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Narratives of genocide: Lothar von Trotha's written and photographic legacy. A critical edition in preparation

Andreas Eckl* and Matthias Häussler**

Abstract

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft has recently approved a project to produce a critical edition of Lothar von Trotha's legacy. The project entitled "Textual and pictorial narrative of genocide. A critical edition of the written and photographic legacy of Lothar von Trotha, commander-in-chief of the colonial troops in German South West Africa from 1904 to 1905" will be hosted by the Institute for Diaspora Research and Genocide Studies at the Ruhr University Bochum and will officially start in February 2021. Lothar von Trotha's legacy includes not only his handwritten diary which constitutes a corpus of about 900 pages, but also a hitherto completely unknown collection of personal photographs, documents and correspondence. The edited diary will be complemented by Lothar von Trotha's personal photo album entitled "Pictures from the War in South West Africa by Lieutenant General v. Trotha", representing the second pillar of the project. Given their inestimable value for scientific, legal and political purposes, it is of extraordinary significance that these sources which have been kept out of the public domain for so long are finally being made available to a wider audience in form of a reliable critical edition.

Introduction

Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha (1848–1920) needs no lengthy introduction, certainly not for readers of this Journal: Between 1904 and 1905 he served as commander of the "Imperial Protection Force for South West Africa" entrusted with the task of crushing native rebellions in what is today Namibia. Performing this task with little luck but all the more fervor, he was largely responsible for the first genocide of the twentieth century, the genocide of the OvaHerero. Fortunately for historians, von Trotha kept a diary – unfortunately, his heirs were unwilling to make it available to them.

Ever since, generations of scholars have been trying to gain access to this diary. Some of them were turned down directly by the von Trotha family, while others were granted access. But for whatever reasons, the handwritten original was never made available, but a typescript made by Lothar von Trotha's second wife, Lucy von Trotha (née Goldstein-Brinckmann) in the 1920s. Given the unique importance of this diary, it comes

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as no surprise that it not only aroused the interest of scholars. Recently, Namibian victim groups also called for his personal writings to be published.

It is against this background that the authors take particular satisfaction and joy in announcing that the von Trotha family finally agreed to place Lothar von Trotha's legacy at their disposal for the purpose of a critical edition. The project entitled "Textual and pictorial narrative of genocide. A critical edition of the written and photographic legacy of Lothar von Trotha, commander-in-chief of the colonial troops in German South West Africa from 1904 to 1905" will start in February 2021. Hosted by the Institute for Diaspora Research and Genocide Studies at the Ruhr University Bochum, it is being generously funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) to whom we are deeply grateful for supporting a critical edition of an outstanding source.¹

Lothar von Trotha's legacy not only includes the handwritten diary which alone constitutes a corpus of about 900 pages, but also a hitherto completely unknown collection of personal photographs, documents and correspondence. The edited diary will be complemented by Lothar von Trotha's personal photo album entitled "Pictures from the War in South West Africa by Lieutenant General v. Trotha", representing the second pillar of the project. In addition, the handwritten original of the diary will be made available to the public as facsimile either online or in the form of a print edition to ensure the verifiability of the edited text.

Context and framing

In the critical historiography of German South West Africa 'genocide' has always been an issue. There is broad consensus among scholars that German action against the autochthonous groups in German South West Africa is to be classified as genocide in accordance with the UN Anti-Genocide Convention of 1948. For obvious reasons, Lothar von Trotha, commanding the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Südwestafrika* from mid-1904 to the end of 1905, has been the focus of attention, and rightly so. It is safe to say that the measures he adopted in the late phase of the campaign against the OvaHerero were likely to bring about the destruction of a "national, ethnic [or] racial [...] group as such in whole or in part", and there is every indication that he – at least at some point – gave his orders with the intent to bring about this sort of destruction. Von Trotha's strategy thus comprised the "physical element" (*actus reus*) and the "special intent" (*dolus specialis*) of genocide.² Consequently, the question of whether his strategy can be described as genocide or not does not arise, for it has to be answered in the affirmative from all we know. It is rather the question of how this genocidal strategy came about that is debatable.

¹ Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, "GEPRIS Geförderte Projekte der DFG", <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/449370248>

² William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000: 214 ff.

Uncertainties stem from a source situation which is not entirely satisfactory, mainly because the files of the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe für Deutsch-Südwestafrika* were irrevocably lost in the wake of World Wars One and Two. This is why von Trotha's personal papers are of such great relevance. These papers were preserved, but were not made available to research at all or only to a limited extent. If Jürgen Zimmerer claims that von Trotha's diary is "not unknown", this is only half of the story.³ What is known are passages from the *typescript* that were made by von Trotha's widow whose intention was to publish the diaries in order to counter the so-called *Kolonialschuldfrage*, thus championing the restitution of the colonies that Germany had lost in the wake of its defeat in 1918. Given this context, it comes as no surprise that the typescript differs significantly from the handwritten original, some passages having been left out altogether, others having been changed considerably. For this reason, it is fair to say that what we *really* know about von Trotha – in the strict sense of the word – is very limited.

As a consequence, much of what has been written on von Trotha, his motives and goals, amounts to mere speculation. Beyond some truisms and stereotypes, we know very little about him. However, it seems that this very lack of knowledge has stimulated imaginations all the more. The historian Horst Drechsler, whose comprehensive, critical portrait of German colonialism in South West Africa shaped narratives that have remained influential years later, went so far as to stylize even the most obvious failures of von Trotha as planned successes, making him seem demonic or even omnipotent.⁴ But if we consider how von Trotha's military skills were judged by contemporaries such as Ludwig von Estorff or Bernhard von Bülow, we begin to realize that nothing could be farther from the truth.⁵ What is needed is the rigorous demystification of this figure – which can only be achieved through rendering available sources accessible.

Von Trotha held dictatorial powers after declaring martial law on his arrival, and he even gained in power when the governor, Theodor Leutwein, took his leave five months later. Hence, one is well advised not to downplay the commander's role in the genocide of the OvaHerero. And yet one should not overlook the fact that von Trotha was 'only' an officer in a regular army and thus had to meet certain role expectations. It should also not be overlooked that Trotha ultimately followed the wishes and orders of Emperor Wilhelm II and his military entourage, the Great General Staff and, the longer the state of war dragged on, the instructions of Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow who formally held the supreme command of the *Kaiserliche Schutztruppe*. There is, therefore, every indication that von Trotha's actions should be viewed in a broader context that was co-

³ Spiegel-Gespräch, "Tod in der Wüste", Der Spiegel, 10.12.2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-148434928.html>

⁴ Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1966.

⁵ Ludwig von Estorff, *Wanderungen und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika und Südafrika 1894-1910*, ed. by Christoph-Friedrich Kutscher, 2nd edition, Windhoek, Meinert, 1979: 117; Bernhard von Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten. Zweiter Band: Von der Marokko-Krise bis zum Abschied*, ed. by Franz von Stockharmern, Berlin, Ullstein, 1930: 21.

determined by various actors and institutions – a point that could be of great relevance with regard to the question of Germany's answerability in the face of victim groups and their reparation claims. Given his position as a top echelon military leader, von Trotha's legacy provides further insight into the decision-making processes. Although they present us with his personal views, they can help us to 'decenter' prevailing narratives and to broaden the debate.

To this day, scholars have different opinions on a central question: When did the German campaign against the OvaHerero enter its genocidal phase? Some scholars assume that this happened at an early point, at the latest when von Trotha took over command.⁶ Others assume that von Trotha's strategy was initially 'conventional' and only gradually turned genocidal.⁷ More often than not, scholars adhering to the first assumption tacitly make do of a teleological procedure. From the results of the campaign they infer corresponding intentions and plans on the part of its central figures. Starting from the genocidal outcomes of the campaign, they presume a fanatical butcher, solely driven by racist, social Darwinian and exterminatory beliefs predating the war. In so doing, they view the process of escalation as a more or less smooth and unhampered implementation of these beliefs.⁸ Particular phases of the conflict are not assessed individually, since the unfolding of violence is dealt with in a few sentences, without any regard for the duration between, for instance, the battle in the vicinity of Waterberg in mid-August and von Trotha's notorious "Proclamation" released in October 1904 – just as if nothing of importance had happened during these weeks.⁹ However, this span of

⁶ Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid. Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in: Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen and Michael Bollig, (eds.), *Namibia – Deutschland, eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*, Köln, Ethnologica, 2004: 106-121; Dominik J. Schaller, "Kolonialkrieg, Völkermord und Zwangsarbeit in »Deutsch-Südwest-afrika«", in: idem, (ed.), *Enteignet – Vertrieben – Ermordet. Beiträge zur Genozidforschung*, Zürich, Chronos, 2004: 147-232; Reinhart Köbller and Henning Melber, "Der Genozid an den Herero und Nama in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904-1908", in: Irmtrud Wojak, (ed.), *Völkermord und Kriegsverbrechen in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2004: 37-75.

⁷ Hendrik Lundtofte, "«I believe that the nation as such must be annihilated...». The radicalization of the German suppression of the Herero Rising in 1904", in: Stephen B. Jensen, (ed.), *Genocide. Cases, Comparisons and Contemporary Debates*, Copenhagen, Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2003: 15-53; Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005; idem, "The military campaign in German Southwest Africa, 1904–1907 and the genocide of the Herero and Nama", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 4, 2008: 7-24, <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/96/68>; George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting. Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; Jonas Kreienbaum, *„Ein trauriges Fiasko“. Koloniale Konzentrationslager im südlichen Afrika 1900-1908*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2015; Klaus Bachmann, *Genocidal Empires. German Colonialism in Africa and the Third Reich*, Berlin, Lang, 2018.

⁸ Cf. critically: Mark Levene, *The Meaning of Genocide. Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 2nd edition, London, Tauris, 2008: 35 ff.

⁹ Cf. Andreas Eckl and Matthias Häussler with Jekura Kavari, "Oomambo wandje komuhoko wOvaherero. Lothar von Trotha's 'Words to the Ovaherero people'", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 23, 2018: 125-133, <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/7254/6435>

time was extremely momentous, especially for the victims. Presumably, most of the fleeing OvaHerero died in these weeks.¹⁰ There is also some indication that German warfare changed qualitatively in this phase of the war.¹¹

Because of the dynamics to which violence is subject in its execution, the main analytical focus must be on the process or on the 'how?' of violence, as has already been called for in recent research on violence.¹² Even if the diary confirms that von Trotha – in contrast to his predecessor, Theodor Leutwein – was more convinced of social Darwinist ideas and displayed more aggressive, if not exterminatory racism, it remains to be clarified when and how such interpretative patterns have been activated and become relevant to action. Finally, it has to be considered that there be gaps and obstacles between fantasy and intention, intention and plan, and plan and execution, all of which must be overcome. The opportunity may first have to arise for the intentions to be carried out, which in turn may depend on the fact that a number of conditions are met over which the perpetrators may have only limited influence. From the perspective of recent research on the sociology of violence, it could be said that the 'why?' question, which addresses directly the perpetrators' motivations, always only takes the detour of the 'how?' question, i.e. within the framework of a detailed reconstruction of what happened. The differentiation of actors and phases needs to be clarified.¹³

Due to the inadequate state of source material in some places, many scholarly accounts appear to be too simplistic. Often enough they are tailored to a linear, simple system, or better: they tailor the case to a linear, simple system by – inevitably – treating 'the Germans' as a monolith and trying to explain the events in a mono-causal way, i.e. mainly by recourse to the ideas of the commander-in-chief. The "War Diary" can be corrective here, as it makes clear that even the military dictator von Trotha, despite his arrogance, soon discovered that there were a multitude of forces and conflicts which could not be controlled easily – and which could, in fact, determine the course of events. A critical edition of his legacy therefore promises to widen the field of vision and thus enrich the debate with important insights into the decision-making processes and conflicts that determined the course of events. Von Trotha's original diary – in sharp contrast to the heavily edited and modified "typescript" of Trotha's widow – is rich in

¹⁰ E.g. Lundtofte, "Radikalisierung": 34.

¹¹ E.g. Hull, *Destruction*: 57.

¹² E.g. Trutz von Trotha, "Einleitung. Zur Soziologie der Gewalt", in: idem, (ed.), *Soziologie der Gewalt*, Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 37, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997: 9-56; Trutz von Trotha and Michael Schwab-Trapp, "Logiken der Gewalt", (Rezension von Sofsky, Wolfgang Sofsky: Traktat über die Gewalt), *Mittelweg* 36, 5 (6), 1996: 56-64; Nedelmann, Birgitta, "Dichte Beschreibungen absoluter Macht", (Rezension von: Sofsky, Wolfgang: Die Ordnung des Terrors. Das Konzentrationslager), *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 46 (1), 1994: 130-134; idem, "Schwierigkeiten soziologischer Gewaltanalyse", *Mittelweg* 36, 4 (3), 1995: 8-17; idem, "Gewaltsoziologie am Scheideweg. Die Auseinandersetzungen in der gegenwärtigen und Wege der künftigen Gewaltforschung", in: Trutz von Trotha, (ed.), *Soziologie der Gewalt*, Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Sonderheft 37, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997: 59-85.

¹³ Trotha, "Einleitung": 22.

references to conflicts and interactions between people, offices and institutions. It thus provides deep insights into the military, strategic and political decision-making processes at the top of the colony and the German Empire. The collection and processing of previously unknown or inaccessible sources from the estate of Lothar von Trotha will considerably expand and deepen our material source basis and provide more nuanced information on the process of violence, its actors and phases.

The written narrative of genocide as presented in the “War Diary” will be complemented by a second narrative as pictured in von Lothar von Trotha’s photographic album. His personal album “Pictures from the War in South West Africa” constitutes something quite extraordinary: in addition to the written narrative of the “War Diary” there is also pictorial narrative of the events by the same author. The objective in evaluating the photo album as a historical source is, on the one hand, to relate the photo album’s story to the records from the diary. On the other hand, the album will be understood as an independent source, a methodically demanding undertaking, because usually photographs were and are used by historians – and the historiography of the genocide in German South West Africa is no exception – only to illustrate glimpses of a past, a past that was reconstructed from other sources. Over the past three decades or so, photographs as historical sources have increasingly found their way into historical studies under the concept of ‘visual history’. The focus of pictorial analysis, however, is still on the single image as the carrier of the historical *Dokumentensinn* (“document sense”).¹⁴ Thus far, private photo albums have hardly been examined as a category of historical sources, they have not yet been considered by historians as displaying a narrative in their own right. But just as pictures are more than mere illustrations, albums are more than just a pictorial chronicle of what was happening. As Wolfgang Kemp strikingly formulated it with regard to the analysis of single photographs: “*they show, don’t tell*”.¹⁵ While this may be debatable, there should be no doubt that a photo album is basically to be understood as not merely a number of individual images: photographs collected and placed in an album are not arbitrary, they represent a sequence and thus – unlike single images – also depict a certain chronological sequence. In other words: they tell.

Building on approaches from serial image analysis¹⁶ and visual discourse analysis,¹⁷ Lothar von Trotha’s photo album will be analysed as a narrative in the sense of a

¹⁴ Ground breaking: Rainer Wohlfeil, “Das Bild als Geschichtsquelle”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 243 (1), 1986: 91-100.

¹⁵ Kemp, Wolfgang, “Erzählen in Bildern”, in: Martin Huber and Wolf Schmid, (eds.), *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Erzählen*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2018: 472-482 (479), emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Ulrike Pilarczyk and Ulrike Mietzner, *Das reflektierte Bild. Die seriell-ikonografische Fotoanalyse in den Erziehungs- und Sozialwissenschaften*, Bad Heilbrunn, Klinkhardt, 2005; Ulrike Pilarczyk, “Grundlagen der seriell-ikonografischen Fotoanalyse. Jüdische Jugendfotografie in der Weimarer Zeit”, in: Jürgen Danyel, Gerhard Paul and Annette Vowinckel, (eds.), *Arbeit am Bild: Visual History als Praxis*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2017: 75-99.

¹⁷ E.g. Silke Betscher, “Bildsprache. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer Visuellen Diskursanalyse”, in: Franz X. Eder, Oliver Kühschelm and Christina Linsboth, (eds.), *Bilder in historischen Diskursen*, Wiesbaden, Springer

meaningful account and with regard to the “complex patterns of perception, interpretation and memory” contained therein.¹⁸ Like the diary, the album was not intended for the general public. While the former is intimate, the private album was intended for a small group of friends and family. The crucial difference, however, between diary and album is that pictorial documents – unlike text documents such as diaries – are not created exclusively through conscious coding. The genesis of texts necessarily involves a linguistic and intellectual process that is not necessary when taking photos. Photographs are thus more immediate than text sources. In this sense, they are better suited for the reconstruction of perception and interpretation patterns, as they also map their unconscious (in the sense of non-linguistic) dimension.

Through the arrangement of individual pictures into a self-contained album – the “Pictures from the War in South West Africa by Lieutenant General v. Trotha” comprises a total of 207 photographs – a narrative is created, individual photos are retrospectively put together to form a pictorial narration. Photographic recordings of singular moments are brought into a meaningful context. Hence, the written narrative of the diary is accompanied by an additional, pictorial narrative in the form of the photo album. Lothar von Trotha’s photographic memoirs of the time spent in German South West Africa and his acts there are, in addition to the “War Diary”, of great importance as a source for the historiography of war and genocide in German South West Africa in two ways: with regards to the general historiography of the genocide and to the role of the commander-in-chief and author of the photo album. While the diary is particularly important as a source on the decision-making processes at the top, the photo album allows conclusions to be drawn about the subjective perception of the events by the commander-in-chief. As a pictorial narrative, the album is above all an expression and carrier of the interpretation of the past, which is thus assigned a specific place in memory.

Summary

The edition of von Trotha’s papers and photographs aspires to provide further insight into how the extreme violence came to be unleashed by revealing the decision-making processes which ultimately lead to the first genocide of the twentieth century. Von Trotha’s “War Diary”, his “Pictures from the War in South West Africa” and other personal documents can help fill in gaps, irrespective of the conclusions one may come to. The diary and the photo album present us with the everyday life and banality of this campaign and thereby convey a feeling for its real duration, its breaks and different

VS, 2014: 63-83; Boris Traue, “Visuelle Diskursanalyse”, *Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung*, 2, 2013: 217-237; Boris Traue and Mathias Blanc, “Visuelle Diskursanalyse”, in: Leila Akremi, Nina Baur, Hubert Knoblauch and Boris Traue, (eds.), *Handbuch Interpretativ forschen*, Weinheim, Beltz Juventa, 2018: 708-740.

¹⁸ Cord Pagenstecher, “Private Fotoalben als historische Quelle”, *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 6 (3), 2010: 449-463 (463), https://www.zeitgeschichte-digital.de/doks/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/1803/file/ZF_3_2009_449_463_Pagenstecher.pdf

phases. Above all, they allow us to identify potential turning points and, hence, to reconstruct the process, enabling us to understand how the commander-in-chief assessed the course of events and why he took certain measures at a given point in time. In addition, Trotha's notes and views shed light on relationships with other actors and institutions. In view of the eventual loss of the *Schutztruppe* files, these are unique sources that give us an insight into the decision-making processes at the top of the German war machine, and indeed foreign policy. Given their inestimable value for scientific, legal and political purposes, it is of extraordinary significance that these sources be made available to a wider audience in form of a reliable critical edition.

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