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Inseparable Evils: The Chimera of Colony and Genocide in German Southwest Africa

Justin M. Hannigan

Between 1904 and 1908, an estimated eighty-percent of the Herero and half of the Nama indigenous populations living in the colony of German Southwest Africa (today the independent state of Namibia) were systematically killed by direct military violence, strategic denial of food and water, or maltreatment through forced labor or in concentration camps.¹ The scale of human loss is staggering. In few other modern European colonial contexts were indigenous populations so completely and swiftly destroyed. The atrocities, which deserve a label no less than genocide, have had lasting effect on the people of Namibia and the memory of colonialism and genocide.

The treatment of the Herero and Nama genocides within comparative genocide scholarship has, however, distorted the historical event and been lacking in useful conclusions. There has been a fixation upon the record of violence, at the expense of useful comparative historical analysis. The genocides of 1904-1908 must rather be situated as an inalienable component of the process of German settler colonialism in Southwest Africa. The genocide was not an aberration of colonialism in Southwest Africa; rather, it was an

¹ Horst Dreschler, *Let us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama Against German Imperialism (1884-1915)*, (London: Zed Press, 1980), 214.

extension of the logic of settler colonialism and a central component in the establishment of real German authority in the colony. The evils of colonialism — racism, the process of “othering” colonized peoples, the denial of sovereign autonomy, and economic exploitation, among others — and the evils of genocide are not usually equated. In German Southwest Africa, however, circumstance married these historical realities. The history of genocide in Southwest Africa is incomplete without imbricating it with the history of colonialism. Genocide was an instrument employed by the Germans to resolve weaknesses of their colonial project.

The historical record of SWA demonstrates the inseparability of the narratives of genocide and the course of German imperialism. This paper argues that the German colonial enterprise, in order to establish full control over the indigenous peoples and their lands in SWA, was hindered by economic troubles, a lack of functional political, legal, and military authority, a dearth of metropolitan enthusiasm, and a severe demographic problem in the form of a shortage of German settlers. While real and historically demonstrable, this weakness contributed to a paranoid sense of vulnerability among the settler population. In turn, these settlers pressured the government in Berlin to swiftly and decisively respond to the indigenous threat. The consequences were genocidal. I argue that the genocide of the Herero and Nama effectively resolved the issues facing German imperialism in SWA, situating the tragedy as part of the broader logic of settler colonialism driving events in the colony. The unsteadiness of colonial authority on the eve of the genocide can be seen in a variety of dimensions. A lack

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of metropolitan support and enthusiasm, economic issues, underdeveloped infrastructure, the relatively small number of German settlers and their scattered distribution throughout the colony, and incomplete military control and legal authority caused anxiety among colonists and bedeviled German efforts to control SWA. Each of these dimensions of the colonial enterprise will be examined in turn, up to the eve of the genocide in 1903.

The tepidity of metropolitan enthusiasm for the colony is evident from the earliest days of German incursion. Otto von Bismarck, the first Chancellor of the German Empire, was vocal in his opposition to Germany's acquisition of overseas colonies in the first decade and a half after the Imperial unification in 1871. If colonies were to be founded, Bismarck felt that "the flag must follow trade."² Adolf Lüderitz, the first German trader to buy indigenous land in the territory in 1883, quickly appealed to Berlin for imperial protection of his purchases. Bismarck engaged in an incredibly cautious diplomatic exchange with the British authorities in the Cape Colony to determine the geopolitical consequences of raising the German flag and, after much hesitant deliberation, cabled the German consul in Cape Town on 24 April 1884 to "declare officially that [Lüderitz] and his establishments are under the protection of the Reich."³ The dispatch of Heinrich Göring and an attaché of just two officials in 1885 constituted the entirety of the German administration in the colony until 1895; in the estimation of historian Jürgen Zimmerer, "this was nothing

² Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 24.

³ Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 40.

more than a symbolic occupation of German South-west Africa.”⁴

Even as the territory claimed by Germany grew to its full extent by 1886, and considering the arrangement Bismarck had offered, Berlin responded to indigenous uprisings — faced with circumstances similar to those that would precipitate the genocide — with nearly complete disinterest in becoming militarily involved in the support of the SWA colony.⁵ In response to German encroachment in 1888, sitting Herero Chieftain Kamaherero warned Provincial Administrator Göring and his administration of two that “if they did not wish to see their heads lying at their feet they should be out of Okahanda and well on their way to Germany before sunset.”⁶ Göring was forced into a hurried retreat to the protection of the British enclave at Walvis Bay in response to the threat and promptly telegraphed Berlin for military assistance. The request was halfheartedly fulfilled in June 1889 with the dispatch of a meager 21 soldiers under the command of Curt von François.⁷ To historians who wish to defend the claim that, as a general law of European settler colonialism, invariably “frontier clash were effectively resolved when metropolitan troops defended settler interests,” the early history of German

⁴ Jürgen Zimmerer, “The Model Colony? Racial segregation, forced labour and total control in German South-West Africa,” in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds., E.J. Neather trans. (Monmouth, Wales: Merlin Press, 2003), 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

conflict with the indigenous people of SWA should serve as a cautionary tale.⁸ After this episode, Bismarck reiterated his position before the Reichstag: "I repeat that I am opposed to colonies, that is, the kind of colonies where officials must be placed and garrisons established... [though] if the locomotive of the empire has struck out on a new track for itself, I will not be the one to place stones in its way."⁹

Lukewarm metropolitan enthusiasm toward SWA persisted up until the eve of the genocide in 1903, although the Chancellorships of Leo von Caprivi (1890-1894) and Bernhard von Bülow (1900-1909) gradually featured greater support for Germany's overseas possessions.¹⁰ Increasing competition with other European imperial powers led to somewhat greater attention to Germany's African colonies, creating a situation where "for reasons of national pride and propaganda, any defeat in Southwest Africa was unacceptable."¹¹ Institutionally, Chancellor von Caprivi founded the *Kolonialabteilung* (Colonial Section) under the Imperial Foreign Office, charged with managing Germany's overseas colonial expansion and enticing Germans to settle in the colonies.¹² By 1903, however, the six districts that comprised the administration of

⁸ Cook, *Colonial Encounters in the Age of High Imperialism*, 23.

⁹ Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 40.

¹⁰ By 1903, these included German Southwest Africa, German East Africa (today Tanzania), Cameroon, Togo, and a scattering of islands in the Pacific, including Samoa and New Guinea.

¹¹ Zimmerer, "The Model Colony?," in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 25.

¹² Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 54.

German SWA were manned by only about 700 soldiers and police.¹³ Although metropolitan enthusiasm for the colonial endeavor in SWA did grow gradually between 1884 and 1903, commitment was not decisively asserted until the dispatch of thousands of *Schutztruppe* in response to the Herero uprising. Retroactively considering the dearth of early metropolitan support for the colonial enterprise in 1907, Royal Commissioner to Southwest Africa Paul Rohrbach wrote bluntly: "The mere idea of doing something substantial toward the opening up of a country like South-West Africa, with such ridiculously small working capital, is about as absurd as the idea of a man who would try to cut a tunnel through the Alps with a pickaxe."¹⁴

Investment capital was also in short supply in the colony prior to the genocide. Examining the German Southwest Africa Company, which assumed possession of Lüderitz's land purchases in 1885, Dreschler notes "a glaring discrepancy between the financial capacity of its shareholders and the modest capital stock of the company," that is, the small amount of money committed to the colonizing effort was disproportionate to the extreme wealth of the German Southwest Africa Company's shareholders.¹⁵ In spite of Lüderitz's hopeful assurances of SWA's mining potential, investors remained rightfully unconvinced. After its first year of operation, the German Southwest Africa Company reported losses of 15 per cent on the

¹³ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 7.

¹⁴ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 28.

¹⁵ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 30.

initial investment.¹⁶ Embarrassed, the shareholders of this enterprise publicly revised their justification for investing in SWA, claiming it had been “out of motives of pure patriotism in order that the country which might in the future prove valuable would not pass into the hands of a foreign Power.”¹⁷ By 1903, several copper mining companies had managed to establish sustainable operations in the colony in spite of the early difficulties. However, business reportage in the *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, a propagandistic newsletter distributed by the Colonial Section to publicize German efforts in the overseas colonies and entice new settlement, indicates indirectly that colonial mining enterprises in SWA were still troubled by a lack of investment. In one article, dated 15 February 1903, a mining prospector named Christopher James gave sunny reports of vast untouched copper lodes in the Otavi district of the colony. Discussing the size of lodes he did uncover, the *Kolonialblatt* reported that “Herr James writes with certainty that if bigger mine shafts are dug, one should find even larger ore deposits.”¹⁸ If such anecdotal arguments for the mineral potential of the SWA colony were still made in 1903, it is safe to assume that investment from German industry remained unforthcoming, or was at best incommensurate with colonial administrator’s ambitious expectations.

The same *Kolonialblatt* article touches on another economic issue troubling the German colonial project

¹⁶ Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 53.

¹⁷ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 28.

¹⁸ “Otavi-Minen und Eisenbahngesellschaft,” *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, 15 February, 1903.

in SWA prior to the genocide: the difficulty of recruiting indigenous labor. According to the article, "Herr James writes of the Herero as a fine people with good spirit and strong physicality. They are willing, good hearted, happy workers, quick on the up-take and outstandingly quick learners in the use drills and hammers, if they are handled properly."¹⁹ Variations in opinion among German settlers regarding the aptitude of the Herero as laborers are to be expected, but it would be in accordance with the generally positive tone of the *Kolonialblatt* to emphasize the benefits of life and the possibilities of business in SWA. Many other settler accounts express frustration with managing indigenous labor. In 1902, a missionary named Herr Brincker described his perception of the Herero residing near his church: "Shocking immorality, disputatiousness, and thievery rule, specifically, the inner life of the [Herero] congregations. Everything is communal, sex in the highest degree."²⁰ In addition to the perceived foibles of the Herero work ethic, a great many laborers were able to simply leave employment if they wished, by escape if not by mutual contract.²¹ Those German settlers who pursued farming and cattle herding and were thus not reliant on large indigenous workforces, however, were at the same time succeeding economically through an insidious combination of thrift and theft: among them, the 1,052 German farmers in the colony by 1902 owned 44,487 head of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Karla Poewe, *The Namibian Herero: A History of Their Psychosocial Disintegration and Survival* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1985), 41.

²¹ Gewalt, *Herero Heroes*, 129.

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cattle, almost exclusively appropriated from the Herero.²² Though settlers capably subsisted on the land through farming and raising cattle, grander commercial prospects for the colony remained bleak because of difficult labor relations and the failing promise of lucrative mineral deposits.

The precarious state of the German colony in SWA on the eve of the genocide was reflected in the deficiencies of transportation infrastructure on which European colonialism necessarily relied. Regular shipping routes between the German port of Hamburg and the colony were nonexistent in the early years of the colony, whereas other European colonial powers already had well-established modes of transporting goods and personnel to African colonies. A telling example of this is that when Captain von François departed for SWA with his 21 soldiers in June 1889, they were forced to pose as “adventurers” rather than soldiers in order to earn passage on a British ship bound for Walvis Bay.²³ Railways in the colony were also underdeveloped. The rinderpest epidemic that swept across Africa between 1889 and 1897, killing perhaps 90,000 cattle in SWA alone, forced a shift away from the reliance on the ox-wagon transport network utilized earlier in the colony.²⁴ Indeed, construction of a railway linking Windhoek, the administrative capital of the colony and an interior settlement, to the coast via Swakopmund had only begun in 1897 as a response to the massive loss of beasts of burden

²² Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 73.

²³ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 42.

²⁴ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 72 and 73 (footnote).

as a result of this epidemic.²⁵ Even by 1904, vast portions of the territory still remained inaccessible by rail.²⁶ And, when a small revolt by the Nama forced Governor Theodor Leutwein southward with the majority of the *Schutztruppe* at the beginning of January 1904 — an opportunity which the Herero seized to begin their uprising on 14 January — the absence of a major north-south rail line delayed the German military's return to the Windhoek area until 11 February.²⁷

The political and legal relations between the German administration and indigenous leadership were increasingly unsteady by 1904. In this instance, it was the over-extension of German power that threatened the colonial enterprise. Disorganization and lack of foresight led to the irresponsible exercise of colonial authority on the part of the Germans. The precise tenets of the protection agreements forged by Leutwein and his predecessors with the various tribes were largely ignored in all dealings between Europeans and Africans, and the colonial administration treated the agreements as a surrender of authority in practically every legal and political situation.²⁸ Crucially, however, German authority across vast tracts of the territory prior to the war of 1904-1907 was practically nonexistent. Outside the boundaries of effective colonial control, tribes such as the Ovambo were largely beyond the purported aegis of German law and order, free to conduct their own political and legal business

²⁵ Gewalt, *Herero Heroes*, 128.

²⁶ A map depicting just how little rail infrastructure existed in German SWA is available in Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-11.

²⁸ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 26.

pending the possibility of German expansion. However, in those regions of the colony where German policing and authority did reach — namely, Hereroland — legal ordinances enshrined the concept that “leniency toward natives is cruelty to whites.”²⁹ Capital punishment was consistently and ruthlessly applied in cases of serious crimes committed by Africans against Germans, while white settlers received juridical license to perpetrate even the most heinous crimes against Africans. “Surely, this goes to prove,” Governor Leutwein wrote, “that a higher value was placed on the life of a white man than on that of a native.”³⁰ By the turn of the century, Leutwein had evidently come to believe that the rapine behavior of the average German settler toward indigenous peoples was endangering the legitimacy of the German colonial endeavor.

As interactions between “colonizer” and “colonized” became even more unjust, tensions between German settlers and particularly the Herero grew. Leutwein became distressed that the settler population was fulfilling its own prophetic fear of a large-scale indigenous uprising.³¹ By 1904, three fault lines undercut German efforts to establish a unified program of legal and political dominance over SWA and its indigenous people. First, the incredibly prejudiced exercise of legal and political power on the part of the German settlers against the Herero had not forced them into dejected submission to colonial authority, but was rather driving the Herero closer to militancy and open strug-

²⁹ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹ Gewalt, *Herero Heroes*, 142.

gle against Germany. Second, the German settler population, motivated by a complex of paranoia about indigenous threats and an ideologically-absolute mentality of settler colonialism that demanded superiority and security in every dimension of colonial life, was agitating for even more forceful treatment of native groups such as the Herero and, incidentally, greater metropolitan support of this position. Between these two mutually incompatible schemas stood the precious few reasonable individuals — some within the colonial administration, such as Governor Theodor Leutwein; some sitting in the Reichstag, such as socialist August Bebel;³² and some from the indigenous populations, most notably Hendrik Witbooi of the Nama — who were interested in a reasoned and non-violent renegotiation of the terms which had to that point guided the course of German colonialism in Southwest Africa.

Leutwein later made a crucial observation, which sheds much light on the commission of genocide on the part of the German military. German settlers, who did not understand the delicate balance of the fledgling colonialism in SWA, “Were inclined, with their inborn feeling of belonging to a superior race, to appear as members of a conquering army, even though we had conquered nothing.”³³ Indeed, the Germans, up to 1903, actually had not conquered the lands that were being settled. In all the haphazard weaknesses and the

³² Helmut Walser Smith, “The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation: Notes on Debates in the German Reichstag Concerning Southwest Africa, 1904-14,” in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 107.

³³ Gewalt, *Herero Heroes*, 145.

uneven excesses of brutal power exercised by the colonizing Germans, the fundamental recourse to arms had not been denied to the Herero, neither through disarmament nor through the development of a military presence large enough to deter violent rebellion.

On 14 January, Chieftain of the Herero Samuel Maherero issued orders that all German males in Hereroland were to be round up and killed.³⁴ Reliable accounts show that in the first weeks of the war, somewhere around 150 settlers — and only a few of them women — were killed by the Herero, but the German press reported inflated accounts of the coldblooded killings of women and children, the Herero practice of mutilating the bodies of enemies killed in battle, and wanton rape and pillage.³⁵ These reports shocked metropolitan Germans. Reinforcements were ordered immediately and arrived from Germany under the ruthless command of Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha. He possessed a conviction that “all colonies had to be conquered with blood” and wrote in his diary on 1 July 1904 that “the natives must give way... either via the bullet of the mission, with alcohol.”³⁶ By August 1904 the German military had forced the majority of the Herero fighting forces into a decisive battle at the Waterberg in east-central SWA. The Herero had gathered the majority of their tribes, including cattle herds, women, and children, as was customary of their practice of war. At this defining moment when the war precipitated into genocide, the Herero were defeated in battle and forced to retreat

³⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

into the arid and unlivable Omaheke desert. Several hundred died in battle, and large portions of their cattle herds were slaughtered. Several thousand, including their leader Samuel Maherero, escaped through the desert into British-controlled Bechuanaland. The majority of the Herero, however, were not so lucky. Thousands perished of dehydration and starvation. On 2 October, several weeks after the battle, von Trotha issued an extermination order for the Herero people. Hendrik Witbooi, the chief of the Nama, perceived that the German military administration would come after the Nama once they had finished their slaughter of the Herero.³⁷ He led his southern tribes to stand alongside the Herero in revolt shortly after the extermination order was issued in October 1904.³⁸

The dust had finally settled by 1908. All told, 60,000 of the original 80,000 Herero and 10,000 of the original 20,000 Nama had been killed.³⁹ The Herero and Nama societies “were now deprived of land and cattle and were without leaders;” their traditional way of life was irretrievably lost.⁴⁰ The escalation from war to genocide is at least partly explained by the metropolitan and military decision to treat the insurgent tribes with an unyielding ferocity to defend the prestige of the military, “the premier institution of the Kaiserreich.”⁴¹ The issuance of the extermination order, however, was undoubtedly connected to the

³⁷ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 183.

³⁸ Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 137.

³⁹ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 214.

⁴⁰ Gewalt, “Colonisation, Genocide, and Resurgence,” in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 136.

⁴¹ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 37.

demands of the settler community, which wished for a total and final resolution of the issues that had been facing the colonial effort. The specific conduct of the German military in the handling of the genocide and the outcomes of these policies did have a direct and instrumental effect in the resolution of the multitudinous issues hindering the German colonial project. The commission of genocide led to an increase of metropolitan attention toward German SWA, facilitated the improvement of the economic situation, provided the labor and security to further develop infrastructure, alleviated demographic concerns, and extended military control and legal authority in the colony.

Metropolitan commitment increased markedly as a direct result of the genocide in SWA, although not necessarily as a reaffirmation of the colonizing mission. Certainly, the dispatch of large numbers of troops under von Trotha in June 1904 itself constitutes a serious increase in metropolitan commitment. The total German military presence in the colony by 1907 had reached 20,000 men, a serious army with serious support from the General Staff in Berlin.⁴² However, the conduct of the war in SWA and particularly the emerging accounts of the horrendous treatment of the Herero and Nama aroused serious political opposition. The German satirical newspaper *Simplicissimus* ran a special issue focused particularly on criticism of German policy and settler behavior in the colonies on 3 May 1904.⁴³ Even in the Reichstag, an anticolonial coalition emerged in 1906 under the leadership of August Bebel successfully blocked a vote

⁴² Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 112.

⁴³ "Spezial-Nummer Kolonien," *Simplicissimus*, 3 May 1904.

to approve further funds for the war in SWA, which by then totaled 585 million Reichsmark.⁴⁴ In January 1907, Kaiser Wilhelm II dissolved the Reichstag and called for an election; this “Hottentot election” of 1907 is referred to as the only election in European history to serve entirely as a referendum on colonial issues, and resulted in the formation of a legislature decisively in favor of the continuation of German colonialism.⁴⁵ Whether supportive or critical of the conduct of the war and colonial policy in SWA, the severity of the genocide had seized the attention of nearly every political actor and voter in metropolitan Germany by 1907. Politically, the commitment to the colony had been sealed in blood, and the new and very public focus was on determining the future course of German policy in SWA.

The genocide of the Herero and Nama was also instrumental in that it led to a significant alleviation of the economic concerns facing the colony. Reflecting the fundamental focus on land inherent to settler colonialism, the colonial propagandist Paul Rohrbach noted that an incidental benefit of the war had been the clearing of lands already purchased by German companies, “a task that would have otherwise proven difficult.”⁴⁶ The genocide had succeeded in removing practically all the Herero people from their traditional lands, freeing them for settlement. This was paired with an offer made by the German government of land

⁴⁴ Dominik J. Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa,” in *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, 298.

⁴⁵ Ulrich van der Heyden, “The ‘Hottentot elections’ of 1907,” in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 113.

⁴⁶ Gewalt, *Herero Heroes*, 143.

grants to soldiers who volunteered to fight in war, in order to fill the newly emptied land.⁴⁷ After the genocide, the import of cattle into the colony from Argentina began as a response to massive livestock losses during the war, particularly at the battle of the Waterberg, and the preceding rinderpest epidemic. A settler woman wrote in her diary in 1909 about a transaction between her brother-in-law and a cattle trader named Herr Lü.: "He used to be a cowboy on a big farm in Argentina... He came to our colony and survived the uprising of the Herero and its end. Because he had good connections in Argentina, he got a job from the government to buy up cattle for the farmers here."⁴⁸ This evidences that the settler cattle export economy had become economically viable after the genocide, and indicates an improvement of the German economic circumstances of the colony generally. Dreschler describes the years between 1908 and 1914 as a "profit bonanza" for German investment, with the German South West Africa Company paying its shareholders a dividend of 64 per cent in 1909.⁴⁹ Incidentally and without relation to the genocide specifically, diamonds had also been discovered by prospectors.

An attempt to resolve earlier difficulties in securing indigenous labor was directly tied to the processes of genocide. Those Herero and Nama who surrendered or were taken as prisoner in battle, including women and children, were brought to concentration camps

⁴⁷ Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, 112.

⁴⁸ Antonia Thiede, *Kleine Missis Toni: Mädchen und Frauenjahre im Sonnenland Deutsch-Südwest, dem heutigen Namibia* (Winhoek, Namibia: Benguela, 2004), 112.

⁴⁹ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 244.

throughout the colony and subjected to forced labor. The largest and most notorious of these camps was on Shark Island, in the harbor of the German port of Lüderitzbucht.⁵⁰ Throughout the colony, some 17,018 prisoners had been taken into concentration camps by July 1906.⁵¹ These prisoners were functionally enslaved and served as a source of labor for infrastructure projects in the port towns and on the railways. Between December 1905 and November 1906, around 900 Herero and Nama prisoners were employed in the construction of a new rail line between Lüderitzbucht and the interior.⁵² Elsewhere, the prisoners were forced into labor on farms, tasked with laying the groundwork for more permanent German settlement.⁵³ These concentration camps served insidiously dual purposes: not only did they allow German businesses to circumvent earlier troubles with indigenous labor, but the poor conditions in the camps and the brutal overworking of the prisoners extended genocidal tactics and results beyond the battlefield. A British official reports that “many again died at the hands of the overseer and by the lash. Probably 60 per cent of the natives who surrendered [after the lifting of the extermination order] died this way.”⁵⁴ In the concentration camps,

⁵⁰ Casper Erichsen, *“The angel of death has descended violently among them”*: concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-08 (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2005), 22.

⁵¹ Erichsen, “Forced Labour in the Concentration Camp on Shark Island,” in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 85.

⁵² Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 171.

⁵³ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 232.

⁵⁴ Silvester and Gewalt, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 171.

the very strategies and methods of genocide were instrumental to the growth of colonialism in German SWA. German infrastructure was literally built on the back of forced African labor.

The genocide also gave the opportunity for a complete overhaul of the legal and political relationship Germans and indigenous Africans, as well as for the restructuring and expansion of administrative authority in the colony. While the laws had been extremely prejudiced against Africans before, the genocide all the more firmly convinced German settlers, judges, and metropolitan lawmakers that harsh legal treatment of the indigenous population was necessary. Theodor Leutwein had been removed as governor in 1905, and was replaced by Friedrich von Lindequist, who was more agreeable to the Kaiser because of his willingness to take whatever steps necessary to secure German interests in the colony.⁵⁵ On 18 August 1907, he issued a set of directives that relegated the surviving Herero and Nama in German SWA to a position of de facto subhumanity.⁵⁶ Known as Ordinance No. 82, these directives introduced three especially unjust precedents: most indigenous groups were barred from owning land and cattle without the specific approval of the governor; all natives were subject to punishment as vagrants unless they carried identification passes demonstrating that they had work under a European employer; and it provided that servants could be severely punished by their masters for even the slightest offenses without the need for a

⁵⁵ John J. Grot peter, *Historical Dictionary of Namibia* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 606.

⁵⁶ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 231.

trial.⁵⁷ Fears of miscegenation also led to the passage of a law in the Reichstag specifically prohibiting intermarriage between Germans and Africans.⁵⁸ These new laws were certainly the harshest of those imposed after the genocide, but even where the legal code was not explicitly remade to disadvantage indigenous Africans it was noted that "it is characteristic of all these German laws that their elasticity seems unlimited, and that their application and practical exercise seems to have depended more on local sentiment [sic] and personal and official prejudice than on the strict tenets of legal procedure and the administration of justice."⁵⁹ We can be certain that the legal framework after the genocide was focused entirely on controlling and subduing the African population, and where Africans did find the opportunity to protect themselves it was always by escaping the law rather than working within it.⁶⁰ The genocide was instrumental in directly providing the circumstance for this revision of the colonial legal code.

The political relationship between the indigenous populations and the colonial administrative system also shifted as a result of the genocide. The earlier protection agreements were thrown out; the massacres of the Herero and Nama had eliminated the possibility of future uprisings, and rather than ruling through the

⁵⁷ Grotpeter, *Historical Dictionary of Namibia*, 381.

⁵⁸ Smith, "The Talk of Genocide, the Rhetoric of Miscegenation," in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, 117.

⁵⁹ Silvester and Gewald, *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, 191.

⁶⁰ Zimmerer, "The Model Colony?," in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 28.

indirect powers of tribal chiefs the Germans dissolved every independent political organization of the indigenous people and handled administration directly.⁶¹ Following the genocide, the relationship between the German authorities and indigenous Africans ceased to be political as such, and was handled rather through administrative and bureaucratic channels. The quashing of African political autonomy was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the size and effective authority of the colonial administration. The most noteworthy development was the German declaration of the *Polizei-zone* throughout the southern two-thirds of the colony.⁶² This was a region where the Germans felt assured in declaring the unconditional authority of the colonial administration, law, and police forces. The region north of the so-called "Red Line" remained under the control of indigenous chiefs, and European trade and travel beyond the Police Zone was prohibited.⁶³ Appropriately, considering the name of this new German administrative division, the police force throughout the colony was greatly expanded, and by 1909 a total of 2,431 policemen were stationed in 69 stations throughout the colony.⁶⁴ Moreover, the administrative bureaucracy was expanded between 1903 and 1914, from 6 districts to 16.⁶⁵ The new metropolitan commitment to the colony as well as the real possibility of establishing effective control in the absence of militant Herero and Nama facilitated the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶² Grotper, *Historical Dictionary of Namibia*, 412.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Zimmerer, "The Model Colony?," in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, 30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

expansion of German authority and administration in SWA, a trend permitted by the genocidal consequences of the 1904-1908 war.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the genocide had the effect of allaying the demographic concerns German settlers had held before 1904. No longer were German settlers a small minority among a large African population in central SWA. On the one hand, the total white population tripled from 4,640 at the beginning of the genocide to 14,840 by 1913.⁶⁶ This resulted from the expanded economic opportunities available in the colony after 1908, as well as the previously mentioned provision that military volunteers from Germany could receive grants of land. On the other hand, the very nature of the genocide provided that only a very small number of indigenous Herero and Nama people remained in the central and southern lands most attractive for settlement. Genocide carries demographic consequences, and the mass murders in SWA were instrumental in creating a new sense of security and racial superiority for German settlers in the colony.

There are few people remaining in our contemporary world who consider genocide anything other than an absolute evil to be prevented at all costs. However, the passions behind this conviction have contributed to an incomplete and uneven treatment of particular genocides within their historical context. The processes of colonialism and genocide in German SWA must be imbricated. Although genocide pursued as a utopian solution to the problems facing the German colony did not resolve every weakness of the colonial

⁶⁶ Dreschler, *Let Us Die Fighting*, 244.

mission,⁶⁷ the fact that the commission of genocide fundamentally strengthened and altered the character of German colonial authority in SWA cannot be ignored. The wholesale massacre of the Herero and Nama in what is today known as Namibia should certainly be remembered for its violence and human devastation, acknowledging the suffering of groups from the past to prevent such atrocities from being committed against others in the future, but also remembered not only for that: it also serves as a reminder that the horrors of genocide are not isolable from the historical circumstances under which they occur. The genocide of the Herero and Nama occurred within the structure and logic of German imperialism and was instrumental to the goals and aspirations of the colonial project in Southwest Africa. Reexamining the genocide beyond the traditional boundaries of comparative genocide studies yields more specific and valuable insights such as these, and I suggest that historians of all genocides and mass murders eschew the existing comparative models in favor of more contextualized analyses.

Justin Hannigan is a senior History student at Santa Clara University, focusing primarily on issues in European colonial history.

⁶⁷ Jürgen Zimmerer, for example, argues too strongly that the genocide failed to solve many issues in "The Model Colony?," in *Genocide in German South-West Africa*, giving little attention to the marked increase in the strength and authority of the German administration as compared to before the genocide.