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SITUATING THE HERERO GENOCIDE AND THE HOLOCAUST AMONG EUROPEAN COLONIAL GENOCIDES

On October 2, 1904, Lothar von Trotha – the military commander of the German South West Africa colony – issued a startling order regarding German South West Africa’s indigenous Herero people, with whom the Germans had been engaged in conflict since January that year:

“I, the great general of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero People. Hereros are no longer German subjects. They have murdered, stolen, they have cut off the noses, ears, and other bodily parts of wounded soldiers and now, because of cowardice, they will fight no more. [...] All the Hereros must leave the land. If the people do not do this, then I will force them to do it with the great guns. Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children; I will drive them back to their people or I will shoot them. This is my decision for the Herero people.”¹

Less than five years later, as a direct result of colonial military and German government actions, only about a quarter of the pre-1904 Herero population survived.²

Largely as a result of von Trotha’s explicit and publicized extermination order, most contemporary genocide scholars accept that the 1904-1908 killing of the Herero and other indigenous groups in German South West Africa – today Namibia – constituted the 20th century’s first major genocide. The extermination of the Hereros certainly qualifies as genocide under today’s international law. In particular, the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as

“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”³

¹ J. Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, Berkeley 1981, p. 127-128.

² A. Kolin, *State Structure and Genocide*, Lanham, MD 2008, p. 9.

³ United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Paris 1948.

German colonial forces used each of the first three methods in this list toward their stated goal of destroying indigenous groups in German South West Africa. Furthermore, the colonizers in German South West Africa actually breached several international humanitarian statutes in force at the time, including the 1878 Lima Treaty to Establish Uniform Rules for Private International Law, the 1889 Montevideo Treaty on International Penal Law, and the 1864 Geneva Convention.⁴

In this context, the fact that the genocide in German South West Africa remains little studied might initially seem puzzling. This is doubly so because the methods of killing during the Herero genocide were similar to those the Nazis used in Holocaust only four decades later: both genocides involved premeditated starvation, dehydration, and overwork in concentration camps, and mass executions. Many people understand the links between the Holocaust and the WWI-era genocide of Armenian Christians by the Turkish government, including Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss's participation in the Armenian genocide and Adolf Hitler's 1939 comment, "Who after all is today speaking of the destruction of the Armenians?"⁵ However, the links between the Holocaust and the Herero genocide – like the Herero genocide itself – remain less studied. Many histories, in fact, continue to treat the Holocaust as a unique phenomenon or as an aberration, failing to recognize its antecedents in hundreds of years of previous European colonial genocides. This article will therefore situate the German colonial genocides of the 20th century – the Herero genocide and the Holocaust – in a longer history of European colonial genocides, arguing the importance of this wider historical context.

To begin, I must define "genocide" for the purposes of this article. Then I will provide a brief overview of the Herero genocide, because unlike the Nazi Holocaust, the events of 1904-1908 in German South West Africa have yet to enter the realm of common knowledge. A section on important links among colonial genocides will follow this short history, demonstrating that ideological and practical connections exist not only between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, but also between these 20th-century German colonial genocides and earlier colonial genocides by other European groups. The concluding section of this article will then explore why a historically-situated understanding of the interrelationships among European colonial genocides is crucial to a nuanced understanding of genocide overall.

⁴ J. Sarkin, *Colonial Genocide and Reparations Claims in the 21st Century: The Socio-Legal Context of Claims under International Law by the Herero against Germany for Genocide in Namibia, 1904-1908*, Westport, CT 2009, p. 1.

⁵ B. Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, New Haven, CT 2007, p. 36.

ISSUES OF DEFINITION

Defining genocide is crucial to understanding genocide as a concept. For decades, the 1948 United Nations genocide convention has functioned as the central statute for prosecuting perpetrators of genocide on the international stage. However, for a wide range of reasons, many genocide scholars contest the convention's definition of the term "genocide." Even Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish jurist who coined the term and devoted himself to making sure that the United Nations ratified the convention, made realpolitik concessions to his original, broader definition of "genocide" in order to fulfill his more pressing goal of passing any genocide convention at all.⁶ Key debates on the United Nations definition of "genocide" have included what level of perpetrator "intent" one must prove in order to ascertain that genocide has taken place; how to define the victim group; how large a "part" of said victim group one must attempt to kill in order to satisfy the requirements for genocide; whether one must prove that the perpetrators of a genocide form a unified group, or whether a genocide can result from the actions of a diverse range of perpetrators with differing agendas; whether genocide requires the perpetrator impetus to come from a national government, or whether non-governmental entities may also commit genocide; and whether the concept of genocide necessitates physical violence, or whether destroying a victim group as a cultural entity without killing its members can also be genocide.⁷

Because the United Nations drafted and passed its 1948 genocide convention in direct response to the Nazi Holocaust, all aspects of its definition of genocide fit the Nazi Holocaust. Because the Nazis lost WWII, allowing the conquering Allied forces to collect photographs, film footage, statistics, and survivor anecdotes when they liberated the Nazis' concentration camps – and because the Allies found it politically expedient to demonize their vanquished foes by publicizing the Nazi atrocities, rather than burying the evidence of them, as the victorious Soviets did with their own genocides also in progress at the time – little doubt remains in most people's minds that genocide occurred under the Nazi regime. Since 1948, partially as a result of the United Nations genocide convention, the Holocaust has in many cases served as the benchmark against which scholars must measure other instances of mass violence and cultural annihilation if they want to argue that genocide has occurred.⁸

However, because the United Nations genocide convention is so Holocaust-centered⁹, scholars, politicians, and popular movements have tended to

⁶ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10 and 13; S. Totten, P. Bartrop (eds.), *The Genocide Studies Reader*, New York 2009, p. 34-35.

⁸ M. Adhikari, "Streams of Blood and Streams of Money": *New Perspectives on the Annihilation of the Herero and Nama Peoples of Namibia, 1904-1908*, "Kronos" no. 34, 2008, p. 304.

⁹ (Editor's note) A draft of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 was put forward in response to the events of the Second World War, but the definition

de-privilege other instances of genocide that do not fit the United Nations' definition of genocide so readily. In particular, debate has raged over genocides for which little written documentation remains, such as those that occurred centuries ago or in areas remote from outside observers. In cases like the Tasmanian genocide, for instance, no remaining diary entries or military orders state an explicit will to commit genocide on the part of a unified body of perpetrators, despite the obvious fact that Europeans killed the indigenous Tasmanian population in near entirety.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this means that genocide scholars often tend to underestimate and in some cases to dismiss pre-20th-century settler genocides, particularly in comparison with the better-documented genocides of the 20th century.¹¹

European-descended populations *did* commit genocide with frightening regularity against the indigenous groups they colonized. In the Americas, for instance, evidence suggests that the population of indigenous peoples today is 90-98% lower than it was before Columbus arrived; though European diseases seem to have been the most prolific killers of these peoples, an enormous but regrettably unrecorded percentage also died violently and deliberately at the hands of their colonizers in massacres like Cajamarca, Sand Creek, and Wounded Knee.¹² Although many colonizing forces attempted to mold indigenous groups to European standards of behavior through non-violent yet culturally genocidal methods, violence almost always accompanied this process as well. This was the case, for example, in the forced off-reservation boarding school systems in the United States, Canada, and Australia, where colonizing authorities removed indigenous children from their parents, placed them in boarding schools, and beat them severely – sometimes killing them – for offenses such as speaking indigenous languages.¹³

The idea of “cultural genocide” may seem strange, since the term “genocide” in both popular parlance and in the United Nations genocide convention tends to imply physical violence. However, it is important to bear in mind that the “genos” to which the term refers – that is, the victim group – is a social and not necessarily a biological entity. Any groupings within human society are necessarily porous,

of the term “genocide”, which is contained in this convention takes into account not only the criterion of “nationality” or “ethnicity” but also the criterion of race and religion. Therefore the definition included in the convention applies also to the case of the Herero genocide described in the article or to the genocide of the native peoples of the American continents.

¹⁰ J. Shipway, *Modern by Analogy: Modernity, Shoah and the Tasmanian Genocide*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 7, issue 2, 2005, p. 212-213.

¹¹ J. Sarkin, *op. cit.*, p. 2; B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 17-20.

¹² D. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*, Oxford 1992, p. x.

¹³ See, for instance, T. Barta, *Sorry, and not Sorry*, in *Australia: How the Apology to the Stolen Generations Buried a History of Genocide*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 10, issue 2, 2008; P. Bartrop, *The Holocaust, the Aborigines, and the Bureaucracy of Destruction: An Australian Dimension of Genocide*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 3, issue 1, 2009; R. Chrisjohn et al., *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada*, Princeton, BC 1997; J. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*, Toronto 1996.

because all modern human populations can interbreed with one another, blending biological traits as well as cultural practices across generations. In fact, Raphael Lemkin himself fought to have the United Nations extend its protection to non-ethnically-based groups that fall victim to mass murder.¹⁴ The United Nations especially considered expanding the range of possible victim groups listed in the genocide convention to encompass political as well as ethnic collectives.¹⁵ However, United Nations delegates from the Soviet Union refused to sign the 1948 convention until political groups had been removed from this list, because the Soviet Union itself was in the process of committing politically-based mass murder – and, as it turns out, racially-based mass murder as well – across what Solzhenitsyn has termed its “Gulag archipelago.”¹⁶ By the time the United Nations genocide convention had passed into law, therefore, its only remaining reference to non-violent methods of genocide was its provision against the forcible removal of children. What Lemkin knew in the 1940s, and what many other scholars have pointed out since then, is that when one human group sets out to destroy another, it almost always employs both cultural and physical violence.

For this reason, this article will rely on Christopher Powell’s “relational” conception of genocide rather than the 1948 United Nations genocide convention in defining the term “genocide.” Powell defines genocide as a relationship between perpetrator and victim groups in which the perpetrator group allows the victim group no role in society, rather than simply a subaltern role, and in which the perpetrator group attempts to destroy the victim group as a group using methods that can include both physical violence and cultural repression:

“The violent persecution of an ethnic minority does not in and of itself constitute genocide. Collective identification can survive or even thrive in contexts where the human beings who bear that identity suffer outrageously. The shift from abuse and persecution to genocide involves a fundamental qualitative transformation, from a relation that assigns the Other an inferior or denigrated position in the wider figuration to which both persecutor and persecuted belong, to one that works to deny them any position at all.”¹⁷

I rely on Powell’s definition here and elsewhere because, while focusing solely on physical killing may be important in contexts such as the International Criminal Court, *understanding* genocide is not the same as *policing* it. Outright violence is not the only warning sign or symptom of genocide, and although it might be the easiest for criminal justice organizations to codify, monitor, and prosecute, this does not mean that scholars should ignore cultural destruction in favor of a narrow focus on

¹⁴ A. Moses, *Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide*, in: D. Bloxham, A. Moses (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, Oxford 2010, p. 37-38.

¹⁵ S. Totten and P. Bartrop, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹⁶ A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, New York 1973.

¹⁷ C. Powell, *What Do Genocides Kill? A Relational Conception of Genocide*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 9, issue 4, 2007, p. 543.

physical killing alone. While it may be difficult to convince the United Nations to send in a task force every time a national government enacts a policy of forced linguistic assimilation, this does not mean that such policies are not genocidal in that they aim to destroy social groups as groups. Recognizing that genocide stems from relationships within and among human groups will help scholars to understand why it happens.

In the case of colonial genocide, Powell's definition is useful because it shifts the scholarly focus from issues of intent, degree, and method into areas of power imbalance and group relationship – useful concerns for scholars who want to understand the difference between racial discrimination and genocide. Using Powell's definition, one need no longer produce a stack of written plans to kill a victim group signed by visible leaders of a unified perpetrator group in order to prove that genocide has occurred. Rather, one must examine how shifting inter-group relations can influence many different kinds of wide-scale physical and cultural violence against disempowered victims. The Herero genocide and the Holocaust both provide examples of how this can happen, and, because the Herero genocide remains little studied even among genocide scholars, the next section of this article will provide an overview of how changing power structures in German South West Africa led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people.

THE HERERO GENOCIDE

In German South West Africa in the late 19th century, relations between indigenous groups and European colonial forces shifted rapidly. Germany took over the area now known as Namibia in 1884, and nearly from the beginning, the German colonizers encountered difficulties with the colony's indigenous pastoralist groups, who made their living primarily from cattle herding. In the late 1880s, the Herero even attempted to expel the Germans from the territory over a breakdown in treaty negotiations.¹⁸ As the German population in the area grew during the 1890s, a series of disasters contributed to a deteriorating situation for the Herero and neighboring indigenous groups in the colony. These included a naturally-occurring famine in 1890 and 1891, as well as a disastrous outbreak of the Rinderpest cattle virus beginning in 1897 that killed 80% of Herero cattle.¹⁹ Food shortages resulted from the massive loss of cattle, and to make matters worse, piles of decomposing cattle carcasses also poisoned many of the Herero's most important water sources, leading to disease among the human groups who relied on this tainted water.²⁰

¹⁸ J. Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia 1890-1923*, Oxford 1999, p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48 & 111-112; B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

²⁰ J. Gewald, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

As a result of these catastrophes, by the late 1890s, living conditions for the Herero in German South West Africa had deteriorated. Impoverished Herero leaders found themselves forced to sell vast tracts of land to the Germans. As German settlers, companies, and government agencies acquired increasing amounts of Herero land for themselves – up to 25% by 1903 – Herero-controlled areas of the German South West Africa colony became increasingly crowded with pastoralist migrants from areas that the indigenous group no longer controlled.²¹ Soaring prices for staple resources, particularly cattle, also meant that many Herero became heavily indebted to German lenders, adding to the pressure on indigenous populations.²² A 1903 Credit Ordinance which the German colonizers hoped would improve this situation by nullifying all Herero debts after a period of one year only succeeded in exacerbating the problem by sending debt collectors scrambling to recoup their money from the Herero before the debts could expire.²³ Then the colonial government announced plans for a massive railroad expansion that the Herero knew would undercut indigenous trade routes and leave the Herero increasingly dependent on the Germans in perpetuity.²⁴

Still, the Herero did not rebel. Many authors have spoken of the “Herero revolt” of 1904, but Gewald demonstrates that, in fact, there was no “Herero revolt” prior to January 12, 1904, when German military forces initiated violence against Herero civilians. Rather, paranoia and rumors of a potential Herero revolt built up among the colonists to the point that colonial authorities were willing to interpret a suspicious facial expression from one Herero Christian leader to mean that a Herero revolt had actually begun – despite Herero denials and calls for de-escalation, and despite some German officials’ skepticism.²⁵ Because key German leaders were aware that the grounds for their attacks were shaky, authorities both in the colony and at home in Germany waged a propaganda war against the Herero, suggesting that the Herero rather than the Germans were in fact the aggressors in the conflict. In particular, the Germans doctored letters from paramount Herero leader Samuel Maharero to appear as if Maharero had declared war on the Germans prior to the outbreak of violence.²⁶ In fact, even the classic Maharero quotation “let us die fighting,” taken by otherwise reliable historians such as Horst Drechsler to signify Maharero’s order for rebellion against the Germans, turns out to have been written after the Germans had already begun shooting Herero

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109; B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

²² J. Bridgman, L. Worley, *Genocide of the Hereros*, in: S. Totten, W. Parsons (eds.), *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 3rd edition, Routledge, New York 2009. p. 21.

²³ A. Kolin, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁴ B. Madley, *Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803-1910: the Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California, and the Herero of Namibia*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 6, issue 2, 2004, p. 182.

²⁵ J. Gewald, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154, 156-161.

civilians.²⁷ Even at this early stage, the Hereros attempted to initiate peace with the Germans, meeting – as was quickly to become a pattern – with failure.²⁸

For a number of reasons including insufficient troops and rampant typhus among the ranks, the German colonizers found themselves unable to vanquish the Herero as quickly as they had hoped.²⁹ Initial battles between German and Herero forces stalemated, and in some cases, even resulted in Herero victories.³⁰ However, Kaiser Wilhelm and others in the government of the Second Reich took interest in the Herero conflict from early on, deciding to invest considerable resources to ensure conquest.³¹ Violence seemed to slow during the late spring and early summer of 1904, lulling many Herero leaders into a false sense that the conflict was drawing to a close, and leading them to submit another request for peace negotiations. In reality, however, the Germans were simply biding their time, waiting for reinforcements, and slowly, under the newly appointed commander Lothar von Trotha, encircling the Herero position. von Trotha never had any intention of accepting an offer of peace from the Herero. He was planning to annihilate them.³²

On August 11, 1904, at the decisive battle of Hamakari at the base of Mount Waterberg, von Trotha sprung his trap. He defeated the Herero army and left its retreating remnants only one escape route from the battlefield: a path into the Omaheke Desert.³³ German forces chased the Herero away from the Omaheke's major water sources, forcing survivors into the most arid and barren areas of the Omaheke to die of dehydration and starvation.³⁴ Many Herero attempted to cross the desert to reach shelter in other territories, but few survived the trek. Others attempted, yet again with futile result, to reach a peace agreement with the Germans.³⁵ Some filtered back into Hereroland to live as outlaws, but these were mostly caught and killed in a German sweep through the colony in September 1905.³⁶ In all, of the 50,000-60,000 Hereros who fled into the Omaheke after the battle of the Waterberg in August 1904, less than 20,000 remained alive a year later.³⁷

Von Trotha's *Vernichtungsbefehl* ("extermination order") of October 1904, quoted in the introduction to this article, only made public a policy that was already

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156; H. Drechsler, *'Let Us Die Fighting': The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884-1915)*, London 1980, originally published in German as *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, Berlin 1966.

²⁸ J. Bridgman, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

²⁹ B. Madley, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³¹ J. Bridgman, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³² A. Kolin, *op. cit.*, p. 10; J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. 170-171.

³³ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

³⁴ J. Bridgman, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

³⁵ J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. 175, 182.

³⁶ J. Bridgman, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

in full effect – the genocide of the Herero. As Stone demonstrates, the order was no toothless document. Von Trotha justified it according to racist logic, and he fully intended for the Herero to die.³⁸ Neither was his order an emergency document, borne out of mere circumstance. Genocide was the colonial force’s calculated goal.³⁹ Furthermore, von Trotha’s colleagues and contemporaries understood the implications of the order, and argued with his judgment – or agreed with it – accordingly.⁴⁰

However, the German South West Africa colony faced a dire labor shortage as a result of the genocide, despite the use of Herero prisoners for forced labor throughout the conflict.⁴¹ The colonial government therefore devised a new strategy that allowed it to keep the Herero population under control while maximizing the cheap labor value of the remaining survivors: concentration camps.⁴² The colonial government used Christian missionaries and Herero representatives to lure survivors out of the Omaheke Desert and into the camps, promising peace.⁴³ Of course, the Germans did not invent the modern concentration camp system, as the British had already used this concept in South Africa during the Boer War, and the United States had also used it in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.⁴⁴ Yet the government of German South West Africa, with the support of the German government at home, employed the concentration camp system with newly devastating effect against the remaining Herero.

Survivors of the long Herero trek through the Omaheke Desert arrived in the German concentration camps in terrible physical condition as a result of the dehydration, starvation, and exhaustion they had suffered in the desert.⁴⁵ In the camps, they faced a new set of difficult living conditions that included a meager diet consisting only of rice, as well as insufficient clothing and shelter that left them at risk for death of exposure – particularly in chilly coastal camps such as Swakopmund, where the weather contrasted sharply with the climate the Herero had become used to in the Omaheke.⁴⁶ In addition, despite the inmates’ poor physical condition, camp authorities typically subjected prisoners to grueling physical labor that

³⁸ D. Stone, *White Men with Low Moral Standards? German Anthropology and the Herero Genocide*, “Patterns of Prejudice” vol. 35, issue 2, 2001, p. 42.

³⁹ M. Brehl, “*Diese Schwarzen haben vor Gott und Menschen den Tod verdient*”: *Der Völkermord an den Herero 1904 und seine zeitgenössische Legitimation*, in: I. Wojak, S. Meinl (eds.), *Völkermord und Kriegsverbrechen in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt 2004. 93.

⁴⁰ J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁴² J. Krienbaum, “*Vernichtungslager*” in *Deutsch-Südwestafrika? Zur Funktion der Konzentrationslager im Herero- und Namakrieg (1904-1908)*, “*Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*” vol. 58, issue 12, 2010, p. 1019.

⁴³ J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁴⁴ R. Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, Middletown, CT 2004, p. 132-133, 137.

⁴⁵ M. Adhikari, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁴⁶ J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

in itself resulted in thousands of deaths. At the request of scientists in Germany, camp officials also conducted mass autopsies on victims in the camps, sometimes forcing female Herero inmates to scrape the flesh from skulls with shards of glass; officials shipped the bodies of some victims back to Germany for display and research purposes.⁴⁷ The Germans finally disbanded the concentration camps in 1908, but for years afterward, colonial authorities forced survivors to wear identifying garments or carry papers that helped the Germans to control their labor and their movements.⁴⁸

Official German figures state that approximately 15,000 Herero entered the camps, along with 2200 members of the neighboring Nama tribe, which had staged a revolt against colonial authorities when the Herero genocide was already underway. Of these inmates, 7700, or 45%, died in the camps.⁴⁹ Of the pre-1904 population of 60,000-85,000 Herero, only 15,000-20,000 survived through 1908.⁵⁰

Germany lost control of the South West Africa colony after its defeat in WWI, and Namibia gained its independence from colonial rule entirely in 1990. Since then, the Herero have struggled to claim reparations from the German government and from German companies that ran concentration camps during the 1904-1908 era.⁵¹ Before the genocide, the Herero represented a significant force in the area, but their diminished post-genocide numbers have placed them at a demographic and political disadvantage in today's Namibia.⁵² In particular, in the wake of independence, the ruling party, which feared political embarrassment, resisted Herero calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission similar to the one convened in post-apartheid South Africa.⁵³ On August 11, 2004 – the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Waterberg – the German government issued an apology to the Herero people. However, the apology was limited in scope to avoid the legal and financial ramifications that might result from admitting full guilt.⁵⁴

SITUATING THE HERERO GENOCIDE AND THE NAZI HOLOCAUST AMONG EUROPEAN COLONIAL GENOCIDES

Clearly, issues stemming from Herero genocide of 1904-1908 continue to affect Namibian society, and this type of long-term effect from genocide is not unique to the Herero case. For that reason, it is important to determine how the Herero

⁴⁷ F. Haas, *German Science and Black Racism – Roots of the Nazi Holocaust*, “The FASEB Journal” no. 22, 2008, p. 333-334; J. Gewald, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴⁸ J. Bridgman, *op. cit.*, p. 165; J. Gewald, *op. cit.*, p. 190, 218-219.

⁴⁹ H. Bley, *South West Africa under German Rule, 1898-1904*, R. Hugh (trans.), Evanston, IL 1971, p. 151.

⁵⁰ B. Madley, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵² J. Sarkin, *op. cit.*, p. 4, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

genocide fits into a longer history of similar phenomena. This section of the article will demonstrate first the philosophical and then the practical links among European colonial genocides including but not limited to the Herero genocide and the Nazi Holocaust in order to illustrate the interdependence of European colonial genocides.

The Holocaust as a Colonial Genocide

It may seem odd to view the Nazi Holocaust as a colonial genocide in the same way that the Herero genocide was a colonial genocide. After all, barring the small minority of its victims who came from outside Europe, the Holocaust was a European genocide practiced upon Europeans by Europeans. Unlike most other European colonial genocides, the Holocaust did not represent an incursion of Europeans into non-European territory. However, the Nazi drive to expand German territory eastwards into Poland and the Soviet Union originated from the same expansionist philosophies that had led European powers to establish exploitative colonies in non-European locales for over four hundred years prior to the Holocaust⁵⁵. One particularly glaring example of continuity in expansionist philosophy between the Holocaust and earlier colonial genocides appears in the German philosopher Friedrich Ratzel's idea of *Lebensraum* ("living space"), which held that a colonizing force should conquer new territories in order to provide its home nation with the space to expand and multiply – and that colonizers had the right to expand and multiply at the expense of the populations who might be living in those territories prior to the incursions. Ratzel himself applied this concept to the German South West Africa colony in a 1901 article entitled *Der Lebensraum*, and Adolf Hitler adopted Ratzel's ideology in *Mein Kampf*.⁵⁶ The way the Nazis went about building an empire and shaping its ethnic makeup to their liking mirrored patterns of earlier colonial genocides except that they involved very few non-Europeans. I therefore treat the Nazi violence against Jews, Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, and others as a colonial genocide in the vein of earlier colonial genocides.

Enlightenment Nationalism and Colonial Genocide

The Nazi Holocaust bears deep philosophical links with prior genocides beyond just the idea of *Lebensraum*. Many of the ideologies which link the Holocaust with

⁵⁵ (Editor's note) Even though in both cases of genocide (i.e. the mass murder of the Herero people and the Holocaust) the drive to gain living space (*Lebensraum*) played an important role, yet the Holocaust also pertained to the inhabitants the Third Reich and the citizens of sovereign countries. One should therefore rather speak of the application of the experience of the colonial period, but never about the colonial character of the Holocaust.

⁵⁶ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

other European colonial genocides stem from the European Enlightenment, a movement which influenced democratic revolutions in places such as France and the United States by popularizing the idea that liberty and equality should be universal human rights and not merely privileges of the rich. Enlightenment philosophers' belief in liberty and equality dovetailed with an emerging spirit of nationalist chauvinism in Europe – a nationalist chauvinism which developed in no small part from Europeans' experiences in colonies outside Europe.⁵⁷ In fact, when Europeans seized land and established colonies outside Europe, colonists' struggle to flourish in foreign locations allowed the European and European-descended populations of the Enlightenment era, technologically and bacteriologically victorious though they were over non-European indigenous populations, to view themselves as embattled and endangered groups surrounded by masses of unenlightened and threatening savages.⁵⁸ In the case of the German South West Africa colony, as in many other European colonies, the radical sense of self-vs.-other that developed among colonists not only fostered violence against the indigenous population, but also contributed to the in-group identity of the population in the home country.⁵⁹

Despite Enlightenment thinkers' emphasis on the equality of all humans and the importance of human liberty, Enlightenment nationalism contained strong undercurrents of racism and violence. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, famously wrote in the United States' Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; [and] that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."⁶⁰ However, Jefferson himself owned hundreds of African-American slaves, and even though the new country's Second Continental Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence with this wording included, the government of the United States allowed its racially-based slave trade to continue within U.S. borders for nearly another century.⁶¹ As this example illustrates for the U.S. case, in areas under the control of European and European-descended populations during the Enlightenment era, liberty, equality, and citizenship applied to individuals regarded as "white" – that is, to individuals of European descent, since many light-skinned non-European populations such as those from the Middle East and East Asia were and still are not included under this rubric – but not to non-European groups regarded as "colored" or "black."

⁵⁷ M. Brehl, *op. cit.*, p. 85-86.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88-89.

⁶⁰ J. Keene et al. (eds.), *Visions of America: A History of the United States*, 2nd edition combined volume, Boston 2013, p. A-3.

⁶¹ P. Finkelman, *The Monster of Monticello*, "The New York Times" 30.11.2012, p. A25.

Scientific Racism and Colonial Genocide

Clearly, no humans are actually “white” or “black” in the sense that zebras, penguins, and oil paints can be “white” and “black.” However, Enlightenment philosophers – although they themselves posed a new challenge to the dominance of medieval-era Christian dogma – often drew on older Christian ideas in framing their worldview. One of the key tenets that Enlightenment thinkers imported from Christian doctrine was a hierarchy of absolute good and absolute evil associated with polarized light and dark – “good” as “white” and “evil” as “black.” In particular, sixteenth-century Europeans merged the image of the Christian Bible’s first murderer, Cain, with the image of a black African, arguing that a “mark” with which the Christian god supposedly cursed Cain was actually darkened skin.⁶² In this way, Enlightenment philosophy combined the new scientific taxonomies and classifications of the natural sciences with an understanding of the differences among human social groups, often linking stereotypical representations of various groups’ phenotypic traits with group members’ intelligence and morality.⁶³ The result was a predatory ethos that rationalized violence against non-Europeans by suggesting that Europeans had the right to steal resources from and kill other peoples because Europeans were biologically, culturally, and spiritually superior to all other groups. Using Christian doctrine again, they justified their exploitation as a civilizing mission that brought the “gift” of “civilized” European culture and religion to “savage” indigenous peoples outside Europe.⁶⁴ European colonizers could excuse any violence visited on these “primitive” peoples by suggesting that European intervention was saving indigenous populations not only from a life of backwards ignorance, but also from eternal religious damnation.

Philosophically, the scientific racism that justified colonial genocides in places like the Americas and Oceania during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries also influenced the Herero genocide and the Holocaust in the 20th century. Nineteenth-century thinkers added to older concepts of scientific racism by appropriating Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution, suggesting that human societies, like biological species, could evolve. Unlike Darwin himself, these so-called Social Darwinists placed human societies on a ladder of hierarchical and teleological development; in fact, the eugenics movement, which developed in the 19th century and had a profound influence on both the Herero genocide and the Nazi Holocaust, suggested that better-evolved European societies could improve the evolutionary fitness of humanity by doing away with less “evolved” societies entirely.⁶⁵ Like

⁶² B. Kiernan, *op cit.*, p. 5.

⁶³ J. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, New York 2010, p. 66.

⁶⁴ R. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Oxford 2001, p. 30.

⁶⁵ F. Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

Enlightenment-derived scientific racism overall, the eugenics movement allowed perpetrators of both the Herero genocide and the Holocaust to naturalize and biologize a hierarchy of racial difference that linked moral and social differences among societies to members' average physical characteristics. Although genocide often appears in popular discourse as a breakdown in rational civilization, European colonial genocides' dependence on the modernizing scientific-racist philosophies of the Enlightenment suggests that genocide was actually an inherent part of the Enlightenment rhetoric of rationality and not, as some have assumed, a result of its sudden and inexplicable absence.⁶⁶

Practical Links Between the Herero Genocide and the Holocaust: the “Rhineland Bastards” and Personnel Continuities

The post-Herero-genocide experience of the “Rhineland Bastards” – mixed-race children of German soldiers and indigenous women from the German South West Africa colony, brought to grow up in Germany by their German fathers – provides one particularly important example of how the Nazi government adapted the scientific-racist ideals of the Herero genocide to its own purposes. Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf* that

“It was and is the Jews who bring the Negro into the Rhineland, always with the same secret thought and clear aim of ruining the hated white race by the necessarily resulting bastardization, throwing it down from its cultural and political height, and himself rising to be its master.”⁶⁷

Clearly, at the time of the Holocaust, Hitler and his German readership – many of whom still held the Herero genocide in living memory, and some of whom had actually experienced it as members of the colonizing force – still held deep ambivalence, if not antipathy, for Germany's pre-WWI colonial subjects. Hitler combined this prejudice with anti-Semitism in *Mein Kampf*, creating a new racist worldview out of several pre-existing ones. As the above passage demonstrates, he updated the image of sub-Saharan-African presence in Germany to include a twist of Jewish subterfuge. He thus pulled descendants of genocide survivors into a Nazi “Feindbild” (“image of the enemy”) which drew on familiar racist ideologies while placing key focus on a central Jewish arch-nemesis.

The German populace had been aware of and opposed to the presence of the “Rhineland Bastards” in Germany even before the Nazis rose to power. In 1927, six years before Hitler's takeover, the Weimar government had voted to deny German citizenship to the “Rhineland Bastards,” although it had also denied a popular

⁶⁶ D. Stone, *Modernity and Violence: Theoretical Reflections on the Einsatzgruppen*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 1, issue 3, 1999.

⁶⁷ A. Hitler quoted in F. Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

request to have the group forcibly sterilized. Ten years later, under Hitler, the “Rhineland Bastards” were the very first group which the Nazi government targeted for forced sterilization.⁶⁸

One of the doctors who helped to plan the Nazi forced sterilization program, used first against these “Rhineland Bastards” and then against others, was Eugen Fisher. Under the Nazis, Fisher served as director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics – the institution that trained Josef Mengele, infamous director of Nazi medical experiments at Auschwitz.⁶⁹ As a younger man, Fisher had conducted a study of mixed-blood Dutch-Nama children in German South West Africa, arguing along scientific-racist lines that African blood was of lesser worth than European blood, that race-mixing would ruin European culture, and that Europeans should therefore use these Africans as slave labor until an expedient opportunity arose to eliminate them.⁷⁰ Hitler read Fisher’s study in prison, and its ideology appears both in *Mein Kampf* and in the sections of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws that forbid interracial marriages between “Aryan” Germans and “non-Aryans.”⁷¹

Other personnel continuities linked the events in German South West Africa with the Holocaust as well. Heinrich Ernst Göring, father of the Nazi Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring, was in charge of the initial treaty negotiations with the Herero in the 1880s.⁷² One of the actual participants in the Herero genocide was the future Nazi governor of Bavaria, Franz Ritter von Epp, who oversaw the liquidation of nearly all Bavaria’s Jews and Roma under Hitler.⁷³ As these individuals’ career and family trajectories indicate, the links between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust were practical and not just philosophical.

LINKING THE 20TH-CENTURY GERMAN COLONIAL GENOCIDES WITH EARLIER COLONIAL GENOCIDES

The Herero genocide and the Holocaust both bear similarities not only with each other, but also with to earlier non-German colonial genocides. Madley has, in fact, proposed an overall pattern for colonial genocides that begins with colonial invasion, leads to violent conflicts over resources, and ends with the indigenous population’s subjugation in what he calls “ethnic gulags” that can include forced ethnic reservations as well as concentration camps.⁷⁴ Madley compares the genocide

⁶⁸ F. Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 335-336.

⁶⁹ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁷⁰ F. Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁷² J. Bridgman, L. Worley, *op. cit.*, p. 20; B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 35, 381.

⁷³ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ B. Madley, *op. cit.*, p. 167-168.

of the Yuki in California between 1851 and 1910, as well as the genocide of the indigenous Tasmanians between 1803 and 1847, to the Herero genocide of 1904-1908, demonstrating that in all three cases, this pattern of invasion, conflict, and incarceration applies. Indeed, this pattern fits settler genocides that occurred across the United States, Canada, and Australia, not just the killing of the Yuki or the indigenous Tasmanians; it also fits later colonial genocides, such as the exile and destruction of the Crimean Tatars in Stalinist Russia.⁷⁵

In fact, Madley's argument seems to suggest that the nineteenth-century reservation systems of North America and Australia actually developed into the early-twentieth-century concentration camp systems in South Africa and Cuba. These systems served in turn as models for the camps used in the Herero genocide, the Nazi Holocaust, the Soviet Gulag, and the genocide in Bosnia and Hercegovina of the 1990s. The Herero concentration camps in this conception actually represent a halfway point between 19th-century indigenous reservation systems – reservations which, to cite the United Nations genocide convention again, “deliberately inflict[ed] on the group[s] conditions of life calculated to bring about [their] physical destruction in whole or in part,” but which lacked the streamlining of the Nazi extermination camps – and the ruthless efficiency of a Nazi system which set out from the beginning to kill *all* the members of its many victim groups within the confines of ethnically segregated ghettos and camps.⁷⁶

Tracing practical links such as the development of the modern concentration camp system, in addition to the philosophical links of Enlightenment philosophy, demonstrates that the German colonial genocides of the 20th century were at their root little different from colonial genocides committed in previous centuries by Spain, Portugal, England, Belgium, Russia, and other European nations. Nevertheless, the racist ethos of the Enlightenment affected German thinkers and colonizers just as it did those in other European countries; for instance, the German Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff was banned from teaching students at the University of Halle in 1723 for defending sub-Saharan Africans so far as to call them “heathen but virtuous Hottentots.”⁷⁷ German colonizers also used Enlightenment-derived racism to justify genocide in their own territories, referring to previous Enlightenment-derived genocides such as the destruction of indigenous Americans by colonial forces from Spain, Portugal, England, and the United States as examples for their own genocidal violence in territories such as German South West Africa.⁷⁸ As a result, German colonial genocides depended philosophically on the ideologies and the practical examples of other European powers' colonial genocides.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, B. Williams, *Hidden Ethnocide in the Soviet Muslim Borderlands: The Ethnic Cleansing of the Crimean Tatars*, “Journal of Genocide Research” vol. 4, issue 3, 2002.

⁷⁶ J. Zimmerer, *Krieg, KZ und Völkermord in Südwestafrika. Der erste deutsche Genozid*, in: J. Zimmerer, J. Zeller (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin 2003, p. 60-63.

⁷⁷ B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 376-377.

The philosophical connections of Enlightenment-era scientific racism and nationalism – in concert with practical continuities such as the treatment of mixed-race Namibians under the Third Reich, the development of the concentration camp system, and personnel continuities between both the Herero and the Armenian genocides and the Holocaust – all suggest that the Herero genocide and the Holocaust were connected not only to one another, but also to other genocides. Far from being aberrations or expressions of some uniquely and innately German will to genocide, the German colonial genocides of the 20th century bear distinct and traceable antecedents in ideas and events that began elsewhere with other generations.

CONCLUSION: WHY SITUATING THE HERERO GENOCIDE AND THE HOLOCAUST
IN A HISTORY OF COLONIAL GENOCIDES IS NECESSARY

Combatting popular stereotypes of 20th-century Germans as more innately genocidal than people of other nationalities is only one of the many reasons why one must study the links and continuities among colonial genocides. In fact, situating the Herero genocide and the Holocaust in a longer history of genocides helps to demonstrate that each individual instance of genocide represents not just a one-time catastrophe at the hands of a few evil perpetrators or “bad apples,” but rather a recurring phenomenon that has been a persistent feature of human intergroup conflict since antiquity. Linking genocides such as the Herero genocide and the Holocaust with earlier genocides in places like Tasmania and the Americas forces scholars to look for what Yehuda Bauer has termed the “dialectic nature between the particularism and universalism of the horror,” or, in other words, for patterns and singularities that help us to understand both why genocides occur overall and how each individual genocide is different from each other.⁷⁹ This is particularly valuable in the case of the Nazi Holocaust, because stereotypical depictions of this genocide fill popular media with discussions of individual evil, but this perspective can deepen our understanding of other genocides too. After all, genocide never happens in a vacuum, but always in a complex socio-historical context.⁸⁰ Viewing genocide as a pattern helps us to see that we can dismiss no genocide as a simple anomaly.

Neither, however, can one dismiss any genocide as simply a “rehearsal” for any other, regardless of historical links between them. One criticism from scholars who oppose comparative genocide studies is that viewing genocide as a pattern somehow

⁷⁹ Y. Bauer, *Comparisons with Other Genocides*, in: Y. Bauer (ed.), *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven, CT 2001, p. 67.

⁸⁰ J. Silvester, J. Gewalt, *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden 2003, p. xxxiii.

diminishes the suffering of some – or, worse, of all – victim groups. Kundrus, for instance, has argued against scholars' attempts to demonstrate the links between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, writing,

“Does it make sense, in terms of the politics of memory, to heighten the perceived significance of colonial history by declaring it a prelude to National Socialism? I would argue that this perspective foils attempts to promote study of the colonial period in its own right and create a space for German colonial history beyond the shadow of the Third Reich. Furthermore, I perceive a danger that the German colonial period may be reduced to a mere precursor of National Socialism. In that case, we would be doing a disservice to both historical phenomena.”⁸¹

In Kundrus' assessment, focusing on the links between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust diminishes the importance of the Herero genocide because the Holocaust looms large in the popular imagination, but she implies paradoxically that this approach also lessens the importance of the Nazi Holocaust because the Herero genocide becomes its “mere” antecedent. This would seem to suggest that Kundrus believes a detailed study of the non-“mere” precursors to the Holocaust to be in order, but she never suggests exactly which causes of and precursors to the Holocaust do constitute valid avenues of study. Kundrus has a valid point to make here only *if* one accepts the assumption that studying the links between these two genocides necessarily relegates the Herero genocide to a subordinate position. Nothing in the process of contextualizing colonial genocides necessitates this hierarchical view, however, and in fact, studying the Herero genocide and the Nazi Holocaust as episodes in a longer pattern of colonial genocides helps to illustrate the complexity and importance of both genocides. Understanding how the ideology and method of genocide develop in a practical context is a necessary element of genocide prevention today, just as it is crucial to any comprehensive and honest history of past genocides.

Exploring how colonial genocides relate to each other has another important effect as well. It forces us to value all survivors of colonial genocides equally. Kundrus is right to acknowledge the overwhelming shadow of the Nazi Holocaust on popular perceptions of genocide; Holocaust survivors routinely appear on television documentaries, as characters in fictionalized films and novels, and – at least for a little while longer – as featured speakers at community events in areas where they live. The same, however, is rarely true for the survivors of other colonial genocides. This is partially because many colonial genocides occurred before the advent of photographs, sound recordings, and film, and also partially because these genocides have tended to happen in areas far from the public gaze rather than in the center of densely populated Europe. Even when documentation exists, however,

⁸¹ B. Kundrus, *From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some Remarks on the Current Debate*, “Africa Spectrum” vol. 40, no. 2, 2005, p. 300.

most colonial genocides rarely receive the kind of attention that audiences lavish on the Nazi Holocaust. Popular discourse often dismisses the mass fatalities of indigenous peoples in European-descended colonies as the necessary byproducts of an otherwise constructive process of modernization.⁸² This contributes to a popular myth that the violent deaths of millions of individuals were inevitable, whether or not they were consciously premeditated – a phenomenon that Silvester and Gewalt call “colonial amnesia,” or the desire to romanticize the colonial past by forgetting the naked violence that cleared colonies’ “virgin territory” for European-descended peoples to exploit.⁸³ This “colonial amnesia,” of course, conveniently sidesteps discussions of perpetrator guilt or reparations to the victims.⁸⁴

Viewing the survivors of all colonial genocides exactly as we do Holocaust survivors would help to change the popular image of many indigenous groups in many different countries, demonstrating that their collective and individual experiences bear value as something more than collateral damage. This perspective shows that many indigenous groups remain disadvantaged today not just because their members fail to succeed on a personal level, but because they and their ancestors have been victims of enduring campaigns of genocide. Ultimately, this is why linking the Herero genocide and the Holocaust to one another and to other colonial genocides is important. Linking genocides shows how individual human beings in many different places at many different times have found themselves involved in one of the large-scale processes of human history, and how individual choices can interact with systemic pressures to produce unspeakable violence. Parsing the links and continuities among genocides does not, as Kundrus and others have assumed, necessarily diminish the value of any particular genocide or its victims. Rather, carefully contextualized genocide scholarship can *honor* the memories of millions of genocide victims by helping scholars and policymakers to understand how genocide really works and how to prevent it in the future.

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⁸² D. Stannard, *op. cit.*, p. xii; B. Madley, *op. cit.*, p. 168; J. Shipway, *op. cit.*, p. 212-213; J. Sarkin, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸³ J. Silvester, J. Gewalt, *op. cit.*, p. xiv; B. Madley, *op. cit.*, p. 168; B. Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁸⁴ M. Adhikari, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

ABSTRACT

This article situates the German colonial genocides of the 20th century – the Herero genocide and the Holocaust – in a longer history of European colonial genocides, arguing the importance of this wider historical context in genocide scholarship. It explores how the 1948 United Nations genocide convention and the definition of the term “genocide” can affect how one studies various kinds of mass killing, drawing on Christopher Powell’s “relational” concept of genocide to argue that genocide scholars should study both physical and cultural methods of genocide as they work to understand colonial violence. After a brief overview of the Herero genocide, this article then demonstrates several important philosophical and practical links not only between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, but also between these and earlier colonial genocides by other European nations. The concluding section explores why a historically-situated understanding of the interrelationships among European colonial genocides is crucial to a nuanced understanding of genocide overall.