

Genocide of the Nama and Herero

In the permanent exhibition of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre there is a small object that is often overlooked by visitors. It is a metal oval disk, only slightly bigger than 5mm in height, with a crest and the words "Swakopmund Pass" embossed on its surface. A number has been stamped into the disk and a small hole at the top makes it possible for the disk to be worn on a chain. This object may be small, but it has many stories to tell us about colonial notions of 'race' and eugenics, about the dehumanization and control of the 'other' and about war and genocide.

In response to growing pressure in Germany to join other European colonial powers in the race to divide the remainder of the African continent amongst themselves, the German flag was eventually raised in what became known as German South West Africa on 7 August 1884. German claims to this land were confirmed during the Berlin Conference later that year. This territory had largely been overlooked by colonial explorers due, in part, to its seemingly deserted and uninhabitable coastline. Out of view from passing ships, however, the fertile grasslands of the central plateau had already been settled by the Herero, moving south from Angola during the 18th century

and the Nama, moving north from the Cape in the early 19th century.

Competition for scarce resources, racial contempt towards Africans and conflicting ideas of territory and ownership lead to clashes between the German settlers and the local populations. Resistance to colonial rule was met with harsh treatment, beatings, murder and rape, committed against ordinary Herero and Nama, and often going unchecked and unpunished. In early 1904, a Herero uprising, led by Samuel Maherero in Okahandja, resulted in over one hundred German civilian deaths. German colonial forces, under Lieutenant-General Lothar von Trotha, retaliated by waging a war of mass murder, forced expulsion, slave labour and the establishment of concentration camps. To make his intention absolutely clear, van Trotha issued an extermination order containing these words: "Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at". The Nama led by Captain Hendrik Witbooi joined the uprising a year later and were met with a similar fate.

The notorious concentration camp on Shark Island off the coast of Lüderitz,

provided slave labour to build the railway line linking Lüderitz to other German settlements but was ill equipped to cope with the extreme weather conditions. Prisoners of this, and other concentration camps, as well as those who were forced to flee into the desert, died of starvation, exposure, dehydration, execution, mistreatment or were worked to death. When the concentration camps were eventually closed, approximately 65 000 Herero people (80% of the entire Herero nation) and over 10 000 Nama people (50% of the Nama nation) had been killed in the years between 1904 and 1907. The survivors were sent to work as labourers for settlers, among whom were the soldiers (and their families) who carried out von Trotha's orders. They were forced to wear numbered identification tags and banned from owning cattle or land.

After several years of negotiations with the Namibian government and over a century after the events, in 2021 Germany formally acknowledged the killing of the Nama and Herero as genocide. While this is an important first step, discussion around reparations remains a contentious issue. It continues to be significant that this genocide is included in the permanent exhibition of the JHGC and that we are able to tell the story of the oval disk and the people who were forced to wear it.

CATHERINE BOYD



This mass, unmarked graveyard in Swakopmund sits at the edge of an upscale neighborhood where approximately 1,000 people, mostly Herero, were buried. Photograph: © Kate Schoenbach, Swakopmund, Namibia, May 4, 2017.

FURTHER READING:

The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism.

Olusoga, D. and Erichsen, C.

<https://www.kateschoenbach.com/the-namibian-genocide>