

**Review:** Peter Curson, *Border Conflicts in a German African Colony. Jakob Morengo and the Untold Tragedy of Edward Presgrave*, Arena Books 2012.

The author, Peter Curson, was Professor of Population and Security at the University of Sydney and his background is in population studies, demography, geography and public health. As Curson is not a specialist in Namibian history it is understandable that the parts of his work dealing with German colonisation in general and the genocidal wars against Ovaherero and Nama in particular (i.e. the chapters II, III, IV, V and VI) are largely based on secondary literature and thus hardly provide any new insights. In the light of recent works (such as Jonas Kreienbaum's) some of Curson's statements e.g. referring to the South West African concentration camps or von Trotha's campaign against the Ovaherero may even seem questionable.<sup>1</sup> Yet, his views do not diverge drastically from the prevailing master narratives.

The frequent misspellings of names – e.g. 'Dreschler' instead of 'Drechsler' – are annoying, and one may wonder whether the glorification of one of the war parties or its leader, Jakob Marengo ('A Hero's War'), undoubtedly one of the most remarkable protagonists of his time, is appropriate in a scientific context.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonas Kreienbaum, "'Vernichtungslager' in Deutsch-Südwestafrika? Zur Funktion der Konzentrationslager im Herero- und Namakrieg (1904–1908)", *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 2010: 1014-1026.

The title is somewhat misleading as a thorough study of border conflicts in southern Africa is clearly beyond the scope of Curson's work, this also applies to his treatment of Jakob Marengo's struggle against the Germans. These issues form the backdrop to the real subject of the work, i.e. the story of Edward Presgrave and his story is indeed closely connected with ongoing border conflicts and anti-colonial wars.

Who was Edward Presgrave and to what extent should his "tragedy" concern us? At first glance it does not seem particularly relevant. Presgrave was born in England in 1881; six years later his parents emigrated to Australia taking him with them (p. 20). He did not set foot on African soil before he had turned 18.

Presgrave was one of the 20,000 Australians who enlisted in colonial contingents to fight in South Africa for the British Empire, first in 1900 as a trooper in Brabant's Horse (p. 23), then a year later in Scottish Horse (p. 27). After having been discharged from service on 27 September 1901, he decided to remain in South Africa as did many of his fellow Australians. He drifted around the country, ultimately ending up in the northern borderlands of the Cape Colony near the Orange River and the German South West African border. Between 1902 and 1903 he eked out a living as a contractor (p. 31), probably in dubious ventures which were common in the border area and consisted chiefly of cattle rustling or trading arms. By this time he had come into contact with Jakob Marengo and eventually went on to supply, support and fight alongside

him when he took up arms against the Germans in 1904 (p. 17). Presgrave is even said to have acted as Marengo's secretary for some time. However, he was one of the figures who remained more or less in the background but caused the German (and consequently the British) authorities a great deal of trouble, above all by supplying their adversaries with arms and ammunition. This appears to have cost him his life as the local German military authorities eventually deemed it necessary to put a prize on his head.

Curson gathers an ample variety of unpublished archival records to reconstruct the circumstances of Presgrave's violent death. Irrespective of the sometimes contradictory information the records provide the author succeeds in giving a conclusive account of the events. Curson suggests that on 28 September 1905, two Boer bounty-hunters in the employ of the German military authority lured Presgrave across the German border on the pretext of buying some cattle – and shot him. The commanding German officer who had most probably hired the bounty-hunters, a lieutenant Beyer, was notified of what had happened and proceeded himself to the site of the incident to make sure Presgrave was really dead. The latter was found badly injured but still alive. Nevertheless, the accompanying physician made no attempt to save him. Instead, Beyer ordered the execution by shooting of Presgrave (pp. 151ff). In his subsequent report Beyer sought to camouflage the events by presenting the killing as an unwanted outcome of a lawful procedure claiming that Presgrave was shot by the patrol

while resisting arrest. The British authorities were highly sceptical of this report and assumed that Presgrave was murdered (p. 157). The realities of international diplomacy, however, meant that the Cape Government and British Colonial Office ultimately accepted the German official version and let the matter rest (pp. 172f.).

This brings us back to the initial question, in how far the "tragedy" of Presgrave concerns us. Presgrave's is not a story plucked randomly from the archives, nor is it merely an intriguing criminal case. As Curson points out it "helps illuminate many of the broader social, economic and political issues that marked life within Namaland and along the Northern Cape border" (p. 17). Thus, by telling this story, Curson aspires to contribute to the understanding of issues such as Marengo's armed struggle, German South West Africa's relationship with the Cape Colony or the clash of British and German imperialism (p. 180). Yet the story's real relevance may lie elsewhere. It sheds light on small wars and the dynamics thereof which gradually propel the brutality beyond the control of higher authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The reach of colonial rule rarely extended beyond the boundaries of the administrative capitals. Of course, the colonial state in German South West Africa claimed for itself the sole right to the use of force. But outside the cities

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<sup>2</sup> Matthias Häussler, Trutz von Trotha, "Brutalisierung ‚von unten‘. Kleiner Krieg, Entgrenzung der Gewalt und Genozid im kolonialen Deutsch-Südwestafrika", *Mittelweg* 36, 21 (3), 2012: 57-89.

settlers were their own masters and the state had virtually no control over them. The colonial state was a weak state, even more so in times of war and particularly on the fringes of its territory. State power was hard to maintain when a handful of troops were responsible for controlling sections of a border stretching for hundreds of miles; but state power ultimately collapsed when its agents adopted methods such as those in the case of Edward Presgrave – a case clearly showing that the line between legitimate or lawful use of force and crime had already become blurred.

Meanwhile, the importance of the role played by figures like Presgrave in such war scenarios cannot be overestimated. Although they do not, as a rule, attract much attention their activities keep wars going and constitute an integral part of the predatory economy through which conflicts are fed. An investigation into these figures, into their backgrounds and motivations could provide insight into the anatomy of small wars – and thus contribute to the debate on “new wars” and similar conflicts.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is all the more lamentable that Curson – as he himself admits (p. 21) – could portray so little of Presgrave’s biography and personality.

There are many unanswered questions but Curson’s work does provide food for thought and grounds for further investigation.

Matthias Häußler

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999.