Review: Gustine Hunter, Die Politik der Errinnerung und des Vergessens in Namibia (The Politics of Memory and Forgetting in Namibia), Frankfurt am Main, Lang, 2008.

Gustine Hunter’s thorough analysis of the politics of memory and forgetting in Namibia’s struggle for independence offers an important contribution to a still contested history. It poses the crucial question as to how a society undergoes a transition from an authoritarian regime characterized by gross human rights violations to a peaceful democracy. Hunter argues that there is a connection between the ways in which a society addresses its past and the degree of consolidation of its democratic regime. This, she notes, does not suggest that a discussion of the past necessarily leads to democracy, or that only non-democratic states seek to deny aspects of their history. Namibia’s transition and reconciliation process included a general amnesty for human rights violations without investigating the past. Hunter contends that this has key implications for the future of Namibia’s democracy as it fails to investigate not only specific acts of political violence but perhaps more importantly, the hierarchical-authoritarian political culture created by the apartheid regime and reinforced by the armed resistance movement (South West Africa People’s Organization, SWAPO) as it struggled for liberation.

Hunter considers various strategies for dealing with the past: trials and tribunals, amnesty (which may be necessary to bring about a political transition), truth commissions, reparations whether material or symbolic, socio-economic justice mechanisms, reform of public institutions, limiting the participation of former state agents, and national reconciliation processes. Her primary sources include interviews, vast archival resources including the private collection of Siegfried Groth, and public documents ranging from military to NGO reports, propaganda materials from all sides, press reports and letters to the editor. She employs this multitude of sources to explore the period of armed struggle from 1966 to 1989 and its effect on present day politics and society. While the former liberation movement and now governing party attempts to silence debate, Hunter’s evidence points to significant controversies and gaps in the historical record. From the mid 1970s, Hunter details growing accounts of human rights violations including torture, extralegal executions and disappearances at SWAPO’s hands. She argues that roughly 2000 people who went missing were last seen in SWAPO’s custody.

In order to put SWAPO’s actions in context, Hunter dedicates a chapter to detailing the violence and human rights violations of the apartheid system. In addressing SWAPO’s still contested human rights violations, she draws on victim’s accounts and documents from supporting organizations as well as SWAPO’s rebuttals. SWAPO was riven by an internal crisis that was a product of both its own weaknesses and infiltration by foreign agents. This led to thousands of allegations against SWAPO members.
of spying for the enemy. Tensions between better-educated younger recruits and the old guard, among different language groups and regions and between the political and military wings of the movement contributed to false allegations. Hunter’s discussion of the Kongwa crisis, the so-called Shipanga crisis, and the spy drama of the mid-1980s demonstrates both the serious human rights violations that took place at SWAPO’s hands and the incredibly difficult conditions under which SWAPO operated. She demonstrates that domestic and international groups that supported the struggle for liberation resisted acknowledging SWAPO’s violations for fear that this would play into the hands of South Africa’s anti-SWAPO campaign.

Hunter also considers the particular challenges faced by those who sought to defend SWAPO detainees. She compares the lack of support for the Committee of Parents in Namibia (due to the lack of prominent civil society and INGO support) to the powerful networks created by support committees in Chile, Peru, Argentina and Bolivia among other Latin American countries. While this is an important point, the comparison is a bit awkward since the Namibian case comprised accusations against a popular liberation movement struggling for independence while the Latin American cases were human rights violations largely committed by popularly discredited authoritarian regimes. Hunter importantly notes that Namibia lies in a region of contrasting responses to the past from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that addressed a number of crucial aspects of the country’s past to the official silence in regard to post-independence war crimes in Zimbabwe. Here as elsewhere, a deeper comparison to South Africa’s response to apartheid-era human rights violations might have offered illuminating insights.

Namibia’s transition and independence process, much more than that of neighboring South Africa, was driven by outside forces. Unlike South Africa, Namibia, did not delve into its past through a mechanism such as the TRC. SWAPO embraced the idea of national reconciliation without requiring the telling of ‘truths’. It offered white Namibians who benefited from apartheid and even those who actively supported it a remarkable opportunity to maintain their wealth and status, and it has employed this general amnesty to silence criticism of its own practices. In chapter five, Hunter outlines a number of significant differences between Namibia and South Africa in order to explain their contrasting approaches to reconciliation. Key among these are: Namibia’s particular experience of war and its struggle not just for the end of apartheid but also for independence and the weakness of civil society in Namibia in comparison to South Africa’s more politically diverse, urbanized, and industrialized society. Namibia’s transition moment also occurred four years before that in South Africa. These are crucial differences that clearly created different politics of memory in the two countries, but their connection to the institutionalization of democracy is less clear.
SWAPO’s political dominance, winning two-thirds of the seats in parliament since 1994 (a similar margin to that enjoyed by the African National Congress in South Africa), has translated into its control over official memory. While the leading representatives of the dominant party speak of national reconciliation through forgiving and forgetting, the party has erected numerous monuments to SWAPO’s military struggle. SWAPO has argued that looking back (aside from its own memorializing) is unconstructive and threatens to open old wounds and perhaps even encourage violence. While Hunter contends that Namibians could have pressed for their own commission by pointing to the contradictions between the general amnesty and basic principles of international human rights law, she also details how numerous individuals and organizations have sought to open public discussion. Siegfried Groth, for example, published his detailed report into SWAPO’s violations: *Namibia – The Wall of Silence* in 1995 (English version in 1996) as the South African TRC began its work, but his work did not change the government’s approach to the past. SWAPO quite effectively undermined all attempts to promote a national discussion of the past though, importantly, it did not silence those calling for an investigation.

Hunter demonstrates that SWAPO’s defense of the general amnesty has thwarted investigations into the past as well as the recovery of the remains of those who disappeared. While the decision to grant an amnesty was never opened to public discussion or popular vote, she argues that the majority of the population has not voiced their disapproval. In concluding, Hunter adds that such amnesties are not exceptional. Indeed, in instances in which there have been thorough investigations into the past and reevaluations of long accepted public histories, such as post-war Germany, an honest, open discussion of responsibility beyond a few individuals has taken decades to develop. She underlines the importance of addressing the past with an eye to the stability of democratic institutions and a culture of human rights and views unaddressed human rights violations as hurdles to democratic consolidation. This is an important argument with far reaching implications. But, the causal connection between how a state addresses past violations and the consolidation of it post-transition democracy remains unclear. The case of South Africa raises interesting questions. Has South Africa’s TRC helped to strengthen democracy in South Africa relative to that in Namibia’s without a TRC? The broad parallels between Namibia and South Africa despite their different institutional approaches to the past are worth considering. Both countries are characterized by a dominant party system in which opposition actors have only marginal influence on government policy-making, both are marked by incredibly high income inequality that has not been mitigated since the end of apartheid, both are widely considered to be strong African democracies but have recently been downgraded by international monitoring agencies for media
freedom. By offering a detailed discussion of the Namibian case, Hunter's work opens the door to fruitful cross-national comparisons into the impact that transitional justice mechanisms have upon the institutionalization of new democracies.

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