The military campaign in German Southwest Africa, 1904 – 1907 and the genocide of the Herero and Nama

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Abstract
This article examines the military campaign to suppress the Herero and Nama Revolts in German Southwest Africa from 1904 to 1907. These operations led to genocide in both cases. Rather than focusing on ideology (racism) as the main causal factor, this article analyzes the genocide as the result of a conventional European-style military campaign whose tenets and propensity to go to extremes developed out of Imperial Germany's military culture. After analyzing the four phases of the military campaign, the article goes on to delineate the characteristic features of German military culture that led to mass killing.

After almost one hundred years of relative academic neglect, the genocide against the Herero and Nama peoples is finally receiving the scholarly attention it deserves. Much of the scholarship interprets the genocide as primarily the product of racist ideology and purposive planning. When I began researching the revolt in German Southwest Africa (GSWA), I also expected to find that the experience of colonial war had taught metropolitan troops and their leaders genocidal practices. My expectations came from Hannah Arendt's brilliant insights in The Origins of Totalitarianism, where she writes that imperialism is the link between racism (anti-Semitism) and totalitarianism with its genocidal outcomes. I was surprised to discover instead a typical European war in which genocide developed out of standard military practices and assumptions. This article summarizes a much longer account of Imperial German military culture through the First World War and its contribution to the genocide in GSWA; its bleak conclusion is that great human disasters may develop from routine beginnings.

The military campaign in Southwest Africa in 1904 – 1907 was the largest and in every respect the costliest undertaken by Imperial Germany before World War I. It began in

1 An earlier, shorter version of this article appeared in the Bulletin of the German Historical Institute (Washington, D.C.), Issue Nr. 37, Fall 2005: 39-44.
3 Isabel V. Hull, Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2005. Many of the quotations in this article were published in Absolute Destruction, but they will be cited here in their original form.

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response to a revolt by the Herero people which started on 14 January 1904. Angered by the taking of their land, the death of their cattle in a series of epidemics, and their treatment at the hands of settlers and colonial officials the united clans of the Herero rose to throw off German rule. Contemporary estimates numbered the Herero at between 60,000 and 100,000 people. Between six and eight thousand warriors targeted adult German male settlers, sparing German women and children, German missionaries, and non-German Europeans. The Herero killed about 125 men.

Germany had only colonized Southwest Africa in 1884. Its rule did not extend to the north, where the Ovambo lived, and only 4,500 Germans lived in the center, Hereroland, and in the south, populated by the Nama people. Before the discovery of diamonds in 1908, German Southwest Africa — arid, sparsely populated, and impoverished — was little known or valued in Germany. Nonetheless, the Herero uprising challenged German state authority and the Kaiserreich’s recently adopted ‘world policy’. Consequently, GSWA became an issue of national security, causing the Kaiser to use his extra-constitutional power of command (Kommandogewalt) to intervene and send reinforcements; he placed the military response under the command of the General Staff, just as if it had been a European conflict. The ensuing war had four phases during which one can observe the increasingly deadly operations of Imperial Germany’s military culture.

In phase one, Governor Colonel Theodor Leutwein led the colonial troops (Schutztruppe) and marine reinforcements in a fairly standard colonial campaign. “Small wars”, as they were known, followed a script produced when numerically inferior European troops used their technical and organizational advantages to leverage victory despite ‘native’ warriors’ superior numbers, local knowledge, and social support. In GSWA’s past conflicts, Leutwein had (narrowly) prevailed by inflicting sufficient damage on rebels’ warriors and cattle (the source of African wealth) to cause his foes to negotiate peace. Thereafter courts-martial condemned the leaders to death and ‘punished’ (by temporary imprisonment, fines, loss of land, or other means) the non-combatant clan members. In 1904 the united nature of the uprising and its initial, shocking success encouraged hysterical calls by the white settlers for the Hereros’ ‘destruction’. But Leutwein’s military aims remained as before and the fighting at first stayed within the ‘normal’ bounds of colonial conflict. These bounds, however, held the potential for radical escalation. For example, it was normal for white troops to shoot indiscriminately at fleeing blacks, spy mania was widespread (leading to the execution of many probably innocent African civilians), few prisoners were taken (the Herero in principle took none, the Germans found it very difficult to do so), the few (male) prisoners whom the Germans did take were often (but not always) condemned to death by military courts-

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martial, and wounded Herero were usually shot to death. These practices, typical of most European colonial military interventions could easily spiral out of control and become massacres (the victims of which included civilians). At home, Reichstag deputies, from the Socialist left to bourgeois critics, worried that German war conduct might be barbarous. But as long as Leutwein was in charge, fighting stayed within certain limits.

In April 1904, however, the Kaiser relieved Leutwein of his command. Why? Under Leutwein the Schutztruppe had secured the towns and the unfinished but strategically important railroad, and at the battle of Oviumbo, Leutwein had caused the Herero to retreat from the center of the colony to the Waterberg on its eastern edge, the last large water source before the Omaheke desert. By colonial-war reckoning these were major successes. By the standards regnant in the German General Staff, however, Leutwein had suffered a humiliating defeat because at Oviumbo, short of ammunition and unsure of the Hereros’ remaining strength, he, too, had made a tactical retreat. By 1904 the ‘cult of the offensive’ was so deeply ingrained in German military thinking that staff officers regarded any form of defensive maneuver, however transitory or necessary, as a species of defeat. Aggressive actionism was always preferable to caution. As the icon of recent German military success, former General Staff Chief Helmuth von Moltke (the elder), had written in the 1888 Field Manual, “The highest commander and the youngest soldier must always be conscious of the fact that omission and inactivity are worse than resorting to the wrong expedient.” The current chief of the General Staff, Alfred von Schlieffen, and the chief of the Military Cabinet, Dietrich von Hülsen-Häsele, suggested Leutwein be replaced by a commander with colonial experience who more readily embodied the aggressive tenets of Imperial Germany’s military culture: Lt. General Lothar von Trotha. Despite the objections of the Colonial Office and the Chancellor, Kaiser Wilhelm ratified their choice. By reputation an obdurate leader who reckoned in “purely military terms”, von Trotha had developed pronounced racist views during an earlier military stint in German East Africa in the 1890s.

Von Trotha arrived in GSWA in June 1904 and set about phase two, the attempt to surround the Herero at the Waterberg and defeat them all in a single battle. The Kaiser had given von Trotha “no instructions or directives,” beyond the standard invocation to “defeat the uprising by all means (mit allen Mitteln),” but he had given von Trotha

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6 Hull, Absolute Destruction: 13-21. The Herero also killed German wounded.
9 Colonial expert Heinrich Schnee, cited in Bley, South-West Africa: 159.
supreme command (19 May 1904), thus elevating military above civilian leadership. Upon his arrival, von Trotha declared a state of martial law. Although Leutwein remained as governor, von Trotha set policy; after November 1904, when Leutwein resigned in protest over the general’s exterminatory policies, von Trotha exercised a virtual military dictatorship until his own recall in December 1905. The Kaiserreich’s unusual constitution, both regarding the Kaiser’s Kommandogewalt and the military ramifications of the state of emergency, thus cleared the decks for the war to be conducted according to purely military considerations.

The slide toward genocide occurred in increments. Von Trotha’s understanding of the parameters limiting (or not) his actions reflected the conventional wisdom within the German military. In this view Herero warriors were not legitimate soldiers, but rebels—thus, civilians illegally engaged in combat. As illegal combatants they were subject to the ‘customs of war’ (Kriegsbrauch), meaning that officers could execute them summarily, if caught red-handed. Von Trotha’s notice to this effect (June 1904) reflected the Imperial Order of 28 Dec. 1899 on “Criminal Procedure in the Army in Wartime,” which called for summary execution of foreign civilians participating in combat against German troops. The summary execution of armed males (as opposed to courts-martial as under Leutwein) was another step forward in the widening spiral of violence.

Von Trotha’s actual operation, the one that ultimately killed a majority of the Herero, was an equally unoriginal adaptation of the default “prescription for victory” known to every contemporary German officer (and to posterity in its First World War form of the Schlieffen Plan). It called for focusing one’s entire force at a single point and completely destroying the enemy’s armed capacity in a single battle. This template was so axiomatic that Leutwein had already laid it out at the Waterberg, intending to use the sharp blow to bring the Herero to a negotiated peace. But the Kaiser had forbidden negotiations without his consent, and von Trotha aimed instead at the classic, unalloyed victory of military force. As Leutwein explained to a subordinate, “in Germany [meaning the General Staff] what counts as a success is not a simple victory but only the

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10 See Absolute Destruction: 27-33 for an in-depth discussion of the controversy surrounding the putative ‘order’ to destroy the Herero. The quotation: von Trotha to Leutwein, copy, Windhuk, 5 Nov. 1904, BA-Berlin, R 1001, Nr. 2089, pp. 101-03.


12 “Prescriptions for victory” was Schlieffen’s phrase: Jehuda L. Wallach, Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht: Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen, Frankfurt, Bernard & Graefe, 1967: 129.
destruction *(Vernichtung)* of the enemy.”¹³ (Military men understood this concept to mean destruction of the enemy’s armed force, not its entire people.)

To achieve that total victory, von Trotha waited for two months, steadily augmenting the ill-trained reinforcements from home who struggled through the trackless desert to surround the Herero warriors, people, and their cattle holed up at the Waterberg. He overloaded his western unit (under Colonel Berthold von Deimling), which stood between the Herero and the rest of the colony, at the expense of the southeastern one (under Colonel von der Heyde), beyond which stretched the Omaheke desert and, ultimately, British Bechuanaland. Von Trotha had thus taken precautions against the worst danger — that the Herero might break through German lines back into the heart of the colony whence Leutwein had banished them. Von Trotha’s plan, as he later explained to Chief of Staff v. Schlieffen, was

> to surround the majority of Herero at the Waterberg and to destroy them with a simultaneous blow, then to build stations to search out and disarm the ones who escaped, and using the bounties on the heads of the captains to bring them into my control and punish them with death.¹⁴

In short, the battle was to destroy the warriors’ fighting ability and to deprive the uprising of its leaders — the usual colonial goal. But a perfect victory of this sort was difficult under colonial conditions which combined numerical inferiority (1,500 Germans versus 6 – 8,000 Herero) with a total lack of infrastructure to support the technical requirements of European-style warfare. In the event, the errors of Col. von der Heyde and the rash disobedience of Col. von Deimling thwarted von Trotha’s plan. On August 11th the great mass of the Herero warriors, people, and cattle, driven southeast by the premature, headlong rush of von Deimling’s troops, broke through von der Heyde’s lines and fled southeast along the dry riverbeds into the desert.¹⁵

Horst Drechsler was the first scholar to claim that the genocide was planned in advance. He argued that von Trotha’s asymmetrical troop configuration was “a well-thought-out plan that the Herero should break through towards the south [east] and perish in the desert there.”¹⁶ But von Trotha was in fact aghast at his failure to achieve the textbook victory. He had had a huge enclosure of thorns and barbed wire built to accommodate the 8,000 prisoners he anticipated capturing; he had promised Berlin a “complete success;” and civilian officials had already allotted the expected prisoners to various

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¹³ Leutwein to Estorff, heliogram from Owikokorero, 16 June 1904, BA-MA Freiburg, RM 121 I, Nr. 431, 50-51.


economic enterprises. The escape of the Herero was a gigantic embarrassment, a monument to military incompetence.

The hurried response to this failure was phase three, the pursuit. It was this phase of the war that brought genocide. At the Waterberg, stragglers and prisoners of both sexes were either simply shot down or summarily executed. Lack of food and water, inexperience in colonial warfare, professional pressure to achieve perfect victory, von Trotha’s own sharp orders to shoot armed males, and, finally, frustrated hubris had all created the pre-conditions for slaughter. These massacres caused von Trotha to struggle to regain troop discipline: he forbade killing women and children, but repeated the order to execute armed men. However, most Herero did not die of gunshot wounds, but of thirst. The genocide was the direct result of the pursuit.

Pursuit was the default corollary to the single battle of annihilation; its purpose was to force the enemy to turn and fight again, giving the attacker the opportunity to finish the decisive battle. Immediately after Waterberg, von Trotha took this conventional step and ordered pursuit, only to learn that the bulk of his forces were unable to do so for lack of food and water. “I think I’ll collapse,” the dumbfounded commander confided to his diary. Consequently, he sent off the only two mobile units he could scrape up, and these, later joined by a third, harried the fleeing Herero farther and farther into the inhospitable desert. Up until the end of September, von Trotha tried again and again to force the Herero to turn and fight. His “idea,” as he confided to his diary on 21 August, was “always to pursue them and beat them if I can, or to push them into English territory and there set up a strong border occupation.” Yet each time they escaped. On 23 September von Trotha again rejected negotiation: “We will fight as long as we can.”

At 11 AM we advanced in a broad front against the waterhole. No enemy to be seen, and also no corpses from the twenty artillery shots [with which they had

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19 Von Trotha diary, 13 August 1904, Trotha Papers, Nr. 315, 29-30.

20 Von Trotha Papers, Nr. 315, p. 35.

21 Ibid.: 42.
Having failed again, von Trotha finally called a halt. “If they want to stay here, they can do so. I am not pursuing them further. Basta.” “I am so tired. Our supplies are at an end.”22 He ordered a cordon sanitaire to seal off the desert against infiltration back into the colony.

It was only at this point, after the majority of the Herero had already died, that von Trotha issued his infamous proclamation of October 2nd.24 Translated into the Herero language and taken by captured women back into the desert, it informed the Herero that

The Herero people must leave this land. If they do not, I will force them to do so by using the great gun [artillery]. Within the German border every male Herero, armed or unarmed, with or without cattle, will be shot to death. I will no longer receive women or children but will drive them back to their people or have them shot.25

In a separate directive to the troops, von Trotha ordered “that shooting at women and children is to be understood as shooting above their heads, so as to force them to run [away].”26 The order was meant to drive them forcibly back into the desert; it condemned them to a death by thirst, rather than by bullets.27

The October Proclamation is often interpreted as an order to exterminate; that is, as part of a future plan to kill an entire people. But the extermination had already happened. Von Trotha and his officers could see with their own eyes the heaps of bodies at the dried out waterholes, and they received reliable eyewitness testimony to the mass deaths by thirst farther out in the desert.28 While they vacillated between believing their awful success and fearing that they might again have failed, the Proclamation during the weeks when it was in force changed nothing, neither in the behavior of the troops nor in that of the surviving Herero. The Herero either continued their flight through the desert or they tried to slip through the German cordon back into the main colony where they could find food and water. German troops continued to

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22 Ibid.: 44.
24 German troops searching the Waterberg battlefield afterwards found 40 dead Herero. Von Trotha optimistically and without evidence hoped that the real number of dead was three to four times that number. See diary entry for 12 August 1904, von Trotha Papers, Nr. 315, p. 29. In any event, the number of Herero killed during the battle of Waterberg was slight: see Viktor Franke diary entry of 20 Aug. 1904, BA-Koblenz, Nl. Franke, Nr. 3, pp. 99-100; Paul v. Lettow-Vorbeck diary entry of 8 Dec. 1904, BA-MA Freiburg, Nl. Lettow-Vorbeck, Nr. 34. There are no estimates for the number killed during the ‘pursuit’. The German troops lost five officers and twenty-one men at the Waterberg: Großer Generalstab, Feldzug: 184.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Hull, Absolute Destruction: 54.
shoot at all fleeing blacks, to execute males. Against von Trotha’s orders, they did take men and children in particular, but occasionally also women, prisoner.29

The Proclamation, far from being part of a plan for the future, was an ex post facto reinterpretation of events that had already taken place. It labeled and justified the gradual shift that occurred during September in von Trotha’s goal, a shift from conventional battlefield annihilation (meaning destruction of the enemy’s capacity or will to resist under arms) to the ‘disappearance’ of the Herero from GSWA altogether. Unable to achieve the tactical military form of a final solution (unconditional surrender), von Trotha repudiated it entirely. He now would not accept surrender, but instead expanded the aim to the more complete, strategic form of final solution, disappearance of the entire people, either by death or by escape across the border to Bechuanaland, he did not care which.30

Von Trotha explained to his superior, Schlieffen, why he wrote the Proclamation — in order to forestall a negotiated peace and therefore to continue to pursue a military solution:

> For me it is merely a question of how to end the war with the Herero. My opinion is completely opposite to that of the governor [Leutwein] and some ‘old Africans’ [i.e., experienced Schutztruppe leaders]. They have wanted to negotiate for a long time and describe the Herero nation as a necessary labor force for the future use of the colony. I am of an entirely different opinion. I believe that the nation must be destroyed as such, or since this was not possible using tactical blows [i.e., by the decisive battle or the pursuit], it must be expelled from the land operatively and by means of detailed actions.31

Breaking one of the greatest taboos for modern, professional militaries, the rule against killing women and children, clearly required more justification. Von Trotha argued that sharing scarce water and food with potentially weakened and ailing women and children would threaten the health of his own troops. Therefore, he continued, “The [Herero people] must now die in the desert or try to cross the Bechuanaland border.” He added, “This uprising is and remains the beginning of a race war ....” Adducing racism at this juncture of his argument helped von Trotha over the dishonor caused by breaking a fundamental taboo. “Race war” dressed up as purposive principle justified the mass killing of civilians which had actually occurred through the repeated use of conventional methods in a failed military campaign.

Once it became known in Berlin, von Trotha’s Proclamation unleashed a fierce battle between civilian and military leaders. To his credit, Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow emphasized humanitarian arguments in his opposition to von Trotha’s express approval of extermination. Schlieffen continually rejected moral arguments, he approved of von Trotha’s designation of the revolt as a “race war,” but he found von Trotha’s extremism merely impracticable. Instead, Schlieffen wanted to end the war in a more conventional

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29 Ibid.: 60-62.
30 Von Trotha to Schlieffen, Okatarobaka, 4 Oct. 1904, BA-Berlin, R 1001, Nr. 2089, pp. 5-6.
31 Ibid.
way, by raising the bounty on the leaders’ heads and accepting surrendering prisoners. At the same time, however, military sweeps were to continue and there were to be no negotiations. Only with great difficulty and some sleight of hand could Bülow bring the Kaiser to countermand the Proclamation and sanction, not negotiation, but at least the acceptance of individual surrender. This modest success was possible because Bülow, having with great difficulty wrested acquiescence from Schlieffen and Hülsen, could represent this policy as that of the military leadership. Under these circumstances the Kaiser agreed. And so the war entered its fourth and final phase: internment.

Collected at first by missionaries, who labored to save their emaciated charges, Herero prisoners (men, women, and children) were then shipped to prison camps run by the military. From there some were sent on to forced labor camps run by private companies or farmers. They were the lucky ones, for their chances of survival were better. In the military camps, low and unaccustomed rations, lack of shelter, clothing, blankets, and medical attention, and a lethal combination of neglect and vindictiveness caused mortality rates to reach at least 45% by the calculation of a contemporary military report. The Nama people of the colony’s South, who had risen up against the Germans in October 1904, suffered a similar fate to that of the Herero. Their warriors avoided a Waterberg-like battle and subsequent pursuit. For them the genocide took place almost entirely in the prison camps.

In the spring of 1907, over three years after it had begun, the government declared the war in GSWA over. For the Germans, it was a huge embarrassment. It had gone on far too long, it had required sending almost 19,000 volunteer troops from home, of whom about 1,500 had died (many of disease), and it had cost almost 600 Million Reichsmark; or forty times the annual peacetime budget of the colony. For the Africans, the war was catastrophic. It is estimated that 75 – 80% of the Herero died (depending on whether one believes the original population was 60,000 or 100,000, that means the deaths of between 45,000 and 75,000 people), and 50% of the Nama (whose population was estimated to be around 20,000 in 1904, before the uprising). Survivors were stripped of rights, condemned to forced labor, and subjected to a frankly racist and paranoid regime until 1915, when the colony fell to Allied troops from South Africa during the First World War.

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32 Schlieffen to Col. Dept., Nr. 12383, Berlin, 23 Nov. 1904, BA-Berlin, R. 1001, Nr. 2089, pp. 21-22; and Schlieffen to von Trotha, telegram, 8 Dec. 1904, ibid.: 49.
33 “Sterblichkeit in den Kriegsgefangenenlagern in SWA”, Nr. KA II. 1181, minuted in Col. Dept. on 24 Mar. 1908, BA-Berlin, R 1001, Nr. 2140, pp. 161-62. The German military estimated around 17,000 prisoners, but, calculating from scattered monthly reports, that number must be at least 20,000 and possibly as many as 30,000, with a death rate of about 51%. See Hull, Absolute Destruction: 89-90.
34 Hull, Absolute Destruction, 7 note 2, 88-90.
The scope of the human destruction in GSWA has helped to raise long overdue questions about the nature of colonial warfare and about the relation of colonialism to the later genocides that disfigured the twentieth century. Many scholars have tended to emphasize ideology, and particularly racism, as the chief motivation behind mass killing and the main link between colonialism and genocide. There are good reasons for doing so, and certainly Lothar von Trotha is a textbook example of a colonial racist. He interpreted the conflict from the beginning as a “race war”, he thought his African opponents barbarous and cruel, he had no sympathy or even regard for African prisoners, and his own self-identification as an exemplar of European supremacy made him hypersensitive to ‘defeat’ at the hands of inferior enemies. These views undoubtedly made it easy for von Trotha to go to extremes, and they certainly made it easy for him to justify, and indeed in the end to embrace as a positive goal, the destruction of an entire people. But those people for the most part actually died in the course of a conventional military campaign. It was the logic of military practice more than the logic of ideology that killed them.

As we have seen, the genocide of the Herero and Nama was not planned or ordered from the beginning. It developed out of the conduct of the war. When that war was most typically ‘colonial’, as it was under Leutwein and the Schutztruppe (reinforced by small contingents of marines), it was less lethal than when it became more professionally military, more ‘European’. The governor and the leaders of the Schutztruppe tempered military considerations with regard for the colony’s broader future, its economic and demographic interests. Once von Trotha (and his successors) was on the scene, those interests vanished. Military goals alone determined action.

The resulting military campaign was organized and conducted according to principles, scripts, default programs, and unconscious basic assumptions worked out in Europe for European wars. These standard military practices and assumptions were the product of the organizational culture of Imperial Germany’s military establishment.

An organization’s culture refers to the habitual routines that it deploys in its work and to the deep cognitive structures it has developed over time as it confronts and overcomes problems in its field of expertise. The military’s field is wielding deadly force in the national interest. This difficult task produces a ‘strong organization’, that is, one whose lessons from the past, distilled into regulations, training, scripts, doctrines, ways of doing business, and basic assumptions about how the world works, are relatively rigid

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and inflexible.\textsuperscript{38} Modern European militaries shared the same basic template of strong organizations. They tended to define problems narrowly as soluble by the use of force; their imperative command structure blocked internal criticism of dysfunctional policies; they tended to rely on technology to increase force, rather than on other forms of expertise to solve problems; and confronted with failure, they were tempted to repeat the old methods using greater and greater force. On the ground, these tendencies of the strong organization predisposed European armies to expand destruction until they succeeded in their aim or until an outside, usually civilian authority stopped them.

Because, as Joseph Conrad put it, colonialism “was just robbery with violence”, it was a mostly military matter, especially its early phases.\textsuperscript{39} Far from metropolitan interference, colonial commanders might follow military logic far up the spiral of violence. The similarities among European armies at war in the colonies are nowhere clearer than in Britain’s conduct of the Boer War (1900 – 1902). Waged against a white enemy, the last phase of the conflict, following implacable military logic, nevertheless developed excesses of violence such as ‘concentration camps’, systematic destruction of civilian habitation and crops, mass deportation, and ‘cleansing’ ‘sweeps’ of territory denuded of people and then cordoned off with barbed wire – until the civilian leadership finally stepped in to negotiate an end to the war.\textsuperscript{40} The Boer War nicely illustrates the tendency of modern Western militaries to go to extremes and also how European military scripts operated in the colonies. But most colonial conflicts, including the Boer War, did not end in genocide. That GSWA took a different path is largely due to factors that predisposed the German military to unleash dysfunctional violence and that prevented the civilian government from intervening to stop it.

The Kaiserreich’s military culture largely solidified out of the Prussian army’s past, but especially from its recent experiences in the wars of unification in 1864, 1866, and especially in 1870 – 71. The first two wars seemed to prove that Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke had discovered the abiding secrets of short, successful wars. The last, with its difficult guerilla phase, taught that civilian resistance had to be broken with draconian measures that other European states increasingly condemned as violations of international law. These lessons swiftly became anchored in its military culture. They are visible in its artefacts: training manuals, techniques, standard practices, doctrines, models of behavior, assumptions about the nature of war, etc.. The tenets seemed to be


\textsuperscript{41} For an extended discussion of the concept of ‘military culture’, see Hull, \textit{Absolute Destruction}. 
the very stuff of truth, because they brought success in battle, they forged a united Germany, and they were institutionalized in arguably the most prestigious organ of the new Kaiserreich, the General Staff. The General Staff inculcated generations of officers in these precepts. For all these reasons, the basic assumptions and default programs of Imperial Germany’s military culture went almost unquestioned inside the military and became ever more difficult to challenge from the outside.

What follows is a brief outline of the most important patterns of Imperial military culture that determined the GSWA conflict and its ensuing genocide. We might begin with the basic parameters within which the war in GSWA was fought. These were set when Kaiser Wilhelm put the conflict in GSWA under the General Staff and consequently preempted civilian leadership. As long as Leutwein was in charge, the effects of this move were obscured because, as was typical in German colonial administration, Governor-Colonel Leutwein combined the (civilian) governorship with (military) command power. But once he was removed, von Trotha answered directly to the Chief of the General Staff and the Kaiser; the chancellor and the Colonial Section of the Foreign Office were cut out. That meant that, unlike in other European colonies, there was no formal mechanism for civilian leaders to oversee or intervene to prevent military decision-making from taking its logical course.42

The Kaiser’s power of command, carefully preserved in Otto von Bismarck’s constitution from parliamentary scrutiny and the caution of civilian statesmen, also permitted him to order that no negotiations would be conducted without his express permission. Here the Kaiser’s hubris and self-image as a tough military man coincided with (and was probably reinforced by) inflamed popular opinion, particularly among GSWA’s settlers; but it collided with the judgment of Leutwein, the chancellor, and the Colonial Section. Restricting the local commander’s ability to negotiate increased the pressure to achieve a clear-cut victory by military force.

As we have seen, the stringent concept of ‘victory’ was one of the singular assumptions of Germany’s military-organizational culture. As Leutwein explained, it went beyond “a simple victory;” it meant “the destruction of the enemy.”43 The roots of this idea are both Napoleonic and Prussian – a relatively small, poor state needed its military victories to come quickly and surely, before its enemies could marshal their superior economic and demographic resources.44 After 1871 this ambitious concept of victory, seemingly realized by von Moltke during the wars of German unification, became hegemonic and blinded officers to lesser forms of military success which then became reclassified as defeats or humiliations – as happened to Leutwein at Oviumbo. This Prussian/German understanding of total victory (and its corollary, total defeat)
dovetailed nicely with the theories of colonial war that preached the same gospel — to avoid a punishing guerilla war, it was important to defeat the enemy definitively: “Decisive victory is to be sought for and not merely success”, as the chief (British) theorist of colonial campaigns noted.45

The problem was that total victory was extremely difficult to achieve, even in Europe, much less in colonies where the necessary infrastructure was missing. Another salient aspect of Imperial German culture was therefore the default techniques that the General Staff, beginning with its first Chief, von Moltke, had honed to achieve this sort of complete victory: the offensive, mobile, concentric, single battle of annihilation (the Schlieffen Plan or Waterberg), and, when that did not succeed, the energetic pursuit to force the enemy to provide another opportunity for the Vernichtung. These technical “prescriptions for victory” were unchallenged inside the officer corps.

The Prussian/German type of offensive, risky, highly-mobile, all-or-nothing warfare required a very strong organizational culture to pull it off and highly reliable independence of individual unit commanders. The General Staff developed this capacity into a system: the ‘mission tactics’ system (Auftragssystem). ‘Mission tactics’ distinguished the Imperial German army from its peers by the latitude it granted to junior officers in the fulfillment of their orders. To prevent chaos from ensuing, officers had to be thoroughly trained; but more than this, they had to be saturated with the precepts of the common military culture, such that they not only solved problems in the same way, but they defined them in the same way in the first place. ‘Mission tactics’ produced officers who were an unusual mixture of flexibly inventive on the tactical level but narrow and blinkered on the larger strategic plain.

The Prussian/German way of war and ‘mission tactics’ encouraged a further patterns of training and behavior identifiable in the model officer. The General Staff set this standard, which called for tremendous initiative, independence, risk-taking, self-sacrifice, and complete relentlessness in the fulfillment of the mission. The Imperial German system rewarded officers who went beyond the usual limits and it thus promoted initiative taken to the point of destruction, even self-destruction. Von Trotha matched this model better than Leutwein did; so did his successor, General Adolf von Deimling, and Captain Klein, a much-sung hero of GSWA who went to his death on a mission of quixotic extremism, to name a few examples.46 Younger officers in GSWA often modelled their behavior after von Trotha, adopting his ruthlessness against civilians or the captured.47

45 Callwell, Small Wars, 106.


47 Hull, Absolute Destruction : 71.
The emphasis on swift, complete military victory meant that the interests of combat eclipsed everything else, including the welfare of civilians or prisoners of war. Indeed, the German armies had learned in 1870 – 71 that (French) civilians were the enemy, both in terms of their contribution to the foe’s war economy and their nationalist solidarity with the enemy. That modern principle (which seems to have been first recognized by the General Staff) was merely reinforced in the colonies where warfare frequently involved the whole population. In the Imperial German military view, civilians were, if not directly the enemy, then dispensable; they were to be totally subordinated to military aims. They could be forced to give information harmful to their own side, they could be punished if they refused, and they could be forced to work directly for the German war effort (for example by building fortifications or hauling munitions). By 1899 international law forbade all these things, but the German military and many German international jurists held that “military necessity” simply cancelled the protections imposed by international law. This interpretation put European civilians on the same unprotected footing as the native inhabitants of colonies, where most Europeans believed international law did not apply. For the German army, therefore, there were no real limits to the instrumentalization of civilians of whatever color. The erasure of the line separating combatants from non-combatants contributed greatly to increased death rates, in GSWA, in German East Africa (1905 – 1908) and in Europe (1914 – 1918).

Germany’s military habits contributed in at least three further ways to the poor treatment and mass death of prisoners of war and interned civilians (who in Africa amounted to much of the indigenous population). First, the obsessive focus on combat and battle made logistics the stepchild of military organization. Talented officers were rewarded by combat commands, leaving the internment camps and their supply to the untrained and inept, even in European wars. Racism intensified the poor treatment that prisoners received, but the base line was set by the logistical support for the German troops, which was scandalously bad. The readiness to sacrifice everything for military victory included sacrificing Germany’s own troops.

Second, at the same time, the troops’ welfare had unquestioned priority over that of all other classes, including civilians, women and children, and prisoners of war. As the manual for administering the rear zones (in a European war) intoned, “The preparedness of the field army comes unconditionally before the welfare of the rear zone.” Therefore, if logistical shortfalls meant that the condition of German troops was bad then civilians fared even worse. The same was true regarding prisoners of war, even


49 The genocide in German East Africa unfolded differently than in SWA, but was nevertheless a product of the same underlying precepts and habits of waging war: Hull, Absolute Destruction: ch. 6.

50 Hull, Absolute Destruction: 137-43.

in a European war. The Chief of Staff’s unofficial handbook on the laws of war (an official handbook did not exist), written two years before the revolt in GSWA, generally recognized the Geneva Convention protections, but nonetheless declared, “that prisoners may only be killed in cases of extreme necessity [such as] the duty of self-preservation or the security of the state.” 52 No other European state allowed the killing of prisoners of war. 53 Given this precedent, it is easy to see whence von Trotha derived his argument that the same principles covered the deaths of women and children. Of course, the official governmental view was that Herero fighters were rebels, not legitimate combatants and therefore not prisoners of war enjoying any legal protection. The point here is simply that in Imperial Germany the law was not reliable protection for any class of person, whether European or colonial, who came into conflict with its military arm.54

Third, there was a strongly punitive element that ran through the lethal internment of prisoners in GSWA. At least partly, this characteristic of Germany’s military culture derived from a principle common to all the European countries: the army represented state authority. For Germany, where the army was the instrument of national unification and the chief bulwark of the monarchy, its identification with the state was more complete and imperative. In the context of Weltpolitik, the national security dimensions of the revolt only reinforced the symbolic importance of military success and the need to punish rebels against state authority. In the military-run camps, von Trotha himself set the original starvation ration, justified by a high colonial administrator “as retaliation for the uprising.” 55 But officers who took over from von Trotha after his departure in December 1905 and who set out to ameliorate conditions repeatedly ran up against the principle that enemies of German authority merited exemplary punishment. 56 Exemplary punishment was yet another link in the chain of mass death.

If we look back at the pattern sketched out above, the factors that facilitated recourse to increasing violence are clear. These began with the constitution that removed external brakes on the workings of military logic. Without extra-military political interruption, the basic assumptions about the nature of war and of victory, and about the only correct techniques to achieve victory determined how the war was fought. ‘Mission tactics’ and

54 Hull, ‘“Military Necessity”’.
55 Deputy Governor Tecklenburg to Colonial Office, 4 July 1905, Bundesarchiv-Berlin, Reichskolonialamt R 1001, Nr. 2090, p. 22.
56 Hull, Absolute Destruction: 77, 84-85.
the behavioral norms for successful officers assured that these precepts would be pursued ruthlessly and to the bitter end. The usual restraints (which admittedly in wartime are unevenly achieved) concerning treatment of civilians, the wounded, and prisoners of war were further undermined by the conviction that civilians were always subordinated to military ends, that military necessity overrode the protection of law or of humanity, that the demands of combat took precedence above all other considerations (including logistics), and that in a conflict the treatment of the troops must always be better than that of any other class of person. The official definition of warriors as rebels, rather than as soldiers, made them subject to summary execution (like the putative francs-tireurs in Belgium and France in 1914). And, finally, the need to uphold state authority, as represented by the army, dictated punishment for everyone who seemed threatening.

Many of these factors — including constitutional deficiencies, the supremely high standard of victory required, the prescriptions for success, ‘mission tactics’ and their behavioral requirements, and the conviction that military necessity cancelled laws or customs dictating humane treatment for civilians, the wounded, and prisoners — were all either much more deeply developed in or actually unique to the military culture of Imperial Germany. These convictions and the institutional habits that upheld them were formed in European wars. By 1904, when the uprising in GSWA began, Germany’s military culture had been polished and strengthened for decades. Deployed in the colonies by an officer chosen for his military single-mindedness, the result was genocide.

In Great Britain the recognized disaster of the Boer War led to fundamental changes in military organization, undertaken by civilian reformers. In Germany, such critical change was already impossible. Its military organization and culture remained intact, ready to be deployed in the next disaster, which occurred not in the colonies, but in Europe in 1914.

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