

## **Germany and Namibia: Negotiating Genocide**

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### **Bio**

Henning Melber came as a son of German immigrants to Namibia, where he joined the anticolonial movement SWAPO in 1974. He has been the Director of The Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU) from 1992 to 2000, and was chairman of the Namibian-German Foundation for Cultural Cooperation (1993-2000). He was research director of the Nordic Africa Institute (2000-2006) and executive director of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (2006-2012), both in Uppsala/Sweden, and remains affiliated to both institutions. He is extraordinary professor at the Department of Political Sciences/University of Pretoria, and at the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies/University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, and a senior research fellow at the Institute for Commonwealth Studies/Centre for Advanced Study at the University of London. A founding member of the International Network of Genocide Scholars (INoGS) he was its first vice-president (2005-2012). Since 2017 he is president of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI).

## **Abstract**

These Reflections present an overview and take stock of the German-Namibian bilateral negotiations how to come to terms with the genocide committed by the German empire in the colony South West Africa between 1904 and 1908. The main actors and their specific positions/approaches are identified since in 2015 a spokesperson of the German foreign ministry recognised the term genocide as applicable. As shown, more than four years of negotiations since then have not yet produced an amicable solution based on a mutual understanding and viable compromise. The pending negotiations have also failed to include significant agencies of the Nama and Ovaherero communities, who feel not represented by the Namibian state. While progress might have taken place behind closed doors, representatives of the German state have during 2019 not advanced credibility among Namibians. In contrast, a local initiative among members of the German-speaking community in Namibia for the first time entered a dialogue with some descendants of the victim groups in an effort to come to terms with the past. There is also progress in the German discourse over the need for restitution of cultural artefacts in German museums stolen during colonial times. But counter tendencies include a reactionary backlash in German policies and public opinion with the revisionism dismissing any historical obligations for colonial crimes as promoted by the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and other proponents questioning the notion of genocide. Colonial amnesia remains a significant phenomenon and challenge.

## **Keywords**

Namibia; Germany; genocide reparations; Ovaherero; Nama; colonial amnesia

It took 110 years until a speaker of a German government ministry finally admitted, that the extermination strategy between 1904 and 1908 in then the German colony of South West Africa (today's Namibia) was tantamount to genocide. The long road included a resolution of the (West) German parliament in 1988 declaring its "special responsibility" for the former colony at the dawn of independence, an exceptional admission of guilt and a sign of remorse by the German Minister for Economic Cooperation, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul at a local commemoration ceremony at the Waterberg in August 2004, and many evasive subsequent efforts by high-ranking representatives of the German state and government to avoid acknowledging the elephant in the room when it comes to German-Namibian relations in the shadow of genocide. The final admission happened almost in passing at a press conference in July 2015 by a spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry after repeated enquiries by a journalist.<sup>1</sup> Despite such admission, an official recognition – such as the resolution adopted by the German Parliament regarding the Armenian genocide – has not followed. Neither has the German President nor the German Chancellor touched upon the subject. Both have remained tight lipped so far. But as a subsequent initiative, bilateral negotiations were resumed between special envoys appointed by the Namibian and German governments towards the end of 2015. After a total of eight meetings behind closed doors since then, no results have yet been announced by early 2019, when preparations were under way for a ninth meeting. Reportedly, progress has been made and an end seems in sight. It remains in doubt, however, if the possible outcome might solve the pending matters in an amicable way. The following reflections point to some of the pitfalls, which characterised the interactions so far.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account from the historic events until early 2017, including the build-up and aftermath to this kind of turning point, see Reinhart Kößler and Henning Melber, *Völkermord – und was dann? Die Politik deutsch-namibischer Vergangenheitsbearbeitung* (Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel, 2017); Henning Melber, "Genocide Matters – Negotiating a Namibian-German Past in the Present," *Stichproben. Vienna Journal of African Studies* 17, no. 33 (2017): 1-24.

## **What is Negotiated?**

The core issues being negotiated are the form of an official apology and its consequences in terms of somewhat adequate compensation. That is, if a compensation could be only remotely adequate given the dimensions of human costs and the lasting structural consequences of the atrocities of the time, shaping parts of Namibian society and the living conditions for several population groups until today.<sup>2</sup> Both an apology and the forms of compensation are closely intertwined, since the nature of the apology (as acknowledgement of the genocide) has legal reparations implications on the degree of compensation. “Reparations” is a term deliberately avoided on the German side. After all, such terminology would create a far-reaching precedence. It would directly affect pending, legally disputed ways to handle German war crimes during World War II. Judgments for compensation to the descendants of victims, as ruled by courts in Greece, Italy and some Eastern European states were so far not acknowledged by Germany. The argument being that the state cannot be held liable for the crimes committed by individuals.

The Namibian case could open a Pandora’s box – not only with regard to the unresolved reparation claims from World War II but also as motivation for subsequent claims from similar crimes committed in other German colonies. Moreover, other former colonial powers may fear legal precedents should Germany find a solution in recognition of the demands and claims brought by the descendants of mainly Ovaherero and Nama (but also the Damara and San), victims of German colonial warfare and the subsequent annihilation strategies destroying their hitherto practised way of life and forcing them into bondage-like dependencies.<sup>3</sup> One does not have to employ conspiracy theories to assume that the German

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<sup>2</sup> See among others the contributions to Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds, *Genocide in German South-West Africa. The Colonial War of 1904-1908 and its Aftermath* (London: Merlin Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Notably, the definition of genocide goes beyond the “intent to destroy” in terms of the deliberately planned (though not necessarily consequently executed) physical annihilation of people targeted on the basis of a shared

negotiations have not only been closely followed by other former colonial powers, but most likely have also been a subject of informal exchanges behind closed doors among some foreign ministers in Brussels.

### **Who Represents Whom?**

Given this constellation, we can only speculate what the negotiated compromise between the two governments might be. One should not hold their breath. Few details have emerged but it is clear that any lasting solution is far from achieved. After all, even if the two governments could come to a compromise, considerable parts of the Ovaherero and Nama communities feel left outside of the official negotiations and are not inclined to surrender their claims. They do not acknowledge the Namibian government as the legitimate agency advocating their interests and negotiating on their behalf. Despite the differences in their approaches, both governments seem to agree that those agencies of the descendants should have no direct say in the negotiations.

The Namibian government has the interest to claim its monopoly over the centralised state to represent the Namibian people and does not consider the local ethnic agencies constituted as Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA) and Ovaherero Traditional Authority (OTA) as legitimate negotiators, despite representing considerable parts of their ethnic groups. These groups have joined with other communities in the diaspora (mainly

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group belonging, and also includes the destruction of cultural identities and hitherto practiced forms of reproduction by societies – all integral part of settler colonial rule and frontier societies with fatal consequences, as the cases of Australia and the Americas show as much as Southern Africa. See i.a. Mohamed Adhikari, ed., *Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When Hunter-Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2014); A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontiers Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); A. Dirk Moses and Dan Stone, eds., *Colonialism and Genocide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide. Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008) as well as Henning Melber with John Y. Jones, eds., *Revisiting the Heart of Darkness: Explorations into Genocide and other Forms of Mass Violence* (Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2008). See also my more general approach in Henning Melber, “Explorations into modernity, colonialism and genocide: Revisiting the past in the present,” *acta academica* 49, no. 1 (2017): 39-52.

Botswana and the USA) and gone to an United States domestic court in New York to claim reparations, so far with no success.<sup>4</sup> The Namibian government, however, has included a group willing to participate, constituted as Ovaherero/Ovambanderu and Nama Council for Dialogue on the 1904-1908 Genocide (ONCD 1904-1908) as a consultative body to join the Cabinet Technical Committee resorting under the Namibian Cabinet Political Committee on Genocide, Apology and Reparations, advising the special representative, Dr. Zed Ngavirue. The German side has, with Ruprecht Polenz, a long-standing, previously high-ranking member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as its special envoy. In 2000 he served briefly the CDU's secretary general and served as chairman of the German Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs between 2005 and 2013. He is a strong supporter of Chancellor Angela Merkel's pro-migration policy and was recently an outspoken advocate in social media fighting the right-wing populism, which has raised its ugly head in German politics.

Germany has conveniently dodged the contested matter of representation by the descendants of the genocide victim groups by declaring it a purely Namibian affair to deal with. This evasive – albeit formally correct – position suits the German side well. After all, Germany would have to expect the least compromises from the side of those who represent the claims of the descendant groups. In particular, when it comes to the issue of restitution of ancestral land robbed under German colonialism and the further expropriation after defeat in what they term the Namibian-German War. 'Retributive justice' is indeed a term missing from the vocabulary. Meanwhile, most of the territory in the Eastern, Central and the Southern regions of the country remain the private property of predominantly white (and often German-speaking) commercial farmers.

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<sup>4</sup> See for their positions and that of some of their supporters contributions in a reader compiled from presentations at events during a "Week of Justice" held in April 2019 in Windhoek and Swakopmund: Judith Hackmack and Arite Keller, eds., *Colonial Repercussions: Namibia. 115 years after the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama* (Berlin: European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2019).

For obvious historical reasons linked to the genocide and its aftermath, the issue of land remains today visible evidence of the structurally embedded inequality and injustice. It is not only economic, but even more so a highly emotional topic related to identity and home. Reversing the skewed land distribution therefore should be a matter of priority to delegate responsibility to the German side. However, Namibian government policy so far does not indicate such concerns. The beneficiaries of the land policy since Independence were often originally from Namibia's northern region's population groups, whom formed the basis of SWAPO, the national liberation movement and the single ruling party in government since Independence. But these groups were never robbed of their land by the encroaching colonial system. Transfer of land to these groups triggers frustration and anger among the local Nama, Ovaherero and Damara communities (while the even more marginalised San or Bushmen so far never had any meaningful agency and are not heard or listened to anyway).<sup>5</sup> The German side therefore has managed until now to get away with ignoring the burning issue of land as a matter requiring an urgent solution as part of any serious effort to come to terms with the past.

### **Germany's Reluctant Remorse**

Ruprecht Polenz, as the official special envoy on the German side, has hardly been visible since the eighth meeting held in early 2019. His public appearances and statements declined markedly and he has kept a low profile. This could have been, partly, the result of less interest by the media in the affair once the negotiations were considered as "work in progress." In contrast, however, others not mandated to negotiate took the floor more prominently, especially in Namibia. In particular, the German ambassadors to Namibia have

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<sup>5</sup> See in more detail Henning Melber, "Colonialism, Land, Ethnicity and Class: Namibia after the Second National Land Conference," *Africa Spectrum* 54, no. 1 (2019): 73-86.

played in varying degrees some role as local representatives of the German state. They were often sending mixed messages, much to the dismay of the Namibian side – and reportedly also to the frustration of staff in the German Foreign Ministry.

While negotiations were supposed to remain confidential, Matthias Schlaga as the German ambassador to Namibia (in office from 2015 until August 2019) notoriously spilled the beans through indiscrete disclosures made to the members of the local white German-speaking group. This in itself was evidence of the asymmetric relations during the negotiations, hardly suitable to build confidence and trust. As late as in June 2019 he reassured a German-speaking audience at a public event that the term genocide has to be understood only in a moral-political context, not a legal sense and that reparations would be a “no go”. Rather, negotiations would be over a reconciliation fund to finance country-wide projects and a trust account titled PACT (Particular Affected Commercial Treaty) to improve the living conditions for the descendants of the mainly affected population groups. As he was quoted:

Germany is ready to apologise, but first we need to know what we are apologising for. Reparations is a legal term. We do not see a legal obligation to pay reparations but will put in place ‘measures to heal the wounds’ from a historic sense. ... The amount of money to be given is what is stalling negotiations and the difference is quite considerable.<sup>6</sup>

Ambassador Schlaga had a blatantly self-righteous talent not to miss any opportunity for blunders and gaffes. Lecturing Namibians how best to deal with the traumatic colonial past

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<sup>6</sup> Adolf Kaure, “Relations can improve, says German ambassador. Germany willing to shake hands”, *Windhoek Express*, 16 June 2019, <https://www.we.com.na/news/relations-can-improve-says-german-ambassador2019-06-16/>.



was certainly no diplomatic success. The insensibilities by representatives of the German state were however anything but confined to ambassador Schlaga. In mid-July 2019 Daniel Günther visited Namibia. As the prime minister of the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein and president of the Federal Council he was one of the five highest representatives of the German state and the first in this league since President Roman Herzog in 1998. He used his stay to pay respect at a Swakopmund graveyard monument in commemoration of the victims of the colonial concentration camp there.<sup>7</sup> But he missed the opportunity to bend his knees as West German chancellor Willy Brandt had done in 1970 when he turned a history page with Poland through the Warsaw genuflection.

Günther's statements during his official encounters were indicative of the German approach. In a meeting with President Hage Geingob, he expressed the interest "in finding a quick solution to the genocide issue". The Head of State responded that there is no need to rush the negotiation process. Rather, issues should be handled properly.<sup>8</sup> Günther also addressed the unsolved land question. He took the liberty to advise the President to respect property rights, since potential investors – such as the businesspeople in his entourage – would not be forthcoming if property would not be protected.<sup>9</sup> This prompted President Geingob to assure that these will be protected.<sup>10</sup> In his main speech addressing the National Council (the equivalent to the German institution he then presided over), he pointed out East German parallels to Namibians that 30 years ago "forced the government to hold the first and only free elections". He stated further: "I believe that people in the GDR and people in

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<sup>7</sup> See the photo posted on the German Embassy's Twitter account at <https://twitter.com/GermanEmbassyNA/status/1151370510414045187>.

<sup>8</sup> Albertina Nakale, "Political declaration on genocide draws closer," *New Era*, 16 July 2019, <https://neweralive.na/posts/political-declaration-on-genocide-draws-closer>.

<sup>9</sup> Jemima Beukes, "German investors turned off," *Namibian Sun*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/german-investors-turned-off2019-07-16>.

<sup>10</sup> Sakeus Likela, "Government committed to protecting property rights," *The Namibian*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.namibian.com.na/80876/read/Government-committed-to-protecting-property-rights>

Namibia clearly showed their courage in their struggle for liberation.”<sup>11</sup> Comparing the civil rights movement in the former German Democratic Republic with the anticolonial struggle under the liberation movement SWAPO was another blunder testifying to the German disconnection with Namibian realities and perceptions. It is at best disrespectful towards the human costs of two decades of war against an illegal regime and adds insult to injury. And while he recognised “historical guilt”, he fell short of an apology and also avoided to meet representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama, which provoked chief Rukoro to qualify the visit as a hollow ritual.<sup>12</sup>

Given such blatant insensitivities, it is a noteworthy and encouraging sign that Schlaga’s successor, German ambassador to Namibia Herbert Beck, seems to be of a different calibre. Being accredited since November 2019, he met the local press for an exchange in January 2020 and stressed that he will not be tempted to make any premature statements on the matter of genocide. As he explained, he could only share information once the two parties have reached an agreement. Nobody should expect him to make any remarks about a negotiation in which he is not involved. This would be disingenuous. Responding to a question he also clarified that it is not for him to decide on the land issue. This would lie entirely within the discretion of the Namibian government.<sup>13</sup> Beck also dismissed the suspicion, that the German side would want to replace compensation by development aid. As quoted:

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<sup>11</sup> German Embassy Windhoek, Speech of the President of the German Bundesrat Daniel Günther at the National Council of the Republic of Namibia on the occasion of his visit to Angola and Namibia, 16 July 2019, <https://windhuk.diplo.de/na-en/aktuelles/-/2233464>.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Springer, “Günther vollzieht Gratwanderung,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.az.com.na/nachrichten/gnther-vollzieht-gradwanderung-2019-07-16/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Botschafter stellt klar. Keine Scheu vor Genozid-Thema – sucht Gemeinsamkeiten,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.az.com.na/nachrichten/botschafter-stellt-klar2020-01-24>.

I think the [reparation] negotiations are a clear indication that it is not a trade-off between development cooperation and addressing the plight of the affected Herero and Nama communities. It is not like we give you development cooperation, therefore, you cannot expect anything for those [affected] groups.<sup>14</sup>

This was an important clarification to earlier German statements, which for years pointing toward the mantra-like echoing of the special relationships cultivated with Namibia as documented by the relative size of German developmental aid funds channelled to the country since Independence.

### **New Dynamics Unfolding**

Other recent developments suggest that there might finally be new dynamics unfolding after a year when negotiations since early 2019 (when the eight meeting took place in Swakopmund) were rather dormant due to elections in Germany and Namibia. On the local level, a new initiative gained momentum, which might add to coming somehow more to terms with the German colonial past. Efforts of the Namibian German Foundation for Cultural Development<sup>15</sup> during the first decade since Independence ended at the turn of the century through significant shifts in its leadership and management, resulting in a conservative backlash.<sup>16</sup> Since then, hardly any meaningful (self-)critical dialogue over the German colonial past took place between the German-speakers and the descendants of the victim communities until in 2019 the *Gesprächskreis Deutschsprachiger Namibier* (Discussion Circle of German Speaking Namibians) was formed among Swakopmund residents.<sup>17</sup> It

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<sup>14</sup> Arlana Shikongo, “‘Aid No Compromise for Reparations’,” *The Namibian*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.namibian.com.na/197197/archive-read/Aid-no-compromise-for-reparations>.

<sup>15</sup> The *Namibisch-Deutsche Stiftung für kulturelle Zusammenarbeit* (NaDS) was established by German-speakers in support of Independence and initiated during the 1990s a series of public events seeking to come to terms with the German past both as regards the Nazi-regime and the colonial era in the country.

<sup>16</sup> See for some examples the chapters 4 to 6 in Reinhart Kössler, *Namibia and Germany. Negotiating the Past* (Windhoek: UNAM Press and Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2025).

<sup>17</sup> The main architects came from the (retired) ranks of German speakers, who were among those politically active also in government positions (and the NaDS) since Independence. They represent the more liberal and

entered a dialogue with the ONCD 1904-1908. A first internal meeting in November 2019 was followed by a public exchange in the Swakopmund museum on 7 February 2020, with some 60 persons of mainly German-Namibian but also Ovaherero identity.<sup>18</sup> Five ONCD members of the Namibian Genocide Negotiating Team presented a summary of the state of negotiations. Reportedly, “all issues except the amount of compensation (‘Quantum’)” seem to be agreed between the two parties:

After appropriate research the Namibian team had submitted a paper containing a summary of losses suffered (land / property / lives /etc.) and quantifying appropriate resources (‘Quantum’) as trade-off for the losses. A common ‘Quantum’ could not be established yet and will have to be dealt with during the ninth round of negotiations.<sup>19</sup>

In the debate following, the ONCD categorically distanced itself from the traditional authorities representing Ovaherero and Nama in civil suit claims unfolding in a US court: “stating that they chose and still believed in the way of dialogue to achieve an amicable outcome, before thinking of alternative options.”<sup>20</sup> That this exchange – a first of its kind – can have a constructive function in regards to local dynamics is reflected in the following example, also prominently quoted in the local print media:

A comment was made to the effect that the ONCD was ‘hooked’ on the past and should rather move on, forget the past, and continue living for the future.

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enlightened element among the local language group, which until today has in terms of the mindset still considerable numbers of “Southwesters” in its midst.

<sup>18</sup> Details, on which the following summary is based, were presented by the Secretary of the Steering Committee of the initiative. See Anton von Wietersheim, “Report on Historic Encounter of Descendants of Colonial Opponents: Ovaherero, Ovabanderu, Nama and German-Namibians,” 11 February 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

The respondent pointed to the historic pictures behind him, indicating that the event was taking place in a Museum – with many exhibits from German colonial times, for that matter – and stating that “you should know your past, to build your future...”<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning of 2020 the Namibian special envoy Zed Ngavirue had publicly clarified that the German government had not yet presented a quantum on what they are willing to pay as reparations. He referred to the “different proposal” shared by ambassador Schlaga with the local German-speakers (see above). Referring to plans for the next (ninth) round of negotiations anticipated for February 2020 in Berlin, he indicated being “positive that we should make a real advance this time around, but it would certainly not be the conclusion of talks.”<sup>22</sup>

In the meantime, German debates addressed colonial legacies in other ways as well. Public exchanges and even policy statements over the restitution of cultural artefacts have considerably shifted towards a more open engagement with the legacy of the criminal nature of transferring goods appropriated by use of force.<sup>23</sup> Also notable was the Foreign Ministry publication of a position paper on transitional justice in mid-2019. It “advocates a *comprehensive understanding of confronting past injustices*.”<sup>24</sup> It clarifies that the approach is widely defined, including “violations of economic, social and cultural rights” and “various dimensions of justice (such as retributive, distributive and restorative justice)”, as transitional justice as part of social transformation processes.<sup>25</sup> As it argues: “*In the long term,*

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Notably, the Swakopmund Museum is a private institution run by the mainly German-speaking community in the *Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft Swakopmund* (Scientific Society Swakopmund). Over the museum’s entry portal is the slogan “*Bauet am Erbe*” (Build on the Heritage).

<sup>22</sup> Jemima Beukes, “German reparation offer ‘not true’,” *Namibian Sun*, 8 January 2020, <https://www.namibiansun.com/news/german-reparation-offer-not-true2020-01-08>.

<sup>23</sup> See Jeremiah J. Garsha, “Expanding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*? German Repatriation of Colonial Artefacts and Human Remains,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 1(2020): 46-61.

<sup>24</sup> The Federal Government, *Interministerial Strategy to Support “Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation (Transitional Justice)” in the Context of Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts and Building Peace* (Berlin: German Federal Foreign Office, 2019), 8. Original emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 8f.

transitional justice measures help to develop inclusive cultures of remembrance.”<sup>26</sup> It advocates, “(P)articipative processes with a broad scope ... to ensure that transitional justice is not perceived as a project of the elites, and that the expertise and political ideas from civil-society organisations and groups (particularly those that represent victims and survivors, or have direct access to them) can be put to use.”<sup>27</sup> The paper then presents examples of transitional justice in Germany: “*acknowledging and providing reparations for past injustices.*” Reference is made to “reparations and compensation for National Socialist injustices” and it maintains: “Given its decades-long and multifaceted experiences in this policy area, Germany can provide information about basic requirements, problems and mechanisms for the development of state and civil-society reparation efforts.”<sup>28</sup> Strikingly, however, the term *colonialism* (my emphasis) does not feature once in the 32-page document.

### **Reactionary Revisionism Unfolding**

These and a few other indications, mainly concerning a related public discourse in Germany, seem to point toward a direction which could finally pave the way for a long overdue solution; at least on the level of the bilateral negotiations pending now for over four years. But other tendencies emerging in parallel seem to suggest a roll back. It might indicate that the window of opportunity has narrowed again with right-wing populism gaining ground, for example through the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) having secured a significant presence in the German Parliament as well as in most of the parliaments in the German federal states. With Nazi-sympathisers even in their highest party ranks, the new right-wing white supremacist reincarnations of megalomaniac thoughts and claims of Empire have arrived in Germany with full force.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10. Original emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 16. Original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23 (original emphasis).

What has been diagnosed as “cultural dementia” mainly with reference to the United Kingdom and France is applicable in the changing political environment of Germany as well.

... the layering of mythology around history is not something that can be simply and uncontroversially pulled back by the application of expertise. The West’s current relationship to the past is not the passive victimhood of an individual dementia sufferer, but rather an actively constructed, jealously guarded toxic refusal to engage with facts that are well-known but emotionally and politically inconvenient, and with other experiences that are devastating to the collective self-regard of huge segments of societies that have no visible desire to come to terms with reality.<sup>29</sup>

After all, the aggressive and unashamed rebirth of colonial-apologetic propaganda is anything but conducive to a dialogue seeking to find ways to address the past colonial crimes, if only as a reluctant compromise with continued flaws. A recent example illustrates the point and documents the extent of denialism now even abusing the German Parliament as a forum. On 11 December 2019 the AfD invited for a public lecture to its chamber in the German Parliament. It had the programmatic (sub-)title: “The balance of German colonialism. Why the Germans have not to apologise and definitely not to pay for the colonial era!”<sup>30</sup> The speaker was not any “patriotic” German, but none less than Bruce Gilley, who managed to obtain dubious fame with an article in 2017, in which he eponymously argued “The case for colonialism.”<sup>31</sup> In his lecture, he claims to be competent in the following way:

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<sup>29</sup> David Andress, *Cultural Dementia. How the West has Lost its History, and Risks Losing Everything Else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018) 144.

<sup>30</sup> In the original: “Die Bilanz des deutschen Kolonialismus. Warum sich die Deutschen nicht für die Kolonialzeit entschuldigen und erst recht nicht dafür bezahlen müssen!” (note the exclamation mark).

<sup>31</sup> See among the numerous contributions to the debate since then for the context and in response Sandew Hira, “A decolonial critique of the racist case for colonialism,” *Decolonial International Network*, 22 September 2017, <https://din.today/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-Racist-case-for-colonialism.pdf>. The significance of the concerted efforts personified by him and a few others in terms of revisionist claims about colonialism has

I am not a historian, much less a historian of colonialism. I am a social scientist, and I have come to the conclusion that very little history on German colonialism meets the most basic standards of social scientific research as normally understood. It is ideological, biased, and often self-contradictory. So my main qualification for writing about German colonial history is that I am not a historian of German colonialism.<sup>32</sup>

Having established his qualifications this way, he directly moves to German South West Africa – and documents his deep knowledge by stating wrongly so that the territory also included “parts of present-day Botswana.” As he reasons, “unless we confront this head-on and get it right, everything we say about the rest of German colonialism will always come with the riposte ‘Well, what about the Herero?’”<sup>33</sup> Be aware, that his answer is not meant to be misunderstood as mis-guided satire:

... let’s remind ourselves that Southwest Africa was about 2% of the German colonial population (measured in terms of people-years). Just logically, imagine we conclude that Germany did a really horrible job with this 2% and a superb job with the other 98%. What would our overall conclusion be about German colonialism?<sup>34</sup>

He then, without disputing the decimation of Ovaherero by 75% and the Nama by 50% as a consequence of the German annihilation strategy, puts the blame entirely on General Lothar von Trotha as the military commander and thereby individualises the root cause of the

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been highlighted by Pepjin Brandon and Aditya Sarkar, “Labour History and the Case against Colonialism,” *International Review of Social History* 64, no. 1 (2019):73-109.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Gilley, “The Case for German Colonialism.” Paper presented in the German Parliament on 11 December 2019, 1, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338555799\\_The\\_Case\\_for\\_German\\_Colonialism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338555799_The_Case_for_German_Colonialism).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



genocide: “Germans and German policy was not genocidal: Trotha was.”<sup>35</sup> He then continues with an unreserved praise song of the civilising mission to end with the appeal:

German memory and writing on colonialism continues to suffer from a post-1918 ideological indoctrination campaign redolent of the worse aspects of totalitarianism. Having variously allied itself with totalitarian movements of the left (Soviets) and right (Nazis), this scholarly industry continues to get a free pass and to be accepted as truthful and just. It is neither. Germany’s reassertion of its classical liberal and Western identity must begin with a rejection of the dogmatic and totalitarian ideology of anti-colonialism.<sup>36</sup>

This reasoning coincided with an AfD draft resolution, circulated to Parliament the same day, to address the German colonial era – as they call it - cultural-politically differentiated.<sup>37</sup> With direct reference to a controversial statement by the Personal Representative of the German Chancellor for Africa<sup>38</sup> it argues that the German empire’s colonialism contributed to liberate the African continent from archaic structures. It then recognises (following Gilley’s line of argument) that the war by the German colonial troops in South West Africa led to un-proportional rigorousness and cruelties, but denies any systematic or intentional genocide by putting the blame only on von Trotha. It also recognises the suffering of the victims of the colonial wars but dismisses any compensation. Rather, the amount of development aid transferred since Namibia’s independence is considered as impressive evidence that Germany

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 6. See also for more on this event Robert Heinze, “Colonial Revisionism in Germany,” *Africa is a Country*, 22 January 2020, <https://africasacountry.com/2020/01/colonial-revisionism-in-germany>.

<sup>37</sup> Antrag, *Die deutsche Kolonialzeit kulturpolitisch differenziert aufarbeiten*, Deutscher Bundestag, 19. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 19/15784, 11 December 2019, <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/157/1915784.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> See Robert Heinze, “A technocratic reformulation of colonialism,” *Africa is a country*, 21 January 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/01/a-technocratic-reformulation-of-colonialism>.

has lived up to its historical responsibility towards a former colony. The submission therefore finds it justified to counteract the growing amnesia by means of an intensification of commemorative and cultural-political enlightenment. For this a federal foundation could be established to not only address German colonial history in a differentiated way but also to transmit it accordingly. It then calls on the federal government to cultivate a commemorative culture, which brings to the fore the gainful sides of the German colonial era; to work towards a differentiated view of the time; to promote such perspectives in the curricula for schools; to decisively oppose demands for reparations; to rebuke demands for the restitution of cultural goods from a colonial context based on the untenable classification of the colonial times as “criminal”; to appeal to communal levels in the federal states to maintain those street names which have been brought up for re-naming.

Notably, with this draft the AfD seeks to occupy the term ‘amnesia’, which hitherto had been applied in the opposite meaning by those critical of the colonial apologetic traits.<sup>39</sup> In its justification for the draft resolution, it unashamedly appropriates studies which had a different (arguably ambiguous) intention for its own purposes.<sup>40</sup> It attacks “cultural Marxist inspired post- and de-colonialism” and bemoans a paradigm shift since German unification, creating the impression that critical colonial-historical studies since then were all indoctrinated by and simply echoed East German ideology. It accuses the “left spectre” having imposed its “normative interpretation of the past” as dominant opinion and turns those who are criticised for advocating colonial apologetic interpretations of a civilising mission

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<sup>39</sup> See Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber, “Koloniale Amnesie. Zum Umgang mit der deutschen Kolonialvergangenheit,” *Standpunkte* 9/2018 (Berlin: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2018). [https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls\\_uploads/pdfs/Standpunkte/Standpunkte\\_9-2018.pdf](https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Standpunkte/Standpunkte_9-2018.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Most prominently Christiane Bürger, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte(n). Der Genozid in Namibia und die Geschichtsschreibung der DDR und BRD* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017). For a critical review see Henning Melber, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 23 (2018): 137-140.

into victims. The demands for restitution of cultural artefacts are disqualified as “inquisitory logic” aimed at the “removal of inalienable property.”<sup>41</sup>

After given this reactionary reasoning much attention, one should however not throw out the baby with the bathwater: public discourse in Germany around the genocide committed in what was then the empire’s colony has in as much as the discussion over the restitution of cultural artefacts appropriated in forms tantamount to theft made - thanks to a pro-active civil society – considerable inroads into the public sphere. This might be one of the more positive factors to explain the current colonial revisionism by right-wing populists. But it also is a reminder that the uphill battle is far from over.

### **Unfinished Business**

The same can be said for the ongoing bilateral negotiations. Even if the Namibian and German governments should in the near future come to a compromise they are both willing to accept, it would not solve the issues in putting the affair to rest once and for all. In Namibia, the agencies of the descendants of the Ovaherero and Nama not involved in the negotiations will hardly accept whatever the outcome is, as long as they have not been adequately consulted and been taken on board. Their support base is big enough to remain a nuisance and question if not obstruct any implementation of what has been agreed upon.

Not least the issue of land will remain a festering wound. Land is, far beyond economic considerations, ultimately a matter of identity – for those who currently own it as much as it is for those who feel it should be theirs. Colonialism in the territory of then South West Africa resorted to brutal crimes, culminating in genocidal practices to force people off their land. Today’s commercial agrarian sector in Namibia remains heavily associated with that violent land theft. Therefore, the current distribution of land in private ownership is a

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<sup>41</sup> Antrag, *Die deutsche Kolonialzeit*, 9-11.

constant reminder that colonialism did not end with independence. It continues as long as restorative justice is not infused into the land debate. The second land conference stated in a resolution under topical issue 38 (“ancestral land rights and claims”) that “measures to restore social justice and ensure economic empowerment of the affected communities” should be identified. The next resolution then suggests to “use the reparations from the former colonial powers for such purpose.”<sup>42</sup> This might offer a way out of the current stagnation in the negotiations between the Namibian and German governments over how to deal with their intertwined history – provided both sides are willing to hand over the land to the descendants of those, from whom it was stolen.

As part of the long-overdue necessity to satisfactorily compensate for the historical injustices that have laid the foundations for the current blatantly skewed land distribution, Germany could provide the necessary funds for a just (in the sense of fair) expropriation of commercial farmers. Their land was utilized by the indigenous communities, and their ancestors are buried there. But the transfer of such land would only constitute a first step. The German state should then finance the necessary investments – both in terms of infrastructure as well as know-how – empowering local communities to fully benefit from resettlement and to gain access to land under the condition of climate change adaptation. The Namibian government, on the other hand, would have to accept that resettlement considers the main beneficiaries hereof to be the descendants of those robbed of their land, and should not privilege those whose land was never taken. This would be an investment by both governments in an act of reconciliation contributing to a relative enhancement of social stability. It would promote a common future for all people who want to continue living in and act as “Southwesters” (*Südwesters*).

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<sup>42</sup> Accessible online at <http://www.mlr.gov.na/documents/20541/638917/Second+National+Land+Conference+Resolutions+2018.pdf/15b498fd-fdc6-4898-aeda-91fecbc74319>.

This perspective also includes a continued German policy concern. After all, the situation of the German-speaking community (often still German citizens) has been an explicit point of reference already, seen when the FRG Parliament adopted its resolution on the special responsibility for the former German colony ahead of the transition to Independence in 1988. Since parts of this community are also ideologically aligned to the new right-wing populism, the two countries remain intrinsically connected. From this point of view, the current aggressive counter-initiatives by the AfD are, strictly speaking, an obstruction to a secure future of the German-speaking community in Namibia, not least including their own sympathisers and followers there.

But revisionist thinking is not only on the offensive by right-wing extremism such as the AfD. Some among those who earlier on took sides with the analysis that what happened then was tantamount to genocide, have now reversed positions and backtracked. Most notably among these is the renowned journalist Bartholomäus Grill, who started to give a “Southwester” farmer and hobby-historian cultivating denialism a prominent voice.<sup>43</sup> He is able to punch above his weight as a “crown witness” (occupying, by the way, a farm which has been at the heartland of the Ovaherero when the Germans came) in denial of genocide. It is indicative, that he and Grill are also playing a prominent role in the AfD resolution submitted to the German Parliament.

While the AfD resolution presumably will not get the necessary parliamentary majority to be adopted, its impact should not be underestimated. Parts of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as biggest party in the coalition government with the Social Democrats (SPD), desire to occupy the “political middle”, and are busy to shift this middle to the right political spectrum in an effort to re-gain voices from the AfD support base. The continued discussion over how to come to terms with the German colonial past and in

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<sup>43</sup> See for detailed engagements Köbller and Melber, *Völkermord – und was dann?*, chapter 4.

particular the genocide committed, will not benefit from such current shifts in both the policy context as well as public opinion.

While post-colonial initiatives have made significant inroads into the public discourse since the turn of the century, colonial revisionism and white supremacy in combination with anti-migration xenophobia have responded with forceful attacks not only among former colonial empires elsewhere but also in Germany. The battles are far from over. What has been diagnosed for other states, applies for Germany too:

... there are entire bookshops' worth of good historical work, whole departments of bold young historians (and some grizzled old veterans) who have been telling their students, and anyone else who would listen, how it really was for at least a generation. The problem remains what to do when people don't want to listen, or learn.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Andress, *Cultural Dementia*, 106.