

The Colonial Origins of Nazi Ideology: Genocidal Practices from Namibia to Germany

This essay analyses the connections between German colonial violence and the Holocaust, arguing that the systematic dehumanisation of colonised peoples in Africa provided a conceptual and psychological foundation for Nazi genocidal practices. In making this argument, this essay challenges historiographical claims of the Holocaust being an unprecedented event, demonstrating that Nazi genocidal practices represented the internal application of colonial extermination strategies.

In 1950, anticolonial activist Aimé Césaire wrote that Nazism essentially “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the "coolies" of India, and the [Blacks] of Africa.”¹ Born in French-occupied Martinique, Césaire was among the first to draw connections between colonial violence and the Holocaust. Similarly, pan-African activist and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that “there was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which Christian civilization or Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defence of a Superior Race born to rule the world.”²

Since these early observations, many historians have refuted comparisons between colonial and Nazi actions, arguing that the Holocaust was a unique event and such comparisons

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (1950; repr., New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfkrm>, 36.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, Mahmood Mamdani, and Gerald Horne, *The World and Africa: Color and Democracy*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1947; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64.

risk relativising its specific horror.³ Scholars like Birthe Kundris have argued that “if parallels to the Nazi period are drawn everywhere, ultimately, we lose sight of all of them” and that attempting to connect colonial violence to the Holocaust risks creating a “historical teleology” that ends in “distortion.”⁴ On a similar vein, Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski remarked that colonial and Nazi actions are incomparable because colonialism contained an ambivalent potential for development and modernisation.⁵ However, claims of relativisation inadvertently diminish the severity of colonial violence, perpetuating the narrative that colonialism was not so bad because it brought developmental benefits that somehow mitigate the violence. Recent scholars like Zimmerer have challenged these claims, revitalising the works of Césaire and arguing that there are undeniable connections between German colonialism and Nazi genocidal practices.⁶ Zimmerer argues that both the Namibian genocide and the Holocaust were horrific, and discussing one in context with the other does not minimise either.⁷ Rather, it provides insight into the underlying principles which enabled both genocides, allowing historians to better understand them. This essay therefore aims to fully analyse the Namibian genocide, showcasing the similarities between colonial and Nazi genocidal practices.

³ Jürgen Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz? : Reflections on the Relationship between Colonialism and National Socialism*, 1st ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110754513>, 21.

⁴ Birthe Kundrus, “From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some Remarks on the Current Debate,” *Afrikaspectrum* 40, no. 2 (2005): 300.

⁵ Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “The Holocaust as a ‘Colonial Genocide’? European Colonial Violence and the Nazi War of Extermination,” *Geschichte Und Gesellschaft* 33, no. 3 (2007): 439–66, <https://doi.org/10.13109/gege.2007.33.3.439>.

⁶ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 2023.

⁷ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 2023.

Crucially, this analysis does not seek to draw overly simplistic conclusions or undermine the horrors of either genocide. Rather, it aims to amplify both by analysing the links between colonial and Nazi ideological and practical frameworks, thereby enabling a better understanding of the underlying causes that made both genocides possible.

Importantly, this essay will use the term “genocide” to describe the mass violence committed by colonial officials in Namibia. Some historians resist applying this term to colonial contexts. Gerwarth and Malinowski, for example, argue that “genocide” is a strictly legal term with a narrow, technically precise definition.⁸ However, by rigidly clinging to its original juridical definition, these scholars are ironically undermining the very purpose for which the term was created – to recognise and prevent the systematic destruction of a population. Moreover, Raphael Lemkin coined the term specifically with colonialism in mind, writing that genocide occurs in two phases: “one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.”⁹ Therefore, as Zimmerer explains, it is “superfluous” to question whether the term “genocide” can be applied to colonialism because “genocide is colonial by nature.”¹⁰

The “Scramble for Africa” was a rapid period of intense European competition for African territories, driven by industrial ambitions, nationalist fervour, and ideologies of

⁸ Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 297, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008938909000314>.

⁹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 9; Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), 79.

¹⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 9.

European superiority.¹¹ Unlike other countries, Germany entered this competition relatively late due to political fragmentation and delayed national unification. Until the late nineteenth century, Germany existed as a collection of separate states, more focused on internal consolidation than overseas expansion.¹² When Otto von Bismarck finally unified the German states in 1871, he was initially sceptical of colonialism, viewing it as expensive and potentially destabilising.¹³ However, by the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, Bismarck had changed his perspective, seeing colonies as crucial for national prestige and economic competition.¹⁴ This conference formalised the partition of Africa, with European nations drawing arbitrary borders and claiming territories with no regard for existing African political and cultural boundaries.¹⁵ Germany acquired Southwest Africa (modern-day Namibia) as a protectorate – a political arrangement where dominant states assume control over a weaker territory while allowing that territory to maintain nominal sovereignty. In theory, protective treaties were supposed to govern through existing local structures. However, the overwhelming military and economic

¹¹ Eric J Hobsbawm, “The Age of Empire,” in *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 56–83.

¹² Martin Kitchen, “The Unification of Germany: 1866-1871,” in *A History of Modern Germany: 1800 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 101–23.

¹³ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 106.

¹⁴ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 33.

¹⁵ Manuela Boatcă, “Race and Politics: Colonial Blueprint, Historical Exceptionalism and Global Connections,” in *A Cultural History of Race in the Modern and Genomic Age*, ed. Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, 1st ed., vol. 6 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 88,

<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350067561.ch-005>.

power of European states meant that protective treaties were merely masked instruments of colonial domination.¹⁶

Namibia was home to approximately 200,000 Africans, primarily the Ovambo, Herero, and Nama peoples.¹⁷ From the beginning, German colonial administration was characterised by a meticulous bureaucratic approach aimed at comprehensive control and economic exploitation. Colonial officials developed increasingly restrictive policies toward Namibia's population, envisioning a "governmental and administrative utopia" where the Indigenous population would be systematically registered, monitored, and transformed into a cheap labour force for German settlers.¹⁸

By 1894, local ordinances allowed police to assign work to Africans deemed unemployed, effectively creating a system of forced labour.¹⁹ Governor Theodor Leutwein saw these measures as necessary to "accustom the unpropertied natives" to working for white settlers.²⁰ Africans were regarded as culturally inferior, likened to children who needed guidance and control.²¹ This ideology ran deep in Europe, based on pseudo-science and a binary worldview that categorised humans into hierarchical racial groups.²² Colonisers ignored

¹⁶ Klaus Bachmann, *Genocidal Empires: German Colonialism in Africa and the Third Reich* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3726/b13834>, 187-88.

¹⁷ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, 1st ed. (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801467097>, 8.

¹⁸ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 63.

¹⁹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 64.

²⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 65.

²¹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 74-75.

²² Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 50.

or could not see that Indigenous cultures had their own systems of governance and ways of living that had thrived for millennia without them. Instead, they saw difference as inferiority. For German colonisers, the goal was to create a “society of racial privilege” where Africans would be distributed as workers according to the needs of the colonial economy.²³ This involved systematically destroying traditional economic and social structures, expropriating land, and creating a legal framework that compelled Namibians to work for German employers.

The Herero, a semi-nomadic cattle-herding population, became increasingly frustrated by German actions.²⁴ Settlers continuously fenced off land and claimed exclusive property rights, which was contradictory to the Herero’s traditional understanding of land use.²⁵ Under German rule, the Herero faced continuous land seizures, restrictions on movement and economic independence, as well as brutal treatment by settlers, colonial police, and judicial administration.²⁶ This treatment culminated in the first revolt against German authorities in January 1904, where the Herero launched an unexpected attack on German troops, successfully occupying central Namibia and killing 158 settlers.²⁷ Rumours of the violence spread rapidly amongst Germans, where horrific stories were spread and a much higher death toll was reported.²⁸ However, investigations revealed that the Herero had followed their leader’s orders and spared women, children, missionaries, and non-Germans, suggesting their actions were targeted resistance rather than indiscriminate violence.²⁹

²³ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 102.

²⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 8.

²⁵ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 8.

²⁶ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 102.

²⁷ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 10.

²⁸ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 10-11.

²⁹ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 10.

After the revolt, Governor Leutwein was replaced by Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, as Leutwein was seen as “too lenient” on the Herero.³⁰ Von Trotha approached the conflict with an explicitly exterminatory mindset, viewing it as a “race war” that could only end with the complete destruction of the Herero.³¹ His reign marked a crucial transformation from military conflict to genocidal campaign, with the Battle of Ohamakarri (which was then called Waterberg) on 11 August, 1904 marking the beginning of this approach.³² Von Trotha meticulously planned a concentric attack designed to decisively defeat the Herero at Waterberg, where approximately 60,000 people, including women and children, were gathered.³³ The German forces, numbering around 1,500 troops, positioned themselves to encircle the Herero, with units commanded in the west and east.³⁴ However, the battle plan was flawed. The unit in the southeast was undersized and poorly positioned, creating an easy escape route. Despite von Trotha’s expectation of a total victory, the battle quickly deviated from his plans. Most Herero managed to break through German lines, fleeing into the Omaheke Desert.³⁵ Immediately after their escape, the Herero demonstrated remarkable survival skills in the waterless terrain. Contrary to von Trotha’s expectations, they did not simply perish. Instead, they moved in small groups, seeking water and attempting to regroup, using their knowledge of the terrain to survive. Their victory shocked German forces, who were unprepared and unfamiliar with the terrain. With their horses dying and their supplies critically low, they left the battle in a state

³⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 33.

³¹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 37.

³² Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 39

³³ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 33-34.

³⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 34.

³⁵ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 39-41.

of defeat. As Major Lequis noted, they failed to pursue the Herero due to “complete exhaustion of the troops” and uncertainty about the landscape.”³⁶

In the following weeks, the Herero began cautiously leaving the desert, seeking water and hoping to return to their homes. When von Trotha recognised this movement, he began a systematic strategy to prevent their return. On September 13, he wrote in his diary that a group of Herero, including women and children, came to ask for water. In response, he gave “renewed orders to drive them all back with force.”³⁷ Under von Trotha’s orders, German troops initiated a campaign to cut off the Herero’s access to water, systematically occupying waterholes along the desert’s edge, creating a slow-motion death trap.³⁸ Von Trotha’s strategy was not immediate annihilation, but a calculated process of genocide by driving the Herero deeper into the desert while preventing their return or access to resources. Eyewitness accounts described increasingly desperate conditions as the Herero were forced to take extreme measures to survive, with some cutting the throats of cattle to drink blood, squeezing moisture from animal stomachs, and digging wells with growing desperation.³⁹ Ludwig von Estorff, a German soldier who critiqued von Trotha, described the situation:

“I followed their tracks, which led me to a number of wells where I beheld terrible scenes. All around them lay heaps of cattle that had died of thirst, having reached the wells with their last remaining strength, but not having being able to drink in time. The Herero continued to flee before us into the sandveld. The terrible spectacle was repeated over and over again. The men had worked with feverish haste to dig wells, but the water had become more and more sparse, the waterholes scarcer and scarcer. They fled from

³⁶ Arnold Lequis, diary entry of 30 August 1904, quoted in Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 55.

³⁷ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 53.

³⁸ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 54.

³⁹ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 29.

one to the next, losing almost all their cattle and very many people. The nation was shrunk to meagre remnants which gradually fell into our hands, though both then and later some escaped through the sandveld into British territory. The policy of shattering the nation in this way was as foolish as it was cruel; many of them and their wealth of cattle could still have been saved if they had now been shown mercy and received back; they had been punished enough. I proposed this to General von Trotha; but he wanted them completely exterminated.”⁴⁰

On October 2, 1904, von Trotha formalised his genocidal intentions with the “Annihilation Proclamation,” declaring that “within the borders of German territory, every Herero, with or without a firearm, with or without livestock, will be shot; nor will I give refuge to women or children any more.”⁴¹ In correspondence with the General Staff in Berlin two days later, he made his intentions explicitly clear:

“The only question for me now is how the war with the Herero was to be brought to an end. The opinions on this subject of the Governor and some of the ‘old Africa hands’ on the one hand and myself on the other are diametrically opposed. For quite some time, there has been a desire on the part of the former to enter into peace negotiations, and they describe the Herero nation as being essential as labour for the future exploitation of the Territory. I am of a completely different opinion. I believe that the nation as such must be destroyed, or, if that should prove not to be possible by tactical actions, they must be expelled from the country operationally and by means of further individual actions. With the watering holes from Grootfontein to Gobabis having been

⁴⁰ Ludwig von Estorff, *Wanderungen Und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika Und Südafrika*, ed. Christoph-Friedrich Kutscher, 1968, 117.

⁴¹ Proclamation by von Trotha, Osombo-Wind[imbe], 2 October 1904, quoted in Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 40.

occupied and the military convoys being constantly on the move, it is bound to be possible to track down those small groups of people who have begun moving back westwards and gradually finish them off.”⁴²

Under von Trotha’s orders, German patrols hunted down Herero survivors, shooting men, women, and children.⁴³ Those who survived the initial pursuit were herded into concentration camps, where conditions were designed to maximise suffering.⁴⁴ These camps were not just sites of punishment but instruments of extermination, with thousands dying from disease, malnutrition, and deliberate neglect.⁴⁵ They were markedly similar to Nazi concentration camps, demonstrating early signs of what Jürgen Zimmerer describes as the “bureaucratisation of extermination” – careful counting of prisoners, forced labour, pre-filled death certificates, and extensive monitoring.⁴⁶ The systematic nature of these operations, combined with their administrative efficiency, provided a template for genocide that would be later refined and expanded during the Holocaust. The practice of pseudo-scientific racial research was also prefigured in the camps. Eugen Fischer conducted research on mixed-race children, developing theories of racial “degeneration” which influenced Nazi policies like the Nuremberg Laws, as well as the work of Nazi researchers like Josef Mengele.⁴⁷

⁴² Von Trotha to the Chief of Staff of the Army, 4 October 1904, quoted in Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 41.

⁴³ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 53.

⁴⁴ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 151

⁴⁵ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 151

⁴⁶ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 196

⁴⁷ Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe,” *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (July 2005): 454-56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691405054218>.

Shark Island was the most notorious of the Namibian camps, with its commandant Berthold von Deimling declaring that “as long as he was in charge, no Hottentot [Namibian] would be allowed to leave Shark Island alive.”⁴⁸ Visiting missionary Emil Laaf described the camp as having a “horribly high” mortality rate, with the dead being “taken to the cemetery by the cartload.”⁴⁹ By 1908, the Herero population had been reduced from an estimated 70,000-80,000 to approximately 15,000-20,000.⁵⁰ Alongside the Herero’s physical extermination, German administrators implemented legal measures to ensure the Herero’s cultural destruction. In 1906, the “Imperial Ordinance concerning the Sequestration of Native Assets” was implemented, stripping the Herero of their remaining land and livestock.⁵¹

With the Herero subdued, German forces began pursuing the neighbouring Nama nation. With significant military power now available to them, settlers saw an opportunity to subjugate the Nama and use them as a cheap labour force.⁵² The Nama had initially allied with the Germans during the Herero conflict – however, they revolted against colonial rule in October 1904.⁵³ Their uprising was both a pre-emptive strike and an attempt to resist a fate similar to the Herero. Recognising the difficulties in the Herero struggle, the Nama developed

⁴⁸ Von Estorff to the Colonial Forces, 10 April 1907, quoted in Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 48.

⁴⁹ *Lüderitzbucht Chronicle*, Archives of the Evangelical Church in the Republic of Namibia, n.d., quoted in Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 47.

⁵⁰ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 431.

⁵¹ Kaiserliche Verordnung, betr. Einziehung des Stammesvermögens der Eingeborenen, 26 December 1905, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, quoted in Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 70.

⁵² Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 165.

⁵³ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 165.

different strategies, using guerrilla warfare and their superior knowledge of the terrain to offset the more numerous and better-equipped German troops. They strategically avoided confrontation, instead employing tactics that would allow them to drag out hostilities, tie down large military forces, and ultimately wear down the German military through attrition.⁵⁴ In response, von Trotha employed the same strategies developed during the Herero attack, systematically occupying water holes to kill the Nama through thirst. The campaign rapidly became genocidal, with German troops deliberately destroying the livestock, crops, and infrastructure of Nama communities.⁵⁵ As Zimmerer explains, “the campaign once again turned into a war against women and children, whose deaths were at least accepted and condoned, if not positively pursued, as part of the strategy of annihilation.”⁵⁶ Like the Herero, the Nama were eventually captured and concentrated on Shark Island, subjected to the same exterminatory conditions.⁵⁷ Of the estimated 15,000-20,000 Nama at the start of the conflict, approximately half were killed.⁵⁸

What distinguished Germany from other colonial powers was, as Reinhard Kössler describes, “the astounding and appalling publicity given to the events by the perpetrators.”⁵⁹ Unlike other European countries that often concealed or downplayed their offshore colonial violence, German society was filled with media depictions of the colonial brutality occurring in Namibia. As Manuela Boatcă explains, publicity was given to the perpetrators “on virtually

⁵⁴ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 165.

⁵⁵ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 166

⁵⁶ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 44

⁵⁷ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 167

⁵⁸ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 313

⁵⁹ Reinhart Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust? Structural Parallels and Discursive Continuities,” *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 2 (2005): 313, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40175077>.

all levels, from picture postcards of the concentration camps or execution scenes to memorial volumes depicting overt crimes.”⁶⁰ The systematic documentation of these crimes created what Kössler terms a “public genocide.”⁶¹ Postcards sent by German soldiers included images of concentration camps, emancipated prisoners in chains, and execution scenes. Memorial volumes published during or shortly after the genocide similarly displayed the ease by which German soldiers disregarded Namibian lives, with one including an image of “two German soldiers packaging a case of Herero skulls with a caption informing the readers that these had been cleaned of their flesh by Herero women using glass shards.”⁶²

Particularly telling was the popularity of Gustav Frenssen’s adventure novel, *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest*, about a German soldier who treated Africans as subhuman.⁶³ The novel justified the superior right of colonisers to “underused” land, surmised that German expansion was a “divine calling,” and dehumanised Africans as “wild beasts.”⁶⁴ This book became so successful it was translated into several languages including English and was introduced into German school curricular by 1908 – only two years after its publication.⁶⁵ This guaranteed that an entire generation of German children received their education through stories that normalised racial violence and dehumanisation. This normalisation extended even

⁶⁰ Manuela Boatcă, “Race and Politics: Colonial Blueprint, Historical Exceptionalism and Global Connections,” in *A Cultural History of Race in the Modern and Genomic Age*, ed. Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, 1st ed., vol. 6 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 88-89, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350067561.ch-005>.

⁶¹ Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust,” 315.

⁶² Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust,” 314.

⁶³ Gustav Frenssen, *Peter Moors Fahrt Nach Südwest* (Berlin, 1906).

⁶⁴ Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust,” 314.

⁶⁵ Boatcă, “Race and Politics,” 89.

to public performances, with circuses depicting gallant German soldiers and farmers overcoming “treacherous blacks.”⁶⁶ As Henning Melber explains, “the Namibian genocide contributed to the establishment of a new pattern of extermination,” as the “inherent racism of settler colonialism worked to increase tolerance of mass killings.”⁶⁷ This created an undercurrent, a normalisation of violence against the racialised “Other” which could be applied internally – and Germany’s World War I defeat provided the catalyst for this.

As part of World War I’s post-war settlement, Namibia was stripped from Germany and placed under South African administration.⁶⁸ In addition, the Rhineland – a region in Western Germany – was demilitarised and temporarily occupied by the Allied forces. There, France deployed up to 45,000 African, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian troops from its colonies in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Madagascar, Guadeloupe, Réunion, Indochina, and Martinique.⁶⁹ This triggered intense racial anxieties throughout Germany, adding to the humiliation of the defeat. Exaggerated rumours of sexual relations between German women and African soldiers exacerbated matters, triggering fear of potential mixed-race children threatening the genetic “purity” of the German race.⁷⁰ The “Black Horror on the Rhine” propaganda campaign epitomised this fear, depicting African soldiers sexually violating

⁶⁶ Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust,” 315.

⁶⁷ Henning Melber, “The Genocide in ‘German South-West Africa’ and the Politics of Commemoration—How (Not) to Come to Terms with the Past,” in *German Colonialism and National Identity*, ed. Michael Perraudin (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 306, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852590-29>.

⁶⁸ Boatcă, “Race and Politics,” 90.

⁶⁹ Boatcă, “Race and Politics,” 90.

⁷⁰ Boatcă, “Race and Politics,” 90.

German women, representing a threat to the Volkskörper (the German national body).⁷¹ Such narratives transformed abstract colonial racial hierarchies into visceral, emotional discourse that pervaded the everyday lives of Germans. Despite acknowledgement by the Reich Ministry of the Interior that these acts were gross exaggerations, the moral panic persisted across Germany and the Western world, with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom making international appeals against "the use, completely contrary to nature, of coloureds in the Rhine districts."⁷²

These racial anxieties, combined with the normalisation of violence against the racial "Other" which had been established during the Namibian experience, created an environment of brewing racial hatred from which the Nazis grew. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler wrote against the "contamination caused by the influx of negroid blood on the Rhine," accusing the French and the Jews of intentionally conspiring to implement a "process of bastardisation in the centre of the European Continent [...] by infecting the white race with the blood of an inferior stock."⁷³ To Hitler, both Jews and Africans were the core perpetrators of the "contamination" of the German body. The two were often linked – in the same paragraph that he wrote about "the ravages from which our people are suffering daily as a result of contamination with Jewish blood," he only a few sentences later wrote that the "negroid parasites in our national body corrupt our innocent fair-haired girls and thus destroy something which can no longer be replaced in this world."⁷⁴ Here, Hitler clearly blames both Jews and Africans for contaminating the German national body. However, he places them on different levels of blame. Jews are regarded as the primary architects of this racial contamination, possessing the intelligence and

⁷¹ Boatcă, "Race and Politics," 90-93.

⁷² Boatcă, "Race and Politics," 90,

⁷³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (United Kingdom, 1939), 507.

⁷⁴ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 457.

malevolence to orchestrate Germany's racial downfall. Meanwhile, Africans are depicted as the unwitting instruments of this downfall, serving as biological weapons rather than conscious conspirators. In doing so, Africans are blamed less, regarded as lacking the agency or intelligence to comprehend their role in the conspiracy.

This hierarchy of culpability, however, did not translate into different treatment under Nazi policies. When the Nazis began their genocidal actions, the mixed-race children born from African-German relations were among the first to be forcibly sterilised.⁷⁵ They were termed "Rhineland bastards," and were subjected to compulsory sterilisation first under the 1933 sterilisation law, and then through the later illegal sterilisations which targeted "alien races" and "asocials" such as Jews, Roma, and homosexuals.⁷⁶ Nazi racial theory, regardless of its internal contradictions about agency and culpability, ultimately led to the same outcome for all who were deemed racially undesirable.

Many colonial concepts were specifically transferred from Nazi ideologies. The concept of "population economics" – viewing humans as economic resources to be managed, moved, or eliminated based on their utility – was first developed in the colonial context.⁷⁷ This utilitarian approach to human life was explicitly articulated in Namibia in 1907, when colonial bureaucrat Paul Rohrbach argued that "from the point of view of the economy of the country, the Hottentots are generally disregarded, in the wider sense, as useless, and in this respect, provide no justification for the preservation of this race."⁷⁸ Similarly, anthropologist Eugen Fischer suggested that the Namibian population's right to exist should depend entirely on their

⁷⁵ Boatcă, "Race and Politics," 93-96.

⁷⁶ Boatcă, "Race and Politics," 93-96.

⁷⁷ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 72.

⁷⁸ Paul Rohrbach, *Deutsche Kolonialwirtschaft*, I (Berlin, 1907), 282, quoted in Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz," 436.

usefulness to Germans, stating that, they should be kept alive “only for so long as they are useful to us. Otherwise free competition, which means in my opinion, their extinction!”⁷⁹ The Nazi *Gerechplan Ost*, which envisioned massive population displacement and elimination in Eastern Europe, mirrored colonial population managements strategies not just in Namibia, but across Africa.⁸⁰ Heinrich Himmler’s plan to exploit Eastern Europe for raw materials, energy, food, and labour even if the process meant destroying local economies, uprooting communities, and murdering millions – followed precisely the economic model established in Namibia where administrators violently subordinated Namibians to serve German interests.

Even specific terminology was carried over. The term “Lebensraum” (living space) was first coined by geographer Friedrich Ratzel in 1897 and later developed in 1901 with Namibia specifically in mind.⁸¹ The concept of “Rassenschande” (racial shame) first appeared in Germany’s colonial laws banning interracial marriage, and was then extensively debated in the Reichstag between 1905-1912, ensuring wide exposure in German public discourse before being adopted by Nazi propaganda.⁸² Even the term “Konzentrationslager” (concentration camp) was pioneered for Namibia, with Chancellor von Bülow introducing the word into the German language in 1904 when he demanded von Trotha “establish Konzentrationslager” for the Herero people.⁸³

Above all, the colonial experience normalised the idea that certain populations could be considered sub-human and therefore expendable. The dehumanisation of colonised peoples

⁷⁹ Eugen Fischer, *Die Rehobother Bastards*, 1913, quoted in Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 454.

⁸⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 61.

⁸¹ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 432.

⁸² Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 438-39.

⁸³ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 446.

provided a template of violence that could be turned inwards and applied to Jews, Roma, and other marginalised groups. The rhetoric of racial superiority allowed both colonisers and Nazis to view their actions not as murders, but as necessary processes – a “cleansing” or “management” of populations deemed inferior. This ideology permeated scientific, political, and cultural discourse, shaping military and administrative conduct both in Namibia and in Germany during WWII.

Nazis adopted not only ideologies, but also concrete practices developed during Germany’s colonial era. These connections were sometimes direct, with Nazi leaders like Hermann Göring having familial connections to the colonial administration.⁸⁴ Göring’s father, Heinrich Göring, served as Namibia’s first imperial commissioner, playing a crucial role in establishing Germany’s colony in Namibia and suppressing revolts. Hermann Göring’s 1939 biography emphasised how he was “thrilled” by his father’s colonial exploits as a child, and at his Nuremberg trial, Göring listed “the position of my father as first Governor of Southwest Africa” as one of the four most important factors in the development of his career.⁸⁵

Similarly, Franz Ritter von Epp, who participated in the Herero genocide, later became a key Nazi Party leader and helped develop Nazi policies.⁸⁶ Von Epp served as Company Commander under General von Trotha, participating in the Battle of Waterberg and its genocidal aftermath, and remaining in the colony during the establishment of concentration camps. He returned to Germany in 1906, and later employed and influenced numerous future Nazi leaders including Rudolf Hess, Ernst Röhm, and Adolf Hitler himself, whom von Epp

⁸⁴ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 451.

⁸⁵ Erich Gritzbach, *Hermann Goering: The Man and His Work*, trans. Gerald Griffith (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1939), 222; Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 451.

⁸⁶ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 452.

employed as an informer and educator in his Battalion Epp.⁸⁷ It was here that Hitler discovered his talent in public speaking, and Von Epp subsequently helped him launch his political career.⁸⁸ After his rise to power, Hitler appointed von Epp head of the Colonial Policy Office of the Nazi Party in 1934, giving him “responsibility for preparing and developing future colonial plans and concerns.”⁸⁹ These connections, as well as information from the extensive records kept by the German colonial administration, allowed Nazis to develop their genocidal practices directly from colonial actions. For example, the concept of “service tokens” – metal identification badges that Africans were forced to wear around their necks – were similarly used by Nazis to identify targeted populations.⁹⁰ The pass system, which restricted African movement and required constant documentation, was also used by Nazis to control Jews and other targeted populations’ movements.⁹¹

Specific colonial military approaches were also adopted by Nazis. The idea of Vernichtungskrieg – a type of war which aims at erasing a specific population – was first articulated by von Trotha in his “Annihilation Policy” against the Herero.⁹² During WWII, the concept became central to Nazi policy and propaganda. In his speech on January 30 1939, Hitler mirrored Von Trotha’s “Vernichtungskrieg” (annihilation) rhetoric, specifically threatening “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.”⁹³ “Vernichtungskrieg” legitimised practices that were central to both the Namibian genocide and the Holocaust: the execution of

⁸⁷ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 453.

⁸⁸ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 453.

⁸⁹ Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 453.

⁹⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 66.

⁹¹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, 72.

⁹² Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz,” 441.

⁹³ Adolf Hitler, “Reichstag Speech,” 1939.

prisoners of war, the targeting of male populations to prevent resistance, and the deliberate targeting of civilian populations as strategic objectives rather than collateral damage.⁹⁴ These methods represented a departure from traditional military ethical codes, transforming warfare from a contest between armies into a tool for demographic elimination.

In 1950, Césaire argued that Europeans “cultivated” Nazism – that they were the ones responsible for it.⁹⁵ While many have regarded his claims as extreme, deep research into the actions and ideologies of Nazis and colonisers reveals profound truth in his words. Genocide is not an aberration – rather, it emerges from ideologies that categorise certain populations as expendable. The racial hierarchies Europeans used to justify violence against Africans and Indigenous peoples created a template for violence that, under the right conditions, could be applied internally. Germany’s WWI defeat was the catalyst for this, with Nazis redirecting their racial hatred toward populations deemed “Other” within Europe – such as Jews, Roma, homosexuals, disabled persons, and any groups perceived as national threats. The German colonial experience in Namibia both reinforced existing European racial hierarchies and pioneered bureaucratic and pseudo-scientific methods of population control that would later enable Nazi industrialised genocide.

Despite these clear links, many scholars continue to resist comparison, instead supporting Steven T. Katz’s argument that the Holocaust is fundamentally incomparable to all other instances of mass violence.⁹⁶ Katz defines the Holocaust as “phenomenologically unique” because “never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualised

⁹⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 54-55.

⁹⁵ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 19.

⁹⁶ Steven T Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

policy, to annihilate every man, woman and child belonging to a specific people.”⁹⁷ However, close analysis of the Namibian genocide challenges this claim, demonstrating that German colonial authorities pursued the same objective decades earlier. This, of course, was not the only case – similar objectives have occurred all over Africa, as well as in Australia, the Americas, and other colonised regions. Why, then, do scholars ignore this? Is it an ignorance of colonial atrocities, or an implicit devaluation of non-European suffering?

Daniel Blatman argues that many historians have created a sacred boundary around Holocaust memory that resists comparisons to other genocides.⁹⁸ He claims that this approach emerged through a combination of historical trauma, collective memory formation, and the political needs of Israeli nation-building.⁹⁹ Zimmerer elaborates further, arguing that retaining Holocaust “uniqueness” serves different but complementary functions for German and Israeli scholarship, both of which have been influential in shaping Holocaust historiography.¹⁰⁰ For German historians, maintaining Holocaust “uniqueness” provides a way to compartmentalise historical guilt, separating Nazi crimes from broader patterns of German violence.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, for Israeli scholars, Holocaust “uniqueness” serves a more complex function, as it is essential not only to national identity but to the moral legitimacy of Israel’s founding narrative.¹⁰² Israel’s establishment as a settler-colonial state was justified as creating a

⁹⁷ Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, 128-129.

⁹⁸ Daniel Blatman, “Holocaust Scholarship: Towards a Post-Uniqueness Era,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 21–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2015.991206>.

⁹⁹ Blatman, “Holocaust Scholarship,” 21-43.

¹⁰⁰ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, XV-XXIII.

¹⁰¹ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, XVI.

¹⁰² Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, XVII.

necessary refuge for the Jewish people after the Holocaust.¹⁰³ If colonialism is acknowledged as fundamentally genocidal and rooted in racial hierarchy, Israelis would have to contend with the fact that their state was built through the same ideological framework that enabled the Holocaust. Such recognition would transform their national narrative from one of pure victimhood to one where they became the perpetrators, partaking in and benefitting from the same system of racial hierarchy and genocidal displacement that had once targeted them.

The sacralisation of the Holocaust has resulted in colonial genocides being relegated to a lower tier of historical significance, deemed unworthy of comparison to the Holocaust. This has created a hierarchy of suffering in which Jewish victimhood occupies a singular, incomparable position. This approach is not only fundamentally racist, but it also constrains historical knowledge and prevents a deeper understanding of how systematic violence emerges. As Zimmerer explains, “stigmatising all comparisons and the drawing of parallels and continuities between the Holocaust and other forms of mass violence leads to the separation of the Shoah from history” which ultimately “blocks our ability to see important roots” and “reduces the moral force of ‘never again,’ since singular events cannot be repeated.”¹⁰⁴ If scholars truly want to understand the underlying causes that enabled the horrors of the Holocaust, it is essential to look beyond national boundaries and examine the broader context.

By tracing the links between German colonial actions in Namibia and Nazi actions during World War II, this essay challenges the historiographical notion of Holocaust “uniqueness,” demonstrating how the Namibian genocide provided the conceptual and methodological foundations that facilitated the Holocaust’s implementation. This analysis does

¹⁰³ Jeff Halper and Nadia Naser-Najjab, “Zionism: A Settler Colonial Project,” in *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and the Case for One Democratic State* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 32–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dm8d20.7>.

¹⁰⁴ Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz*, XVI.

not diminish the horror of the Holocaust, as scholars like Katz might argue, but rather, it amplifies it by exposing the broader patterns of dehumanisation and violence which made such a catastrophic event possible. The mechanisms of racial dehumanisation proved to be portable and adaptable, capable of being redirected from colonial subjects to internal populations when political circumstances shifted. This historical continuity reveals an uncomfortable truth: racialised violence, once normalised in one context, can be easily applied to new targets. The boundaries between oppressor and oppressed are not fixed – rather, they are contingent upon shifting political and social circumstances. Understanding this is essential not only for historical accuracy but for recognising the warning signs of genocide before it is too late.

Bibliography

- Blatman, Daniel. "Holocaust Scholarship: Towards a Post-Uniqueness Era." *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 21–43.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2015.991206>.
- Boatcă, Manuela . "Race and Politics: Colonial Blueprint, Historical Exceptionalism and Global Connections." In *A Cultural History of Race in the Modern and Genomic Age*, edited by Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, 1st ed., 6:87–106. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350067561.ch-005>.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. 1950. Reprint, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfkrm>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B., Mahmood Mamdani, and Gerald Horne. *The World and Africa: Color and Democracy*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. 1947. Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Gerwarth, Robert, and Stephan Malinowski. "Hannah Arendt's Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz." *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 279–300. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008938909000314>.
- Gritzbach, Erich. *Hermann Goering: The Man and His Work*. Translated by Gerald Griffith. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1939.
- Gustav Frenssen. *Peter Moors Fahrt Nach Südwest*. Berlin, 1906.
- Halper, Jeff, and Nadia Naser-Najjab. "Zionism: A Settler Colonial Project." In *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and the Case for One Democratic State*, 32–50. London: Pluto Press, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dm8d20.7>.
- Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Translated by James Murphy. United Kingdom, 1939.

- Hitler, Adolf. "Reichstag Speech." Presented at the Kroll Opera House, Berlin, January 30, 1939.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. "The Age of Empire." In *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914*, 56–83. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.
- Hull, Isabel V. *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*. 1st ed. Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 2005.
<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801467097>.
- Katz, Steven T. *The Holocaust in Historical Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Kitchen, Martin. "The Unification of Germany: 1866-1871." In *A History of Modern Germany: 1800 to the Present*, 2nd ed., 101–23. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012.
- Klaus Bachmann. *Genocidal Empires: German Colonialism in Africa and the Third Reich*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b13834>.
- Kössler, Reinhart. "From Genocide to Holocaust? Structural Parallels and Discursive Continuities." *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 2 (2005): 309–17.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40175077>.
- Kundrus, Birthe. "From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some Remarks on the Current Debate." *Afrikaspectrum* 40, no. 2 (2005): 299–308.
- Lemkin, Raphaël. *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944.
- Ludwig von Estorff. *Wanderungen Und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika Und Südafrika*. Edited by Christoph-Friedrich Kutscher, 1968.

Madley, Benjamin. “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe.”

European History Quarterly 35, no. 3 (July 2005): 429–64.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691405054218>.

Melber, Henning. “The Genocide in ‘German South-West Africa’ and the Politics of

Commemoration—How (Not) to Come to Terms with the Past.” In *German*

Colonialism and National Identity, edited by Michael Perraudin, 297–315. New York:

Taylor & Francis , 2011. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852590-29>.

Zimmerer, Jürgen. *From Windhoek to Auschwitz? Reflections on the Relationship between*

Colonialism and National Socialism. 1st ed. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110754513>.