

“Enough to Make Many Millionaires”: Forced Labour, Resource Extraction and Capitalism in
Southwest Africa, 1884- 1919

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Historian Steven Press stated that the wealth extracted from Namibia with the use of forced and unfree labour¹ was “enough to make many millionaires.”² German merchants first colonized South West Africa, or Namibia as it is now called,³ with the ambition of wealth. In 1883, German merchant Adolf Lüderitz purchased Angra Pequena – a natural harbour along the Southwest African coasts – alongside twenty-five square kilometres of the Namib desert next to the harbour from an Indigenous leader.⁴ Fuelled by the desire for riches, Lüderitz sought to profit from the territory’s ports, the local Indigenous wars, and potential diamond mines. Diamonds were discovered in South African mines close to the Namib desert and inspired many other European powers to seek wealth by colonizing Africa. The land purchase of Angra Pequena would mark the beginning of Germany’s colonization of Southwest Africa. The land purchase was riddled with fraud and deceit, as the Indigenous leader was not aware of how much land and political control he signed over.⁵ Southwest Africa was made a “protectorate” of the German

¹ The terms “forced” and “unfree” labour are collective terms used to describe any work relation in which an individual or group of people are employed against their will with the threat of penalty, and is used interchangeably throughout this paper. See “Forced Labour Convention, 1930, for ratification by the Members of the International Labour

Organisation in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of the International Labour Organisation,” *International Labour Organization* No. 29 (June 28, 1930).

² Steven Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning,” *Time*, June, 2021, <https://time.com/6072145/namibia-germany-apology-diamonds/>

³ In this essay, I refer to the region as the name most recognized during each period. I refer to the region by the colonial name “German Southwest Africa”, or “Southwest Africa” for short, when discussing the German colonial period of 1884 to 1915, as well as the period under South African control from 1920 until 1990. When discussing the period following the Independence of Namibia in 1990 until the present day, I refer to the region as Namibia. Specific regions of Namibia is referred to as by their common names during the colonial period, such as Hereroland and Ovamboland.

⁴ Steven Press, *Blood and Diamonds; Germany’s imperial Ambitions in Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 17, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/calendar/press_-_blood_and_diamonds.pdf.

⁵ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 18.

Empire. In 1885, the protectorate was on the verge of bankruptcy and struggling to subdue revolts orchestrated by the Herero people. Instead of selling the territory over to another colonial empire, Otto Von Bismarck officially made the territory a colony.⁶ German colonial forces expanded the colony, building railroads, mines, and other infrastructure. From 1904 to 1908, the colony faced the Herero revolts. Officials in Germany were increasingly concerned about the profitability of the colony, with many calling the colony a failure.⁷ During the First World War, Germany lost control over the colony in 1915 and was mandated by the League of Nations to surrender the colony to South Africa in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles.⁸

The first section of this essay examines the historiography of the German colonization of Southwest Africa and forced or unfree labour. The second section of this essay examines the use of forced and unfree labour of the Herero and Nama people in mining, infrastructure, agriculture, and domestic spheres. Finally, this essay examines the modern context of forced labour, resource extraction, and capitalism in Namibia. I argue that the forced and unfree labour of the Indigenous African people in the mining, infrastructure, and agricultural sphere was economically important to the German colonial powers. Furthermore, the systems of forced labour established by the colonial forces remained after Germany surrendered the colony, resulting in continual exploitation of the former colony and a lack of reparations for the genocide.

Historiography

The historiography of German colonization and unfree labour is a relatively new field in the history of Namibia, with few scholars publishing on the subject before in the 1990s. Until then, Namibian history had largely been ignored by German and Anglo-American scholars due to the lack of acknowledgment of the genocidal colonization. As Germany has only recently

⁶ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 20.

⁷ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 21.

⁸ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 227.

acknowledged and apologized for the genocidal past of German colonization in Namibia in 2021, the historiography of German colonization of Southwest Africa and forced or unfree labour has many gaps that still need to be filled. Scholars of Namibian history have written on economic history, labour relations with surrounding regions, and race and gender relations to labour. Many of the scholars who have written on this subject have relied on German official documents as well as German, British, Namibian, and South African archival documents including images, speeches, and testimonies. The primary gap in Namibian historiography is the Indigenous African perspective. The Herero and Nama people did not have a formal written history prior to colonization. Instead, the Indigenous Africans had an extensive oral tradition. Due to the loss of the connection to their land and the genocidal colonial wars of 1904 to 1908, much of the oral history was lost. The Herero and Nama people have begun rebuilding their oral history as survivors of the 1904-1908 wars have passed down history to their descendants. Some historians have used the testimonies of the descendants of survivors to fill this gap, such as Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller.⁹ This paper contributes to the historiography of labour in Southwest Africa by examining the forced labour in mining, infrastructural projects and agricultural spheres that was used to create a prosperous colony for the benefit of the German Empire.

Scholars such as Philipp Prein and Steven Press have researched and written on the economic history of Southwest Africa. Prein's 1994 article, "Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915," discussed the profitability of the colony from 1904 to 1908 through a German perspective. Prein analyzed the use of convict labour and concentration camps to build the German colonial economy, while highlighting debates from the

⁹ Zimmerer and Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908*.

German government on how to make the colony more profitable.¹⁰ Steven Press's 2021 news article "As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning," examined the negative economic repercussion from diamond mining in southwest Africa for the modern-day Namibian economy. Press argued that the German control over the diamond industry made German merchants wealthy and impoverished Namibians. In the 2021 book, "Blood and Diamonds: Germany's Imperial Ambitions in Africa," Press argued that German Southwest Africa was economically successful due to the discovery of diamonds.¹¹ Furthermore, Press calls on the modern German government to pay reparations to Namibia for the loss of income generated from diamonds.¹²

Scholars such as Jean-Bart Gewald and Kai F. Herzog have written on the migration of labour across borders to Southwest Africa during the colonial period. Both scholars discuss the coercive and forceful measures taken by the German colonial forces to supply migrant labour such as convict labour, slavery, deceit, and fraud. Gewald's 1999 book titled *Herero Heroes: A Socio-political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923*, examined the resistance of the Indigenous Africans against German colonization. He discussed the labour demands of the colony under both German and South African control while addressing the flow of labour from the surrounding regions of Botswana and Zimbabwe.¹³ Kai F. Herzog's 2021 article, "Violence and Work: Convict Labour and Settler Colonialism in the Cape–Namibia Border Region (c.1855–1903)," argues that following the abolition of slavery in Germany, colonial forces turned

¹⁰ Philipp Prein, "Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637122>.

¹¹ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*.

¹² Press, "As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning."

¹³ Jean-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923* (Ohio University Press, 1999), https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files3/jan-bart_gewald_herero_heroes_a_socio-politicalbook4you.pdf.

to convict labour as a cheap and accessible labour supply. The article examined labour migration across the Southwest African and South African border. Comparing German Southwest Africa to South Africa (the latter of which adopted the former German Colony) was studied prior to this article. However, Herzog highlighted the labour policies that would remain the same, as well as the cultural aspect of the Indigenous African labour migration.¹⁴ Both scholars expanded the historiography of labour in Southwest Africa by addressing the forced, coercive, and voluntary labour migration from other African countries into Southwest Africa.

The relationship between gender, patriarchy, and labour during the German colonial period was studied by scholars such as Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller published *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908 and it's Aftermath* in 2008. The book is a collection of essays written about the genocides that took place between 1904 to 1908. The book argued that the race policies of the German colony established a system of forced labour and concentration camps. This system was maintained through universal registration and policing. Zimmerer and Zeller addressed the experiences of the Indigenous women in concentration camps, forced labour, and under colonial rule.¹⁵

Forced Labour and Genocide

In January 1904, the Herero people staged an uprising against German colonial rule over Southwest Africa. Fighting spread across Southwest Africa as Herero people sacked German farms, settlements, and railway lines. The German colonial authorities demanded an

¹⁴ Kai F. Herzog, "Violence and Work: Convict Labour and Settler Colonialism in the Cape–Namibia Border Region (c.1855–1903)," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 47:1 (2021), 10.1080/03057070.2021.1861819.

¹⁵ Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908 and it's Aftermath*, trans. E.J. Neather (Berlin: Merlin Press, 2008).

“unconditional surrender” of the Herero people.¹⁶ In June of 1904, General von Trotha enacted a plan to surround the Herero people and attack their position. Cornering the Herero people at the Waterberg plateau, General von Trotha ordered the shelling of the Herero combatants. By August, the Herero uprising was in disarray, with many fleeing to the neighbouring Botswana or deep into the Omaheke Desert.¹⁷ Historian Jan-Bert Gewald argued that the continuation of the war was an excuse to enact harsh punishments against the remaining Herero people.¹⁸ Some German officials argued against the extermination of the Herero because of the labour demand. The Governor of Southwest Africa stated that “[he did not] agree with the fanatics who want[ed] to see the Herero destroyed altogether...[he] consider[ed] it a bad mistake from an economic point of view. [He] need[ed] the Herero...especially as labourers.”¹⁹ In November, the Kaiser ordered an end to the extermination order in favour of concentration camps.²⁰

In 1905, German colonial authorities issued a policy of interning prisoners of war into *Konzentrationslager*, or concentration camps.²¹ The conditions within the camps were deplorable, with insufficient provisions, housing, clothing, and unsanitary facilities.²² Thousands of people were forced into small areas and forced to build their shelters. Interned prisoners were forced to survive on a kilogram of flour and thirty grams of salt daily.²³ In the concentration camps, such as those built at Swakopmund and Shark Island, prisoners were forced to provide hard labour for the colony, regardless of their age, gender, or condition. The hard labour prisoners were forced into included diamond mining, construction of piers and railroads, and

¹⁶ Casper W Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them": concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-08* (African Studies Centre, 2005), 4-5.

¹⁷ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them": concentration camps and prisoners-of-war in Namibia, 1904-08*, 20.

¹⁸ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 9.

¹⁹ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 6.

²⁰ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 19.

²¹ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 1.

²² Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 46.

²³ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them,"* 49-50.

agricultural work. In the concentration camps, seventy percent of all interned prisoners died due to malnutrition, exhaustion, disease, and abuse. The deaths in the concentration camps totalled a third of all the deaths in the Colonial Wars.²⁴

Mining

As diamonds were found in South Africa c.1870, the world became obsessed with the lucrative symbol of wealth and love. However, the diamonds found in Namibia would be tainted by the brutal conditions of forced labourers, earning Namibian Diamonds the nickname “blood” or “conflict” diamonds.²⁵ In the 1880s, the colony’s founder Adolf Lüderitz, believed that he would find diamonds in Namibia. He colonized “with the conviction that diamonds would turn up” as they had in South Africa. Lüderitz’s suspicions were proven correct in 1908 when the German colonial forces found the last major diamond deposits – not in mines but in sand dunes.²⁶

The German colonial forces required a cheap and mobile workforce to shift through the sand and extract the diamonds. Prior to 1908, labour from concentration camps was used to mine diamonds underground. By 1906, 5170 prisoners were leased out to private companies or individuals for labour in construction, agriculture, or mining.²⁷ After the abolishing of the concentration camps in 1908, the colonial forces and private companies relied on contract labour for the diamond mines, specifically from Ovamboland. The Ovambo entered fraudulent contracts with the hope of sending their wages back to their families.²⁸

²⁴ Erichsen, *"The angel of death has descended violently among them"*, 1.

²⁵ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

²⁶ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

²⁷ Julio Decker, "Lines in the sand: Railways and the archipelago of colonial territorialization in German Southwest Africa, 1897–1914," *Journal of Historical Geography* 70 (2020): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2020.09.002>.

²⁸ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

The condition of the Herero, Nama, and Ovambo people in the diamond mines and fields was harsh and completely segregated. The living compound had separate bathrooms, storage sheds for provisions, and different water supplies.²⁹ White workers lived in wooden houses while the Indigenous people were forced to live in tents or shacks. The German workers were able to have some domesticity as one report stated that two German women living with their husbands in the mining fields would provide domestic labour for the white workers.³⁰ Black workers were tasked with the mining and sorting of the ores while the white workers acted as overseers of the Black labour (Figure, 1).³¹ This relationship made physical violence rampant throughout the mining compounds. White overseers would routinely abuse the workers, sometimes resulting in death. The colonial courts failed to protect the Indigenous population and would consistently acquit the white overseers in cases involving beatings.³² The compounds presented a high risk of death and disease for the Black workers. The tents and sheds provided to the Black workers were unable to protect them from the wind and cold temperature of the desert at night. The workers were not provided any type of safety equipment (Figure, 2) Their food provision did not meet the government-mandated amount and the lack of fresh produce led to scurvy. Furthermore, for each transport of Indigenous workers to the mining fields, over forty percent died.³³ The extreme violence and abuse present in diamond mining earned Namibian diamonds the nickname “conflict” or “Blood Diamonds.”³⁴

²⁹ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 83.

³⁰ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 83.

³¹ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 83.

³² Decker, "Lines in the sand," 83.

³³ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 83.

³⁴ Press, "As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning."

After discovering an abundance of diamonds scattered in the sand of the Namib Desert in 1908,³⁵ Germany controlled more than thirty percent of the world's diamond supply.³⁶ The German state believed the diamonds in the Namib desert would be able to support the German empire while also securing wealth for the settler farmers.³⁷ Although German controlled diamond mining would only last from 1908 until 1915, the quantities of diamonds found in the south were so massive, diamond mining would continue for more than a century. However, the Namibian people would not see this wealth for over a century. After the First World War, Germany sold the rights to the diamond mines to South Africa at an inflated price. Scholar Steven Press stated that the prices were “generous enough to make many millionaires,” referring to the German mining companies.³⁸

Infrastructure

The German colonial forces relied on the cheap labour of the Indigenous people, who were either contract labourers or prisoners of war to fulfill the labour demand in construction. Men, women, and children who were deemed fit would be required to work in the harbour or railway depots.³⁹ In January 1905, the German *Reichskanzler* issued a new policy that the Herero and Nama people would be interned in camps. Prisoners within the camps were forced to do hard, unpaid labour. One witness of the camps stated that even the women were forced into menial labour and made to carry heavy loads with their bare hands for construction projects (see Figure, 3).⁴⁰ The construction projects, such as the pier or the wave-breaker projects, required the PoWs to stand in freezing cold water while picking up rocks. In 1907 the harbour projects were

³⁵ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 3.

³⁶ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

³⁷ Press, *Blood and Diamonds*, 28.

³⁸ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamond Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

³⁹ Zimmerer and Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908*, 88.

⁴⁰ Zimmerer and Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908*, 85

abandoned as the Nama people assigned to the project were depleted due to death and disease. Out of the roughly 2000 Nama people who entered the Shark Island concentration camp, only twenty people able to work remained by mid-January. The military required the twenty Nama people to work for urgent tasks, including building railways.⁴¹

Concentration camp prisoners were also required to work in constructing and maintaining railway lines. In 1905, Dr. Vikto Fuchs, a district officer for Swakopmund argued that a second railway line would connect the colony's copper mines to the ports, increasing investments and labour demands. The Otavi Mining and Railway Company built a railway to connect the copper mines in the north to the Swakopmund port. PoWs made up seventy percent of their Black workforce, with the other employees being white construction workers (see Figure, 4).⁴² Within the company-run camps, prisoners were forced to work twelve hours a day on insufficient provisions. The prisoners, who included men, women, and children, faced sexual and physical violence. The workers were repeatedly whipped by their German overseers. The women were forced to co-habituate with soldiers and white railway labourers.⁴³ Of the 2014 prisoners building a new line near Lüderitz Island, sixty-seven percent died in 18 months.⁴⁴

Creating railway lines throughout Namibia was of utmost importance for the German Empire regarding creating a profitable colony. In his 1905 Reichstag speech, Wilhelm II stated that their "goal must be to make the re-conquered land profitable again. Efficient transportation routes are vital for the military defense and economic development of our protectorates."⁴⁵ With the construction of railways in Southwest Africa, the number of farms owned by white settlers

⁴¹ Zimmerer and Zeller, *Genocide in German South-West Africa; The Colonial war of 1904-1908*, 93.

⁴² Decker, "Lines in the sand," 77.

⁴³ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 77.

⁴⁴ Decker, "Lines in the sand," 77.

⁴⁵ Wilhelm II's speech, *Die Reden Kaiser Wilhelms II*, Eds. Johannes Penzler. Trans, Adam Blauhut. German History in Documents and Images, Leipzig, Germany, 1905.
https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=788.

tripled between 1907 and 1913, encompassing three million hectares of land. Furthermore, the railway lines connected the zones of mineral extract to the global markets and made the minerals highly profitable. The Otavi Mining and Railway Company guaranteed low costs for transporting copper and Ovambo labourers in bulk (see Figure, 5).⁴⁶

Agriculture

By 1906, Indigenous prisoners were distributed to white settlers to fulfill labour demands.⁴⁷ Throughout the colonial wars of 1904 to 1908, the Herero and Nama people were taken captive and forced to work on settler farms. Despite using prisoner labour, the demand for cheap African labour continued to expand. With the high death rates of the PoWs, alongside runaways, one administrator stated that “without natives any economy is impossible!”⁴⁸ In 1908, the concentration camps were abolished cutting off the supply of Herero PoW labourers and the “acute labour shortage was exacerbated.”⁴⁹ With the high demands for labour, the colonial government recruited Indigenous labourers from Ovamboland and eastern parts of South Africa. Those recruited for labour included men, women, and children.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the remaining Africans within the “Police Zone” were forced into contract labour for the settlers.⁵¹ To secure labourers for the settler farms, all Herero were exempt from working in mines and were then forced to work on white farms.⁵²

The conditions of the Indigenous people on settler farms involved racial segregation and racial hierarchy. The Indigenous farmhands lived in separate dwellings on the compounds and white farmers were legally entitled to the “paternal right of corporal punishment.”⁵³ Within the

⁴⁶ Decker, “Lines in the sand,” 82.

⁴⁷ Decker, “Lines in the sand,” 77.

⁴⁸ Prein, “Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915,” 102.

⁴⁹ Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890-1923*, 215.

⁵⁰ Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 216.

⁵¹ Prein, “Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915,” 102.

⁵² Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 217.

⁵³ Decker, “Lines in the sand,” 82.

farms, cultural misunderstandings often led to physical violence. As Herero men completed their forced labour tasks, they returned to see white farmers on their ancestral lands. Without cattle to support themselves, Herero men would offer their employment to the white settlers in hopes of rebuilding their own farms.⁵⁴ However, the white farmers did not understand the cultural practices of loaning cattle. Many thought that giving cattle to the Herero men would result in them losing control over their labourers.⁵⁵ An example of this cultural misunderstanding can be seen in the story of the white settler farmer, Cramer. Cramer immigrated with his wife in 1907, buying a large estate in the district of Gobabis. During the first months, he had difficulties keeping the captive labourers he was assigned by the district office from running away. In 1908, many of the formerly captured labourers returned to their land and found Cramer's farm established on their ancestral lands. Those who returned began working on Cramer's farm. He gave them sheep and goats. He assigned some Herero herdsmen to look after his cattle. Cramer viewed the cattle as his own private property, but it is likely that the Herero viewed the cattle as the *omuhona* loan. Cramer was furious with the Herero herdsmen for taking his cattle and he took back the sheep and goats he had originally given and beat the labourers with whips. As Cramer's abuse towards the Herero increased, many ran away. Allegedly, some of the runaway Herero remained in the area and would routinely steal cattle from Cramer.⁵⁶ By having the Herero herdsmen tend to his cattle, Cramer did not understand the Herero cultural practices of loaning or giving away cattle in order to rebuild Herero farms. This misunderstanding was common throughout many white farms and led to abuse, but also resistance.

Modern context

The forgotten Genocide – Germany's avoidance of the Past

⁵⁴ Prein, "Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915," 108.

⁵⁵ Prein, "Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915," 109.

⁵⁶ Prein, "Guns and Top Hats: African Resistance in German South West Africa, 1907-1915," 110-111.

The genocides that took place through the colonial war of 1904 to 1908 have garnered the nickname “the Forgotten Genocide” as Germany avoided acknowledging the atrocities that took place for over 100 years.⁵⁷ German colonial forces killed an estimated 80,000 Africans in Namibia.⁵⁸ Eighty percent of the Herero population and fifty percent of the Nama population were killed as a result of the concentration camps, the sexual violence, forced labour, and medical experiments.⁵⁹ Pressure for Germany to formally recognize the genocide grew in 1990 with the independence of Namibia. This pressure grew stronger in 2004 with the 100th anniversary of the colonial wars.⁶⁰ Despite Germany avoiding the recognition of the genocide, many around the world acknowledged the devastation brought on by the colonial wars. In 1985 the United Nations declared the wars as genocidal. Since the late 1980s, German officials would meet with leaders in Namibia, but fall short of apologizing or offering substantial reparations. In 2001 and 2019 Herero representatives filed four billion US dollars lawsuits against the German Government, however, the cases were dismissed. In 2018, the bodies of deceased Herero and Nama remains were returned to Namibia from Germany following intense pressure from the descendants. Despite returning the bodies, Germany continued to fall short of an apology or acknowledgment of the genocides.⁶¹

Compensation not Reparations

On May 28th, 2021, Germany officially apologized for the genocides with German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, pledging 1.35 billion US dollars⁶² in aid to Namibia to be paid out

⁵⁷ Norimitsu Onishi and Melissa Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/europe/germany-namibia-genocide.html>.

⁵⁸ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

⁵⁹ Suyin Haynes, “Germany Recognizes Colonial-Era Atrocities,” *Time*, May 28, 2021, <https://time.com/6052493/germany-colonial-genocide/>.

⁶⁰ Onishi and Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.”

⁶¹ Haynes, “Germany Recognizes Colonial-Era Atrocities.”

⁶² Onishi and Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.”

over 30 years.⁶³ The money given to Namibia was promised to fund projects focusing on energy, water, education, and vocational training in regions with large Herero and Nama populations.⁶⁴ Although the Namibian government accepted the compensation, many Herero and Nama communities viewed the fund as a public relations stunt and demanded a formal recognition of reparations.⁶⁵ Scholars such as Zoé Samudzi have argued that the proposed \$1.3 billions dollar (US) compensation in 2021 was strictly for development and infrastructure and was not compensation for genocide.⁶⁶ Other scholars including Steven Press have pointed out that the compensation was insufficient in aiding the Namibian economy. Press argued that when Germany lost the rights to its colonies following the First World War, the rights to the diamond mines were sold to South Africa at “prices generous enough to make many millionaires.”⁶⁷ Through selling the rights to the diamonds, German merchants became extraordinarily rich, and the Namibian economy missed out on nearly a century of wealth generated from the diamonds.

Why not “reparations”?

The use of the term “reparations” provokes many legal questions for former colonial powers. Throughout his 2021 speech in Namibia, Foreign Minister Maas avoided using the term “reparations”, a point of contention between the two countries. In 2020, the Namibia officials rejected the German offer of \$12.1 million (US) in compensation. Namibian former-president Hage Geingob stated that the compensation was insufficient as it did not include reparations.⁶⁸ When the Namibian government accepted the \$1.3 billion dollar (US) compensation in 2021, officials stated the compensation was for reparations. However, the German government rejected

⁶³ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

⁶⁴ Onishi and Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.”

⁶⁵ Onishi and Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.”

⁶⁶ Haynes, “Germany Recognizes Colonial-Era Atrocities.”

⁶⁷ Press, “As Germany Acknowledges Its Colonial-Era Genocide in Namibia, the Brutal Legacy of Diamon Mining Still Needs a Reckoning.”

⁶⁸ Haynes, “Germany Recognizes Colonial-Era Atrocities.”

the term. By claiming the compensation was for reparations, Germany would be found legally guilty of genocide under the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide. This would make Germany – as well as other European colonial powers – liable to claims from other colonies.⁶⁹

In conclusion, the forced or unfree labour of the Indigenous Africans in the Southwest supplied the German colonial demand for cheap labour in mining, infrastructure, and agricultural work to make Southwest Africa a profitable colony. Colonial forces and private companies used African labour in the form of either prisoners of war or contract labourers, to shift through the sand dunes in search of diamonds. Abuse and violence were rampant throughout the mining fields, leading to disease, injury, and death. The use of African labour ensured that the wealth remained in the hands of the colonizers, despite the debates on whether that made the colony profitable. African labour was also used in the construction and infrastructure of the colony. Private or state-ran construction projects relied on the cheap labour source of contract or convict labour. The harrowing conditions of the labourers killed much of the Indigenous population, which resulted in many of the construction projects failing. Agricultural spheres also used African labour as many white settlers used contract labourers on their farms. Despite living on the same farm, African workers were segregated into different dwellings. The cultural misunderstandings between farmer-owners and African labourers resulted in violence and abuse, but also resistance on behalf of the Herero. Furthermore, the labour policies and systems of forced labour established by Germany were adopted by South Africa after Germany surrendered the colony, resulting in continual exploitation of the former colony.

⁶⁹ Onishi and Eddy, “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.”

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Appendix



Figure 1. *Ovambos work in a diamond field under the supervision of a German foreman on horseback. n.d.*



Arbeiter im Norden von Deutsch-Südwestafrika.
Der mit der Hacke ein Herero, der mit der Schaufel ein Ovambo.

Figure 2. *Workers in the North of German South-West Africa. 1908.*



Figure 3. *Herero women as forced labourers on the beach of Swakopmund. n.d*

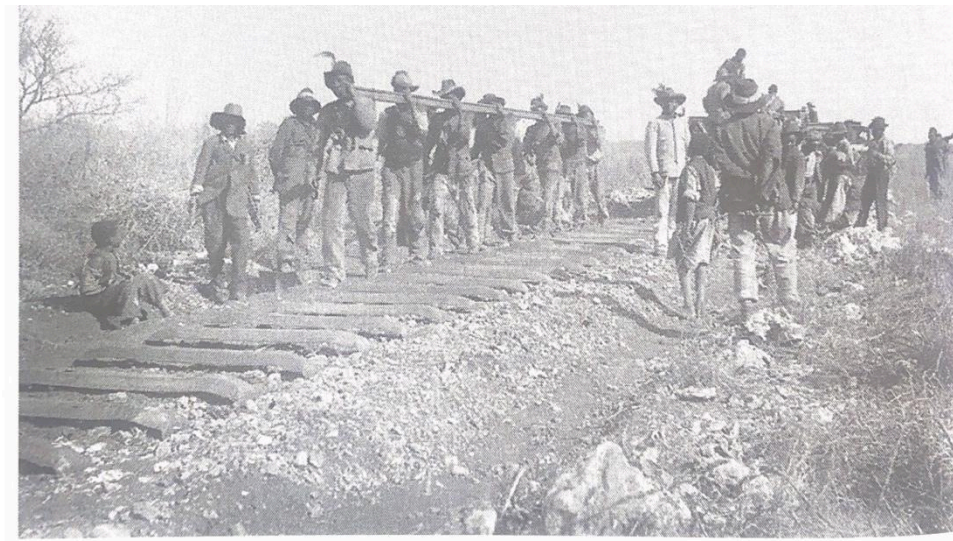


Figure 4. *African Forced Labourers Involved in the Construction of Railway Tracks. 1906.*

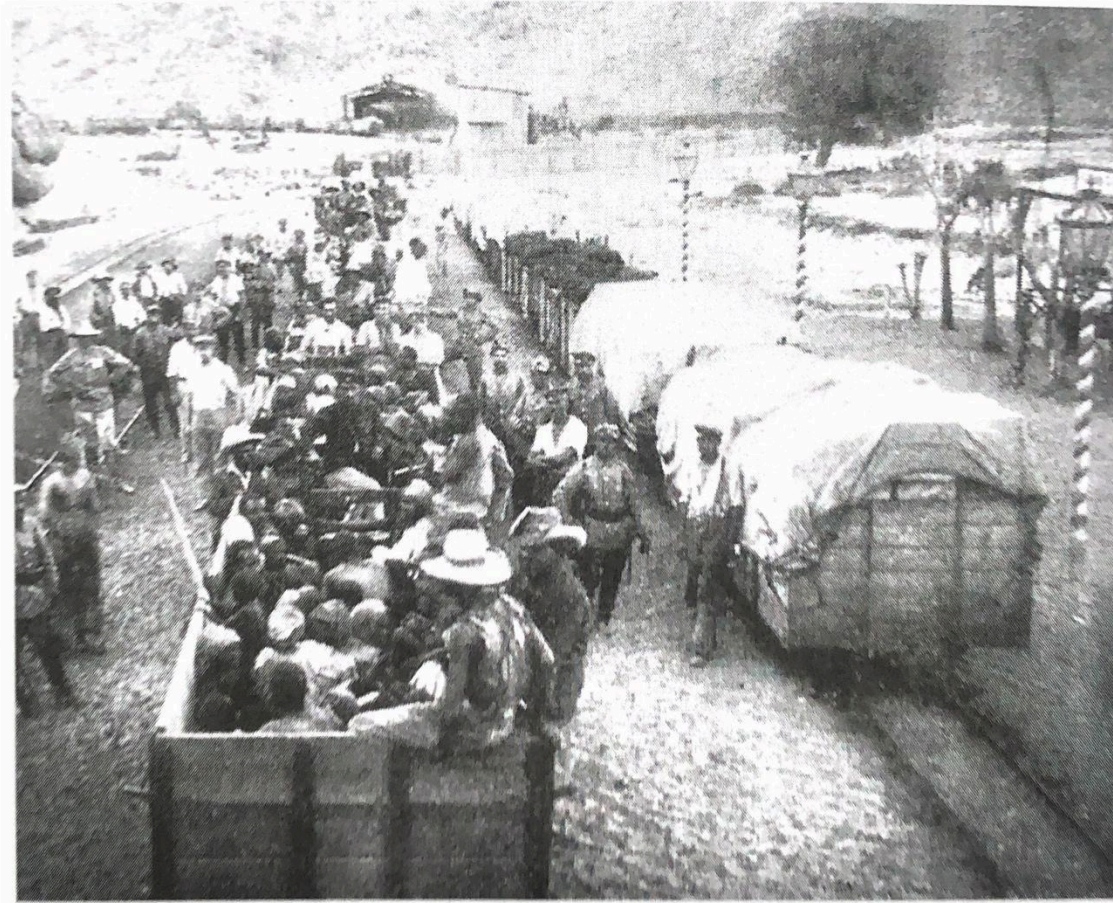


Figure 5. *African prisoners of war were transported to the concentration camps of Swakopmund or Windhoek either by train or on foot. 1907.*