Guerrilla wars and colonial concentration camps.
The exceptional case of German South West Africa
(1904 – 1908)
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Abstract
The article argues that the reasons for the establishment of concentration camps in German South West Africa were different from contemporary camps in other colonial territories where civilians were concentrated in the course of colonial wars. Unlike in South Africa, Cuba or the Philippines, concentration in GSWA was not about isolating civilians from guerrillas in order to cut the latter off from their support, but about (1) punishing the interned for ‘rebelling’, (2) ‘pacifying’ the colony by controlling former fighters, and (3) using the camps as a reservoir of forced labour. These differences in purpose were the result of structurally different conditions in the German colonial war, which made the separation of guerrillas from civilians obsolete.

Guerrilla warfare and the use of concentration camps around 1900
Around 1900 the concentration of civilians became standard practice in colonial warfare. Several colonial powers tried to crush resistance movements in their overseas possessions by establishing what came to be called ‘concentration camps’.\(^1\) On Cuba, the Spanish, under the Commander-in-Chief Valeriano Weyler, introduced a policy of concentrating large sections of the rural population in certain localities during the war of

\(^1\) In this paper I will use the term ‘concentration camp’ when referring to the camps in colonial wars. In contemporary sources we find a range of different terms for these camps. In the South African War, for example, they were at first usually called ‘refugee camps’ or ‘burgher camps’ while ‘concentration camp’ became more and more common towards the end of the conflict. In German South West Africa they were often termed ‘Gefangenenkraal’, prisoner enclosure in English. It is sometimes argued that the term ‘concentration camp’ should not be used in the colonial context because of the connotations arising from World War II. Be that as it may, I will continue to use it as it is the term that was used by contemporaries when referring to the four cases mentioned in this paper – though only very rarely in the Filipino and Cuban cases – and as it is still the most frequently used word for these places of concentration in scholarly debates. On the use of ‘concentration camp’ in the Philippines see: Reynold C. Ileto, “The Philippine-American War: Friendship and Forgetting”, in: Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Franca, (eds.), Vestiges of War. The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream 1899 – 1999, New York, New York University Press, 2002: 3-21 (12); Isabel V. Hull was one of those who replaced the term ‘concentration camp’ with ‘collection camp’, see Isabel V. Hull, Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005: 73.
1895 to 1898.² During the South African War (1899-1902), Lord Roberts and in particular Lord Kitchener used ‘concentration camps’ to break Boer resistance, while the U.S. military established ‘zones of concentration’ on the Philippines in order to end what they called the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902).³ Two years later, during the war against Ovaherero and Nama (1904 – 1908), Imperial Germany established ‘Konzentrationslager’ (concentration camps) in South West Africa. For Casper W. Erichsen, who has published the only monograph on those camps in the German colony, it is obvious that “the concept of the concentration camps was ‘borrowed’ from the South African Boer War”.⁴ He is not alone in this assessment. Most scholarly accounts of the camps in German South West Africa try to relate these institutions to historical precedents in contemporary colonial wars.⁵

Another approach explains the frequent occurrence of concentration policies in the colonies around 1900 with the structural similarities between the settings in which they were used. The British military historian Ian F. Beckett, for example, argues that concentration was not ‘borrowed’, but evolved independently as armies faced the same problems of guerrilla warfare in the different theatres of war.⁶ It is indeed striking how similar the constellations in Cuba, South Africa and the Philippines were. In all three cases the colonial powers fought guerrilla forces who were supported substantially by the civilian population. Information on the movements of the colonial military were gathered by civilians and passed to the guerrillas giving them a decisive advantage in intelligence. Food and other essential goods were supplied to the fighting men. And, if necessary, the guerrillas could always hide their rifles and melt into the civilian population by pretending to be peaceful peasants.⁷ To end these wars, the colonial military resorted to the widespread practice of isolating civilians from guerrillas by

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⁷ On guerrilla and anti-guerrilla warfare especially in the colonies see ibid.: 1-54.
concentrating the population of certain towns or regions in camps or zones. The rest of
the country was declared a “free-fire zone” and was stripped of all supplies which often
involved ‘torching’ large areas. This ‘scorched earth policy’, combined with the use of
concentration camps certainly contributed to ending the wars in South Africa and the
Philippines and would probably have brought about the same result in Cuba, had the
United States not intervened on behalf of the Cuban Liberation Army in 1898.

Thus, while the form of concentration among the three cases varied considerably in
terms of living conditions or appearance — in South Africa we mainly find specially
erected tented camps, while people were guarded in existing towns in Cuba and the
Philippines — they shared a common purpose. They all were to function as instruments
to separate civilians from guerrillas, assuming that resistance would now be impossible.

At first glance, the situation in GSWA appears to have been quite similar. The German
Colonial Army was fighting a guerrilla army, at least against the Nama in the south of the
colony, and established concentration camps. But, as I shall argue, these camps were
not erected to isolate fighters from civilians, but rather to (1) punish the insurgents, to
(2) pacify the colony, mainly by controlling the fighters who had surrendered or been
captured, and (3) as a reservoir for forced labour.

The Ovaherero and Nama War

In January 1904 the war between Germany and the Ovaherero, a semi nomadic people
numbering about 80,000 who lived in the central part of the colony, began. The
Ovaherero rose up against the brutal treatment at the hands of German settlers and the
colonial state, the fraudulent practices of European traders and the loss of their land
and economic basis following a Rinderpest epidemic, which had destroyed their cattle
based economy to a large extent. After some initial Ovaherero successes, the heavily
reinforced German Schutztruppe (Imperial Protection Troops) started to gain the upper
hand. On August, 11th — after months of preparation — German troops under the newly
arrived Commander-in-Chief, General Lothar von Trotha, attacked the mass of Ovaherero
people in a concentric battle at the Waterberg. But in spite of German hopes that this
would deal a decisive blow to Ovaherero forces and end the war, Ovaherero were able to

8 Glenn A. May, “Was the Philippine-American War a 'Total War'?” in: Manfred F. Boemeke, (ed.), Antici-
pating Total War. The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914, Cambridge, Cambridge University

9 See Iain R. Smith and Andreas Stucki, “The Colonial Development of Concentration Camps (1868 –

10 This is the most common estimate. It has to be borne in mind that all numbers concerning Ovaherero and
Nama populations and especially deaths are simply very vague estimations as only incomplete evidence
exists. On the problem of the death rates see especially Brigitte Lau, “Uncertain Certainties: The Herero-
German War of 1904”, Migabus, 2, 1989: 4-5, 8.

11 On the reasons for the Herero-German War, see: Zimmerer, “Krieg”; Hull, Destruction; 8; Dominik J.
Schaller, “Kolonialkrieg, Völkermord und Zwangsarbeit in ‘Deutsch-Südwestafrika’”, in: Dominik J. Schaller,
escape the encirclement. What followed was an unsuccessful German pursuit of Ovaherero, who fled into the Omaheke Desert, followed by the infamous ‘Extermination Order’ of 2 October 1904, in which von Trotha declared that no more prisoners were to be taken. In the following weeks thousands of Ovaherero became victims of this genocidal policy, dying of thirst in the desert from where they were prevented from returning. Headquarters in Berlin intervened in December, revoking von Trotha’s orders. Simultaneously, Chancellor von Bülow instructed Trotha to construct “Konzentrationslager [concentration camps, J.K.] for the temporary accommodation and maintenance of the rest of the Herero people”. Those who had survived von Trotha’s extermination policy either in the Omaheke or hidden away in Hereroland, were to be gathered together and placed under German control. In fact, these camps were not started as counter-guerrilla measures, as there was no guerrilla war in central GSWA. At most, there was a vague German fear that Ovaherero might resort to guerrilla warfare when returning from the Omaheke. But in general they were perceived as having lost the will to resist militarily after the battle of the Waterberg.

The situation was different in the south of the colony where the Nama rose up in early October 1904. After Hendrik Witbooi, the aged and very influential captain of the Witbooi-Nama, declared war against the German colonial power, several other Nama groups joined the struggle. Nama strength was estimated to have been around, at most, 2,500 fighters. Nevertheless, resistance lasted two and a half years against a force of up to 15,000 German soldiers. The Nama, who were well trained in shooting and riding, did not possess large cattle herds and were therefore far more mobile than Ovaherero in the north. This was reflected in their guerrilla-style warfare. In bands of a few hundred under Hendrik Witbooi, Cornelius Frederiks, an under-chief of the Bethanie-Nama, and Jakob Morenga, who led a group of mainly Bondelswart-Nama in the far south of

12 The original order is lost. Copies can be found in several archives. For example in the Bundesarchiv-Berlin (BArch), Reichskolonialamt (R) 1001/2089, Proclamation of Lieutenant General von Trotha, Osombo-Windimbe [meant is Osombo-Windimbe, J.K.], 2 October 1904, 7.

13 All quotations from German sources were translated by the author of this article. Ibid., tel. Bülow to Trotha, 11 December 1904, 54 (my emphasis). “Konzentrationslager für die einstweilige Unterbringung & Unterhaltung der Reste des Herero-Volkes”.

14 For general accounts on the war against Ovaherero still see the standard works written in the 1960s: Helmut Bley, Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894 – 1914, Hamburg, Leibniz, 1968 and Horst Drechsler, Let us die fighting. The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism (1884 – 1915), Berlin, Akademie, 1986, first published in German in 1966; the best recent book is Hull, Destruction As the focus is on German motives behind the establishment of the camps, the text mainly draws on sources produced by the colonisers. To complement them by accounts of the colonised would have been desirable. But the few written sources as well as existing oral history collections do not tell us anything about the camps or – in the latter case – have been recorded generations after the events and only possess value to determine how the camps are remembered today.

Namaland, they evaded decisive battles, while ambushing and constantly threatening the German colonial military’s Achilles’ heel: their lines of communication.16 Nama were also interned in the newly erected camps, which were situated at the two coastal towns, Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht, and in Hereroland, in Karibib, Okahandja, Windhoek, along the only railway line in the colony, and Omaruru. But Nama non-combatants were at no stage taken from their homesteads and placed in the camps. The civilians accompanied the fighting men and later on — as the guerrilla bands split up into ever smaller units17 — often moved across the border into British territory:18 Hendrik Witbooi managed to send some of his people across the eastern border into British Bechuanaland in September 1905.19 In March 1906, most of the women and children of the Bondelswart-Nama under Morenga and Johannes Christian, who had just been driven out of their positions at the southern border of the colony by German troops, fled across the Orange River into the neighbouring Cape Colony.20 There they were interned and about 800 were sent back by the British only after peace had been concluded between the Germans and the Bondelswarts at Ukamas at Christmas in 1906.21 The guerrillas, too, regularly visited the borderland, where traders of all nationalities had settled to take advantage of the situation, by bartering cattle taken in raids for ammunition and other supplies or simply to escape the pursuit of German columns.22 This was possible because neither the Germans nor the British had sufficient troops to guard the hundreds of kilometres of border effectively.23 Furthermore Britain insisted on a policy of strict neutrality towards the fighting parties as they feared the uprising could spread to South African territory if they showed signs of cooperation with the Germans.24 Naturally this concerned German colonial officials who accused the British authorities of purposely prolonging the war.25 It was suggested that a line of blockhouses be established to guard the eastern border, possibly inspired by Kitchener’s successful

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17 Georg Maercker, Unsere Kriegsführung in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Berlin, Paetel, 1908: 56f, 67.
18 On the possibility of retreat to British territory see Nuhn, Feind: 74, 106, 139.
19 Bühler, Namaaufstand: 261f. As several hundred Witboi women and children surrendered to the German troops in October for want of water, (see below), it could only have been parts of Hendriks people who were pushed across the border.
20 Ibid.: 277.
21 Ibid.: 288.
23 Nuhn, Feind: 74.
24 Bühler, Namaaufstand: 286-291.
A blockhouse system in the South African War, but this was rejected as impracticable. In December 1906 the German Ambassador in London, Count Metternich, finally succeeded in persuading the British Government to ask the Cape Authorities to prevent contact between the interned Nama on British territory and the guerrillas. This would have, if successful, cut non-combatants off from the fighting men, though it would not have solved the German authorities’ problem as the guerrillas would still have been able to get supplies by dealing with the white traders in the borderlands. Fortunately for the Germans, the peace of Ukhams with the Bondelswarts ended all serious Nama resistance a few days later and rendered the border question less important.

As a consequence of the situation at the border, the Germans were clearly not in a position to pursue what one could call a classic counter-guerrilla strategy like that used, for example, in South Africa or Cuba: denying the insurgents supplies by concentrating and controlling the civilian population, while removing all shelter and food from the countryside. The Nama could always counter such efforts by moving into British territory, their safe hinterland, to obtain all necessary provisions.

If it was not the civilian Nama population that was interned in the camps, who was? It were the people who had been captured or who had surrendered, mainly former fighters as well as non-combatant women, children and old people, all of whom were labelled prisoners-of-war (POWs) by their captors. Nama were first interned in large numbers in late 1905. When the Germans occupied all the known waterholes on the Kalahari border, roughly 400 women and children were forced to leave Hendrik Witbooi and surrender. Shortly afterwards, on 29 October, Hendrik Witbooi was mortally wounded in battle. The rest of the Witbooi and Veldschoendrager then surrendered in several groups between the end of November 1905 and the beginning of 1906. While the peace treaty declared them to be “free”, within very narrow boundaries, and allowed them to remain in Gibeon in Namaland, this commitment was broken shortly afterwards by the new governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, in late November 1905. He resented the relatively liberal terms the military had granted the Witbooi and therefore deported them, as prisoners of war, to concentration camps in the north of the colony – mainly to Windhoek. This was congruent with von Lindequist’s

26 BArch, R 1001/2137, Hennings to Jacobs, Cape Town, 1 October 1905, 34f.
27 In return Germany had to meet the internment costs of the Nama on British soil. See BArch, R 1001/ 2139, tel. Metternich to Foreign Office, London, 19 December 1906, 91.
28 Though Morenga was only killed by English troops in November 1907 and another Nama leader, Simon Cooper, even held out in the Kalahari desert till 1909, see Bühler, Namaaufstand: 310-317, 321-328.
29 While Major von Estorff agreed to take in these thirsty Nama another group was sent back to the fighting men by Major von Lengerke who denied them water as long as their men refused to surrender. See ibid.: 262f.
31 Bühler, Namaaufstand: 262-270; Nuhn, Feind: 192-194.
deliberate scheme to send Nama to Hereroland and Ovaherero to Namaland thus making both groups easier to control. It was also deemed necessary as a result of transport problems in the south of the colony, where no railway existed. These problems made it difficult to feed the Nama who had surrendered there and were serious enough for military operations to be stopped repeatedly due to lack of supplies. Shortly afterwards the Nama were joined in the north of the colony by Cornelius Frederiks’ people who had capitulated in February and March after being pursued constantly since the end of January 1906.

Among the interned there was one small group, the Nama of Bethanie, which had neither surrendered nor been caught. After the outbreak of the war in Namaland, old rifts between two sections of the Bethanie Nama had resurfaced and led to divisions amongst the people. The southern sections, under the old Bethanie captain, Paul Frederiks, remained loyal to the Germans. Their northern counterparts, under the rival under-captain Cornelius Frederiks, took up arms. But the Germans did not believe in the loyalty of the southern groups. After a German transport, which was led by four Bethanie men, was attacked in the vicinity of Bethanie in early November 1905, and the four leaders had joined the guerrillas, the Germans erected a new concentration camp in Bethanie, where they interned all followers of Paul Frederiks. They justified the internment by explaining “that there was reason to believe that the people had contact with the rebels” and put them under heavy guard. Here we see the classic constellation that had also led to the establishment of concentration camps in Cuba, South Africa and the Philippines: the wish to isolate guerrilla fighters from civilians in order to disrupt the supplies for the former; in the case of Bethanie and the “concentration camps for the faithful”, as a mission inspector called them, the main aim was to limit the flow of intelligence.

But Bethanie was an exception and the reasons for the majority of concentration camps were different. A military rationale was involved there, too. The German military wanted to prevent former fighters from returning to the field to resume fighting, and therefore was alarmed, when Nama POWs fled from the Windhoek camp in mid-1906. The newly

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33 See for example Großer Generalstab, Hottentottenkrieg: 251; or Bühler, Namaaufstand: 195-199.
35 Difficulties in supplying the internees in Bethanie meant they were sent to !Kubub and !Umub and several other places after Christmas 1905 (see Bühler, Namaaufstand: 207.) The Bethanies were finally released after Cornelius Frederiks surrendered in March 1906, see Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft, Berichte der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft, 63, 1906: 203.
36 Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft, Berichte, 63: 34. “… dass man Grund hatte anzunehmen, dass die Leute mit den Aufständischen Fühlung hätten.” On the Nama of Bethanie and the camp in Bethanie see Bühler, Namaaufstand: 203-208.
appointed Commander-in-Chief, Colonel Berthold von Deimling, immediately moved all Nama prisoners back to the south, to the high security camp on Shark Island in the harbour at Lüderitzbucht. Deimling and Lindequist wanted to deport all Nama to another colony, but as Berlin rejected this, they chose Shark Island as the safest spot in the colony. See the communication in National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Zentralbureau des Gouvernements (ZBU) 2369 VIII.G Geheimakten der Witboi-Hottentotten, 1905-1908, 83-87.

Deputy Governor Oskar Hintrager explained that “outside the island escape impossible to prevent in spite of all caution.” And further: “escape of every single one of the embittered prisoners might cause new disquiet and hostilities.” The importance of the security argument can be seen in the fact that only Nama women and children were allowed to leave Shark Island in January 1907. Despite the appalling conditions that resulted in the deaths of around 1200 of the estimated 2000 Nama on the island between September 1906 and April 1907, the male inmates were considered too dangerous to be allowed to leave.

In the north of the colony, where Ovaherero were thought to have lost any will to resist militarily and the war was believed to be over, concentration was also understood in terms of pacifying the country, making it safe for white farmers to resume their business. The surviving Ovaherero, who had lost their cattle and with it their traditional means of subsistence, were trickling back to Hereroland. In order to survive in the field, some raided the cattle and other stock of white farmers and thereby hindered the settlers’ efforts to resume farming. To solve this problem, the military not only sent out patrols to capture returning Ovaherero, but also used the Rhenish Mission Society as intermediary. From late 1904 onwards, missionaries went into the field to persuade Ovaherero to come to German settlements or delegated the task to ‘native messengers’. A year later the mission was allowed to establish special collection camps — sometimes also referred to as concentration camps — while military patrols were abandoned for a few months. In these camps, where no military was allowed, Ovaherero were gathered, fed at government cost and, after a short time of recovery, sent to the military run concentration camps. Through these efforts the Germans managed to collect about 20,000 Ovaherero men, women and children.

38 Deimling and Lindequist wanted to deport all Nama to another colony, but as Berlin rejected this, they chose Shark Island as the safest spot in the colony. See the communication in National Archives of Namibia (NAN), Zentralbureau des Gouvernements (ZBU) 2369 VIII.G Geheimakten der Witboi-Hottentotten, 1905-1908, 83-87.
40 AVEM, Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) 1656a, Missionary Nyhof to Johannes Spiecker, 22 April 1907, 347-352; concerning the number of Nama brought to Shark Island see also Erichsen, Angel: 110.
41 On the complaints of farmers about Herero raiding cattle, see for example: Anonym, “Der Bankrott der Südwestafrikanischen Kriegsführung”, Vornwärts, 1, August 1905; see also Maercker, Kriegsführung: 47.
43 12,253 came to the four collection camps the Rhenish Mission Society ran between December 1905 and March 1907. Otjihaenena (4829 surrenders), Omburo (4497), Otjozongombe (1824) and Okomitombe
There was often another motive besides the German aim to ‘pacify’ the colony by concentrating Ovaherero and Nama in camps: the wish to punish the colonised for the rebellion. This motive can be traced back to the first days of the war. After rumours spread that Ovaherero had murdered and mutilated hundreds of German men, women and children the consequences were clear to settlers, the military and the colonial administration alike.44 “The hardest punishment of the enemy is necessary in expiation of the countless, cruel murders and as a guaranty for a peaceful future,” as captain Gudewill put it.45 This connection between pacification and punishment can also be seen in a comment on the high death rate in the camp in Swakopmund in mid 1905 by Deputy Governor Hans Tecklenburg:

The more the Herero learn the outcome of the insurrection the hard way now, the less they will be overcome, for generations, by the desire to repeat the insurrection. Our actual martial successes impressed them little. I am expecting a more lasting effect by the time of suffering, they are enduring now, without wanting to take up the cudgels for the proclamation of the lieutenant general v. Trotha of October the 2nd last year. Economically the death of so many natives is admittedly a loss.46

The “time of suffering” in the camps seemed to be a just punishment — as contemporaries perceived it — and was supposed to fulfil two objectives: It was — as expressed by Gudewill — not only to punish the crime of rebellion against the colonisers, but also to discourage any future resistance.47

(1103). See AVEM, RMG 1664, Missionary Diehl to Johannes Spiecker, Okomotombe, 20 September 1906, 86; AVEM, RMG 1644a, Missionary Kuhlmann to Honoured Society, “Abschluß der Sammelarbeit”, Omburo, 31 July 1906, 49-52; AVEM, RMG 1609e, Präses Eich to Johannes Spiecker, Okahandja, 1 November 1906, 25f.; AVEM, RMG 1664, Wilhelm Diehl to the Fathers of the Mission, Otjimbinque, 28 May 1907, 75-77. About 8000 had already been caught or had surrendered before the start of the collection camp system. See BArch, R 1001/2136, Trotha to General Staff, 13 September 1905, 109; and BArch, R 1001/2137, Dame to General Staff, 2 December 1905, 92.

44 In fact 123 Germans were killed during the initial assaults, but women, children and missionaries were spared on order of Ovaherero leadership. See Zimmerer, “Krieg”: 45f.
45 Gudewill to Chief of the Admiral Staff of the Marine, 4 February 1904, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (BArch-MA), Nachrichtenbüro des Reichsmarineamtes (RM 3)/v. 10263, 38a, as cited in Zimmerer, “Krieg”: 48. “Die härteste Bestrafung des Feindes ist notwendig als Sühne für die zahllosen, grausamen Morde und als Garantie für eine friedliche Zukunft.”
47 See Hull, Destruction: 75, 84. On another occasion Tecklenburg commented on the many deaths among the Nama corps that had been fighting alongside the German troops in the Herero campaign and which was then deported to Togo after the Nama rising: “Rapid mortality does not astonish here, must be perceived as retaliation for rebellion.” BArch, R 1001/2090, Tecklenburg to Colonial Departement, 4 July 1905, 22, cited
There was also a third motive behind the concentration camps; it is evident in Tecklenburg’s statement: the economic dimension of concentration mentioned in the last sentence. GSWA was suffering from a massive shortage of labour, especially ‘native’ labour, after the war started. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, many former Ovaherero and Nama workers were no longer available once the war had begun. Secondly, far more goods had to be shipped to the colony to feed and supply the thousands of troops and, later, to feed the up to 20,000 POWs. Therefore, in the harbours of Swakopmund and Lüderitzbucht, there was extra demand for labourers to unload the ships and transport the goods to the troops scattered throughout the country. This was mainly done by ox-wagon, as there was only one railway line, in the north of the colony, at the start of war. The wholly inadequate transport infrastructure was hindering the war efforts, and thus a third factor entered the equation. Work on a new railway line in the south, from Lüderitzbucht to Keetmanshoop, began in late 1905. For this project several hundred workers were needed. At the same time in the north a second, private railway line to Otavi was already under construction and this project was also heavily dependent on the labourers from the ranks of the colonised. Finally, there was constant demand for workers among private persons, especially settler farmers, as well as from the civil administration and the military for a variety of tasks.

One answer to this massive problem of the labour shortage was to use the prisoners as forced labour. This was done from the first days of concentration. Shortly after Chancellor Bülow had directed Trotha to establish concentration camps, he specified that “the surrendering Herero are to be placed in concentration camps in different locations in the country and should be made to work there under guard”.

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49 There were some 20,000 Herero POWs, as I argued above, and at least another 2,000 Nama POWs (see BArch, R 1001/2140, Sterblichkeit in den Kriegsgefangenenlagern in SWA, 24. March 1908, 16 f.). But as they gradually fell into German hands and as the death toll was constantly high, the number of prisoners will probably never have exceeded 20,000 at any time in the war. On 5th February 1906 there were, for example, 13,040 prisoners all together, see BArch, R 1001/2138, Dame to General Staff, Windhoek, 8 February 1906, 41 f. By December numbers had increased to 16,420, see BArch, R 1001/2139, Tel. Hintrager to Foreign Office, Windhoek, 12 December 1906, 85.
50 The numerous rejected requests for assignments of POWs as forced labourers especially by private persons and enterprises bear witness to the general scarcity of labourers in the colony. See for example NAN, Bezirksamt Windhuk (BW) 406 E.V.8 spec. Bd. 2, Kriegsgefangene. Anträge auf Überweisung, 1905-1906.
51 At the same time workers, both Boers and blacks, the latter referred to as “Cape boys”, were imported from South Africa especially to drive the hundreds of Ox-wagons. See for example Maercker, Kriegsführung: 33, 59.
52 Bärch, R 1001/2089, Bülow to Trotha, Berlin 13 January 1905, 116 f. “die sich ergebenden Herero an verschiedenen Plätzen des Landes in Konzentrationslagern unterzubringen sind und dort unter Bewachung zur Arbeit angehalten werden.”
from early 1905 onwards, many hundreds of prisoners, who surrendered in Hereroland, most often in Omaruru,53 were sent directly to the camps, especially to Swakopmund, where they were forced to work in the harbour, and to the Otavi railway.54 When the new civil governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, took up his post in the colony in November 1905, replacing Lothar von Trotta as the head of the colonial state in German South West Africa, the labour question became even more pressing. With the new railway project in the south starting, von Lindequist took several decisive steps to persuade more Ovaherero to surrender: He initiated the system of missionary collection camps mentioned earlier, ended military patrols and even started to pay the POWs small wages.55 The plan worked and thousands of Ovaherero, who came to the missionary collection camps, were quickly transported to concentration camps run by the military, in particular to Lüderitzbucht, where they were immediately put to work, with no distinctions made between men, women or children. Indeed, when Lindequist took up his office in the colony it seems that — at least for Ovaherero prisoners — the need for cheap labour became the main motive behind the concentration camp system.56 With the Nama, security remained number one priority for the system. Male Nama prisoners were not allowed to leave Shark Island — not even to perform forced labour.57 They were even held on the island and not moved to healthier surroundings after all construction work on the island itself had to be stopped due to illness among the POWs.58

Closely linked to the forced labour regime was the aim of ‘educating’ the POWs through labour. Colonel Cai Friedrich Theodor Dame, as commander of the rear in charge of the prisoners, directed his subordinates:

The political situation in the protectorate prospectively forces us for a longer period of time […] to treat the insurgents as prisoners. The Schutztruppe therefore, apart from guarding, assumes the difficult task of educating the people to work in order to preserve them as a useful element for the further development of the protectorate.59

55 Small wages of a maximum of 5 Marks per month were only paid to prisoners who had already worked for half a year. See BArch, R 151 F 82097, Feldzüge Exped. Niederwerfung v. Aufständen D.IV.L.3 Vol. 1, Circular Lindequist, Windhoek, 21. January 1906, 118; ibid., Lindequist to Dame, Windhoek, [date unreadable, J.K.] 1906, 119f. Later the wages were slightly increased. On Lindequist’s steps see also Hull, Destruction: 82-85.
56 See Maercker, Kriegsführung: 47f.
57 AVEM, RMG 1656a, Karl Laaf to Johannes Spiecker, Lüderitzbucht, 21 October 1906, 46f.
58 See the documents in NAN, Hafenbauamt Swakopmund (HBS) 52 4/1 Haifischinsel. Arbeiter auf der Haifischinsel, 1906-1907.
And governor Lindequist also emphasized the importance of ‘education through labour’:

The use of the Herero as labourers during captivity is very beneficial for them, indeed it is a real mercy for them that they learn to work, before they are given back their full freedom, as they would prospectively rove around the country in idleness and after having lost all their livestock scrape a miserable living.60

Another function of the camps in South West Africa is frequently referred to in the existing literature: the extermination of the interned. For example, Jürgen Zimmerer, one of the most influential proponents of this thesis, says: “The treatment of Herero and Nama in the camps therefore meant a prolongation of von Trotha’s extermination policy despite the cancellation of his extermination order.”61 David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen even regard Shark Island in Lüderitzbucht as the place where the “death camp” was invented.62 The main reason for this view of the camps as an instrument of mass murder is the exceptionally high mortality rate.63 The only official statistics that exist for the whole period of internment state that 7,682 or 45.2% out of some 15,000 Ovaherero and 2000 Nama prisoners died in the camps between October 1904 and end of March 1907 when the war was officially terminated.64 But despite these appalling figures there are major factors that speak against Zimmerer’s — and also against Olusoga’s and Erichsen’s — assertion. Pars pro toto another reference can be made to Tecklenburg’s statement above, in which he explicitly distances himself and the camp system he is referring to from the proclamation of von Trotha.65 Clearly then, the camps were never planned for exterminatory purposes. Given the labour shortage, extermini-
tion would have been extremely irrational and, indeed, several measures were taken to improve the situation in the camps: People unfit for work due to illness or age were sent to the missionaries to recover, rations were increased, clothes and blankets distributed. Some young internees were even trained in craftsmanship. All this would have been contradictory, if extermination was the objective. Indeed, no statements can be found that indicate an intention to exterminate the entire Ovaherero or Nama population in the camps. The only basis for such an assumption is the high death toll. But that should — according to Isabel Hull — be explained rather with the military’s lack of interest in the interned, with problems with the sourcing of adequate supplies and, of course, with the possibility to rationalize prisoner deaths as the just punishment for rebellion.

Conclusion

The camps in German South West Africa fulfilled a threefold function: They were designed to punish the insurgents, to pacify the colony, mainly by controlling the former fighters, and to serve as a reservoir of (forced) labour. In Cuba, South Africa and the Philippines we also find some of these objectives. Cuban reconcentrados and inmates of the separate camps for Africans in South Africa were not only expected to sustain themselves by growing crops, but were frequently sent to work for the military and other employers who needed additional workers. But the labourers in Cuba were often paid, in South Africa this was always the case; in South West Africa payments were only

66 Erichsen’s interpretation that the absolute wish to “maximise the prisoner’s labour potential” ruled out all consideration for the prisoners’ health or welfare and consequently fostered extermination, does not sound very convincing as the high death rate soon exacerbated the labour shortage problem. In fact the high death rate and spread of diseases on Shark Island rendered the interned Nama useless as workers within a few months and that was one of the reasons why the camp was abandoned in April 1907. See BArch, R 1001/2140, Estoff to Schutztruppe-Berlin, Windhoek, 10 April 1907, 88; Erichsen, Angel: 113-115.

67 See BArch, R 1001/2118, Missionary inspector Haussleiter to Bülow, Barmen, 22. April 1905, 70-73; ibid., Haussleiter to Bülow, Barmen, 5 May 1905, 100-102; ibid., Tecklenburg to Colonial Departement, Windhoek, 3 July 1905, 154f; and BArch, R 151 F 82097, Feldzüge Expedit. Niederwerfung v. Aufständen D.IV.L.3 Vol. 1, Etappenkommando to Lindequist, Windhoek, 14 December 1905, 121f; also missionary sources point in this direction: AVEM, RMG 2528a, Spiecker, Zweiter Visitationsbericht der Gemeinde Swakopmund, 305-311.

68 See BArch, R 151 F/D.IV.L.3 Vol. 1, Colonel Dame to the Imperial Government Windhoek, Windhoek, 9 August 1905, 99f; and ibid., Etappenkommandantur to Imperial Government Windhoek, Windhoek, 14 November 1905, 107.

69 Hull, Destruction : 70-90; I will not elaborate on the question, whether the camp system should be understood as an extension of extermination, in further detail, as I have covered it elsewhere, and it is not essential for the main line of argument. See Jonas Kreienbaum, Kreienbaum, Jonas, “‘Vernichtungslager’ in Deutsch-Südwestafrika? Zur Funktion der Konzentrationslager im Herero- und Namakrieg (1904 – 1908)”, Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, 58, 2010: 1014-1026.

reluctantly allowed after Governor von Lindequist took up his office in late 1905 and then only on a very small scale after the first year of internment. Furthermore, in the German colony it was not only the men, who were forced to work, but also women and children.

While punishment did not play a major role in concentration in Cuba, South Africa and the Philippines, the wish to pacify the country did. In fact, it was the prime objective behind concentration. But pacification worked in a completely different way than in South West Africa. It was about isolating the guerrillas from the civilian population which supported them in order to deny the guerrillas supplies and to force them into submission. This was not on the German authorities’ agenda as it could never be achieved and was never tried, with the minor exception of Bethanie, because the Nama guerrillas always had good chances to withdraw to the British hinterland. Here we see a major functional difference between the camps in South West Africa and the ones in Cuba, South Africa and the Philippines.

There is another important particularity to the German case which must also be considered. While Spanish, British and Americans did force non-combatants from the countryside and into concentration, captured combatants were usually interned separately as POWs. The Germans, in contrast, interned civilians and fighters together and referred to them all as POWs. As women and children had accompanied Ovaherero and Nama fighting men in the field and often surrendered together with them, they were seen as part and parcel of the enemy. The term POW was not understood in any legal sense by the Germans. Indeed it was not used in the sense intended in the 1899 Hague Convention.71 As von Trotha later rationalised, “a war in Africa cannot solely be fought according to the laws of the Geneva Convention.”72 POWs in German South West Africa were consequently denied all rights.

What do these findings tell us about the relationship between these four cases of colonial concentration discussed? Or to be more precise, what do they tell us about the relationship between the German case and those of the other three colonial powers? Firstly, a structural approach alone, which explains the frequent occurrence of policies of concentration in various colonies around 1900 as having evolved independently of each other as answer to similar problems of warfare, is not convincing. The problems the German colonial power tried to solve by the use of concentration were very different in structure to the ones in Cuba, South Africa or the Philippines. The fact that the Nama civilians accompanied the guerrillas or were sent to British territory where they were beyond the reach of the German troops, meant that a policy of separation through concentration was out of the question. And the Ovaherero had actually stopped fighting

71 Indeed the rules of the Hague Convention were generally not thought to apply to colonial wars. See: Christoph Marx, “Die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht.’ Kriegsgefangene im Burenkrieg 1899 – 1902”, in: Rüdiger Overmans, (ed.), In der Hand des Feindes: Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, Köln, Böhlau, 1999: 255-276 (255f.).

96
before concentration even began, meaning that the camps can hardly be judged as a measure to end war.\textsuperscript{73} Thus the structural explanation, at least for the use of concentration camps in South West Africa, is not adequate.

The assumption that Germany ‘borrowed’ the concept ‘concentration camp’ is more convincing. German military and colonial officials were certainly aware of the historical precedents for the camps — especially those in neighbouring South Africa. The press had been reporting extensively on the camps in the British colonies.\textsuperscript{74} Military journals asked what lessons could be learned from the South African War.\textsuperscript{75} Important German colonial figures had been visiting camps in South Africa: most notably the future governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, and Ludwig von Estorff, later Commander of the \textit{Schutztruppe}.\textsuperscript{76} Von Lindequist is of particular importance as he was involved in the decision to establish concentration camps in German South West Africa as is documented by a remark in the files of the Colonial Office.\textsuperscript{77} Additionally, parallels with the camps in South Africa were repeatedly drawn by German officials.\textsuperscript{78} Furthermore, and probably most importantly, in 1904 the use of the word ‘Konzentrationslager’ was closely linked to the British camps in South Africa. In Germany, as in Great Britain, the term ‘concentration camp’ had only been introduced in 1901 to denote camps for Boer civilians and soon became widely accepted.\textsuperscript{79} Therefore, when German officials chose to use the word ‘Konzentrationslager’ for the camps in South West Africa, they were consciously emphasising their similarity to the British camps in the South African War.

But the process of adapting the concept of the ‘concentration camp’ was necessarily a creative one, which involved adopting parts of the foreign import and adding new

\textsuperscript{73} Though — as argued above — they had a ‘pacifying’ function.


\textsuperscript{76} See Estorff, \textit{Wanderungen}: 93-95.

\textsuperscript{77} Bärch, R 1001/2089, Bülow to Trotha, Berlin, 13 January 1905, 116f.

\textsuperscript{78} For instance Oskar Hintrager (NAN, ZBU 2369 VII.G, 97f.) made excuses for the high death rate in the German camp on Shark Island by explaining: “England viewed it as unavoidable for the sake of ruling South Africa to see 20,000 women and children die during a very long captivity in the concentration camps.” (‘England hat es um seiner Herrschaft in Südafrika willen für unvermeidlich erachtet, 20000 Frauen und Kinder während einer sehr langen Gefangenschaft in den Konzentrationslagern sterben zu sehen.’).

\textsuperscript{79} See Annette Wieviorka, “L’expression ‘camp de concentration’ au 20e siècle”, \textit{Vingtième Siècle}, 54, 1997: 4-12. In the German press the British camps were first mentioned as “women’s camps” or “refugee camps”. Only during the course of 1901 the papers started to refer to “concentration camps”. See for example \textit{Neue Preußische Zeitung}, 21 June 1901, 22 June 1901, 24 July 1901, 13 September 1901.
features, as Christiane Eisenberg argued in an article on cultural transfers.80 Given the structurally different constellation of the war in German South West Africa, where isolation of guerrillas from civilians was impossible, the aims behind the camps had to be redefined. Here the structural argument comes in again. The only transferable aspect was the idea of interning, in guarded camps, a potentially hostile population of mainly women and children. This rough concept then had to be specified to meet the needs of the local situation.81 In other words, transfer and structural factors are not mutually exclusive explanations but have to be understood as complementary. They worked hand in hand and both influenced the concentration camps in German South West Africa.

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