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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Andreas Heinrich Böhler. *Der Namaaufstand gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft in Namibia von 1904-1913.* Frankfurt: IKO Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2003. 435 pp. EUR 42.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-88939-676-1.

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When in January of 1904 war broke out in central Namibia—then German Southwest Africa (GSWA)—and in October of the same year spread to southern Namibia, the whole of southwestern Africa was plunged into an unprecedented crisis. Never before in the known history of the region did so many people die in a conflict and never before were so many people imprisoned or forced to flee on such a regional scale.

Historiography conventionally tends to differentiate between the so-called German-Herero war, also known as “the Herero war” or “Herero revolt,” and the German-Nama war or “the Nama war” or “Nama revolt,” as if the reasons and genocidal consequences of these conflicts could be attributed to these ethnic designations only and only to certain regions inside GSWA. Other historical narratives have constructed an interrelated series of anti-colonial wars of resistance or have subsumed these under the theme of the first anti-colonial war of liberation, with the war of liberation waged by SWAPO from 1966 onwards against South African rule being regarded as the second war of liberation. In addition to these perspectives, there exist interpretations, predominately in German historiography, which regard the conflict from 1904 onwards as the “first war” of the Wilheminic Reich after the German-Franco war of 1870-71, and as “the first German Genocide,” given the genocidal war strategies of the German authorities and the consequences of these for the African population. The southern Namibian conflict from 1904 onwards in particular has also been labeled the “first guerilla war in the history of the modern German army.”[1] Whatever the value of all these conceptualizations and designations they indicate the efforts to attribute particular historical significance to the con-

flict for both Namibian and German twentieth-century history. Notwithstanding this, there exists to date no comprehensive historiographical discussion of the conceptualizations of the conflict, nor a discussion of the methodological and analytical virtues and shortcomings of these approaches. The latest debate on the conflict in Namibia which takes place in the context of Genocide Studies has tended so far to entrench rather than to question some of the existing conceptualizations, notably its ethnically based narratives. It seems as if historians still need to think more comprehensively about the South-west African War, which it basically was, given the inter-related and grave consequences of the conflict not only for some groups but a larger part of the population inside the colony, and its regional dynamics beyond the colonial borders.

The book under review, a Ph.D. thesis originally submitted a few years ago to a German university, presents basically a military-political narrative for the conflict of 1904 and beyond, with southern Namibia being its main focus. Rightly so, it situates the “Nama revolt” within the concept of a series of interrelated conflicts, starting with the so-called Bondelzwart rising of 1903, and ending with the return of prisoners of war from Kamerun in 1913. While this, as such, is not original, it needs to be stressed that the main virtue of the book rests with the mere fact that an attempt has been made to research the southern Namibian conflict in depth. This, like a recent study of the “Great Nama revolt 1904-1908,”[2] makes the book a useful contribution to scholarly understanding of the events.

The author designates the first third of his study

to pre-colonial developments in southern and central Namibia, including a detailed account of the “Herero revolt” of 1904, the structure of the German military, and the resulting genocide. The second section of the book details the wars and skirmishes in southern Namibia from October 1904 to 1909 and provides narratives for those communities engaged in the war. Situating the “Nama revolt” in a narrative of interrelated conflicts during 1903-04, the author discusses the Witbooi engagement, on the side of the German military, in the “Herero revolt” up to October 1904. The author rightly situates this collaboration (pp. 163-174), which popular history tends to ignore, in longer historical perspective, as he does in contextualizing the influence of the Cape prophet Stuurmann (Henrik Bekeer) for southern Namibian leaders.[3] He also discusses those polities (in Berseba and Bethany) which did not engage directly in the war (pp. 203-212) and which, in part, provided services to the German military. Here, as in the many other local narratives provided, the author at least provides glimpses into the political and social fissures that the conflict forced upon African leaders and their followers. The last section of the book discusses colonial polities and conflicts in various German power institutions both in Germany and in the colony and includes a detailed account of the genocidal politics of the concentration camps for the African population, ending with an account on the deportation of prisoners (mostly Nama but also a few Herero) to Togo and Kamerun.

Readers will find the detailed, if not painstaking, accounts of individual military and local political ma-

neuvers, based predominately on German and South African (Cape and Transvaal) military and administrative records, useful. If the publishers had made the effort to provide indexes of names and places, then these narratives could have been made more accessible. As presented here, they make for difficult reading. Taken together, the narratives at least allow glimpses into the often uncoordinated nature of German responses to the conflicts and the highly flexible strategies of the Nama contingents. Of greater concern is the virtual absence of methodological and theoretical discussions, resulting in a rather uncritical appropriation of conceptualizations of peoples and dynamics as they are reflected in the sources. It is hoped that the centenary of the southern Namibian conflict results in more research, and more social history on a neglected Namibian region.

Notes

[1]. Walter Nuhn, *Feind Überall. Der Grosse Nama-Aufstand (Hottentottenaufstand) 1904-1908 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia). Der erste Partisanenkrieg in der Geschichte der deutschen Armee* (Bonn: Bernard and Graefe Verlag, 2000). The quote refers to the subtitle of the book.

[2]. *Ibid.* The present study does not consider this work, probably due to its recent date of publication.

[3]. The author could seemingly also not incorporate Tilman Dederig, “The Prophet’s ‘War against Whites’: Shepherd Stuurman in Namibia and South Africa, 1904-7,” *Journal of African History* 40 (1999): pp. 1-19.

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