

‘Certain uncertainties’  
or  
Venturing progressively into colonial apologetics?<sup>1</sup>

Werner Hillebrecht

*Abstract*

*This article deals with Brigitte Lau's contentious article "Uncertain certainties" of 1988. The author explains the controversy sparked by the article and refutes her call for a revision of the historiography of the war of 1904-08; further, the article's echo is contextualised and explained in terms of a specific Namibian-German psychological reaction to the trauma of 20th century German history among Namibian Germans.*

The Namibian genocidal war of 1904-1908 remains a contentious issue. It has, apart from its centenary commemoration, also been put into the limelight by the attempt of a section of the Namibian Herero community to sue certain private companies and the German state for reparations.<sup>2</sup> It keeps cropping up as a subject of monologous polemics in Windhoek's *Allgemeine Zeitung*. This article is not an attempt at summarizing a 'debate' which is not really a debate but a constant exercise in denial of historical evidence. It analyses, and attempts to explain the background of, an article by Brigitte Lau which has become a centre-piece in a campaign against characterising this war as genocidal.

The title of the present article reverses the title of *Uncertain certainties*, first published by the Namibian historian and archivist Brigitte Lau in 1989 in the Namibian grassroots magazine *Mibagus*.<sup>3</sup> Her article, which had a tremendous and controversial echo, was reprinted in an updated version in a collection of several Lau articles in 1995, and has since been republished three times in German translation, and web-published by a German military veterans' organisation which deals in colonial nostalgia.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to the late Dr Klaus Dierks, who co-operated on an earlier version of this paper, delivered at the conference "1904-2004. Decontaminating the Namibian Past", University of Namibia, August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise overview of commemorative activities, see Joachim Zeller, "Genozid und Gedenken, ein dokumentarischer Überblick", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Genozid und Gedenken. Namibisch-deutsche Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Frankfurt, Brandes & Apsel, 2005: 163-188.

<sup>3</sup> Brigitte Lau, "Uncertain certainties", in: *Mibagus*, Windhoek, 1989/2: 4-5, 8. Only two issues of *Mibagus* ever appeared (in 1988 and 1989) and were distributed as a supplement to *The Namibian*.

<sup>4</sup> Brigitte Lau, "Uncertain certainties", in: *History and historiography, 4 essays in reprint*, Windhoek, Discourse/MSORP, 1995. (All subsequent citations of the article follow this version.) *Nachrichten/Museum*

There have been two diametrically opposed reactions to *Uncertain certainties*, which for the sake of convenience can be called the 'leftist' (or, as Brigitte Lau said, 'liberal' or 'Eurocentrist') and the 'rightist' (or, as the leftists said, 'revisionist' or 'colonial-apologetic') approach. The leftist response – mostly from people who greatly valued Brigitte Lau's previous contributions to Namibian historiography, and who often regarded themselves as her personal friends – started immediately after publication of the article, and was to a considerable extent a puzzled gut reaction to the fact that she argued against the term 'genocide' for the effect of the war of 1904-1908.<sup>5</sup> Several contributions with rather pointed polemics against the article's theses were published, other individuals expressed their concern in private letters, and were answered in similarly sharp tone by Brigitte Lau.<sup>6</sup>

One reason for the intense response to Lau's theses was that, not long before, and apparently unknown to her, an article in a West German historical journal had regurgitated the 1975 revisionist book by Sudholt and questioned the genocide.<sup>7</sup> The rightist response came rather belatedly, and only after Brigitte Lau's death – probably because, being steeped in colonial tradition, neither issue of *Mibagus* was widely read by Germans or German Namibians. However, during the last few years, in particular since

---

*Gesellschaft für wissenschaftliche Entwicklung*, Swakopmund, 30/1998/1: 7-11 and 30/1998/2: 2-15. *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, Windhoek/Wuppertal, 1/1991/1: 11-23. Heiner R. Schneider-Waterberg, *Der Wahrheit eine Gasse. Anmerkungen zum Kolonialkrieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904*, Swakopmund, Gesellschaft für wissenschaftliche Entwicklung, 2005. By the time of these publications, Brigitte Lau had died in a car accident; and the German republications were authorised by the editor of the *History and historiography*, Annemarie Heywood. The 1998 translation raises the question whether the anonymous translator actually knew what the argument is all about, as he/she appended the wrong literature list to the document (namely the one for the preceding article about Urieta Kazahendika/Gertze in the 1995 publication). Website of the "Traditionsverband deutscher Schutz- und Überseetruppen/Freunde der deutschen Schutzgebiete e.V.", <http://www.traditionsverband.de>

<sup>5</sup> The periodisation "1904-1908" in itself is debatable. The initial hostilities were opened by the Bondelswarts in 1903. The German side declared the state of war as officially ended in 1907. However, military-style activities continued not only into 1908 (the last major campaign against Simon Copper) but at least into 1910, although the Germans no longer termed them 'war' but 'police operations' against 'bandits'.

<sup>6</sup> The immediate response included Randolph Vigne in *Southern African Review of Books (SAROB)*, February/May 1990; B. Lau's reply in *SAROB* June/July 1990; a counter-reply by Vigne and Henning Melber in *SAROB* August/October 1990. I could not find a publication of Horst Drechsler's response (Mss. in private possession). – There have been several critical references in later articles and books. To cite from a private letter to the author, who had criticised Poewe's uncritical use of Sudholt's book: "Ihr seid eine richtige Mafia geworden: wessen "Absichten" "gut" sind, der hat recht, den darf man auch zitieren, aber wenn die "Absichten falsch" sind, dann muss einem "schlecht werden", wenn man den Mann (oder die Frau) nur liest. Also mit Forschung, Wissen oder auch nur Denken hat das nichts mehr zu tun, das ist Dir hoffentlich klar. Das ist Gruppenterror – und um noch deutlicher zu werden, ein Gruppenterror, den Bundesdeutsche heute dem namibianischen Diskurs aufzuzwingen versuchen, in schönster kolonialer Tradition". (B. Lau to W. Hillebrecht, dated 25 May 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Günther Spraul, "Der 'Völkermord' an den Herero: Untersuchungen zu einer neuen Kontinuitätslehre", in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 38, 1988: 713-739; Gert Sudholt, *Die deutsche Eingeborenepolitik in Südwestafrika von den Anfängen bis 1904*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1975.

the first publication of its German translation, *Uncertain certainties* has become a central and often-cited text for authors trying to exculpate the German side – despite, or rather because of, Brigitte Lau’s progressive credentials.

Two works have engaged in more depth with Lau’s article. Tilman Dederling published a substantial critique in 1993, and this author owes much to his analysis. In a number of aspects, especially in analysing Poewe’s and Sudholt’s arguments, it goes into a lot more detail.<sup>8</sup> Gesine Krüger’s doctoral thesis gives a balanced assessment.<sup>9</sup> In particular she recognizes Lau’s plea for a change of paradigm from colonial history to African history.<sup>10</sup> However, when dealing with the results of the extermination order and the treatment of prisoners, Krüger delivers much factual detail to contradict Lau’s theses; again, much more than could be mentioned in this article.

With the actualisation of the reparations demand and the centenary of the war, Lau’s article deserves another close review. I shall try to elucidate the motives behind it, as well as the factual base, the merits and deficiencies of its argumentation. In doing this, I shall follow the article closely in its revised version of 1995.

## 1. “The mystification of the Herero war”

In her first chapter called “The mystification of the Herero war”, Lau summarises (“adequately”, according to her own words) the prevalent historiographical account of the wars of 1904-1908 into three main theses, which she considers a mystification, and which she subsequently tries to refute in three steps. The Germans “followed a war policy of genocide which led to the extermination of between 70 and 80 per cent of the Herero nation”; further, “even after the war, they continued this policy by allowing about half their Herero and Nama prisoners of war – i. e. more than 7500 people – to die in camps, or doing ‘slave labour’”. Also, “in order to achieve these aims, they militarised the country to such an extent that, by 1907, several hundred Nama warriors were faced with an army of about 19 000 German soldiers”.<sup>11</sup>

She does not mention, however, what is just as widely seen as the most significant outcome of the war: the almost total expropriation of land and cattle of the indigenous peoples within German reach in what became known as the ‘Police Zone’.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Tilman Dederling, “The German-Herero War of 1904: revisionism of genocide or imaginary historiography?”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19/1993/1: 80-88.

<sup>9</sup> Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstse: Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkrieges in Namibia 1904 bis 1907*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999: 12-15, 67, 71-72, 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: 13.

<sup>11</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 39.

<sup>12</sup> Total expropriation, if one accepts the laws passed by the colonisers as a reflection of reality. However, as Jan Bart Gewald has shown, the law could never be totally enforced against the constant attempts from the African side to repossess land and cattle, if not in title, then *de facto*. See for example Jan Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, Oxford, Currey, 1999: 226. Two German ordinances from 8th August 1906 and 8th May

The thesis that Lau erects against these views, is that they

represent historical images which are entirely rooted in a Eurocentric consciousness – which means their relevance for Namibian history must be challenged, and their factual accuracy investigated.<sup>13</sup>

This is a most laudable objective. However the investigation which follows is far from satisfactory. Firstly, Lau proceeds to set up a fictitious view of the German colonisers, only to deconstruct it more easily. She puts up a strawman which is easy to shoot down.

To describe German colonisers as firstly successfully genocidal toward the Herero, and secondly as 'owning' them as slaves, implies images of them as superior strategists and cold killing machines pursuing, in 1904, extermination strategies similar to those which the whole world was – rightly – afraid of in 1939, supermen of Roman magnitude who, undaunted, operated deadly armies in entirely foreign territories.<sup>14</sup>

It is hardly conceivable from where Lau conjured this picture of “superior strategists” and “supermen of Roman magnitude”, unless from a few of the heroizing German colonial fiction and war reminiscences which flourished between 1904 and 1945. This kind of scenario is definitely not present in the scholarly literature which she attempts to critique, the works of Drechsler, Bley, and Pool.<sup>15</sup> There, the German military machine is rather depicted as a permanently bungling, hopelessly incompetent, large and cumbersome apparatus, which had to make up for their lacking experience in guerilla warfare by deploying vast numbers of military personnel. Even in much of the contemporary literature published before World War I, no such ‘supermen’ picture is drawn.

As for the “cold killing machines”, again one cannot find any such allegations in the literature critiqued by Lau. Genocide does not need human killing machines to be effective: willing or even reluctant compliance is enough. The deeply religious officer Ludwig von Estorff, who criticised von Trotha's policies severely, and later acted against orders by removing the surviving Nama from the deadly Shark Island, complied just like

---

1907 decreed that all communal property (land, cattle and small stock) of the Herero, Swartboois, Topnaar, Witboois, Red Nation, Bethanier Nama, Franzman Nama, Veldschoendragers, and Bondelswarts was expropriated. This means that south of the Red Line, only the 'faithful' Rehoboth and Berseba communities kept their land, while the Damara – whom the Germans considered anyway, like the San, as having no land rights because they were perceived as acephalous communities and therefore without land title – were 'granted' some territory for use, but not as property. In addition, the ownership of *Grossvieh* (i.e. cattle and horses) was forbidden to these communities. Land and cattle further north were not expropriated for several reasons: because the Germans realised this would mean another costly war; because the area was considered too unhealthy for European settlers; and because the colonial economy was in desperate need of a steady supply of 'native labour' from these areas – especially after the genocide.

<sup>13</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 39.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herrero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884-1915)*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1966; Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894-1914*, Hamburg, Leibniz, 1968; Gerhardus Pool, *Die Herero-opstand 1904-1907*, Kaapstad, HAUM, 1979.

everybody else when it came to sealing off the Omaheke against the return of the starving Herero. He later wrote in his memoirs, “I had the unrewarding task to follow the refugees into the sandfield [Omaheke] and then to prevent their return.”<sup>16</sup> The task may have been unrewarding and against his convictions, but it was the official policy and the order of the supreme commander von Trotha; therefore it was followed, and to a large extent was effective.<sup>17</sup>

One remark in this chapter is programmatic and indispensable for the understanding of Lau’s intentions:

The Herero and Nama appear in the role of victims, helpless against such supermen. European scholars and politicians have envisioned Africans in such roles ever since colonisation began, and apparently continue to do so today.<sup>18</sup>

This remark reveals the central Africanist motive behind most of Brigitte Lau’s previous historical research: the desire to restore African dignity, to prove African agency, that Africans were making their own history. However, she does not hit the target. The picture of Africans as helpless victims is a prevailing image of Africa in the West, nowadays maybe more than ever, but is this the picture that Drechsler and Bley paint of the Herero and Nama? Quite to the contrary; for example, Drechsler cites rather gleefully from Jacob Marengo’s interview to the *Cape Times*, where he answered the question whether he was aware of Germany’s military power: “Yes I am aware of it, but they cannot fight in our country. They do not know where to get water, and they do not understand guerilla warfare”.<sup>19</sup> This is actually how Drechsler was read by a generation of Western solidarity activists who shaped much of the international support for SWAPO in the 1970s and 1980s (as well as for other liberation movements): not as an account of an overwhelming imperial power crushing a poor helpless African people, but as an African people rising against all odds because, in Mao’s words,

All reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality they are not so powerful. From a long-term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are really powerful.<sup>20</sup>

This Western perception of Mao’s writing in the 1970s may have been naïve, but it is definitely far removed from reality to say that Western solidarity to the cause of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ludwig von Estorff, *Wanderungen und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika und Südafrika 1894-1910*, Wiesbaden, Selbstverlag, 1968: 117: “Ich hatte die undankbare Aufgabe, den Flüchtlingen in das Sandfeld nachzustoßen und dann ihre Rückkehr zu verhindern.”

<sup>17</sup> Of course it was not totally effective. Several of the genocide deniers have mentioned evidence – including the just cited von Estorff – that the German military was not in a position to completely seal off the Omaheke. The fact that some Herero succeeded in breaking through the lines changes neither the intent, nor the overall result of the policy.

<sup>18</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Horst Drechsler, *Let us die fighting*, London, Zed Press, 1980: 202, fn. 14, citing from *Cape Times* 29. May 1906.

<sup>20</sup> *Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, 2nd ed., Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1967: 72, citing Mao Zedong: *Talk with the American correspondent Anna Louise Strong*, Selected Works, vol. 4: 100.

Namibians conjured a picture of them as helpless victims.<sup>21</sup> Nor is it true for the state support from the Communist bloc, which supported African liberation movements as allies in the anti-capitalist struggle. It is significant that the best-known image of contemporary Namibians in the early 1970s progressive press was a photograph of the 1971/72 strikers symbolizing workers' power, while the most reported (and dozens of times reprinted) voice of Namibians was ya Toivo's defiant speech from the dock at the "Terrorism Trial", 1968 in Pretoria.

Lau's following sentence is also programmatic and reveals another crucial motive behind her reasoning:

Thus the Nazi German 'Aryan' hero is perversely resurrected, and one [of] the foremost Namibian experiences of the last 25 years, the total militarisation of the country by South Africa, is neatly taken off South Africa's contemporary shoulders and placed at the doorstep of those turn-of-the century early colonisers.<sup>22</sup>

This is a recurrent theme in Brigitte Lau's work: her (rightful) insistence that it is South Africa who was the colonial master for 75 fateful years after the initial 30 German years, and who was responsible for Apartheid, Bantu education, continued land theft, colonial distortion of the economy, and the perfection of the system of oppression.<sup>23</sup> However, the invocation of these undeniable truths at this point is grotesque: neither does the German oppression exculpate the South African one, nor vice versa. In fact, they complemented each other perfectly: the South Africans continued to build on what they inherited from the Germans, with only a brief intermittent period of liberalisation under the military rule 1915-1920. Senator Vedder spoke the truth when he proudly claimed in the South African Senate that Apartheid was invented by the Germans and "in South West Africa we have the only country in the world where Apartheid has been exercised in

---

<sup>21</sup> The author, for sure, was personally quite naive when Drechsler's dry but evocative account of Hendrik Witbooi captured his imagination as a West-German Maoist in 1976, and prompted him to focus research and solidarity work on Namibia.

<sup>22</sup> Lau, "Certainties": 39.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the two books she co-authored on water affairs (*Namibian water resources and their management, a preliminary history*, with Christel Stern, Windhoek, National Archives, 1990) and on agricultural history (*100 years of agricultural development in colonial Namibia*, with Peter Reiner, Windhoek, National Archives, 1993), or the brilliant exposition on land alienation under South African rule, published posthumously from an unfinished draft in *The Namibian* 8.11.1996, and *Windhoek Observer* 9.11.1996; unfortunately she never found the time to elaborate on the latter topic. The history of land alienation under South African rule, and the highly successful 'affirmative action' scheme to transform landless *Arme Blankes* (poor whites) into settled farmers in Namibia, still remains to be researched. There is only a single academic thesis on South African land settlement policies in Namibia, and that one ends with the year 1932. Cf. F.G. Curry, *The land policy of the South African government in South Africa, 1915-1939*, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1967. The primary sources are available – there are endless rows of files in the Windhoek archives on the subject.

an increasing degree for fifty years”.<sup>24</sup> The German colonial proclamations on the systematic deprivation of the rights of “natives” speak a clear language.<sup>25</sup>

The last paragraph in this chapter mentions a key source behind Lau’s opinions on the subject, namely Karla Poewe, whom she cites as “the only progressive scholar in over 25 years who has dared [...] to challenge the genocide interpretation” and “has been effectively marginalised by a silent forum of fellow scholars and writers”.<sup>26</sup> Now, in terms of serious scholarship, Karla Poewe has successfully marginalised herself not only by uncritically accepting Sudholt’s poorly researched interpretation of the 1904 war, and promoting the term “psychological warfare” for von Trotha’s extermination order, but also by labelling the entire Herero society since the war in terms of psychopathology.<sup>27</sup> However, the remark also hints at Lau’s own feeling of rejection and marginalisation by academia, which may have influenced her intransigent attitude against any criticism of this particular article.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. “What happened to the evidence”

In her second chapter, “What happened to the evidence”, Lau deliberates on the problem of the loss of the files of the *Schutztruppe*. This is indeed a big problem for Namibian historiography.

However, the insistence on the loss of the military’s own documentation rather obscures the fact that there is substantial evidence at hand. Not only the *Reichskolonialamt* files, which when Lau wrote her article were still at Potsdam and somewhat difficult to access, contain much information, but also the National Archives in Windhoek.<sup>29</sup> The central German administration files (ZBU) hold 116 bundles dealing with the military; amongst which there are 28 bundles dealing specifically with aspects of the 1904-1908 war. Five

---

<sup>24</sup> Union of South Africa, Senate Debates, 1956, vol. 15, cols. 3884-85; cited according to: United Nations, *Report of the Committee on South West Africa*, 12th session, 1957. The original of this particular volume of the Senate Debates cannot be found in any Namibian library.

<sup>25</sup> The compulsory carrying of passes and the prohibition of ‘mixed marriages’ may be mentioned here.

<sup>26</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 40.

<sup>27</sup> Karla Poewe, *The Namibian Herero. A history of their psychosocial disintegration and survival*, Lewiston/Queenston, Mellen, 1985, in particular p. 125f. and ch. 14 “Herero attitudes”, p. 233-245. Cf. the reviews of Poewe’s book by Brian Mokopagosi, *African Affairs*, 87, 1988: 480 and Dag Henrichsen, *International Journal of African historical studies*, 28, 1995: 453; also in Dederling, “War”.

<sup>28</sup> The author witnessed Brigitte Lau in tears after her contribution at the 1984 conference of the German Association of Africanists at Hannover was heavily criticised by Mose Tjitendero, not on its academic merits, but because the organisers had violated the academic boycott against South Africa by inviting a scholar based in occupied Namibia. This incident deeply influenced her attitude against any form of ‘political correctness’. What prevented her apparently from taking serious any of the several criticisms of her *Mibagus* article, was her subjective impression that this criticism was not motivated by seeking for the truth, but by ‘political correctness’.

<sup>29</sup> Since October 2003, a microfilm of the entire *Reichskolonialamt* files is available in the National Archives of Namibia.

of these bundles, containing 13 volumes, deal with prisoners of war. Also, in the district files of Keetmanshoop and Windhoek one can find substantial information on the war. Most of these files have hardly been touched by historical research; not by Drechsler, not by Bley; only one volume is cited by Sudholt.<sup>30</sup> Only Pool and, in more recent years, Henrichsen, Gewalt, Krüger, Nuhn and Erichsen have made extensive use of this material.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, their findings corroborate Bley's and Drechsler's research based on the Potsdam archives. Whether Brigitte Lau had ever earnestly used these files, cannot be established from her publications; her main work focused on pre-colonial history, and the two publications dealing at least in part with the period in question (*Uncertain certainties*, and *The Hendrik Witbooi Papers*) contain absolutely no reference to original 1904-1908 files.

### 3. "The basis of the myth"

The third chapter "The basis of the myth" succinctly summarises the points on which Drechsler bases the verdict of "genocide": population figures, von Trotha's extermination order, and military strategy at the Waterberg. It also brings in a subject which is not really of relevance in this context, namely the numbers of German soldiers deployed in Namibia. All points are discussed in detail later on.

### 4. "The numbers involved"

The fourth chapter "The numbers involved" discusses the population figures used by Drechsler. It is particularly this chapter which invoked the wrath of Lau's critics: because the obsession with minimising figures seemed to support a crude line of argument along the lines 'the numbers before the war are inflated, the numbers after the war are estimated too low, therefore the number of killed must be much less, therefore it was no genocide'. This is painfully reminiscent of the line of reasoning of the deniers of the Holocaust, the proponents of the "Auschwitz lie" argument. It is not surprising that it is especially this chapter which later caught the attention of the genocide deniers. Brigitte Lau met the outrage of her critics with plain bewildered incomprehension – a fact which can only be explained by her political socialisation: she left Germany just after high

---

<sup>30</sup> Sudholt, *Eingeborenenpolitik*: 195 cites ZBU 450, D IV k 4; Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft*; Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*.

<sup>31</sup> Gerhardus Pool, *Samuel Maharero*; Dag Henrichsen, *Herrschaft und Identifikation im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia*, unpubl. PhD thesis, Univ. Hamburg, 1997; Jan Bart Gewalt, *Towards redemption, a socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 to 1923*, Leiden, CNWS, 1996; Jan Bart Gewalt, *Herero heroes*; Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung*; Walter Nuhn, *Sturm über Südwest. Der Hereroaufstand von 1904 - ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias*, Koblenz, Bernard & Graefe, 1989; Walter Nuhn, *Feind überall. Der Große Namaufstand (Hottentottenaufstand) 1904-1908 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia)*, Bonn, Bernard & Graefe, 2000; Casper Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them". Concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-1908*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2005.



school, moved to Namibia and then studied in Cape Town, where the Western European debates on the holocaust were very far removed from the central stage of political historiographic discussion. This is quite understandable – there were more pressing issues in South Africa at the time – but does not validate her argument.

#### 4.1. What constitutes a genocide?

It is not my task here to elaborate in detail why it is not a number, nor a percentage of killed people, that constitutes a genocide. A genocide is a genocide whenever people are being killed *en masse* for nothing else but for being perceived as ‘the other’, as a member of an ethnic or religious group. This has been elaborated by more competent persons. It should suffice here to refer to the United Nations Genocide Convention.<sup>32</sup> The gross inappropriateness of basing an argument on numbers has prevented other critics of Lau from taking up the question of figures at all. In discussing the casualty figures, it is not my purpose to accept this line of argumentation, but to make it clear to what extent she disregards any scholarly diligence in discussing this matter.

#### 4.2. The numbers at Waterberg and before the war

Firstly, there is the question of the number of Herero and cattle present at the Waterberg during the fateful August 1904. Sudholt, and following him, Poewe and Lau, make it a big issue to cast doubt on the figure estimated by some contemporary German observers. They cite various sources including “Water Affairs specialists” declaring that such a concentration of people and cattle could never have been sustained for a longer period by the existing water sources.<sup>33</sup> This whole debate is a kind of shadow-boxing, because the numbers present at Waterberg are not relevant for the numbers of Herero victims of the war.

Secondly, there is the estimate of the number of Herero before the war. The figures cited in the literature vary to a considerable extent. The famous *Blue Book* proposes a minimum figure of 80,000 (based on the estimates of Palgrave, Leutwein, and Schwabe) and argues that allowing for “natural increase” one should rather estimate 100,000.<sup>34</sup> Drechsler cites the figure of 80,000 given by the *Blue Book*, and adds in a footnote that “some 10,000 Herero had already died during the typhoid epidemic that occurred in 1898”.<sup>35</sup> In other words, he arrives at a number of 70,000. Bley mentions an estimate of 60-80,000 without providing a source, but elsewhere (endnote 14 on p.319) cites

---

<sup>32</sup> See the excerpt reproduced as appendix to this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Sudholt had enquired with H.W. Stengel of the SWA Dept. of Water Affairs.

<sup>34</sup> Union of South Africa, (ed.), *Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and their Treatment by Germany*, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1918.

<sup>35</sup> Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 252 and footnote 329 on p. 364: “...dass während der Typhusepidemie des Jahres 1898 bereits an die 10 000 Herero gestorben waren”.

Leutwein's estimate of 70-80,000.<sup>36</sup> Gründer takes the figure of 60-80,000.<sup>37</sup> Leutwein, while the war was already on, speaks of 60-70,000.<sup>38</sup> The geographer Karl Dove cites "the generally used estimate of the Ovaherero people, which puts the number of heads at 80,000".<sup>39</sup> So does missionary Irle.<sup>40</sup> Only his colleague Bernsmann arrived at a radically lower estimate of 35,000.<sup>41</sup> There is a well-documented overview by Maria Fisch, who collected a number of further, quite divergent estimates.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously all these were estimates, but to allege, like Lau, that they were totally uninformed guesses, because neither missionaries nor German officials travelled far enough is disingenuous.<sup>43</sup> Because of the nomadic nature of the Herero pastoral economy, all major chieftainships were known to the missionaries and colonial officials, and they must have based their estimates on these (admittedly somewhat fluid) groupings, and not on guesswork of unknown areas. It has to be accepted that the actual number of Herero was somewhere in the region between 60-80,000.

### 4.3 The survivors

Thirdly, there is the issue of the number of Herero after the war. Drechsler assumes a number of 15,130 based on the *Blue Book* which claims this as the figure of the official 1911 census.<sup>44</sup> According to Drechsler, no 1911 census figures can be found in the *Reichskolonialamt* files, and he therefore relied on the *Blue Book*.<sup>45</sup> Instead of verifying the 1911 census figures, Lau does some juggling with 1906 figures and attempts to push the figure up to 30,000, admitting that this as well is "possibly quite mistaken". Moreover, she brings in more confusion by introducing an alleged 1910 estimate of total "African native population" in the police zone as 40,000 by Poewe.<sup>46</sup> The problem is, Poewe nowhere mentions such a figure (which can only be inferred from a percentage she gives on the cited page), and anyway never documents her figures.

---

<sup>36</sup> Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft*: 191.

<sup>37</sup> Horst Gründer, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1985: 121.

<sup>38</sup> Leutwein to Kolonialabteilung, 23.2.1904, Deutsches Bundesarchiv (previously Zentrales Staatsarchiv der DDR), RKA file 2113: 89-90, cited by Drechsler, *Fighting*: 148.

<sup>39</sup> "Wenn wir uns der allgemeinen üblichen Schätzung des Volkes der Ovaherero anschliessen, welche die Kopffzahl derselben auf 80,000 angiebt". Cf. Karl Dove, *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Süsserott, 1903: 181.

<sup>40</sup> Johann J. Irle, *Was soll aus den Herero werden?*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann, 1906: 6.

<sup>41</sup> ELCRN Archives (Windhoek), I.I.22, Beilage 3: Bernsmann, 25. September 1906.

<sup>42</sup> Maria Fisch, "Zum 'Genozid' an den Herero", in: *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 1, 2001: 25-41.

<sup>43</sup> Lau, "Certainties": 43.

<sup>44</sup> Union of South Africa, (ed.), *Report*: 35.

<sup>45</sup> Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 364, footnote 329.

<sup>46</sup> Lau, "Certainties": 44.

Nobody, including the editors of the re-publication of the *Blue Book* and the many critics of Drechsler and the *Blue Book*, ever seems to have tried to look up the easily accessible census reports in the National Archives of Namibia, which give the figure of 19,423 Herero for 1 January 1911 (and a total of 70,537 “natives” excluding “*Mischlinge*”).<sup>47</sup> This is substantially higher than the figure given by the *Blue Book*, but nevertheless does not change the overall picture very much. Also, again Maria Fisch has invested much effort into documenting various escape routes of small Herero groups to neighbouring areas, and seems to infer that this documentation reduces the death toll to an extent that she can deny a genocide, again assuming that reduction of the numbers can change the verdict.<sup>48</sup> None of these efforts can deny the terrible toll the war has taken from the Herero people.

#### 4.4 The prisoners

Fourthly, Lau takes up the issue of the numbers of prisoners, and again sets about doubting them with the allegation that no reliable records exist. In this case, she wrongly recurs to the destruction of the German military records, claims that local records (for the Swakopmund and Windhoek camps) are poor, and refers to imagination:

It is hard to imagine how a little village such as Swakopmund (with at the time c.1300 inhabitants) or the equally small-scale settlement of Windhoek could have handled POW camps with several thousand people in each of them.<sup>49</sup>

One does not have to resort to imagination.<sup>50</sup> As for the records, it is difficult to tell whether she was not aware of the meticulously kept 13 volumes of files on “prisoners of war” in the archives which she herself was heading, or whether she is keeping deliberately silent on this record.<sup>51</sup> These files, which until a few years ago have hardly been touched by research, make chilling reading in their matter-of-fact way of dealing with untold human misery.<sup>52</sup>

Lau also attempts to doubt the figure of a 45% mortality of the prisoners of war, alleging that it comes from “a book published by the Rhenish Mission Society in Wuppertal”, apparently a doubtful source because “the only reliable set of records to check these figures, the military Truppe records, do not exist any more.” On the contrary: Drechsler traced an official report by the Schutztruppe command with this

---

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Silvester/Jan Bart Gewald, *Words cannot be found. German colonial rule in Namibia, an annotated reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden, Brill, 2003; NAN, ZBU 172: A.VI.d.4, Bevölkerungsstatistik Eingeborene und Farbige, Hauptstatistik, Bd.1, fol. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Fisch, “Genozid”.

<sup>49</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 44-45.

<sup>50</sup> Dederling derisively speaks of “imaginary historiography”; Dederling, “War”: 87.

<sup>51</sup> NAN, ZBU 454-456: D.IV.I.3 (6 vols., Herero) and 465-466: D.IV.m.3 (7 vols., Nama).

<sup>52</sup> They have in the meantime been consulted by Jan Bart Gewald and Gesine Krüger, more extensively by Casper Erichsen.

figure.<sup>53</sup> Obviously, because she does not want to believe the reality, Lau did not even bother to read the sources with adequate care. Her exclamation, “Certainly these are terrible figures (20 would be too many!) and must not be trivialised”, is belied by her constant attempt to minimise them.

Further evidence of this avoidance of the truth can be found in her doubting that Herero were used on a large scale as slave labour (a term she put into quotation marks to indicate her disapproval of it). Citing Pool, she seems to believe that 2,500 prisoners were “sent to do railway work”, and that’s it. The prisoner-of-war files in the National Archives (ZBU files) give the full picture: Basically all prisoners, including women and small children, were dished out not only to the railways but to all kinds of businesses, farmers, households, even missionaries, against payment – not to the prisoners, but to the German government! What else but slave labour can one call this practice?<sup>54</sup>

## 5. Von Trotha’s “extermination order”

This brief paragraph is one of the most embarrassing passages of Lau’s article. She claims summarily that von Trotha’s order

has been adequately challenged by Karla Poewe who problematised the word “extermination” which at the time referred to breaking the enemy’s power to resist, not killing off one by one; who pointed to the fact that the order was issued two months after the decisive battle at Hamakari when the war was all but over; and who demonstrated that it was a successful attempt at psychological warfare, never followed in deed.<sup>55</sup>

So one has to go back to Poewe’s book to deal with this issue. Poewe performs an extraordinary feat in discussing von Trotha’s order. She actually copies all her arguments from Sudholt, and it is not clear why Lau does not refer directly to Sudholt – let us kindly assume because she wanted to present an English source to an English-speaking audience, while Sudholt’s book is in German.<sup>56</sup>

Firstly, Poewe argues that the term *vernichten* in common usage at the time “means to break resistance”, but not to exterminate.<sup>57</sup> This is, at best, a half-truth; the

---

<sup>53</sup> “Nach den eingegangenen, den Zeitraum vom Oktober 1904 bis März 1907 umfassenden Berichten sind insgesamt von den etwa 15,000 Köpfe betragenden Hereros und den etwa 2,000 Köpfe starken Hottentotten 7,682, als 45.2 Prozent der gesamten Gefangenen, gestorben.” Cf. Deutsches Bundesarchiv, RKA 2140, fol.161, cited in Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 251.

<sup>54</sup> And surely these payments, which can be traced, could be a basis of reparation demands towards Germany? But just like Brigitte Lau, the authors of the reparation claim (published in: *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 4, 2002: 3-53) did not do their homework and only cited the *Blue Book*, which on its own can rather easily be dismissed in a court of law. See the article by Michael Weiskopf, “Concerning the use of history in the 9/01 Herero-Klage”, *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 4, 2002: 74-111.

<sup>55</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 46.

<sup>56</sup> Sudholt, *Eingeborenenpolitik*.

<sup>57</sup> Poewe, *Herero*: 60; cf. Sudholt, *Eingeborenenpolitik*: 184.

authoritative contemporary dictionary allows both interpretations.<sup>58</sup> Von Trotha's proclamation of 2 October 1904 itself does not use the word *vernichten*, but is extremely clear: "Within the German boundaries, every Herero, with or without rifle, with or without cattle, will be shot." No argument about the semantics of *vernichten* can change this message.

Much has been made of von Trotha's additional message to the German troops, that "firing of shots at women and children means firing over their heads to drive them away". This already reinforces the message that any Herero men – whether armed or unarmed – should be killed with aimed shots, but for anyone who might not yet have understood this, Trotha adds: "I am in no doubt that as a result of this order no more male prisoners will be taken". In military language, this leaves no interpretation open. It means shoot them all, no matter whether they come hands up, or are wounded and no longer able to wield a gun. Incidentally, the Geneva Convention which outlaws such war practice had by this time already been signed by Germany.

Poewe has the audacity to declare this order "psychological warfare" and even provides a justification: "The intent was to keep small guerilla bands away from German troops. The former shot upon the latter unexpectedly [what a surprise in a war! W.H.] and cruelly mutilated German soldiers."<sup>59</sup> Without Poewe acknowledging the source, the whole paragraph is just a paraphrase of Sudholt's exercise in denial.<sup>60</sup>

But one also has to look at the rest of von Trotha's order:

I am in no doubt that as a result of this order no more male prisoners will be taken, but neither will it give rise to atrocities committed on women and children. These will surely run away after two rounds of shots have been fired over their heads. I trust that our force will always bear in mind the good reputation that the German soldier has acquired."<sup>61</sup>

In von Trotha's opinion, the good reputation of the German soldier is not tarnished by frightening women and children into an almost certain death through hunger and thirst in the Omaheke. From von Trotha's explanatory memorandum which he sent to the Army Chief of Staff in Berlin it becomes very clear that this was the implicit intention.<sup>62</sup> And it is

---

<sup>58</sup> *Muret-Sanders enzyklopädisches deutsch-englisches Wörterbuch*, 1900: 1047: "to annihilate, to reduce to nought; to declare null and void, to nullify, annul, cancel; to revoke; to abolish; to destroy, to demolish; to destroy by fire, to burn (down); to exterminate, extirpate; to crush, to defeat, foil; to overthrow".

<sup>59</sup> Poewe, *Herero* : 65.

<sup>60</sup> Sudholt, *Eingeborenenpolitik* : 189.

<sup>61</sup> "Ich nehme mit Bestimmtheit an, dass dieser Erlass dazu führen wird, keine männlichen Gefangenen mehr zu machen, aber nicht zu Greuelthaten gegen Weiber und Kinder ausartet. Diese werden schon fortlaufen, wenn zweimal über sie hinweggeschossen wird. Die Truppe wird sich des guten Rufes der deutschen Soldaten bewusst bleiben." Drechsler is citing from the *Vorwärts*. Translation from Horst Drechsler's English version of *Südwestafrika, Fighting* : 157; German original on p. 184.

<sup>62</sup> "Andererseits ist die Aufnahme der Weiber und Kinder, die beide zum grössten Teil krank sind, eine eminente Gefahr für die Truppe, sie jedoch zu verpflegen eine Unmöglichkeit. Deshalb halte ich es für richtiger, dass die Nation in sich untergeht, und nicht noch unsere Soldaten infiziert und an Wasser und

also not debatable that this remained the official policy, sanctioned from Berlin, until under public pressure the order was rescinded. Brigitte Lau attempts to play down this fact by alleging that it *was* “rescinded six weeks later (Bley, 163) by Chancellor von Bülow”.<sup>63</sup> Again, she did not read her sources carefully. Bley only mentions the date when Chancellor von Bülow set the process to rescind the proclamation in motion. Only on 12 December, nine weeks after the order was issued, did von Trotha have to take it back – time enough for thousands to die a miserable death, plus some weeks more before the missionaries could effectively reach the remaining survivors to persuade them to report to German prison camps.<sup>64</sup>

Given the substantial evidence which Drechsler put together from German files, it is simply incorrect that Drechsler quotes the *Blue Book* “as his only evidence of an intentional and implemented genocide”.<sup>65</sup> But even if this were so, the constant bashing by Lau and others of the *Blue Book* as “an English piece of war propaganda with no credibility whatsoever”, whose “further distribution was proscribed by embarrassed Union officials in 1926”, is quite beside the point.<sup>66</sup> The embarrassment, if any, was rather that the same racial policies which were denounced in the *Blue Book* were followed by the new South African administration. As Silvester and Gewalt have documented, the retraction of the *Blue Book* was an act of reconciliation among the different groups of white settlers in the country, aimed at integrating the German settlers into the envisaged South African colony, and had nothing to do with the truthfulness of its contents.<sup>67</sup>

In a 1995 footnote to the original article, Lau insists that “the intent of some nascent German fascists or necrophiliac fanatics – which von Trotha and some of his respondents in Germany certainly were – must not be confused with what actually happened in Namibia”.<sup>68</sup> While I would concur with this characterisation of von Trotha, the fact is that he could – with approval from above, right up to *Allerhöchst*, as the Kaiser was usually referred to – make his intentions actually happen. It is not that some commanding officer suddenly went berserk on his own, without knowledge of his superiors. Nobody ever claimed *Tropenkoller* for von Trotha’s policies.<sup>69</sup>

Leutwein had already warned in February 1904

---

Nahrungsmitteln beeinträchtigt.” Deutsches Bundesarchiv, RKA 2089, fol.5/6; as cited by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 189-190 and Nuhn, *Sturm*: 284.

<sup>63</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 46.

<sup>64</sup> Nuhn, *Sturm*: 303.

<sup>65</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 46

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Silvester/Gewald, *Words*: xxx-xxxii.

<sup>68</sup> Lau, “Certainties”: 46, footnote 10.

<sup>69</sup> The standard German excuse for individual sadistic excesses in the colonies, claiming that the tropical climate had a destabilising effect on the minds of otherwise sane Europeans.

I do not concur with those fanatics who want to see the Herero destroyed altogether. Apart from the fact that a people of 60,000 or 70,000 is not so easy to annihilate, I would consider such a move a grave mistake from an economic point of view. We need the Herero as cattle breeders, though on a small scale, and especially as labourers. It will be quite sufficient if they are politically dead.<sup>70</sup>

It is however exactly this 'moderate' position which was officially refuted from Berlin, by sending von Trotha with his extremist strategies.

Nor did the talk of *vernichten* only arise in military circles and after the 1904 war had started. It was one of the most influential protagonists of German colonialism, the lawyer Dr. Scharlach, who wrote as early as 1903: "Colonisation, as is shown by the history of all colonies, does not mean to civilize the natives, but to push them back and ultimately destroy them".<sup>71</sup> Scharlach understood this in a Social-Darwinist sense. From there, it is but a small step to assist this "natural" process by active extermination. This is the philosophy which was put into practice by von Trotha.

## 6. Excursion: Gert Sudholt

Considering that central arguments forwarded by Lau can be traced back to Gert Sudholt, the original context of his writings should be mentioned. Sudholt's book *Die deutsche Eingeborenenpolitik in Südwestafrika*, originally a doctoral thesis accepted at the University of Munich, was published in 1975 as a counter-project to the critical depiction of German rule in Namibia by Bley and Drechsler. While the main parts of the book are based on (rather selective) research in the Windhoek archives, the introductory general framework reveals a very uncritical reading of conventional colonial historiography, geography and ethnography. Poewe holds against Drechsler that unlike Sudholt he never used interviews from Namibia and therefore did not get the "feeling" for the situation.<sup>72</sup> This statement must be qualified: In his book, Sudholt cites exactly two surviving German witnesses whom he interviewed, plus letters to the editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* from three other surviving Schutztruppe soldiers.<sup>73</sup> Not a single Herero survivor was interviewed – at a time when still quite a number were alive, including the legendary Hosea Kutako. So much for "feeling". This fits in with Sudholt statements such as that the Damara speak Otjiherero, something which appears incredibly ignorant for a person who after all spent three years in Windhoek (1964-

---

<sup>70</sup> Leutwein to Kolonialabteilung, 23.2.1904, Deutsches Bundesarchiv, RKA 2113: 89-90, as cited by Drechsler, *Fighting*: 148.

<sup>71</sup> "Kolonisieren, das zeigt die Geschichte aller Kolonien, bedeutet nicht, die Eingeborenen zivilisieren, sondern sie zurückdrängen und schliesslich vernichten." Cited by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft: Die grossen Land- und Minengesellschaften 1885-1915*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1996: 325, quoting Julius Scharlach, *Koloniale und politische Aufsätze und Reden*, Berlin, Mittler, 1903: 27.

<sup>72</sup> Poewe, *Herero*: 58.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.: 188. Rübener and Karl Frey are mentioned by Sudholt, *Eingeborenenpolitik*: 189.

1966) as a journalist for the *Allgemeine Zeitung*.<sup>74</sup> However, it also reflects the scale of Apartheid lack of social contact of the white community at the time. For judging the validity of Sudholt's opinions on the 1904 war, it is significant that in his chapter on the 1904 war, he also rarely cites from the original files in the Windhoek archives (which he used extensively in the other chapters of his book) but mostly uses secondary sources.

Sudholt subsequently made a name for himself as an extremist right-wing author and publisher, was repeatedly convicted for distributing anti-Semitic publications and with multiple connections to the German neo-Nazi scene which also keeps a close relationship with certain circles among Namibians and South Africans of German origin.<sup>75</sup>

## 7. "The colonialist war machine"

In this chapter, Brigitte Lau attempts to turn the tables around with a speculation that the Battle of Ohamakari was not a German victory but had an undecided outcome, and that

the Herero had again taken the initiative and chosen a national exodus into exile and death rather than continuing the war with its ultimate prospect of continued life under colonial oppression.<sup>76</sup>

A heroic collective suicide, or auto-genocide? It seems that no speculation is absurd enough to exculpate the German army. While many contemporary accounts make it quite likely that indeed the Battle of Ohamakari was not the resounding military victory that von Trotha and the Prussian General Staff tried to proclaim, there is no indication whatsoever that the Herero did not lose militarily, but nevertheless took a decision for mass suicide.<sup>77</sup> The enormity of this allegation would require at least some factual basis for the argument, but none is provided. The following account by Lau on the condition of the German troops as being almost completely incapacitated by disease and lack of supplies, leaves one to wonder why, after the rescission of the extermination order, thousands of "undefeated" Herero gave themselves up into imprisonment from their remote hide-aways.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.: 35.

<sup>75</sup> "Gert Sudholt 60", in: *Nation & Europa 2004*, no.3, 64; IDGR-Lexikon Rechtsextremismus, [http://lexikon.idgr.de/s\\_u/sudholt-gert/sudholt-gert.php](http://lexikon.idgr.de/s_u/sudholt-gert/sudholt-gert.php), accessed 13.3.2004.

<sup>76</sup> Lau, "Certainties": 47.

<sup>77</sup> Theo Sundermeier (*Die Mbanderu. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur*, St. Augustin, Anthropos-Institut, 1977: 98-99) maintains that the direction of flight to Bechuanaland via the Omaheke was outlined in Kahimemua's prophecy of 1896 and therefore pre-determined in Herero belief. This is an arguable interpretation, but cannot be construed as a self-destructive tendency of an entire people.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.: 48.



## 8 “The more likely truth”

In this chapter, Lau first deliberates again on the alleged inability of the German troops for concerted and effective military action due to “misery, incompetence, suffering and weakness”, and she concludes: “But it is clear that the image of German turn-of-the-century soldiers as plotters of Herero ‘genocide’ is inappropriate and certainly inaccurate”.<sup>79</sup>

As this is her conclusion, one should take it literally and respond to it in detail:

1. Nobody has ever pictured “German soldiers” as collective “plotters” of the genocide. What matters are the intentions and actions of the military and civil command. The fact is that a genocidal strategy was followed by von Trotha, not as an individual but as the commanding officer of the German forces in South West Africa; first with full support from his superiors in Germany, later with some modifications.

2. None of the historians who used the term ‘genocide’ for the 1904-1908 war has ever alleged that it was ‘plotted’ with a premeditated strategy in the way the extermination of European Jews was plotted by Hitler and his cohorts. Nobody has alleged there was anything in 1904 resembling the Wannsee Conference where administrative responsibilities for the Holocaust were planned.

3. One can even assume that von Trotha himself initially planned to take prisoners on a grand scale. Paul Rohrbach reports about a large “kraal” at Okahandja which was built to accommodate prisoners expected from the Waterberg battle.<sup>80</sup>

4. The background of incompetence and logistical problems of the German military, which Lau paints somewhat exaggeratedly, is nevertheless real. It is against this background, that the German command apparently realized that they would be unable to take in, feed and control vast numbers of prisoners.

5. Instead of the logical conclusion of negotiations for a peace, which had been proposed by Leutwein, von Estorff, and others, the German command then took the conscious decision for a genocidal strategy, to let the Omaheke solve the problems which the *Schutztruppe* could not solve. They fully understood the situation and that it meant a ‘final solution’ for thousands of Ovaherero, although they could not control the details of the unfolding deadly events.

6. Even when the military operations against the Ovaherero were over, the treatment of prisoners including women and children was one of organised brutality and neglect, contributing again to a horrendous (and in this case extremely well documented) death toll. And the same fate was meted out to the Nama.

7. Therefore the German command cannot be absolved from the verdict of genocide, even if this may not have been their first intention. They let it happen, they did not follow

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.: 49-50.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Rohrbach, *Aus Südwest-Afrikas schweren Tagen. Blätter von Arbeit und Abschied*, Berlin, Mittler, 1909: 169.

the path of a negotiated settlement which was always open, and they rationalized and defended it *post factum*.

## 9. "Postscript"

When Brigitte Lau took the decision to let her 1989 article be reprinted in a collection of essays in 1995, she did so in full knowledge of the criticism the article had received.<sup>81</sup> She added a "postscript" citing some recent research literature on the subject. However, she remained intransigent and picked from the publications of Gewalt, Henrichsen and Dederling only those snippets which fitted into her picture.<sup>82</sup> She completely failed to understand the argument about the definition of genocide, and when she wrote "[t]hose writers who invest themselves heavily in the numbers of those who died in the war, might have to rethink their argument" she did not refer to herself but to her critics.<sup>83</sup> All criticism from a variety of authors was summarily dismissed as "these comments seem to be beset by their writers' problems with their own history, transferred to another continent and another time".<sup>84</sup> She affirms the thesis of the singularity of the holocaust, without acknowledging that there might be traits and developments connecting this event (in its sheer scale, certainly unprecedented) with pre-existing mindsets and developments. Where she had mentioned Hannah Arendt, she takes no cognizance that it was Arendt who had first postulated a connection between the colonial mindset and the rise of fascism.<sup>85</sup> Where she mentions Klaus Theweleit, she acknowledges the relation of "certain colonial phenomena to the rising tide of fascism in the North", but in the same sentence dissociates it again as "phenomena [which] should be studied as aspects of European history", and not in the Namibian context.<sup>86</sup>

## 10. Why?

The puzzling question remains: Why did a historian and archivist with progressive credentials and a record of painstaking and ground-breaking research allow herself to write and maintain such a shoddy piece of biased non-research which would make her the crown witness of an unsavoury array of unrepentant colonialists and neo-Nazis?

I have mentioned above her motive of directing the focus of blame for Namibia's violent history of over one hundred years of oppression away from the sole focus on German

---

<sup>81</sup> *History and historiography*, the compilation from which all citations for this article have been taken.

<sup>82</sup> Jan Bart Gewalt, "The curse of Kahimemua", unpubl. paper, Symposium writing history, identity and society in Namibia, Hannover, May 1994; Dag Henrichsen/Andreas Selmeçi, *Das Schwarzkommando. Thomas Pynchon und die Geschichte der Herero*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 1995; Dederling, "War".

<sup>83</sup> Lau, "Certainties": 50.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*: 51.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*: 46.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 10.

colonialism towards fully realizing the role of South African colonialism, and also the motive of changing the viewpoint on Namibian history from one of European initiative which was imposed upon a passive and suffering African people, to one which recognises the African initiative and agency in making their own history. Both are laudable objectives, but I contend that in *Uncertain certainties*, the attempt to carry them through has gone horribly wrong.

I can offer no easy answer as to why this happened in this way. But my first tentative approach to find an answer is that Brigitte Lau, although initially far removed from the 'Southwester' scene of Namibian Germans, assimilated certain prejudiced attitudes which are rampant in this scene, and which are subconsciously colouring her argument.

I am speaking of the anti-Boer prejudice on the one hand, which tends to glorify German colonial development achievements versus a whole host of Afrikaner sins: ecologically unsustainable settlement, the Broederbond conspiracy, cultural backwardness, lopsided development in favour of the South African motherland, etc. It is quite amazing how this prejudice unexpectedly crops up in the most unlikely persons and arguments – myself not excluded. The theme is covered throughout the two books on Namibian colonial economic history which Lau co-authored and has a solid factual basis: While the German colonial government, far removed from the 'motherland', tried to establish to some extent a self-sufficient settler economy, the South African administration tried to stifle self-sufficiency in terms of food and consumer goods production, and instead promoted a lop-sided development which reduced Namibia to the production of raw materials, beef and mutton, while basically all marketed finished consumer goods were imported from South Africa.<sup>87</sup> But still, this argument covers up the basic truth that the German 'development' too, was a colonial underdevelopment based on fundamental injustice to the indigenous population.

And on the other hand, the anti-British prejudice which fuels the *Blue Book* phobia: a deep-seated grievance against having lost two world wars, a colony, and even the motherland itself which is now seen as controlled by 're-education'-brainwashed sell-outs. Unfortunately, this feeling meets too easily with the extremist fringe from the 'motherland' which uses it to promote their exclusive goals.

These two strains of thought, quite widely held in Namibia's German-speaking population, combined with Brigitte Lau's own experience of marginalisation by the international 'politically correct' academic scene, which (for valid reasons!) drew a straight line against any form of official recognition of an illegal regime.<sup>88</sup> It was unavoidable that this would at times hurt people who rightfully regarded themselves as moles who undermined the system from within. Taking this injury personally, instead of

---

<sup>87</sup>Brigitte Lau/Christel Stern, *Namibian water resources and their development*, Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1990. Brigitte Lau/Peter Reiner, *100 years of Agricultural development in colonial Namibia*, Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1993.

<sup>88</sup> Lacking statistical sociological research in the matter, it is difficult to quantify such sentiments. One cannot simply judge from the readers' letters in the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, which might represent a small but vocal minority – all the more as many of the published genocide-denial letters are written from Germany.

recognizing its institutional context, apparently blinded and immunized her against any criticism coming from these quarters.<sup>89</sup>

## 11. The inability to mourn

The whole issue should be seen in a wider context. It is not only by the accident of the centenary date that this debate crops up now at the same time as the land question in Namibia.

I would characterize the direction which both debates are taking now, as a symptom of what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich termed *the inability to mourn*.<sup>90</sup> One does not have to recur to Freud, as the Mitscherlichs do, to realize that several times the German Namibians were thrown into a serious crisis of identity, and every time they were saved from productively working through this trauma by the mechanisms the Mitscherlichs describe regarding post-war Germany's dealing with the Nazi past, and by a *deus ex machina* which prevented them from being confronted with the trauma any more. In this way, the unopened baggage of the 1904 genocide was carried through until today, and continues to threaten true reconciliation.

To be more specific: In 1915, Namibian Germans lost in their theatre of war, and were then confronted by the *Blue Book* with their role in the 1904 genocide. They were also confronted with the demise of the German monarchy, with which they had closely identified. They responded with stylizing themselves as victims of a conspiracy and of unprovoked aggression, and by shooting the messenger. The White Book (actually an anti-*Blue Book*), which was drafted under major involvement of the German Gustav Voigts, is to a large extent not a factual refutation but a retaliation that the British committed the same kind of atrocities, which can hardly be doubted, but does not help to come to terms with guilt.<sup>91</sup> They were finally saved from further troubling their minds by the South African government's 'white solidarity', which continued with the same policies and, as an act of reconciliation between the different factions of settlers, finally officially revoked the *Blue Book*.

In the 1930s, a majority of German Namibians supported the upcoming Nazi regime, only to be defeated again, and moreover, to be confronted with the most horrendous genocide in history. Truly, the German Namibians had no direct part in the genocide, but in close identification with the 'motherland' they reacted the same way as before. Denial of the Holocaust (aided by geographical distance from the scene) was again accompanied by stylizing themselves as victims (in particular, regarding the long-term internment of a large part of the male population), and the war crimes of the other side

---

<sup>89</sup> See also footnote 28.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander & Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, München, Piper, 1977.

<sup>91</sup> Reichskolonialamt, (ed.), *Die Behandlung der einheimischen Bevölkerung in den kolonialen Besitzungen Deutschlands und Englands. Eine Erwiderung auf das englische Blaubuch vom August 1918: Report on the natives of South-West Africa and their treatment by Germany*, Berlin, Engelmann, 1919.

(in particular the blanket bombardment of German cities) were relativised – Dresden versus Auschwitz). And again, the *deus ex machina* was sent by South African politics – this time in the form of the 1948 election victory of the National Party, who gladly welcomed them back into the fold of white racist brotherhood.

The unquestioning support of Apartheid policies developed into the next trauma when Apartheid was finally defeated. Rather unlikely, salvation came under the guise of the SWAPO policy of national reconciliation, which was understood as forgive *and* forget. And anyway, there was the option of seeing oneself again as the victim, this time for a change as the victim of Apartheid, which suddenly nobody had wanted and everybody had rejected in *inner emigration*.

Now that the delayed land question is coming to the fore, the spectre of the 1904 genocide and wholesale expropriation of land is rearing its head again – never questioned, never discussed, never *bewältigt*. One can already see some people avoiding the *Trauerarbeit*, the labour of mourning, by casting themselves into the role of innocent victims of a Mugabe-inspired conspiracy. It is doubtful whether this time there will be a *deus ex machina*, and now may be the final chance to seriously engage with history instead of avoiding it.

## Appendix: Excerpt from the United Nations Genocide Convention

**Article II:** In the present Convention, genocide means 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.

**Article III:** The following acts shall be punishable:

- (a) Genocide;
- (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
- (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
- (d) Attempt to commit genocide;
- (e) Complicity in genocide.

## Bibliography

- Bley, Helmut, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894-1914*, Hamburg, Leibniz, 1968.
- Dederling, Tilman, "The German-Herero War of 1904: revisionism of genocide or imaginary historiography?", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19/1993/1: 80-88.
- Dove, Karl, *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Süsserott, 1903.
- Drechsler, Horst, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft, der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884-1915)*, Berlin, Akademie, 1966.
- Drechsler, Horst, *Let us die fighting*, London, Zed Press, 1980.
- Erichsen, Casper, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them". Concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-1908*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2005.
- Estorff, Ludwig von, *Wanderungen und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika und Südafrika 1894-1910*, Wiesbaden, n.p., 1968.
- Fisch, Maria, "Zum 'Genozid' an den Herero", *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 1, 2001: 25-41.
- Gewald, Jan Bart, "The curse of Kahimemua", unpubl. paper, Symposium writing history, identity and society in Namibia, Hannover, May 1994.
- Gewald, Jan Bart, *Towards redemption, a socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 to 1923*, Leiden, CNWS, 1996.
- Gewald, Jan Bart, *Herero Heroes*, Oxford, Currey, 1999.
- Gründer, Horst, *Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1985.
- Henrichsen, Dag/Andreas Selmec, *Das Schwarzkommando. Thomas Pynchon und die Geschichte der Herero*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis, 1995.
- Henrichsen, Dag, "Review of Karla Poewe, The Namibian Herero", *International Journal of African historical studies*, 28, 1995: 453.
- Henrichsen, Dag, *Herrschaft und Identifikation im vorkolonialen Zentralnamibia*, unpubl. PhD thesis, Univ. Hamburg, 1997.
- Irl, Johann J., *Was soll aus den Herero werden?*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann, 1906.
- Krüger, Gesine, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstse. Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkrieges in Namibia 1904 bis 1907*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999.
- Lau, Brigitte, "Uncertain certainties", *Mibagus*, Windhoek, 1989, 2: 4-5, 8.
- Lau, Brigitte "Uncertain certainties", *History and historiography*, 4 essays in reprint, Windhoek, Discourse/MSORP, 1995.
- Mitscherlich, Alexander/Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, München, Piper, 1977.
- Mokopakgosi, Brian, "Review of Karla Poewe, The Namibian Herero", *African Affairs*, 87, 1988: 480.
- Nuhn, Walter, *Sturm über Südwest. Der Hereroaufstand von 1904 - ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias*, Koblenz, Bernard & Graefe, 1989.
- Nuhn, Walter, *Feind überall. Der Grosse Namaaufstand (Hottentottenaufstand) 1904-1908 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia)*, Bonn, Bernard & Graefe, 2000.
- Poewe, Karla, *The Namibian Herero. A history of their psychosocial disintegration and survival*, Lewiston/Queenston, Mellen, 1985.
- Pool, Gerhardus, *Die Herero-opstand 1904-1907*, Kaapstad, HAUM, 1979.
- Pool, Gerhardus, *Samuel Maharero*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1991.
- Reichskolonialamt, (ed.), *Die Behandlung der einheimischen Bevölkerung in den kolonialen Besitzungen Deutschlands und Englands. Eine Erwiderung auf das englische Blaubuch vom August 1918:*

- Report on the natives of South-West Africa and their treatment by Germany*, Berlin, Engelmann, 1919.
- Rohrbach, Paul, *Aus Südwest-Afrikas schweren Tagen, Blätter von Arbeit und Abschied*, Berlin, Mittler, 1909.
- Silvester, Jeremy/Jan Bart Gewald, *Words cannot be found. German colonial rule in Namibia, an annotated reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden, Brill.
- Spraul, Günther, "Der 'Völkermord' an den Herero: Untersuchungen zu einer neuen Kontinuitätslehre", *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 38, 1988: 713-739.
- Sudholt, Gert, *Die deutsche Eingeborenepolitik in Südwestafrika von den Anfängen bis 1904*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1975.
- Sundermeier, Theo, *Die Mbanderu. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur*, St. Augustin, Anthropos-Institut, 1977.
- Union of South Africa, (ed.), *Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and their Treatment by Germany*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1918.
- Weiskopf, Michael, "Concerning the use of history in the 9/01 Herero-Klage", *Befunde und Berichte zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 4, 2002: 74-111.
- Zeller, Joachim, "Genozid und Gedenken, ein dokumentarischer Überblick", in: Henning Melber, (ed.), *Genozid und Gedenken. Namibisch-deutsche Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Frankfurt/M., Brandes & Apsel, 2005: 163-188.