

The History that Germany Wants to Forget: The Namibian Genocide

The first genocide of the twentieth century took place on the southwest edge of Africa, thousands of kilometers away from Europe. In the genocide carried out under the command of German General Lothar von Trotha from 1904-1909, 80% of the Ovaherero community and 50% of the Nama community that rebelled against Germany who had colonized the region were mercilessly killed. Unfortunately, the events were not limited to such killings. Survivors were locked away in concentration camps and the bodies of about 100,000 Namibians were carried to Germany in ships for racial experiments. Those who were able to escape the genocide were doomed to starve and suffer thirst in the hot sands of the Kalahari Desert. With local wells already poisoned beforehand, those that drank the water were poisoned to death. The bodies were swallowed up by the desert sands after they were broken into pieces by wild birds.

Having colonized the Namibia between 1884-1915, Germany treated the local community terribly cruelly, seizing their lands, and carrying out a genocide on rebellious peoples. Germany took control of the diamond deposits in this region and sent the best troops of the German Empire to uphold security under the command of Kaiser Wilhelm II. While some of the tribes that rebelled against the Germans were completely eradicated, the remaining were subjugated under pressure and persecution. Shark Island was the primary concentration camp where the victims were taken and left to die.

Having increased the brutality of the treatment between 1904-1909, the German policies allowed the slaughter, hanging, and rape of the rebellious local community, as well as the seizure of their lands and animals, before finally dooming them to death in the concentration camps. One of the survivors recounts the violence that took place at Shark Island as follows: "The Germans sent me to the island. I stayed there for a year. There were about 3,500 of us at first, only 193 of whom managed to get out. The other 3,307 died on the island." One form of compulsory labor carried out by those taken to the island was peeling and cleaning off the flesh from certain bones, such as the skulls of people who had died there before. The cleaned skulls were sent to German universities for "scientific research" purposes.

On top of this, the skulls and bones brought to Germany were used in the racial experiments of scientists at German universities. One such scientist was Eugen Fischer who tried to theoretically prove the superiority of the Aryan race. It was actually him who requested the bones to be transported to Germany. His works which he put down on paper after performing experiments on the local community would later be read by none other than Adolf Hitler.

Now in the present day, the representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama communities are calling for a dialogue with the German government and parliament, demanding the formal recognition of this genocide and for the Germans to ask the Ovaherero and Nama communities for their forgiveness. They also request the return of the Namibian bones that are kept at the universities of Berlin and Freiburg and displayed in various museums. The leading figures of the Ovaherero and Nama communities believe that the souls of their ancestors will not rest in peace until their bones are buried underground.

So far Germany has avoided formally recognizing the truth behind the genocide. The Namibian committees who have visited Germany have not been able to get the exact results they were hoping for. In 2004, on the 100th anniversary of the genocide, the German Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wiczeorek-Zeul, visited Namibia to make amends and tried to close the case. As a result of the subsequent meetings, 20 skulls were returned to Namibia as a token gesture in 2011, and in order to atone for the distress caused, Germany promised technical aid to Namibia, however, they did not agree to pay compensation.

Last January, the Association of the Ovaherero Genocide and Nama Traditional Leaders Association wishing to take part in the interstate negotiations filed a suit against Germany in New York for the 100,000 Namibians that were killed. Pressing Germany in the diplomatic field, the state of Namibia and civil bodies want to bring the Germans to account in court for the first genocide of the 20th century.

Germany has failed to resist the strong Jewish lobby in the past and accepted to pay compensation, but refrains from displaying the same understanding to the Namibians whose lobbying activities are limited. In

the petition submitted to the German parliament and government officials in 2015, it is briefly stated that Germany who recognized the Armenian genocide carried out by the Young Turks on April 24, 2015, must also formally recognize the genocide it carried out in Namibia, and fulfill its historical responsibility.

Even though the German government appears to have partially accepted the genocide, the German minority that still lives in Namibia is unwilling to accept this historical fact. According to Elke Zuern who has published work on Namibia, the German minority group mostly living in Swakopmund continues to defend all that happened in the past and maintain their racist perspective. Another tendency of this community is to try to preserve the sculptures and monuments in Namibia from colonial times. The Namibians, on the other hand, want these monuments to a dark past to be removed and make protests now and then to this aim.

But Germany's genocides in Africa are, of course, not limited to Namibia. Tragedies similar to those that the Namibians faced are hidden within each piece of land they stepped onto across the continent. It is possible to see the cold face of German imperialism and racism in the bleak histories of Togo, Tanzania, and Cameroon. In fact, the preparations and theoretical infrastructure behind the Nazi Holocaust date back to Germany's colonial years in Africa. Now, a century later, local communities in Africa are ready to initiate a legal struggle in pursuit of their ancestors' rights and bring Germany to account for its colonial genocides. Such a struggle deserves all kinds of support.