Compounds, camps, colonialism
Tilman Dedering*

Abstract
Discussions on the history of the concentration camps in German South West Africa during the Herero-Nama War (1904–1907) have concentrated primarily on the relationship to the mass murder of the Jews during the Second World War. This article considers the earlier history of camps in southern Africa by shifting the focus from genocide to a history of internment and closely controlled labour. The harsh practices in the labour compounds in South Africa suggest that African experiences of extreme forms of incarceration predated the period of the German concentration camps in Namibia, although on quite a different scale. A broader history of violence and regimented labour may open perspectives that have been neglected in the narrowly framed discussion of historical linkages and continuities between the wars in colonial Namibia and Eastern Europe.

Introduction
The history of the Herero-Nama War in German South West Africa (1904–1907) continues to attract the attention of scholars and the general public.1 About 80 per cent of the Herero population and 50 per cent of the Nama population perished as a result of the genocidal warfare conducted by the German Schutztruppe under the leadership of General Lothar von Trotha. The survivors were herded into camps, officially designated ‘concentration camps’, where large numbers of African men, women and children died of neglect, disease or exhaustion.

Inspired by a renewed interest in Hannah Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism the debate about the concentration camps in colonial Namibia has recently been reinvigorated by controversial interpretations of the broader context of genocide and colonialism.2 One important strand of this debate about the conduct of the war and the

* Tilman Dedering is Professor of History at the University of South Africa. He has published widely on Namibian and South African history. His current research focuses on transnational aspects of southern African history between the two world wars. E-mail: dedertm@unisa.ac.za

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treatment of prisoners reflects the Germanocentric focus of the participants on the question of whether the genocide in Namibia must be seen as a precursor to the Holocaust. In this article, I approach such debates about camps and colonialism from a different angle. I do not propose an alternative itinerary from one historical node of mass violence to another by presenting novel empirical data from the archives. Instead, I explore questions that arise from the debates in the existing literature on the subject. Investigating some of the conceptual strands of these debates from a historiographical bird’s eye perspective is no substitute for in-depth primary research and exhaustive theoretical argument. My point of departure is, however, that the previous debate has become constrained less by the dearth of empirical data than by conceptual problems that emerge from too narrow a focus on the hypothetical links between German colonial history in Africa and the Holocaust. The emphasis on systematic mass murder as the constitutive characteristic of the camps in Namibia may obscure other markers of colonial violence and coercion that need to be integrated into a global history of mass violence. I argue that such instances of violence reflected practices in other parts of Africa and the rest of the world, which may have belonged to a broader repository of oppressive patterns from which any colonising power could draw. I do not suggest blurring the differences between the functionalities of different types of camps during different historical periods. I want to shift the focus, however, from the preoccupation with the camps in South West Africa as places of mass murder to a broader context of internment as a practice of marginalisation, punishment and of a racialised system of forced labour.

Contentious continuities

Jürgen Zimmerer has become the most prolific representative of a school of thought that explores lines of continuity between the Herero-Nama War in colonial Namibia and the mass killings of Jews during the Second World War. In a series of publications he has argued that continuities extend ‘from Windhoek to Auschwitz’, and, in a similar vein, other scholars have suggested more or less clearly defined common points of reference leading from the Namibian genocide to the Holocaust. Contracting the complexities of


historical linkages even more radically, Benjamin Madley has condensed colonial atrocities, mass killings and camps in German South West Africa to form the germinating phase of the Nazi war of extermination in the East. In this reading, the colonial war “incubated methods and ideas” that eventually came to fruition when the Nazis occupied Eastern Europe.\(^5\) By way of structural similarities, actors common to both stages and ideological affinities, the German conquest of the East “replicated” the colonisation of Namibia.\(^6\) The colonial obsession with race and space continued to fester in various forms. The Wehrmacht, SS and Einsatzgruppen followed in the footsteps of the Kaiser’s Schutztruppe, “borrowing” from Wilhelminian concepts of Vernichtung, which culminated in the racially motivated mass murder of millions of people during the Second World War.\(^7\)

Some versions of this kind of narrative may make concessions to structural and historical modifications in genocidal patterns over time, referring to other instances of colonial mass violence in order to avoid the charge that too strong a focus on the Windhoek-Auschwitz connection may lead to the ill-omened reappearance of the Sonderweg debate.\(^8\) Even though some scholars, including Zimmerer, do qualify somewhat their assertions that links and continuities exist, the postulation of a connection between the two genocidal campaigns assumes, to varying degrees, that political, structural, ideological or discursive traditions must have been created in South West Africa to sustain genocidal concepts and practices elsewhere over several decades.\(^9\)

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the entire range of nuances that have been appended to the analysis of historical continuity. A number of critics have responded by saying that such claims of historical connections between the colonial war in Namibia and Nazi expansion in Eastern Europe frequently only hint at similarities


\(^6\) Ibid.: 441.

\(^7\) Ibid.: 445.


instead of providing a historical analysis of how exactly methods and ideas were transmitted from Africa to Europe.  

10 The literature on colonial mass violence frequently refers to a lineage in the history of camps, from the deadly ‘reconcentrados’, which the Spanish erected to crush anti-colonial resistance in Cuba (1868-1898), to the camps built by the American occupiers of the Philippines (1899-1902) to the British concentration camps for Afrikaner civilians and Africans during the South African War (1899-1902). In this context Jonathan Hyslop is wary of accepting Arendt’s theoretical treatise as a solid historical examination of the links between colonial violence and totalitarian power.  

11 Despite the similarities between the history and structures of these three camp complexes which were the products of savage military campaigns that affected civilians on a huge scale, other observers emphasise the analytical obstacles that clutter clear lines of continuity and causality between the earlier period of colonialism and the Second World War. Iain Smith and Andreas Stucki argue that it is not surprising that there were ideological similarities in terms of “the exclusion of the enemy from ‘civilisation’ or blunt racial attitudes of superiority”  

12 Instead of finding distinct causal and structural links, Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski have also pointed to a shared “colonial archive” in the history of settler colonialism where there is a recurrent pattern of violence.  

They draw attention to the importance of embedding the colonial history of mass violence, camps, and other oppressive practices in an expanded transnational framework instead of confining such connections into a bilateral structural relationship between colonial South West Africa and Nazi Germany.

Much of this sprawling debate has been fraught with a conceptual ambiguity. The differences between structural and discursive similarities generated by comparable instances of mass violence on the one hand, and genocidal colonial patterns that may have later merged with or instigated new episodes of mass violence elsewhere on the other are not elucidated. In view of the many unanswered questions, Matthew P. Fitzpatrick maintains that the recent quest for continuity has not been able to signpost clearly the route from Windhoek to Auschwitz. Apart from making us aware of broad similarities in the dynamics of mass violence, Fitzpatrick argues, such historical links may


13 Gerwarth and Malinowski, “Holocaust”: 447.
be “more definitional than explanatory” we can see that “these are genocides because they meet a posited definition of genocide”.14 These contributions indicate that the discussion on the history of concentration camps could benefit from being decoupled from too narrow a perspective that ranks genocide above other aspects, such as the increasing importance of military professionalism from the late 19th century.15

Camps
The camps in colonial Namibia were characterised by a degree of ambiguity that is reflected in contemporary debates about what colonial officials in the settler society and in the metropole considered to be the purpose of the internment of Africans. For a period of time, the prisoners were subjected to a range of the colonial state’s contradictory measures: vindictive neglect by colonial officials left them to die; the hunger of the colonial economy for cheap labour turned them into slaves; the humanitarian impulse of the missionaries led to attempts to ameliorate their situation. Ranging from labour camps to refugee camps to concentration camps, most colonial systems drew on an assortment of sites of disciplinary interventions to create and maintain colonial order. This constellation would seem to be reflected in a transnational context and it fragments the prism of the Windhoek-Auschwitz connection into a broader multifaceted context of internment, regimented labour and racial oppression.

Camps signified states of liminal existence and of violent reorganisation of physical space where the marginalisation and subjugation of conquered peoples became manifest. The colonial disruption of indigenous socioeconomic and political structures created conditions of dispersal and fragmentation that became visible in the creation of camps of various types. Even descriptions of earlier examples bear witness to the connections between colonial infiltration and the loss of indigenous sovereignty. For example, from the late 1830s the sprawling settler community of Melbourne began pushing the Aboriginal inhabitants into camps along the Yarra River which were not rigidly structured and monitored. Physical assaults and floggings, lent a veil of legitimacy by colonial law, accompanied the ostracism of the indigenous population from white settler space. While land and livelihood were taken away from the Aboriginal population, six camps were established around the outskirts of the growing town to provide shelter to more than 600 Aborigines. Colonial laws intended to cement racial segregation were ineffective in preventing these camps from turning into lawless and violent places. White settlers frequently visited the camps for the purpose of sexual gratification or to satisfy their curiosity.16 Social disintegration, aggravated by disease and alcohol, compounded

15 Which is the argument forwarded by Hyslop, “Invention”: 273.
the colonial mechanisms of dehumanising the Aboriginal inhabitants to the point that organised killing sprees could be portrayed as a mere extension of a “natural” process of extinction.17

The Germans had not come to South West Africa with the intention of exterminating the indigenous population.18 Most empires, by definition, need subject populations as pools of labour and as markets. Mark Levene suggests that an “instrumental rationality” of colonial power relations implies that colonial empires must have inbuilt restraints on genocidal tendencies.19 Levene thus argues that empires do not have “an inherent propensity towards genocide.”20 This does not, however, rule out the possibility of mass violence. Even though empires rarely seek to exterminate indigenous populations, there may be a genocidal explosion when they come under pressure, especially when challenged by indigenous resistance. The urge to secure the colonial order made terror an accepted tool of colonising states or settler societies. In the words of Tony Barta: “The colonising impulse to possess the world as the birthright of European superiority could become a genocidal one wherever the assumption of superiority was threatened by resistance or competition.”21 In the same vein, A. Dirk Moses has pointed out that colonial wars had the potential to turn into total wars which cumulated in indiscriminate mass violence, because the fundamental strategic aims of the colonisers were to acquire territory and natural resources. After the end of the armed conflict, the colonisers wanted to consolidate their power over the socioeconomic matrix and the reservoir of coerced labour of these indigenous societies. Concentrating the vanquished and disempowered in camps seemed natural to the colonisers, especially in those cases where indigenous peoples lived in more or less decentralised structures, scattered across territories or pursued transhumant lifestyles.22

A basic assumption behind the colonial economy in South West Africa was the exploitation of cheap African labour. Prior to the outbreak of war in 1904, the settler society had been looking for a solution in the struggle for control over land and labour. The uprising of the Herero and Nama shattered white expectations that Africans could somehow be coaxed into the new power relations without major disruption to the evolving colonial order.

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17 Barta, “Discourses”: 40f.
18 Schaller, “Conquest”: 297.
20 Ibid.
21 Barta, “Discourses”: 38.
Indigenous resistance created fear and hatred that was most clearly articulated by General Von Trotha and it produced extreme violence during a genocidal moment.\textsuperscript{23} Despite the violent rhetoric, however, concern about the preservation of indigenous labour gradually muffled the crescendo of genocidal propaganda. The murderous fantasies articulated by many proponents began to alarm colonial administrators who were worried about the impending loss of labour. The camps not only gave German officials the opportunity to make moralising comments on the salutary aspects of the suffering of the Herero and Nama, they also functioned as labour reservoirs for private companies and state projects. Small-scale employers collected their workers at the camps on a daily basis; larger companies, such as the Woermann shipping line, maintained their own camps.\textsuperscript{24} The spectacle of mass dying in the camps also led to complaints from missionaries, who had initially welcomed the collecting of the survivors in camps. However the missionaries now depended too heavily on the goodwill of the authorities to protest more vociferously.\textsuperscript{25} There was also protest against the strategy of \textit{Vernichtung}, as it was formulated by Von Trotha, in the German press and in the Reichstag.\textsuperscript{26} While some military officers responded with contempt to suggestions, which were also raised from within the military ranks, to provide better conditions for the inmates, other voices contended that the harsh conditions in the camps served to discipline the survivors for their projected fate as disempowered subjects without land, livestock or property. Jonas Kreienbaum has poignantly critiqued the perception of the camps as the continuation phase of the preceding genocidal campaign by arguing that it was not deliberate extermination but the strategic “triad” of punishment, pacification and coerced labour which gave rise to the shocking mortality rates.\textsuperscript{27}


Compounds

Critical voices in the debates about colonialism and genocide have argued that the global appearance of historical patterns of mass violence makes it difficult to define the exact historical juncture at which the genocide in South West Africa represents, in the words of Zimmerer, an “ultimate breaking of a taboo.” Zimmerer also makes the important point that the genocide in colonial Namibia constitutes an aspect of a much broader global history of mass violence, but it is only quite recently that scholars have begun to examine this question more carefully by refining their comparative and empirical methodologies. I wish to shift the focus tentatively, not only from a Namibian to a wider southern African perspective and beyond, I also wish to extend the analytical scope beyond the context of colonial war. I ask whether the atrocious conditions of internment in South West Africa were really completely new in the colonial history of southern Africa.

In southern Africa, the history of internment under dehumanising conditions would be incomplete without mentioning the history of the labour compound. Before the Herero and Nama survivors were driven into camps to die of diseases, starvation or general neglect, many Africans in South Africa had already come into contact with the lethal combination of dehumanising living conditions in confinement, hard labour and physical exhaustion. While being far less severe than those in the South West African concentration camps, the harsh conditions in the labour compounds at the Kimberley diamond mines in the Cape claimed a considerable human toll. Since the discovery of diamonds in the 1860s, the mines had attracted thousands of migrant African labourers. During the early stage of diamond mining from 1870, up to 20,000 African workers were accommodated in open compounds. Closed compounds at the Kimberley diamond mines were introduced in 1885.

A study of the history of town planning in the British Empire has identified the barrack, which was first designed to house Indian labourers on the Natal sugar estates and in Durban in the 1870s, as the original model from which the Kimberley mining compound developed. There is also a broader transnational context of coerced labour in South Africa. The closed compound model in Kimberley was also inspired by the slave compounds in the diamond industry in Brazil. In 1879, a Welsh mining engineer, Thomas Kitto, using his knowledge of Brazilian slave compounds, recommended stricter forms of control of indigenous labour at Kimberley. Kitto proposed that the garrisoning of black workers under the permanent supervision of white overseers would facilitate the

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29 Ibid.: 60-62.
monitoring of an “uncivilised” labour force which needed to be disciplined for the rigours of the South African mining industry. This monitoring system for African workers also drew on South African experiences with prison labour. Even before the introduction of closed compounds, Cecil Rhodes’ company, De Beers, developed plans for its own convict station for coerced workers. Ironically, however, ‘free’ compound labourers were not as well cared for as convicts, who received better clothing and food. With the steady increase in the number of convicts, rising from 300 in 1887 to 1,000 by the late 1890s, De Beers could rely on a constant, though fluctuating intake of coerced labour and benefitted from the fact that Rhodes, as an official in the Cape government, had good contacts in the Cape administration. Not surprisingly, Rhodes endorsed enthusiastically “harsh limitations on the mobility of mine workers”. Rhodes had his German admirers. Franz Josef von Bülow, without directly alluding to the working conditions in the compounds, praised the “Bismarck of South Africa” in his South West African travelogue, by repeating the former’s maxim: “In South Africa everything revolves around one question, that is whether it pays”.

The introduction of closed compounds was welcomed by the mining industry and by contemporary observers because it promised more efficient supervision of the labour force in an industry that was extremely vulnerable to theft by mine workers. Furthermore it was assumed that the accidents and diseases which were rife before the introduction of closed compounds could be more efficiently controlled. The debilitating effects of a smallpox epidemic that spread from the Cape to reach the Kimberley area in 1883, running its course until 1885, were compounded by the reckless attitude of the white authorities towards black workers. Mine owners conspired with medical doctors, “most of whom had financial interests in mining”, to deny the existence of a contagious disease because they feared labour shortages. Although they were fully aware of the true nature of the smallpox epidemic, mine operators and doctors claimed that the illness was not contagious and affected only black people. Sick workers were not quarantined but were prevented from receiving medical treatment. The conspiracy collapsed when the smallpox epidemic spilled over into the white parts of Kimberley.

33 Turrell, “Model Compounds”: 68-70.
38 Worger, City of Diamonds: 101.
The mortality rate among Africans was almost three times as high as among the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{40}

Closed compounds for contracted labourers dramatically restricted the movements of workers who lost all freedom of mobility and communication. The compounds were not only surrounded by fences but also covered by mesh wire in order to prevent the smuggling of diamonds out of the camps. By 1889, 10,000 mine workers lived in 17 closed compounds in conditions of complete isolation.\textsuperscript{41} Working conditions and safety regulations were neglected to an extent which would not have been tolerated by miners in Europe. In 1896, the number of compounds was reduced to five and these had to accommodate 5,000 workers. This was also the result of a shift system in which each sleeping bay was to be used by more than one worker.\textsuperscript{42} As Robert K. Home argues, South Africa became a “testing ground for colonial mining capitalism and for methods of managing African and Asian workers”, starting in Durban and Kimberley in the 19th century before spreading to other parts of the British Empire. From the perspective of administrators and mining company managers, the compound system was a social welfare model. Much later variations on this type of oppressive control of indigenous labour became synonymous with the township system during the South African apartheid era as well as with the so-called hostels for African workers.\textsuperscript{43}

Initially, the expectations that more efficient control of the movement of African labourers would lead to more sanitary living conditions were not met. In 1887, it was reported that four convicts were permanently occupied collecting the dead bodies of Africans who had collapsed and died in the streets of Kimberley, and many more were employed as gravediggers to cope with the large numbers of African males who perished as a result of starvation and exhaustion.\textsuperscript{44} In 1888, it was estimated that the mortality rate had risen from 80 per thousand in the late 1870s to 100 per thousand.\textsuperscript{45} Contemporary medical experts were aware that the majority of casualties during the closed compound era were due to pneumonia and not accidents, and thus the result of neglect, poor diet and overcrowding in the compounds. William H. Worger states that by the early 1890s two thirds of the deaths recorded in two De Beers hospitals were due to pneumonia. There were statistical fluctuations, but African mortality in Kimberley rose from 41 per thousand to 55 per thousand between 1891 and 1892, which was double the mortality rate for other urban Africans on the Cape.\textsuperscript{46} The figures given by Rob Turrell and Worger differ somewhat, but it seems that there was eventually some

\textsuperscript{40} Turrell suggest that the official numbers of 700 dead out of 2,311 certified cases of illness are too low, Rob Turrell, \textit{Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871-1890}, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987: 139.

\textsuperscript{41} Turrell, “Model Compounds”: 61, 64.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.: 64f.

\textsuperscript{43} Home, “Barrack”: 332.

\textsuperscript{44} Turrell, “Model Compounds”: 64.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.: 63.

\textsuperscript{46} Worger, \textit{City of Diamonds}: 265.
improvement in the living and working conditions for African miners, since the mortality rate dropped to 43.59 per thousand in 1903 and declined further afterwards, probably due to less crowded living quarters.47

Workers became the targets of biopolitical measures that virtually reduced Africans to their naked physical existence.48 Regular strip searches were designed to prevent diamond theft. When their period of confinement was terminated, convict labourers were held for five days, in a state of total nakedness save for a pair of thick leather gloves they were forced to wear. These were intended to discourage the handling of diamonds that had been hidden in or about the body for later removal.49 Many workers were not even afforded the minimal protection that resided in the contract system, which made the premature abandoning of the compound a legal offence. Thousands of workers were not given contracts at all and therefore remained in “a legal no-man’s land”.50 The effect of all of this was to corroborate existing stereotypes of Africans as inherently criminal in the minds of white settlers. After the South African War, managers of the gold mines at the Rand in Johannesburg examined the Kimberley compounds in order to learn from their example.

It was not surprising that the bad reputation of the compound system spread to other areas via the networks established by migrant labourers. African workers did not simply accept these conditions and the response of employers to protest and resistance was harsh, including flogging and the killing of riotous labourers.51 In 1901 African dockworkers in Cape Town went on strike because they feared that the plague epidemic that was ravaging the city at the time would be used as an excuse to put them into closed compounds like those at Kimberley.52

Namibian-South African connections

From the second half of the 19th century on economic ties between South Africa and Namibia were relatively close as members of various southern and central Namibian population groups became temporarily engaged in work relations in mines and on farms in South Africa. There are indications that there were also indigenous Namibians among the many African males who flocked to Kimberley following the discovery of diamonds. The nature of the information about the mines disseminated by these early labour

49 Turrell, “Model Compounds”: 70.
50 Ibid.: 71.
51 Ibid.: 73.
52 Home, “Barrack”: 337.
migrants on their return is unknown. When diamonds were found in South West Africa at Lüderitz in 1908, it was a German railway employee, August Stauch, who was celebrated as the discoverer, but it was, in fact, a former worker on the Kimberley diamond mines, Zacharias Lewala, whose find made Stauch a very wealthy man. The mines in the north-western Cape also employed substantial numbers of workers from Namibia, and in the 1880s and 1890s there was a regular transfer of indentured labourers via Walvis Bay to the Cape Colony. In 1903, a South African labour recruiter travelled through central Namibia hiring workers for the Rand mines. 628 Africans were transported first by ship to Cape Town, then by rail to the mines in the Johannesburg area. This trafficking did not stop immediately after the outbreak of war in January 1904. The settler community at Swakopmund handed over 282 Herero captives to the South African representative of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association, who were then expedited along the same route to the South African mines. The labour recruiter then shifted his activities to the eastern border of the German territory, where a continuous flow of Herero refugees, some of whom had managed to flee from the concentration camps could be expected. In the Rand mines they were no longer subjected to the unforgiving treatment at the hands of the vengeful German colonisers, but the conditions were still miserable.

The Kimberley compounds were not concentration camps. Nor were they prisoner-of-war camps where inmates were subjected to harsh treatment at the hands of resentful victors. Apart from the convicts, most workers in the Kimberley and Rand mines were wage workers who were free to leave their employment after the termination of their contracts. The everyday lives of many of these workers, however, were dominated by disease, lethal neglect and harsh disciplinary measures. According to Jan-Bart Gewald, mining company figures indicate that in 1905 mine workers who came from German South West Africa had more than a one in ten chance of dying during their contracts; this was the fourth highest mortality rate among mine labourers according to origin.

While the mortality rates and the reasons for internment in colonial Namibia were of a vastly different nature to those in South Africa, we can see that Africans in both territories had become locked into a colonial economy which depended on racialised systems of industrial labour where disciplinary intervention in the lives of Africans was so harsh that the differences between ‘free’ wage labour and coerced labour became

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55 Gewald, “Road”: 24f.
56 Ibid.: 26f.
57 Ibid.: 29.
58 Ibid.: 34.
blurred. Further empirical research is required to provide hard evidence, but it is not unlikely that some of the prisoners in the German concentration camps might have previously experienced the horrors of internment in the South African mines.

Both in Namibia and in South Africa, industrial and political leaders described this labour regimen as a didactic instrument conducive to civilising the ‘natives’ and making colonial subjects of them. At the time of the war in Namibia, Acting Governor Tecklenburg articulated the idea that the camps would have a deterring and disciplining effect for generations to come. Significantly, he was also moved to distance himself from Von Trotha’s overt genocidal declarations and his regret over the negative economic effects of the death of so many people was not unambiguous.59 Tecklenburg emphasised the necessity of strict control of disempowered Africans through pass laws and restriction of mobility. This model conceptualised camps as disciplinary machines to engrave colonial power into the minds and bodies of the colonial subjects. As Tecklenburg clearly stated, death in the camps had a stabilising function for colonial rule as long as it did not get out of hand, but he did not plan to exterminate the much needed colonial labour force:

I do not want to deny that these suggestions are very harsh. Half-hearted measures, however, would only incite the people even more without breaking their resistance once and for all and without preventing another uprising in the future.60

At the same time, he also suggested that the system should offer some incentives, such as the limited possession of livestock, in order to persuade Africans to recognise their inferior status as disempowered workers.

Tecklenburg’s comments on the necessity of harsh discipline in internment as a means of persuading Africans to accept the colonial order resonate with the views of the Kimberley mining engineer, Kitto. In 1879, the latter favourably compared the productivity of Brazilian slaves to the inefficiency of the ‘free’ Kimberley labourers. Kitto pointed out that he did not support slavery, but he argued that a system of bonded labour had civilising effects on Africans, as much as slavery would prepare Brazilian blacks for their freedom after manumission (which he then expected to occur in about twenty years’ time).61

Nearly thirty years later, a German observer of the conditions in South West Africa in the wake of the colonial war expressed approval at the destruction of the remnants of African independence which afforded the Germans the opportunity to create a docile labour force. Leonard Schultzee welcomed the introduction of locations and passes, pointing out that this might give the German colonial economy a much needed boost instead of continuing to allow the South African mining industry to siphon off labour from

59 Cited in Zimmerer, Deutsche Herrschaft: 46.
60 Tecklenburg to Foreign Affairs, 17.8.1905, Imperial Colonial Office (RKA), Federal Archives, Berlin Lichterfelde; The full citation in German: “Ich verhehle mir nicht, dass meine Vorschläge sehr einschneidender Natur sind. Halbe Massnahmen würden aber nur erbittern, ohne den Widerstand für alle Zukunft zu brechen und eine Wiederholung des Aufstandes unmöglich zu machen.”
61 Turrell, Capital: 97f.
Namibia. Schultze made it clear that sentimental notions about the disappearance of African societies were misplaced. It was unavoidable that the progress brought by European civilisation was “built on the graves of those races”. This grim prediction did not imply deliberate mass murder. The fate of those who were not prepared to work, however, was to perish without leaving any imprint on historical memory. Africans, “marked with the signs of the Imperial Eagle and the Christian cross” would have to learn how to survive by providing cheap labour.

Concluding remarks

About 13,600 kilometres away from Kimberley in the northern Cape and 12,600 kilometres away from Windhoek, black workers at another mining complex might have discovered many similarities between themselves and their African colleagues. Birmingham, the leading industrial city in the American South, was founded in 1871, the same year Kimberley’s rise as an industrial city began. One mining camp, located about 40 kilometres north of Birmingham was named Kimberly in allusion to the industrial site in the Northern Cape. The mortality rate among African Americans working in the Birmingham mines in the 1880s was also extremely high due to negligence, corporal punishment and malnutrition. In 1895, the mortality rate at some mines was estimated at 90 per thousand. The Birmingham workers faced worse conditions than the De Beers convict workers in South Africa. They were regularly whipped and beaten, and also punished by being confined in coffin-like boxes made of wood or tin, which intensified the effects of the Alabama sun. Both American and South African companies monopolised state convict labour. In Birmingham about 1,000 convicts made up a quarter of the work force, which included children between the ages of ten and sixteen. These labour conditions were moulded by a racialised discourse on workers as naturally criminal who needed strict supervision and harsh forms of physical control. Around 1920, at a time when the Kimberley mines were no longer producing at their peak levels, Birmingham workers still lived in closed camps watched over by armed company

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63 Ibid.: 295.
64 The full citation in German: “Der Ethnolog mag es beklagen, daß ein so charakteristisch ausgeprägtes Stück Menschentum, wie es die einzelnen Stämme Deutsch-Südwestafrikas, besonders die Herero und Hottentotten, in ihrer körperlichen, geistigen und politischen Eigenart darstellen, einst erinnerungslos eingeschmolzen sein wird, um, mit dem Zeichen des Reichsadlers und des christlichen Kreuzes versehen, mit der Aufschrift ‘farbige Arbeiter’ als Wirtschaftswert in allgemeiner Tagelöhnerewährung wieder neu in Kurs gesetzt zu werden.”
65 Worger, “Convict Labour”: 73.
66 Ibid.: 76.
67 Ibid.: 77.
68 Ibid.: 73f.
guards. Mobility was monitored through a pass system. In the words of John C. Cell, Birmingham was the “American South’s Johannesburg”. Thus racialised systems of labour discipline do not seem to have been the prerogative of colonial empires. Worger has pointed out that in both the US South and South Africa, “changing policies of incarceration in the nineteenth century reflected changes in the economic organisation of society, particularly a growing demand for cheap industrial labour”.

Giorgio Agamben’s often cited comments on the camp as a defining category in the spatial reorganisation of colonial and modern state power have focused on how the West has laid claim to universalising norms that result in the marginalisation of colonial subjects. According to this view, camp inmates led an emblematically precarious and unprotected existence in the shadow of modern power. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore Agamben’s ideas in detail. It is worth mentioning, however, that the focus on camps and colonial wars should not lead us overlook the fact that the context of coerced labour, marginalisation and violence pervades the history of colonialism in a way that seems to make the drawing of unbroken lines of continuity from one site of internment and death to another much more complicated.

Moreover, not only have scholars of genocide recently drawn attention to a much earlier history of colonial expansion, internment and mass murder, but the history of colonialism prior to the Second World War also provides other such pointers, which have received far less attention than the connections between colonial Namibia and Nazi Germany. For example, the use of gas and concentration camps in the Italian colonies of Libya and Ethiopia provides another landmark in the global history of mass violence. The Italian conquest of Ethiopia has recently been re-appraised as a “key event in the 20th century history of violence”, which has, however, been largely sidelined in the recent debates about the linkage between the colonies and the Holocaust. There are many signposts in the history of camps, racism and mass violence which point to

69 Ibid.: 65f.
71 Worger, “Convict Labour”: 68.
Auschwitz. More of these signposts still need to be placed on a global map of mass violence, which may in turn reveal a less direct route from South West Africa to Poland.

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