

The Current Problems in Relations between Germany and Namibia

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Abstract

Relations between Germany and Namibia are still heavily influenced by colonialism. As part of the scramble for Africa in the 1880's, the German Empire came to what is now Namibia and created German South-West Africa. Germany remained the colonial power of the territory until 1915. The period of colonial rule was marked by the genocides of the Hereros and the Namas tribes.

This article focuses on the current political climate within Federal Republic Germany and how the nation is dealing with the difficulties of its colonial past. It is clear how strained relations are between the colonizer and the former colony. It should be noted that Germany has undertaken reconciliatory steps this year (which marks the 100th anniversary of the end of German rule over Namibia) in order to deal with its history.

Keywords:

Germany, Namibia, genocide, colonialism, German South-West Africa.

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that former colonisers have quite complicated relations with their former colonies (Loomba 2015). All of the former colonial powers committed some sort of injustice, repression, organised violence or genocide while their colonies were under their rule. It is therefore understandable that these historical events are still causing problems in relations between these countries. This is the result of the difficulties the former colonisers have with dealing with the issues effectively and critically.

These issues are often not only related to politics but also to interpersonal issues. The latter is particularly true if in the given countries ("old colonies") there are still large groups of descendants of the former colonisers still living there. This is exactly the case in Namibia which was a German colony until 1915. The Germans started to occupy and inhabit Namibia in the early 1890's. Their arrival marked an increased involvement in politics, the economy and society. This had a major impact on the lives of the local black inhabitants, who soon felt repressed. The repression resulted in the ethnic tribes rioting.

A three year genocide ensued in which the Hereros (65,000 – 85,000 victims) and the Namas tribes (10,000 tribesman) were persecuted.

The Germans acted with extreme aggression. The genocide is considered to be the biggest trauma in the history of Namibia (Melber 2005). The genocide is in fact forgotten in Germany because it is overshadowed by the events of the Second World War and the guilt Germans still feel for what happened. Taking responsibility for the blame of the wrong-doing during the colonial era is a problematic point in German history because it has been forgotten.

The situation in Germany contrasts strongly with that in Namibia. Many Namibians are living descendants of the murdered Hereros and Namas. They refuse to ignore the genocide and do not want this fact to be forgotten (Anderson 2005, Special Issue 1993). They are continuing to demand that Germany recognizes the atrocities they committed during the genocide and for Germany to extend an apology. Some are even demanding financial compensation (Coopert 2006).

This study aims to show that there are broader issues within Germany with regards to reconciling itself with its own history, including the issue of colonial rule and with that the Namibian genocide at the start of the 20th century. The only reason that this historical event has recently been brought to the attention of the public is the 100th anniversary of the end of German colonial rule in Namibia. In connection with this anniversary, the Chairman of the German Bundestag officially apologised for acts of the German colonisers in German South-West Africa and named the mass killings as genocide (*Völkermord*). This gesture must be considered a ground-breaking conciliatory act towards Namibia because until then the relationship between the two nations was strained. This was clear from the numerous diplomatic and other misunderstandings that occurred over time.

This article is neither an historical text, nor a description of the act of genocide, but is a description of the process of reconciliation within German politics and society with its own history. This year's apology is a significant act, but by no means usual. The fear of apologising sooner was probably driven by the demands of the descendants of the victims to pay financial compensation. The analysis in this article of the steps Germany has undertaken to reconcile itself with its history are presented and explained within the context of the country's politics and economics. The aim of this essay is to find answers to questions such as: how are current relations between the two countries weighed down by the shadow of colonialism? And, whether the recent steps Germany has taken is helping to normalise relations.

The results of events that led to the explosion of violence and the bloody genocide of 1904-1908 speak for themselves. In 1904, there were an estimated 80,000 – 100,000 Hereros. By 1911 there were only an estimated 15,000 left (65,000 – 85,000 were killed in the violence). At the end of the same period, there were only an estimated 10,000 Namas left (of an original 25,000). With such low numbers both the Hereros and Namas were no longer considered to be a danger to the colonisers anymore.

Settlement with the genocide

No compensation has as yet been discussed or agreed for the victims of the genocide. This is not for want of trying by Namibia itself and by other organisations who have sought recognition of the genocide for several decades. In so doing, they have referenced the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, as recognised by the United Nations in 1948. Partial success was booked with the publication of the Whitaker Report in 1985. This report was the result of the work of a sub-commission, created in 1983 under the auspices of the United Nations, into the prevention of discrimination and the protection of minority laws. The report explicitly mentions the Hereros massacre as an example of genocide. This clear message was never accepted as a resolution. The genocide was therefore never officially recognized by the United Nations (Eatwell 2006). Under the circumstances, and in combination with the United Nations standoff attitude towards the Namibian genocide, it is of no surprise that Germany did not engage very much in the issue. This attitude even prevails today with regards to normalizing relations (Kössler 2008).

Evidence of the mutual problems is reflected in the fact that until 1995 not one German Federal Chancellor visited Namibia. This changed with the visit of Helmut Kohl. However, Kohl chose to skip a meeting with the Hereros. As a result of this visit, the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs openly condemned the events which happened in German South-West Africa. However, Germany refused to take responsibility for these events with reference to the Genocide Convention of the United Nations, which it should be noted cannot be applied retrospectively.¹

Germany's argument for not accepting responsibility was that, since 1990 Namibia had received hundreds of millions of German Marks in developmental aid (by end of 2014 approx. EUR 800 million according to German Foreign Office).² However, according to the organisations representing the Hereros tribe, the financial help is mainly managed by the Namibian state party SWAPO (South-West African People's Organization) and only a small part of the funds finds its way to them. To emphasise their case, the Hereros point to Germany's violation of the fourth convention of 1899. As a result they are asking for material and financial compensation from Germany. This was clearly stated by the spokesman of the Hereros delegation to Berlin on 3rd August 2004, where he demanded an admission of guilt for Germany's colonial past (Die Zeit 5.8.2004). This appeal came on the back of Holocaust memorials at the time. The delegation reminded Germany that the Hereros had been forgotten – there were no memorials in the whole of Germany and not even the Battle of Waterberg was commemorated.

The lack of a memorial was eventually addressed in 1999 with the erection of a memorial to the victims of the genocide and the Battle of Waterberg close to the anti-colonialism monument in Bremen. The memorial itself was built out of stones from the place where the Hereros were imprisoned, where they lived without food or water and where they died in their masses. Despite a slight improvement in the political relations with the Hereros, some court proceedings were initiated in 2002 by the American law

¹ N.N., 2014. Bundesregierung: Deutschland hat keinen Völkermord an Herero und Nama begangen. [online]. [12-04-2015]. Available from: http://webarchiv.bundestag.de/archive/2013/1212/presse/hib/2012_08/2012_367/05.html

² N.N., 2014. Beziehungen zu Deutschland. [online]. [12-04-2015]. Available from: http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_3144239D29F4CFB63EA9929FEA7F43A8/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Laenderinfos/Namibia/Bilaterale_node.html#doc352362bodyText3

firm Musolino and Dessel on behalf of their client, the “Herero People’s Reparations Corporation”. The organisation was led by Kuaimo Riruak who in 2003 became the Chairman of the National Unity Democratic Organisation. The organisation went to the American Courts of Justice (Washington) demanding USD 2 billion in compensation for the residuary of the Hereros (Der Spiegel 25.6.2008). In 1999, similar accusations were also placed with the International Court of Justice. The claimant did not come off well. The subject of the claim was to make Germany recognise that it had committed an act of genocide, that Germany should condemn the violations of the German African Line (*Deutsche Afrika-Linien*) and that Germany should pay compensation to the residuary of the victims (Kämmerer – Föh 2004). Until today, no court case has been won on this topic, however we can be sure that the accusations will not stop and that we can expect more court cases of this kind in the future.

To make matters worse, Namibian politicians are now siding with the Hereros with regards to their demands. On 15th November 2007, the late Namibian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marco Hausiku, sent a letter to his German counterpart Franka-Waltera Steinmeier, with a request for compensation for the Hereros (Allgemeine Zeitung 26.11.2007). Another important step towards reconciliation between the Germans and Namibians was the attendance of Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul (Minister for Developmental Aid) at the remembrance service held in Okkarara on 14th August 2004 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Waterberg. The event included a short re-enactment of the uprising which included Hereros. The minister became the first official member of a German government to attend the ceremony.

While giving a speech she recognised the political and moral responsibility Germany had for the acts of the German army units. Literally, she stated: The past acts of violence are what in today’s world we would call genocide. Germans recognise the historical and political responsibility, as well as the moral and ethical responsibility, and recognise our blame. ³ I beg you to say the Lord’s Prayer and to forgive us.” (Der Spiegel 13.7. 2004). However, the minister did not go so far as to offer financial compensation, although she promised continuous financial support to Namibia.

In November 2004 there was another important act of reconciliation between members of the Von Trotha family (descendants of General Trotha who oversaw the genocide) and Omar Alfons Maharero (Chief of one of the Hereros groups living in Namibia). Maharero is the direct descendant of Samiel Maharr who was the Chief of Hereros during the uprising against the colonisers. The meeting took place in Ginheim-upon-Rhine. The Von Trotha family apologised for the acts of wrong doing and for all the violence committed by their ancestor, General von Trotha, during the colonial era. The family also apologised in written form. They wrote: as citizens of today’s Germany and also as Christians, we are asking together with you for forgiveness.⁴ In October 2007, eleven members of the Von Trotha family travelled to Omaruru at the invitation of the Chief of the Hereros. On this occasion the family officially apologised for the acts of General von Trotha and asked for forgiveness (Der Standard 25.4.2008).

³ N.N., 2004. Rede von Bundesministerin Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul bei den Gedenkfeierlichkeiten der Herero-Aufstände am 14. August 2004 in Okakarara. [online]. [12-04-2015]. Available from: http://www.windhuk.diplo.de/Vertretung/windhuk/de/03/Gedenkjahre__2004__2005/Seite__Rede__BMZ__2004-08-14.html

⁴ N.N., 2014. German family's Namibia apology. Bbc.co.uk [online]. [12-04-2015]. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7033042.stm>

The latest developments

In 2011 a Namibian political representation visited Germany to repatriate over 20 skulls of Hereros from the colonial period which had been in storage in the hospital a Charité Berlin. It is estimated that in Germany there are 3,000 such skulls in existence. These skulls are an indication of the trade that existed in these objects at the time. Photographic evidence exists to this effect which shows German soldiers packing skulls and sending them to Germany for various purposes. Scientists who were influenced by the work of Eugen Fischer were interested in the skulls. Fischer's thoughts inspired The Third Empire and the theory that the white race (Arian race from Europe) was superior to the black race.

The skulls had also been used by German scientists for various race study projects back in 1904. The official ceremony to mark the return of the skulls to Namibia was supposed to be a conciliatory event, but it ended up in a fiasco. The Namibian delegation led by the Minister of Culture and Youth, Mr Kazanambe, whose family was a member of one of the persecuted groups, was unhappy that the German government had not sent anyone of the appropriate level. Ideally this should have been the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Unfortunately, the minister's back up was sent, the State Minister, Cornelia Pieper. She was forced to leave the ceremony shortly after completing her speech. There was loud booing throughout. Kazenambo also left the ceremony early which once again led to a worsening of relations (Focus 30.9.2011). In Charité Berlin and German universities there are additional skulls of Namibians from the colonial era (Allgemeine Zeitung 2.12.2011). As a result, another 14 unidentified Hereros skulls were returned to Namibia in 2011.⁵

On 22nd March 2012, on the 22nd anniversary of the independence of Namibia, the German Bundestag discussed the joint past between Germany and Namibia for the very first time. This discussion was instigated at the behest of the SPD and the Green Party. The debate only lasted half an hour. Until today, there remains very little interest in Germany for discussions on this topic. The current majority government has refused requests from the opposition to raise the issue. The only positive, is that the SPD and the Green party made more progress on the issue whilst in power (between 1998 -2005) than any other government at any other time. Unfortunately, their initiative did not produce visible results, with both parties unable to formulate a joint plan. Also of interest at this time was the fact that Party Die Linke (Party of the Left) was trying to push for financial compensation and continues to do so from time to time (Zimmerer 2005).

It is evident that even after 100 years, history is still alive. The issue of colonial rule will not disappear from the memories of the victims' descendants. It is however positive that in today's Germany a debate has begun on the issue in society itself and among intellectuals. Unfortunately, this cannot be said for Germany's politicians. History is interestingly also influencing the present. This is particularly reflected in protests against street names in German cities which carry the names of late colonial army leaders. For example: In 2013, Von-Trotha-Straße in Munich (named after General Von Trotha - one of the most active oppressors and genocide leader) was renamed Hererostraße; and Wissmannstraße (named after Governor Hermann von Wissmann) in

⁵ N.N., 2014. Rückführung von Schädeln aus Namibia. Uni-freiburg.de [online]. [12-04-2015]. Available from: <http://www.pr.uni-freiburg.de/pm/2014/pm.2014-03-04.18>.

the suburb of Stammheim in Stuttgart was renamed Wolle-Kriwanek-Straße.

The latest event on this issue occurred in July of this year when the Chairman of the Federal Government gave a speech in the Bundestag. The Chairman of the Bundestag, Norbert Lammert, officially recognised the colonial atrocities as genocide. He declared that if someone talked about genocide in connection to the Armenians in the Osman Empire, the same should be said about wrong doing of the German army in the German South-West Africa (Die Zeit 8.7.2015). The debate about the behaviour of the German colonizers in Namibia was held in connection to the fate of the Armenians in the Osman Empire (the Bundestag criticized the genocide of the Armenians even against strong Turkish protests). The Austrian-Hungarian Empire and the German Empire were allies of the Osman Empire during the First World War. Politicians in Berlin and Vienna were all aware of the Armenian massacre, however they were not willing or simply failed to get involved.

In connection with Namibia, the Chairman of the Bundestag said: "The war in Namibia between 1904 and 1908 was a war crime and genocide." This can be interpreted as a major turning point in the current relations between Germany and Namibia. In the next couple of months there will be a planned joint declaration with the Namibian government. The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not expressed whether the next step of German diplomacy will be a formal apology to Namibia, or alternatively whether there will also be some form of financial or other kind of compensation. Until this day, the brutal killings 100 years ago still burden the political relations between the two countries. The culprit, Germany, still has, at least on a political level, a very big issue with taking the blame for the events, making an apology and showing compassion by moving towards the provision of possible compensation to the victims of the genocide.

The federal government is in all likelihood afraid that any warm gesture could set a precedent. If the Germans are seen to be willing to accept their moral and political duty and work towards a financial settlement this could put additional pressure on the other former colonial powers. Similar problems are being experienced by Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium and Italy in their former colonies. In 1990, Namibia gained independence and became an internationally recognized sovereign state. German-Namibian relations are still burdened and Germany's colonial past is still a hot topic in Namibia. The tracks of the German minority are also still visible in industry and culture to this day. During the Cold War two German states existed. It was the GDR which strived to create good relations with today's governing party in Namibia, the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO).

The SED regime in the GDR actively supported the emancipation efforts of Namibia. Ironically, at the same time Namibians gained independence, the SED was dismantled. Today the only partner for SWAPO is clearly Germany. Germany is trying hard to develop a very special developmental strategy towards Namibia and tries to support Namibia economically. There are now discussions underway about some form of compensation for the wrong doing during colonialism. Germany is the most important donor of developmental aid to Namibia, although the value of this aid pales into insignificance when compared to the loss of lives (Zimmerer 2005). It is a fact that Germans are extremely unpopular in Namibia, which directly influences the lives of the local German minority (Gretschel, 1995; Blackshire-Belay, 1992). The Federal German Government is unlikely to ever unequivocally accept the blame for the genocide that occurred in Namibia at the beginning of 20th century. The next step towards

reconciliation of the relations could be compensation for the residuary of the victims, however this has been firmly rejected by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The residuary of formerly haunted groups of the Namibian population are also unfortunately underrepresented within the Namibian government. Hereros, Namas and Damaras are trying to gain greater minority rights, however they have very little influence, even though there have been some concessions and friendly steps from the Namibian government.

The conclusion

Firstly, the colonial events from the time before the First World War still influence German-Namibian relations. It is clear that the issue is not as “dead” as it may seem from the “European” point of view. In Namibia it is still a huge topic of discussion which is kept alive by Namibian politicians and organizations representing Hereros and Namas alike. The strain in relations is evident from the fact that until 1995 no German Chancellor had ever visited Namibia. Diplomatic exchanges on the Namibian side also appear to be slow. However, both countries are ever so slowly attempting to rebuild political ties, but the relationship remains influenced by the residuary of Namibian victims from the Hereros tribe, who continue to call for various forms of apology and compensation. Court cases are also still pending and overall relations are also influenced by the fact that Germany does not want to unequivocally accept the blame for the genocide. Germany has recently sought to ease relations by increasing its financial aid to Namibia, however this is not sufficient to dampen the calls and growing pressure to resolve the situation at least symbolically.

Secondly, there have been recent changes to the political communications between both countries. In particular, when the Bundestag and the Federal Government recognized, that what happened to the Hereros and Namas during 1904 and 1908 was genocide (*Völkermord*). This is a real breakthrough and represents a new direction in the diplomatic relations between the two countries. Germany probably does not feel comfortable with the situation within the context of its important role in world politics. This is possibly the reason why this fitting symbolic gesture was made during the 100th anniversary of the end of colonial rule.

In the near future a joint German-Namibian declaration will be made which should raise the relations one degree higher. One of the relics of the cohabitation of Namibians and Germans is the local German minority. These are the descendants of the late colonizers. It is this minority which is trying to keep the cultural heritage of Germans alive. However, the reality is different. The minority is getting smaller and it's close to dying off and is therefore not able to maintain the role of the “living” bridge between Germany and Namibia, even though there is continuous support from various German institutions, including the local Goethe Institute. German-Namibian relations are therefore influenced by the shadow of German colonialism. Hopefully in the near future the planned joint declaration will provide positive results for both countries.

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