

**Review:** Hans-Martin Milk, *Der Stimme der Gnade Gehör schenken. Zur Rolle der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft bei der Errichtung von Konzentrationslagern in Namibia – 1905 bis 1907*, Berlin, Wichern, 2016.

The genocidal war Imperial Germany waged in former South West Africa between 1904 and 1908 is now probably more prominent in the public conscience than ever before given the ongoing dialogue between the Namibian and German governments over an official apology and compensation, the recent lawsuit of Ovaherero and Nama groups in New York against the Federal Republic, and a major exhibition in the German Historical Museum in Berlin on German colonialism. Among the most hotly discussed aspects of the war are the concentration camps Germany established in late 1904 which proved to be the sites of death for more than 7000 interned Ovaherero and Nama.

Hans-Martin Milk, a former mathematics and physics teacher who grew up in Namibia and spent much of his working life there, has now contributed another article on the role of the Rhenish Mission Society in the creation of the South West African camp system. His aim is to refute an interpretation put forward by Hanns Lessing in the course of the so called 'Studienprozess' of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* though he only reveals this in his concluding remarks (pp. 24f.).<sup>1</sup> Lessing

<sup>1</sup> The 'Studienprozess' produced two weighty volumes. The first one being Hanns Lessing et al., (eds.), *Deutsche evangelische Kirche im kolonialen südlichen Afrika. Die Rolle der*

argues that the initiative for establishing concentration camps came from the missionary side and that the missionaries became directly involved in the structures of genocide by persuading Ovaherero to come into the camps where thousands would die.<sup>2</sup> Milk on the other hand rightly stresses the important difference between collection camps established by the Rhenish Mission in Omburo and Otjinhaenena and later in Otjozongombe and Okomito from late 1905 onwards and the concentration camps built a year earlier, which were run by the military. Given the determined attempts by missionaries to better the conditions for Nama and Ovaherero in the concentration camps, which Lessing also acknowledges, and the general doubts recently formulated as to whether the military camps really

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*Auslandsarbeit von den Anfängen bis in die 1920er Jahre*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2011 (engl. *The German Protestant Church in colonial Southern Africa. The impact of overseas work from the beginnings until the 1920s*, Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publ., 2012). It was harshly criticized by the Mainzer Arbeitskreis südliches Afrika of which Milk is a member. See Markus Braun, *Völkermord verjährt nicht. Kommentar zum EKD-Studienprozess zum kolonialen südlichen Afrika*, Berlin, Wichern, 2014. See also the reply Klaus Burckhardt, Jürgen Kampmann and Hanns Lessing, *Zur Auseinandersetzung um die Geschichte der protestantischen Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und dem südlichen Afrika. Eine Stellungnahme des Studienprozesses*, Berlin, Wichern, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Hanns Lessing, "In der Nähe dieser Wasserstellen sollen Konzentrationslager errichtet werden". Eine theologische Rekonstruktion der Rolle der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft während des Kolonialkrieges in Namibia (1904–1908), in: Lessing, *Kirche*: 471–495; and Burckhart et al., *Auseinandersetzung*: 22.

were an intentional continuation of von Trotha's earlier extermination policy, and thus part of the genocide, it does seem too sweeping a judgment to consider the Rhenish missionaries part of the genocidal structures.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Milk's own assessment that all those involved in the missionary collection camps "were in the first place motivated by the charitable thought to save many lives and to protect" (p. 24) also seems rather too simplistic. Thoughts about the mission's position after the war and rationalisations of the suffering in the camps as being a just punishment for "rebellious" or, as Lessing puts it, as theological signs of future blessings should not be ignored.<sup>4</sup> The role of the Rhenish Mission certainly was highly ambivalent.

The most remarkable aspect of Milk's article, however, is to be found in a different field. He highlights the importance of so called "evangelists", Africans who collaborated with the missionaries, many of whom had done so before the war, and who were crucial for the work of collection. Milk's argument that the missionaries themselves lacked the necessary trust among the Ovaherero population to convince them to turn themselves in is compelling. The missionaries usually only knew a few

converts living around the mission stations, while the "evangelists" and other helpers looked after the more remote parts of the country. Therefore the missionaries were dependent on these trusted collaborators to perform their collection task successfully and it was actually they who went out into the field searching for people to bring in (pp. 16-24). Milk's argument is in line with recent scholarship here which stresses the importance of intermediaries for the colonial project.<sup>5</sup> He names several of these "evangelists" and provides more background on the brothers Erastus, Gustav and Josaphat Kamatoto. The former two worked in the collection camp in Otjihaena. However, one would wish for more detailed information, for instance, on the motives of these intermediaries and how they perceived their work. But, as so often with research on turn of the century Africa, the references in the colonial archives to the actions and perceptions of Africans are patchy and haphazard and even managing to name some of the intermediaries, as Milk does here, can be extremely difficult.

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<sup>3</sup> On the different interpretations of the genocidal character of the camps see Jonas Kreienbaum, *"Ein trauriges Fiasko". Koloniale Konzentrationslager im südlichen Afrika, 1900–1908*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2015; and Casper Erichsen, *"The Angel of Death has Descended Violently among Them". Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904–1908*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Lessing, "Konzentrationslager": 493.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts, (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, Madison, University of Wisconsin, 2006.