
Straight histories rarely get much attention these days; to procure some attention, it seems that academic books focusing on African history have to go cross disciplinary or across the Atlantic (or Pacific) to garner some attention. And so when a book such as Marion Wallace’s A History of Namibia comes out, it is hardly surprising that it goes largely unnoticed among the general public or scholars who study Africa. No, it does not have much in the way of cross-disciplinary integration in the text; nor does it have many trans-Atlantic tentacles. But this should not deter one from picking up this book. Wallace’s account of Namibia is accessible, well-written, and provides a desperately-needed update on the country’s history and historiography. The book’s biggest asset, however, is that it suitably highlights the country’s deep historical connections to the outside world, and does it this while maintaining a Namibian-centric view of the events shaping the country’s history.

Wallace succeeds repeatedly at incorporating a Namibian-centric view of history throughout the book. Her approach is not unique; Jeremy Silvester, Patricia Hayes, Robert Gordon, Jan Bart-Gewald, Wolfram Hartmann and a host of others have created accessible Namibian-centric history. But Wallace goes one step further on two different levels. First, and most importantly, she applies this method to a general history of the country. Depending on how one counts the general historical literature on Namibia, this has rarely been accomplished or, at most, is very dated in its approach. Secondly, Wallace applies this Namibia-centric approach to the two major eras of foreign influence, the German and South African colonial periods, and threads them seamlessly together. The benefit for those interested in understanding this part of Africa is that this information is all under one cover.

A few examples suffice to illustrate the scope and approach of this book. Wallace argues that Ovaherero reorganisation, for example, came about as the result of an increasing Christian conversion rate after 1908 and the number of boys and girls absorbed into the German Schutztruppe between 1904 and 1908. This information is not unique in and of itself; however, her presentation of the material focusing on how Namibians used European religious and military structures to strengthen and reorganise their own societies points to an important shift in the way information is privileged. This event could have easily been written through a Eurocentric lens, favouring the scaffolding of European society for saving this population from extinction.

Wallace also does well to point out the changing historical interpretations of certain events and eras in the country’s history, a sorely needed update to Namibia’s history. A discussion of the previous literature is located at the start of four different chapters respectfully focusing on northern Namibia (1750-1907), the Namibian War (1904-1908),...
“Nationalism and Apartheid, 1946-70” and the late modern liberation movement (1971-1990). These commentaries on the nature of historical literature are well positioned, setting the stage for the narrative that follows. This may seem like a mundane contribution to praise from a general history book but its importance cannot be underappreciated. In chapter 9, “Nationalism and Apartheid, 1946-1970,” Wallace writes: “Writing the history of the period between the Second World War and independence in 1990 is facilitated by the fact that African-authored sources are much more plentiful than for earlier periods [...]. Yet [...] historical narratives are difficult to construct. This period in still very much in flux, as new facts and arguments are put forward and debated, and which [...] holds continued political significance and resonance” (p. 243).

The succeeding chapters bear out the difficulties of writing on this period as Wallace oscillates between a straight political history on apartheid’s rise in Namibia (chapter 9) and the increasing complexity of Namibian resistance discussed in chapter 10. These two chapters are problematic due to their uneven historical analysis. However, Wallace’s unapologetic foreshadowing of these chapters (through changing historical sources and methods) demonstrates the difficulties in writing this period’s history, but also highlights the potential development for many different types of histories that are yet to be written on this era.

Oral histories, individual histories, and historical photographs are also used constructively throughout the manuscript. They add a layer of historical context that Namibia has become noted for in recent years. Since independence Namibians and scholars of Namibia have made a prominent push for the preservation and escalation of public, oral and photographic histories. Wallace takes advantage of this work to illuminate the big, historical picture. At times she uses individual histories to embody the collective experience. Wallace suggests that Axel Johannes, an activist in the Namibian resistance movement, epitomized activists working towards political independence; she suggests that Johannes’ arrests, re-arrests, torture, and exile provide a clean snapshot of the typical experience among those seeking Namibian independence from South Africa (pp. 307f.). There are also some good uses of historical photographs from archives in Namibia and throughout Europe. Included are some of the more common pictures used in Namibian History; Hendrik Witbooi (p. 113), Theodor Leutwein (p. 132), and Hosea Kutako (p. 225) occupy their rightful places in the appropriate parts of this manuscript. However, lesser-known (or viewed) photographs have a greater impact on the material, demonstrating multiple meanings in their relation to their captions and accompanying text. Figure 19 on page 196, for example, provides evidence of the growing number of Afrikaner families entering Namibia during the German era but also emphasises the socio-economic divisions between white ethnic groups during the period. The reader also receives these multi-layered meanings with figure 15 on page 159 depicting a
survey crew working on the Otavi-Swakopmund railway line in 1903. In regards to the text, this photograph portrays the construction of a line that led to disputes over land rights and eventually to the Namibian War of 1904. Beyond this meaning, Wallace writes: “This photograph is also a reminder of the importance of the work of Africans in both skilled and unskilled roles, in the construction of the colony’s infrastructure.” It is difficult to be satisfied with the number of illustrations and photographs in this book in the wake of such photographic milestones as Colonising Camera; nevertheless, Wallace succeeds in her strategic placement of these photos and their multiple meanings.

This is not to say that A History of Namibia is flawless. One missed opportunity in this work was to draw comparisons between (and analyse) the German and South African periods. Admittedly, it is not often the place of general histories to tread new paths. However, Wallace’s reputation as a respected historian of Namibia should have translated into some risks that transcended chronological boundaries. Her judicious tone throughout the book also leaves much to be desired. While applauded by Shula Marks (on the backside of the book’s sleeve), Wallace’s apparent quest to strike a balanced tone is painfully awkward at times. Wallace does an excellent job to include and interpret the oral commentaries she weaves into this history. But these oral inclusions do not often mix well with straight political history. For example, chapter nine’s introductory comments on the inclusion of African voices and sources during the period of nationalism and apartheid are judicious but unevenly paired with a heavy dose of information pertaining to the rise of apartheid in Namibia. Much of the latter information reads as a colonial-centric, chronological rehashing of the South African period.

Wallace’s book works best when it is not even-handed. For example, her support of Henrichsen’s interpretation on how nineteenth century African political leaders rose is juxtaposed to the interpretations of their predecessors: “Lau and Loth […] exaggerate the importance of Europeans in Namibia at this period” (p. 70). This returns us to the importance of Wallace’s work, her emphasis on telling Namibia’s history from a Namibian perspective. From John Kinahan’s pre-eighteenth century chapter on the country’s archaeological foundations to the concluding chapter, A History of Namibia makes great strides in pushing the genre of general African histories toward an Afrocentric reality. What’s more exciting is that Namibia is at the forefront of this movement.

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