, who in their blindness also believed that they could wage war successfully on the powerful German Emperor and the great German people. I ask you, where are the Herero today?”**

Kotek 2008, 184 [translation]



The internment of the Herero and Nama in concentration camps after their defeat by the Germans had a threefold objective and continued the genocide process begun by General von Trotha. The aim was to:

1. Mitigate the labour shortage (economic reason)
2. Restore Germany's image, which had been tarnished in Germany and across Europe because of its African policy (political/diplomatic reason): internment is a more socially acceptable strategy than murder to achieve one's ends<sup>29</sup>
3. Make up for the ineffectiveness of the military strategy of murder adopted by von Trotha, which resulted in the flight of "too many" Hereros to British-occupied countries

In the concentration camps, the Herero were treated inhumanely. They were subjected to forced labour, mistreated and exposed to disease and malnutrition. These conditions contributed to their elimination. In 1905, the first year of captivity of the Herero, 7862 of 10632 women and children and 4137 men died in concentration camps.<sup>30</sup>



The Waterberg mountain range identified by German troops as a "theatre of decisive battles," i.e. the place where most of the murders took place.

Credit: Anonymous, Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt

## TO DENY

A decade after the genocide of the Herero and Nama, a first recorded effort was made to deny the facts attesting to the crime, for racist reasons. This effort involved mainly the treatment of certain evidence of the massacre of the Herero and Nama. In September 1917, Major Thomas O'Reilly began compiling translations of German documents, as well as sworn testimony by African witnesses and survivors, accompanied by photographs. This compilation, published in the **Blue Book**, presented evidence of the atrocities committed by the Germans in South West Africa. The British intended to use it to confiscate the colony from the Germans. Although the document clearly served the interests of the British Crown, it was precise and remains a reliable source of invaluable testimonies by Hereros and Namas concerning the genocide perpetrated by the Germans. According to author Élise Fontenaille-N'Diaye, it “was destroyed at Germany’s request in 1926. All copies were returned to Great Britain and destroyed, except for one that had long been thought lost or stolen” [*translation*]<sup>31</sup> In response to the Blue Book, Germany published the White Book. In this document, it refuted the allegations of the British and accused them of hypocrisy, since Great Britain was also a colonial power.<sup>32</sup>

### Blue Book

British government report written by Irishman Thomas O'Reilly in the 1910s, presenting evidence of the atrocities committed by the Germans in South West Africa.



Until 2004, the German authorities refused to recognize the crime as a genocide, despite the fact that it was recognized in 1985 by the United Nations based on the Whitaker report. For example, German president Roman Herzog, visiting Namibia in March 1998, expressed his compassion, but never used the word “genocide.”<sup>33</sup> He qualified the crimes committed by the Germans against the Herero and the Nama as “a dark chapter in our distant shared past” [translation].<sup>34</sup> Germany has often recognized a “historic responsibility toward Namibia, but has long refused to apologize to the Herero in particular” [translation].<sup>35</sup> Finally, when the German authorities accepted that the massacres of the Herero and Nama did indeed constitute genocide, and made an official apology in August 2004 at the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Waterberg, it had no plans to compensate the Herero and Nama. They changed their position, however in Spring 2021 when they recognized the genocide.



Grave of a German soldier in Waterberg. German propaganda suggests that this was a military battlefield rather than the main site of the genocide.

Credit: Goethe University's colonial archives, Frankfurt



The descendants of the German settlers in Namibia also deny that the crimes against the Herero and the Nama constituted genocide. Chair of the German-Namibian cultural association Eckhart Mueller openly denied that the massacre of the Herero and the Nama at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a genocide: “[for the Herero] if not genocide, it will be something else. I think we must bury the past and look to the future” [*translation*].<sup>36</sup> According to him, “. . . the Herero are taking a long shot to get some money” [*translation*].<sup>37</sup>

The Namibian political authorities, most of whom are from the Ovambo community, have economic and political reasons to dismiss the crime. They fear that, if the Herero and the Nama were to receive the four billion dollars they are claiming as compensation, it could have a political impact and reverse the current political hegemony.<sup>38</sup> In the same vein, calling this crime a genocide would give it considerable historical importance, which would outweigh the country’s independence, won in 1990 by the Ovambo and their party, the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO), which is still in power.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the Namibian authorities have been trying to obscure the memory of the crime to avoid damaging their relationship with Germany, which provides the majority of their development aid, or compromising their tourist trade, since Swakopmund, one of the largest concentration camps, is a flagship tourist attraction where “everything has a German flavour: the food, the company names and even the souvenirs, which reflect the aesthetic of the Second Reich” [*translation*].<sup>40</sup>

## JUSTICE

The Herero not only want their massacre recognized as a genocide, but they also want justice and reparations. They have made several attempts in court.

In January 2001, a demand for four billion dollars in compensation based on the United States 1789 Alien Tort Statute authorizing individuals who are not US citizens to bring a case before the federal court in the case of a violation of international law, was officially filed by an American law firm against the German State, Deutsche Bank and the Woermann-Linie shipping company. The defendants are accused of helping the Reich eliminate the Herero and later force them into slavery. The Herero are therefore the first ethnic group to claim damages for colonial genocide. The complaint has not been followed up.

Since 2011, Germany has returned to Namibia several dozen Herero skulls that were sent to Berlin for experiments aimed at proving the superiority of whites over Blacks. This restitution strengthened the Herero's determination to obtain reparations for the genocide.

In 2016, Germany and Namibia began negotiations aimed at drafting a joint statement regarding the crimes. Given that the Herero and Nama were not involved in the negotiations between the two countries, in January 2017, they filed a claim for genocide against Germany before a New York court, demanding reparations. On March 16 that same year, a New York judge announced that she would act on the complaint. The plaintiffs' lawyer has defended many descendants of the victims of the Holocaust.



Genocide Memorial in Windhoek

Credit: Pemba.mpimaji, Wikimedia

At the end of July 2017, the German State attempted to have the case thrown out, deeming it inadmissible based on the principle of State immunity. The judge declared this argument valid. After the hearing, held in the presence of a large number of representatives of both tribes, the judge indicated that she would not rule immediately, but did not set a date.

The possibility of individual or collective damages for descendants of the victims was rejected outright by the German State. The question resurfaced on August 29, 2018, in Berlin, during a religious ceremony to return the remains of the Herero and Nama victims to a Namibian delegation. Then, on May 28, 2021, for the first time, Germany recognized that it had committed genocide against the Herero and Nama populations in Namibia during the colonial period. It also indicated that it would pay that country more than one billion euros in development aid as compensation.



Nama family in front of their traditional dwelling

Credit: Walther Dobbertin, Das Bundesarchiv

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