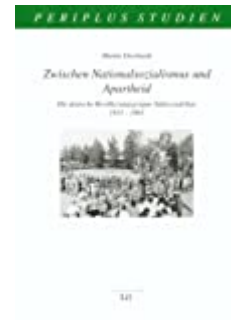




Martin Eberhardt. *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid: Die deutsche Bevölkerungsgruppe Südwesafrikas 1915-1965.* Münster: Lit, 2007. 584 pp. ISBN 978-3-8258-0225-7.



Reviewed by Robbie Aitken (SOCLAS, University of Liverpool)

Published on H-German (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Confrontation, Escalation, and Cooperation: A History of Namibia's German Population in the Aftermath of the First World War

The dominant strain in recent research into the German colonial past has focused primarily on the period of German rule over its foremost settler colony, German Southwest Africa, now Namibia. Since the pioneering work of Klaus Rüdiger in the early 1990s, few scholars, however, have paid much attention to the continued presence of a German population in Namibia following the end of German colonialism.[1] Martin Eberhardt seeks to address this neglect in this vast study, which treats the survival of the culturally independent German population in the aftermath of World War I. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, German Southwest Africa and its German population were placed under the mandate authority of South Africa. Eberhardt's study centers on the subsequent relationship between the German inhabitants and the South African Union and mandate authorities, as well as on their strained interaction with South African settlers in Namibia. Employing an impressive array and volume of archival sources from Germany, Namibia, and Switzerland, he begins his study in 1915, when German

troops capitulated to the South African army, and ends it in 1965, a year before the guerrilla warfare campaign against white rule in Namibia began. What emerges is evidence of a tempestuous relationship with German settlers struggling against adapting to new political circumstances and retaining, at least until 1945, hopes of colonial revision.

The study is split into three chronological parts. The first part focuses on the period from 1915 up to the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany. Eberhardt outlines the developing confrontation between the German population and the South African authorities in both South Africa and the mandate territory. The author argues that in this period, as the Germans were reduced to a minority within the white population of the territory, they became increasingly aware of their Germanness. As a consequence, they resisted South African policies of assimilation and sought to distance themselves from the growing Afrikaner population, whom they deemed their inferiors. Frustrated by their inability to improve their lot

through parliamentary means, the Germans hoped for colonial revision and took up an increasingly defensive stance when faced with South African accusations of being a disruptive element. All these factors contributed to the ethnicization of the German group. With the onset of the world economic crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a large proportion of German settlers enthusiastically looked to the National Socialist movement for help.

The emergence of the NSDAP in the mandate territory and resulting escalation in the conflict between the Germans and South African authorities is the focal point of the second part of the book. A particular strength of the study is Eberhardt's analysis of the support base and success of the NSDAP and its sponsored organizations among German inhabitants. The author demonstrates that the NSDAP was largely controlled from Germany and, despite eventually being banned, it successfully infiltrated almost all aspects of German settlers' cultural and political lives. Eberhardt successfully challenges the findings of previous research, like Rüdiger's, which suggested that a generational conflict existed between older settlers who viewed National Socialism with skepticism and a younger generation of new migrants who were more enthusiastic towards the movement. Using a range of sources such as party member lists, individual police files, and lists of naturalized Germans, he demonstrates that both groups were almost equally represented within the party and its affiliated organizations. In part, the success of the NSDAP is put down to economic factors rather than being linked explicitly to the Nazis' racist policies. In particular, the NSDAP drew its support from groups most affected by the economic crisis, like farmers and mining workers. Outbreaks of antisemitism were limited in an environment in which the maintenance of white prestige was seen as crucial to white rule. Equally, in terms of colonial racism, the Nazis could add little to the settlers' already entrenched sense of superiority and existing practices of discrimination against Africans. While settler resistance to the Nazis was limited, the growing influence of the NSDAP nonetheless led to serious divisions among the German inhabitants. Three distinct groupings emerged: supporters of the party, those actively against it and in favor of cooperating with South Africa, and those who withdrew from any political involvement, but remained loyal to Germany, if not to the NSDAP.

The concluding part of the study deals with the aftermath of the Second World War, which brought to an end any lingering hopes of colonial revision. The coming to power of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party

in South Africa in 1948 helped usher in a new era of cooperation between Southwest Africa's German population and the South African authorities. Planned reprisals against German settlers were dropped, and the German population, including Nazi sympathizers, was rapidly rehabilitated into white South West African society. Mutual suspicion of communism, an anti-British stance, and the desire to maintain exclusive white rule drew Germans and Afrikaner nationalists together. Many German settlers were willing to support the apartheid policies of the National Party, which they considered in keeping with a tradition of German colonial racism. Criticism of apartheid from the likes of the United Nations only served to bolster the relationship between the Germans and Afrikaner nationalists. Cooperation did not, however, amount to assimilation, and as a group, the Germans continued to struggle to retain a German identity. This desire was greatly complicated by their increasingly ambiguous relationship to Germany itself, which became increasingly distant as criticism of apartheid came from the Federal Republic of Germany.

Given the centrality of the German-Afrikaner relationship to his study, it is perhaps disappointing that Eberhardt only looks in passing at the roots of this relationship in the colonial period. Further investigation would have shown that in response to increasing Afrikaner migration into the German territory from the mid-1890s, the German governor Theodor Leutwein introduced a policy of "Germanization," not all that dissimilar from the Union's policies of the 1920s. Afrikaner migrants clashed with the German authorities over issues of political participation, citizenship, and the language of instruction in which Afrikaner children were to be educated. These clashes are echoed in the debates and points of conflict that Eberhardt discusses in detail with regards to the post-World War I era, during which roles were reversed and it was now the German group that was intent on resisting assimilation and retaining its cultural independence. Equally, despite initially stressing in his introduction the importance of investigating the relationship between the German population and the African majority population, Eberhardt spends little time actually doing this. His history of the German population is also one that largely leaves out any discussion of women settlers, who, like Africans, appear only on the margins of the study.

The author's succinct summarizing of his main arguments at the end of each chapter at times feels somewhat repetitive, but it enables the reader to work through the large amount of detail he provides. In all, this work is

well researched, thorough, and interesting. It adds an important new dimension to the study of the presence of a German population in Namibia. Eberhardt is to be commended for placing his work within the wider research field of German colonialism and tackling issues such as the question of a German colonial *Sonderweg* and continuity between German colonialism and not just the Third

Reich, but also apartheid.

Note

[1]. Klaus H. Rüdiger, *Die Namibia-Deutschen: Geschichte einer Nationalität im Werden* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Robbie Aitken. Review of Eberhardt, Martin, *Zwischen Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid: Die deutsche Bevölkerungsgruppe Südwesafrikas 1915-1965*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23088>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.