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## **Journal of Namibian Studies** **History Politics Culture**

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**Review:** Reinhart Kößler and Henning Melber, *Völkermord – und was dann? Die Politik deutsch-namibischer Vergangenheitsbearbeitung*. Vorwort von Heidmarie Wiczorek-Zeul, Frankfurt a.M., Brandes & Apsel, 2017.

The historiography of the colonial war in German South West Africa (1904–1907) has grown considerably to produce a wide range of relevant insights into the causes, trajectory and repercussions of this genocide. Despite the substantial scholarship on the mass violence that annihilated a large part of the Herero and Nama communities, political exigencies and ideological partiality mean the historical memory of the Namibian genocide is still contested.

This careful study by two renowned experts on Namibian history and politics meticulously disentangles the tortuous political response of the German government to Namibian requests for an official, unambiguous acceptance of responsibility for the mass killing in the former German colony.

Part of the problem is, as the authors point out, the general lack of interest in Germany's colonial past in Germany. Compared to the much longer history of empire of other European countries, Germany's foray into the international race for colonial annexations was relatively short-lived. The country's defeat in the First World War signified the end of the German colonial empire. The interwar period saw the festering resentment of an embittered colonial revisionism, but the next German defeat in 1945 terminated these far-flung reveries for good. This facilitated an

artificially induced historical amnesia in the post-war period. In contrast to other European countries Germany was purportedly not contaminated by a colonial past. This became a popular mantra especially when West Germany's reinvigorated post-war economy began to explore new markets in Africa.

The authors argue that the lack of historical awareness facilitated the attempts made by the German government since Namibia's independence in 1990 to avoid a clear-cut acknowledgement of its responsibility as the legal successor of the German Empire (e.g. p. 38). The drawn-out debates were overshadowed by anxieties on the German side that an unambiguous recognition of historical culpability could result in requests for monetary compensation. German politicians across the political spectrum habitually mentioned the 'special relations' that supposedly linked the two countries, but more often than not these vague references to a rather grim colonial past were accompanied by emphasizing the substantial German contribution to development aid for Namibia (p. 53). Various diplomatic exchanges and state visits were not without their awkward moments. German representatives studiously avoided the term 'genocide' when referring to the mass killings. From a Namibian perspective such irritations looked suspiciously like symptoms of a condescending attitude to Africans. The discussion between the two countries was additionally complicated by the reluctance of the Namibian government to accept independent initiatives started by the descendants of

the victims of the colonial genocide (p. 55).

In 2004 Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, German Minister for Economic Cooperation at the time, gained widespread attention for a speech given at the Waterberg, the site of the major battle between the Germans and the Herero when she broke a taboo by calling the Namibian genocide by its name. She also expressed in general terms that Germans were the perpetrators of mass murder and asked the audience for forgiveness (p. 54). This speech did not, however, result in resolving the issue for good and tensions have continued to surface at various levels of political and cultural relations. Many observers, including the authors, have interpreted this intervention as a step forward in the bilateral relations, but there has been constant pressure for more tangible and practical measures in compensating Namibian communities that were on the receiving end of German colonialism. One striking case of political maneuvering brought the contradictions of German policy into sharp focus. The German Bundestag, after heated debates, adopted a resolution in 2016 that condemned the genocide of the Armenians during the First World War, which predictably resulted in fierce denials by the Turkish government. Critics in Germany and in Namibia wondered why a similar resolution had never been discussed in parliament in the Namibian case (pp. 80-84).

In the last part of the book the authors broaden the discussion beyond the controversial interchanges among politicians. There is, for example, the

puzzling case of a respected German journalist and expert on African affairs who provided a platform for the resuscitation of a 'revisionist' attempt to question the reality of the genocide on spurious grounds (pp. 94-106). In another section, the authors critically analyze the mixed accomplishments of a number of commemorative projects, ranging from museum exhibitions to the renaming of streets.

By way of conclusion, the authors recommend intensified information campaigns in various public spaces to prevent the historical memory of the colonial genocide from being ossified in meaningless rituals or from being forgotten altogether. Whether or not this strategy would prove to be effective in the face of the recalcitrant political apparatus, this book provides a useful reminder of the complexities of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in Germany.

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