Life and death in the borderlands —
the story of Edward Presgrave

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Abstract
This is the story of Edward Presgrave, a young Australian who went to South Africa to fight in the Boer War and then drifted up to the Northern Cape where he eventually joined Jakob Marengo in his war against the Germans. In 1905 Presgrave was actively supporting Marengo’s forces supplying them with horses, cattle and arms as well as fighting alongside Marengo in a number of engagements with German forces. Presgrave’s story is one of adventure, sacrifice, deception and betrayal and in many ways his short life and untimely death serve to illuminate many of the broader issues that marked life in colonial Namibia and in the Northern Cape borderlands.

A forgotten name
Edward Presgrave’s name has been totally forgotten, long ago consigned to the dustbin of colonial history.1 His story is one of tragedy — the tragedy of the Nama people in the years after 1903, the tragedy of Jakob Marengo and his epic struggle against the German colonial forces, the tragedy of the failed German colony of South West Africa and the tragedy of a young man cut down in his prime. This then is the story of a young Australian who made his way to South Africa where he fought in the Boer War and who stayed on after the war before drifting up to the Northern Cape where he settled near the town of Upington. In the years 1904–05 he joined up with and fought alongside Jakob Marengo who was engaged in a guerrilla war against the Germans. Presgrave’s story is one that is full of adventure, sacrifice, deception and betrayal.

His is a story of the Nama rebellion against the Germans and its shattering aftermath for the Nama people. The Nama uprising and that of the Herero further north, were not minor affairs. By the time the uprisings were over in 1906 the death toll far exceeded that of the Boer War. In a little over two years, thousands of men, woman and children had been killed or imprisoned and many survivors were destined for a life of servitude or

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1 This article draws on the author’s recent study of Jakob Marengo and Edward Presgrave namely Border Conflicts in a German African Colony: Jakob Morengo and the Untold Tragedy of Edward Presgrave, Bury St Edmonds, Arena, 2012.
slavery. While it is true that Presgrave played only a minor part in these events, his short life and tragic death serve to focus our attention on many of the themes that came to dominate German South West Africa and its relationship with the Cape Colony in the early years of the 20th century. The ‘Presgrave Affair’ as it became known, also shows how a micro-history can illuminate a wider set of issues relating to early 20th century imperialism and the relations between colonial powers in Southern Africa.

Life in the borderlands – the turbulent frontier 1903–07

Edward Presgrave is first mentioned in official records during the latter days of Marengo’s long guerrilla war against the Germans. He was working in and around the town of Upington, and regularly crossed the Northern Cape/South West African border from 1903 to 1905, probably to the north of the town in the vicinity of Klipdam, Rietfontein and Bisseport. It was here that his destiny would ultimately be determined, and it was here that he would join Jakob Marengo in his struggle against the Germans. During the years following the end of the Boer War, the area around Upington and to the north remained in a state of considerable turmoil. The legacy of the war still lingered as did an underlying fear of a resurgence of hostilities. In addition, lawlessness, cattle-raiding and gun-running were widespread, and border violations, from both the German and British side, commonplace, producing a volatile local environment. Cattle raids on both sides of the border had by 1903 become everyday events and a cause of considerable concern for both the German and the Cape authorities. On the British side, the Cape Police did not have the men or resources to adequately police the border. Between 1903 and 1905 there were no more than 20 police guarding the long desert frontier with German South West Africa. The three police posts of Rietfontein, Obobogorap and Nakob were isolated and separated from each other and their headquarters at Upington by vast expanses of desert and scrubland, in many places surrounded by huge sand dunes, and all lacked telephone or telegraph connections. There also seems little doubt that bribery and corruption were widespread among local traders and the under-staffed Cape Mounted Police. Many simply closed their eyes to illegal transactions, or actively participated in cross-border activities and/or took regular bribes or payments from traders and gunrunners.2 As a result there was a steady and substantial flow of supplies and livestock across the border. Upington had by late 1904 become the greatest market for livestock in the whole of South Africa. All the horse-dealers gathered there and demand among the Germans for an apparently endless supply of horses, mules and donkeys was constant. The legacy of the Boer War also lingered and as many as 2,000 Boers had moved across the border into German South West Africa by the end of hostilities. Many of these were contracted into the German army as scouts and transport riders in the war against the Herero and the Nama. The seemingly uncontrolled movement of rebels and others back and forth across the

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2 See for example a comment by Wade quoting an article in a German daily paper on the bribery of a senior Cape Mounted Police Officer, Tägliche Rundschau, No.484, National Archives United Kingdom, London (NAUK), WO 106/269 473049.
German border and the high degree of local support for Marengo and the uprising remained a real problem for the German authorities. Marengo and his supporters would regularly meet with gunrunners, cattle thieves and local traders including Edward Presgrave on either side of the border to replenish their supplies, and when threatened by German military actions they would send their women and children across the border to the safety of British territory. The many border violations by German troops in pursuit of rebels was also a regular source of friction in Anglo-German relations, as was the firm belief that many local Boers acted as German ‘spies’ reporting on Nama rebels and their local sympathisers, and, on occasion, even apprehending Nama known to be supporting Marengo and smuggling them across the border. While many of the local native population were sympathetic towards Marengo there remained the fear that the Boers could easily ferment an uprising in the Northern Cape. The Cape authorities tried to monitor the situation and harboured deep suspicions about the large number of German troops virtually on their doorstep. The British High Commissioner wrote to London on numerous occasions expressing his concern about the build up of German troops in Namaland and the continued recruitment of Boers. The continuing flow of refugees and others across the border raised other issues. By April 1906 there were more than 2,000 refugees clustered on the British side of the border of which almost three quarters were women and children. The border was so porous and so poorly policed that not only refugees but also gunrunners, horse thieves, traders and guerrilla bands crossed at will.

It was in such an environment that Presgrave found himself in the years after 1903. He appears not only to have immersed himself willingly in this environment but also to have prospered. During this time he was friends or at least on good terms, with a number of settler families in the area, all of whom were aggressively anti-German and sympathetic to Marengo’s campaign. Like these families, Presgrave was actively engaged in supplying Marengo with arms, ammunition, horses and oxen. There was in fact no shortage of local settlers on the Cape side of the border who sympathised with the Nama rebels and who had for years been involved in arms and livestock trading. The Spangenberg family who held a number of properties near the German border was particularly important. Spangenberg and his two sons lived at Bisseport about 500 metres from the German frontier and their farm straddled the international border. There are a number of references to this family in the official Colonial German and Cape records. The family seem to have been deeply involved in many kinds of illicit activities and supplied arms and ammunition to the Nama rebels. Other evidence exists to link Presgrave’s to Marengo and the Nama revolt. On the 3rd of August 1905, Presgrave was...

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3 See for example, Letter from Lord Selbourne to Littleton, 11 January 1906, NAUK, Foreign Office (FO) 64/1646.
5 See letters and other material in Western Cape Archives and Records Service, Cape Town, (WCA), N1 55/05.
arrested in Upington and charged with the theft of stock. An official telegram sent by the Cape Mounted Police in Upington to Cape Town stated that "Presgrave has been causing police good deal of trouble by fraternizing with Marengo rebellious native chief across the border and continuously crossing and recrossing frontier". 6 Perhaps one of the most interesting comments about Presgrave and his support for Marengo was made by Major Berrange's on Sub-Inspector Attwood's official report on Presgrave's death. Berrange, Head of the Cape Mounted Police in Upington, probably relying on Attwood's evidence, stated:

It is said by the Germans that Presgrave supplied ammunition to the Hottentots, but no authentic information to that effect had come to Mr Attwood's knowledge. Presgrave was a kind of adventurer who was with the Hottentots for some time, and amused himself by taking photos. Some of the Hottentots told Mr Attwood that Presgrave never carried a rifle (Marengo might have given information on this). 7

Having received various reports on Presgrave's death, Hely-Hutchinson, the Governor of the Cape Colony, wrote to the Imperial authorities on the 13th of November 1905 affirming Presgrave's link to Marengo in the following words: "Presgrave is stated to have been Marengo's 'secretary'. There is no doubt that he had been for a long time actively assisting the natives who are in rebellion against the German Government in German Southwest Africa". 8 The official statement then reads:

It has been ascertained that Presgrave took part in the fight at Narugas [Narudas] on March 11th and in a patrol fight at Bissiport [sic!] in April of last year. On March 16th 1905 armed with a Rifle Model 98 and a revolver, he came with Morengo from Narus to Bissiport [sic!], where he translated letters which had arrived for Morengo and also wrote letters for him. He remained till after the fight at Leukopp near Bissiport [sic!] in Morengo's laager. 9

The most detailed statement on Presgrave's link to Marengo and the rebellion comes from Frode Sahlertz's testimony at his trial in Keetmanshoop. Sahlertz, who was Presgrave's companion on the day he was shot, claimed that Presgrave told him that "he was with the Hottentots for three months in the Havasbergen [he probably meant the Karasberge] and had fought against the Germans". 10 The material in Sahlertz's testimony would later form the basis of the official German response to the British Government, as well as the official statement which was sent on behalf of Lord Elgin in the British Colonial Office to the New South Wales Governor, to his parents, and later to the Australian Governor-General and the Australian Government. It stated that Presgrave had been engaged in actively assisting the natives in German South-West Africa in their rebellion against the German authorities, and had actually taken part in fighting the German troops. Mr E.L. Presgrave is reported to have acted as

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6 Telegram from Upington Cape Mounted Police to Cape Town, 3 August 1905, WCA, AG 1628.
7 Berrange to Commissioner Cape Mounted Police, 10 October 1905, WCA, AG 1647 8920/05.
8 Letter from Hely-Hutchinson labelled 'secret', 13 November 1905, WCA, N 234.
9 Papers headed "Death of F[sic] L. Presgrave", 13 November 1905, WCA, AG 9820/05.
10 Translation of Note from Count Pourtales, 30 September 1906, NAUK, FO 367/9, 3386.
“Secretary” and advisor to Morenga [Marengo], one of the rebel leaders and His Majesty’s Government are informed by the German authorities that it has been ascertained that he took part in the fight at Narugas [Narudas] on 11th March and in a patrol fight at Bissiport [Bisseport] in April 1905.11

Into the battle zone – Narudas, Leukop and Narus March–June 1905

While Jakob Marengo largely conducted a guerilla war against the Germans he also engaged in a handful of major encounters. Three of these in mid 1905 particularly stand out and Edward Presgrave was involved in each of them. There seems little doubt that Presgrave was with Marengo in the Karasberge Mountains in early 1905, sometime between late January and March. He was thus present at the major encounter between Marengo’s forces and the Germans that took place at Narudas in March 1905 and also at the battle of Narus a couple of months later. Between these two encounters Presgrave was also alongside Marengo when they were engaged in a patrol fight with the Germans near the British border in mid May. At Narudas and Narus Presgrave was involved in two of the most important moments in Namibian history and the long struggle for independence. The Karasberge, where much of Marengo’s struggle against the Germans took place, is a rugged mountainous area rising to a little over 2,200 metres above sea level. The area is marked by table-top plateaus surrounded by wild crags and rocky summits, overlooking wide valleys, ravines, gorges and gulleys. Narudas lay at the north of the valley and was dominated by a long stone ridge atop a cone-shaped mountain that ran roughly north-south. Such an environment was admirably suited to Marengo’s guerilla tactics and provided a safe haven for his forces. It was here that Marengo established his heartland as early as mid 1904, and it was from here that he carried out numerous successful raids against German farms and German military outposts and patrols. Presgrave spent some months here early in 1905, living with Marengo’s forces. He was at this time actively ferrying arms, ammunition and other supplies across the border to Marengo’s forces. It was here in January of 1905, that Colonel Deimling, the German Commander in the South, fearing an alliance between Marengo and the Morris brothers, and against von Trotha’s orders, determined to launch an all out attack on Marengo’s stronghold in the mountains. Aware that Marengo was encamped in the rugged mountains and gorges of Narudas on the eastern slopes of the Karas Mountains, Deimling determined to encircle his forces and eliminate them in a massive show of force. Pursuing the same strategy used successfully against the Herero at Waterberg, four major German columns were involved in a broad encircling campaign. It was an impressive display of force, involving approximately 1,000 heavily armed German troops with six Maxim machine guns and 14 quick-firing Krupp mountain guns. Marengo could only marshal between 300 and 400 supporters armed with rifles. Moving such a large German force proved extremely difficult given the heat and terrain and Marengo was well apprised of the German intentions. On March the 10th he

11 File of Papers re Claim of Mrs Presgrave against the German Government, Department of External Affairs 1907, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (NAA), 07/707, 2109.
launched a surprise attack against one of the advancing columns at Aob, inflicting at least 40 casualties, almost one-third of the total force. It was classic Marengo. Strike the enemy when least expected, utilise the local terrain, and then withdraw as quickly as possible. On the evening of March 10th the advance sections of the German southern column neared Narudas. Early the next day the Germans brought all their artillery to bear on Marengo’s position. Faced with such an artillery barrage Marengo and his supporters were forced to retreat through the winding valleys to his rear, leaving behind women and children and a large number of cattle. Just when the Germans were contemplating a major victory and a possible end to the Nama war, Marengo reappeared and in a short encounter at Uchararis, 60 kilometres south-east of Keetmanshoop, he fell upon the rear of a German convoy of wagons, inflicting a number of casualties and managing to recapture much of the material lost at Narudas. Presgrave took part in this attack and helped Marengo physically capture a number of supply wagons bogged down in the heavy sand. After Narudas Deimling was of the opinion that Marengo’s forces had been dealt a death blow and that he was no longer a unifying force among the Nama. Events over the next eight months, however, were to prove him wrong.

The patrol fight at Leukop 19th May 1905

As dawn broke on the morning of May 19th Presgrave was riding with Marengo and 160 or so of his followers as they made their way through the soft and shifting sands of a line of dunes not far from Leukop and almost in sight of the British border at Bisseport. Having moved eastwards after the battle at Narudas, Marengo was now heading along the dry Kareb River Valley with the intention of crossing into the British colony to rest and restock his supplies. As they moved through the dunes they saw a German patrol in the distance and quickly dismounted to take up positions along the sandy dune tops. Apparently the Germans had alerted all their troops south of Hasuur that Marengo was moving their way and to be on the alert. The O.C. at Hasuur, Captain , who was present at the scene quickly moved to attack the nearby Nama and at about 11am he was joined by Lieutenant Beyer from Klipdam who had arrived with his unit. Another German detachment tried to advance over open ground towards the entrenched Nama positions from the south but came under heavy fire and lost several soldiers wounded as well as five mules killed. By this time Beyer’s unit had managed to make some headway into the dunes and was moving towards Marengo’s position. By 1pm the situation had become critical for the Germans as many of their soldiers were running low on ammunition. It was at this stage that they were bolstered by the arrival of a Reserve Unit. Both sides exchanged fire for almost an hour until Marengo, realising that the situation was rapidly becoming untenable, was forced to withdraw. Marengo, accompanied by Presgrave,

13 The same Lieutenant Beyer would figure prominently in Presgrave’s death some four months later.
quickly retreated to the east and despite German pursuit managed to cross the British border. All in all, this engagement probably cost the lives of no more than two or three Germans and 10 Nama as well as a number of mules and horses, and although the Germans claimed it as a victory there was no clear result. Hopeful that Marengo and his followers would be disarmed and restrained in British territory, the Germans were to be disappointed, for only four days later Marengo returned to German territory attacking a German supply wagon and killing all five riders.

The battle of Narus June 1905

Presgrave was also involved in the other major battle between Marengo’s forces and the Germans which took place at Narus in mid June 1905. Like the battle at Narudas this engagement took place in a wild and rugged landscape of mountains, valleys and deep ravines. In mid June Marengo established an operations base here much as he had done earlier at Narudas. The Germans, conscious that he must be somewhere nearby sent out various patrols to search for evidence. Finally, having heard rumours that a large group of Nama were moving their cattle somewhere near the mountains south of the Kareb River, a German force set out from Devenishputs. The German force was heavily armed and brought a light Krupp mountain gun with them. After riding for the best part of eight hours, the German troops reached the mountains and began to scale the rugged slopes near Narus in search of the waterhole used by the Nama. Eventually after an arduous climb hampered by rough stones, thorn bushes and cacti as well as having to transport the mountain gun and its shells by mules, they reached the plateau from where they could see a large herd of cattle some 300 metres to their west being driven towards a waterhole. In the meantime another German force had managed to take up a position near the edge of the gorge looking directly down on the Nama herd. The Germans immediately opened fire, with the shells from their mountain gun causing considerable panic among the Nama. Faced by such an assault Marengo’s forces fought a desperate rearguard action and were eventually forced to retreat up the valley in a north-westerly direction. The engagement lasted no more than 90 minutes, and while it only produced a handful of casualties among Marengo’s supporters, it nonetheless took a heavy toll on their cattle. The following day another German unit advancing up the Kareb River Valley from the east spied a large encampment of Nama on the plateau top at a height of 1,300 metres. To engage the Nama the Germans had no choice but to scale the steep sides of the gorge and as they did so they came under heavy rifle fire from Marengo’s followers who were dug in on both sides. For a number of hours the two sides exchanged fire until the Germans, suffering heavy casualties, were only saved from total annihilation by the arrival of a relieving force from Devenishputs. Confronted by a reinforced enemy, the Nama withdrew to an almost impregnable position a few

kilometres away, whereupon the German forces also pulled back but not before they had killed as many of the Nama’s cattle as possible and totally destroyed the waterhole.

Wilful murder – September 28th 1905

Following the battle at Narus, Presgrave returned to the British side of the border and continued to trade in cattle and supplies to Marengo’s forces. In this he relied heavily on his relationship with the Spangenberg family who continued to have close contact with the Nama rebels. There is little doubt that Presgrave’s activities attracted the attention of both the German and British authorities and that there were many on both sides of the border that would have been glad to see the end of him. At that stage there already were plans to apprehend and kill him. He was to eventually pay the ultimate price for his support of Marengo in late September.

Sometime around mid-afternoon on a warm day in early spring of 1905 amidst the sand dunes, salt pans and scrubland of a remote part of south-eastern German South West Africa not far from the British border, the young Australian lay in the shadow of a long linear sand dune dying from one or more gunshot wounds to the stomach. Eventually, late the next morning a German patrol found him, and he was finally killed by a shot fired by a Baster irregular in German employ. He was 24 years old.

Ironically, we know much more about the circumstances of Presgrave’s death than we know about his life. The official report into his death compiled by the Cape authorities between October 1905 and the early months of 1906 which was forwarded to the British Colonial Office and much later to the Australian authorities in response to his parent’s claim for compensation, draws largely on the investigation carried out by Sub-Inspector Attwood, the officer in charge of the Cape Mounted Police post at Rietfontein. Attwood who had been sent into German territory with a police patrol to investigate Presgrave’s death was shown the whereabouts of Presgrave’s body. As well as submitting his own report, Attwood sought detailed statements from a number of local sources, including the local German commander. In the course of his investigation, he collected statements from Frank Stoffberg, a schoolmaster from Paarl who was visiting his brother in Hasuur on the 1st of October 1905, and who had talked to Frode Sahlertz, Presgrave’s companion on the day of his death and who had been taken prisoner. R.B. Kirkman, a Private in the Cape Mounted Police at Biesjespoort, who had a conversation with Sahlertz while being held in the same gaol in Keetmanshoop also provided a statement, as did one Hans Auersmar, a Nama in local employ in German South West Africa, who was in Klipdam the night the arrangements were apparently made for the apprehension and death of Presgrave. In addition, Attwood obtained a copy of the Official German Report submitted by Lieutenant Beyer, the German O.C. at Klipdam. Finally, a statement made by Sahlertz to the German authorities some months later when he was imprisoned at Keetmanshoop, was to form the basis of the official German response to the British Government’s formal request for an explanation of Presgrave’s death. Interestingly, Sahlertz’s statement was not included in the papers eventually forwarded to the Australian authorities in 1907 by the British Foreign Office. While all
these accounts differ in their particulars, with one exception, they all agree that Presgrave was lured across the border by two Boers and gunned down on that day in late September. It would appear that Presgrave had met Sahlertz at Narugas a few hours to the east of Bisseport and the two had entered into some sort of business arrangement re the sale of some oxen. Presgrave asked Sahlertz if he would take the oxen to Upington and sell them on his behalf. The two then journeyed to Obobogorap near the border of German South West Africa where Presgrave was approached by two Boers called de Waal and du Preez who said that they had some oxen for sale and wanted to know if Presgrave was interested in buying them. Presgrave was and asked Sahlertz to accompany him on what he believed would be a short journey. The four apparently met at Bergman’s Store in Obobogorap, and at around noon du Preez rode off alone in the direction of Holpan. At 2pm Presgrave, Sahlertz and de Waal set off and rode for about 10 kilometres in a northerly direction until they reached Holpan, a salt pan a few hours south of Klipdam. Here they were eventually joined by du Preez. Crossing a sand dune they dismounted and at this stage de Waal apologised for forgetting his rifle and asked if he might borrow the Lee-Metford rifle that Sahlertz was carrying as there were plenty of ‘stenbok’ around. Once handed the rifle he immediately trained it on Presgrave and called on him to surrender. At this point the various accounts differ as to what happened next. Kirkman’s statement based on his discussion with Sahlertz, claims that

all of a sudden du Preez snatched the rifle away from Sahlertz; at the same time Sahlertz saw Presgrave come running down the sand dune and de Waal after him, the latter with a revolver in his hands shouting “hands up”. Sahlertz then saw de Waal shooting Presgrave in the back. Presgrave did not fire at de Waal. After Presgrave had been shot by de Waal and was lying on the ground du Preez fired four shots at him with his rifle.15

On the other hand, Attwood’s account of his interview with a man, who spoke to Sahlertz at Hasuur shortly after his arrest, had Presgrave firing his revolver wildly as he ran until he was probably brought down by one of three shots fired by either du Preez or de Waal. Sahlertz’s later statement probably made in July or August 1906 while in prison, tends to agree with this account, but may well have reflected undue German influence on him while he was imprisoned. In this statement he is reputed to have made:

Whilst de Waal and Presgrave went forwards to seek the oxen, Sahlertz and du Preez remained behind and waited. The latter asked Sahlertz, who showed him his rifle handling it to him, whether he would not sell him the rifle. Sahlertz replied he could not; he wanted it so that he should not be caught when he went over the frontier. He would however get him a similar rifle and cartridges, if he would continue to “work” in partnership with him. Thereupon du Preez cried “hands up” and held the rifle ready and de Waal did the same with his revolver. Sahlertz held up his hands. Presgrave on the contrary as he made off

15 Attorney-General Minute Paper, Statement by E.B. Kirkman, pp. 2f., NAA, 07/707, 2109.
towards the frontier, fired 4 shots at the Boers, without hitting them.\textsuperscript{16} He was shot down by du Preez […]\textsuperscript{17}

On the 13\textsuperscript{th} of January 1908, in an Affidavit, Sahlertz gave a slightly different account of the shooting. To quote:

After sitting a short time Presgrave and de Waal mounted the sand dunes; this was about 15 yards off. Du Preez then asked me to let him look at my rifle which I did. Shortly after Presgrave came down towards me followed by de Waal. They both passed me and went towards the horses. I was then talking to du Preez who had my rifle in his hands — when I heard a shot fired and saw de Waal with a revolver in his hands and at the same time I saw Presgrave fall. De Preez then jumped up and pointed the rifle at me telling me to hands up. Presgrave then turned over on to his side when du Preez fired three shots into his body.\textsuperscript{18}

Whatever the truth of the matter, shot and believed to be dying, Presgrave was left where he fell, and Sahlertz restrained and taken into custody by the two Boers. Although wounded in the stomach Presgrave was apparently still alive. The next morning when an official German patrol from Klipdam arrived on the scene, Lieutenant Beyer the officer commanding, ordered a Rehoboth Baster police constable, Dirk Campbell, to kill him, which he did. His body was then stripped of its boots, leggings, field glasses and revolver, a photograph taken by a Dr Erchardt who had accompanied the German Patrol, and Presgrave's body left where it was. While four of these accounts are in rough agreement as to the course of events on September 28\textsuperscript{th}, the fifth, the Official German Report written by Lieutenant Beyer at Klipdam, differs, in that it has a German patrol from Klipdam playing the major role in Presgrave's apprehension and death while the two Boers were merely innocent spectators who fled the scene at the vital moment. Beyer's report reads:

On the 28\textsuperscript{th} of September a patrol consisting of one non-Commissioned officer and four men, found four dismounted men in the sand-dunes whose horses were grazing. They called on Presgrave and Sahlertz, who, with the latter, to "hands up". The other two men were a little distance away near their horses. Sahlertz, who was carrying a rifle, immediately held it up, but Presgrave ran away firing his revolver at the same time. He was shot dead at a distance of 100 yards. The two remaining men mounted their horses and galloped away into British territory. Two Dutchmen, De Waal and Du Preez who reside at Klipdam, returned to camp on the night of the occurrence carrying their saddles and bridles and reported the loss of their two horses. On being questioned they stated that they had not seen Presgrave. Their behaviour was somewhat suspicious and, they were consequently confined to camp.\textsuperscript{19}

As Sub-Inspector Attwood points out in his assessment of the evidence, no German patrol was actually present on the day of Presgrave's death and in fact none appeared until the following day. There seems little doubt that Beyer's report was written for the

\textsuperscript{16} The translated German document in the Archives actually says “44" shots, an error by the translator.
\textsuperscript{17} Translation of Note from Count Pourtales, 30 September 1906, NAUK, FO 367/9, 3386.
\textsuperscript{18} Report to Sub-Inspector Attwood, WCA, 13 January 1908, WCA, 0920/05.
\textsuperscript{19} Berrange to Colonel Nolan-Neyland, 20 October 1905, WCA, AG 1647, N 212/05.
benefit of his superiors, and to raise his own profile. In many ways, Hans Auresmar’s statement is perhaps the most telling, for it details the plans laid to capture Presgrave. Auresmar was at the German base in Klipdam a few nights before Presgrave’s shooting and noticed the two Boers leave on horseback. He is reported to have asked a German Corporal where they were going and was told that Lieutenant Beyer had sent them to try and lure Presgrave over the border for the purpose of shooting him. A couple of nights later he noticed the Boers returning with a prisoner. That night he was told that the Boers had successfully enticed Presgrave over the border and had shot him. The following morning, Lieutenant Beyer, Dr Erchardt, a German Corporal, the two Boers and a Baster named Dirk Campbell left Klipdam and returned that afternoon. When he questioned Campbell as to where they had been, he was told that they had been to the border at Holpan where they found Presgrave who had been shot through the stomach, but was still alive. Lieutenant Beyer had then ordered Campbell to shoot him dead and this order was carried out. When Sub-Inspector Attwood at the Police Post in Rietfontein learnt of Presgrave’s death he approached the local German authorities for permission to visit the spot. Accordingly, accompanied by Lieutenant Kruger and five German soldiers he was taken to the location where Presgrave was shot and later his official report included the following telegram forwarded by his superior Major Berrange to the Commissioner of the Cape Mounted Police in Cape Town:

Acting on your instructions yesterday I visited the spot where Presgrave was killed: found corpse some two hundred yards off border about two miles north Holpan Beacon. I buried the corpse at spot had previously arranged for Germans to show me exact place accordingly Commandant met me [...].

The role of Frode Sahlertz, Presgrave’s companion, in this episode is also unclear. Was he simply swept up in the events of September 28th or did he have a more active role? There is some evidence that he and Presgrave had known each other for at least six months prior to events at Holpan and may even have been involved in stealing cattle. Sahlertz had been resident at Upington from early April 1905, and had found employment with two local storekeepers. In late September he was asked to take a wagon-load of goods to Narongas where his employer intended to open a store. On arrival there he met Presgrave who asked if he would take two oxen back to Upington for him. They left Narongas together and proceeded to Obobogorap where they met the Boers De Waal and Du Preez. Evidentially, having closed some sort of deal with the Boers, Presgrave asked Sahlertz if he would help him cross the border and collect 25 oxen sold to him by De Waal. Sahlertz agreed.

After Presgrave was shot, Sahlertz was taken to Klipdam and chained to a wagon wheel. During this time he was subject to considerable physical abuse by his German guards. Later he was taken to Hasuur and from there sent by wagon under guard to Keetmanshoop. Brought up before a judge on the 23rd of November, he was charged with having sold a wagonload of arms and ammunition to Marengo, as well as having

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20 Telegram sent on Attwood’s behalf by Major Berrange to Commissioner of Cape Mounted Police in Cape Town, 10 October 1905, WCA, AG 1647 8920.05.
stolen 50 horses and mules and some oxen. His plea to be allowed to call witnesses from across the British border denied, he was found guilty and sentenced to two years penal servitude. Later in 1906 he would be interviewed by the German authorities about what actually happened on September the 28th 1905, and his testimony would form the basis of the official German response to the British Government’s unofficial note requesting information on Presgrave’s death.

There are many unanswered questions and inconsistencies relating to the circumstances of Presgrave’s death. In the first place, the official German report can be dismissed out of hand. There was no German patrol present at the scene until the next morning and Lieutenant Beyer’s report was undoubtedly written for the simple purpose of impressing his superiors. In the second place, the fact that Presgrave could survive for more than 18 hours lying fatally wounded during a cold night in a hostile environment, seems somewhat surprising. Thirdly, given the nature of the two Boers involved in the shooting it seems highly unlikely that they did not rummage through Presgrave’s pockets and take the field glasses and revolver that Lieutenant Beyer’s patrol is reported to have removed the next morning particularly given that they were quick to relieve Sahlertz of any valuables in his possession. Finally, what of the role of Dr Erchardt, the resident military medical officer at Klipdam, who accompanied the German patrol? Presumably Presgrave was too badly wounded to be saved, but the fact that no medical assistance was rendered or indeed considered, and no attempt made to remove or bury the body, speaks volumes about how ‘gunrunners’ and rebel supporters were viewed by the German authorities, to say nothing of the nature of colonial medical care. And finally, what was the fate of the photograph that Dr Erchardt is reported to have taken of Presgrave’s body? Presumably this would have been sent to military headquarters at Windhuk along with Beyer’s official report. No record of the photograph has been found.

Legitimate target or unjustifiable act?

On the 30th of October 1905 one month after Presgrave’s death, Major Berrange the Commanding Officer of the North West Border Police formally wrote to Elizabeth Presgrave at an address in Sydney, to inform her of the death of her son Edward. His letter simply stated that on the

28th of September, Edmund [sic!] Lionel Presgrave was captured by a German patrol in their territory in possession of arms and ammunition and being unable to give a satisfactory explanation of his movements, he was shot. He was subsequently given a decent burial by a Cape Mounted Police Patrol […] I may further inform you that for the past few months the German Government has had a price on your son’s head in consequence of his having assisted the Hottentots in their operations.21

This letter would set in train a sequence of events whereby both Elizabeth and her husband would pursue the German authorities for a full explanation of their son’s death and demand compensation for what they saw as a murder. But even before the

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21 Letter from Major Berrange to Presgraves, 30 October 1905, WCA, AG 1647, 8920/05.
Presgraves could respond to the news of their son’s death, the Cape Government had expressed its concern over his killing and the arrest of Frode Sahlertz. The official report submitted by Sub-Inspector Attwood of the Cape Mounted Police laid the blame squarely on the German authorities. On the balance of the evidence that Attwood had collected, it was clear to him that the two Boers, de Waal and du Preez had been commissioned by the German authorities to lure Presgrave over the border and kill him, or at the very least apprehend him, and hand him over to the local military authorities. Evidence gathered by Attwood showed that they were both paid 50 pounds for what he termed “their dirty work”. Attwood was firmly of the belief that “murder was committed” even though his immediate superiors, Inspector White and Major Berrange, remained somewhat unconvinced when they forwarded their official report to Lieutenant-Colonel Nolan-Neylan, the Commissioner of the Cape Mounted Police in Cape Town. White maintained his scepticism throughout 1906 and in a letter dated the 8th of August 1906 he dismissed Attwood’s evidence and claimed that “It was impossible to obtain reliable evidence as to the connection of de Waal and du Preez with the Germans. What had been obtained was only hearsay”. There seems little doubt that the Cape Government had some problems with the evidence as presented to them and were perhaps more concerned with German border violations, cattle raiding, German and Boer scouts trespassing in British territory and the attempted kidnapping of a Cape citizen, than they were with the death of a young Australian known to be supporting the rebels. Nonetheless, their initial “official” response referred to Presgrave’s death as a “murder” and there was pressure from within the Cape cabinet to pursue the matter further. In a draft statement from Hely-Hutchinson, the Governor of the Cape Colony, dated the 13th of November 1905 and labelled “Secret”, the Governor wrote:

> There seems little doubt that Presgrave was trepanned and murdered. The statement of the Hottentot, Hans Auresmar […] confirms the alleged statements of Sahlertz […] the conduct of Presgrave, a white man, in actively assisting the natives in German South West Africa in their rebellion against the German authorities, has to be taken into consideration in deciding whether any formal application should be made to the German Government for redress. In my opinion it puts him out of court.

Despite such comments it would appear that there was pressure in the Cape Government for a review of Presgrave’s killing and the Government wrote formally to the Colonial Office. This letter was forwarded to the Foreign Office and a request was made for an investigation into the killing, as well as the apprehension of Sahlertz and various border incidents. In support of this they forwarded copies of the police and other reports to the British authorities. On receipt of this formal request, Sir Edward Grey the British Foreign Secretary stated that he agreed with Hely-Hutchinson’s comments, and in a note to Sir Frank Lascelles the British Ambassador in Berlin on the 11th of January 1906, he stated:

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22 White to Commissioner Cape Mounted Police, 8 August 1906, WCA, AG 8920/05 1647.
23 Draft secret letter from Hely-Hutchinson, 13 November 1905, WCA, CH 35/351.
I concur in the view that it would be inadvisable to make representation to the German Government as regards the shooting of Presgrave in view of the active assistance said to have been given by him to the insurgents. You should however call their attention unofficially to the case which would seem to require further elucidation and also to the report that Sahlertz was to be shot.24

On the 24th of January 1906, Lascelles formally presented two memoranda to von Muhlberg the German Foreign Under Secretary in Berlin. The first and longest of these drew the attention of the German Government to various border incidents on the frontier with German South West Africa, the attempted kidnap of the Hottentot Hans Jan, the cross-border cattle raids and the continuing trespass of German scouts (presumably Boers) into British territory. The second, referred specifically to Presgrave and Sahlertz, and was couched in the following terms:

His Majesty’s Government desire that the attention of the Imperial Government should be unofficially called to the death under peculiar circumstances of one Presgrave and the arrest by the German authorities of his companion Sahlertz in German South West Africa.25

The German Government replied to the Presgrave memorandum almost immediately, using Lieutenant Beyer’s report of the incident as a defence. When this evidence was found to be in conflict with the material assembled by Attwood and other sources, Lascelles in his response to the German Government stated that:

Reports received from native and other sources, however, state that Presgrave and Sahlertz were decoyed across the frontier by De Waal and Du Preez who then treacherously disarmed and took Sahlertz prisoner and shot Presgrave dead; that there was no German patrol at the spot until the next day, and that Sahlertz was lying in irons in Hasuur and about to be shot. These latter reports are by no means clearly stated or proved but it appears to H.M. Government that the account stated to have been received from German sources requires itself some further elucidation, as well as the statement that Sahlertz was a prisoner and was about to be shot.26

On the 31st of January 1906 Lascelles received a note from the German Government informing him that the Imperial Governor of German South West Africa had been instructed to enquire into and report on the death of Presgrave, the arrest of Sahlertz and the other frontier incidents complained of in the memoranda of the 20th.27 Nothing much seems to have happened over the next two months, and in early August Lord Elgin in the Colonial Office enquired whether the Foreign Office had received any further communication from the German Government, whereupon the Foreign Office wrote to Lascelles in Berlin asking him to formally bring the matter to the attention of the German Government. In late September the German Government finally replied when Count Pourtales in the German Foreign Office formally delivered a report prepared in Windhuk by the German Colonial administration, to Lascelles. This was then translated and

24 Note Grey to Lascelles, 11 January 1906, NAUK, FO 367/9 C430129.
26 Note Lascelles to Grey re Note to German Government, NAUK, FO 367/9 C439129.
27 See letter from Lascelles to Sir George Grey, 3 September 1906, NAUK, FO 367/9.
forwarded to the Foreign Office and later to the Cape authorities, but interestingly, never to the Australian Government. The Note forwarded by Count Pourtales, was largely based on material provided by the Imperial Governor in Windhuk, who seems to have relied on statements made by Sahlertz while he was imprisoned at Keetmanshoop. The note specifically addressed the death of Presgrave and the imprisonment of Sahlertz as well as various border incidents. This official note stressed the fact that Presgrave had been supporting the Hottentots, regularly supplying them with horses, cattle and arms and frequently transgressing the German border. It also stated that he had fought alongside Marengo on several occasions. It further detailed the circumstances of his death stating that the two Boers acted in self defence.

On receipt of the German report, Barrington the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, conveniently ignoring the circumstances of how Presgrave and Sahlertz were lured across the border by two Boers in German employ, and even failing to mention Presgrave’s support of Marengo and the insurgents, concluded that there are no grounds for representations respecting the cases of Sahlertz and Presgrave [sic!]. They were cattle thieves and deserved what they got. The former got two years and the latter was shot in self-defence by the Boers who tried to arrest him. The charges as to cattle raiding from German territory are denied and met with counter charges of a similar nature. It is denied that a German Non Commissioned Officer took part in the attempt to kidnap Hans Jan. The alleged violation of the frontier is said to have occurred unwittingly. All we can do is to send a copy to the C.O. and ask if they wish any further representations made on any of the subjects referred to.29

Apparently, Elgin in the Colonial Office still harboured some doubts, and six weeks later he asked Lascelles to seek from the German Government a copy of the German Criminal Code in which justification for the shooting of Presgrave might be found. In a response forwarded from Count Pourtales in Berlin on the 5th of December 1906 to Count de Salis, the British Charge d’Affaires in the British Embassy, the shooting of Presgrave was defended as an “act of self defence” (“Akt der Notwehr”) and that the two Boers were justified under the German Criminal Code because Presgrave was caught “inflagrante delictu”.30

Four weeks later on the 1st of January 1907, an official statement prepared by the British Colonial Office and signed by Lord Elgin was forwarded to the New South Wales Governor and to the Presgraves, and later to the Governor-General and the New South Wales Government. The statement asserted that Presgrave was “actively assisting the natives in German South West Africa in their rebellion against the German authorities, and had actually taken part in fighting the German troops”.31 In consequence the Presgrave’s claim for compensation was dismissed by the British Colonial Office on the

28 Translation of Note from Count Pourtales to Lascelles, NAUK, FO 367/9/22.
29 Statement by Barrington to Lieutenant Nolan-Neyland, 20 October 1905, on receipt of German Report, NAUK, FO 367/9/222.
30 Papers sent by Count de Salis to British Embassy in Berlin, 10 December 1906, NAUK, FO 367/9/237.
31 Colonial Office to Mr E. Presgrave, 1 January 1907, NAA, 07/2275, 47793.
grounds that their son was engaged in supporting the native rebels and had illegally crossed into German territory. Presgrave’s killing caused a wave of anti-German sentiment among many of the families living along the border. Otto Busch, a German spy employed by the German Consulate in Cape Town to report on activities along the border, reported as much in a despatch delivered to the consulate on the 13th of November 1905. He drew attention to the aftermath of Presgrave’s death and the fact that the German authorities regarded it as a minor matter (“als eine abgetane Sache betrachtet wird”) and that it had angered the locals living along the border and intensified anti-German feelings. Interestingly he also reported on the German attempts to win over Attwood to their way of thinking. Apparently Attwood was invited to the German post at Hasuur where he was “entertained” for 8 hours by officers and the Commandant. The following day the German Commandant paid a reciprocal visit to Attwood at Reitfontein. The German efforts, however, went unrewarded as Attwood remained convinced that murder had been committed 29th of September and that the Germans had been party to it.32

The campaign of the Presgraves

From early 1906 until 1910 both Edward Presgrave Senior and his wife Elizabeth, whose marriage had broken down, campaigned independently to obtain details of their son’s death and to demand compensation from the German Government for what they saw as his unlawful killing. The scene was set early in 1906 when Elizabeth Presgrave approached Thomas Garvin the Inspector General of New South Wales Police to write on her behalf to the Commissioner of the Cape Mounted Police seeking details of Edward Presgrave’s death. Quite possibly Garvin wrote more than once on her behalf, as his letter dated the 15th of June 1906 refers to details of Presgrave’s death already made available to him by the Cape Mounted Police. In this letter he requested further information about the role played by de Waal and du Preez in the shooting and in particular whether or not they were “German officials” or in the pay or employ of the Germans. There would appear to be no record of any further correspondence. It would also appear possible that Garvin may have helped Elizabeth Presgrave submit a formal claim for compensation to the Governor of New South Wales for the death of her son at the hands of the German authorities in South West Africa. The Governor sent this claim directly to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London without reference to the Australian Governor-General or the Australian Government. In the meantime, separated from his wife, Edward’s father pursued his own campaign to get to the truth. In early May 1906 he wrote formally to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies in London, providing background details about his son. He referred to the letter sent by the Cape authorities to his wife in Sydney informing her of her son’s death, and mentioned that very little detail had been provided about the actual circumstances. He recalled how his son had written to his mother on a number of occasions telling her that the Germans

32 Journal of Otto Busch 1900–1914, National Archives of Namibia (NAN), A.0529.
were stealing his cattle, and how he had had been forced to go to court over such
incidents. He also drew their attention to the fact that his wife had formally requested
the Governor of New South Wales to pursue the matter of her son’s death with the
British and Cape authorities. This was to be the opening salvo in an intensive
campaign waged by Presgrave Senior over the next three years. The Colonial Office
replied to his letter by simply stating that they were awaiting the German report on the
incident. On the 7th and 26th of December he wrote again to the Colonial Office, although
the letters do not seem to have survived. Presgrave’s father continued to chip away at
the Colonial Office and the Cape and South African Government in pursuit of the truth
over the next few years. There is no record of him receiving a reply from the Cape
Government although on the 1st of January 1907 the Secretary of State for the Colonies
sent him the explanation of his son’s death as forwarded by the German Government,
and stating that the British Government was not prepared to ask for compensation for
his son’s death as it was not in a position to dispute the circumstances provided by the
German authorities. It went on to say that,

Lord Elgin presumes that you are not aware that your son had been engaged in
actively assisting the natives in German South West Africa in their rebellion
against the German authorities and had actually taken part in fighting the
German troops, Mr. E.L. Presgrave is reported to have acted as “Secretary”
and advisor to Morenga [sic!] one of the rebel leaders: His Majesty’s
Government are informed by the German authorities that it has been
ascertained that he took part in the fight at Naragus on the 11th of March and
in a patrol fight at Bisipo [sic!] in April 1906.

But the matter did not rest there, as three years later on the 21st of September 1909
the Secretary of State for the Colonies forwarded to the Governor of the Cape Colony a
despatch stating that Presgrave’s father had written to him asking for access to the
police files and reports on his son’s death. Initially the Cape Government seems to have
agreed to release this material provided His Majesty’s Government had no concerns for
diplomatic reasons. Later, however, this recommendation was significantly altered by the
Cape Attorney-General, who argued that as Presgrave was shot on German territory, it
was not for the Cape Government to make his death the subject of a formal enquiry, and
that as the information in the possession of the police was of such a character as to
render its disclosure to the public inadvisable, Ministers were not prepared to
recommend that it be placed at Mr Presgrave’s disposal. In the Minute Paper (endorsed
“Secret”) of December 1909, the Prime Minister’s Office listed eight pieces of
information taken from the police and other reports about Edward Presgrave’s death
that should not be made available to Mr Presgrave because of “their confidential
character and for diplomatic reasons”. Certain extracts were, therefore, marked for
exclusion. These were largely passages that included any reference to Presgrave being
“decoyed over the border”; that a “murder was committed”; that the two Boers were “in
German employ” and that they had received “a large sum of money from the German

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33 Letter E. Presgrave to Colonial Office, NAUK, FO 367/9 C43 9129 18418.
34 Secretary of State for the Colonies to Mr E. Presgrave, 1 January 1907, WCA, 47793/1906.
Government for their dirty work.”35 Unwilling to let the matter rest, Presgrave tried again a year later, this time writing to Sir George Reid, the High Commissioner for the Commonwealth, who forwarded his letter to Sir Richard Solomon, the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa, who in turn handed it to Smuts, the South African Prime Minister. Again, it would appear that his quest came to nothing as the South African Government refused to release the unedited police reports. It was at this stage, after trying vainly to obtain detailed information about his son’s death for almost five years, that Presgrave senior finally admitted defeat.

The Australian Government’s reaction

The Australian Government remained totally unaware of the ‘Presgrave Affair’ until early in 1907, when the Governor of New South Wales finally forwarded various papers, including Elizabeth Presgrave’s claim, to the Governor-General, who then sent them on to the Australian Government. Presgrave had died 14 months earlier and despite considerable activity on the international diplomatic scene, the Australian Government had remained totally ignorant of the matter. By then it was too late, the case was closed. The British Colonial and Foreign Offices had washed their hands of the affair, and Lord Elgin had signed an official despatch forwarded to Presgrave’s parents and to the Governor of New South Wales. At this stage there would have seemed little that the Australian Government could do but accept the Colonial Office and German reports on Presgrave’s activities in the Cape Colony and German South West Africa. Despite this, Deakin, the Australian Prime Minister, insisted that the Attorney-General read through the papers and give an official opinion.

After assessing the various statements in the documents submitted to the Australian Government, Littleton Groom, the Australian Attorney-General wrote:

There is thus a serious conflict of evidence as to the way in which Presgrave met his death. If the German Official account is true, and it cannot be proved that Presgrave and Sahlertz were decoyed into German territory by agents of the German Government, I do not think that, in view of the existence of martial law — and assuming that Presgrave had been, or was bona fide believed to have been, fighting with rebels against the German Government — a claim could successfully be made against the German Government. On the other hand, if Sahlertz’s version is substantially true and the two Boers were acting as agents of, or with, the knowledge of, the German Authorities, there would undoubtedly be good grounds for a claim for compensation for what, on the facts as stated, was a treacherous murder. Sub-Inspector Attwood evidently takes that view, and does not credit the German version. The Hottentot’s evidence […] supports that view. But Inspector White, of Upington, reports (18th August 1906) that “it is impossible to obtain reliable evidence as to the connection of the men De Waal and Du Preez with the German Authorities. What has been obtained is simply hearsay evidence”.36

35 Secret Minute Paper Prime Minister’s Office, Cape Colony, 8 December 1909, WCA, GH 35/151.116.
36 File of Papers, Re Claim of Mrs Presgrave against the German Government, Department of External Affairs, 1907, NAA, 07/707.
In his final summing up, Groom wrote:

In view of the existence of martial law and assuming that Presgrave had been or was bona fide believed to have been fighting with rebels against the German Government — then a claim could not be successful against the German Government. On the other hand, if Sahlertz’s version is substantially true and the two Boers were acting as agents of, or with the knowledge of, the German authorities, there would undoubtedly be good grounds for a claim for compensation for what, on the facts stated, was a treacherous murder. Sub-Inspector Attwood evidently takes that view as does the Hottentot. 37

In his conclusion it is evident that Groom still harboured some concerns, as he wrote:

Though the evidence is not sufficiently conclusive to warrant at the present stage a demand for compensation, the same in my opinion calls for a searching inquiry. Sahlertz and Inspector Attwood must be able to give much more exact and detailed information than is present contained in the papers: and the different versions of the affair could be corroborated or disproved by examination of the several persons mentioned in the papers — especially Lieutenant Beyer, Corporal Thein, Dr Echardt, Dirk Campbell etc. I therefore think that representations should be made to Germany with a view to eliciting the whole of the truth about the affair. 38

This message was taken up by the Acting Australian Prime Minister William Lyne, who wrote to the Governor-General on the 15th of March 1907 asking him to forward Groom’s request to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, inviting him to approach the German Government for further information. Lord Elgin simply replied to the Governor-General on the 9th April 1907 by sending a copy of the despatch that had been sent to the Presgraves some months before, which the Governor-General forwarded to the Acting prime Minister. It would appear that as far as Elgin and the Colonial Office were concerned, the matter was closed. It is likely that this course of action reflected the uneasy relationship between the former colonies of Australia and the Colonial Office. There is also more than a hint of the ‘divine right’ of the British Government to negotiate and ‘manage’ the affairs of her colonies and former colonies without reference to ‘new’ national governments. Here the Presgrave affair rested and there is no evidence that the Australian Government pursued the issue any further. It would seem, however, that among some members of the Cape Government the case still evoked unpleasant memories. A Cape Cabinet paper referring to Sahlertz’s request for assistance with a compensation claim against the German Government begins with the words: “Sahlertz was an associate of Presgrave [sic!] the shooting of whom on the German border in 1905 was officially represented to the Governor by Ministers as being an act which can hardly be termed consistent with the ordinary customs of civilised nations”. 39 Arguably, for some at least, justice may well have been seen to be denied Presgrave and the real truth of the matter unresolved. It is also interesting how the Presgrave case brought to the surface other local tensions such as those within the hierarchy of military/police

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Paper from Assistant Secretary to Cabinet, 27 May 1908, WCA, AG 1647 8920/05.
command. Sub-Inspector Attwood’s evidence and conclusions about Presgrave’s death were merely swept aside by his superiors Berrange and White in Upington, much as Lieutenant Beyer’s official report on his platoon’s role in Presgrave’s killing (admittedly, full of untruths) was eventually discarded by the German military authorities.

Hidden truths
In the wider context of colonial and imperial politics the ‘Presgrave Affair’ was little more than a minor irritation but it did serve to focus attention on a number of important issues. There seems little doubt that the Germans planned Presgrave’s capture and death and were well aware of his activities and support for Marengo. There is also little doubt that the Cape Government and British Foreign Office were aware that the German explanations of Presgrave’s death were less than watertight and that the Germans were frequently transgressing the international border and had a network of local spies. International diplomacy, however, necessitated that the matter be pursued between London and Berlin in an ‘unofficial’ manner. But one question remains. Why did the Cape Government and the British Colonial Office ultimately come to accept the German explanation justifying Presgrave’s death when all the local evidence pointed the other way? Given the delicate nature of international relations was it for fear of producing a cause celebre that might further inflame Anglo-German colonial relations? There is little doubt that Anglo-German rivalry had been building for some time, fostered by the German support for the Boers, the Kruger Telegram, the naval arms race and lingering concerns about German colonial ambitions in the rest of Africa and the Pacific. Part of the explanation also lies in the geopolitics in the Southern Africa from 1903 to 1907 and in the social and political turmoil of the Cape and German South West African borderlands. During the Boer War, for example, many Boer commandos frequently sought refuge in German South West Africa and the German Government refused requests to extradite them, arguing that they were refugees. Much the same happened in reverse during the Nama revolt when the British refused to expel Marengo’s supporters when they sought refuge across the border. In the Cape there was also some apprehension about the huge build up of German troops in Southern Namaland after 1903 and many believed that the Germans had a long-term agenda involving the Northern Cape. There was also considerable concern about the number of times German troops illegally crossed the border in pursuit of rebels. For their part the Germans believed that the British revelled in the fact that they were struggling to put down a revolt by a mere handful of Nama. There was an economic factor in all of this as well. At the end of the Boer War the Cape Colony suffered a major economic downturn and the Cape authorities were quite prepared to turn a blind eye to the Germans buying up large amounts of supplies and shipping them across the Orange River. It is quite possible that the Nama uprising might have continued had it not been for the active cooperation of the Cape Government in allowing an endless flow of munitions, food, horses and people
to cross the border. Severe labour shortages in South Africa also saw labour recruiters become active throughout German South West Africa seeking to recruit cheap labour for the Transvaal gold mines and for farms. Many young Herero made this journey.

Finally, there was considerable tension in Australia between Deakin the Australian Prime Minister, and the Governor of New South Wales over the way Elizabeth Presgrave’s claim against the German Government had bypassed the Australian Government and the fact that the first the Australian Government came to learn of the Presgrave Affair was 14 months after Presgrave’s death. In addition, the Australian Government was excluded from the flurry of diplomatic exchanges that occurred between the Cape, Windhuk, London and Berlin. Finally, when official documents regarding Presgrave were forwarded to the Australian Prime Minister a number of critical papers had been omitted. To Australians this was simply history repeating itself and a rerun of a number of Boer War incidents involving Australians where the Australian Government was totally bypassed and ignored. There seems little doubt that the Australian Prime Minister wished for the Presgrave Affair to be reopened but as far as the British Government was concerned the matter was closed. Some unease still existed about it in the Cape, however, and in 1908 the Cape Government wrote in an official paper, that the “Pressgrave’s [sic] case now belongs to the dead past” and that “the Imperial Government was not disposed to press the matter or any rate did not succeed in convincing the German Government that the trepanning of Pressgrave [sic] was an unjustifiable act.”

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