

The OvaHerero-Nama Genocide

Note on Disturbing Content

This reading contains content that may be upsetting for readers. It refers to physical and psychological violence, including persecution, mass killing, intense hatreds, trauma, and sexual violence, and includes first-hand accounts from survivors. Texts and images might be particularly intense for students with a personal connection to the topic. It is important to be sensitive to your classmates and the ways in which this content might be a difficult topic to study.

In 2019, a delegation of politicians, scholars, museum employees, artists, and journalists accompanied a Bible and a cattle whip on a flight from Frankfurt, Germany, to Windhoek, Namibia. It was the second time in their over 130-year

history that the objects had crossed the planet, but this time they were headed home.

The Bible and the whip belonged to Hendrik Witbooi, a powerful leader of a native Namibian ethnic group called the Nama. German colonial troops stole the objects during an attack on his headquarters in Hornkranz, Namibia, in 1893. Some scholars consider this raid the turning point in colonial Southwest Africa, as Namibia was then called, which led to a genocide. From 1904-1908 German colonial troops and civilians killed approximately 50 percent of Nama people and 80 percent of another group called the OvaHerero.

Who are the OvaHerero and Nama?

In the nineteenth century, before German colonizers arrived, the OvaHerero were semi-nomadic cattle herders in central Namibia. The Nama, who lived in southern Namibia and



NASA/GSFC/Jeff Schmaltz/MODIS Land Rapid Response Team

This satellite image of the coast of Namibia shows sand blowing off the Namib Desert towards the Atlantic Ocean. About 15 percent of Namibia is desert; less than 5 percent is suitable for agriculture. Except for in the far north of the country, rainfall is very low and often not dependable. For millennia, the various groups of people in Namibia were mostly small and quite spread out from each other because of the challenging landscape and climate. The movement of people over thousands of years to and across what is now called Namibia has been tied to the availability of water.

northwest South Africa, tended sheep, goats, and cattle but also practiced hunting and gathering. These groups (among others) travelled to known areas where water could be found at different times of year. Sometimes there were violent conflicts among the groups for the limited resources.

What is settler colonialism?

For various reasons Germany came late to what is often called the “Scramble for Africa,” or the European colonization of Africa. By the time Alfred Lüderitz, a German tobacco merchant, started a trading post on the coast in 1883, other European nations had already been involved in other parts of Africa for decades in a process called settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism is a form of imperialism. At its most basic level, settler colonialism is the process of removing people in order to replace them. More specifically, it is when settlers from an imperial power migrate to foreign territories, attempt to remove or eliminate the territories’ native inhabitants, and replace them with new communities of the colonial settlers. The settlers then profit from the settled land. European nations colonized Africa to gain resources, money, and power.

European imperialism in Africa interfered with the ability of local people to decide their own political and economic affairs. Europeans exploited natural and human resources for their own economic benefit. Their rule was often violent, racist, and destructive.



It is important to note that the term “ethnic group” does not accurately describe the relationship among people speaking the same language and sharing customs in precolonial Namibia. The groups we today call “OvaHerero” or “Nama” were, in precolonial times, more fluid than today. Some of the cultural traits that define different groups today were shared across groups. Generally, identities in Namibia became more ethnically defined during and after colonization. Today, there are eleven recognized ethnic groups in Namibia.

Over time, white Europeans established justifications (beliefs for why something is right or good) for settler colonial expansion. These popular beliefs were used to rationalize—or explain to themselves and others—why they thought their conquest and settlement of African land was honorable, beneficial, and necessary.



Courtesy of Jephtha Nguherimo

Men inspecting a portion of the herd after a drought, 2018. From precolonial times to today, OvaHerero have raised cattle for milk and meat and slaughtered them for ceremonial events. Over the centuries, OvaHerero developed a strong sense of themselves as cattle herders. They used to see cattle as a gift from the creator, and believed that other human groups were given lesser gifts. Cattle are an important source of wealth and a key part of OvaHerero culture and economy.

How did the arrival of Europeans in Namibia influence central and southern Namibian societies?

Before Europeans settled in Namibia, native Namibians traded with each other and with other groups throughout southern Africa, including European traders along the coast and settlers in South Africa.

Christian missionaries from Europe also travelled to Namibia. They hoped to convert native groups to Christianity and to “civilize” them. To “civilize” native Africans meant forcing them to follow European customs, such as in the way they dressed, structured their families, and worked.

The first missionaries in Namibia came from England in 1806 and established mission stations among the Nama. Later, missionaries came from Germany and focused on areas inhabited by the OvaHerero. By reporting on their activities and their views of native Namibians to the German public, the missionaries also helped pave the way for German colonization of Namibia.

Why did Germany establish a colony in Namibia?

For the German Empire, colonization was an opportunity to gain territory for Germany, exert power over populations they saw as racially and culturally inferior, and to compete with other European states that had colonies. Many Germans believed further territorial expansion was crucial for the nation’s economic success, and that they were being “left

behind” by their European neighbors. The sense of urgency many Germans felt to demonstrate their competence as a colonial power contributed to their ruthless and violent treatment of native Namibians.

“German Southwest Africa is the only one among our colonies that appears suitable to satisfy one of the main demands of the creators of Germany’s colonial movement, namely to possess our own overseas territories that are partially capable of absorbing the current of German emigration.”

—From the newspaper of the German Colonial Society, August 1893

How did German colonists acquire land in Southwest Africa?

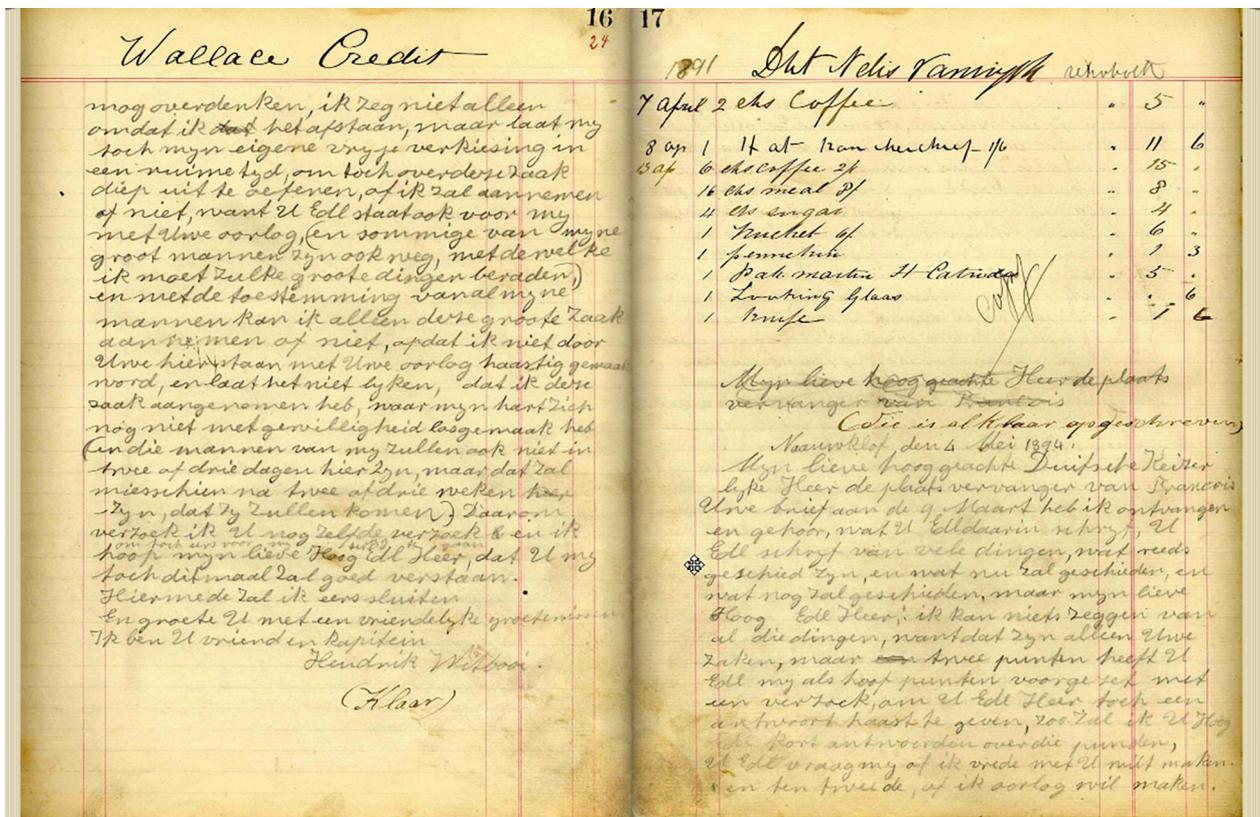
At first, Germany sent only a small number of people to gain control and sign treaties with native Namibians. These colonists engaged in a “divide and rule” policy. They turned one native Namibian leader against another, and through this manipulation took over land in return for money, firearms, and the promise of protection from other native groups. Samuel Maharero became an important OvaHerero leader, for instance, in part

because the colonial government supported him over others. Maharero hoped that the Germans would protect the OvaHerero from cattle raids by the Nama under Hendrik Witbooi.

“[I]t is obviously more convenient for us to deal with a politically divided Herero nation, than with a closed and unified one.”

—German Colonial Governor Theodor Leutwein, June 1894

Witbooi, for his part, refused to sign any treaties with Germans. His forces repeatedly repelled the Germans until, finally, Germany sent two hundred troops and ambushed his headquarters in 1893. The Germans killed more than eighty people, mostly women and children who were sheltered there. Witbooi was forced to enter into an agreement with the Germans in 1894, reducing his ability to resist German colonization.



Pages from one of Hendrik Witbooi’s copy books. Witbooi wrote out copies of all of his correspondence in the Cape Dutch language, from 1884 until about 1901. This book was an accountancy book before Witbooi used the empty spaces to keep copies of his letters. The copy books are part of the UNESCO Memory of the World Program because they represent one of very few nineteenth century African accounts of European colonialism.

“I can’t understand exactly what the Germans are planning to do. They tell the chiefs of this country that they come as friends to prevent other powerful nations to take their land away from them. But it looks to me as if they are the ones who are taking the land.”

—Hendrik Witbooi, June 28, 1891,
in a letter to a friend

What caused the outbreak of war between the OvaHerero and German colonizers?

By the turn of the twentieth century, several thousand German settlers had arrived in Southwest Africa. Their presence, as well as other factors, severely weakened the OvaHerero. First, because settlers took land, OvaHerero herds were reduced, forcing many to work as wage laborers. Second, settlers often extended predatory loans to OvaHerero, which they had to repay in cattle or land. Third, the German colonizers built a railroad line directly through the best areas for grazing animals. Fourth, in 1897 a devastating cattle disease broke out, which was made worse by the reduced land available for grazing, and wiped out enormous numbers of cattle. Many OvaHerero began to experience poverty. The cattle herds had been the foundation of OvaHerero culture and social structure, and without the herds, relationships across families and groups disintegrated. Finally, many OvaHerero began to resist their brutal treatment by German colonizers.

The vast majority of German colonizers were men. Many believed in racist ideas which claimed white people, and especially Germans, were superior to Africans. At the same time, many settlers were deeply distrustful and fearful of native Namibians and used violence to try to intimidate and control them. Settlers sometimes murdered native Namibians with few repercussions. Rape of OvaHerero and Nama women by settlers and military personnel was very common.

“[E]very German farmer seemed to be able to do towards us just what he pleased, and to make his own laws, and he never got punished. The police and the soldiers might flog us and ill-treat us, the farmers might do as they pleased towards us and

our wives, the soldiers might molest and even rape our women and young girls, and no one was punished.”

—Abraham Kaffer, an elderly Nama man recounting the treatment of native Namibians under German colonial rule, 1918

Samuel Maharero developed a twofold plan that he hoped would frighten the German settlers into leaving Southwest Africa. First, the OvaHerero would attack military outposts to reduce their power. Second, they would attack the isolated farms owned by German colonizers. In the attacks, which lasted for several days in January 1904, the OvaHerero loyal to Maharero destroyed many homes, disabled sections of the railroad, and killed 120 people.

For the next several months, skirmishes and surprise attacks weakened both sides. German settlers and Germans in Europe believed the OvaHerero were engaged in an illegal uprising and demanded a solution. The lack of a solid defeat of the OvaHerero embarrassed the German government. The government sent a new commander, General Lothar von Trotha, and thousands of additional German troops. Meanwhile, the remaining OvaHerero forces, their cattle, and their families moved together to an area called Waterberg.

How did the war in Namibia become a genocide?

Like many German military officers, von Trotha thought that war was over only when the enemy had been utterly defeated. He believed Black Africans would only respond to unrelenting violence, and that in Southwest Africa he was involved in a war in which the future of the white “race” was at stake. The German government supported his approach.

“Each Commanding Officer is authorized to shoot or hang black inhabitants who are caught committing hostile acts, for example, armed rebels who are caught with clear war intentions against German troops, without a preceding trial, overruling the current practice of war.”

—Lothar von Trotha, June 11, 1904

German troops surrounded the OvaHerero at Waterberg in August 1904, but the OvaHerero retreated and escaped. Von Trotha ordered his troops to pursue the OvaHerero toward the Omaheke Desert and to prevent any of them—men, women, or children—from getting out of the desert alive. He announced that OvaHerero were no longer permitted in the German territory of Southwest Africa. All who escaped from the desert would be chased back or killed.

“The Hereros are no longer German subjects.... All the Hereros must leave the land. If the people do not do this, then I will force them to do it with guns. Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children [as prisoners]. I will drive them back to their people or I will shoot them....”

—Lothar von Trotha, October 2, 1904 in his “Vernichtungsbefehl” [extermination order]

The vast majority of OvaHerero and their livestock died of thirst in the desert. Those who did return were forced into camps by missionaries and then handed over to the German administration. A small number managed to escape to the other side of the desert or to the far north of Namibia. Samuel Maharero escaped to the British colony in what is now Botswana, where he lived in exile until 1923.

“[My grandmother] Inajovandu, which means the mother of the people...became weak and sickly during the flight toward the Omaheke desert.... My grandmother was left to die under a tree. That’s the story my mother told me about her. She was left under the tree to die....”

—Ehrenstine Inaambepera Zauisomue, aged 78, interviewed by her grandson, Jephtha Nguherimo, 2004

How did the Nama experience German colonization?

Like the OvaHerero, the Nama had also suffered livestock and land losses as well as poor treatment at the hands of German settlers and

traders. Hendrik Witbooi, the leader of the Nama at the time, observed the German-OvaHerero war and concluded that war between the Nama and the Germans was inevitable. He declared war in October 1904.

For nearly two years Nama guerillas were able to inflict heavy losses on the German troops, even after Witbooi was killed in September 1905. Eventually, Germany sent an overwhelming number of reinforcements and defeated most of the remaining Nama groups. German troops engaged in a scorched-earth policy, burning villages and deporting all remaining inhabitants to makeshift concentration camps.

How did Germans establish concentration camps in Namibia?

Some German missionaries were alarmed by the extermination order and asked the German government to change the policy. German farmers and industrialists, too, asked to spare the lives of native Namibians because they wanted to use them



Metal pass tokens, worn around the neck, were issued during and after the war to restrict native Namibians’ travel. This pass was acquired by a missionary. It is unknown who wore it.

Courtesy of Joachim Zeller

for forced labor on their farms and railroads. The German government revoked von Trotha's extermination order in December 1904 and required the colony to send any surviving OvaHerero to the concentration camps. The climate in the coastal camps was so harsh that most of the starving prisoners were unable to survive. Those who did survive were used as forced labor. Germans often committed sexual violence against women at the camps. Approximately half of the concentration camp prisoners died.

“I was sent down with others to an island far in the south, at Lüderitzbucht. There on that island were thousands of Herero and Hottentot [Nama] prisoners. We had to live there. Men, women and children were all huddled together. We had no proper clothing, no blankets, and the night air on the sea was bitterly cold. The people died there like flies that had been poisoned....”

—Samuel Kariko, an OvaHerero recounting his experience in the Shark Island concentration camp, 1918

A large number of human remains, including skulls, were shipped from concentration camps in Namibia to Germany for eugenics research. Eugen-

ics was the racist and debunked study of biological differences in humans. Nazis later used eugenics to justify extermination of Jews and other groups during the Holocaust.

Until World War I, most of the remaining OvaHerero and Nama worked for colonists, though some escaped to what is now Botswana in the east, South Africa in the south, and Angola in the north. Some struggled in “native reserves” put aside by the colonial regime. These were areas of land on which native groups were assigned to live after the genocide.

How did the international community respond to the OvaHerero-Nama genocide?

Colonialism was a worldwide system in which European powers invaded other areas of the world and forcibly gained control over the native inhabitants. Few Europeans or Americans questioned the right of Germany or German settlers to take land, exploit the native inhabitants of Namibia, and exert power over them.

Some major newspapers in the United States reported briefly on the war in Namibia, but they described it as a violent uprising that had to be suppressed. The British-controlled regions in southern Africa (what are now Botswana and

Reconciliation and the Question of Reparations

Since the hundredth anniversary of the genocide, different groups of OvaHerero and Nama have filed lawsuits against the German government. They have sought an apology, reparations, return of stolen land, and a seat at the negotiation table to address the lawsuits. In 2015, Germany began negotiations with the Namibian government. The negotiations did not include representatives for individual OvaHerero and Nama. Germany claims that it could not bypass the Namibian government to negotiate with nongovernmental groups. Some OvaHerero and Nama do not believe that the Namibian government acted on their behalf in the negotiations. They say that truly open negotiations in which all crimes against humanity were discussed would have exposed the current ruling party to accusations of human rights violations during the independence movement from South Africa.

Germany admitted to the genocide of the OvaHerero and Nama, and the special envoys from Namibia and Germany drafted an agreement in May 2021. In the agreement, Germany refused to offer direct reparations (the term does not appear in the agreement), but agreed to add significantly to previous financial assistance for Namibia. As part of the reconciliation effort, Germany promised to return objects like cultural artifacts and human remains stolen by German colonizers to Namibia.

Many Namibians reject the agreement because they were not included in the negotiations. They point out that the German government did negotiate directly with Jewish groups after the Holocaust. They and others also note the many similarities between the two genocides. Some have called the OvaHerero-Nama genocide a “dress rehearsal” for the Holocaust.



Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (CC BY 2.0), via Flickr

Women from BEN’s Bikes in Windhoek demonstrate their training in bike repair in a photo taken in 2009. The Bicycling Empowerment Network (BEN) of Namibia supports business growth and sustainable incomes related to bike use, a racing team, innovative projects like bike transport for rural health workers, and the creation of bike lanes for safe travel. It is important to remember that countries and people affected by genocide were not just victims. They led diverse lives and continue to do so today.

South Africa)received more detailed reporting. Many residents and members of the government in Great Britain were shocked by the German treatment of the OvaHerero and Nama, particularly

the killing of civilians. The British government remained officially neutral, however, as it hoped to avoid a conflict with Germany. The British also wanted to avoid giving native South Africans and Botswanans the impression that an anticolonial uprising might be successful. Unofficially, the British were involved in several ways, including by providing supplies to the Germans and by disarming and containing OvaHerero and Nama refugees.

When did Namibia gain independence?

At the end of World War I (1914-1918) the Allied Powers forced Germany to give up all its colonies. At the Paris Peace Conference, the negotiators gave Namibia to South Africa as a protectorate. The South African government extended its white supremacist rule to Namibia, forbidding native Namibians (who were Black) to hold political office or to live in the same areas as white people. Some OvaHerero were gradually able to steal cattle, occupy land, and reestablish their community during South African rule.

Namibians began to fight for independence from South Africa in the 1960s and finally gained full independence in 1990. The country is a democracy. Since independence, Namibia and

Germany have begun to come to terms with their joint past, but the legacies of the genocide continue to this day.