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**Review:** *The Autobiography of Eugen Mansfeld. A Settler's Life in Colonial Namibia*, London, Jeppestown Press 2017.

The historiography of the German period of Namibian history is overwhelmingly based on sources produced by colonial officials, namely the documents filed in the National Archives of Namibia under the acronym ZBU (*Zentralbüro des Kaiserlichen Gouvernements*) or the files of the former Colonial Office (*Reichskolonialamt*, R 1001) held by the Federal Archives in Berlin. A number of memoirs (by 'settlers' or others) published either before or some years after World War I also appear regularly in historians' footnotes. Books by Frieda von Bülow, Wilhelm Mattenklodt, or Margarethe von Eckenbrecher come to mind here. Read in conjunction with the writings of officialdom these private sources provide important additional insights into the working of everyday colonialism in German Southwest Africa (GSWA), the making of colonial hierarchies and the challenges posed by men or nature. A third, equally important group of written sources are those letters, memoirs, or other private files from the German colonial period that were never meant to be published, but which somehow – luckily – found their way into the archives, filed now under the title of 'accessions' or 'private papers' (*Nachlässe*).

The book under review here, *The Autobiography of Eugen Mansfeld*, does not fit neatly into any of the groups of sources mentioned before. This autobiography was (mostly) written in Cape

Town in 1942, thus partly more than forty years after the events in GSWA the author describes and more than twenty years after the demise of the German colonial empire. The author wrote it in German "for my sons" (p. 1), not for a larger audience. The original, as the introduction by editor and translator Will Sellick explains, is still not in the public domain but held by Dr. Nigel McLean of Johannesburg and thus, this reviewer can only assess the translation from German into English (not without expressing the hope that one day the original document will find its way into the National Archives of Namibia). Given the problem the German language (and in particular the Gothic (Sütterlin) script of German colonial contemporaries) poses to many researchers working on colonial Namibia, it is of course laudable that this autobiography has been published in English. However, this should not result in a sort of linguistic 'streamlining' of research, by which non-German-reading historians of Namibia will see 'their' histories only through the lenses of the sources available in English.

When Eugen Mansfeld sat down in 1942 to write his autobiography he reflected on his past with bitterness and disappointment on the one hand (loss of the German colonies, his business failures after 1918, the death of his son in 1940) and with glorification and pride on the other (his participation in the colonisation of GSWA from 1897 onwards, his rise to the post of deputy director of the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwestafrika*, his participation in the war against the OvaHerero in 1904 and against the South Africans

in 1914/15). The resulting changes of perspectives should always be born in mind by those working with Mansfeld's book as a source on colonial Namibia. In short: GSWA was for him a great time, everything that came after was demise.

Mansfeld (born in 1871 in Bohemia) came to South Africa as a well-educated middle-class businessman in 1895. After a stint in the wool industry of East London in 1897 he hired with the company Mertens & Sichel in Walvis Bay. The six-page chapter on one of the most-forsaken outposts of the British Empire (since 1878) is a must read for any historian of that place ("a church and five houses", p. 9), where "life [...] was, generally speaking, tedious and dull." (p. 11). In 1899, Mansfeld was hired by the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft für Südwestafrika* (DKGSWA), the successor of A. Lüderitz's company and thus one of the major landholders in the colony. Its inaction and financial intransigence have been lamented by contemporaries and analysed by historians such as Horst Drechsler.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, the story Mansfeld – as a major player in this company in the GSWA – recalled in 1942 was very different. Dire financial straits are not mentioned, nor does he explain the disputes with other companies, such as with the Namaqualand Company, or with the government – in Windhoek or Berlin. It is a general characteristic of this memoir that it remains "a gossipy, informal account" (as stated by the editor, p. iii) and politics is markedly

absent from this narrative. For the period after 1910 Mansfeld merely mentions "many more unpleasant negotiations and even court cases with the government because of the diamond area and tax matters" (p. 96). What a wealth of legal and social history could have been found in these colonial court cases! And Mansfeld had had a chance to recount them from his perspective. However, barely any details are given. The names of governors and important officials or businessmen occur in the text, but their undertakings are neither analysed nor put into a larger context. Recounting his duties in Swakopmund, Mansfeld summarised the ventures of the DKGSWA as follows: "Land and farms had to be acquired [by settlers arriving from Germany] through the Company agent in Swakopmund, and prospecting licence for all sorts of minerals and ores, as well as the exploitation rights, had to be obtained and delivered in Swakopmund." (p. 17) In addition to his administrative and merchant's duties in Swakopmund and later Lüderitzbucht, Mansfeld was also assigned managerial duties on farms owned by DKGSWA, namely Farm Spitzkopje. The lively description of the farm management, the successes, failures, brutalities (against 'native workers') and infights (among employees of the DKGSWA and/or other farmers, like Carl Schlettwein) will be of great help for all those working on the history of farming in southern Africa.

In this regard, one error in the title, telling as it is, should be mentioned here. Mansfeld was never a "settler", a farmer in the sense that he had invested all his capital and manpower in

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Teil 2: Die großen Land- und Minengesellschaften (1885-1914)*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1996.

his own farmland and felt like a 'little king' on the property he had bought. Mansfeld was a manager, an employee who worked for the profit of a company and its stakeholders. The land he worked, the cattle he sold, the trees he planted were never his own. But he also never mentioned in his autobiography that he, despite the talent he (according to his own judgment) had, would want to purchase his own farmland. Rather, he bought a plot of land in Swakopmund and had a mansion built there for his family. From the perspective of his "monotonous existence" in Cape Town in 1942 (p. 156) his life in Swakopmund thirty years earlier seemed most joyful: "Great conviviality prevailed between the traders and officials [what about the disputes, one might ask?] and their families, with many entertainments and dances" (p. 95).

Colonial 'conviviality' of a very different kind is laid out before the reader in the chapter on the "Herero Rebellion 1904". Judging by the style, the author apparently inserted here his contemporary war diaries from January to March 1904. Some entries are of only one line, others fill over two pages with details of military operations against OvaHerero forces on the offensive. Specialists on that war will find little that is surprising. The value of rank-and-file diaries for a better understanding of this war has been proven repeatedly, the works of Gesine Krüger and Matthias Häußler come to mind. Given the area of operations in which Mansfeld was on duty during the early stages of the war – the Swakop valley and the railway line to Windhoek –, what becomes particularly evident from his entries is that the

OvaHerero forces were unable to meaningfully cut the lines of communication between Windhoek and Karibib, and thus failed to isolate the scattered German forces. For example, on January 15, 1904 Mansfeld noted about his company's train ride: "About twenty minutes before Okahandja was one much more extensive patch where the tracks had been destroyed and required repair. As soon as the train stopped we came under heavy fire from both sides of the railway tracks". He goes on to give a description, rich in self-praise, of a successful battle against the "black devils", as he repeatedly calls them (p. 44). His hatred of the OvaHerero mirrored his contempt for "the missionaries, especially the ones of the Rhenish Mission", accusing them of treason, similar to many other accounts – claiming, for instance, that the missionary in Okahandja had been a close friend of Samuel Maharero (p. 50). Horror stories about the brutalities committed by OvaHerero combatants complete this very predictable account – which only indirectly hints at the many difficulties the Germans encountered with their unexpected enemy.

Mansfeld, by then a reserve-officer (lieutenant), recounted a similar self-congratulatory story about the war against the South Africans in 1914/15. Judged only from this account one could well wonder why the Germans lost this war. From 16 August 1914 to March 1915 Mansfeld again inserted his surviving diary entries (p. 103). However, the month of October is completely missing. So in 1942 he included additional sections, in which he at times mixed up the chronology of the

war. For example, Mansfeld claimed to have learned in late October about Major Franke's "punitive expedition" to Naulila, Angola and the successful "storming" of the fort (p. 110). In fact, the 'battle of Naulila' took place in December 1914. Mansfeld, like many other officers, was not convinced by Franke, "a brilliant company commander [...], but [he] was no strategist" (p. 111).

All things considered this is a helpful book for all who want to learn from an eyewitness about the *situation coloniale* in GSWA, where some at the top of the colonial social ladder thrived in an atmosphere rife with racism, anti-semitism, militarism and an overdose of virility. No wonder that the author failed to accept the new order of republican Germany ("Jews had all the prime positions", p. 153). He returned to South Africa, where he apparently continued dreaming of a bygone era.

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