Memory and Denial: Confronting the Enduring Legacies of the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide

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Cover Image

Drawing of a memorial to the Ovaherero and Nama genocide in Swakopmund, Namibia by the author.

Abstract

This thesis examines the legacies of the 1904-1908 Ovaherero and Nama genocide, perpetrated by German soldiers in Southwest Africa (modern-day Namibia). How the atrocities committed in the name of colonialism subsequently vanished from the public consciousness in Germany, the process by which this era has come back into focus, and the impact of recent efforts to reckon with colonial violence are considered. In May 2021, the German government offered €1.1 billion in development aid to the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama, a promising gesture that at the same time exposed the flaws of negotiations between Namibia, Germany, and the victim communities. The past two years have also marked a watershed moment in German memory culture, as recent comparisons between German colonialism and the Holocaust have ignited a furious debate among historians, the likes of which have not been seen in Germany since controversies surrounding this subject arose in the 1980s. This paper seeks to contribute a nuanced discussion of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide within the framework of German memory culture, revealing how the legacy of this event challenges established conceptions of coming to terms with a past plagued by acts of genocidal violence. Despite progress in confronting the silences surrounding the colonial era, Germany’s unresolved reckoning with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide nonetheless tarnishes the nation’s reputation as a pioneer in addressing instances of historical injustice.
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Introduction

When discussing the history of European colonialism, Germany is likely not the first name that comes to mind. Indeed, by the time Germany emerged as a unified nation-state out of a conglomerate of kingdoms and princedoms in 1871, England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands had begun colonizing overseas territories centuries ago and already presided over vast multicontinental empires. Yet despite its late entry onto the international stage, Germany had lofty ambitions to establish itself as a colonial empire rivaling the other European powers. Accordingly, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the first leader of unified Germany, hosted representatives from 11 European states as well as delegates from the Ottoman Empire and the United States to discuss European influence in Africa in November 1884. As a clear reflection of the exploitative nature of the colonial project, not a single representative from Africa was allowed to attend. This summit, known as the Berlin Conference, invigorated the rapid partition of the African continent into European colonies, the movement commonly referred to today as the “scramble for Africa.”

While Britain and France snatched up the largest territories, Germany was able to carve out four distinct colonies across Africa in the years directly following the proceedings in Berlin. Settlers established German East Africa in what today is Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania; Togoland, part of modern-day Togo and Ghana; German Cameroon, comprised of territory that now falls within Cameroon, Nigeria, Congo, Central African Republic, Gabon, and Chad; and German Southwest Africa, present-day Namibia. Berlin also turned its attention to the Pacific at this time, forming colonies in New Guinea and on a grouping of islands in Micronesia. Within two decades of achieving unification, Germany had succeeded in becoming a global empire; yet
this triumph for Germany came at an immeasurable cost to the Indigenous peoples of these territories, who would go on to suffer grave human rights abuses under colonial rule.

While the damaging impact of colonialism in each of Germany’s colonies deserves recognition, an investigation of this scale unfortunately falls beyond this project’s scope. This thesis instead directs its focus to Southwest Africa, the best-documented instance of German colonial violence and the site of the 20th century’s first genocide. This is the story of the Ovaherero¹ and Nama, two Indigenous communities that took up arms to combat the encroachment of German settlers, sparking a conflict that rapidly devolved into an exercise of excessive brutality by the German military. Between 1904-1908, German forces indiscriminately murdered the populations of both groups, leaving an estimated 60,000-100,000 people dead.² Yet despite the scale of this slaughter and the publicity these atrocities received at the time they were committed, the Ovaherero and Nama genocide largely disappeared from public memory in Germany until recently, when discussions of colonial violence resurfaced and prompted an ongoing interrogation into the nation’s relationship with this dark chapter of its past. How colonialism in Southwest Africa vanished from German history, the process by which this era has come back into focus, and the impact of reckoning with colonial violence are key considerations that guide this project.

Each of the four chapters presented here discuss a different facet of the lasting consequences of German rule over Southwest Africa. The first chapter describes the legacy of the atrocities committed in Southwest Africa within Germany, arguing that these acts of

¹ The Ovaherero people are also commonly referred to as the Herero people. I choose to use the term Ovaherero as this is the term that members of this group tend to use when referring to themselves. So as not to original sources, I do not alter the language of quotes where the term ‘Herero’ is used.
genocide faded into obscurity over the course of the 20th century as a result of deliberate historical revisionism as opposed to a passive process of forgetting the past. The following chapter revolves around memories of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide in Southwest Africa/Namibia, arguing that the enduring consequences of colonial violence in the aftermath of German rule, coupled with domestic political tensions, eventually prompted Ovaherero and Nama leaders to pressure Germany into critically examining its colonial past. The third chapter contextualizes Germany’s recent efforts at reckoning with the genocide in Southwest Africa within the nation’s broader memory culture, debunking claims that the intense focus on the Holocaust has impeded efforts to address the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. The final chapter sheds light on recent developments between the descendants of the Indigenous victims and the German Government, exposing the ways in which this historical injustice has yet to be adequately handled by the nation responsible for the egregious acts of violence perpetrated over a century ago. Overall, this thesis argues that despite progress in confronting this previously neglected history, Germany’s unresolved reckoning with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide nonetheless tarnishes the nation’s reputation as a pioneer in addressing instances of historical injustice.

The Ovaherero and Nama genocide has attracted the focus of a handful of academics whose research has been integral to this project. The East German scholar Horst Drechsler and the West German scholar Helmut Bley were among the first to revisit German colonialism in Southwest Africa in the 1960s, followed by the historian Jürgen Zimmerer leading a wave of literature interrogating this era beginning in the 1990s. Other prominent voices on this topic include the political scientist Henning Melber, sociologist Reinhart Kößler, human rights scholar Jeremy Sarkin, and African history specialist Jan-Bart Gewald. The first chapter draws heavily
upon the contributions of these scholars, relying on their writings to piece together the narrative of German historiography on the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. The next chapter prominently features the research of the cultural anthropologist Larissa Förster, whose book *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften: wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 Gedenken* (Post-colonial Memory Landscapes: how Germans and Ovaherero in Namibia Commemorate the War of 1904) provides a crucial window into memory culture within Southwest African/Namibian society. Chapter three evaluates several claims regarding the connections between Germany’s reckoning with the Holocaust and its treatment of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, putting these debates in conversation with the works of prominent scholars of memory culture including Michael Rothberg, Dirk Moses, and John Torpey. Finally, the fourth chapter relates Germany’s efforts to address its painful colonial past in Southwest Africa to the historian Elazar Barkan’s *The Guilt of Nations*, a text that outlines approaches to restitution in cases of historical injustice.

Since significant portions of my thesis rely upon German scholarship, many of the primary and secondary sources used in this project are available in German. As a result, a large number of the quotes included are direct translations into English. I take full responsibility for any discrepancies between the translated versions and the original quotes. For the sake of readers who know German, as well as for accountability purposes, I have made an effort to include the quotes in their original language in the footnotes where they appear throughout this document.

Because the Ovaherero and Nama have experienced a history of marginalization over the past century, there is an unfortunate lack of research into how these communities have reckoned with the genocide they experienced at the hands of German forces. As a result of the gaps in the historical record, I acknowledge that the section covering the legacy of German colonialism
within Southwest Africa is largely reliant upon the limited work of Western scholars. The relative abundance of sources dealing with how Germany remembers its colonial empire compared to those covering how the inhabitants of Southwest Africa/Namibia have experienced the legacy of German rule has led to a methodological imbalance in this thesis that is itself a reflection of the work that remains in addressing these neglected histories.

My project builds on the existing scholarship of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, taking into account the latest developments in the process of confronting German violence in Southwest Africa. The past two years have marked a watershed moment in German memory culture, as recent comparisons between German colonialism and the Holocaust have ignited a furious debate among historians, the likes of which have not been seen in Germany since controversies surrounding this subject arose in the 1980s. Furthermore, Germany’s relationship with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide has transformed dramatically over the past year alone. Just weeks after submitting my thesis proposal in April 2021, the German Government, in a surprise move, made an unprecedented offer of development aid to Namibia aimed at compensating the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama victims. Although this development compelled me to revise my initial plans for this project, I was extremely fortunate with my timing; one of the most rewarding aspects of working with this topic has been its relevance to ongoing events.

This thesis strives to contextualize the treatment of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide within the current state of Germany’s process of addressing its troubled history. While previous papers have compared the German response to the Southwest African genocide with its reckoning with other historical injustices—such as the Holocaust and the crimes of the East German regime—this subject deserves greater attention in light of the ongoing disputes among
scholars over Germany’s relationship with the colonial era. My project seeks to contribute a nuanced discussion of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide within the framework of German memory culture, revealing how the legacy of this event challenges established conceptions of coming to terms with a past plagued by acts of genocidal violence.
I. Historical Revisionism of the Colonial Era: German Approaches to the Ovaherero and Nama Genocide in the 20th Century

The bloody history of German colonialism in Southwest Africa began under innocent pretenses when members of the Rhenish Mission Society of Berlin arrived in the 1840s and established churches throughout the regions of Namaqualand and Damaraland. Alongside their efforts to convert the inhabitants of Southwest Africa to Christianity, these missionaries also came to occupy an important economic role, selling finished goods to Indigenous peoples at general stores they set up at each mission station.\(^3\) The success of these missionary-merchants over the following decades went on to attract the attention of professional merchants back in Germany, most notably the tobacco seller Adolf Lüderitz.

In 1883, Lüderitz bought an extensive parcel of land stretching down the west coast of Southwest Africa and extending 20 miles inland, marking the first large-scale German acquisition of territory in this region. On April 24th, 1884, Lüderitz successfully persuaded Otto von Bismarck to permit the German flag to be hoisted over this territory, thereby establishing this area as a Schutzgebiet (protectorate of the German Empire). German authority over this 580,000 square kilometer territory soon achieved international recognition at the Berlin Conference, which concluded in February 1885.\(^4\) This same year, Lüderitz proceeded to sell the entirety of his land holdings to the shareholders of the newly established Colonial Company for South-West Africa, leaving them with the responsibility of overseeing this colonial project. Ironically, the German delegation’s emphatic condemnation of the oppression of Indigenous Africans at the 1890 Anti-slavery Conference in Brussels convinced Great Britain to sign a treaty

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\(^3\) South-West Africa Administrator’s Office, “Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and Their Treatment by Germany” (H.M. Stationery Off., August 1918), 12.

allowing Germany to formally annex Southwest Africa,\(^5\) transforming this protectorate into a fully-fledged colony.

German settlers who arrived in Southwest Africa set their sights on expanding into Ovaherero and Nama lands, which they deemed most suitable for agriculture and grazing.\(^6\) Yet encroachment into these regions quickly fueled animosity between these groups and the colonizers, as German expansion posed a threat to the Ovaherero and Nama, who subsisted on cattle farming. When these tensions came to a head, the colonial administration did not hesitate to employ violence to aid the German community’s usurping of Indigenous lands. In April 1893, Captain Curt van François led German soldiers in a vicious surprise raid of the Nama settlement at Hornkranz, where colonial forces indiscriminately slaughtered men, women, and children. Reflecting on this atrocity, Nama Chief Hendrik Witbooi noted that “the Captain [van François] entered the camp and sacked it in so brutal a manner as I would never have thought a member of a White civilized nation capable of—a nation which knows the rules and ways of war.”\(^7\) The brutality that German forces exhibited during the Hornkranz massacre foretold the future horrors that would take place in Southwest Africa.

The rinderpest virus arrived in Southwest Africa in 1897, killing over 90% of Ovaherero cattle over the following years, further exacerbating frustrations with German settlers who capitalized on desperation by snatching up Ovaherero lands at deflated prices.\(^8\) Marginalized and economically debilitated, members of the Ovaherero lashed out against their oppressors, launching an armed revolt against German colonizers in January 1904. The German military

\(^8\) Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides*, 59.
responded to the outbreak of fighting by rapidly reinforcing its troop numbers on the ground, which in turn escalated the scope and brutality of this conflict. After German soldiers led by General Lothar von Trotha devastated the Ovaherero encampment at the Battle of Waterberg on August 11, the battered survivors retreated to the Omaheke Desert. Lothar von Trotha’s forces then pursued the Ovaherero and surrounded their positions; with escape routes blocked, thousands of the trapped Ovaherero nation succumbed to starvation or thirst in this barren region. The German army then rounded up the surviving members of the Ovaherero, imprisoning them in concentration camps where they faced horrendous conditions.

While the Nama, who held a long-standing rivalry with the Ovaherero, initially aligned themselves with Lothar von Trotha’s army, word of the German forces’ ruthless attack at Waterberg caused this group to abandon its alliance with the colonizers and launch its own uprising in October 1904. After waging a campaign of guerilla warfare, the Nama were also eventually overpowered by the German forces and surrendered in the early months of 1906. As was the case with the Ovaherero, Germans sent many of the surviving Nama to concentration camps, where mortality rates were extremely high due to disease and deprivation. Among those held captive, members of the Ovaherero and Nama deemed capable of work were also forced to grueling perform manual labor for the benefit of the colonial administration. Meanwhile, German forces continued to target the Nama who evaded capture by destroying their sources of food and water.

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9 David Olusoga, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 95.
By the time colonial authorities released the Indigenous prisoners from concentration camps in early 1908, an estimated 80% of the Ovaherero population and 60% of the Nama had died, a figure indicative of the scale of the atrocities committed in Southwest Africa.11 The indiscriminate violence inflicted upon civilians by the German military, as well as General Lothar von Trotha’s stated intent to annihilate the Ovaherero people, provide clear-cut evidence that these events constituted genocide, which the United Nations first defined in 1948 as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”12

Yet despite the scale and brutality of these events, it was not until a ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Ovaherero Uprising on August 14, 2004, that the German government acknowledged the atrocities it committed against the Ovaherero and Nama peoples for the first time. In a speech at this event, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, the German Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, conceded that “a century ago, the oppressors—blinded by colonial fervor—became agents of violence, discrimination, racism and annihilation in Germany’s name. The atrocities committed at that time would today be termed genocide—and nowadays General von Trotha would be prosecuted and convicted for such actions.”13 Why did a century pass before the German government acknowledged guilt for the genocide that took place under its colonial rule?

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Reports from the time of the Ovaherero and Nama uprisings shed light on public awareness of Germany’s violent response to the Indigenous groups’ uprisings. Writing in the October 1905 edition of the British monthly review *The Nineteenth Century and After*, the German-born author Otto Eltzbacher argues that Germany’s war with the Ovaherero arose through “the short-sightedness of her policy and by the incapacity and the harshness of her colonial officials.” The author goes on to strongly condemn German conduct, stating that “Germany’s ill-treatment of the South-West African natives undoubtedly constitutes not a private injury, but a public wrong; it is not only an offence against justice and humanity, sentiments upon which different nations and different individuals may differ, but also against public peace, public safety, and against public justice.” While Eltzbacher’s article is noteworthy both for its fiery critique of the colonizing forces as well as its publication while the conflicts in question were still ongoing, this author was not alone in recognizing German barbarity.

An August 1906 edition of the *Bulawayo Chronicle*, published by British colonists in Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), contains an article titled “The Herero Rising: Serious Allegations of Horrible Butchery,” which describes a statement by a German soldier who witnessed the shooting of 50 captive women and 38 children and was threatened with physical violence following his refusal to participate in the slaughter. The title of this story alone conveys the reality that contemporaries recognized the brutality of German conduct in Southwest

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15 Ibid., 533.
Africa. Word of the German military’s excessive violence reached a domestic audience as well, especially following the issuance of General Lothar von Trotha’s *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order).

This infamous command, in which General Lothar von Trotha instructed his forces that “within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot,”\(^\text{17}\) received harsh criticism back in Berlin for ordering German soldiers to target civilians, including women and children. In remarks delivered at the *Reichstag* (German parliament), Georg Ledebour of the Social-Democratic Party voiced his outrage over the tactics employed by the military in Southwest Africa. Ledebour argued that “at a minimum, in war, we must observe the rules of civilized warfare. When our soldiers are facing a barbaric enemy, they should not stoop to the level of the barbarians.”\(^\text{18}\) While this language frames the conflict between the Germans and the Ovaherero in racist terms, comparing the ‘civilized’ Germans to the ‘barbaric’ Indigenous Ovaherero, Ledebour’s statement nonetheless reflects awareness that the colonial regime was committing atrocities overseas. Indeed, disapproval of Lothar von Trotha’s order amounted to Kaiser Wilhelm II rescinding the extermination order in December 1904 and recalling the General from Southwest Africa in November 1905. Of course, the removal of Lothar von Trotha was largely a symbolic gesture, as German atrocities nonetheless continued in his absence over the following years.


German representations of the conflicts in Southwest Africa published in the aftermath of these genocidal acts, however, exhibit a strikingly remorseless tone. The official account of the war with the Ovaherero produced by German military historians in 1906 glorifies the campaign waged by German forces in no uncertain terms. This narrative lays out the harsh tactics employed by the military during this campaign of extermination: “no efforts, no deprivations were spared to rob the enemy of their last reserves of resilience; like game hunted half to death, they were driven from watering hole to watering hole, until finally, possessing no more will, they became victims of their own land. The waterless Omaheke [Desert] was supposed to complete what the German forces had started: the annihilation of the Herero people.”19 Not only did the historical record reflect the brutal violence inflicted upon the Ovaherero, but popular German literature also did not shy away from recounting the atrocities that took place in Southwest Africa.

_Afrikabücher_, fictional tales of adventure and conquest often based on colonists’ true experiences published both during and in the aftermath of the conflicts in Southwest Africa, portrayed the war in a similar fashion to the official account published by the German military. 20 Gustav Frenssen’s 1906 novel _Peter Moor’s Journey to Southwest Africa_, for example, contains graphic descriptions of the carnage that resulted from German forces’ attack on the Ovaherero people at the Battle of Waterberg. Frenssen writes:

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19 _Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika_ (Berlin: E. Mittler, 1906), 207. Original quote in German: “Keine Mühen, keine Entbehrungen wurden gescheut, um dem Feinde den letzten Rest seiner Widerstandskraft zu rauben; wie ein halb zu Tode gehetztes Wild war er von Wasserstelle zu Wasserstelle gescheucht, bis er schließlich, willenlos, ein Opfer der Natur seines eigenen Landes wurde. Die wasserlose Omaheke sollte vollenden, was die deutschen Waffen begonnen hatten: die Vernichtung des Hererovolkes.“

And there lay the wounded and the old, women and children. A number of babies lay helplessly languishing by mothers whose breasts hung down long and flabby. Others were lying alone, still living, with eyes and noses full of flies. Somebody sent out our black drivers and I think they helped them to die. All this life lay scattered there, both man and beast, broken in the knees, helpless, still in agony or already motionless; it looked as if it had all been thrown down out of the air. At noon we halted by water-holes which were filled to the very brim with corpses.21

At a later point in this book, a character who is a lieutenant in the German army defends the use of excessive violence against the Indigenous populations, claiming that “these blacks have deserved death before God and man, not because they have murdered two hundred farmers and have revolted against us, but because they have built no houses and dug no wells.”22

Frenssen’s novel, littered with depictions of extreme violence justified by racist beliefs, is emblematic of the motifs that permeated the genre of Afrikabücher at this time. As the German historian Medardus Brehl remarks, “It is striking that in the early publications on the colonial wars the annihilation of the Herero and Nama is neither disputed nor minimized, but rather is viewed as a reasonable and justified contribution . . . in what was believed to be an unavoidable confrontation between ‘Whites’ and ‘Blacks’ and between ‘culture’ and the ‘uncultured.’”23

Thus, the dominant narrative that emerged in Germany—both from a historiographical and literary perspective—praises the level of brutality exhibited by the military against Indigenous Southwest Africans.

22 Ibid., 232.
German atrocities are also described in an early attempt by the British to document the conflict with the Ovaherero and Nama, which culminated in the 1918 *Report on the Natives of South-west Africa and their Treatment by Germany* being drafted for Parliament. This document, commonly referred to as the *Blue Book*, condemns German soldiers’ massacre of the Herero in unambiguous language: “when viewed from the point of view of civilization and common humanity, what a comparison there is between this German barbarism and the attitude of the Herero chiefs, who before a shot was fired ordered their people to spare the lives of all German women and children and non-combatants!”24 This excerpt offers interesting contrast with the Parliamentarian Ledebour’s earlier critique of the military’s violence, in that it represents a complete reversal where the Germans are pitted as barbarians vis-à-vis the civilized Ovaherero. While British antagonism towards Germany given the context of World War I contributed to the *Blue Book*’s hypercritical tone,25 as did the British attitude that their own form of colonialism was more humane, this report nonetheless provides clear-cut evidence of early awareness that the German colonial regime had acted with excessive cruelty in the conflicts with the Ovaherero and Nama.

Unsurprisingly, the German government was outraged by *Blue Book*’s critique, and quickly fired back by producing its own perspective of the events in question. The German response, titled *The Treatment of Natives and Other Populations in the Colonial Possessions of Germany and England: An Answer to the English Blue Book of August 1918 “Report on the Natives of Southwest Africa and Their Treatment by Germany,”* published in 1919, sought to dispel Britain’s claim that Germany was unfit to preside over colonies. This report, written in German and translated into English, downplays German atrocities and seeks to rationalize these

violent acts by comparing them to cruelties that the British themselves inflicted upon the Indigenous inhabitants of their colonies. The German account also attempts to discredit the *Blue Book* by criticizing its reliance on Black Indigenous witnesses, whom the authors of this report claim “cannot have the slightest conception of the nature of an oath.” Not only does this study reflect the degree to which notions of racial superiority remained ingrained in the German colonial narrative, but the document’s tone is also emblematic of the narrative shift that depictions of German imperialism underwent in the wake of World War I.

In the aftermath of the Central Powers’ defeat, German society continued to glorify its rule over German Southwest Africa while simultaneously minimizing the vicious tactics employed by the military in conflicts with the Ovaherero and Nama peoples. Consistent with the *Blue Book*’s criticism of German conduct in Southwest Africa and its other overseas possessions, the Treaty of Versailles dispossessed the former *Kaiserreich* of all its colonies in 1919 and demanded high reparations payments from the German government for war damages. Humiliated by the military loss and the dismantling of Germany’s global empire, German society eagerly latched on to historical narratives that contested the harsh terms that the victorious Allies imposed on the nation.

Increasingly, depictions of Germany as a benevolent colonial power were incorporated into accounts that contested the nation’s responsibility for starting WWI. As the political scientist René Lemarchand points out, “unsurprisingly, in the days of the Weimar Republic, when colonial revisionism emerged as a major theme among German historians, many dismissed British criticisms of Germany’s war as *Kolonialschuldlüge* (colonial guilt lie), itself part of the

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so-called *Kriegsschuldlüge* (war guilt lie).”

Across German society, people readily embraced this revised narrative of events. According to the memory studies scholar Britta Schilling, “many Germans, including those who had traditionally shown little enthusiasm for colonialism, felt an affinity towards the nation’s former overseas territories following the Treaty of Versailles.”

Thus, although the Second Reich had been dissolved, “colonial fantasies” continued to occupy a prominent space in the German public consciousness through the proliferation of these distorted, apologetic accounts.

*Afrikabücher* continued to flourish in Germany throughout the interwar period, although the tone of these narratives changed considerably after Germany lost its colonial possessions.

Whereas *Afrikabücher* published while Germany was an imperial power had glorified the violence that colonial forces inflicted upon the Ovaherero and Nama, books published during the Weimar Republic sought to downplay the brutal aspects of German rule. This reversal embodied the wider narrative shift in German portrayals of colonialism that took place during this era.

Britta Schilling observes:

> The approach seen in Afrikabücher after the First World War thus differs markedly from accounts written by Germans in Africa up to and into the First World War. Earlier accounts, as yet uninfluenced by the Treaty of Versailles and the ‘colonial guilt lie’, openly and unapologetically discuss violent actions against blacks, because at that point these actions were still seen as legitimate… In the Afrikabücher following the First World War, few authors allude to the colonial wars which preceded it and focus instead on events which cultivated the myth of the ‘loyal native.’

Such accounts not only sought to rewrite the history of German colonialism but also bolstered the wider movement seeking to promote the return of “lost” territories to Germany.

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27 Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides*, 52.
29 Ibid., 3.
30 Ibid., 31-32.
Revisionist efforts to minimize the atrocities committed in Southwest Africa were accompanied by attempts to rekindle German colonialism. German academics continued to research and publish on the nation’s former colonies during the Weimar Republic, with universities sponsoring “a surprisingly healthy publishing market for books devoted to a range of colonial topics.” At the same time, organizations such as the Deutsche Koloniale Gesellschaft (German Colonial Society) hosted events and lectures promoting the positive outcomes of German colonialism as well as “perpetuat[ed] an active visual campaign and nostalgia in the form of illustrated stories and merchandise associated with the former colonies.” These efforts only intensified as the Weimar Republic collapsed.

During the rise of National Socialism, the Nazi party played off public sentiments that the confiscation of German colonies by the League of Nations had been unjust as it promoted the resurgence of a German global empire. Literature on the colonial experience continued to play an important role during this time, as Hitler’s regime promoted sales of Hans Grimm’s 1926 novel *Volk ohne Raum* (Masses without Space) after assuming power over the national government in 1933. Though not a National-Socialist himself, Grimm’s advancement of German territorial expansion in this *Afrikabuch* represented “an overt expression of a general radical conservative political stance similar in many ways to that of the Nazis,” for whom the expansion of German *Lebensraum* (living space) was a key component of their vision for

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31 Elaine Martin and Florian Krobb, eds., *Weimar Colonialism Discourses and Legacies of Post-Imperialism in Germany After 1918*. (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2014), 129.
33 Martin and Krobb, eds., *Weimar Colonialism*, 129.
reviving the nation. Following the defeat of the Axis Powers in World War II, however, the Ovaherero and Nama genocide largely faded into obscurity in Germany.

Divergent trends in historiography mirrored the fracture between East and West Germany, which separated into two distinct countries in 1949. Yet the overall silence in both states after 1945 on German imperialism has led contemporary scholars to describe this era as one in which the two states suffered from “postcolonial amnesia.” Yet while the term amnesia connotes a passive process of forgetting events in the past, it is crucial not to overlook the pernicious legacy of earlier attempts in Germany to rewrite the nation’s history. Although the historian Reinhard Kößler claims that “after World War II, colonial revisionism was no more an option” in Germany, an investigation into the historiography from this era tells a different story. Alongside efforts to obscure the dark chapters of Germany’s colonial past, the German studies scholars Elaine Martin and Florian Krobb note that the “Weimar’s colonial revisionism echoed loudly in the silence that followed in the wake of the Third Reich.” Indeed, glorification of the colonial era continued to pervade German historiography.

An examination of articles published in prominent West German magazines in the decades following the end of World War II confirms the extent to which German imperialism was a marginalized topic in print culture. Whereas colonialism itself remained a major theme in articles during the 1950s and 1960s, as evidenced by coverage of contemporary events in Germany’s former colonies, only “scattered allusions to German colonial history”

36 Kößler, “Germany: From Late Coloniser to First Postcolonial Nation,” 64.
39 Monika Albrecht, “(Post-) Colonial Amnesia? German Debates on Colonialism and Decolonization in the Post-War Era,” in German Colonialism and National Identity, ed. Michael Perraudin and Juergen
contextualized the historical significance of these territories. Furthermore, of the limited references to Germany’s imperial past that appear, two articles in the popular magazine *Der Spiegel* “repeated the idea of the *koloniale Schuldüge* (denial of colonial guilt) in the post-war era.”

References to the atrocities Germany committed in Southwest Africa, though rare, also perpetuated the myths that arose through the wave of historical revisionism that gained footing during the Weimar Republic. One *Der Spiegel* article from 1960 goes so far as to cast doubt on whether the extermination of the Ovaherero even took place: “The Germans—so the British authors of the White Paper claimed in those days—administered South-West Africa without taking care of the Negros’ well-being and right to exist. The Herero peoples were (supposedly) decimated—from 80,000 to 15,000.” Not only did reportage treat the history of German colonialism as an afterthought, but the few descriptions that exist in the historical record demonstrate the entrenchment of narratives that belie the violence that Germany inflicted upon the Ovaherero and Nama.

Positive portrayals of imperialism also remained apparent in German art, as exemplified by the photographs of Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl, who had directed several films during the Third Reich, made several trips to photograph the Nuba people, an Indigenous people of Sudan. *The Last of the Nuba* and *The People of Kau*, collections of her images in published in 1973 and 1976, respectively, enjoyed commercial and critical success and helped to restore her reputation

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41 Ibid., 192.
as an artist despite her Nazi past. The scholar Lisa Gates points out flaws in Riefenstahl’s exoticized, distorted depictions of Indigenous people, arguing that these images foster “a space for continued imperialism, a kind of a metaphorical domination that attempts to exert another form of control over the African.” Not only does Riefenstahl promote an overly primitive view of Indigenous Sudanese people by casting her subjects as either “noble-“ or “ignoble savages,” but the artist’s own writings also exhibit themes that reflect colonialist attitudes. Analyzing a passage from Riefenstahl’s journal, Gates observes that for the artist, her “journey itself is carefully inscribed in another classic imperialist trope—the hunt—only now, of course, it is the camera that is used to shoot.” Riefenstahl’s work thus echoes the motifs of the Afrikabücher published decades earlier.

West German education curricula after World War II similarly overlooked the Herero and Nama conflict, as well as the crimes of the Nazis. History textbooks published in the 1950s downplayed the impact of German imperialism by pointing out the nation’s “late entry into the circle of colonial powers.” Only beginning in the early 1960s did acknowledgement of Germany’s participation in the wider European scramble for African territories began to appear in these texts. Yet even in the cases where colonialism received recognition, laudatory descriptions of European colonial rule perpetuating the revisionist tropes that pervaded German historiography after World War I continued to dominate the historical narrative. For example, a 1960 public-school geography textbook paints the following portrait of German colonial efforts:

43 Ibid., 234.
44 Ibid., 240-241.
46 Ibid.
“As a result of the colonial activity of the Europeans, prosperity among the native populations grew. The inhuman struggles among the tribes stopped.”\(^{47}\) It was not until a decade later that colonizers’ violent acts began to factor into discussions of German imperialism, with the 1976 volume of *Geschichtliche Weltkunde (Historical Geography)* emerging as one of the first West German textbooks to reference the conflicts in Southwest Africa against the Ovaherero and Nama.\(^{48}\)

While discussions of Germany’s colonial atrocities were overwhelmingly relegated to the periphery of public consciousness in the decades following the Second World War, it is important to recognize that this subject was never entirely ignored. In the German Democratic Republic in particular, anti-imperialist sentiments contributed to criticisms of West German policies towards Germany’s former colonies. A 1965 document published by the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee in the German Democratic Republic accuses the Federal Republic of Germany of neglecting the horrors of the colonial era, claiming that “the atrocities of the German colonial mercenaries, the cruel oppression of the native population, and ruthless extermination of the citizens opposing the robbery of their country is either being silently ignored[,] reported as being harmless[,] or even falsified as being humane deeds.”\(^{49}\) The authors then go on to explicitly mention the violence inflicted by German soldiers upon the Indigenous people of Southwest Africa. Using the antiquated term ‘Hottentot’ to describe the Nama people, the report states: “Passed over in silence is also the fact that the German imperialists waged a cruel war of extermination against the Hereros and Hottentots.”\(^{50}\) It is especially significant that this

\(^{47}\) Paul Friedländer and Hartmut Schilling, eds., *The Neo-Colonialism of the West German Federal Republic* (Berlin: Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee in the German Democratic Republic, 1965), 193.

\(^{48}\) Garske and Müller, “Die Geschichte Sichtbar Machen,” 146.

\(^{49}\) Friedländer and Schilling, eds., *The Neo-Colonialism of the West German Federal Republic*, 192.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 193.
description of the 1904-1908 conflict as a “cruel war of extermination” approximates a characterization of genocide.

Just one year later, in 1966, the East German researcher Horst Drechsler produced an account of German colonialism in Southwest Africa reflective of the critical perspective that had taken root in the GDR. In his book Let Us Die Fighting: The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915), Drechsler argues that German soldiers employed a “policy of extermination” and that the slaughter of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples amounted to genocide. In publishing this work, Drechsler became known as the first person to explicitly link the concept of genocide to the conflicts in Southwest Africa. It is worth noting, however, that Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term genocide, also wrote about the Ovaherero and Nama in unpublished manuscripts from the early 1950s. Although Lemkin never calls this event genocide outright, some argue that his descriptions of the brutality that took place are consistent with the definition he created for what constitutes genocide.

Although recognition of the genocidal nature of the slaughter of the Ovaherero and Nama originated in East Germany, the West German historian Helmut Bley soon reached the same conclusion in his 1968 book Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894-1914 (titled South-West Africa under German Rule in the English translation). And while it is tempting to view these scholars’ findings as clear-cut evidence against the persistence of historical revisionism of the colonial era, such an interpretation may exaggerate Drechsler and

Bley’s influence. According to Jürgen Zimmerer, a specialist on the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, the works of these two authors largely “marked the state of knowledge about German colonial crimes in Namibia for almost 30 years.”\(^{54}\) While this statement reflects how research on German colonial atrocities remained largely confined to pockets of academia until the 1990s, Zimmerer’s timeline overlooks a few important developments.

The 1985 publication of the United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on Human Rights’ “Revised and updated report on the question of the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide” brought the neglected conflicts in Southwest Africa back into focus on an international stage. This study, commonly referred to as the “Whitaker Report” after its author, Ben Whitaker, lists General Lothar von Trotha’s *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order) and the poisoning of Ovaherero waterholes as evidence that this conflict was the first genocide of the 20th century.\(^{55}\) Notably, this document makes no mention of the Nama genocide. Yet despite the publication of this document by the UN, legal pressure from representatives of the Ovaherero people in the aftermath of Namibian independence from South Africa in 1990 was ultimately what brought about a surge of scholarship on German colonial atrocities. A discussion of the memory culture surrounding the Ovaherero and Nama genocide within Southwest Africa is necessary to understand why Germany only began to again pay attention to these atrocities more than 80 years after the fact.


II. An Enduring Legacy: Memories of the Herero and Nama Genocide in Southwest Africa/Namibia

Whereas the legacy of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide became increasingly eclipsed by silence and denial in both East and West Germany over the course of the 20th century, these events did not fade from public memory to the same extent in Southwest Africa. There, annual commemorations of these conflicts and the lasting impact of the genocide on the victim groups prevented historical amnesia from setting in. While developments within Southwest Africa over the course of the 20th century have changed how various groups memorialize the German atrocities, lasting inequalities that arose through this genocide remain painful reminders of colonialism. As it became clear that Namibian independence would not address these longstanding disparities, Ovaherero and Nama representatives put pressure on Germany to atone for the violence its military inflicted. Thus, the legacies of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide in Southwest Africa and in Germany are intertwined, as developments in newly-independent Namibia caused this genocide to rise out the shadows of neglect in Germany.

Among the Ovaherero people, rituals commemorating the genocide they experienced at the hands of the German military date back to the years following these atrocities. Some Ovaherero survivors of the slaughter at the Battle of Waterberg fled east from Southwest Africa to the neighboring British-controlled Bechuanaland Protectorate, in modern-day Botswana. Meanwhile, those who were unable to evade capture survived as prisoners or laborers in camps run by the German administration until 1908. It was not until South African troops invaded Southwest Africa in 1915 and subsequently took control of the territory, however, that the Ovaherero once again began being able to live freely and reestablish themselves in the territories
they had occupied prior to the war with German forces. Yet only after the death of the Ovaherero Chief Samuel Maherero eight years later, in March 1923, does evidence appear documenting a formal culture of commemoration within this group.

Among the Ovaherero, Samuel Maherero was widely regarded as a champion of the uprising against the colonial regime, and the transportation of his remains from the Bechuanaland Protectorate—where he had stayed since the disastrous Battle of Waterberg—to the historic center of the Ovaherero people in Okahandja took on significant symbolic meaning. Paradoxically, the gathering assembled at his funeral on August 26, 1923, represented a moment of revitalization for the Ovaherero community: “‘Samuel Maherero’s burial was the largest social and political event since the war’ and formed the completion of the process of revindication, in which a collective Herero identity was made new and filled with life after the catastrophe of genocide and land expropriation.” Each year since 1923, Herero Day has been celebrated as an Omazemburukiro, or commemorative holiday, honoring Maherero’s legacy and “remembering the causes of his and many others’ exile – that is, the genocidal aspects of the war” against the German forces. Customs memorializing the conflict with the German military took root among members of the Nama people, too.

Often overlooked in the literature on the memory culture of Southwest Africa/Namibia, which focuses predominantly on the practices of the Ovaherero and the descendants of German colonists, are the early memorial practices of the Nama tribes. As with the Ovaherero, there is little evidence of a formal culture of remembrance in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, a reflection of the silences of the archive as well as the fractured identity of the victim groups in the wake of German atrocities. The first example of a deliberate memorial culture among the Nama with respect to the German genocide appears among the Witbooi, a tribe within this larger group, more than two decades after the release of Indigenous prisoners from German concentration camps.

After severing his people’s alliance with the German administration against the Ovaherero, Hendrik Witbooi, the leader of the Witbooi and “perhaps the greatest of the Nama warrior chiefs,”59 played an instrumental role in leading the Nama uprising against colonial forces. Killed in combat against German forces at the age of 75, Hendrik Witbooi came to be seen as a martyr to the cause of anticolonial resistance among the Nama tribes. Citing a German report by Rhenish missionaries in Nama territory, the historian Reinhard Kößler claims that the 1930 unveiling of the tombstone of Hendrik Witbooi’s son, Isaak Witbooi, whose epitaph is also dedicated to his father, represents “the first veritable trace of the annual event that became the public symbol for the collective identity of the Witbooi and also for their historical demands right up until the present day.”60 The Witbooi community continues to celebrate Witbooi Fees, Afrikaans for Witbooi Festival, annually on October 29, the date of Hendrik Witbooi’s death.

There is also early evidence of commemoration practices among settler communities honoring the German soldiers killed in the conflict with Indigenous peoples. A letter dated November 8, 1907, describes early an plan for financing a monument to the wars in Southwest Africa: “an official and externally noticeable step will be taken on behalf of [monetary] collections for the memorial to the Schutztruppe [German protective troops].”61 This letter reveals that even prior to the release of Ovaherero and Nama prisoners from concentration camps, officials in Berlin were already working on the construction of a memorial in honor of the fallen soldiers of the German forces.

These efforts culminated in the construction of the Reiterdenkmal (Equestrian Monument), a towering statue depicting a soldier on horseback installed at the heart of the German settlement of Windhoek on January 27, 1912, the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm II. The prominence of this memorial is reflected by a newspaper article on the British invasion of Southwest Africa in 1915, which reports that “Until a few days before [their] occupation, the guns of the Transnaval Artillery which were captured at Sandfontein early in the campaign, adorned the Ovaherero memorial in the center of the town.”62 German memorial culture also appears in the coastal settlement of Swakopmund, where colonizers erected a sculpture dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the First Marine Expedition corps in August 1908. Alongside these physical testaments to the conflict of 1904-1908, commemorative events among the German population also shaped the memory of these conflicts in Southwest Africa.

While the German victory over the Ovaherero at the Battle of Waterberg had been celebrated each year since the first anniversary of this event in 1905, it was not until 1923 that settlers established a formal ceremony memorializing the German soldiers who died fighting. This timing is due in part to the passage of the 1923 Treaty of London, which loosened restrictions on German colonists’ liberties in Southwest Africa imposed by Allied authorities following their taking control of this territory in 1915. The repeal of constraints on expression allowed that “for the first time since the defeat of the German Empire in the First World War and the takeover of what was formerly German Southwest Africa by the South African Union, were the Germans granted cultural and political recognition — a condition that made confident public remembrance on colonial war possible again.” From the onset of practices commemorating the conflict of 1904-08, memory culture in Southwest Africa has been shaped by tensions between Indigenous groups and the German community, as well as with the South African Apartheid regime in power.

The inequalities within Southwest African that arose as a result of the genocide that German forces perpetrated against the Ovaherero and Nama have not only continued to have damaging effects on the victim communities, but also serve as persistent reminders of the conflicts. During these wars, German settlers laid claim to large swathes of Indigenous land that had been confiscated by colonial authorities, and the refusal to return these parcels to their original owners has had a detrimental effect on the Ovaherero and Nama, communities that traditionally have been reliant on cattle farming. Despite its overall hostility to the Germans, the

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63 Larissa Förster, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften: wie Deutsche und Herero in Namibia des Kriegs von 1904 Gedenken* (Campus Verlag, 2010), 188.
64 Ibid., 191. Original quote in German: „Erstmals seit der Niederlage der Deutschen Reiches im Ersten Weltkrieg und der Übernahme des ehemaligen Deutsch-Südwestafrikas durch die Südafrikanische Union wurde den Deutschen kulturelle und politische Anerkennung zuteil – ein Umstand, der das selbstbewusste öffentliche Erinnern an den Kolonialkrieg wohl erst möglich machte.“
South African government that took control of Southwest Africa in 1915 perpetuated this unfair practice by allowing German settlers to retain possession of their farms.\textsuperscript{65} In his study of the legal ramifications of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, the human rights scholar Jeremy Sarkin traces contemporary economic disparities between the German community and the Indigenous populations of Southwest Africa back to this conflict, claiming that these outcomes are “a direct legacy of colonialism and land appropriation.”\textsuperscript{66} Subsequent policies put in place by the South African government further compounded the disadvantaged position of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples in Southwest African society.

While the South African authorities initially targeted the German community, this group overwhelmingly experienced privileged status over Indigenous communities throughout the second half of the 20th century. Although the South African administration initially restricted the freedoms of German settlers in Southwest Africa in the wake of World War I, these hostilities thawed after the Treaty of London, and nationality in the South African Union was extended to all members of the German community in 1924. The entrance of South Africa into World War II on the side of the Allies in September 1939 led the colonial administration to once again crackdown on the German community’s activities, however, with the government placing known Nazi sympathizers in detention camps, shutting down German political organizations, and preventing the ceremony commemorating the Battle of Waterberg from taking place.\textsuperscript{67} Yet relations changed course again when Daniel François Malan and his National Party took power in South Africa in 1948. Promoting its racist policy of Apartheid, Malan’s administration embraced the German community as a “group with equal rights among the white community of Southwest

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{67} Förster, \textit{Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften}, 200.
Africa.” The promotion of social status for German colonists and their descendants stoked tensions between this group and the Ovaherero and Nama communities.

Preferential treatment by the government towards descendants of German settlers coincided with renewed efforts by the Ovaherero and Nama to protest the legacy of the genocide in Southwest Africa. Granting full political rights to the settler community allowed for the resumption of German commemorative practices, and a ceremony that glorified the war against the Ovaherero and Nama and honored the German soldiers who died fighting at the Battle of Waterberg enjoyed a resurgence beginning in 1954. During this decade, members of the Ovaherero established the South West African National Union (SWANU), a political party that drew heavily on the experience of the conflict of 1904-1908. That “the loss of land incurred in the Ovaherero genocide proved a major mobilizing factor,” for this party expresses the degree to which the memory of genocide continued to loom large among the Ovaherero people at this time. In 1959, the pro-Apartheid South African regime came down hard on the SWANU’s activities, forcing many Ovaherero leaders at the helm of this organization to go into exile.

The Ovaherero community became divided as a result of the German community being granted new privileges, the reinvigorated celebrations among Germans of the atrocities their forebears committed against the Ovaherero and Nama, and the government’s crackdown on SWANU political activity. While the Ovaherero chief Hosea Kutako looked to pursue a policy of appeasement regarding the German community’s renewed celebration of the slaughter that took

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68 Ibid. Original quote in German: „…[Malan] machte sich für einen Verlieb der Deutschen in Südwestafrika stark und erkannte sie also gleichberechtigte Bevölkerungsgruppe innerhalb der weißen südwestafrikanischen Gesellschaft an.“
69 Ibid., 201.
place at the Battle of Waterberg, younger members of this group protested this conciliatory approach. Writing in the *Windhoek Advertiser* in 1964, Clemens Kapuuo, who went on to become the chief of the Ovaherero people, voiced his displeasure with the status of his group in Southwest Africa and the German community’s glorification of the war: “The members of the *Alte Kameraden* [German Veterans Association] are today a free people whereas the Hereros are not and are under a foreign Government which was elected partly by members of the *Alte Kameraden*. It is natural that the Hereros would be opposed to the celebration of a battle which placed them under foreign domination up to this day.”

The debate over commemoration practices of the genocide reveals how battles fought over memorial practices kept memories of this atrocity fresh in the minds of the descendants of the victim communities decades after the fact.

Animosity between the Ovahero people and the German settler community does not tell the whole story of their relations, however, as a campaign seeking to resist South African administration caused an unlikely association between these groups. The South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO), established in 1960, emerged as a political organization seeking to liberate Southwest Africa from South African colonial rule. Organized primarily by members of the Ovambo, the largest ethnic group in Southwest Africa, SWAPO initially aligned with the Ovahero-led SWANU party; however, “due to much rivalry between internal and external factions, this coalition was short-lived.” Thus, when this party began to engage in violent resistance against the South African regime in 1966, Ovahero members of the SWANU found themselves at odds with the SWAPO’s liberation movement. Meanwhile, members of the

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71 Förster, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften*, 205.
German community perceived the SWAPO as a threat to their safety and their privileged status as white people under Apartheid.\textsuperscript{74}

As the Ovaherero and German communities sought to distance themselves from the SWAPO, these former enemies grew closer to one another from a political standpoint, a pivot that had a direct impact on the memorial culture of the 1904-1908 conflict. In emphasizing these groups’ common interests, Werner Bertelsmann, a former editor of the oldest German-language newspaper in Southwest Africa, explicitly played off the memory of the Ovaherero genocide. Writing on the dangers posed by the SWAPO-led liberation movement in a 1969 newspaper article, Bertelsmann mentions that after achieving independence from colonial powers, both Nigeria and Sudan spiraled into civil wars during which far more people died than in the Battle of Waterberg.\textsuperscript{75} Changes took hold in commemorative practices, too. Over the course of the 1970s, organizers of the German community’s ceremony of the anniversary of the Battle of Waterberg increasingly dialed back the most ostentatious aspects of the event, which they recognized as being divisive towards the Ovaherero community and counterproductive to their alliance against the SWAPO.\textsuperscript{76} Shockingly, ceremonies commemorating the Battle of Waterberg came to be events where the Ovaherero and German communities emphasized their commonalities.

In 1976, Clemens Kapuuo, the leader of the Ovaherero people, accepted an invitation by the committee that organized the annual commemoration of the Battle of Waterberg to participate in this event. Although Kapuuo was assassinated before he could attend, his successor, Kuaima Riruako, was present at the 1978 ceremony alongside a delegation made up of

\textsuperscript{74} Förster, \textit{Postkoloniale Erinnerungslandschaften}, 214.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 216.
other members of the Ovaherero people. Reciprocally, German war veterans attended the celebration of Maherero Day that following year.77 Riruako returned to the Waterberg commemoration again in 1981, delivering a speech emphasizing the need for cooperation between Germans and the Ovaherero: “It follows the course of history, that enemies become friends—friends, whom one can rely on. There is no hate or resentment in the hearts of the Herero. Our hand is extended over the graves to friendship and readiness to work together to create a homeland for all out of this land.”78 In alluding to the colonial soldiers and Ovaherero killed in this war, Riruako added gravitas to the prospect of an alliance between the settlers and the Ovaherero people.

The Ovaherero and Nama genocide also factored heavily into the rhetoric that SWAPO leadership employed throughout their campaign for independence from South Africa. Despite its contentious relationship with the Ovaherero community, the party leveraged the story of German atrocities in Southwest Africa in justifying the need for a new wave of anticolonial resistance against the Apartheid regime. The organization co-opted the memory of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, weaving these groups’ experiences into a narrative claiming that all Indigenous groups in Southwest Africa suffered equally under the yoke of colonialism. Jan-Bart Gewald, professor of African history, notes how the SWAPO spokesperson Peter Katjavivi deliberately adapted this earlier conflict to fit his party’s agenda:

Well-versed in Namibian history, Katjavivi, in condemning the attacks of South African forces, did not hesitate to liken them to those perpetrated by von Trotha seventy-five years earlier. The anti-colonial struggles of the Herero and Nama came

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77 Ibid., 223.
to be applied to all of Namibia, as if the nationalist struggle had begun with the wars undertaken by Imperial Germany against the two groups.\footnote{Jan-Bart Gewald, “Imperial Germany and the Herero of Southern Africa,” 70.}

In addition to distorting the scope of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, SWAPO leaders also imposed nationalist overtones on the commemoration practices of the victim communities.

During its quest for Southwest-African independence, the SWAPO altered the meanings of Ovaherero rituals memorializing their experience of genocide. Significantly, the first attack by South African forces on the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (SWAPO’s military wing) occurred on August 26, 1966—the same day of the year as the annual Herero Day celebration. Viewed by SWAPO as the onset of its struggle against the Apartheid regime, this date has been celebrated as “Heroes’ Day” on each anniversary since. The SWAPO party capitalized on the coincidence that Samuel Maherero’s burial and the initial skirmish with the South African military lined up on the same day by again incorporating the Ovaherero’s experience of victimhood at the hands of the German army into its proto-national myth of common anticolonial resistance.\footnote{Ronald Niezen, “Speaking for the Dead: The Memorial Politics of Genocide in Namibia and Germany,” \textit{International Journal of Heritage Studies} 24, no. 5 (May 28, 2018), 13.} The recasting of what Herero Day signifies likewise parallels the transformation that the commemoration of Hendrik Witbooi’s death underwent.

As with Herero Day, SWAPO’s liberation struggle caused the celebration of Hendrik Witbooi’s contributions to anticolonial resistance to take on new significance. The historian Reinhard Kößler describes the deliberate revision of this event: “the annual celebration dates back to a simple memorial service that was transformed in the course of the liberation struggle into a representation of the diverse national culture and politics of Namibia, without its central point being abandoned through these extensions across cultures.”\footnote{Reinhart Kößler, “Namibiens Deutschland: Afrikanische Perspektiven,” 67. Original quote in German: „Das ebenfalls jährlich begangene Ereignis geht auf einen schlanken Gedenkgottesdienst zurück, wurde}
was the decision to redesignate the October 29 holiday *Witbooi Fees* as another Heroes’ Day in 1980. A crucial distinction between this event’s narrative shift and that of Herero Day, however, is that unlike the Ovaherero, the Witbooi people wanted Hendrik Witbooi’s legacy to become a rallying cry for nationalism. Kößler notes that renaming the celebration “came after the majority of the Witbooi leadership had joined SWAPO and indicates a conscious effort to merge communal with explicitly national concerns.” Whereas the SWAPO co-opted Herero Day despite widespread Ovaherero opposition to this party, Kößler suggests that the Witbooi played an active role in adapting this event to fit the narrative of national unity.

As the prospect of Southwest-African independence loomed, Ovaherero leaders increased efforts to make the world aware of their plight. In 1988 and 1989, exiled SWANU activists living in Germany appealed to the Dutch anti-Apartheid movement for support in making a legal case against the West German government over the colonial regime’s atrocities. These efforts did not come fruition, however. Rather, it was the establishment of the state of Namibia out of Southwest Africa in early 1990 that created the conditions necessary for the Ovahereros’ pleas to make waves among a domestic audience as well as in Germany.

Representatives of the Ovaherero seized the occasion of Namibian independence as an opportunity to address the historic injustices this group had experienced. While the South African regime’s removal initially appeared to be an encouraging sign that a new nation would finally address ongoing inequalities that arose through the German genocide, this proved not to
be the case. The SWAPO-majority government that took power in 1990 did not prioritize remedying the injustices experienced by minority groups such as the Ovaherero and Nama, as the party viewed policies favoring certain groups over others as being at odds with its vision of overcoming sectarianism. Many Ovahereros’ continued opposition to the SWAPO added to the administration’s unwillingness to entertain such calls for remedying historical injustices. As it became clear that the new regime would not take on the challenge of combating the pernicious legacies of German colonialism, the Ovaherero community instead turned its attention to Germany, which had recently become reunified after 28 years of being divided into East and West Germany. The historian Karie Morgan describes the circumstance that caused this pivot:

Feelings of being sidelined in the new nation-state and even of betrayal by SWAPO during the liberation struggle heightened the interest of some Hereros in publicly remembering and addressing their early experiences with German colonialism. Amid these politically and ethnically based tensions some Hereros reclaimed 1904–1907 as a genocide and a matter to be taken up with Germany, in part as a means of regaining political agency that was effectively lost in the transition from South African to Swapo administration.  

Aside from the domestic dynamics that shaped the Ovaherero community’s decision to address its restitution claims to Germany, external trends also played a crucial role in bringing about this development. Increased scrutiny of historical atrocities on an international level coincided with these events, paving the way for Ovaherero representatives to make legal claims against Germany.

In 1991, Ovaherero Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako publicly demanded that the either Namibian government return Ovaherero lands stolen under German colonial rule or the Ovaherero would attempt to obtain compensation for damages from the German government.  

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87 Ibid., 28.
marking the first signs of what would become a decades-long pursuit of a legal victory against Germany. The decision to seek damages from the German government, rather than focusing solely on pressuring the SWAPO into confronting the legacies of colonialism, was in part inspired by wider movements to confront historical injustices at this time. The human rights scholar Jeremy Sarkin identifies that Namibian independence “overlapped with major growth in international justice, including justice and reparations for past human rights violations in the domestic context. Accordingly, independence brought rights, and with them responsibilities, for the rehabilitation of the communities of Namibia.”\textsuperscript{88} German society, itself undergoing a renewed reckoning with the horrors of the Holocaust and East German crimes, proved a receptive target to these cries for justice. While the legal challenge against the German government gained little ground at this time, over the course of the 1990s, the movement to achieve historical justice attracted the attention of a handful of academics. Through Ovaherero activism, supplemented by the critical research of academics like the historians Jürgen Zimmerer, Jan-Bart-Gewald, and Gesine Krüger,\textsuperscript{89} the Ovaherero and Nama genocide finally began to creep out of the corners of obscurity in Germany.

III. Denial within a Culture of Memory: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and Colonial Genocide

Crucial to studying the memory of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide is the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming the past), which refers to Germany’s process of confronting its violent history. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has come to primarily refer to reckoning with the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, particularly the Holocaust. The German political scientist Peter Reichel writes that “every person who hears or uses the word immediately knows that it refers to the National-Socialist past and only to it.”

While efforts brought about by external forces, such as the trials of high-ranking Nazis accused of committing war crimes at Nuremberg, the processes of denazification in both East and West Germany, and the financial payments to the state of Israel and Jewish victims of the Holocaust by the German government represented key components of the nation’s response to the Holocaust, these efforts do not fall under *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Rather, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* applies to an internal movement beginning in the 1980s aimed at promoting public acknowledgement of historical injustices in Germany. Specifically, this process has been articulated through the erection of memorials dedicated to the victims of Nazi Germany as well as campaigns to educate the public about the history and legacy of the Holocaust.

Although *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* initially focused on reckoning with Nazi crimes, contrary to Reichel’s quote above, this term has also been applied to the process of coming to terms with other chapters of German history. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the reunification of East and West Germany one year later, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* also came to encompass efforts aimed at reckoning with the human

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rights abuses of the GDR regime. Yet despite the intense focus on public memory within Germany, the Ovaherero and Nama genocide received comparatively little attention until recent years.

The scope of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has significant implications for the memory of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, as its emphasis on the Nazi era has had an impact on how Germany has addressed other historical wrongs. Peter Reichel observes that “as long as the expression ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’ and the consequences of the Third Reich dominated public discourse, it seemed as if every other past period were rendered meaningless, as if all the prior history leading to our present were condensed into the 12 year-long dictatorship under Hitler.” This quote suggests that by focusing predominantly on National Socialism and the Holocaust specifically, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has had the effect of minimizing the significance of other periods of German history.

Indeed, scholars have noted the discrepancies between Germany’s emphasis on reckoning with the Nazi era and its lack of engagement with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. Human rights scholar Jeremy Sarkin views the neglect of the atrocities in Southwest Africa by Minister of State Kerstin Müller, who represented the German government at the 2004 Stockholm International Forum on Preventing Genocide, as evidence of the nation’s failure to acknowledge the full scope of its historical responsibility for genocide. While Müller’s speech at this conference stressed that her country’s history was “inseparably bound up with the Holocaust”

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and that Germans “have acknowledged our responsibility for that genocide and accepted the obligations such a responsibility entails,” she made no mention of the Ovaherero and Nama. And although Müller’s rhetoric reflects the extent to which Germany has reckoned with the Holocaust, Sarkin argues that the absence of any reference to the Ovaherero and Nama peoples showed that the nation was “unwilling to deal directly with the genocide it committed forty years before that time” in Southwest Africa. While Sarkin does not posit that the focus on the Holocaust has obstructed efforts at coming to terms with the colonial past, he points out the glaring disparities between Germany’s relationship to this later genocide and that experienced by the Ovaherero and Nama peoples.

Other academics have contested the notion that Vergangenheitsbewältigung has hindered acknowledgment of colonial genocide, instead claiming that this process has made Germany more inclined to take responsibility for its other historical injustices. The prominent German historian Jürgen Zimmerer maintains that Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul’s apology for German colonial atrocities in 2004 at the centennial commemoration of the Ovaherero Uprising came about through the nation’s efforts at reckoning with its history under the Nazi regime. Zimmerer states that:

It is no accident that the first official apology for genocide in a former colony was delivered by a German politician. Had it not been for the Holocaust and a specific German popular culture of Holocaust remembrance – which led to a more critical and distanced relationship to the German national past as such – accepting historical responsibility in such a grave matter as colonial mass atrocities would not have been possible.

Thus, even though *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has primarily been concerned with coming to terms with the Holocaust and East German crimes, Zimmerer contends that Wieczorek-Zeul’s apology came about because of German society’s willingness to address the nation’s problematic past.

There is some truth behind Zimmerer’s statement, as Germany has been among the few former empires to acknowledge the violence it inflicted upon the people it colonized. While Queen Elizabeth II signed an apology for British violence and destruction towards the Māori people in the 19th century while visiting New Zealand in November 1995, this action does not fully contradict Zimmerer’s statement, given that genocide was not discussed. Perhaps the closest that another nation had come to apologizing for colonial genocide occurred in April 2000, when Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt begged forgiveness for his country’s failure to prevent the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which had been a colony of Belgium from 1916 until 1962. Although Verhofstadt did not explicitly invoke the history of his country’s rule over Rwanda, many interpreted this apology as alluding to the colonial past. Aside from these two examples, however, no other overseas empire had expressed remorse for its actions as a colonizer at the time of Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech. Despite Germany being at the forefront of reckoning with the colonial era, the claim that the country’s unique relationship with its own past provided the impetus for the 2004 apology is complicated by events in the time leading up to this groundbreaking speech.

The idea that Germany was particularly willing to confront the colonial era is challenged by the reality that previous administrations had refused to apologize to the Ovaherero and Nama in the years before Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech. In the spring of 1998, when German President

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97 Boehme, “Reactive Remembrance,” 3.
Roman Herzog agreed to meet with representatives of the Ovaherero people during an official visit to Namibia, he referred to the slaughter of Indigenous Southwest Africans as a “dark chapter in our bilateral relations.” Yet despite this admission, Herzog declined a request by Ovaherero leaders to apologize for this period of violence. The newspaper Die Tageszeitung reported that Herzog viewed the events as having occurred too long ago to be taken into consideration, and that from his perspective, “an apology is at best an empty phrase that does more harm than good.” That a German government official refused to admit guilt for colonial atrocities just six years before Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech is consistent with the argument that Germany’s decision to apologize in 2004 came about due to external pressure, rather than through its unique memory culture.

Organizations representing the Ovaherero and Nama proved to be a driving force behind greater recognition by Germany of the atrocities its military committed in Southwest Africa, which ultimately led to the unprecedented apology at the centennial ceremony. In September 2001, representatives of the Ovaherero initiated legal proceedings demanding that reparations be paid to the descendants of the victims of genocide. The Herero Peoples’ Reparation Corporation (HPRC) sought $2 billion in damages from three German firms—Deutsche Bank, Terex Corporation, and Safmarine—which were accused of profiting from their complicity in colonial genocide. However, after discovering that Terex Corporation had operated under entirely different management during the time Southwest Africa was a German colony, the HPRC dropped the lawsuit against this company and instead filed a new $2 billion claim against the

German Federal Government just weeks later.\textsuperscript{100} As a private foundation lacking the support of the Namibian government, the HPRC could not submit legal claims to the International Court of Justice located in the Hague. Instead, the organization filed suit with the District Court of Washington D.C. through the U.S. Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789, a law that allows non-Americans to initiate lawsuits in instances where international law has been violated.

Compensation was not the sole goal of the Ovaherero activists, however, as they also demanded that Germany apologize for the atrocities it had perpetrated. While human rights organizations in Germany also voiced their support for an official apology,\textsuperscript{101} the scholar Kathryn Jones notes that “calls for an official apology were strongest in the former colony itself, and came mainly from Ovaherero representatives rather than the Namibian government.”\textsuperscript{102} That this movement drew its strength primarily from within Namibia is at odds with crediting \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung} for creating the necessary conditions for the German apology. Rather than an internal shift in Germany, the international attention garnered by the Ovaherero’s $4 billion lawsuits, coupled with external pressure for an official apology, best explain the reversal from Herzog’s refusal to apologize in 1998 to Wieczorek-Zeul’s remarks in 2004.

Although Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech was pioneering in that it offered the first acknowledgment of German guilt for the nation’s actions in Southwest Africa by a government official, her rhetoric was also deliberately noncommittal when it came to the issue of payments for the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama victims. In stating that German “atrocities

\textsuperscript{100} Ib., 148-149.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
committed at that time would today be termed genocide,”¹⁰³ she purposefully avoided directly referring to these actions as genocide outright. Wieczorek-Zeul’s precise wording represented a calculated attempt at damage control, as “her formulation was probably used to avoid admission of what occurred then as a crime of genocide—to circumvent liability for reparations.”¹⁰⁴ This consideration reflected the fear among Germany officials that characterizing this event explicitly as genocide would open the door to future reparations claims. Accordingly, the German government adopted a restrictive timeline regarding what could be considered genocide.

In response to the HPRC’s legal actions, German officials became concerned about the potential domino effect that could result from officially designating the Ovaherero and Nama conflict as a genocide. From the government’s perspective, such a move would encourage any group that had experienced state-sponsored violence at the hands of Germany to make a legal case for reparation payments. The political scientist Allan Cooper summarizes the government’s position: “essentially, the German argument is that the 1948 Genocide Convention cannot be applied retroactively to cover crimes against humanity that occurred before the 1948 act. If such an application were permitted, there would be no end to the potential claims that could be made to remedy each genocide in history.”¹⁰⁵ Were Germany to accept that colonial atrocities in Southwest Africa constituted genocide despite the anachronism of this term being coined decades later, officials feared that any conception of a statute of limitations associated with this crime would be irreversibly lost.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 117-118.
A glaring inconsistency in this logic is that Germany has provided compensation to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, even though these atrocities also took place prior to the codification of genocide in 1948. Germany has paid out significant sums of money to the victims of the Holocaust, with the nation having allocated an estimated $90 billion to survivors of this genocide over the 70 years since the nation first approved compensation in 1952. Because German officials wanted to avoid making costly payments to the Ovaherero and Nama, fearing that doing so would also make the country vulnerable to future demands from other groups, the precedent set by offering financial compensations as a means of atoning for the Holocaust added to reluctance towards acknowledging the scope of the violence committed in Southwest Africa. This suggests that Germany’s decision to pay reparations for the Holocaust ironically has had the effect of inhibiting attempts at reconciliation with the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama victims.

Germany, however, has contributed economic aid to the Namibian government since the nation achieved independence, a fact that representatives have emphasized when questioned on the subject of reparations. Pressed on this issue in an interview with the newspaper *The Namibian* during his official diplomatic visit to Namibia in 1998, German President Roman Herzog stuck to the script that international laws around genocide could not be applied retroactively. Herzog followed up by stating that “Germany will live up to its special historical responsibility towards Namibia, not least by engaging in exceptionally intensive development cooperation. Namibia receives the highest per capita development aid contributions paid by

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Germany.”

Parallel themes resurfaced during Wieczorek-Zeul’s apology speech in 2004, where she tiptoed around any discussion of reparations while also asserting that the German people “continuously provide the people of Africa with help and intensively support the NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa’s Development] initiative.”

It is no coincidence that in the aftermath of this ceremony, the German government doubled down on its commitment to supplying development assistance to Namibia.

The economic relations between Germany and Namibia have been further complicated by Namibia’s internal dynamics. Once it became the ruling party in the national government following the first elections post-independence, the SWAPO made its opposition to demands for reparations clear. The historian Jan-Bart Gewald observes that “after independence, the SWAPO government of Namibia tried to ensure that Herero claims for reparation would remain muted or couched within the demands of the nation-state which they controlled.”

While this was in part due to the long-standing political rivalry between the SWAPO and Ovaherero supporters of the SWANU, the government also justified its position by arguing that offering special treatment to certain groups was counterproductive to promoting a unified national identity. With leaders of the German government insistent on cooperating with their counterparts in Namibia, the SWAPO’s objection to reparations added an additional barrier to achieving reparations.

Domestic dynamics in Namibia shifted drastically in 2005, however, when President Hifikepunye Pohamba took office.

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Although also a member of the SWAPO, Pohamba was far more receptive to reparations demands. When the German government proposed funding a €20 million “special initiative” for development projects in primarily Ovaherero- and Nama-populated territories in 2005, Pohamba refused to accept the money before consulting the targeted groups, who had been left out of negotiations.\(^{110}\) While the aid package received the green light in November 2006 after discussions with the affected communities, this came in the wake of a significant development that embodied the improving relations between the victims’ groups and the ruling government. Just weeks earlier, the Namibian National Assembly had unanimously adopted a resolution drafted by Ovaherero Paramount Chief Kuaima Riruako affirming the Namibian Parliament’s support of reparations demands and committing the government to future negotiations with Germany that would involve representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples.\(^{111}\) Yet even with the blessing of the Namibian government, Germany continued to oppose the Ovaherero and Nama’s claims. Aside from the purely legalistic argument, Germany’s unwillingness to pay reparations is also related to the ways in which German society has memorialized the Holocaust.

Not only did the Holocaust lead to the coining of the term genocide and its subsequent transformation into a legal concept, but this genocide has become the model to which other acts of historical violence are compared. Writing in 2001, the sociologist John Torpey describes how the Holocaust has shaped the issue of compensation for other victimized groups: “the perfidy of the Nazi assault on European Jewry has emerged as a kind of gold standard against which to judge other cases of injustice and to which advocates seek to assimilate those instances of human


cruelty and oppression for which they seek reparations.” Among other groups, he specifically identifies the Ovaherero as a community that has leveraged the importance of the Nazi genocide for its cause. Indeed, creating connections between the genocide in Southwest African and the Holocaust has been a core tenet of the Ovaherero and Nama representatives’ strategy for securing reparations from the German government.

The 2001 lawsuit filed by Ovaherero representatives contains language deliberately comparing the atrocities in Southwest Africa to those perpetrated in Nazi death camps. Torpey mentions that “the Namibian claimants have asserted a parallel to the Holocaust in an extermination order issued by Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha.” Likewise, the HPRC’s initial lawsuit against German firms contains the following statement:

Foreshadowing with chilling precision the irredeemable horror of the European Holocaust only decades later, the defendants and Imperial Germany formed a German commercial enterprise which cold-bloodedly employed explicitly-sanctioned extermination, the destruction of tribal culture and social organization, concentration camps, forced labor, medical experimentation and the exploitation of women and children in order to advance their common financial interests.

In the words of the political scientist Allan Cooper, Ovaherero representatives have maintained that their ancestors “were the victims of a German genocide every bit as destructive to their community as that suffered by Jews during the Holocaust — and since Germany has offered reparations to Jews, then it is only consistent that Hereros be compensated in kind.”

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113 Ibid., 341.
Aside from these clear-cut instances of invoking the Nazi past, some also contend that merely describing the atrocities in Southwest Africa as an act of genocide creates a connection to the Holocaust. The German historian Jürgen Zimmerer notes that “there is an insistence on genocide on the part of the victims’ societies and their representatives precisely because it is considered the worst crime against humanity as well as implicitly creates a connection to the Holocaust, that is, it conveys that the mass atrocity in question is on the same level in terms of its moral reprehensibility as the murder of over six million Jews by the Nazis.” At the same time, by clinging to a narrow timeline of what counts as genocide, the German government created further impetus for the Ovaherero and Nama to establish parallels between colonial violence in Southwest Africa and the genocide perpetrated under Nazi rule, given that the Holocaust also took place before 1948. Yet despite the victim communities’ emphasis on the parallels between these two genocides, the German government has refused to acknowledge the commonalities between the Holocaust and the Southwest African atrocities, a position that reflects the nation’s particular relationship with the Nazi past.

The special status of the Holocaust in Germany has had a direct impact on the relationship between the Ovaherero and Nama and the German government. The refusal to characterize the conflicts with the Ovaherero and Nama as genocide is tied to German society’s emphasis on the unique nature of the Holocaust, specifically the perspective that it is incomparable to other historical atrocities. This perception, which the Australian genocide

scholar Dirk Moses refers to as the “catechism of the Holocaust” (Katechismus des Holocaust), has had a deep impact on the German psyche. Moses argues that as a result of the Holocaust becoming a core tenet of German national identity, its importance also minimizes attention to other historical atrocities:

In short, the catechism implies a redemptive story in which the sacrifice of Jews in the Holocaust by Nazis is the premise for the Federal Republic’s legitimacy. That is why the Holocaust is more than an important historical event. It is a sacred trauma that cannot be contaminated by profane ones – meaning non-Jewish victims and other genocides – that would vitiate its sacrificial function.\(^{117}\)

Indeed, Germany perspectives on the Holocaust had a clear effect on deliberations over whether the government would compensate descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama victims of genocide.

Only in 2015—nearly a decade after the Namibian Parliament committed itself to engaging with Germany and the victim communities over reparations—did such negotiations begin. Several developments caused these discussions to take shape: significantly, in April of that year, German President Joachim Gauck referred to the massacre of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire as an act of genocide on the 100th anniversary of this event. This designation aided the Ovaherero and Nama’s demands for official acknowledgment of the genocide in Southwest Africa, as Gauck’s statement showed that Germany was now willing to apply this term to other events that occurred before 1948 besides the Holocaust. Moreover, in July, Norbert Lammert, President of the German Parliament, published an article in the weekly newspaper Die Zeit explicitly arguing that like the Armenians, the Ovaherero and Nama had also been victims of genocide.\(^{118}\) Soon thereafter, the German and Namibian governments appointed special envoys,


the politician Ruprecht Polenz and the former Ambassador to the European Union Zedekia Ngavirue, respectively, to oversee discussions involving members of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples. Yet when these parties met over the following months, disagreements comparing atrocities in Southwest Africa to the Holocaust stymied an agreement.

Representatives of the Nama expressed that the emphasis on the singularity of the Holocaust impeded negotiations between the victim communities and German officials, ultimately forcing the parties to put the talks on hold. Reflecting on a meeting with German officials that took place in 2016, Ida Hoffman, chairperson of the Nama Genocide Technical Committee, criticized the German delegation’s attitude towards the representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama. When she and other representatives invoked Germany’s payments to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the German delegation was unwilling to equate the Holocaust with colonial genocide. Hoffman lamented that:

> During these sensitive discussions, on the statement that Germany having massacred the Jewish people, and has done reparations to the unfortunate Jewish victims by the Nazi regime, Mr. Ruprecht Polenz, with arrogance and insensitivity unbecoming a diplomat and an Special Envoy entrusted with doing justice to that painful past of German destruction of the Nama and the Herero, admonished the delegates, telling us not to compare the destruction of the Nama and the Herero with the massacre of Jewish people.119

Polenz later defended his position towards the Holocaust in an interview with the Washington Post, stating that he “tried to explain to them that, for Germans, it is part of our identity to say it was a unique crime against humanity. . .We don’t want to relativize it. It stands on its own.”120

Polenz’s language unmistakably echoes the themes that Dirk Moses associates with the so-called

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“catechism,” suggesting that the primacy of the Holocaust in the eyes of Germans may have narrowed responses to other instances of extreme violence perpetrated by the nation.

The question of the Holocaust’s singularity in Germany first came to a head during the Historikerstreit (historian’s dispute), which began in 1986 following the publication of a provocative article by the German historian Ernst Nolte. Writing in the leading newspaper the Frankfurter Allgemeine, Nolte claimed a “causal relationship between the Stalinist Gulag system and the murder of Jews by the National Socialists” in which “the Gulag ‘came first’ and is therefore to be classified as a precursor to the German crimes against the Jews.” In drawing a direct parallel between Stalin’s Gulag system and the Nazi death camps, Nolte’s article incited a fierce debate among German academics over whether other historical atrocities ought to be placed on the same scale of atrocity as the Holocaust. Recently, the debate over the uniqueness of the Holocaust has reemerged in reaction to the release of a German translation of the book Multidirectional Memory by the American memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg.

Rothberg’s study, originally published in 2009 and released in German in February 2021, made waves in Germany through its critique of the nation’s relationship to Nazi crimes. The author argues against treating commemoration as a zero-sum game; specifically, he critiques Germany’s rigid memorialization of the Holocaust. Instead of treating the Holocaust as sacred, Rothberg emphasizes the necessity of “a multidirectional trauma theory in the era of Holocaust and decolonization: a comparative theory that would track the interconnectedness of different perpetrators and different victims in overlapping, yet distinct, scenarios of extreme violence.”


122 Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization, Cultural Memory in the Present (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 96.
While Rothberg contends that putting the Holocaust in conversation with other genocides opens the door for greater reckoning, others perceive Rothberg’s idea of integrating this genocide into wider discussions of historical injustices as a threat to the memory of the Holocaust.

The translated edition of *Multidirectional Memory* has been met with vitriol by Germans who abide by the idea that the Holocaust represents an incomparable atrocity. A common motif throughout the backlash to Rothberg’s work is the insistence that the Holocaust cannot be equated to any other genocide because it exhibited an entirely different logic of violence. The historian Götz Aly notes that unlike instances of colonial violence, during the Holocaust, “Jews were to be exterminated because they were Jewish. In Africa, various punitive expeditions revolved around suppressing resistance. That is a different situation. They never thought about simply wiping out entire populations because they belonged to a certain group or religion or ethnicity.”

Both the prominent historian Jürgen Habermas and the columnist Thomas Schmid echo skepticism of Rothberg’s willingness to integrate the Holocaust into the wider timeline of colonialism, refusing to recognize the validity of claims that the Holocaust exhibits continuities stemming from the earlier genocide perpetrated against the Ovaherero and Nama.

Not only does the controversy surrounding Rothberg’s findings reflect the dominant, even overbearing role of the Holocaust within German memory culture, but the backlash to *Multidirectional Memory* exposes ongoing resistance towards placing the Holocaust in the wider timeline of historical injustices.

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conversation with other genocides. Thus, although Rothberg’s book itself does not dwell on the case of the Ovaherero and Nama, its reception exposes the flaws of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* when it comes to Germany’s reckoning with the legacies of colonial violence.

Yet despite the drawbacks of the so-called “catechism,” those who maintain that the memory of the Holocaust has obstructed coming to terms with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide overlook the ways in which the paradigmatic nature of the Holocaust has led to greater scrutiny of other historical injustices. The historian John Torpey makes the important observation that although the proliferation of comparisons to the Holocaust “inflates the term and undermines the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide,” the deep engagement with this event has had an overall positive effect on reckoning with wider historical injustices. Alluding to growing efforts to address historical atrocities, Torpey notes: “the emblematic status for our time of the Jewish Holocaust has helped others who have been subjected to state-sponsored mass atrocities to gain attention for those calamities.” In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg makes a similar claim, positing that “the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories—some of them predating the Nazi genocide, such as slavery, and others taking place later, such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) or the genocide in Bosnia during the 1990s.” The legacy of the Holocaust has been especially important for the Ovaherero and Nama, as while Germany has been defensive regarding comparisons to Nazi crimes, on the other hand, the centrality of the Holocaust has also made Germany particularly receptive to the Ovaherero and Nama’s demands for justice.

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126 Ibid.
Had the Holocaust not come to occupy such a central role in German memory culture, one wonders to what extent the German government would have the Ovaherero and Nama’s claims. After all, the crux of the victim communities’ argument for receiving reparations arises from the precedent Germany set by compensating the victims of the Holocaust. Historian Jan-Bart Gewald argues that the notoriety of the Holocaust even changed the Ovaherero and Nama’s perception of the violence of genocide they had experienced, as “the real and imagined linkages of the Herero genocide to the Nazi Holocaust could not be hidden and came to be deployed in further discussions relating to the Herero genocide. Hence, the Nazi Holocaust changed forever the import and meaning of the Herero genocide.” And while the emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust has impeded negotiations between the German government and the Ovaherero and Nama, the mere fact that the German government has recognized responsibility for the massacres in Southwest Africa and given these victim communities a seat at the table challenges the extent to which the Holocaust has obscured reckoning with other genocides. The positive effects of Germany’s reckoning with the Holocaust are unfortunately often overshadowed in research on the relationship between the legacy of the Holocaust’s and the Ovaherero and Nama genocide.

Recent scholarship has been largely critical of German memory culture, claiming that the role of the Holocaust has contributed to Germany’s selective memory when it comes to reckoning with the past. Like Dirk Moses, the anthropologist Ronald Niezen attributes the nation’s silence towards colonial atrocities to imbalances in its memory culture, writing that “the selection and valuation of key episodes in German history as the reference points of memorialisation and contrition has its counterpoint in the oblivion of other crimes of the state,

more distant in time and space.”¹²⁹ The political scientist Franziska Boehme echoes this critique, arguing that the lapse in critical discussion of colonial genocide “suggests that other difficult chapters in Germany’s more recent history, including the Holocaust and Germany’s own East/West division, have overshadowed and possibly prevented earlier and more apologetic engagement with the Ovaherero genocide.”¹³⁰ Finally, the historian Jeremiah Garsha writes: “The legacy of the Holocaust threatens to continue dominating the Vergangenheitsbewältigung discourse, so publicity surrounding colonial history remembrance in Germany is critical.”¹³¹ These authors all contend that the emphasis of Vergangenheitsbewältigung on the Holocaust and East German crimes has acted as a barrier to acknowledging the genocide in Southwest Africa.

The Ovaherero and Nama genocide undoubtedly complicates understandings of Germany’s process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. While it is tempting to attribute Germany’s acknowledgement of colonial atrocities to the nation’s memory culture, it is crucial not to overlook the Ovaherero and Nama peoples’ instrumental role in pressuring Germany to engage with this history. And although the perspective that the Holocaust is incomparable to other atrocities has narrowed German officials’ responses to comparisons between the massacres in Southwest Africa and Nazi extermination camps, the precedent set by reckoning with the Holocaust has made Ovaherero and Nama’s quest for reparations carry weight in the first place. Recent scholarship emphasizing the ways in which neglect of the colonial era exposes weaknesses in Germany memory culture tells a one-dimensional story that neglects the positive contributions of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Vergangenheitsbewältigung is an unfinished process with room for improvement, as exemplified by the ongoing controversies over whether

the Holocaust ought to be compared with other historical atrocities. Germany’s reckoning with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide must not only be about coming to terms with the colonial past, but also about working to overcome the flaws and limitations of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* itself.
IV. An Open Wound: Approaches to Addressing Historical Injustice

Several important developments have taken place since deliberations began between representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama and officials from the Namibian and German governments. Since 2015, Germany has stepped up efforts to repatriate human remains from Southwest Africa that had been housed in museums and institutes since being brought over from the colony for use in pseudoscientific experiments. Germany first returned 20 skulls belonging to the victims of the 1904-1908 genocide in October 2011, and again handed over more than 25 bone fragments to a delegation of Namibian officials and members of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples at an August 2018 ceremony in Berlin. But while a 2019 report published by the German Federal Foreign Office stated that the government considers repatriation “to be an important part of efforts to address the past,” Germany would not budge on the issue of paying reparations.

Despite these instances of progress, the German government has nonetheless clung to the argument that reparations to the Ovaherero and Nama are out of the question. That same 2019 document explains how “the atrocities committed in Germany’s name at the time constituted what would now be called genocide, although it only proved possible to define and legally codify the crime of ‘genocide’ after the Holocaust. For this reason, the talks are also looking at putting the term ‘genocide’ in a historical and political context.” The language here reflects the degree to which noncommittal remarks like those in Wieczorek-Zeul’s speech have continued to shape—and narrow—the German government’s position vis-à-vis the victim communities. German officials’ reluctance to consider making reparations payments has gone unchallenged in

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133 Ibid.
recent years in part because the lawsuits filed by the victim communities through the American court system have failed.

Over the past two decades, representatives of the Ovaherero have been unable to achieve a legal victory for their cause of receiving reparations from Germany. The initial lawsuit filed in the U.S. by the Herero People’s Reparations Corporation in 2001 was dismissed by the District Court of the District of Columbia because the German government asserted its right not to submit to American jurisdiction, as guaranteed in an earlier treaty with the United States. The cases against the companies Deutsche Bank and Safmarine likewise were unsuccessful: the HPRC was unable to present an actionable claim against the former, while a judge ruled that American courts did not have jurisdiction over claims by the latter. Even after the HPRC filed another suit against Deutsche Bank through the Southern District Court of New York, the state where the American branch of the corporation is headquartered, this claim was thrown out in April 2006 on the basis of res judicata, meaning that the new case was too similar to the original for the previous judgment by the District of Columbia courts to be reversed.

Despite these challenges to the legal case for reparations, descendants of the genocide victims did not give up. In early January 2017, frustrations over the lack of representation at the ongoing negotiations with the German Government prompted a fresh lawsuit demanding damages from Germany. This time, rather than being solely an Ovaherero-led initiative, Vekuii Rukoro, the Paramount Chief of this group, joined forces with the Nama Traditional Authorities Association, led by David Frederick. Frustrated that the German government had dodged officially apologizing and paying reparations for the violence inflicted on Indigenous Southwest Africans, the claimants once again sought damages from the state. Yet as with previous attempts

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134 Cooper, “Reparations for the Herero Genocide,” 120.
aimed at achieving a monetary settlement, the American courts proved unresponsive to these efforts.

In March 2019, the Southern District Court of New York dismissed this lawsuit on the grounds that it lacked jurisdiction over the case due to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA). Under this act, Germany, as a sovereign nation, is immune from the rulings of American courts unless it is proven that violating international law had a direct impact on the United States. For the Ovaherero and Nama, this meant establishing that German commercial activities in America were in part funded through the confiscation of Ovaherero and Nama land, cattle, and personal properties during the 1904-1908 conflict. Although the court acknowledged that properties purchased by the German government in New York City were paid for using the wealth Germany had amassed through colonialism, ultimately, the connections between crimes in Southwest Africa and commercial activities in the United States proved too tenuous to constitute a violation of FSIA. Efforts to appeal this decision again resulted in the dismissal of these claims in September 2020.

Throughout negotiations between the German government, the Namibian government, and the representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama, the German delegation has maintained that development aid is the best tool for remedying historical injustices and demonstrating the nation’s commitment to its former colony. The only exception to this approach occurred in August 2020, when the German government reportedly offered €10 million as compensation for historical atrocities. While the Namibian delegation rejected this offer before its exact terms were

136 Ibid.
publicized, officials referred to this proposed payment as “healing the wounds,” a phrase that neither connotes outright reparations nor aid. Since then, the German government has returned to solely promoting offers of economic aid to Namibia.

After more than five years and nine rounds of negotiations, discussions between the German and Namibian governments and the Ovaherero and Nama representatives concluded in late May 2021, when Germany, in a joint declaration, pledged €1.1 billion (roughly $1.3 billion) to fund development programs benefiting the Ovaherero and Nama communities over a 30-year period. Alongside this financial offer came an official apology from German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who also added that Germany “will now officially call these events what they are from today’s perspective: a genocide.” Yet despite the progress this rhetoric represented and Germany’s sizable investment in Namibia, his statement also attests to Germany’s continued opposition to meeting the victim communities’ demands. Referring to this aid package, Maas made clear that “legal claims for compensation cannot be derived from it,” an obvious snub directed at those insistent on Germany paying reparations.

Nonetheless, leaders of both the German and Namibian governments were quick to hail the agreement as a success. Steffen Seibert, spokesperson for then-Chancellor Angela Merkel, announced: “we are thankful that these long-running negotiations on how to deal with this dark

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139 Ibid.
chapter of our joint history could be brought to a good conclusion for both sides,”’140 while a representative for Namibian President Hage Geingob described this agreement “’as the first step’ in the right direction.”’141 Geingob then added an unfounded claim that reparation payments would follow in the aftermath of Germany’s official apology. It is necessary to acknowledge the significance of the German government’s recognition of the Ovaherero and Nama massacres as a clear-cut instance of genocide, finally placing this event on the same scale as the Holocaust, which also took place before this term was adopted by the international community in 1948. Among the victim communities, however, the proposal between the German and Namibian governments received harsh criticism for several key reasons.

Prominent members of the Ovaherero and Nama communities promptly rejected Germany’s offer of development assistance. At the top of their list of complaints was Germany’s continued refusal to pay reparations to the affected Indigenous groups. According to the terms of the Joint Declaration, the German government “accepts a moral, historical and political obligation to tender an apology for this genocide and subsequently provide the necessary means for reconciliation and reconstruction.”’142 Yet conspicuously absent is any reference to the government’s legal responsibility to extend such payments, a reflection of Germany’s ongoing unwillingness to break from the position that it does not owe reparations because the events in

Southwestern Africa predated the establishment of the term genocide. In other words, Germany’s genocide designation proves largely symbolic.

Ovaherero Paramount Chief Vekuii Rukoro voiced his frustrations with the negotiated deal, stating that the victim communities were underrepresented throughout deliberations and criticizing the way that the German government avoided taking legal responsibility for the genocide by framing this offer as a gesture of goodwill as opposed to an obligation to the affected groups.143 Deodat Dirkse, secretary-general of the Nama Traditional Leaders Association, denounced the German offer on similar grounds, protesting that the German and Namibian governments have not accepted the atrocities in Southwest Africa as genocide from a legal standpoint. In Dirkse’s words, “they are not talking about genocide in terms of international laws and what we understand genocide means according to the U.N.”144 Indeed, there are compelling reasons why the victim communities ought to be skeptical of the proposed development plan and the process that led to its creation.

Although select members of the Ovaherero and Nama were present throughout negotiations, many in these communities feel that their legitimate representatives were excluded from the talks. Both the Nama Traditional Leaders Association and the Ovaherero Traditional Authority, organizations representing the leadership of their respective peoples, claim that they were barred from sending delegates to discussions despite making several attempts to take part.145 This reflects the reality that the German and Namibian governments—not the victim

145 “Alternative Report to the 7th Periodic Report Submitted by the Federal Republic of Germany under Article 40 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)” (European Center for
communities—served as arbiters in these dialogues. Prior to the onset of negotiations, German Special Envoy Ruprecht Polenz remarked that “the direct partner in negotiations is, of course, the Namibian government. I reckon that the Namibian government will lead discussions in a way that includes the entire Namibian people—and thus, also the descendants of those who especially suffered under German colonial rule.” That the 2021 Joint Declaration outlining the new development initiative states that “the two Governments jointly decided to embark upon measures to heal the wounds of the past and create a lasting partnership for the future” is telling of how these negotiations were ultimately between German and Namibia, rather than being between Germany and the Ovaherero and Nama peoples. Not only did the affected groups have a limited say in the outcomes of negotiations, but there are also questions regarding the proposed development program’s efficacy.

Although the 2021 Joint Declaration states that “a separate and unique development support program will be set up by both governments to assist the development of descendants of the particularly affected communities, in line with their identified needs” and affirms that “representatives of these communities will participate in this process in a decisive capacity,” issues surrounding the distribution of German aid in the past give reason for doubt. Despite Germany providing Namibia with the most economic aid per capita of all the countries in

Constitutional and Human Rights, September 2021),


147 “Joint Declaration,” 5.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
Africa,\textsuperscript{150} material conditions for the Ovaherero and Nama have hardly improved since this assistance began after Namibia became independent in 1990. These groups have never recovered economically since the revocation of their land and cattle by German colonizers,\textsuperscript{151} injustices that were further exacerbated by Apartheid policies under South African rule. Yet even after Namibia achieved statehood, inequalities rooted in the colonial experience endured, in part due to the Ovaherero and Nama’s marginalized status as ethnic minorities in a society where the SWAPO wields the most political power and caters to needs of the Ovambo people.

Activists have accused the Namibian government of diverting funds away from Ovaherero- and Nama-occupied localities to areas populated by the Ovambo, the ethnic group from which the SWAPO derives the bulk of its support.\textsuperscript{152} Moreover, the €20 million set aside by the 2006 German Special Initiative to specifically fund development in regions predominantly populated by the Ovaherero and Nama was egregiously mismanaged. As the scholars Ellie Hamrick and Haley Duschinski point out, this Initiative “has been fraught with problems, as communities affected by the genocide have complained that they were not consulted, and very little, if any, of the money has actually been distributed for its intended purpose.”\textsuperscript{153} Given this history, there are legitimate grounds for these groups to be dubious of yet another promise of aid. At the same time, the impact of development assistance on the victim communities is further limited by geographic constraints as to where the proposed funds are to be distributed.

\textsuperscript{150} Henning Melber, “The Genocide in ‘German South- West Africa,’” 257.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
Because of the bilateral nature of the negotiations between the German and Namibian governments, the reach of development aid is bounded by Namibia’s borders. While the Joint Declaration outlines that future projects are to be implemented in the Erongo, Hardap, Khomas, Kunene, Omaheke, and Otjozondjupa regions of Namibia, this document makes no mention of providing support to the greater Ovaherero and Nama diaspora. To this day, significant numbers of these peoples live in the neighboring states of Botswana, Angola, and South Africa, having settled outside their homeland after fleeing Southwest Africa to avoid German colonial violence. Members of the Ovaherero and Nama who reside outside of Namibia did not have the opportunity to participate in negotiations. In light of the flaws in the German offer, as well as frustrations over the negotiation process that brought about this resolution, the question of whether the Namibian Parliament would accept the terms of the Joint Declaration emerged as a hotly contested issue.

Protests broke out in Namibia at the beginning of parliamentary debates over the German development aid proposal in June 2021 and again in September on the first day that representatives were slated to put the Joint Declaration to a vote, when a crowd of roughly 400 protesters gathered outside the assembly building in Windhoek. Resistance to the proposed development program was also voiced among elected leaders, with the Landless People’s Movement, National Unity Democratic Organization, and the Rally for Democracy and Progress parties all demanding that the Namibian government reject the terms of the agreement. Politicians opposed to the Joint Declaration have ferociously critiqued the proposal, to the point

154 “Joint Declaration,” 5.
that even representatives supportive of the deal became concerned that these debates were tearing at the nation’s political fabric. These fears were articulated by Tom Alweendo, the Minister of Mines and Energy and a member of the SWAPO, who stated: “I am troubled by how the conversation has gone thus far. It is now so apparent that the debate has become so divisive. We call each other names. We refer to each other as puppets and sell-outs.”\textsuperscript{157} Although the SWAPO, which holds the majority of seats in both chambers of Namibian Parliament, initially approved the German offer, the level of resistance to the Joint Declaration has since caused the party to reconsider.

In a surprise move in early December 2021, after nearly six months of debates, Namibia’s Parliament opted to abstain from holding a vote on the Joint Declaration. The nation’s leaders instead proposed that the government re-enter into negotiations with Germany.\textsuperscript{158} That the German government would agree to participating in further talks is unlikely, however, according to Special Envoy Ruprecht Polenz. In an October 2021 interview with \textit{Der Spiegel}, Polenz noted that “the negotiations are closed. There is no intention of reopening this text now. I think that can be ruled out.”\textsuperscript{159} Yet while prospects for progress appear bleak, there are key factors for why Germany should consider returning to the negotiating table.

Despite past failures to achieve reparations for the Ovaherero and Nama through legal battles, as well as ongoing German resistance to an agreement that includes reparations, there are


important reasons why such a settlement makes sense for all parties. Germany’s proposal of
development aid has backfired, as instead of being perceived by the international community as a
gesture of goodwill towards its former colony, this proposition has been slammed by the press.

*The New York Times* published a scathing critique of the German aid offer penned by Kavena
Hambira, a member of the Ovaherero and chair of the Namibia Institute for Democracy, and
Miriam Gleckman-Krut, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, in which the authors
criticized the lack of Ovaherero and Nama participation at the negotiations.\(^{160}\) Opinion articles
condemning the proposal also appeared in the BBC and *Deutsche Welle*,\(^ {161}\) among other
prominent news outlets.

The Joint Declaration’s flaws provide an easy target for those critical of the uniqueness of
the Holocaust, as Germany’s rejection of making reparations payments lends itself to
comparisons with the government’s treatment of the victims of the Holocaust. Hambira and
Gleckman-Krut article’s does just that, contrasting Germany’s compensation of Jewish
Holocaust victims and the public’s engagement with Nazi crimes with the exclusion of certain
Ovaherero and Nama representatives from negotiations and the lack of memorials dedicated to
colonial atrocities.\(^ {162}\) If anything, the disparities between the treatment of the Ovaherero and
Nama and those who experienced Nazi violence have become starker as a result of Germany
officially designating the events in Southwest Africa as also being an instance of genocide. Even

\(^{160}\) Kavena Hambira and Miriam Gleckman-Krut, “Germany Apologized for a Genocide. It’s Nowhere

\(^{161}\) See, Emsie Erastus, “Viewpoint: Why Germany’s Namibia Genocide Apology Is Not Enough,” *BBC
Germany’s Namibian Genocide Apology Could Miss the Mark,” Deutsche Welle, June 9, 2021,
https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-germanys-namibian-genocide-apology-could-miss-the-mark/a-
57829103.

\(^{162}\) Hambira and Gleckman-Krut, “Germany Apologized for a Genocide. It’s Nowhere Near Enough.”
though Germany’s intense reckoning with the Holocaust has played an integral role in attracting
attention to other instances of historical injustice, including the colonial-era massacres in
Southwest Africa, these positive contributions to the nation’s memory culture today are often
overlooked by those critical of colonialism and its legacies. And while it is tempting to simply
denounce Germany for its varied responses to genocide, one must also acknowledge the
differences between compensating victims of the Holocaust and the case for reparations by the
Ovaherero and Nama.

Several considerations complicate making direct comparisons between German
reparations to the Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities and the claims made by the Ovaherero and
Nama. In the case of the former, reparations supported those who had survived the Holocaust,
whereas compensation for the Ovaherero and Nama would aid the descendants of the victims
rather than those who survived German cruelty themselves. Moreover, the state of Israel
represented the Jewish people during reparations negotiations with Germany in the early 1950s, a
precedent that helps to explain why Germany opted to negotiate with Ovaherero and Nama
representatives in the presence of officials representing the Namibian national government.
Nonetheless, there are compelling grounds for why the German government ought to reconsider
its opposition to offering reparations to the Ovaherero and Nama.

Not only does avoiding reparations payments invite critiques about Germany’s
inconsistent treatment of the Herero and Nama and the victims of the Holocaust, but this refusal
also contradicts a recent document published by the German government. While Germany still
adheres to the purely legalistic argument that the Ovaherero and Nama cannot be entitled to
reparations, this position is challenged by a 2019 report published by the Federal Government
titled the “Interministerial Strategy to Support ‘Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation
On the issue of compensating victims of state-sponsored violence, this document states:

In terms of acknowledging and providing reparations for past injustices, Germany began in the 1950s developing a diversified structure for providing reparations and compensation for National Socialist injustices. The structure is now founded on legal and non-statutory regulations and considers compensation from an individual and group perspective (in particular for Jewish Holocaust survivors, but also for a wide variety of other groups who were persecuted under National Socialism). Its evolution could serve as an exemplary model for reparations in the context of international peace and conflict management.163

That paying reparations for Nazi crimes “is founded on legal and non-statutory regulations” raises questions as to why the government maintains that only a statutory conception of genocide could compel Germany to compensate the Ovaherero and Nama. Indeed, Germany’s reckoning with the Holocaust may well provide an exemplary model for reparations—yet one that it refuses to follow. While paying reparations would help settle criticism over Germany’s contradictory responses to these two instances of genocide, the fundamental issue at hand remains finding the best means of remedying historical injustices for the Ovaherero and Nama.

As international affairs scholar Elazar Barkan effectively argues in his seminal book The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices, apologizing represents the cornerstone of wrestling with atrocities. Barkan writes: “often, by validating and showing respect for the victims’ memory and identity, the very recognition of past injustices constitutes the core of restitution. It is a recognition that transforms the trauma of mourning and allows for rebuilding.”164 While it is tempting to claim that the 2021 Joint Declaration achieves restitution...

because it states that “the German Government further acknowledges the grave guilt incurred by individuals in positions of military and political responsibility”\textsuperscript{165} and that “Germany apologizes and bows before the descendants of the victims,”\textsuperscript{166} such an interpretation overlooks a key aspect of Barkan’s conception of restitution: involvement of the victim communities.

Barkan goes on to state: “I believe the significance of restitution stems from its impact on the victim, who is often (but not exclusively) the poor and oppressed. The emphasis here is on consent and inclusion, not on equality.”\textsuperscript{167} In other words, because no reconciliation agreement can put the Ovaherero and Nama on equal footing with the German government nor reverse the violence of the past, it is crucial that these groups have the opportunity to actively participate in the restitution process. With this in mind, the consensus among the Ovaherero and Nama that they have been inadequately represented throughout negotiations calls into question the validity of the German government’s apology. Alongside the importance of accepting guilt remains the thorny issue of financial compensation for the affected communities.

To Barkan, economic restitution comes secondary to an apology, and accompanies acknowledgement of a historical injustice as primarily a symbolic gesture. He argues that “commensurate economic compensation is rarely practical,”\textsuperscript{168} particularly in cases where this could result in “economically destabilizing any segment of society or significantly shifting the distribution of economic resources.”\textsuperscript{169} Yet on the other hand, Barkan acknowledges that “in certain cases even a restitution settlement of small economic value makes a significant contribution and improves the state of the victim.”\textsuperscript{170} While it is not possible to assign an exact

\textsuperscript{165} “Joint Declaration,” 4.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Barkan, The Guilt of Nations, 348.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 324.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
value to the damages caused by Germany’s slaughter of approximately 80,000 people and the repercussions these atrocities have had over the 110 years since the genocide itself, reparations could considerably ease Ovaherero and Nama’s efforts to reclaim lands confiscated during the colonial era. Germany—the country with the fourth highest GDP in the world, many orders of magnitude higher than that of Namibia—can afford a contribution that would have an outsized effect in Namibia without feeling financial pain. Thus, even a symbolic payment, such as the proposed 30-year, €1.1 billion program, would have real impact. Yet the amount of money itself is of lesser importance so long as the Ovaherero and Nama are not properly involved in negotiations and while the threat of the SWAPO usurping such funds looms.

Since the various lawsuits aimed at achieving reparations have failed, the decision to renew discussions with the Ovaherero and Nama ultimately comes down to the German government. Despite the significance of Germany recognizing the atrocities in Southwest Africa as genocide, the memory of these massacres remains an open wound for the victim communities. In the words of Barkan, at the end of the day, “agreements are reached voluntarily, if under pressure, and as part of a democratic process.” Indeed, perhaps pressure is what is necessary to compel Germany to return to negotiations. After all, demands by Ovaherero and Nama activists proved to be a driving force compelling Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul to offer her apology speech in 2004. Given the German delegation’s insistence on negotiating with representatives from another national government, the SWAPO’s support is also crucial to a successful return to negotiations. As Mutjinde Katjiua, a leader of the Ovaherero Traditional Authority states, “we need to have a Namibian delegation consisting of two legs, one will be representing the victims,
and another representing the government of Namibia as a facilitator in the process. But together we will be forming one unit.”

Germany, too, stands to benefit from properly addressing the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. The inadequacies of the 2021 Joint Declaration, which further exemplify Germany’s inconsistent responses towards the victims of the Holocaust and the descendants of the survivors of the Ovaherero and Nama genocide, have come under fire across news outlets around the world. These critiques not only tarnish the nation’s memory culture but also further legitimize the views of those who attribute these failures to Germany’s emphasis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust while overlooking the positive effects that the intense reckoning with the Holocaust has had on addressing other historical atrocities. Whether scrutiny in the press proves powerful enough to mobilize the German government to return to the negotiating table remains to be seen. What becomes clear, however, is that if left unresolved, Germany’s incomplete reckoning with its colonial past in Southwest Africa will remain an unfortunate blemish on the reputation of Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

Conclusion

While Germany’s colonies were revoked over a century ago, the case of the Ovaherero and Nama epitomizes how the grave repercussions of colonial rule still reverberate today. Although the Ovaherero and Nama genocide may represent the most extreme instance of colonial violence by the German empire, the abuses in Southwest Africa took place within the greater context of brutal exploitation by European powers of people across the African continent and around the world. Germany is one offender on a long list of nations that perpetrated heinous crimes against the inhabitants of their colonies; Belgium, France, England, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands, among others, also share a history of colonial violence that must be addressed. As it stands, Germany’s engagement with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide comes at a critical junction within the wider movement of reckoning with the historical injustices committed in the name of colonialism.

Alongside Germany, other former European empires have recently shown an increased willingness to confront the violence of their colonial pasts, in part in reaction to the broader racial reckoning spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement. In March 2020, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands apologized for the excessive violence Dutch forces inflicted upon Indonesians during a campaign to reclaim this colony in the wake of World War I. His act was followed by an official apology by Prime Minister Mark Rutte in February 2022, in light of the

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gruesome findings of a new historical report on this era.\(^{174}\) In an unprecedented move, King Philippe of Belgium expressed regret for his nation’s treatment of the inhabitants of the Congo in a June 2020 letter to DRC President Félix Tshisekedi, though this gesture fell short of an explicit apology.\(^{175}\) This past September, French President Emmanuel Macron apologized to the *Harkis*, Algerian soldiers who fought for French colonial forces during Algeria’s bloody War of Independence, many of whom were killed in the aftermath of this conflict after being accused of treason. Not only did this statement include a promise of future reparations for the *Harkis*,\(^{176}\) but it also represented a drastic reversal from January 2021, when a spokesperson for the French government announced that “there will be no repentance, there will be no apologies” when questioned on this issue.\(^{177}\) Yet despite these encouraging signs of progress, fierce resistance to addressing colonial atrocities persists.

As is the case with Germany’s unresolved relations with the Ovaherero and Nama, there is no end in sight for the process of coming to terms with the violence committed in the name of colonialism. Around the world, countless calls for addressing these historical injustices, ranging from demands that Britain apologize for the 1919 Amritsar massacre in India\(^{178}\) to the request by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador that Spain acknowledge the acts of violence


perpetrated against Indigenous peoples by conquistadors,179 remain unanswered. It is at this crucial crossroads, where long-denied histories of cruelty are becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss, that the German government has the ability to send a powerful message by returning to negotiations with representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama peoples.

Offered by a global leader and the most influential member of the European Union, a revised settlement that deliberately and adequately engages with the victim communities has the potential to not only address the lasting consequences of colonialism in Namibia but also to encourage other former empires to critically examine their own troubled pasts. Despite Germany’s imperfect relationship with the colonial era, its memory culture has attracted attention to other acts of genocide by way of its extensive reckoning with the Holocaust, an encouraging sign that intense engagement with the Ovaherero and Nama genocide may also produce positive spillover effects. Germany faces the opportunity to confront the flaws of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and in doing so, emerge as a leader in the broader movement of coming to terms with the darkest chapters of the colonial past.

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