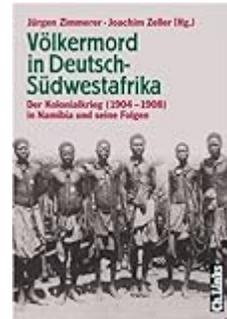


Jürgen Zimmerer, Joachim Zeller. *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika: Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2003. 276 S. + 100 Abb. EUR 22.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-86153-303-0.



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German Colonialism and the Extent of Indigenous Agency: The Case of Namibia

Spanning the two fields of colonial/post-colonial studies and genocide studies, this anthology encapsulates the type of work being generated in German scholarship's recent and not altogether uncontroversial attempts to come to terms with Germany's colonial legacy. It has been assembled by two of this field's more interesting researchers, whose earlier works, as with this one, are of the type still often discussed in German historiographical circles with the cautionary preface "American-influenced post-colonial studies." As with the works of such fellow post-colonialism researchers as Birthe Kundrus, such works have met with a mixed reception in Germany.[1]

Editors Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller have already published substantial monographs in the field, and to some extent their contributions to this anthology are a reiteration of their earlier, more detailed works. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, offering as they do a neat summary or pithy introduction to their work for the non-specialist reader. For those already familiar with Zimmerer's detailed and broadly researched re-assessment of the effects of German rule in Namibia and Zeller's innovative work on colonial monuments and

the "culture of commemoration" of Germany's former colonies, however, this volume does not substantially deviate from their profitable, previously established lines of inquiry.[2]

The contributions to this collection have been divided into four parts. The first part, "Namibia on the Path to Colonialism," consists of Gesine Krüger's scene-setting orientation and Zimmerer's discussion of the colonizers' use of race as an organizing principle, and the concomitant system of forced labor. Krüger's article, in its discussion of indigenous modes of historical consciousness and social formation, is partially aimed at dispelling the notion that pre-colonization African societies existed without their own histories or collective sense of the past. Perhaps an important insight for the undergraduate at which this text is primarily aimed; in terms of contemporary research, Krüger is perhaps here pushing on an open door. The rest of the article is a useful, if compressed and therefore necessarily simplistic historical narrative of nineteenth-century indigenous societies, rightfully stressing African agency in colonial encounters with Europeans.

Zimmerer's first article is a virtual summary of his earlier research on forced labor and German colonialism's racializing tendencies. It focuses on the legal and cultural status of marriages between Europeans and Africans, as well as that of the offspring that resulted from such unions. The racial ordering of African society, as a means of manifesting social control and discipline, is also examined. Importantly, the inability of German colonial authorities to realize this system of control is also discussed, illustrating the difference between official intention and actual outcomes, and once again highlighting a degree of indigenous agency.

Part Two, on the 1904-1908 Colonial War, discusses the events and effects of the Herero/Nama wars, specifically as "the first German genocide," as Zimmerer's title provocatively asserts (p. 45). Throughout this section, the focus ranges from events in Namibia (contributions by Zimmerer, Zeller, and Erichsen) through to literary and political responses to the "extermination of the Herero and Nama" in Germany in Brehl and van der Heyden's articles (p. 86). The first few articles are an excellent and passionate summary of the *Vernichtungskrieg* (p. 45) itself, as well as the types of neglect and abuse perpetrated in the concentration camps set up during the wars. Disappointingly, Erichsen's contribution on forced labor in the Shark Bay concentration camp has been compressed to an impossible three-and-a-half pages, which contrasts rather unfavorably with Zeller's detailed account of conditions in the Swakopmund camp.

The tendency towards overly brief treatments of complex issues continues with Ulrich van der Heyden's article on the 1907 "Hottentot" election, which allows space for a delineation of official party positions during the election and little more. His final contention, that the SPD learned from the 1907 election never to be outflanked on military spending issues and therefore supported the war in 1914 as a result of its own "colonial experience," is one that could and should be examined in further detail.

Sandwiched between Erichsen and van der Heyden's short pieces is Merdardus Brehl's interesting look at how the liquidation of Namibia's indigenous population was treated in German popular literature. Brehl convincingly argues that, through a process of trivializing and self-justification, German literature simultaneously drew upon and assisted in the construction of a dichotomy between cultured Europeans and barbarian Africans that both legitimated colonial violence and contributed towards a reified notion of German racial identity. An im-

portant addition to this article is its short bibliography of colonial-war era literature.

Part Three, "Sorrow, Resistance and a New Beginning: the African Perspective," focuses on various aspects of colonial war-era Namibian society, including useful surveys of the effects of the war upon the indigenous societies of the Herero, the Nama and the Ovambo (Gewald, Hillebrecht, and Schaller). Gesinne Kr  ger's and Dag Henrichsen's subsequent discussions of the role, representation and instrumentalization of women and marriage during the war years are both interesting introductions to the subject, viewed from the macro and micro levels respectively. Their demonstration of how the categories of gender and race intersected, as well as their narration of how individuals and authorities reacted to this during and after Namibia's colonial wars, points to a radicalization of colonialism's intrinsic racializing effects during the crisis of the war years, resulting in a situation in which "what was possible before the war ... was refused in 1907 on the grounds of race" (p. 168).

Part Four, "Remembering and Forgetting," with its focus on the "symbolic politics" (p.192) of the commemoration of both German colonial imperialism and indigenous resistance, charts the strategies of appropriation employed in the instrumentalization of colonial contact and conflict by various participants in cultural and political projects since. Exemplifying the truism that the contemporary uses of history are of equal importance to the events themselves, this section attempts to situate the Herero/Nama wars within the differing but overlapping contexts of Namibian nation-building, German identity, modern German-Namibian relations and the debate over a putative German *Sonderweg*.

In this context, Jean-Bart argues that Samuel Maharero's funeral represented a watershed post-war moment, where Herero identity was reasserted and reconstituted. Reihart K  rner discusses the development of the twentieth-century commemoration of the Witbooi contribution to the colonial wars as a gradually emerging form of symbolic politics, initially as a means of expressing resistance to South African colonial rule over Namibia and eventually, as a vehicle for the expression of Namibian national unity.

Zeller's second article for the collection is, as discussed, a partial summation of his earlier monograph, on German commemoration of the colonial era and of the Herero/Nama wars in particular. It offers an overview of imperial and Weimar-era commemoration as a means of further inscribing German identity in terms

of racial chauvinism, while contextualizing the contemporary “forgetting” of the German colonial past, linking this to current discussions regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of German reparations or an official apology for the events of 1904-1908.

A thematic bridge between contemporary German and African commemoration of the period comes in the form of Larissa Fährster’s discussion of the German cemetery in Waterberg and its position in the social politics of modern Namibia as a site of commemoration for the German-speaking population in Namibia. The final two articles, Henning Melber’s discussion of the reparations issue and Andreas Eckert’s orientation of the Herero/Nama wars in terms of the long-lived *Sonderweg* discussion, bring the anthology up to date with contemporary perspectives on the significance of Germany’s colonial wars in Namibia.

Firm in its assertion of the colonial wars as not just an instance of genocide, but the first German genocide, this general-reader volume is a necessary step in the overturning of the popular, unreconstructed German self-perception as “strict but fair” imperial masters. Points of similarity and continuity between the colonizing project and Nazi imperialism and genocide are examined, largely without any simplistic equations, and at several points, the volume attempts to grapple with the paradox of delineating continuities between colonial and Nazi violence without endorsing a vulgar *Sonderweg* position. In this, the collection, with its readership in mind, might have perhaps been clearer—its overall trajectory points to a broad agreement with Hannah Arendt’s claim that the origins of Nazism and Nazi violence were to be found in the colonial past, as well as the claim of Frantz Fanon that fascism was Europe’s colonial violence returned to its origins (see, for example, pp. 60-63, 231-236). However, the strong desire, particularly noticeable in Zimmerer’s forthright contributions, to link explicitly Germany’s colonial and Nazi genocides may confuse the targeted general reader into coming away with the misconception that German society suffered from a particular national predisposition towards genocidal violence. Continuities undeniably exist, but they are subtle, as this volume at other points suggests, and it would be a poor

outcome for much necessary and sophisticated research if the simplistic and largely discredited “from Bismarck to Hitler” *Sonderweg* approach were to be replaced in the minds of the undergraduate reader by an equally simplistic “from Waterberg to Auschwitz” narrative.

In deference to its chosen demographic, this is perhaps not the most detailed, nuanced, or probing example of German post-colonial research; however, it is a concise, committed and forthright reiteration of the latest scholarship dealing with the case of colonial Namibia. It has an eye not only for the historical importance of the events with which it deals, but also their contemporary resonances, on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Herero/Nama wars, and at a time in which questions such as the appropriateness of reparations payments to Namibia and the place of colonialism in German history have seen the study of the German colonies return as a field of deepening scholarly and political interest. As well as being a collection that brings together some of the most important researchers on German colonial imperialism in Namibia in a manner that would be easily accessible to undergraduate (German-speaking) readers, it also offers a useful starting point for those wishing to acquaint themselves quickly with the thematic parameters of current German research on German colonialism.

Notes

[1]. See Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten. Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003); see also idem, ed., *Phantasie- iche. Zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kolonialismus*. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2003); See H-German review at <[\\$>\\$](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=20391105462247).

[2]. Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002); Joachim Zeller, *Kolonialdenkmäler und Geschichtsbe-wußtsein. Eine Untersuchung der kolonialdeutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Frankfurt: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2000).

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