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Namibia

# Colonial violence in Namibia

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Germany's colonial conquests were carried out late, the construction of the German nation having itself come late. Chancellor Bismarck was not very interested in colonial adventures, preferring to use energy and money in the consolidation of the country. In addition, the constitution of an empire required an efficient navy that the country did not yet possess. Finally, all the territories that could have been easily conquered were already occupied by other European powers.

## Treaty of Berlin

From 1880 onwards, industrialists and major merchants in search of new outlets put pressure on Germany to embark on the "colonial adventure". It was with the Treaty of Berlin of 1885, which formalized the African possessions of European countries, that Bismarck succeeded in taking over some territories. Thus, current countries such as Togo, Cameroon, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Namibia fell into the German fold. Like other European countries, German settlers evicted the inhabitants from their land, requisitioned their livestock and used violence against the population.

## A repressed revolt

In Namibia, a Herero revolt broke out in 1904, led by Samuel Maharero, then joined by another population, the Nama. Historically, these two pastoralist communities have often competed for access to pasture. The warriors attacked the colonists but spared women and children.

The German authorities, for their part, sent Lothar von Trotha, an officer specializing in colonial repression who had distinguished himself in the repression of the Boxer rebellion in China. Thanks to naval infantry, the revolt was crushed and a terrible repression ensued.

## Desire for extermination

The soldiers of the military unit of the African colonies of the *Schutztruppe* received an extermination order: "Within the German borders, every Herero, with or without weapons, with or without cattle, will be slaughtered. I no longer accept women or children; they will be taken back to their people - or shot. Thus, the people were pushed towards the Kalahari desert, the wells were poisoned and a large majority died of thirst and hunger.

Those who surrendered were transported by train to the concentration camps, where most died of disease or exhaustion from forced labour. Some were victims of "medical" experiments carried out by a certain Eugene Fischer, who would later have the sinister Josef Mengele as his assistant.

Members of other communities were also massacred, such as the Damara and the San. This genocide was clearly assumed by Von Trotha, boasting of having the support of Emperor Wilhelm II. He declared: "I destroy the insurgent

tribes in rivers of blood and money. It is only on such soil that the seed can take, that something can grow.” It is believed that 80% of the Herero population and 50% of the Nama were exterminated between 1904 and 1908.

# Controversy over genocide recognition and reparations

Germany's recognition of the Herero and Nama genocide has been a lengthy process and remains marred by controversy over the issue of reparations. During his trip to Namibia in 1995, Chancellor Helmut Kohl avoided the representatives of the Herero. Federal President Roman Herzog in 1998 spoke only of a “dark chapter”. Foreign minister Joschka Fischer said in October 2003: “We are fully aware of our historical responsibility, but we are not hostages of history”. It was not until 2004 that Germany finally recognised the genocide through the development minister, Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul, while rejecting a policy of reparations. Only \$20 million will be offered for communities that were victims of the genocide.

## The demand for redress

This rejection of reparation, presented at the time by Germany as a principle, was not very convincing. It had set a precedent in 1890 by demanding reparations of 12,000 cows from the Herero who had fought against colonization. The other argument put forward, that of the impossibility of attaching a legal qualification dating from 1948 to previous facts, suffers from inconsistency with the Bundestag's recognition of the Armenian genocide perpetrated in 1915.

The Namibian government, in its desire to maintain good relations with Germany, which remains the country's largest donor, was reluctant to lead this fight. Reinforced by a concern that the Herero and Nama, benefiting from financial support, would compete with the power held by the members of the country's ethnic majority, the Ovambo.

The situation gradually changed with the mobilizations of the Herero and Nama, who kept challenging the German and Namibian governments and to take legal action. Added to this was the parliamentary mobilization of the radical left. In response to a question from *Die Linke*, the government began to evolve by considering that the 1948 Convention “can serve as a reference criterion for a non-legal assessment of a historical event to qualify it as genocide”.

Thus, the German and Namibian governments signed an agreement at the beginning of June recognising the genocide with a payment spread over thirty years of a sum of 1,050 million euros.

## Recovering the stolen land

This agreement has been criticized because the Herero and Nama peoples were not involved in the negotiations, thus violating the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 18 states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making on matters affecting their rights, through representatives chosen by them in accordance with their own procedures.” The Damara and San communities, who also suffered colonial violence, are not mentioned.

This agreement turned its back on the main demand: the recovery of the plundered land with the demand that the German government buy back the land holdings held by the German-speaking community. A measure allowing the Herero and Nama to get out of the poverty in which they have been plunged for a century.

But current events also impact this agreement. While Israel is conducting genocide in Gaza, Germany has intervened as a third party to support the genocidal government at the International Court of Justice. As the former Namibian president said: "The German government has not yet fully expiated the genocide it committed on Namibian soil...Germany cannot morally express its commitment to the UN Convention against Genocide, including the expiation of the genocide in Namibia, while supporting the equivalent of a holocaust and genocide in Gaza."

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#) and [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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