



Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand-Gewalt-Erinnerung.
Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde.

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Germany and Namibia: Memories of a Violent Past

Although little popular recognition is made of the German role in Africa at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholarly interest in German colonialism in Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) has surged in recent years. While historians produced a few solid books during the Cold War era,[1] a growing number of monographs and articles of the last decade analyze German colonial rule and its wars in southwestern Africa.[2] This revival of interest has many causes. The end of the Cold War allowed western scholars access to German colonial documents, previously housed in Potsdam under GDR control, while the end of apartheid created a more open debate about the past in Namibia. A continuing interest in genocide studies generated greater emphasis on the German atrocities against the Herero in 1904 as one of the first genocides of the twentieth century. Finally, the influence of cultural studies in the field of history produced greater interest in the German colonial experience. The museum exhibit currently displayed at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde in Cologne (to be shown subsequently at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin from November 25, 2004-March 13, 2005) is a successful expression of the strong academic work on this subject. This exhibit is both a synthesis of the successful scholarly work of the past and present and an engaging attempt to communicate the importance of this episode in German and Namibian history to a popular audience. The exhibit is structured in an innovative manner. After a clear and concise introduction to the tortured history, diverse ethnic groups, and arid geography of Namibia, the heart

of the exhibit unfolds in three sections. The first section portrays the German relationship to the people of southwestern Africa in the nineteenth century; the second part treats the brutal German colonial wars between 1904-1908; and final portion uses five displays to illustrate German-Namibian relations of the last 100 years. Two parallel perspectives run through all three sections of the exhibit. On the left, history is presented from the point of view of German colonizers, missionaries, settlers, and their descendants, who make up 1.5% of population in present-day Namibia. On the right, the visitor experiences history from the viewpoint of the Herero, the Nama, and the rest of the black population in Namibia. In the concluding segment, the middle aisle converges into a site portraying the intersections of the German and black population. The first part of the exhibit recounts social developments for the ethnic groups of southwestern Africa both before and during the early stages of German colonization. Detailed descriptions of Oorlam immigration from the British Cape Colony, the rise of the Herero as livestock farmers with a strong military in the 1860s, and the de-stabilizing impact of European trade in weapons and alcohol illustrate the dynamism and change of the region during the nineteenth century. Artifacts demonstrate the importance of clothing to the identity of the ethnic groups of the region, such as the Ovambo. This section also examines early reactions to German colonizers, contrasting the strategy of cooperation with Europeans by Herero chief Kamaherero and the early opposition of Nama leader Hendrik Witbooi. In the background, developments within South Africa are described

to provide the context for these local reactions. Across the aisle, the German side portrays early colonial events, such as the efforts of missionaries, the use of both negotiation and force by German colonial Governor Leutwein to gain treaty signatures from local leaders, and the conflict over land caused by the growing number of German settlers in the 1890s. The backdrop analyzes events in Germany to show how action in the colony influenced domestic developments. <p> The second section of the exhibit examines the brutal colonial wars between 1904-1908 and the German genocide of the Herero. On January 12, 1904, the Herero attacked German farms, military staging posts, and rail links because of a loss of land, anger with German traders, and the imposition of land reservations by the colonial government. The war ended after the Germans overwhelmingly defeated the Herero at Waterberg in August 1904, drove the survivors of the battle into the sand field of Omaheke, and interned men, women, and children in concentration camps. The Nama revolted in October 1904 and fought a long guerilla war until their defeat after a scorched earth campaign by the Germans in 1908. These wars caused the death of 35-80% of the Herero population and 50% of the Nama population. While the African side of this section displays the resistance of the Herero and Nama through profiles of Herero chief Samuel Maharero and Nama leaders Hendrik Witbooi and Jacob Marengo, it also shows the suffering caused by these wars through haunting photographs of emaciated concentration camp prisoners and excerpts from first-hand accounts of the victims. The German side illustrates in frank and horrifying detail the instruments of colonial violence. The exhibit clearly states that German atrocities against the Herero constitute genocide when judged by definitions by both Raphael Lemkin and the United Nations. They support this claim with evidence from the time period, displaying General von Trotha's infamous "<cite>Schlussbefehl</cite>", which ordered the murder of all Herero who did not leave the region. The disease and starvation of the concentration camps, which killed one in every two prisoners, and the frequent rape and beatings perpetrated by German soldiers are examined through pictures and vivid text descriptions. Perhaps most shocking are the photographs of Herero skulls being sent to Europe for anthropological and medical studies. <p> The final segment uses five displays to portray German-Namibian relations and focuses mostly on the period after World War I when South Africa gained control of the region. The first two displays analyze the separate experiences of the German and black majority population of Namibia both during the era of apartheid under South African rule and after

independence in 1990. One display presents everyday life in the capital city of Windhoek, contrasting the elite education and wealthy lifestyle of the German population and the forced re-settlement and "Bantu education" imposed by South Africa on the black population. Artifacts from everyday life are also displayed, such as the German language newspaper, medals from the German Carnival celebration, and advertisements for Windhoek Lager. The African side shows photos of a shebeen, an informal bar where people from the neighborhood meet over beer, and the role of the Pentecostal Church in Namibian life. The next display deals with the issue of land distribution in Namibia, a problem initiated by the colonial government and continued by the apartheid policies of South Africa. A commercial farm, most of which are white owned and occupy 75% of the country's fertile land, is compared to a family living in one of the communal areas, where there is no private ownership of land and most of the black population lives. <p> The final three displays of the last section explore the intersections between Germans and blacks living in Namibia. One display documents five family biographies to examine the ties between white and black family members going back to colonial times. While the left side focuses on the German fathers, the left tells the stories of the black women who bore their children. The middle aisle considers the children and grandchildren of these interracial relationships. On the one hand, this middle section demonstrates the ambivalence many black Namibians have toward their German heritage. On the other hand, it highlights the positive contributions of these men and women of mixed ancestry to independent Namibia. The fourth display focuses on how Namibia remembers and commemorates the war and genocide from the early twentieth century. Herero day in Okahandja, celebrated from 1923 to the present, shapes and strengthens ethnic identity through the colonial past. During this celebration, members of the <cite>Oturupa</cite>, a Herero network that supports members socially and economically, appear in dress from the colonial period to honor chiefs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Alternatively, Heroes Day, celebrated annually on August 26, honors leaders from both the colonial wars and the struggle against South African apartheid to strengthen a unified Namibian identity. The final display is a call for reconciliation and understanding for a pluralistic society and global community and features interviews with white and black Namibians, as well as German politicians and academics interested in the German-Namibian relationship. <p> The exhibit offers two catalogues. The first is a brief overview of the exhibit with pictures of the most important artifacts and sells

for nine euros. The second catalogue is a longer edition with twenty essays on varying issues in the history of German colonialism in Southwest-Africa by an international group of scholars (including Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, Helmut Bley, Michael Bollig, Georgios Chatzoudis, Larissa Foerster, Jan-Bart Gewald, Horst Gruender, Wolfram Hartmann, Dag Henrichsen, Werner Hillebrecht, Jekura Kavari, Gesine Krueger, Susanne Kuss, Henning Melber, Stefan Muehr, Kathrin Roller, Brigitta Schmidt Lauber, Wolfgang Werner, Joachim Zeller, and Juergen Zimmerer) selling for twenty-five euros.[3] The gift shop also offers a wide selection of the most important recent academic titles in the history of German colonialism and Namibia. *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte* contains only a few weaknesses. Unfortunately, the exhibit neglects the role of women during the era of German colonialism, despite some very strong academic work on the subject. The exhibit ignores the studies done by Lora Wildenthal on the ambivalent position occupied by German women in the colonies, as well as Gesine Krueger's analysis of the Herero women during the colonial wars (although references to this research are included in essays by Krueger and Bechhaus-Gerst in the longer exhibition catalog). According to Krueger, these women stood behind their men shouting encouragement during the heat of battle, intimidating some German soldiers. Second, the background information on southern Africa in the first section of the exhibition represents the only other disappointment. The introduction promises a detailed description of South African developments to contextualize information about the southwestern region during the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, most of the background deals only with the southwest. This is particularly disappointing because the context section on Germany is so effective. Despite these criticisms, this exhibit is an impressive combination of popular and academic history. The presentation is remarkably accessible. It recounts a narrative faithful to much of the academic work on the region, while presenting it in a clear and concise manner. The museum also displays several engaging artifacts, such as a bag presented to Erich Honecker by orphans of Namibian independence fighters given refuge in the GDR. The exhibition also integrates many media, presenting video clips of Herero Day celebrations as well as a traditional 19th century song to show how the Herero concept of land differed radically from that of their European colonizers. The exhibit's structure is also creative. The two perspectives running through the exhibit create the desired contrast between the Namibian and German experience of history. There are several other innovations, such as peep-

holes that allow the visitor to peer back at caricatures and postcards in Germany to gain a sense of the distance between the domestic and colonial settings during the violence of 1904-1908. Finally, the greatest achievement of this exhibit is its balance between narrating a story of horrible atrocity and emphasizing the need for reconciliation. While openly dealing with the horror of German war crimes, it also undertakes a sophisticated examination of how the genocide of the Herero is remembered and the need for a resolution to this difficult past. This call for reconciliation is significant for both Germany and Namibia, since the former is already burdened with the memory and guilt of the Holocaust and the latter seeks a historical narrative to unify a newly independent nation and heal the wounds of both the colonial and apartheid eras. *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte* should be commended for demonstrating how the memory of a painful past, when truthfully and openly narrated, can create a context for reconciliation. Notes [1]. Horst Drechsler, "Let Us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915)" (London: Zed Press, 1980); Helmut Bley, *Namibia under German Rule* 2nd ed., (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 1996). [2]. A few of the titles include, Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (eds.), *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923* (Oxford, Cape Town and Athens: James Currey and Ohio University Press, 1999); Gesine Krueger, *Kriegsbewaeltigung und Geschichtsbewusstsein: Realitaet, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia 1904 bis 1907* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999); Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001); Juergen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (eds.), *Voelkermord in Deutsch-Suedwestafrika: Der koloniale Krieg (1904-1908)* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2003). [3]. Larissa Foerster, Dag Henrichsen, and Michael Bollig (eds.), *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand-Gewalt-Erinnerung. Publikation zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung im Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum fuer Voelkerkunde der Stadt Koeln (7.3 bis 3.10.2004) und im Deutschen Historischen Museum, Berlin (25.11.2004 bis 13.3.2005)* (Wolfratshausen: Editions Minerva Hermann Farnung, 2004) [bookstore edition; a separate edition was published by the museum itself].

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