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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Kundrus, B. (2005). From the herero to the Holocaust? Some remarks on the current debate. *Afrika Spectrum*, *40*(2), 299-308. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-105497

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gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

afrika spectrum 40 (2005) 2
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Debattenbeiträge / Debates

Birthe Kundrus

From the Herero to the Holocaust? Some remarks on the current debate

Henning Melber s recent article in this journal is a critical and highly commendable survey of research on the genocide perpetrated by German colonial forces against the Herero and Nama from 1904 to 1908 and of the divergent cultures of memory about these atrocities that have emerged in Nambia and Germany (Melber 2005). The author points out the decades of amnesia that reigned in the Federal Republic and offers a probing account of the social and political struggles for power and position that surfaced in Namibian society as a result of the debate over this genocide. He ends, however, with an attempt to substantiate Germany s political responsibility for the genocide in its former colony German Southwest Africa (*Deutsch-Südwestafrika*) by arguing that there is considerable evidence of clear-cut continuities between that first genocide of the twentieth century and the Shoah and war of annihilation decades later in Eastern Europe. As evidence shows, we can observe continuities in accounts and novels read by a mass readership, in military practice as well as in the activities of specific persons, and in military doctrines and routines that link strategic ideas of decisive battles to the concept of final solution and extinction of the enemy, which came into full effect under the Nazi Regime. (Melber 2005:145). Unfortunately, no reference that furnishes further evidence follows; perhaps this is not merely an oversight, for published monographs with research findings on these questions remain the rare exception.[1]

Referring to the Boxer Uprising, Susanne Kuß finds some parallels to the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union but remains rather vague when it comes to the question of continuities (Kuß 2002). Without supplying empirical evidence, Jenntje Böhlke-Itzen asserts a continual line (Böhlke-Itzen 2004:95) with respect to personnel, ideology, and politics, stretching from the racial obsession of German colonialism to the Third Reich . Jürgen Zimmerer would appear to be the scholar who has dealt with this issue most intensively to date; he concludes that the war waged against the Nama and

1 One exception is Furber's (2003) as yet unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.

Herero was a *decisive* link to the crimes of the National Socialists (Zimmerer 2003:1118). The genocide was an important source of ideas for the Nazi war in Eastern Europe, since, according to Zimmerer, it represented the breach of a final taboo namely, not only conceiving of, but actually implementing the annihilation of an ethnic group.

It is not without a certain irony that the continuities between colonialism and National Socialism are currently being emphasized, for, prior to this new development, the overwhelming significance of Auschwitz and the Shoah, as the most devastating breach of civilization imaginable, actually stood in the way of a closer examination of German colonialism and the violence that it engendered. Media interests no doubt play a role in this recent tendency to label the genocide perpetrated against the Herero as the prehistory of the Third Reich s crimes against humanity. If one aims to have the public take notice, it seems that weighty arguments are essential and, in discourse about the past, Auschwitz is the weightiest argument of all. But does it make sense, in terms of the politics of memory, to heighten the perceived significance of colonial history by declaring it a prelude to National Socialism? I would argue that this perspective foils attempts to promote study of the colonial period in its own right and create a space for German colonial history beyond the shadow of the Third Reich. Furthermore, I perceive a danger that the German colonial period may be reduced to a mere precursor of National Socialism. In that case, we would be doing a disservice to both historical phenomena—the history of violence under German colonialism and the history of violence in the National Socialist period.

One example of how our understanding of these occurrences can be obscured rather than furthered is a recent book by French journalist Rosa Amelie Plumelle Uribe (Urbie 2004). She contends that the murder of millions of European Jews is the result of four centuries of white rule, in which the annihilation of the racially inferior entered into the cultural and ideological patterns of thinking of western civilization (Uribe 2004: 154-155). According to Uribe, the National Socialists also drew on this conceptual and applied reservoir of annihilation , which was characterized by invariable structures, processes, and dimensions, regardless of whether one considers the slave trade, colonialism, lynch murders in the U.S., or the Shoah. Thus, the Holocaust was merely new wine in old bottles.

This kind of historical teleology apparently ends in disorientation. If parallels to the Nazi period are drawn everywhere, ultimately, we lose sight of all of them. For scholars, therefore, the decisive question must be: Are there parallels between colonial and National Socialist annihilationist violence and if so, where? Where are the differences? Recognizing parallels does not mean that we can also discern continuities, which leads to the next question. Did the National Socialists consciously draw on the German colonial period in developing their policies of annihilation? Were specific forms of action or discrete

patterns of perception adopted directly from the colonial period? Did a process of brutalization occur, in the sense that the thresholds preventing violent behavior were lowered, and did this effect persist long after the war against the Herero was over and influence not only dealings with Africans but also with other races, especially Jews and Slavs? This is apparently what is meant by the idea of a prehistory of the Holocaust: a specifically German genocidal disposition, which emerged for the first time in the genocide perpetrated against the Herero and culminated in the German catastrophe of World War II.

The perpetration of uncontrolled violence in a colonial context is, however, not a specifically German phenomenon. And it is by no means a coincidence that Henning Melber quotes the work—inspired by Belgian atrocities in the Congo— of British author Joseph Conrad, as a much cited symbol of precisely this kind of brutalization (Melber 2004: 146). If we survey international scholarship on violence, genocide, and colonialism, then it soon becomes apparent that discussions in this field, rather than scrutinizing what is supposedly a German *Sonderweg*, are instead devoted to the interactions between metropolitan and colonial violence and their European, transnational dimensions and contextualizations (see Eckert 2003 for further references). Especially when the focus is on colonial powers as perpetrators of uncontrolled state violence, it soon becomes apparent that analysis of the complex tapestry of reciprocal influence, of how ideas and policies are transferred between states and their respective agents, is absolutely essential. Jan-Bart Gewald s contribution to the conference Genocides: Forms and Consequences—The Namibian War (1904-1908) in Historical Perspective is one example of how fruitful this approach can be (Gewald 2004). Supplying evidence of how German officers such as Paul Pogge, Hermann Wissmann, and Curt von Francois served Belgium s King Leopold II and participated in the violent conquest of Leopold s Congo state, Gewald asserted that this was where they learned to quash indigenous resistance with merciless brutality and a ruthless scorched earth strategy. Whether these kinds of traveling violent imperialists also participated in the escalation of the war against the Herero and Nama remains to be elucidated in future research. In any case, Gewald must be credited with having directed our attention to the way in which the actors in colonial wars transcended national boundaries.

Whether and in what manner the experience and practice of violence in colonial settings influenced World War I and its aftermath—a question that suggests itself more readily than that of possible continuities linking colonialism and World War II—has not yet been the subject of detailed investigation (see for example Reimann 2004:226). In their fascinating study of German atrocities committed in Belgium and France in the fall of 1914, John Horne and Alan Kramer suggest that violence perpetrated on the periphery—in the colonies—may have returned to Europe in the years 1914 to 1918

(Horne / Kramer 2004:622-624). Similar metaphors of violence characterized the atrocity accusations that each side leveled against the other and these metaphors shared a common basis in European perceptions of colonial violence. Both the Allies and the Axis powers charged their respective enemies with violating existing norms for the conduct of war by civilized nations and accused one another of having become barbaric (see also Koller 2001). Whether military leaders and the soldiers they commanded transmitted a predisposition for violence from the colonial context to European theaters of war is a question Horne and Kramer do not answer. But their account offers a possible example of such a phenomenon in the person of the German officer Major Scheunemann, who ordered the execution of civilians in Andenne in the fall of 1914. As far as the German military is concerned, answers to this question may prove relevant to later events, including the activities of the *Freikorpsverbände* in the Baltic region in 1919, the way in which domestic uprisings were stifled during the Weimar Republic, and occurrences during the partition of Upper Silesia in 1921. In his recently published history of bomb warfare, Sven Lindqvist offers evidence of a connection between how European countries conducted war in the colonies and in Europe (Lindqvist 2001). The image of the savage who is civilized or annihilated from a distance and from above by bombs was ultimately transferred, in terms of personnel and ideology, to European theaters of war. Lindqvist recounts how, on 1 November 1911, the first bomb in history fell near Tripoli in Libya. It was thrown by an Italian lieutenant at Arabs who had rebelled against Italian colonial troops. In the years and decades that followed, nearly all colonial powers used bombs in attempts to quell uprisings: France in Morocco; Great Britain in India, Egypt, Afghanistan, Somaliland, and Iran. During the so-called Third Afghan War in 1919, Arthur Harris—later the commander of the British Bomber Command in Germany—headed bombing attacks on Dacca, Jalalabad, and Kabul. Iraq was also a target of British bombs in the same period. Whether the destruction of Guernica by the German Condor Legion in Spain and the damage inflicted upon Warsaw, Rotterdam, Belgrade, and Murmansk by the Luftwaffe, to name two examples, were planned or justified with references to British acts of violence against colonial civilians remains to be investigated. In any case, Lindqvist s findings dovetail with an argument put forward by Dirk Schumann, who asserts that the stability, in the 1920s and 1930s, of the old nation-states Great Britain and France relied to a considerable extent on their opportunities for redirecting potential aggression to the colonies, whereas in Italy and Germany, in contrast, this potential for aggression was turned inward (Schumann 2003). And yet, these two democracies apparently also shared a heightened sense of the unacceptability of excessive violence. Thus, when British troops massacred participants at an illegal but peaceful assembly in the Indian city of Amritsar in 1919, the British public was stunned and outraged (Sayer 1991).

Retracing the national and European dimensions of the development of colonial dispositions for violence—in search of continuities as well as discontinuities—and their possible impacts on World War I is by no means an easy undertaking. Attempting to do the same with respect to the German conduct of war from 1939 to 1945 represents an even greater challenge. By 1939, German colonial rule had long since come to an end, and only relatively few military men who had served in the colonies were still active in the (relatively youthful) leadership of the Third Reich. Moreover, exactly what is meant by the German conduct of war must be elucidated in greater detail, as a methodological prerequisite to practicable and promising comparative studies or transfer analysis. German warfare was permeated with genocidal and terrorist elements and it is essential that one differentiate between war situations and occupation, between the eastern and western fronts, between the early and later phases of the war, and the various racially tinged images of the enemy that were associated with the respective states attacked in the course of the war. And these are only some of the factors to be considered (cf., as the most recent survey, Müller 2004). Moreover, a large number of perpetrators of violence were involved in the German conduct of the war, including those in the Wehrmacht, the SS, the police forces, the civilian administrations, ministerial bureaucracies, academic planning units, and, last but not least, local collaborators. A specific constellation was necessary to realize the Shoah and the exterminatory violence unleashed by the Germans in Eastern Europe during World War II. The precise contours of this constellation remained controversial within scholarship on the Holocaust for a long time. Today, a closely intermeshed interplay of anti-Semitism, warfare strategies, occupation policies, *Umvolkungpläne* (re-population plans , i.e. the *Generalplan Ost*), and plans for starving out these regions is generally viewed as the most probable explanation (see Herbert 1997).

In most analyses presented to date, the establishment of links to colonial rule—whether with respect to acts of violence committed by German colonial authorities or by other colonial powers—play a minor role, if any. If we consider only the Holocaust and its possible colonial antecedents, then this blank spot seems warranted. Thus, a comparison of the Holocaust and the German annihilation of the Herero reveals that parallels existed between the two on three levels:[2] First, in both cases, the Germans held that they were involved in

2 The following compilatory considerations are based, with respect to the Shoah, on Aly (1995), Benz (1991), Brechtken (1997), Browning (2003), Friedländer (1998), Gruner (2004), Herbert (1997), Klein (1999), Longerich (1998), Pohl (2000), Safrian (1995), Wildt (2002); with respect to the genocide perpetrated against the Herero: Böhlke-Itzen (2004), Bühler (2003), Dedering (1993), Förster et al. (2004), Gewald (1998), Kössler / Melber (2004), Krüger (1999), Lau (1989), Zimmerer (2001), Zimmerer / Zeller (2003), Zimmerer (2004).

a racial war in which they characterized themselves as innocent victims of an armed conflict for which they could not be held responsible. Second, violence escalated gradually. Third, the victims were dehumanized ideologically and bodily in both cases. All of these elements can be found again and again in conflicts played out on the basis of racist ideologies. It would seem that forms of warfare or conflict based on claims to superiority with respect to a racially defined Other contribute to unleashing uncontrolled violence. Ruthlessness and dehumanization become the determining characteristics of such conflicts. But according to Dieter Langewiesche, this abandoning of contemporary codes of warfare appears to be an atemporal mode of behavior (Langewiesche 2004:11-12) that can be retraced in numerous wars since antiquity and escalated with the emergence of racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This development applies to all colonial wars, including the war against the Herero, the genocide against the Jews and the German conduct of World War II in Eastern Europe, but also to how the United States waged that same war in the Pacific (see Dower 1986) as well as the war in Vietnam (see Greiner 1998) or the conflict in the former Yugoslavia (see Höpken 2000).

That these are structural parallels, rather than continuities becomes apparent if one considers the differences with respect to the course of events, the victims involved, the situative dispositions, and the specific logic of each of these racial wars. In the case of colonial genocide, the focal point was fear of a possible loss of prestige—and the loss of control over the colonies. The National Socialists, in contrast, perceived themselves as part of a global fight against world Jewry , a fight that was relevant for politics as well as cultural affairs and economy. They asserted that the Aryans would only be saved if world Jewry disappeared from Germany, Europe, and the world. This anti-Semitic construction was more powerful by far than the racist affects associated with Africans.

The actual behavior of the Jews was of no importance for the development of the Shoah. In German South-West Africa, in contrast, genocide was a consequence of ongoing armed conflict. Within Nazi thought and options for action, the Jews were seen as a passive mass, to be pushed around or killed as the Nazis saw fit. The means used to take lives also differed. At least as far as studies conducted to date have shown, there is no evidence of systematic murders (massacres of the Herero), whether planned or spontaneous. The mass murder resulted from armed conflict and the fact that the German side took no steps to prevent the death of thousands in the desert from lack of food and water. During the Shoah, such deaths as a result of neglect and omission were merely the prelude to systematic murder by execution or in the gas chambers. The aim was to capture as many Jews as possible, in a systematic and sweeping search operation, and kill them.

Moreover, there is no indication that the National Socialists consciously referred to the Herero genocide as a kind of model, as proposed by Zimmerer.

Nor are there signs of brutalization that survived the war against the Herero and was later transferred to other races, in particular the Jews and the Slavs. Apparently, what was needed to evoke a genocidal disposition was not so much recourse to colonial racism as specific anti-Semitic traditions. On a conceptual level, modern nineteenth century anti-Semitism laid the groundwork for condoning the use of violence against the Jews. Some forms of this modern anti-Semitism called for the removal of the Jews from Germany; a vague notion of physical extermination as a possible option for solving the Jewish question resonated in this demand. Implementing this fantasy of removal was a task the National Socialist regime set for itself, a task that then functioned as an ideological framework of justification for the most radical solutions, which, in turn, were brought about again and again in specific situative contexts. Finally, I would like to suggest that the authors who place a great deal of emphasis on continuity perhaps fail to taken into account an insight that can be won from historical experience, namely, that people and institutions tend to forget. Evidence of this tendency constitutes the very starting point of this discussion, the disappearance of German colonial history and of the genocide perpetrated against the Herero from collective memory.

Rather than comparing the genocide in Germany's former African colony with the Shoah I would propose a comparison with the German conduct of war and the occupation regime, especially the practices in Poland and the Soviet Union. Here again, one must differentiate and argue precisely: Can we observe parallels or continuities? Where are the differences and how must we weight differences and similarities in the total picture? Did a conscious recourse to colonial structures of violence and interpretive patterns occur in dealing with the Slavs or is the unlimited use of violence instead evidence of a phenomenon that frequently develops in specific structural contexts, such as settler colonies? Such an analysis must also consider German colonialism as part of a European phenomenon and aim to recognize possible reference points within this larger framework.

Nonetheless, if we accept the idea of a history of colonial violence that transcended national borders, then we cannot avoid the issue of why such mass crimes were only perpetrated by the German Reich. For this reason, a multifactoral approach that focuses on traditional images of the enemy, on intentions, dispositions, contingencies, coincidental structures, social practices, and the dynamics of specific situations is absolutely essential. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius' study (2002), to refer to one example, is an emphatic reminder of the German experience on the Eastern front in World War I. According to Liulevicius, a comparison of the nightmare-like visions of the war of aggression unleashed by Germany in 1941 and the project *Ober Ost* in 1914 reveals considerable differences, but also common elements rooted in the history of mentality. In view of the complex setting of factors that lead Germany—and Germany alone—to initiate this breach of civilization and, more-

over, in consideration of the dynamics of the war of annihilation, it seems plausible that, if European colonial experience was indeed activated in this context, it was only one of many elements that influenced the Nazi conduct of war and occupation policies in Eastern Europe.

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