“The public danger of rumor-mongering”:
News in German colonial South West Africa during the
First World War
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Abstract
With the possibility of invasion by the South African Union looming at the start of the
First World War, the German colony of South West Africa lost access to reliable news
transmissions. Governor Theodor Seitz issued daily news updates and denounced the
spread of rumors, but German newspapers in the colony continued a pattern of
publishing unconfirmed reports unchecked, including allegations of danger to white
settlers from Africans and impelling greater government surveillance and suppression
of Africans. The colony’s oldest newspaper faced censorship, not for spreading
rumors, but rather for criticizing the governor. Ultimately, the colonial press under-
mined the solidarity among the German settlers, and their faith in both the news and
German colonial officials, establishing a climate of anxiety that inflamed racial
tensions and the potential for interracial violence.

Introduction
The sudden outbreak of the First World War on 1 August 1914 disrupted all contact
between Germany and its colonies, including South West Africa. With British declaration
of war on Germany on 5 August, British military strategists ordered the immediate
severing of German international news cables and the destruction of its global network
of overseas radio towers. The British navy also began targeting all German shipping
which, among other supply problems for the South West African colony, also cut off mail
communication. The impact was a near total news blackout: the territory received at
most a weak, fifteen-minute daily government radio telegram transmission one-way,
directly from Nauen, Germany to Windhoek.1

Although the East African campaign is far better known, the military history of the First
World War in South West Africa is also well-documented: British and Afrikaner South African

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Union forces invaded between September 1914 and July 1915, gradually imposing control over the much smaller neighboring German colony. Strong Afrikaner resistance to the campaign soon emerged within the Union, which stalled the South African advance into the interior from mid-September 1914 through January 1915 and extended the suspense of German civilians in South West Africa awaiting their fate. The near complete communications silence between Germany and its overseas colonies left an absence of written sources in its wake, so it is unsurprising that scholars have published very little about German civilians in South West Africa during the First World War.²

The following narrative focuses on the news blackout of August and September 1914, on the cusp of the South African invasion, exploring its impact on German civilians and social relations in the colony. It argues that as Governor Theodor Seitz asserted control over vital colonial resources, including the news, the colony’s various newspapers lined up in support or defiance of his expanded war powers, leading to a confrontation over the freedom of the press. Newspapers also exploited the settlers’ wartime anxieties by publishing rumors which deepened readers’ distrust of the colonial administration, even in the face of officials’ growing efforts to curtail hearsay. This account complicates historical interpretations which emphasize German settlers’ collective unity during the war and solidarity with the German homeland, much as historians have recently come to question the apparent jubilation uniting Germany at the outbreak of the war, identifying elements of concern and opposition among the population.³


farmers from remote areas forced to leave their families with little protection, and of patriotism for Germany mingled with fear for those back home:

There is much confusion, much heedlessness here! Many live hundreds of kilometers from train lines. Now comes the mobilization order. […] Dare [the farmer] leave his farm? Even worse, dare he leave his wife and children? [His wife] cannot quell her quiet anxiety at being left alone, especially now. – Soon comes the first news of victory at home. It flies through the whole land once the radio tower in Windhoek has spoken. All our passionate yearnings and wishes now pour out daily to the Fatherland. Again and again come hours of despair that we must be so far away from Germany at the dawn of such a crucial moment and that we remain in complete ignorance about our loved ones — for who knows how long?4

Indeed, Willich’s remarks demonstrate that the very lack of contact with Germany established a climate of deep insecurity that clouded colonists’ experiences of the war and strained their patriotic fervor. Stranded without reliable news or the necessary imported food and supplies from the German Heimat on which the local economy depended, the colony’s German civilian population grew ever more reliant on the local colonial administration. In addition to the precaution of calling up reservists, Seitz took other measures to re-impose a sense of security among white colonists, not only in seeking to manage scarce resources, but to control the flow of information as well. Even before it was clear whether or not the war would come to South West Africa, German readers in the colony were very concerned to learn how Germany was faring in the European theaters, not only out of solidarity with the home front but also from self-interest in a quick German victory that would allow them to resume their normal lives. From the outset of the war, Seitz began to assume new war powers to manage currency circulation and food supplies in the wake of the shipping embargo, announcing the measures in the press to calm white settlers and forestall their panicked impulses to hoard food and money.5


5 “An die Deutschen Südwestafrikas”, Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung (DSWAZ), 17, no. 63, Aug. 8, 1914, describes food and currency reserves: “das Schutzgebiet für länger Zeit ausreichend mit Lebensmitteln versorgt ist […] Auch mit Barmitteln […] Es ist deshalb bedauerlich, daß eine größere Anzahl Leute aus übertriebener Vorsicht und unbegründeter Angst bei den Bankinstituten des Landes die Depots […] zurückgezogen haben.”
Rumors, censorship, and the news

The role of colonial newspapers in the German Empire before 1914 has been a source of considerable interest to scholars, who generally characterize each of the four dailies serving the white population in South West Africa as having a history of catering to a specific interest group in the colony, although most agree that these biases had relaxed over time. For instance, the Lüderitzbucht Zeitung sympathized most closely with the diamond industry, which was centered in its environs. The Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung, or DSWAZ formerly the Windhuker Anzeiger, the oldest newspaper in South West Africa, had a reputation for promoting settlers’ self-government. In 1901, the journal’s original founder had relocated the paper’s headquarters from the capital of Windhoek to the city of Swakopmund, arguably to reduce potential interference by the colonial administration. The paper had been so critical of the colonial administration during the Herero and Khoi wars that the military governor, Lothar von Trotha ordered his staff to halt all news releases to the DSWAZ in June 1905. In November 1905, he suspended a Windhoek newspaper for endorsing a greater political voice for settlers. After the formal end to the conflict, settler newspapers, particularly the DSWAZ maintained their critical stance towards successive colonial administrations and ratcheted up the tension during Seitz’s tenure, accusing him of excessive leniency with the native population. As developed below, in the weeks following the outbreak of war in Europe, the DSWAZ defended local merchants’ interests, criticizing Seitz’s emergency policies, particularly price controls, while the Südwest tended to support farmers and advocate price ceilings on their behalf.

German colonial governors had broad powers which could be used to punish oppositional newspapers, although less restrictive than the press laws prevailing in Germany. A chancellor’s decree effective 1 April 1912 specifically empowered colonial governors to sanction and even close down newspapers after repeated warnings if they “incited African violence against whites”. In addition, the governor’s office had expanded powers “during African insurgency”, to block newspapers from publishing strategic information. The chancellor’s order promulgating new restrictions followed in the wake of the so-called Rechenberg scandal in Germany’s colony of East Africa, after German courts in the colonies ruled that the Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Zeitung’s reports in alleging the colony’s governor, Albrecht von Rechenberg had engaged in homosexual acts with.

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colonial subjects were unfounded and libelous. German officials charged that these claims had damaged the authority and prestige of the colonial governor’s office in the eyes of the local African population, and jailed its editor. The 1912 colonial press law explicitly cited the danger of African unrest, rather than war in general, as a condition for government censorship of the press, which limited its apparent applicability during the South African invasion in 1914.7

During the First World War, the various combatant governments all struggled with the problem of how much state censorship to impose on newspapers. In times of war, the release of strategic information can aid the enemy, yet popular uncertainty and fear in the absence of reliable news gives rise to public speculation. Unverified news and information that circulates among the public, whether ultimately true or not, is often characterized by the term ‘rumor’. Uncontrolled rumors potentially undermine people’s confidence in their government and damage the war effort, they even can provoke violence, riots, and mutiny, yet tight official control over news or suppression of the press can backfire by spawning even greater skepticism towards official versions of events and thus more rumors. For example, historians cite the role of rumormongering in contributing to the German and Austro-Hungarian defeats, despite the long history and relative sophistication of German censorship practices.8

In sum, rumors need not be truthful to have real impact, especially when citizens distrust the news. Within the long adversarial relationship between the German colonial newspapers and colonial administrations, the publication of rumors in the press in South West Africa regularly served as an indirect mechanism to challenge the authority of governors and their underlings. For example, unconfirmed allegations of African servants’ and workers’ poisoning whites erupted in the press between 1910 and 1913, casting doubt on the ability of colonial police and administrators to maintain peace and security. German administrators in Windhoek did their best to assert their authority and debunk these baseless accusations.9


How did this pattern of rumor carry forward into the First World War? Unfortunately, the available evidence is incomplete. Most library collections of South West African newspapers end in 1914, due to the breakdown in the mail between South West Africa and the outside world. However, the titles that can be readily obtained from the war, including the DSWAZ as well as the Lüderitzbücher Zeitung and the Windhoek-published independent, Südwest indicate that the communications vacuum opened a new rift in the contentious relationship between the press and colonial administrators. The war positioned Governor Seitz’s office as the main source of official news, since the government radio telegraph receiver in Windhoek was the only available substitute, albeit inadequate, for the private news services from Europe. In effect, the colonial government assumed the power to issue news of the war, although officials apparently did permit local editors to reprint stories from South African Union newspapers, which still had access to wire news services.

German colonial authorities’ powers to suppress the publication of rumor and hearsay in the press further expanded on 12 August, when Seitz promulgated a new order threatening military discipline against civilians who spread rumors. However, newspapers were quick to praise the decree:

> A new regulation by the governor, in conjunction with the military commander, is intended to halt rumor-spreading that is contrary to the public wellbeing, through the threat of discipline by military law for criminals who circulate fraudulent or uncontrolled news. It is hoped the measure will be successful. […] The governor has informed local officials that he will provide official daily updates. Actions should be taken against the unrestrained broadcast of rumors from [non-official] sources. […] Every good citizen should reflect upon [this] order […] and not only take action against the promulgation of false news, but also report the authors of such information, who admittedly are difficult to detect. For, the dissemination of all such hoaxes, even if they contain happy tidings, is frivolous and such nonsense is damaging to the public welfare at this time.10

Newspaper publishers were the clear beneficiaries of settlers’ thirst for news, since public anxiety led to increased sales. However, the Seitz’s administration found it impossible to satisfy the German colonists’ insatiable demand for reliable news, since radio transmissions from Germany lasted a few minutes at most and electrical storms

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sometimes disrupted them altogether. The Südwést warned its readers to ignore the many false news reports in circulation and to rely exclusively on official news reports, no matter how cursory. Its publishers began churning out daily special editions of press releases from the governor’s office, most containing only a few lines of text, some with ellipses at key points where the radio transmission was garbled. A front-page editorial appealed for readers to be patient and understanding if disruptions occurred or if information about the European theaters was incomplete. It further requested that its readers not regard the lack of news as grounds to mistrust the government, and promised to ensure that nothing important would be kept from the population, which was more than a mere hint that the uncertainty of the settler population was leading to public suspicion of Seitz and his administration.¹¹

Yet, newspapers themselves published hearsay and speculation, much of it alluding to the dangers of black insurrection, rather than an invasion by white South African troops. Nor is there evidence of government intervention to suppress this vein of discussion in the press. Instead, the fear of Africans’ intransigence and insurgency seems to have spurred the German colonial administration to enact a series of new and oppressive policies toward Africans. The following analysis of settler newspapers also firmly establishes that the white South West African population initially believed the greatest threat of the First World War was African unrest; and this anxiety dominated the minds of settlers and administrators alike.

**Speculative and provocative news coverage**

Colonial newspapers first reported the start of the war in Europe in editions published on 4 and 5 August. In general, the colonial newspapers’ response to the outbreak of the European war was to voice solidarity with the German Fatherland and included announcements of a special prayer service in Swakopmund, a collective public telegram declaring patriotic support for the Kaiser from the German townsfolk of Gobabis, and fundraising appeals in aid of the German Red Cross from administrators and settler women of Okahandja District. Governor Seitz had issued an export ban once the conflict became imminent and endangered the colony’s ability to import essentials like food, fuel and animal fodder, threatening to confiscate merchants’ wares if price gouging erupted for necessities. A group of Windhoek merchants consequently agreed to hold price increases to a minimum, at least for the goods impacted by the governor’s decree.¹²

¹¹ “Gestörte Verbindung mit der Heimat”, Südwést, 5, no. 65, Aug. 14, 1914: “Man soll daher nicht misstrauisch gegen das Gouvernement sein; wir können bestimmt versichern, daß der Bevölkerung keine wichtige Nachricht unterschlagen wird.” For example, in the run up to the defense of Paris, the paper’s brief Extrablätter from 3 and 4 September report radio telegrams that were indecipherable (“Telegramm über den westlichen Kriegsschauplatz war nicht aufnehmbar”), while the 5 September special edition was based entirely on English newspapers (“Aus Englischen Zeitungen”).

¹² “Lebensmittelpreise und Gouvernement”, DSWAZ, 17, no 61, Aug. 1, 1914, reports on the Windhoek merchants’ decision and predicts a similar show of patriotism among Swakopmund shopkeepers: “In Swakopmund wurde heute versichert, das Gouvernement habe den Entschluß geäußert, sämtlichen im
However, brewers and other merchants’ immediately issued advertisements demanding cash-only purchases, overshadowing their promise not to raise prices. An open meeting of the Swakopmund Chamber of Commerce alleged that merchants in the city of Lüderitzbucht had already raised food and liquor prices across the board by 25 percent, and asserted that hefty price increases were a necessity. The city’s merchants justified their price increases and restrictions on credit on the basis of their experiences during the Orlog as they termed the Herero and Khoi Wars of 1904 to 1907, suggesting how readily colonists’ experiences of previous wars with Africans resonated within the uncertainties of the new crisis. Among the most indelible images of these wars had been surprise African attacks on settler homesteads at the start of both conflicts, including exaggerated rumors alleging mass slaughter of German farmers and their wives and children, mutilations, and other atrocities. Settlers had blamed the war on the German civil administration’s mismanagement of the African population and also criticized the military’s war effort. Seitz later reflected in his memoirs how readily his and other Germans’ expectations of the new conflict hinged on their collective memory of these wars at the outbreak of the First World War. Still more disturbingly, he perceived an enduring, unresolved conflict loomed between whites and blacks in all of Southern Africa.13

Local newspapers also undermined Seitz’s early reassurances that the public in the colony would remained informed, proclaiming his message amid dire warnings. The Südwest remarked:


13 The Lüderitzbucht rumor and Swakopmund refusal to hold prices firm appears in “Vereinigung Swakopmunder Kaufleute”, DSWAZ, 17, no. 63, Aug. 8, 1914, which also refers to the economic climate of the Herero and Khoi wars: “Es wurde mitgeteilt, daß nach einem eben aus Lüderitzbucht eingelaufenen Telegramm die dortigen Kaufleute auf Getränke, Konserven, und Lebensmittel 25 Prozent aufgeschlagen hätten […] Die Kaufleute würden, wenn das Kabel den Friedenschluß meldet, läger an teuer angekauften Waren haben, und dann werde es gehen wie 1904 bei der plötzliche Zollaufhebung durch Generalmajor Trotha […] In 1904 hatten die hiesige Kaufleute Zehntausende durch die plötzliche Ausserkraftsetzung der Zölle verloren; das werde beim Friedensschluß wiede so werden. Unter diesem Umständen sei der Preisaufschlag nicht nur gerechfertigt, sondern es sei geradezu ein Akt der Notwehr.” The speaker also justified merchants’ restrictions on credit due to defaults experienced in these wars. The Swakopmund Brewery’s demand for cash and carry sales appears in Südwest, 5, no. 63, Aug 8, 1914. See Bley, South-West Africa : 149-52 on criticism of the colonial administration; Gesine Krüger, Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußtsein. Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkriegs in Namibia, 1904 bis 1907, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999; 72 and 108-115 depicts the rumors; Seitz, Südafrika : 18 remarks: “Es ist daher auch ganz natürlich, daß man jene Kämpfe, den einzigen großen Kolonialkrieg, den Deutschland geführt hat, als Maßstab nahm für das, was man von Südwestafrika in diesem Kriege erwartete.” And, p. 21: “In diesen Momenten liegt die große Schwierigkeit einer dauernden und befriedigenden Auseinandersetzung zwischen Schwarz und Weiß im ganzen Südwestafrika.”
The honorable governor has declared [...] that he will immediately inform the press upon the receipt of news. It is not his intention to leave the population in doubt. One should not give way to useless speculation, which can only lead to incitement. There is no basis for any fear in the colony. On this occasion, however, we would not want to omit the warning to everyone that during such earnest times as these one needs to take care and secure one's weapons and munitions lest they fall into unauthorized hands.14

Such dubious reassurances in the German press in the colonies, which warned settlers to secure their weapons, presumably from Africans, were more likely to escalate than reduce white readers’ fears and served to underscore the limits of the governor’s power to safeguard colonists from the perceived danger of the African population surrounding them. It is unknown whether race-baiting in the press sparked isolated instances of violence in South West Africa during the war, but racial and sexual fears and rumors depicting people of color as ‘internal enemies’ prompted riots andlynchings of black men in the US and so-called colonial workers in France in the First World War.15

From the outset of the war, newspapers in South West Africa played a controversial role in stoking colonists’ anxieties even in the face of the colonial government’s efforts to maintain public calm, sometimes by reporting rumors in print, ostensibly in an effort to debunk them. The DSWAZ recriminated that “the most laughable and absurd stories [were] being circulated and believed” in its publication city of Swakopmund.16 It then recounted a number of supposed tall tales, some of which would later seem prophetic rather than nonsensical: for example, the report refuted alleged sightings of enemy warships in the colony’s waters or government plans to evacuate the port cities.17


The DSWAZ downplayed rumors of African unrest as well, advising readers to stop complaining about the sudden insubordination of Africans in the territory. Still, their unfortunate choice of phrasing again underscored the potential danger of an impending native revolt: "Instead of palavering about the unruliness of the natives, in each instance of recalcitrance the offender should be sent to the police, who soon will ensure that any incipient attempts at rebellion will be nipped in the bud." Similarly, the Südwest also advised its readers to safeguard the public wellbeing through the continued care for African workers in farm employment, with the support of the colonial administration:

The farmer has a very serious responsibility for his native workers! He cannot simply fire them and set them on the street without food and shelter. That way will only force them to steal cattle! He must provide his people with work, food, and pay. The government will help in cases where businesses can no longer supply provisions and will step in for farmers who cannot grow enough corn for their people. The government will also ensure that no threatened price increases will make it impossible for farmers to maintain their farms.

Colonial newspapers thus voiced settlers’ high expectations that now burdened Seitz’s administration: to safeguard the imported food supplies which fed African workers, to maintain level prices, to ascertain that the colonial police would remain in place to discipline recalcitrant Africans, and to forestall any hint of looting or rebellion by indigenous populations. Reflecting local district administrators’ apparent sensitivity to German civilians’ concerns, soon after, the DSWAZ reported that Swakopmund officials had begun shipping the city’s unemployed African workers inland to work for the military, since Africans were used in support roles only in the conflict, although the account lamented that the government might not return the workers to their former employers after the conflict. Towns and cities also enforced strict nighttime curfews on native quarters.

The colonial government displayed concern over one of the largest groups of unemployed Africans, South African migrant workers from the Lüderitzbucht diamond

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18 Ibid.: "Man sollte, statt über Unbotmäßigkeiten der Eingeborenen zu palavern, in jedem Falle einer solchen Unbotmäßigkeit den Missetäter der Polizei zuführen, die schon dafür sorgen wird, daß etwaige Ansätze der Farbigen zur Aufhebung im Keime erstickt werden."


mining region, where the mines had closed down due to the shipping embargo. The district government established a makeshift camp for at least 800 of them in the city’s supply depot, to await repatriation to the Union. The local newspaper reassured readers that the city’s citizen militia relieved the local troops guarding them during the night watch, so they presented no danger. Still, as prisoners, the newspaper argued that these many foreign workers were ‘useless eaters’ draining food reserves. Mine owners reportedly were seeking a neutral ship to deport the nearly 2000 African contract workers in total in the colony back to the South African Union.21

However, colonial newspapers also deplored the broader and more dangerous new economic circumstances threatening German settlers, as food prices rose precipitously and businesses shut down or laid off many workers, both whites and blacks. An article in the Südwest questioned, “Is an increase in food prices justified?” and answered this question with a resounding negative, claiming Seitz’s administration would be releasing the names of unpatriotic merchants who were price-gouging. The Südwest underscored the danger of untenable food prices bankrupting farmers, who might have to release their potentially restive African workhands, thus imperiling the white community.22

Still, storekeepers were reluctant to extend credit, resulting in hardship for many settler families. A news report in the DSWAZ covering a meeting of the Swakopmund Chamber of Commerce on 5 August noted the members’ concerns over widespread unemployment in general, reporting that one speaker called on the government to assist them in order to prevent a Hungeraufruhr (“hunger insurgency”).23 Merchants at the meeting decried the growing unruliness of Africans, who not only defied the local curfew but also flouted whites’ authority in other ways:

> Several speakers have given testimony that local natives now are more intrac- 
> table than before. A native customer in one of the area shops allegedly said 
> that natives would no longer repay their debts at all, since the day after 
> tomorrow they will be ‘boss’.

The Africans in question may have been unable to pay their debts under the deteriorating economic conditions, but the merchants also collectively demanded that Swakopmund district officials put a stop to a local group of Africans who engaged in late-night drill exercises in public after curfew, depicting these so-called Truppenspieler (play soldiers) as defiant and a potential threat. Speakers also urged the government to

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23 “Vereinigung Swakopmunder Kaufleute”, DSWAZ, 17, no. 63, Aug. 8, 1914.

24 Ibid.: “Von mehreren Rednern wurde darauf hingewiesen, daß die hiesigen Eingeborenen jetzt noch frecher aufträten als sonst; so habe ein Eingeborener in einem hiesigen Geschäft rund erklärt, Schulden bezahlten die Eingeborenen überhaupt nicht mehr, übermorgen seien sie ‘Baas’.”
remove the area’s remaining South African migrant workers inland until a deportation ship could be arranged, where they would not represent such a danger to the city.  

An even more hostile open protest letter to the governor criticizing his war measures appeared in the DSWAZ on 15 August. The editorial sought to “dampen the patriotic enthusiasm uniting the colony”, by depicting the war economy’s impact. Among a litany of complaints, the open letter alleged that the governor had wrongly accused Swakopmund shopkeepers of raising their food prices exorbitantly and illegally, noting that the existing colonial code freezing the prices of essentials in wartime only applied to military provisions, “The guarantor who told you, Herr Governor, false stories about these merchants and their activities should at the very least be punished just as sharply as those who spread made-up stories.” The piece detailed a series of problems for ordinary colonists that Seitz and his administration had either failed to address or caused through its war mobilization. The most serious of these was that the call-up of all able-bodied men to military service had removed most breadwinners from their families, who now were forced to resort to local charities, particularly parish poor relief. The editorial demanded that the civil authorities provide state assistance, alleging that still more families were unable to pay their mortgages and other debts. Adding to the settlers’ burden, the newspaper recounted that the collapse of the credit system had led to a run on banks and a currency shortage. Summing up the unhappiness of the colonists, the paper editorialized, “[In the sarcastic words of that longtime Southwest African [colonist], ‘At the outbreak of war, our government always makes war on its own people first!’].” The allusion again appears to draw a connection to the 1904 Herero and Khoi wars. Governor Seitz soon issued a rebuttal, promising state support for all white civilians in need and forcing outraged merchants to supply goods at prewar prices.


26 “Offener Brief an unserer Governeur”, DSWAZ, 17, no. 65, Aug. 15, 1914: “einen Dämpfer auf die vaterländische Begeisterung setzen”.


28 Ibid.: “das Sarkastische Wort eines alten Südwester ernst zu nehmen, der davon sprach, ‘bei Ausbruch eines Krieges erkläre unsere Regierung zunächst immer erst der eigenen Bevölkerung den Krieg.’”
to the state for public distribution to their fellow settlers. Other newspapers in the
territory deplored the unpatriotic tone of the DSWAZ in a time of war.

The paper further courted the wrath of the governor by openly speculating on sources
of possible native unrest, despite the threatened military discipline for rumor mongering:

As we hear it, great but baseless fear reigns in the North. The people most
distant from protection are the most nervous. The troop mobilization was the
logical response to mobilization in the homeland. We must do what we can to
prepare ourselves in case something happens. But, until now, there have been
no reports of activity among the Bondelswarts [Khoi nation]. It will probably not
come to that. At least there is nothing to indicate that it will. All reports to the
contrary are ‘stories’.

The article, which purported to debunk false reports specifically identified the
Bondelswarts as the rumored source of likely trouble, based on their recent unrest. The
rumors seem to have resulted in Seitz’s forced relocation of Bondelswarts from the
colony’s southern border near Warmbad, to Ovambo territory in the north, in September. The DSWAZ had circulated this hearsay in contravention of the governor’s
prohibition, and the reports could also be perceived as provocative toward the African
population, in defiance of the Colonial Press Law of 1912. In particular, the brief allusion
to public anxiety seemed especially calculated to taunt Seitz, but his response indicates
an accommodation rather than a confrontation over these rumors.

Government suppression and harassment of the press

Instead, the public letter condemning the government quickly escalated into a major
controversy over the freedom of the press. DSWAZ reported in its very next issue on 19
August that Swakopmund district officials had confiscated the issue containing its open
letter to the governor, but that its directors had already begun to meet the conditions to
lift the confiscation order. The article added that, despite reports to the contrary, the
governor had personally assured that his officials would not arrest the editor, Arthur
Mylo, which the article claimed would have been a serious infringement of his legal rights:

29 “Eine Erklärung des Gouvernements”, Lüderitzbcher Zeitung, 6, no. 35, Aug. 28, 1914, outlines Seitz’s
telegram to the Swakopmund district office: “In Swakopmund soll Privaten Not an Lebensmittel drohen, weil
Geschäfte nur gegen Barzahlung Proviat an Weißes herausgeben. Weist Stadt darauf hin, daß sie für Mittel-
lose zu sorgen hat. Eröffnet den Geschäften, daß eventuell staatliches Einschreiten erfolgen muß.”

30 “Wie wir hören…”, DSWAZ, 65, no. 17, 15 Aug., 1914: “Wie wir hören, soll im Norden eine große, aber
groundlose Aufregung herrschen. Die Leute geht vom Schutz werden am meisten nervös! Die Truppenan-
sammlungen sind die natürliche Folge der Mobilmachung in der Heimat. Etwas muss doch aber geschehen,
Um für alle Falle gerüstet zu sein. Bis jetzt hört man nichts von Bewegungen bei den Bondels. Wird wohl
auch kaum dazu kommen. Sonst ist nichts im Anzuge. Alle Erzählungen sind ‘Stories’” [emphasis in orig.].

31 In addition to Bondelswart insurgency in 1903 in the lead-up to the Herero War, Bley, South-West Africa : 133 mentions their 1913 revolt. Willich, Kriegstage : 19 confirms the government’s forced removal of
unemployed Ovambo mineworkers and 1600 Bondelswarts by rail from Warmbad to Ovamboland around 16
September.
An attempt by the [Swakopmund] District Office to have police take our editor into custody for questioning by the district officer was suspended after our editor explained to those charged with apprehending him that such a measure would be a violation of his rights, and that he flatly refused to satisfy the demand for such an interview. It is further advised that it is not legal for the government to seize copies of the issue in question that are in private hands.32

A follow-up report on the very same page added fuel to the controversy, by seeking to dispel the “mistaken notion in many quarters that there is not presently a need for charitable collections”, noting at least six families in the city whose breadwinners had been called to military service.33

The governor’s orders to seize the newspaper proved to be an overreach of his powers over the press. As the subsequent issue of the DSWAZ detailed, the Swakopmund district court summarily ordered the government to return the confiscated copies on Wednesday August 19, ruling the seizure order illegal. But the Seitz administration re-imposed its ban on the issue the very next day, adding a criminal charge against the editor — libeling the governor and his fellow officials, which the newspaper protested vehemently:

Anyone who read our open letter to the governor with an open mind would find nothing libelous. Even the local jurists could not find anything of the kind in it. Nothing lay further from our minds than insulting anyone. Completely apart from the fact that in earnest and momentous times as these, every good German has better things to do than to inflict needless difficulties on fellow citizens, it would be madness to insult the governor or his officials in an article containing a series of requests from the people to him.34

Seeming confident of victory in spite of the outstanding libel charge against its editor, the following issues of the newspaper continued to rehash many of the previous complaints concerning the lack of state support for local families in need due to the


mustering of reservists. The paper also claimed an outpouring of support for their position from "respected settlers" throughout the colony.\(^35\)

The *Südwest*, in keeping with its previous position defending the governor’s price controls against the *DSWAZ*, disputed the rival paper’s claim that there were any settler families in need in Swakopmund and declared that its other complaints bore no resemblance to circumstances in Windhoek. More significantly, the *Südwest* alleged that the open letter to the governor had revealed strategic military information. Other articles in the paper downplayed the potential danger of African insurgency. Reports noted with satisfaction on 28 August that the government had deported all the remaining South African migrant workers from the colony; reminded readers many indigenous Africans had displayed loyalty and gratitude to their German employers during the 1904 revolts; and urged their readers to have faith in South West African natives’ devotion to the German cause. The *Lüderitzbucht Zeitung* was more evenhanded, acknowledging that difficult circumstances had arisen for some colonists as a result of the government’s recent policies, but strongly disapproved of open criticism of the governor’s defensive measures.\(^36\)

The *DSWAZ* continued to launch new complaints against Seitz’s administration in its next issue, charging that the government’s restricted railroad schedule, aimed at conserving fuel, had limited train service to only one weekly connection between Swakopmund and other cities. The newspaper announced that it was forced to revise its publication schedule to allow its issues to circulate by rail with as little delay as possible to its dispersed readership. Shortly after that, the *DSWAZ* complained that Seitz’s administration had submitted translated press releases from South African newspapers to the Windhoek paper nearly a week earlier than to their own office. Dismissing most of the old news as “British fabrications”, the editor refused to publish the material and further related that there were a number of other deliberate misrepresentations in the enemy newspapers that the German government had spared readers. It editorialized, “How many aggravating and disconcerting rumors have circulated in this territory as a result of falsehoods printed in the Cape Colony press, carried in for example, via Lüderitz-

\(^35\) “Unser ‘Offener Brief’”, *DSWAZ*, 17, no. 70, Sept. 2, 1914: “Vor uns liegen eine Menge Zuschriften aus den verschiedensten Gegenden des Landes und von angesehenen Männern; ausnahmslos stimmen diese Zuschriften unseren Ausführungen zu.”

Such remarks implied that Seitz’s administration was irresponsibly circulating false British reports in the absence of reliable news transmissions from Germany. Nonetheless, on 4 September the Swakopmund district council held a three-hour hearing of DSWAZ editor Arthur Mylo’s case which resulted in his sentence to a month in the city jail for libeling the governor and his military and civilian subordinates. Further government harassment of the paper quickly followed. On 8 September, the Swakopmund police brought new charges against the DSWAZ in the form of a 100 Mark fine against the paper’s owner, for failure to provide an advance copy of its 7 September special edition to local police for clearance. An editorial implied harassment, claiming that the copy had been forwarded in its usual fashion, since district authorities were now holding their news bureau to the letter of the 1912 Colonial Press Law, which had not been enforced previously. The publishers further complained about the high costs of telephoning the administration in Windhoek to receive only dated news releases taken from enemy newspapers. The governor’s office would otherwise have forwarded the material in written form by the weekly rail to Swakopmund, despite the “moral right of the population to the fastest possible transmission of this news”. More disturbingly, the DSWAZ further reported that local criminal police had also questioned the editors about their sources for the 7 September issue, which had been reprinted from enemy newspapers, although the newspaper’s coverage clearly stated that the German government had supplied the information in question.


41 Ibid.: “die Bevölkerung ein moralisches Recht auf möglichst schnelle Mitteilung dieser Nachrichten hat. Deshalb halten wir es für unsere Pflicht, die recht erheblichen Kosten, die mit der telephonischen Übermittlung der spaltenlangen Nachrichten verbunden sind, im öffentlichen Interesse auf uns zu nehmen.”

42 “In eigener Sache”, DSWAZ, 17, no.72b, Sept. 9, 1914: “der Herr Bezirksamtmann heute früh durch die Kriminalpolizei unseren Redakteur auffordern ließ, ihm mitzuteilen, woher die in der gestrigen Sonderausgabe veröffentlichten Nachrichten aus dem britischen Blättern stammten.”
According to the paper, the investigation was the result of a charge of treason against the editor of the DSWAZ:

In fact, a criminal complaint was issued against the editor, from which administrative office we unfortunately do not know, for betrayal of military secrets. Our editor was alleged to have published war dispatches, which had actually been circulated by the government in Windhoek! Under these circumstances, the court obviously shelved the matter.43

The escalating administrative repression of the newspaper would likely have resulted in the eventual government closure of the paper, but circumstances intervened. South Africa’s legislature voted to declare war the following day on 10 September. The confrontation between the DSWAZ and the colonial administration was never resolved, but Seitz’s draconian actions probably also had a chilling effect on the other newspapers in the colony.

South Africa launched its invasion of the colony the following week. A small armed force crossed the Southern border in Uhabis on 12 September, followed by naval bombardment of Swakopmund on 14 September. A marine occupation of Lüderitzbucht commenced on 19 September. The final issue of the DSWAZ from that date incorrectly speculated that Swakopmund would fall to enemy hands in the next few days, leading to an official evacuation that would put an abrupt end to the conflict between the DSWAZ, and Seitz. Although the Lüderitzbucht Zeitung and the DSWAZ both ceased publication by 24 September, ironically, Südwest reported a spate of new rumors circulating in Windhoek just after refugees trains began arriving there from Swakopmund on the 29th.44

Still more ironically, some of the events announced in unfounded rumors from earlier in the war now came to pass. For example, in August newspapers had sought to quash rumors of sightings of British warships as “dangerous to the public wellbeing” and “a bare-faced swindle on all counts,” and denied the rumored evacuation of the port cities on the governor’s orders.45 But the alleged presence of enemy warships and coastal evacuations were no longer mere fantasies. The eventual confirmation of hearsay that the newspapers had denied, when added to Seitz’s harassment of the DSWAZ may well have had the effect of further undermining German settlers’ confidence in the news, and

43 “Briefkasten”, DSWAZ, 17, no.72b, Sept. 9, 1914: “Die Sache stimmt. Es war in der Tat eine Strafanzeige wegen Verrats militärischer Geheimnisse ergangen, von welcher Behörde, wissen wir leider noch nicht. Unser Redakteur sollte die Straftat dadurch begangen haben, daß er eine Kriegsdepesche in der Fassung abdruckte, in der sie das Gouvernement in Windhuk veröffentlicht hatte! Das Gericht legte die Anzeige unter sotanen [sic] Umständen selbstverständlich ad acta.”


45 “Storiejäger!”, DSWAZ, 17, no. 63, 8 August 1914: “Schwätzhafe Wichtigtuer und sonstige Neuigkeitskrämerwieder eine Menge Storys im Umlauf gesetzt, deren Verbreitung in diesem Augenblick ganz besonders gewissenlos ist, ja geradezu gemeingefährliches Gepräge trägt. Da wurde z. B. versichert, am Freitag ein britisches Kriegsschiff in Lüderitzbucht […]
even the governor. After all, Seitz failed to order an evacuation of Lüderitzbucht, leaving the city’s German residents exposed.

On 21 September, after South African marine forces assumed formal control over the city, German and Austrian civilians who had not evacuated of their own accord were removed by ship to civilian prisoner of war camps in Roberts Heights South Africa, near Pretoria where they were held for months, with no notification to the public of their identities or condition. German memoirist F. W. Kaufmann alleged that residents of Swakopmund were also critical of the fact that the hasty official evacuation ordered in the wake of Lüderitzbucht’s fall had forced them to abandon necessary items and needed provisions, crowding them into the cities of Karibib and Windhoek for months to come. An Afrikaner rebellion in South Africa against the war delayed the South African invasion from October 1914 into January 1915. The South Africans’ campaign to occupy German territory resumed in January 1915, and only then did undefended Swakopmund fall. The South African invasion was hampered by difficulties with terrain and supplies, but gradually imposed control over German settlements, and culminated in the final surrender of German forces on 9 July, 1915. German civilians in the territory remained hopeful that an eventual German victory in Europe could result in the restoration of the colony. Kaufmann’s memoirs also described strict censorship during the South African occupation, although he and fellow Germans in South West Africa secretly circulated smuggled news bulletins about the war from Germany on typewritten papers.46

Long-term consequences

Although Seitz’s administration was heavy-handed in suppressing the DSWAZ for its criticism of his war measures, we have seen that he was far more tolerant, and indeed responsive to speculation in the colonial press concerning the potential for African insurrection. In fact, the territory’s African population suffered greatly in the war. Unrest in neighboring Portuguese Angola and the wartime embargo on food imports exacerbated by drought and the failed harvest of 1915 culminated in a famine in the colony’s Ovamboland district, and causing many Ovambo-speaking Africans to migrate into Central Namibia permanently. Seitz’s own memoir estimates 30,000 Africans starved in the Northern Territories during the invasion, but his own forced removal policies added population to the troubled region. Thousands of Africans, many no doubt

receiving inadequate nutrition, pillaged cattle and supplies from German homesteads and assisted the invading forces from South Africa. Seitz’s military defense of the colony, by resisting the South African invasion, prevented humanitarian assistance from relieving African privation in the north until the German surrender.47

The absence of reliable news compounded German colonists’ racial fears during the South African invasion, causing many to react irrationally. Skirmishes erupted between some German and Afro-European Baster farmers in the Rehoboth District in April 1915 which resulted in civilian deaths and ratcheted up racial tensions. German memoirs suggest that rumors provoked fear and confusion that drove many of the German settlers who had remained on homesteads to abandon them for towns and cities. These refugees taxed city resources and left their possessions and cattle exposed to looting, especially by Herero farmworkers who seized the opportunity to re-establish themselves as independent cattle herders. Many German settlers and businesses complained of economic ruin as a result of the war. Once the South African military completed the occupation of the colony, there was no quick relief for German settlers’ feelings of insecurity. Under South African martial law, German reservists returning to civilian life surrendered their weapons for the duration of the war. The German Colonial Ministry reported in 1916 that the unarmed German homesteaders remained anxious and distrustful: “The white population, namely the unarmed farmers, are still fearful – this is apparent in almost all letters and reports before us – that the natives will soon commit violent acts, if not a broad rebellion against the whites.”48 Of course, many Germans returned to Germany during the South African military occupation or following the German defeat, either by choice or compulsion, but scholarship of Namibia in the Mandate era confirms that the continued rumors of African unrest and the weakness of the state in the region legitimated ongoing German settler violence against Africans in Namibia well into the 1920s.49

Conclusion

In summation, the scarcity of reliable news in South West Africa during the First World War directly impacted German civilians in the war and had lasting consequences for the territory. Just as gaps in the news, censorship, and misinformation reduced German settlers’ sense of security, they have also clouded historical understanding of civilians’

47 Figure from Theodor Seitz, Südafrika im Weltkriege, 18. For more on the lasting impact of the famine, see J.B. Gewald, “Near Death in the Streets of Karibib: Famine, Migrant Labour and the Coming of Ovambo to Central Namibia,” The Journal of African History vol. 44, no. 2, (2003): 211-239, especially page 222.
war experiences in the colony. Over time, the incremental loss of telegraphic news services, the German colonial administration’s monopoly over information and suppression of criticism, and the closure of newspapers in the course of the South African invasion, gradually choked off German settlers’ access to reliable information. Although German newspapers from South West Africa in 1914-1915 contain many expressions of settler solidarity with each other and with the homeland over the war, historians, like readers at the time, are left to speculate how much faith to place in newspapers’ portrayals. While settler rumors identified Africans as a dangerous internal enemy and undermined the German community’s confidence in their safety and thus in the governor’s leadership, Seitz’s heavy-handed efforts to control the news likely further undermined German colonists’ trust in him. Despite postures to the contrary, Seitz’s administration was far more assertive in controlling newspapers and silencing his critics in the press than suppressing rumors and hearsay among colonists. White colonists’ expressions of anxiety about the potential for African insurrection extended long-standing patterns of racial tension in the colony. In the end, the speculation and hearsay recorded in wartime newspapers may be more revealing representations of the war experience in the colony than the so-called news.

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