

Germany in the German South West Africa

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Introduction

“For as long as I remain Chancellor, we will not become involved in colonialism.”¹ This statement was made in 1881 by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.² Three years later, from 1884-1885, Germany would participate in the Berlin Conference alongside dominate European powers and thus, the ‘scramble for Africa.’ The conference did not section off colonies for the European powers. Instead, it laid the ground rules for claiming colonies. Until the end of the century, around 1899, the German empire began to acquire colonies all over the globe, from China, the Pacific, and Africa.³ One of their colonies was in what is now Namibia. At the time, it was simply called German Southwest Africa (GSWA). Consisting of around 835,100 square kilometers, GSWA was one of Germany’s largest colonies, specifically standing at one and a half times the size of Germany.⁴ While GSWA was made to be a settler colony to solve domestic problems in Germany, tensions between the German settlers and the Herero and Nama peoples led to the what some have referred to as first genocide in the twentieth century. The 1904 to 1907 German campaign led to the extermination of around 10,000 Nama and 60,000 Herero, which is around 60 and 80 percent of their respective populations.⁵ Examining the

causes for colonialism provides a better understanding of Germany’s relations with the GSWA. Along with colonialism, examination of Kaiser Wilhelm II, General von Trotha, and the German military culture may help to understand how war turned into genocide.

Background on GSWA

German Southwest Africa was home to many ethnic groups; however, the most notable, and perhaps the most affected by colonization, were the Nama and Herero. During this time, the Khoisan-speaking Nama were led by Hendrik Witbooi, while the Bantu-speaking Herero were led by Samuel Maharero.⁶ By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Herero dominated cattle breeding and herding, causing the economy to rely mainly on cattle.⁷ Many scholars acknowledge that prior to German arrival there were preexisting tensions between the Herero and the Nama. However, this perhaps is not due to tribalism. The Herero and Nama already had a taste of colonialism. GSWA was “already a colonial frontier zone, much influenced by colonial South Africa, where white settlers had grabbed land and displaced indigenous communities, which had then moved northwards across the Orange River, trying to maintain their independence, yet already dependent on the colonial market for trade and for weapons and ammunition.”⁸ Under Witbooi, smaller Nama groups were united, moving north from the South African

1 Sebastian Conrad, *German Colonialism: A Short History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21.

2 Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 21.

3 Woodruff D. Smith, “The Ideology of German Colonialism, 1840-1906,” *The Journal of Modern History* 46, no.4 (Dec. 1974), 652. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1877789>

4 Mads Bomholt Nielsen, “Colonial Violence in Southern Africa at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in *Britain, Germany and Colonial Violence in South-West Africa, 1884-1919: The Herero and Nama Genocide*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94561-9>

5 Timothy Stapleton, “Wars of Colonial Conquest (1900-36),” in *Africa: War and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge, 2018). Credo Reference.

6 Stapleton, “Colonial Conquest”

7 Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons, “The Genocide of the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa, 1904-1907,” in *Centuries of Genocide: Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 93.

8 Jeremy Silvester, *Re-Viewing Resistance in Namibian History*, (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2015), 41.

Cape.⁹ Nevertheless, many scholars also agree that the Germans used these tensions to their advantage. Ultimately the Germans used tactics of divide and rule to increase animosities further and take the focus away from their invasion.¹⁰ Initially, both the Nama and Herero attempted to use Germany for their own purposes; however, these relations turned cold.¹¹

Colonialism

The causes of colonialism must be examined in order to understand why the Germans were in Southwest Africa. Some of the main reasons for German colonialism stem from the change in attitude of Chancellor Bismarck about colonies. Prior to the Berlin Conference, the Chancellor thought it too risky for economic and foreign policy reasons to acquire colonies.¹² Many scholars have debated the reason for the change. Scholars point to a number of theories, such as public pressure, desire for expansion, economic issues, and redirecting social tensions.¹³ Another interesting justification deals with strategic foreign policy. Specifically, the Chancellor hoped that by bringing Germany closer to France through similar colonial interests, it would act as a way to circumvent English domination as well as prevent France from “plotting revenge against Germany.”¹⁴ Of course, there were also reasons similar to that of other European powers at the time, stemming from the Victorian era’s ideas regarding race. From this came the idea that Germany and other European powers could provide civilization to the so-called savage way of African life. Whatever the reasons, perhaps the most prominent reasons are what some scholars refer to as the ‘economic’ and ‘emigrationist’ ideologies.

Economic ideologies allowed colonies to be seen as extensions, benefitting the industrial and commercial industries of Germany.¹⁵ This ideology could also be exemplified by the economic depression and crash of 1873. The idea was that overproduction

was the cause of the depression.¹⁶ This overproduction would have to be exported elsewhere, and Germany turned toward overseas colonies to carry out the so-called ‘export offensive.’¹⁷ The desired result of the offensive would bolster German industry, overseas commerce, and reduce a possible socialist revolution.¹⁸

Perhaps the more dominant of the two ideologies, the emigrationist ideology calls for colonies to act as settlements in hopes of creating a ‘New Germany.’¹⁹ The German government hoped that creating a ‘New Germany’ would alleviate two problems: increased emigration and population growth. The population was rapidly growing in Germany by the 19th century. From 1890 to 1913, Germany’s population grew by 16 million.²⁰ Simultaneously, the German government was dealing with the problem of *Auswanderung*, the massive emigration from Germany.²¹ By the 19th century, around 250,000 Germans would emigrate, mainly to the United States.²² However, Germany wanted its emigrants to “stay within the home territories”²³ and colonies seemed like a perfect way to achieve this. This ideology was the predominant motivation for the colonization of German Southwest Africa.

GSWA was Germany’s poster child for colonial settlement. While settlement to the colony was slow at first, more Germans warmed up to the idea later on, to the point that GSWA was the most settled colony out of all of Germany’s colonies.²⁴ Perhaps part of this reason is due to the advertisement of GSWA as an agricultural hub. In a report from 1886, it stated the agricultural possibilities in the colony, even if these claims may have been exaggerated.²⁵ The land the Germans thought most suitable was in the South, which was primarily inhabited by the Herero and Nama.²⁶ The Herero and Nama also held most of

9 Stapleton, “Colonial Conquest”

10 Jeremy Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers*, (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2011) 59.

11 Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 38.

12 Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 21.

13 Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 21.

14 Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 21.

15 Smith, “The ideology of German Colonialism,” 642.

16 Smith, “The Ideology of German Colonialism,” 645.

17 Smith, “The Ideology of German Colonialism,” 645.

18 Smith, “The Ideology of German Colonialism,” 645.

19 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 51.

20 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 51.

21 Smith, “The Ideology of German Colonialism,” 641.

22 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 51–52.

23 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 52.

24 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 53.

25 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 54.

26 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 64.

the land.²⁷ A similar report produced the following year also stated positive things about the agricultural potential and further increased prospects by adding that the climate was suitable.²⁸

In order to get promote GSWA, the German government implemented many initiatives. Programs to get more women to the colonies, land ordinances, and loans were used to increase the number of German emigrants.²⁹ The German government already had goals set for its colony: “land for settlement, cattle for export, gold, and diamonds for mining and Africans to work for long hours for little or no money.”³⁰

Eventually, the number of German settlers would increase. However, as the number of settlers increased, so did the need for land. By 1897, Rinderpest plagued Herero cattle, causing them to lose up to 90 percent.³¹ While the Herero depended on cattle for their livelihood, the loss was devastating, especially economically. As a result, many Herero sold their land to the Germans, racking up debt in the process.³² By the 1900s, the balance of power shifted heavily towards the Germans. Herero cattle and land were confiscated by the German soldiers in order to settle debts, leading to multiple uprisings and eventually war in 1904.³³

Genocide

It is clear that what once was a war radicalized into a genocide. Perhaps the turning point of this war came in October of 1904, when General von Trotha issued the notorious ‘extermination order,’ declaring that all men, women, and children to be killed.³⁴ Perhaps this begs the question as to why war turned into genocide. While Trotha issued the extermination order, there persists debate among scholars as to who authorized it. The two most likely suspects are General von Trotha himself and Kaiser Wilhelm II. Despite the debate, perhaps an examination of both figures can lead to a better understanding of how the war radicalized

into genocide.

The Kaiser was known to be a brutal, violent, and sadistic man with racist and extremist views. While this violence extended to international leaders, prominent members of foreign governments, and even the Kaiser’s own family,³⁵ perhaps it found itself in the GWSA as well. For example, during the Boxer Rebellion, the Kaiser exclaimed to the German army, “Give no quarter! Take no prisoners! Kill him when he falls into your hands!”³⁶ This has a similar sentiment to that of the extermination order for the Herero and Nama. Wilhelm II also believed in the extermination of Jews.³⁷ Furthermore, during the first World War, the Kaiser stated men, women, and children should be killed, further elaborating, “considerations of humanity will unnecessarily prolong the struggle.”³⁸ This was said about a European war. If the Kaiser had been able to say this about Europeans, he most likely would have readily accepted (or ordered) the extermination of Africans. Prior examples also demonstrate that the Kaiser usually thought of extermination as a possible option during conflict, and it seems unlikely he would not have considered the extermination of the Herero and Nama.

Wilhelm II also had a history of revenge. For example, he demanded reprisals when German missionaries were killed in China, as well as ordering his troops to ‘take revenge’ in Peking when an envoy was killed.³⁹ Perhaps this idea of revenge acted as a motivator for genocide. Perhaps the Kaiser wanted revenge for the uprisings and to avenge the deaths of Germans and soldiers who died. Another concept that goes along with revenge is punishment. Perhaps the combination of extermination, revenge, and punishment led to the establishment of concentration camps in order to carry out genocide.

The idea for concentration camps came from the British, who utilized them in the South African War.⁴⁰ However, while the British camps were not intended to “exterminate, enslave, or significantly reduce the Boer population, the intention of German

27 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 65.

28 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 54.

29 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 60–62.

30 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 54.

31 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 94.

32 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 94.

33 Stapleton, “Colonial Conquest”

34 South-West Africa Administrator’s Office, *Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*, (London: Stationery Office, 1918), 63. <https://archive.org/details/b32172266>

35 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 162–163.

36 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 18.

37 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 166.

38 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 179.

39 Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*, 167.

40 Nielsen, “Colonial Violence,” 29.

camps in GSWA, however, was exactly that.”⁴¹ A Deputy Governor in the colony stated, “The more the Herero people now feel physically the consequences of the uprising the less they will yearn after a repetition of the experience for generations to come.”⁴² This harkens back to the idea of revenge and punishment. Unsurprisingly, the conditions of the camps were miserable. In a camp near Lüderitz, referred to as Shark Island, prisoners suffered from rape and beatings.⁴³ Across all camps, prisoners succumbed to malnutrition, torture, and unsanitary conditions.⁴⁴ Prisoners were also subjected to forced labor and medical experiments.⁴⁵

Perhaps it was through the Kaiser’s knack for ruthless brutality that he supported the appointment of General von Trotha for assignments in the GSWA. The general had experience in the colonies, dealing with rebellions in Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, and China during the Boxer Rebellion.⁴⁶ Von Trotha also had “a great reputation for his utterly ruthless methods with rebels.”⁴⁷ Perhaps because of this reputation, the Kaiser ‘wanted it replicated’ in the GSWA.⁴⁸

When it came to the GWSA, von Trotha also had extreme views, stating that there was only one way to end the war: “I believe that the nation as such must be annihilated or if this is not possible from a military standpoint then they must be driven from the land.”⁴⁹ He also claimed that the Herero and Nama must “melt away,” as “Darwin’s law ‘Survival of the Fittest’” must thrive.⁵⁰ Interestingly, von Trotha’s view disagreed with other officials and even settlers in the GWSA. Many did not want the extermination of the Herero and Nama.⁵¹ However, the reasoning was no better; Germans depended on Africans for forced labor. While the Kaiser and von Trotha are two prominent figures that should be examined, perhaps another group, who played a major role, should be examined as well: the German military.

Arguments exist that the genocide was not based on ideology. Instead, the brutal German military culture would have turned the war into a genocide regardless of whether or not an order was issued. Many scholars acknowledge prior military conflicts, such as the Maji-Maji rebellion.⁵² As a result, some scholars believe “the military preferred solving political problems by ‘total unlimited force’ and brutal methods employed cannot be attributed to the orders given, but to the way the soldiers conducted the campaigns.”⁵³

The campaign in the GSWA was extremely brutal. Jan Cloete, a guide for the Germans, recounts the time a nine-month-old baby Herero boy was brought back to a German camp, watching as “The soldiers formed a ring and started throwing the child to one another and catching it as if it were a ball. After a time, they got tired of this, and one of the soldiers fixed his bayonet on his rifle,” and “the child was tossed into the air towards him, and as it fell, he caught it and transfixed the body with the bayonet.”⁵⁴ This resulted in “roars of laughter by the Germans, who seemed to think it was a great joke.”⁵⁵ In another instance, Daniel Esma Dixon, who worked as a transport driver, recalled giving a crippled man and his wife some food.⁵⁶ As the two left, German soldiers shot both of them.⁵⁷ Dixon exclaimed, “How on earth did you have the heart to do such a thing? It is nothing but cruel murder” to which the soldiers “merely laughed, and said, Oh! These swine must all be killed; we are not going to spare a single one.”⁵⁸ The Germans used many other methods, such as hangings with fence wires and burning Africans alive.⁵⁹ The Germans also referred to killing as ‘hunting,’ signifying the Germans dehumanized the Herero and Nama into no more than sport.⁶⁰

Some scholars account for this brutality by fear. German soldiers had little knowledge about the Herero, Nama, and geography of the region.⁶¹ Consequently, they feared ambushes and had “paranoid

41 Nielsen, “Colonial Violence,” 31.

42 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 95.

43 Nielsen, “Colonial Violence,” 32.

44 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 95.

45 Stapleton, “Colonial Conquest”

46 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 193.

47 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 192.

48 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 194.

49 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 97.

50 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 97.

51 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 97.

52 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 213.

53 Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide*, 213.

54 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 64.

55 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 64–65.

56 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 66.

57 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 66.

58 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 66.

59 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 66–67.

60 Administrator’s Office, *Report*, 62.

61 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 99.

fantasies.”⁶² The soldiers also heard rumors that Africans “would torture white women and violate the corpses of Europeans,” justifying the Germans cruelty towards the Africans.⁶³

Perhaps this information can explain how the war turned into genocide. Perhaps it was a combination of many factors. For one, genocide may have been committed as a form of punishment. The Kaiser was known for revenge and punishment of those who rebelled. Perhaps this explains why he supported the appointment of von Trotha. The Kaiser knew of von Trotha’s methods of quelling rebellions. Thus, the Kaiser knew revenge and punishment would be achieved with von Trotha in charge. Perhaps the genocide was also about land. Going back to why Germany colonized Namibia, it was to become a settlement colony. The colony was also a success, as more people settled there. Even statements by von Trotha perhaps reinforce this ideology. He stated that the Herero and Nama should at least be driven from the land if unable to be exterminated. He was also a social Darwinist. Perhaps genocide was a way for Germany to fully complete its goal of having a new, white Germany. A final factor in genocide was racism. The Kaiser, General von Trotha, and most likely the soldiers held racist views of the Herero and Nama. Viewing the Africans as inferior and less than humans most likely made the soldiers ready to commit brutal acts of genocide.

Conclusion

Germany colonized GSWA to bolster its industries and, more importantly, to become a 'New Germany' for German settlement. As tensions increased between the Herero and Nama and Germany, it led to uprisings against the Germans, eventually leading to war. However, the war radicalized into a genocide. Perhaps the genocide stemmed from Kaiser Wilhelm II's violent disposition and his habit of revenge and punishment. Perhaps this is why concentration camps were instated in the colonies. Maybe genocide stemmed from the want of land. General von Trotha, a racist and social Darwinist, stated that, at the very least, the Herero and Nama should be driven from the land. Perhaps this illustrates that Germany committed genocide in order to commit the colony to be a new,

white Germany. As for the brutality of the soldiers, perhaps they could commit such heinous acts because of their racist views of the Africans.

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62 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 99.

63 Totten and Parsons, *Centuries of Genocide*, 99.