

From German South West Africa to the Third Reich. Testing the continuity thesis

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Abstract

The connections between the atrocities committed by German colonial forces in German South West Africa and the mass murders perpetrated by Nazi Germany later in Central and Eastern Europe have become an important aspect of the scholarly debate about German colonialism. This article tests several elements of these continuity claims: whether there was elite continuity between the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich, whether formal and informal knowledge about the atrocities in the German colony were available to and used by the Nazi elites and whether the former German colonies played a role in foreign policy strategies of the Third Reich. The author deems it more appropriate to speak about a rupture rather than continuity between colonial elites and the Nazi movement, he argues, that formal knowledge about colonial violence was hardly available to the Nazis and they did not even consult the scarce institutional knowledge which would have been available. Informal knowledge was available but tended to downplay or negate the atrocities and therefore was unsuitable to inform policy makers of the Third Reich. Their main objective in Southern Africa was to pull South Africa out of the British war effort, rather than reconquering their former colonies.

Introduction

In 1904, the German colonial authorities reacted to uprisings of first the Herero and then the Nama in the South West African colony by resorting to extreme violence.¹ After the *Schutztruppe*, a special military force created for deployment in the German colonies, had crushed the Herero uprising and forced the Herero to flee into the desert,

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¹ The issue, which of the German actions during the wars against the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa were genocidal according to criteria of International Criminal Law, exceeds the scope of this article. It is dealt with in detail in: Klaus Bachmann, "Germany's colonial policy in German South West Africa in the light of international criminal law", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43 (2), 2017: 331-347, and in Bachmann, *Genocidal Empires*. All actions, genocidal or not, are comprised in this article under the notion of 'extreme violence'.

the troops tried to seal off the desert and occupy the waterholes.² In a speech in October 1904, the commander of the *Schutztruppe*, Lieutenant-General Lothar von Trotha, urged his troops not to take any more prisoners and to prevent Herero women and children from approaching waterholes by firing over their heads. The order was withdrawn two months later by the government in Berlin and the Herero were offered the option of surrendering without having to fear being shot.³ Many were hanged for their alleged crimes while many of the survivors were imprisoned in camps and sold to settlers and farmers as forced labourers. A similar fate awaited the Nama, who formally surrendered and with whom an agreement was signed, the terms of which were violated by the German authorities. The Nama were also imprisoned in camps and their leaders were deported to other German colonies in Africa.⁴ The persecutions led to a high death toll among both groups, which eliminated them as possible constraining factors on German policies in the colony. It is difficult to say how many died because there are no accurate population figures for Herero and Nama prior to the conflict and the number of those, who survived the war, the camps and the deportations is disputed. Approximations of the Herero death toll range between 60,000 and 100,000, which means that between fifty percent and more than eighty percent of the pre-war Herero population perished.⁵ Estimates of the Nama fatalities during the fighting are usually lower, between 20 and 30 percent of their population prior to the uprising. However, the accuracy of these figures is limited by the lack of robust population data for both groups before and after the uprisings.⁶

For a long time these events were on the margins of Germany's process of coming to terms with the past. They were addressed in Namibian and South African historiography mainly as examples of colonial violence, but overshadowed by the focus on Namibia's longer lasting and more recent period under South African rule and under apartheid. In Germany and to a lesser extent among researchers of colonialism and genocide, they become more widely known when members of the Herero and Nama community took

² Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia*, Berlin, Lit, 2001: 31-55, 126-147, 176-182.

³ Otto von Weber, *Geschichte des Schutzgebietes Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, Windhoek, Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 2010: 148-150; Walter Nuhn, *Sturm über Südwest. Der Hereroaufstand von 1904 – ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias*, Bonn, Bernard & Graefe 1996: 260; Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Band 1: Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884-1915)*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2nd edition, 1984: 182f.

⁴ Walter Nuhn, *Feind überall: Der große Nama-Aufstand (Hottentottenaufstand) 1904-1908 in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (Namibia) ; der erste Partisanenkrieg in der Geschichte der deutschen Armee*, Bonn, Bernard & Graefe, 2000: 42-46.

⁵ Jeremy Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero; Kaiser Wilhelm II, his General, his Settlers, his Soldiers*, Cape Town, Curry, 2011: 136-141, provides the most comprehensive overview of the different estimates on Herero casualties.

⁶ Marion Wallace, with John Kinahan, *A History of Namibia. From the Beginning to 1990*, London, Hurst and Company, 2011: 178. She estimates the death toll as one third of the pre-war population. Such estimations are difficult, because the 1911 census could and did not account for Nama and Herero who had fled to neighbouring countries as a result of the fighting.

action against Germany and German enterprises for genocide before US courts. These lawsuits were modelled on to the successful advocacy through which the Jewish Claims Conference had managed to obtain considerable compensation for Jewish people who had been forced labourers under Nazi rule.⁷ Another factor, which brought the events of 1904 to 1907 to the attention of the public in what is now Namibia, was the continuity hypothesis debate, a strand of scholarship, which has tried to establish connections between German colonial policy in German South West Africa on the one hand and the occupation of Central and Eastern Europe (including the Holocaust) by the Third Reich on the other. This hypothesis has been frequently revisited, rejected and criticized. One of the leading proponents of the continuity hypothesis is Jürgen Zimmerer, who has tried to construct a causal link between colonialism in what is now Namibia and the colonization of Eastern Europe according to the Third Reich's *Generalplan Ost*. Scholars like Zimmerer and Baranowski point to parallels and similarities between the justification for colonial expansion between the Kaiserreich (Empire) and the policy of *Lebensraum* (living space) under Hitler, they emphasize common elements such as the Kaiserreich's racism and the Third Reich's anti-Semitism and the role of German settler communities in German South West Africa on the one hand, and the annexed parts of Poland during World War II on the other. But they balk at linking the extermination of the Herero to the Holocaust and do not argue that the Holocaust took place as a result of the colonial genocide.⁸

The latter claim has been made in popular academic literature and by a popular, polemical and highly emotional account of the Herero genocide written by Olusoga and Erichsen, which has also been translated into other European languages.⁹ The very title illustrates the authors' main thesis: They see the Holocaust as the culmination of a policy that started in German South West Africa and whose meanders ran through the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. Contrary to Zimmerer's and Baranowski's rather limited continuity claims, Olusoga and Erichsen base their argument on elite continuity and the similarity of both regimes' ideologies, often by making connections which either did not exist at all, or were relatively marginal if put into a broader context:

What Germany's armies and civilian administrators did in Namibia is today lost history, but the Nazis knew it well. When the *Schutztruppe* attempted to exterminate the Herero and Nama peoples of Namibia a century ago, Hitler was a schoolboy of fifteen. In 1904, he lived in a continent that was electrified by

⁷ The compensation had later been extended to non-Jewish compulsory labourers in central and Eastern Europe, who had not been covered by other postwar German compensation schemes. See: Jerzy Kranz, Bartosz Jałowiecki, Jan Barcz, *Miedzy pamięcią a odpowiedzialnością. Rokowania w latach 1998–2000 w sprawie świadczeń za pracę przymusową*, Warszawa, Wyd. Prawo i Praktyka Gospodarcza, 2004.

⁸ Shelley Baranowski, *Nazi Empire. German Colonialism and Imperialism from Bismarck to Hitler*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁹ David Olusoga and Caspar Erichsen, *The Kaisers Holocaust. Germanys Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*, London, Faber and Faber, 2010.

the stories of German heroism and African barbarism emanating from what was then German South West Africa.¹⁰

By quoting Moritz Bonn, they claim, that “Nazi violence against the Jews drew directly upon the racial ideologies that Germany used to justify the Kaiser’s holocaust in German South West Africa forty years earlier”.¹¹ Shelly Baranowski takes the same stance when she argues, “[a]lthough the slaughter of the Herero and Nama was less centralized and bureaucratized than the Nazi regime’s ‘final solution’, the obsession with ‘military security’ and hatred of the enemy ensured a genocidal outcome”.¹² This is a far-reaching claim, but Baranowski bases it on ideological, rather than institutional or elite continuity, pointing to the gradual radicalization of racial exclusion as a consequence of the Herero and Nama uprisings and the similarities between the Kaiserreich’s racism and the Third Reich’s antisemitism. Hardly any supporter of the continuity hypothesis formulates his claim as bluntly as Madley: “the German experience in Namibia was a crucial precursor to Nazi colonialism and genocide”.¹³

This shows the diversity of continuity claims which the debate has produced. As early as the 1950s, Hanna Arendt constructed links between the evolution of bureaucracy, the emergence of race in the colonial context (as a substitute for citizenship) and the genocidal practices of totalitarian regimes in Europe.¹⁴ These were rather abstract and difficult to verify empirically, as were attempts to contextualise colonialism in a broader framework of forced modernisation, of which totalitarianism might be seen as the culminating period. Such a broad perspective sets aside the rather narrow search for continuity within German history, neglects the influence which British, French or Italian colonialism (and the respective practices of extreme violence) might have exerted on the way German politicians, administrators and militaries treated their colonies and the colonized people, and in how far they impacted on the methods and concepts of other colonizing states.¹⁵ It also leaves untouched Walther’s argument about the anti-capitalist edge of German colonialism and the nostalgia which German colonial advocates shared about the country’s rural and economically undeveloped past, which resonated with the Nazi’s rejection of capitalism and points to the possibility that both German colonialism

¹⁰ Olusoga, Erichsen, *Kaiser’s Holocaust*: 11.

¹¹ Ibid.: 329.

¹² Baranowski, *Nazi Empire*: 48-59 (49).

¹³ Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa incubated ideas and methods adopted and developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe”, *European History Quarterly*, 35 (3), 2005: 429-464 (429).

¹⁴ Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973.

¹⁵ Cf. Tilman Dederig, “Compounds, camps, colonialism”, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 12, 2012: 29-46 (43f.).

and Nazi ideology might form part of a much broader and possibly transnational tendency, which was not only rooted in German history.¹⁶

The hypothesis linking the genocide against the Herero and Nama with the Third Reich's policies of *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe and the Holocaust is based on a number of arguments, some of which can be tested against empirical evidence, while others cannot, mostly because they do not identify clear mechanisms of influence between colonialism and the Third Reich. Continuity between German anti-Semitism and racism during the nineteenth century and the Holocaust have been traced by many authors.¹⁷ Comparisons have been made between the methods with which the German authorities strove to achieve security, ensure there was adequate labour and carry out social and ethnic engineering after the uprisings in German South West Africa on the one hand and in the occupied and annexed territories of Eastern Europe during the 1940s on the other.

Against this backdrop, claims that Namibia was a "training ground for the German state's conduct" are rather difficult to test, since they presuppose that the *Schutztruppe* and the regular military and civilian authorities in German South West Africa were training for something which they could not have anticipated.¹⁸ If there was such a link, then it was more likely to be in reverse: The political elites of the Third Reich might have referred to the Kaiserreich's experiences in order to implement methods and use concepts that had been developed during the suppression of the Herero and Nama uprisings and during the campaign of racial engineering that followed.

It is this claim that this article intends to examine: Did the Nazi leadership refer to methods and concepts, which had been elaborated during the colonial campaigns in German South West Africa? Was there an institutional memory, to which the Nazis could refer, and if there was, did they refer to it? Was there elite continuity, through which knowledge and concepts from Germany's violent colonialism could have been transmitted to the policies of the Third Reich in the East? And finally – can we identify continuous political strategies which link the Third Reich to the colonial times and which would indicate a colonial influence on Nazi policy-making in Africa?

In the following paragraphs, this article traces the history of those institutions which might have created an institutional memory which then influenced the authorities of the Third Reich; it then asks whether the Kaiserreich's colonial bureaucracy actually created the necessary elements of such memory; next, it evaluates whether such memory was in fact later applied and whether it served the Nazis to develop a colonial policy in Africa,

¹⁶ This argument permeates Walther's whole book and is frequently repeated: Daniel Joseph Walther, *Creating Germans Abroad. Cultural Policies and National Identity in Namibia*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2002.

¹⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche. Der Diskurs um "Rasse" und nationale Identität 1890-1933*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2001; Michael Schubert, *Der schwarze Fremde. Das Bild des Schwarzafrikaners in der parlamentarischen und publizistischen Kolonialdiskussion in Deutschland von den 1870er bis in die 1930er Jahre*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2003: 221-247.

¹⁸ Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide*: 244.

which was inspired by the ideas and concepts of the Kaiserreich's colonial lobbies. This will allow the reader to determine whether the Nazi Empire was actually 'inspired' by colonialism, or whether its strategies, policies and ideological concepts constituted a rupture with the Kaiserreich's colonial ideas and politics.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, a disclaimer is necessary: This article only deals with personal and institutional continuity, with formal and informal knowledge that might have been passed from the Kaiserreich's colonial lobby to the NS movement and with the continuity of geopolitical strategies among the elites of both empires. It neither addresses the broader claims which link colonial expansion and imperialism with modernisation and totalitarianism nor the more specific questions as to whether expansion in the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich were justified in similar ways, or whether discourses about otherness, race and ethnic exclusion were similar in both cases. The scope of this analysis is restricted to a few, rather narrow issues, which can be dealt with in a journal article and which can be tested against the empirical evidence available in published sources and archival records.

Institutional continuity between the Kaiserreich's colonial bureaucracy and the Third Reich

After the German colonial trade associations had proven to be too weak to guarantee the security of traders in Togo, Cameroon, East Africa and South West Africa, the German Empire took on the task and created a direct administration of the territories between 1884 (for Cameroon and Togo) and 1885 (for German South West Africa and German New Guinea). The German administration of German East Africa was founded six years later. At the time, colonisation was regarded as an element of trade policy. The body responsible for colonial issues was therefore the foreign trade department of the Foreign Ministry. This changed in February 1885, when a special *Referat* (unit) for "colonial issues and the deployment of war vessels in order to protect German interests" was created. The unit is frequently referred to in the literature as the *Kolonialreferat*.¹⁹

In April 1890, the *Kolonialreferat* was established, but soon afterwards the competence of its supervision was split between a *Staatssekretär* (secretary of state) in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which was responsible for colonial issues, but only if they related to foreign powers, and the head of the *Kolonialreferat*, who was subordinated directly to the Chancellor and made responsible for all other colonial issues. In legal terms, the *Reichstag* was marginalized in colonial affairs. It could only intervene on colonial policies through its right to debate and vote on the budget and the provisions relating to colonial problems. Colonies did not elect representatives for the *Reichstag* and the government did not need the approval of the *Reichstag* for specific decisions. The

¹⁹ Michael Hollmann, (Bearbeiter), *Findbücher zu Beständen des Bundesarchivs. Reichskolonialamt, Bestand R 1001, Teilband 1*, Koblenz, Bundesarchiv, 2003: XIII.

colonial decision-makers in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Chancellery only sought advice from a special *Kolonialrat* (colonial council), which was composed of representatives of the enterprises and trading houses active in the protectorates.

The colonial department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was small, but its staff steadily grew. More significantly, the *Kolonialreferat* obtained competence for military actions in March 1881. Until then, military issues and the *Schutztruppe* had been the responsibility of the *Reichsmarineamt* (Imperial Naval Agency). In July, the competence for punitive actions, carried out by the *Schutztruppe*, was transferred to the *Kolonialreferat* and the Chancellor became the commander of the *Schutztruppe*. He delegated his powers to the director of the *Kolonialreferat* whose general staff consisted of two military officers, while the local units of the *Schutztruppe* remained under the orders of the governors on the ground.

By 1902, the *Kolonialreferat* had expanded to 62 employees. The uprising of the Maji-Maji in German East Africa, of the Herero and the Nama led to further growth. By 1907, there were 176 people working on colonial issues.²⁰ The uprisings also triggered a reform of the colonial administration, which was carried out after the early elections of February 1907, called as a result of Chancellor von Bülow's dissolution of the *Reichstag*. The election result strengthened the colonial hardliners and weakened the liberal and social-democratic critics of colonial expansion and brought a *Reichstag*, which was much more favourable towards the government's reform of the colonial administration. The creation of the *Reichskolonialamt* (Imperial Agency for Colonisation), based on the former *Kolonialreferat*, was the result. The latter was extracted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and became a ministry of its own. It employed 107 people in three civil departments and additional staff in its military administration. Many of these tasks became irrelevant after Germany's defeat in the First World War and the loss of its former protectorates. In April the Colonial Ministry again became a part of another ministry, the *Reichsministerium für Wiederaufbau* (Ministry for Reconstruction). But four years later, the Ministry for Reconstruction was dissolved, and the department dealing with colonial issues was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs again. Its only tasks were now defined as: collecting information about the former colonies, supporting the study of colonialism and staff issues of former colonial officers. The number of staff was reduced continuously and by 1931, the department had shrunk to a unit dealing with tropical Africa, South West Africa and the Pacific.²¹ After the National Socialists took power in 1933, they reorganized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but this only brought a further marginalization of colonial issues, which totally disappeared even from the ministry's nomenclature. In 1937, the only remaining department which had until then dealt with, among others, "colonial issues" was dedicated to issues of the "African Continent".

²⁰ For staff statistics, see subsequent editions of the *Handbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, here the 1907 edition, pp. 30-38.

²¹ Hollmann, *Findbücher*: XXI.

During all these changes, the archives of German colonialism remained almost untouched, at least until 1924, migrating from ministry to ministry. Only in 1924 were the archives screened, because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to decide which volumes it intended to keep, send to the *Reichsarchiv* (Imperial Archive) or destroy.²² Only a few documents were actually destroyed, while the overwhelming majority was sent to the *Reichsarchiv*. As colonial issues lost salience for the administration more and more material was archived. This process continued after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assumed responsibility for colonial issues. A huge body of archival material, which had been transferred from the former colonies to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was sent to the *Reichsarchiv* in 1938.²³

Tracing the journey of these archives is particularly pertinent for the purposes of this study. If one intends to assess whether there was any continuity between Germany's extermination policies in Africa at the beginning of the 20th century and the policies of the Third Reich in Central and Eastern Europe, it is necessary to ascertain whether the rulers of the Third Reich actually had the possibility to learn from the experiences of the German colonial administration and the conduct of the *Schutztruppe* in Africa, and if yes, whether they did so. The body of archival material of the former *Kolonialreferat* and later the *Reichskolonialamt* is the largest body of institutional memory available in later years. But, as the destiny of the archives indicates, hardly anyone was interested in using them. The bulk of the colonial documents was archived, a small part was destroyed, and even the few records, which the administrative successors of the Kaiser's colonial administration decided to keep in their offices were eventually sent back as public and political interest in the colonial past waned.

An analysis based on the inventory of the 1924 selection shows that the KA 1 documents (relating to East Africa) were mostly archived and that the volumes which were kept by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were in most cases related to economic and geographic topics, including border and delimitation issues. KA 2 volumes, which dealt with German South West Africa, were retained when they concerned mining, agriculture, economic or administrative issues.

²² The Central Archive of the government was still called *Reichsarchiv*. The decision can be traced in a special inventory, in which the document selection is listed: Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), Reichskolonialamt (R), 1001/9603.

²³ This transfer can be traced in BArch R 1001/9671. At the *Reichsarchiv*, all documents pertaining to colonial issues were kept together. On April 14 1945, the *Reichsarchiv* was bombed and destroyed and about 30% of the colonial collections were burnt, including those on Finance and Accountancy, technical issues and the railway, the documents on the *Schutztruppe* and the administration of the protectorates. Some documents about the *Schutztruppe* and the colonial administration in Africa were retrieved from other ministries, the documents kept at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the national archives in Africa. Some documents from Tanzania and Namibia are now available at the *Bundesarchiv* as microfilms. The regional archives from the *Bezirksämter* (district offices) in German South West Africa are still exclusively in Windhoek, and so are some of the few *Schutztruppen*-records containing documents about the competence of the commanders, mobilisation for a possible war, espionage and contacts with the British authorities in Cape Town (National Archives of Namibia, ZBU 2372 IX A). For a general overview, see: Hollmann, *Findbücher*: XXXIII-XXXIV.

The records dealing with the Herero and Nama uprising were moved to the *Reichsarchiv* and remained there. According to the records, Walter Berner, a researcher from Ulm, submitted a request to the *Reichsarchiv* in 1935 for access to the records for a dissertation about the uprisings.²⁴ The archive administration asked the Foreign Office whether there were any reservations concerning this request. There were none as the request was backed by a professor from Tübingen.²⁵

Those who sorted the material out apparently did not intend to keep records about violence, the crushing of uprisings or about military issues, which could later be used in a different context. But even if they did, it would not have made a great difference. In 1938, the German Foreign Office sorted the material further, transferring most of the remaining records to the *Reichsarchiv*.²⁶ If later politicians, officers or militaries decided to apply lessons from Germany's colonial adventures in Europe, they did not obtain that knowledge from the German colonial records.

Continuity of informal knowledge?

It would have been possible for the Nazi leadership to draw on a body of colonial knowledge that was derived from sources other than archival ones, for example from popular science literature, academic publications or even from poetry and fiction. As Birte Kundrus has shown, colonial issues permeated everyday life in Germany and the relatively short duration of German colonial power was no obstacle to the emergence of specialized *Kolonialwarenläden* (shops selling imports from the colonies), children's games and fairy tales invoking colonial and racial motives.²⁷ There was also of course a large body of literature and personal accounts, memoirs and fiction about the lost colonies, including the book that coined the notion of *Lebensraum*.²⁸

There is, however, a crucial point which turns these facts into a counter-argument to the continuity claims. Olusoga and Erichsen, the most ardent supporters of the hypotheses about elite and ideological continuity between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, point out in great detail that almost all of the literature that was produced after the sudden end of Germany's colonial adventures was apologetic and negationist. Authors of colonial memoirs and fiction tended to idealize and glorify colonial times and either downplay or openly deny (or, most often, just omit) the massacres committed by

²⁴ Gesuch um Gewährung in Akten des Reichsarchivs (sic), 19 May 1935, by Walter Berner, BArch R 1001/2102. Whatever Berner wrote, it was never published, according to the records of the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog and the catalogues of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

²⁵ Letter Foreign Office to the Reichsarchiv, 29 May 1935, BArch R 1001/2102.

²⁶ The inventory of the archived records can be found in BArch R 1001/9671.

²⁷ Cf. Joachim Zeller, *Bilderschule der Herrenmenschen. Koloniale Reklamesammelbilder*, Berlin, Links, 2008; idem, "Harmless 'Kolonial- biedermeier'? Colonial and exotic trading cards", in: Volker Langbehn, (ed.), *German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory*, New York, Routledge, 2010: 71-86.

²⁸ Benjamin Madley, "'From Africa to Auschwitz': 430-435.

Germans in the colonies.²⁹ Instead they painted deeply biased and counterfactual pictures about chivalrous battles of brave German soldiers, whose respectability required the enemy to be presented as courageous and bold rather than as poor victims of outrageous slaughter. Among the flood of apologetic soldiers' accounts which were published during the Weimar Republic, there are even some which replicate photos of arbitrarily hanged Herero. But they usually justify the hangings by pointing to the alleged crimes the Herero had committed and emphasize the bravery of the German soldiers, not their crimes.³⁰ Through such stories, postcolonial attitudes and customs were channelled into everyday life and affected (or infected) intellectual debates and everyday discourse, but they were hardly suitable for teaching genocidal practices. They certainly helped to foster racist attitudes, contributed to the creation of a German identity based on the rejection of the racial 'other' and upheld a nostalgia for the former German possessions in Africa, but they hardly ever contained any information which could have been implemented in the Third Reich's policies in Eastern Europe.³¹ The idea of a strict and insurmountable separation of the races is the predominant element that links all these works together, despite the variety of stereotypes they adopted.³² The concept was accompanied by a tendency to ascribe non-human, animal like features to Africans. This dehumanizing approach runs from the Kaiserreich through the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich and served as the ideological backbone of the German South West African camp system, the deportations and the war crimes committed by the *Schutztruppe*. It also formed the background of the genocidal occupation policies in Central and Eastern Europe, but there, the groups targeted were different from those in Africa; Slavs, communists and Jews, who were often conflated with communists. They were all scorned by the NS propaganda as subhuman beings, whose ultimate purpose was either to vanish and make place for Aryans or to serve as a slave-like labour force. But after 1933, the emphasis was on Slavs, Jews and communists, not on Africans.

There are two other problems with this kind of continuity. Firstly, the race-based (rather than economic or religious) anti-Semitism of the Nazi movement was much more ideological in its content than the disdain, which Nazi writers and theorists attached to

²⁹ Olusoga, Erichsen, *Kaiser's Holocaust* : 310-318.

³⁰ E.g. Paul Kolbe, *Unsere Helden in Südwestafrika*, Leipzig, Engelmann 1907; Georg Maercker, *Unsere Kriegsführung in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Vortrag, geh. in der Abtheilung Berlin-Charlottenburg d. Deutschen Kolonial-Gesellschaft*, Berlin, Paetel, 1908.

³¹ Honold, Alexander and Oliver Simons, (eds.), *Kolonialismus als Kultur. Literatur, Medien, Wissenschaft in der deutschen Gründerzeit*, Tübingen, Francke, 2002; alexander Honold and Klaus R. Scherpe, (eds.), *Mit Deutschland um die Welt. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Fremden in der Kolonialzeit*, Weimar, Metzler 2004.

³² The postcolonial literature in the Weimar Republic was not that coherent. Some authors included positive black heroes (strongly stereotyped, but nevertheless as positive figures) in their novels, for example Maximilian Bayer (a former *Schutztruppen* officer and settler in German South West Africa) did so in his Okowi novels, a kind of Karl-May-like adventure literature, which he published under the pseudonym Jonk Steffen. Cf. Jörg Wassink, *Auf den Spuren des deutschen Völkermordes in Südwestafrika. Der Herero/Nama-Aufstand in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur. Eine literarhistorische Analyse*, München, Meidenbauer, 2004: 166f.

black people. They had a sophisticated (though often self-contradicting) theory which blamed Jews for capitalism, communism, diseases and for world-wide conspiracies, but there was no such belief system with regard to Africans.³³ And secondly, the mainstream narrative about animal-like, dangerous and unreliable Africans, which dominated the colony-nostalgic literature was exposed to several cross-currents – the rather positive stereotype of the ‘faithful Askari’, which had its roots in the myths and legends about Lettow-Vorbeck’s partisan-like warfare in German East-Africa and the image of the ‘noble savage’, modelled after Karl May’s Winnetou, which was present in the extremely popular Okowi-novels written by Maximilian Bayer.³⁴ There was nothing comparable in the anti-Semitic literature of the Weimar Republic or the anti-Semitic propaganda of the Third Reich. It would have been much easier for the Nazis, to base racial exclusion of Africans on Gustav Frenssen, whose Peter Moor novels were bought and read by hundreds of thousands of Germans in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. He had no positive black protagonists, his stories focused on the adventures of a young German soldier and his hardship in fighting the Herero and they were based on the same racial hierarchy the Nazis employed in their propaganda.

Personnel continuity between colonial elites and the elites of the Third Reich

Many of the officers and soldiers who enrolled into the *Schutztruppe* were adventurers; young men who were seeking challenges on the battlefield, eager to demonstrate their vigour and virility, to reach out for booties and military honours and hoping swift promotion, which could not be achieved by serving in Germany proper. Since the Herero war was characterized by a significant asymmetry in capabilities to the disadvantage of the Herero, the fights and battles entailed a relatively low risk of injury or death and a relatively high probability of obtaining a medal and a higher rank. The risk of falling ill and dying from typhus and malaria were quite high, though, but this was not enough to put these young adventurers off. When the war ended, the next was already in sight, and many of the *Schutztruppen* members were drafted into the German Army which fought in World War I. The fate of Hansheinrich von Wolf is a good example. He first fought in the

³³ There was a campaign for the sterilization of the so called Rheinlande-Bastarde, the offspring of mixed couples of black French soldiers with German girls during the occupation of the Rhine basin after World War I, but paradoxically while the Nuremberg laws were promulgated and enacted and the atmosphere in Germany was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic, the Third Reich Foreign Office paid small subsistence payments to the few Africans, who had managed to come to Germany and stay there after 1933. The Foreign Office even intervened at other state and NSDAP agencies to improve these people’s lot, mainly because it intended to invoke their good treatment as evidence of the ability of the Germans to administer colonies as an argument in negotiations with Britain. The correspondence is contained in BArch 1001/7540. The *Rassenpolitisches Amt* faced a major ideological challenge when the Consulate in South West Africa inquired whether descendants of German *Schutztruppen* soldiers and Baster women (such couples had been very frequent due to the gender imbalance among whites in the colony) would be regarded as ‘Aryan’ or not.

³⁴ See footnote 30.

Schutztruppe against the Nama, then built a medieval-looking German castle in the Namib desert which he immediately abandoned when World War I broke out in order to join the German Army. He was wounded, recovered, returned to the trenches and died in action during the Battle of the Somme.³⁵ After World War I, Germany demobilised thousands of soldiers, many of whom formed paramilitary units and clandestine organizations which conspired against the new, democratic and republican authorities and prepared for revenge against the countries which had seized the former German provinces. It is not surprising that a number of colonial officers and soldiers became members of these *Freikorps* (militias), as did many World War I veterans. This, however, does not make the militias a continuation of the *Schutztruppe*, at least not any more than they were the successors of the Kaiser's regular army.³⁶ Unemployed, with no chance on the labour market in Germany's embattled economy, many of them were radicalised during the great depression of the 1930s and entered the ranks of the National Socialists *Sturmabteilung* (SA) (Storm Troops). Here, we rediscover in the archival records names such as Franz Ritter von Epp, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, Eugen Fischer and even Göring.³⁷ Some supporters of the continuity hypothesis usually invoke these names, claiming, for example, that "they served as conduits through which colonial and genocidal ideas and methods were transferred from German South West Africa to the leadership of the Third Reich".³⁸

The problem with this claim is not so much that it is not underpinned by any evidence, as, for example, Kühne and Zollman wrote.³⁹ The problem is twofold, methodological and

³⁵ His life is described in a booklet written by former German ambassador in Namibia, Harald N. Nestroy, *Duwisib, die deutsche Ritterburg in Namibia und ihr Burgherr Hansheinrich von Wolf*, Windhoek, Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 2008. The castle is now a national heritage site and a small hotel.

³⁶ It is worth mentioning here that the *Schutztruppe* was not part of the *Kaiserliche Armee* (Imperial Army) and was not subordinated to the Minister of War, but to the Colonial Office. Officers who were eager to enter the *Schutztruppe* first had to resign from their positions in the Army.

³⁷ Hermann Göring, the supreme commander of the German Air force in World War II, is probably the only politician and member of the Third Reich leadership who could have employed methods from colonial times during the Third Reich, because he held a position, in which he had the power and the means to do so. Olusoga and Erichsen highlight his family and colonial connections at the very beginning of their book. However, the problem with Hermann Göring is that he never had any colonial experience. When the Herero war broke out, he was 10 years old. His father, Heinrich Ernst Göring, had been the first *Generalgouverneur* of German South West Africa, but Olusoga and Erichsen do not elaborate on how he could have passed on to his son any colonial or genocidal thoughts or knowledge, since Heinrich Ernst Göring remained in Haiti (where he served as a German consul) until three years after the birth of his son in Germany and died 1913, while his son attended a boarding school far away from home. Hermann had several relatives with some experience in German South West Africa, but they played no role in the Third Reich. One of them was his stepfather, Hermann Ritter von Epenstein, who had both – colonial experience and influence on the boy – but he was Jewish under the Nuremberg laws. Cf. Richard Overly, *Goering. Hitler's Iron Knight*, London, Tauris, 2012: 8f., 76-79.

³⁸ Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz": 430.

³⁹ Thomas Kühne, "Colonialism and the Holocaust. Continuities, causations, and complexities", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5 (3), 2013: 339-362 (342); Jakob Zollmann, "From Windhuk to Auschwitz – old wine in new bottles? Review article", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 14, 2003: 77-121.

empirical. First, if one only concentrates on cases which confirm a hypothesis, one will never be able to find evidence that challenges that hypothesis. And, as Zollmann has pointed out, supporters of the linkage between Windhoek and Auschwitz usually do not examine either personal discontinuities between the colonial authorities and the Nazi leadership, or cases which show links between a colonial career and engagement in the resistance against Hitler, political passivity during the Third Reich or a commitment to pacifism.⁴⁰ Only if all these potential connections are examined in a comparative way can one make claims about which links are more important than others. Otherwise, there is a great risk of making circular conclusions. In the latter case, all colonial careers seem to lead to a career in the Nazi leadership, because only those colonial trajectories are examined. Second, even if the evidence suggested by supporters of the continuity hypothesis is taken into account, it counters their claim. The blind spot in the continuity hypothesis: the careers of the most prominent members of the post-1933 establishment, who had a colonial past, ended in a cul-de-sac. But authors who use them to support the continuity hypothesis usually focus on the ascending phase of their careers and avoid describing their downfall. If put into a larger context, the fate of von Epp and many less prominent former colonialists during the Third Reich shows how much the former colonial elites were actually marginalized and side-lined by the Nazis, probably even more so than would have been the case if Germany had remained democratic. In their new jobs and functions, former colonialists usually stuck to a strong colonial nostalgia, held speeches and published pamphlets whose aim it was to convince the public of the need to reconquer the colonies and that the colonies, just like Alsace-Lorraine, Upper Silesia and the Prussian provinces had been lost due to conspiracies by leftist, communist and Jewish traitors. During the Weimar Republic, these colonial nostalgists were organized in a variety of and, to some extent, even competing organizations. After the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) had taken power, they were unified in the *Reichskolonialbund* under the leadership of von Epp, who was appointed director of the *Kolonialpolitisches Amt der NSDAP* (NSDAP's Colonial Office) in 1936. From 1933 onwards, von Epp had two powerful competitors in colonial affairs: Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's foreign policy advisor, and Ernst Wilhelm Bohle, the head of the *Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP* (AO). The latter also held two other important positions: he was a member of the Führer's staff and became secretary of state at the Foreign Office.⁴¹ In the web of competing agencies within the NS state, the AO had been placed above von Epp's *Kolonialpolitisches Amt* by 1935. In a regulation by Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, the AO was entrusted with looking after and organising Germans in the former colonies (von Epp lost this responsibility), and the *Kolonialpolitisches Amt* was left with decision-making on colonial policy and economic measures in those countries, which, as Germany had no leverage over its former colonies, had no practical application. In addition, such decisions could only be issued

⁴⁰ Zollmann, "From Windhoek to Auschwitz": 88.

⁴¹ The German titles were 'Mitglied des Stabs des Stellvertreters des Führers' and 'Staatssekretär im Auswärtigen Amt' (since 1937). Bohle also was a 'Gauleiter'.

after the *Sonderbeauftragter des Führers* (special envoy), Joachim von Ribbentrop and the AO had approved it. If Bohle and von Ribbentrop could not agree, the final decision would be made by Hess.⁴² The KPA even had to seek Ribbentrop's approval before issuing publications.⁴³ In his position, von Epp could do nothing to prevent the takeover of the colonial organisations by the NSDAP. Across Germany, the different organisations were ordered to dissolve and their members were called upon to join the new Bund. The police was ready to use force, if the decision met any resistance.

After 1935, it was the AO which took over the responsibility for the *Gleichschaltung* of the German population under South African rule.⁴⁴ Bohle also managed to subordinate the German Foreign Office (GFO) to the AO, after he was appointed secretary of state in 1937 and could then influence the appointment of diplomats. In some cases, they served as envoys of the AO at the same time and helped to shelter the latter's subversive actions abroad. For Hitler as well as for von Ribbentrop, a colonial agenda was only needed in order to coerce Britain into a standstill agreement vis-à-vis Hitler's plans for Eastern Europe. To achieve that, the colonial lobby had been taken over and forced into a political straightjacket, which allowed the GFO to blackmail Britain, but deprived the colonialists of any agency. Colonial propaganda could demand a return of Germany's former colonies, but it had a strict ban imposed on any actions, which might encourage Germans to emigrate. Germans were meant to conquer and populate Eastern Europe, not Africa.

The situation changed to the advantage of von Epp's agency when German troops advanced on all fronts during the war and hopes were again high that they might reconquer or otherwise regain colonies after the surrender of Germany's western foes. The KPA became more respected, but von Epp did not really profit from this development due to the infighting between the various agencies within the Third Reich state and party bureaucracy, in which younger long-term party members had greater influence. When von Epp's agency was due to be upgraded to a fully-fledged colonial ministry, Ribbentrop's right hand in colonial affairs, Consul Rudolf Karlowa, was sent to the army headquarters as to liaise in the creation of a colonial army. But the increase in international tensions and the perspective of military successes also aroused the interest of the NS system's armed services, the SS and the SD. Rumours that the KPA would become a ministry with the competence to create a colonial police force led to competition for von Epp from the SS and the SD. In the end, the swift German advance in Eastern Europe and the defeats in North meant that von Epp's plans, the envisaged

⁴² Klaus Hildebrandt, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich. Hitler, NSDAP und koloniale Frage 1919-1945*, München, Fink, 1969: 358-362. He claims that in the second half of 1935 Ribbentrop managed to side-line Bohle, too. Ribbentrop then wrote to the AO that Hitler had given him the responsibility for the "entire colonial policy".

⁴³ Ibid.: 262f.

⁴⁴ *Gleichschaltung* (streamlining) means at the same time to subdue an organisation to the will of the state and the (Nazi) party, to impose the *Führerprinzip* (leadership principle), abolish internal interest aggregation or democratic or bottom-up decision making and coerce it into compliance with Nazi ideology.

resurrection of a *Schutztruppe* and a colonial police, never materialised. The bureaucracy continued to plan for the colonial conquest, and as long as the Wehrmacht won battles, the leadership of the NS state allowed von Epp's bureaucrats to draft memoranda and bills for the future. In 1941, hopes of conquering colonies were so high that several high ranking individuals from the NS elite were moved to compete for positions which would never come into being. There was a general pattern behind this bureaucratic infighting. The more immediate the prospect of gaining colonies (or recovering them) became, the more personnel von Epp's agency could employ. But this absolute rise in influence was countered by the efforts of other agencies to secure their share. And the more the KPA expanded, the more it had to yield to more powerful players, who did their best to fill the KPA with their own senior staff members. Thus, von Epp's old and trusted comrades from the colonial elites were increasingly marginalized by the powerful NS bureaucracy, which had its own agenda. Until the end of the war, von Epp's men were allowed to make plans for the administration of future German colonies in Africa. It was in vain, because the German Army never entered any territory in Africa, which could have served as colony.⁴⁵ The British, French, Belgian and Dutch colonies remained out of the reach of the German. After the battle of Stalingrad, however, the German Army was constantly retreating and any hope of retaking the colonies in Africa had vanished. Von Epp's plans had lost any value they might have had before. In 1943, Hitler's deputy in the NSDAP, Martin Bormann suddenly requested that von Epp dissolve the whole office, dismiss the employees and hand over the building, arguing that the government needed every building and every person to reinforce the war effort.⁴⁶ Such was the miserable end of a von Epp's career that is usually cited as a proof of how "the Namibian experience inspired the Nazis".⁴⁷

Despite his marginal role in the Third Reich's elite and his subaltern role in political decision-making, von Epp is a colourful example of elite continuity, but he is rather the exception to the rule.⁴⁸ Zimmerer has identified a number of former colonists who continued on a certain kind of career path during the Third Reich, often by going to the *Freikorps* and the SA and ending up as propagandists of National Socialism. But there are two important reasons why such cases could not and did not open any significant channels of influence between the colonial lobby and the Third Reich leadership. The first reason is demography, the second statistics.

⁴⁵ Jonas Billy, (Bearbeiter), *Kolonialpolitische Amt der NSDAP, Findbuch des Bundesarchivs Berlin-Lichterfelde, Bestand NS 52*, Berlin, Bundesarchiv, 2004: 3-5. The *Amt's* archival records can be found in the *Bundesarchiv*, but are only fragmentary and often inconclusive.

⁴⁶ Hildebrandt, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich*: 941-945.

⁴⁷ Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz": 430; Olusoga and Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust*: 11f. and 288-290.

⁴⁸ He was a member of the NSDAP, while Lettow-Vorbeck was only a nominal (and according to his biographer, rather unwilling) member of the SA. Cf. Uwe Schulte-Varendorff, *Kolonialheld für Kaiser und Führer. General Lettow-Vorbeck – Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, Berlin, Links, 2006: 106-109. On von Epp, see: Katja-Maria Wächter, *Die Macht der Ohnmacht. Leben und Politik des Franz Xaver Ritter von Epp (1868-1946)*, Frankfurt/Main, Lang, 1999.

Most colonial officers were too old when the NSDAP took power and Hitler became Chancellor. A *Schutztruppen* soldier, who had been 20 years old when fighting against the Herero would have reached the age of 50 in 1934. Officers, who were often much older when they guided their units against the Herero, had already retired in the 1930s. Only those members of the colonial troops who entered politics and joined radical right wing organizations such as the *Stahlhelm* (as Lettow-Vorbeck did), could hope for a career in the NSDAP, the civil administration or the *Schutzstaffel der NSDAP* (SS), the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Main Security Office) or in the bureaucracy of an occupied country. Joining the *Freikorps* and later the SA was a dead end rather than a career boost. In 1934, Hitler solved the conflict between the Army and the armed wing of the NSDAP, the SA, by sacrificing the latter in a large-scale purge, after which many leading SA members went to jail or were executed as traitors.⁴⁹

The second important reason why colonial lobbyists and their way of thinking could not influence the Nazi leadership is statistical: The number of Germans with a colonial past of any kind was too low to leave an imprint on the new system, whose proponents saw it as a break not just with Weimar, but also with the Kaiserreich. During the last years before the outbreak of World War I, the white population of German South West Africa had increased to 14,830.⁵⁰ But among them, less than 5,000 could have had a personal impression of the war against the Herero and Nama.⁵¹ Additionally, 107 officers worked at the *Reichskolonialamt* before the outbreak of the war.⁵² During the uprisings, the number of *Schutztruppen* soldiers had risen from 756 in late 1903 to almost 20,000 in 1907.⁵³ This is the number of soldiers that could have had some kind of colonial experience from German South West Africa, which they could pass to others, including their families and friends. After 1915, when the Union of South Africa took over

⁴⁹ Madley, "From Africa to Auschwitz", enumerates many of those SA leaders (and their contacts with von Epp) as examples of elite continuity between German South West Africa and the Third Reich, but fails to mention what happened to them after 1933.

⁵⁰ Zimmerer: *Herrschaft*: 110.

⁵¹ According to the population statistics, by 1907 the colony counted 4929 Germans. Cf. Walther, *Creating Germans*: 27.

⁵² *Handbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, 1914: 30-38.

⁵³ These numbers are calculated on the following basis: According to the *Sanitätsberichte der Schutztruppe*, the initial strength of the *Schutztruppe* before the Herero uprising had been 756. They were reinforced by 45 officers and 734 privates from the Navy after the Herero uprising. During the uprisings, reinforcements of 17,856 soldiers arrived in the colony. This amounts to 19,391. This number does not include a number of settlers, who had been called to arms during the Herero uprising. Including them raises the final number to 20,867, but this does not take into account those, who had died in the colony (738) during the uprisings. It also does not include those returning home injured or ill who later died in Germany (this number is totally unknown as no institution collected data about such cases). Cf. Walter Rahn, *Sanitätsdienst der Schutztruppe für Südwestafrika während der großen Aufstände 1904-1907 und der Kalahari-Expedition 1908*, Homburg, Stilt, 1997: 109; Kommando der Schutztruppen im Reichs-Kolonialamt, *Sanitätsbericht über die Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Südwestafrika während des Herero- und Hottentottenaufstandes für die Zeit vom 1. Januar 1904 bis 31. März 1907*, Erster Band, I. Administrativer Teil, Berlin, Mittler u. Sohn, 1909: 1.

the colony, less than 13,000 Germans lived there. More or less half of them were expelled, almost entirely state employees, who were replaced by South Africans, and soldiers, who had been interned or disarmed and remained at large on parole. Their number overlapped with the number of soldiers, so that all in all, not more than ca. 25,000 Germans in the Weimar Republic had a direct and personal experience of German South West Africa. By no means all of them had a deeper knowledge of the genocidal events during the war against the Herero and Nama because the press in the colony had only covered the military actions, but refrained from reporting about war crimes and killings of Herero and Nama, irrespective of whether the victims of the latter were combatants or civilians. German settlers could only find out about the fate of prisoners, the conditions in camps or the treatment of surrendering Herero and Nama on the basis of their own observations or the accounts of others. Between 1904 and 1908, the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung* in Windhoek only mentioned the word 'Eingeborene' (natives) 31 times and the word 'Gefangene' (prisoners) eight times, but never printed a single article about camp conditions, deportations or executions.⁵⁴

Many German settlers remained in German South West Africa after the South African Union had taken over the colony. But even if all of them had returned, their stake among those who joined the NSDAP and, after 1933, the state administration and NSDAP-controlled mass movements would have been less than marginal. The SA alone counted more than 200,000 members before the organisation fell from Hitler's favour; the SS, which later absorbed many of the SA members, grew from 40,000 members before the war to over 900,000 in 1944. The NSDAP had almost four million members before the party introduced an admission stop in 1933.⁵⁵ The political and economic unimportance of German South West Africa and the small numbers of Germans that had gone there before 1915 would have made their influence in any German regime negligible, not only in the Third Reich. Zimmerer is right when he claims that colonial violence could have been transferred to other contexts by people with a colonial background, but that is true for all Germans with violent backgrounds. People with a *Freikorps*-background in the Silesian Uprisings or experience at the front in the World War I were much more numerous than those with a colonial or specifically Namibian background.⁵⁶

Colonialism and Hitler's grand strategy

Former colonialists were usually older than the average NSDAP member, who despised them as members of the old elites. Their careers continued after 1933, but the NS state

⁵⁴ Own research in the archival copies of the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung* in the Archive of the Sam Cohen Library, Swakopmund in 2015.

⁵⁵ Sven Felix Kellerhoff, *Die NSDAP. Eine Partei und ihre Mitglieder*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 2017: 273-276. Dietrich Orlow claims, in early 1935 the party had recorded 4 million membership cards, but had only 2,5 million members, cf. Dietrich Orlow, *The Nazi Party 1919-1945. A Complete History*, New York, Enigma, 2010: 305.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Zimmerer, "The birth of the Ostland out of the spirit of colonialism : a postcolonial perspective on the Nazi policy of conquest and extermination, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39 (2), 2005: 198-218 (213).

side-lined the colonial lobby. Operational power over foreign policy and colonial issues in the new bureaucracies of the NS state shifted to new actors: the new leadership within the GFA and the *Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP* (AO), the foreign arm of the NSDAP, which became the crucial stakeholder with regard to all German populations abroad. The GFO and the AO were strongly intertwined, due to the party membership of their leaders and because some of them, like Bohle, held high positions in both bureaucracies. There was also a third actor, about which next to nothing is known, due to the lack of archival material – the *Abwehr*, the Army's secret service.

All three were very much interested in Africa and made great efforts to gain the sympathy of the German and Afrikaner population in the Southern part of Africa, but they were neither interested in colonial adventures nor in regaining former German colonies. They had other ambitions, they strove to destabilize the Union of South Africa in order to isolate it from the British Empire and coerce it into a separate peace agreement with Germany. To achieve this, the *Auslandsorganisation* and the German Foreign Office sought to cooperate with radical right wing organisations in South Africa, they supported anti-Semitic groups and maintained close contacts with the nationalist faction of the Afrikaner movement, which was not only sympathetic to Nazi ideology, but also hostile to supporting the British war effort.⁵⁷ The AO also tried to impose conformity on the German population in South West Africa, but it never managed to counter the influence of the South African administration on the Germans living there, most of whom had accepted South-African citizenship during the 1920s. One reason for the AO's and GFO's failure to gain a firm hold on the German population in South West Africa was the German settlers' mistrust of the Nazi movement, whose activists were usually younger, more radical newcomers from Germany and hence *Reichsdeutsche* with much less African experience. As traders and bureaucrats they also had less to lose than farmers and entrepreneurs, who depended on the goodwill of the South-African administration.

In early 1939, there were panic-like rumours in South West about an imminent German military intervention, about airplanes landing on remote and clandestine airstrips and weapons being distributed by NS agents. The South African government, weary of unrest in the mandate, sent police reinforcements and incorporated the South West African police force into the Union police. A small and clandestine group of die-hard Nazis planned to seize the radio tower in Windhoek and to storm British banks, hoping to trigger a military intervention from the Third Reich. But Konsul Karlowa abandoned them. The Third Reich was not in a position to open a front thousands of miles away from the homeland, which would require its forces to fight their way through ocean waters controlled by superior British naval forces and face a showdown with South

⁵⁷ This hostility came of course from the Anglo-Boer war, of which most politically interested Afrikaner and a large part of their political establishment, whose members had fought as officers and generals, had personal experience. More about the attempts to destabilize the Union of South Africa can be found in: Albrecht Hagemann, *Südafrika und das Dritte Reich. Rassenpolitische Affinität und machtpolitische Rivalität*, Frankfurt/Main, Campus, 1989; idem, "Very special relations. The Third Reich and the Union of South Africa 1933-1939", *South African Historical Journal*, 27, 1992: 127-147, and more recently in: Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm. Antisemitism in South Africa 1930-1948*, Cape Town, Ball, 2015.

African troops, which were likely to be more numerous and better acquainted with the territory than a German intervention force.⁵⁸

But in the immediate neighbourhood of South West Africa, the Third Reich's agencies carried out "Operation Weissdorn" which had the potential to undermine an important part of the British Empire. Formally under the auspices of the *Abwehr*, it was undertaken with the knowledge and support of Rudolf Karlowa. He had helped to recruit Robey Leibbrandt, a young, radical Afrikaner boxer, who had participated in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and who was ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of pushing South Africa into the German camp in the war. In June 1941, he entered Namaqualand and contacted members of the *Ossewa Brandwag*, a radical right-wing Afrikaner organisation with strong sympathies for National Socialism, whose members opposed the South African government's decision to join the British war effort. Leibbrandt's aim was to assassinate Prime Minister Jan Smuts and members of the South African business elite of Jewish descent, and to launch an uprising by the *Ossewa Brandwag*. The plan was audacious, but not as daring as it looked. The *Ossewa Brandwag* had close contacts to the AO and had already asked for 8,000 rifles to stage an uprising. It had several hundred thousand members, many of whom were members of the South African police force. Nevertheless, the *Brandwag* leadership mistrusted Leibbrandt and leaked his conspiracy to the government, which mounted an ambush. Leibbrandt was arrested, tried, sentenced and, after the war, amnestied.⁵⁹

What is important in the context of the continuity hypothesis is the fact that the only significant Third Reich military operation in Southern Africa was carried out by agencies which were not connected to the colonial lobby. In this operation, almost no German officers with a colonial background took part. The key criteria for selection to take part in the destabilisation of South Africa, if there were any, would appear to have been experience in South Africa, not in German South West Africa. Both Bohles, junior and senior, had worked there as had Karlowa and the diplomats on the ground, who sheltered the NS operations with diplomatic immunity. Despite the influence of German agencies such as the AO and the GFO in South West Africa, the former German colony played absolutely no role in their war plans. If, as a result of a coup and the installation of a pro-German Afrikaner-dominated government in Pretoria, South West Africa had come under German rule again, the Nazis would have treated it as a windfall, not as the final reward for their efforts.

⁵⁸ Hagemann, *Affinität*: 207.

⁵⁹ Hans Strydom, *Für Volk und Führer*, Johannesburg, Ball, 1982. Strydom is a journalist who based his account on interviews, but does not provide references to sources. Leibbrandt later wrote his memoir about the affair: Robey Leibbrandt, *Vertel alles in Geen Genade*, Pretoria, Bienenfell, 1966. The story of his arrest, the trial and the subsequent South African government clampdown on the *Ossewa Brandwag* can be derived from the H. G. Lawrence papers (Lawrence was Minister of the Interior back then) in the special collection of the University of Cape Town's Library (UCT Library, H. G. Lawrence Papers, BC640, E3.262-271).

Conclusion

The similarities between the German extermination policies in Eastern Europe and Southern Africa do not come from elite continuity or the proliferation of colonial experiences from colonial institutions to NSDAP or Third Reich organs. Indeed, the opposite is true: the weakened and isolated colonial nostalgists from German South West Africa were streamlined by the National Socialist movement and were side-lined in the Third Reich. Even if the National Socialist leadership had intended to learn from what von Epp and others had done to the Herero, there would not have been much to gain in consultations. The colonial records were in the archives and only a small department in the Foreign Office survived in the Third Reich; nobody was interested in reading the old files. The Nazis could have learned from the colonial lobby and its protagonists, but they mostly despised the old elites from the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic and saw them as proponents of Germany's decline. They tried to create their own elites, rather than rely on the old ones. They could have taken advantage of their colonial experiences by reading their memoirs and analyses, but these never contained anything about war crimes, genocide or mass atrocities. Instead, the colonial literature downplayed atrocities committed against the native peoples and emphasized the commitment and suffering of the German soldiers. For demographic, ideological and strategic reasons the colonial lobby was not in a position to influence the politics of the Third Reich more than other lobbies. The colonial elites of the Kaiserreich were too old, they had no means to mobilize mass support and they did not have the lines of communication to channel their interests and opinions to the Nazi leadership. Hitler and his entourage wanted to conquer *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, not in Africa and the colonial issue was only an instrument, by which they hoped to neutralize Britain on the European continent.⁶⁰ Colonial specialists for resettling, expropriation and ethnic engineering were not needed to carry out large-scale expulsions from the annexed territories of pre-war Poland to the General Government. The only official with a dual background in the colonies and in the administration in the East, whom Zimmerer managed to identify, was Dr. Viktor Boettcher, the former deputy governor of Cameroon, who became *Regierungspräsident* (head of a district administration) in the Warthegau.⁶¹ When Zimmerer claims that former GSWA colonists' participation in the colonization of the Eastern territories was "welcomed by the German state and the Nazi Party" and that "former German colonists in Africa [were] the preferred settlers in the East, where their 'pioneer qualities' were thought to be useful", he again is right.⁶² But how relevant is this after taking into account that in 1940 the authorities of the Third Reich organized the resettlement of approximately 270,000 people from Romania and the Soviet occupied territories in the

⁶⁰ Hildebrandt, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich*: 441-587.

⁶¹ Zimmerer, "Ostland": 212.

⁶² Ibid.: 214. The argument is based on a letter of von Epp to a businessman, but von Epp and his agency were not involved in the large-scale resettlement plans and action (*Heim ins Reich*) in Central and Eastern Europe. The responsibility for resettlement was with the *Reichskommissar für die Festigung des Deutschtums* (commissioner for the reification of Germanness) and the SS.

Baltics to the annexed Polish territories?⁶³ Even if there had been re-settlers from South West Africa among them they would have been insignificant among the masses of new settlers.

The same kind of tautological reasoning lies behind the claim about elite continuity: Yes, Ritter von Epp did not vanish from politics after World War I and led a prominent life during the Third Reich, just as Eugen Fischer became a respected expert on racial issues (and remained one in post-war Germany).⁶⁴ But is this enough to support the continuity thesis, bearing in mind that other colonialists, such as Walter Rathenau, were later assassinated by *Freikorps* members, or Bernhard Dernburg, who entered a Social-Democrat-led government in the Weimar Republic, or, Franz Kempner, who initially supported von Epp after the war, later became a conspirator against Hitler and was executed as a traitor following Stauffenberg's failed assassination attempt?⁶⁵ To some extent, the Third Reich was a successor of colonialism, in the same way, as it was a successor to the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic. Careers from these times did not always end in 1933. But if there was a link between colonial mass violence against Herero and Nama and the German occupation of Central and Eastern Europe after 1939, it can hardly be proven by pointing to institutional memory or elite continuity. The NSDAP and the SS attracted some former colonialists, but they attracted many more non-colonialists and the connection between *Schutztruppe* and the SA is much weaker than between the post-war *Freikorps* movement and the SA and SS.

It should be clear that this does not preclude any connections other than those examined in this article, such as racism and concepts of racial or ethnic engineering applied in German South West Africa and under German occupation in Eastern Europe. Much broader continuity claims, such as Hannah Arendt's concept of linking race and bureaucracy to imperialism, cannot be disproved by the evidence presented here. On the contrary, there is quite a lot of evidence pointing to such links, which would then go far beyond the German-centric perspective of continuity between German South West Africa and the Third Reich and expand to a theory of how extreme violence in the colonies under imperialism led to the genocides of the totalitarian regimes in Europe

⁶³ Götz Aly, „Endlösung“ : *Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden*, Frankfurt/Main, Fischer, 1995: 167.

⁶⁴ Zollmann, “From Windhuk to Auschwitz”: 88f.

⁶⁵ Walter Rathenau, later foreign minister, travelled with Dernburg to German South West and East Africa before World War I, see: Ulrike Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen. Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880-1914*, Frankfurt/Main, Campus, 2011: 139, 142, 148-150; Eugen Fischer published studies about race-mixing and eugenics (based on research on the Basters in Southern Namibia), became a member of the NSDAP and rector of the University of Berlin during the Third Reich. In 1961, an editor from Graz republished his 1913 work on the Basters with an adulatory foreword: Eugen Fischer, *Die Rehobother Bastards und das Bastardisierungsproblem beim Menschen. Anthropologische und ethnographische Studien am Rehobother Bastardvolk in Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika*, new edition, Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1961. Bernhard Dernburg was head of the *Reichskolonialamt* between 1907 and 1910 and in 1919 became minister of finance and vice-chancellor under Philipp Scheidemann. Franz Kempner was *Bezirksamtmann* (district governor) in German East Africa. See: Zollmann, “From Windhuk to Auschwitz”: 88.

and elsewhere. And there is yet another hypothesis, which this small study neither proves nor discredits: that the learning processes and the inspiration did not so much link German colonialism to the Nazis, but instead ran back and forth between the administration and the settler community in German South West Africa, Berlin, Cape Town and Pretoria, that German colonialism inspired race segregation first in the Boer republics and the Cape Colony, and after 1910 in the Union of South Africa – and in return was inspired by the practices and concepts in South Africa and in other German colonies. Ulrike Lindner's study points to such mutual influences, enumerating the 'study tours' of German colonial officers to South Africa and the intense exchange of experiences by *Schutztruppen* officers, who served and fought in several German colonies. These analyses also reveal first the Kaiserreich elites' and later the Nazis' deeply rooted appreciation of Britain's colonial past which was mixed with envy and admiration.⁶⁶ In this regard the narrow continuity claims linking colonial violence with the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe may even obfuscate the broader picture of who learned from whom and who was inspired by whom.

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⁶⁶ Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*: 43-46, 226-239. Lindner shows how British colonial officers in Southern Africa looked down on their German counterparts (and Germans often accepted British experience in dealing with the 'natives' as superior to their own).

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