

Was the Treaty of Versailles an Appropriate Response by the Allies?

By Felicity Murphy

The ending of the First World War left many European nations scrambling for resolutions, re-drawing borders, rebuilding cities, and conceiving punishments for Germany. Thus, leaders of various countries gathered in Paris to determine such matters, creating the Treaty of Versailles; the terms of the Treaty ranged from requiring Germany to pay reparations to de-militarizing Germany, as well as the loss of territory and giving up its overseas colonies. In the years following the signing of the Treaty, there has been much debate over whether or not this was the best response, with some historians arguing that the conditions of the Treaty were too harsh on Germany. While aimed at addressing the aftermath of the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles can be viewed as an inappropriate response due to its punitive nature, arguably sowing the seeds of future conflicts and failing to achieve any lasting peace. This essay will focus on the seizing of overseas colonies, specifically focusing on Namibia, and ask not only if it was an appropriate response for the Allies to take this colony but also if it was appropriate for the Allies to give themselves the colony. The following paragraphs will cover the signing of the Treaty as well as its reaction, and the history of Namibia under German rule and Namibia under British control following the First World War.

Germany, a relatively new country forming in 1871, quickly set out to establish itself as a powerful nation, expanding its territory and gaining new colonies; between 1884 and 1890, they colonized areas of South West Africa, now known as Namibia. German settlers faced opposition from two indigenous groups in the area: the Herero, who were cattle herders, and the Nama, beginning a long battle between the Herero and Nama and the Germans, which is now

called the “forgotten genocide.”¹ As mentioned above, the Herero people possessed cattle estimated in tens and hundreds of thousands, and soon, the surviving Herero had nothing as they were forbidden to own large stock under German Laws.² Some historians consider that the theft of the Herero’s cattle is what led to the Herero rebellion of 1904; Lothar von Trotha was brought in by the German Government in order to squash the revolution as he had earned himself a fierce and ruthless reputation during other colonial battles. Conditions before this rebellion were less than ideal; Jeremy Silvester notes that “There can be no doubt that during the period 1890 1904 very many Hereros were done to death in one way or another or died as a result of brutal floggings and ill-treatment.”³ A shared ideology of the time was that any settler who helped reduce the number of the Herero peoples was performing a public service; rarely was there any punishment for White settlers for these murderers, the highest form of punishment being three years imprisonment, in which they never served their full time if any at all; in contrast, for the indigenous, the court sentenced them to death.⁴ Things for the Herero and Nama people continued to deteriorate following the arrival of von Trotha, who ordered every Herero shot, including women and children, as they would no longer be taking prisoners; a similar warning was issued the following year to the Nama people. According to historians, around 80 percent of the Herero people were believed to have died by shooting, hanging, and driving them into the desert; the German soldiers were ruthless even going as far as poisoning the watering holes in the

¹ Onishi, Norimitsu, and Melissa Eddy. “What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It’s Saying Now.” *The New York Times*. May 30, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/europe/germany-namibia-genocide.html#:~:text=It%20has%20been%20called%20the.country%20northwest%20of%20South%20Africa>

² South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, December 1, 2003, 75.

³ South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, December 1, 2003, 93.

⁴ South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, December 1, 2003, 94.

desert. A year later, in early April, the Indigenous peoples signified their willingness to surrender with a few seemingly reasonable terms: that the lives of their people spared, they should be allowed to retain their livestock, and that the reserves they were to be put on should be large enough for their stock to find water and graze. Von Trotha declined these terms saying, “The surrender was to be unconditional, that they would receive no guarantee as to the sparing of their lives, and that they would have to hand over all their livestock.”⁵ To the Germans, it seems that the Herero were less than human, and the Germans would do anything to prove that they were the superior race. In contrast to the German’s barbarous attitudes, the Herero chiefs had ordered their people to spare the lives of German women, children, and non-combatants; whether or not everyone followed those orders is questionable, but issuing the order at all provides a comparison on the view of civilization and humanity between the groups.⁶ To revisit the question of whether seizing German territories was an appropriate action for the Allies to take, one may agree that, seeing the suffering inflicted upon the Herero and Nama peoples, Germany should not have continued to hold the colony.

November 11, 1918, marked the end of the First World War, racking up around 40 million casualties, both military and civilian. With victory and loss still looming over the world, the leaders of the Allied nations quickly gathered to decide the next steps. For six months, these leaders negotiated the terms and conditions of the Treaty before finally agreeing and signing on June 28, 1919, officially ending the five-year conflict, which people at the time referred to as the Great War. Representatives from 32 countries were present during the Conference, excluding

⁵ South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, December 1, 2003, 169.

⁶ South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, December 1, 2003, 121.

Bulgaria, Turkey, Austria, Russia, and Germany;⁷ Lord Riddle says, “It was an impressive scene – the greatest and most important international conference ever held.”⁸ As mentioned before, one of the things done at the Paris Conference was taking pieces of territory and their inhabitants and putting them under other Governments; this is probably one of the most well-known portions of the Conference as it is the portion people can see on a map.⁹ Germany’s overseas territory included parts of Africa, South-Western Asia, and Oceania; the victor’s main goal was to weaken Germany by seizing these territories but also to carry out their own plans of national self-determination. Therefore, the Council decided that Great Britain and France were to make a joint representation to the League of Nations for the future of Togoland and Cameroon, Great Britain shall hold East Africa and control parts of South-West Africa.¹⁰ Regarding the transfer of territories the Treaty of Versailles officially reads: “Germany renounces in favour of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers all her rights and titles over her overseas possessions.”¹¹ In Article 119, and “All movable and immovable property in such territories belonging to the German Empire or to any German State shall pass to the Government exercising authority over such territories, on the terms laid down in Article 257 of Part IX (Financial Clauses) of the present Treaty. The decision of the local courts in any dispute as to the nature of such property shall be final.”¹² Colonies were power; they provided economic stability for the Government controlling them, often at the expense of the inhabitants, so for punishment’s sake, if the goal was to weaken Germany, then taking away its territory was a strategic move for the Allies. For a time, Germany threatened not to sign the Treaty because of the conditions which would harm their economy,

⁷ *The Treaty of Versailles and After*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1935, 11.

⁸ *The Treaty of Versailles and After*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1935, 11.

⁹ *The Treaty of Versailles and After*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1935, 70.

¹⁰ "Enemy Receive The Terms." *Times*, May 8, 1919, 12. *The Times Digital Archive*.

¹¹ Treaty of Versailles . [Washington, Govt. print. off, 1919] Pdf.

¹² Treaty of Versailles . [Washington, Govt. print. off, 1919] Pdf.

discussing the pros and cons of rejecting the Treaty before eventually agreeing to the Allies' terms and signing the Treaty of Versailles.

After the enactment of the Treaty of Versailles, the British Empire took control of the German territory, which now became a part of the pre-established colony of South Africa, and the surviving peoples of the land found themselves under similar conditions as when under German rule. The British also believed themselves superior to the Herero and Nama, thus creating laws to separate themselves from those they viewed beneath them. Voters elected a Government that implemented apartheid in the late 1940s, which created a system of legalized racial segregation and deprived the victims of political and civil rights. By the 1960s, many African countries gained their independence except for Namibia; hoping to hold onto Namibia's mineral resources, the British continued to prevent Black Namibians from having political rights while simultaneously restricting social and economic freedoms.¹³ In 1964, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) was formed in an attempt to gain independence for Namibia but was labelled a terrorist organization, and over the coming years, the Government would show their own forms of brutality. "Herta, a 14-year-old schoolgirl from Onanhende, under questioning about SWAPO movements, was repeatedly raped by a member of the security forces while two other soldiers held her down. It was five days before she got hospital treatment."¹⁴ In another instance of brutality, members of the SADF (South African Defence Force) pressed a 15 year-old schoolboy's face against the hot exhaust pipe of their truck burning him severely. Medical services were good in South Africa for a white child; by 1981, almost fifty times as much was spent on the health of every white child than was spent on a Black child.¹⁵ In 1966, war broke out

¹³ The Namibian Struggle for Independence – 1966 – 1990 – a Historical Background | South African History Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/namibian-struggle-independence-1966-1990-historical-background>

¹⁴ "Namibia: Apartheid's Forgotten Children." 1985. Oxfam Policy & Practice. January 1, 1985, 38.

¹⁵ "Namibia: Apartheid's Forgotten Children." 1985. Oxfam Policy & Practice. January 1, 1985, 30-38.

in the country, where roughly 80,000 Namibians were forced into exile, similar to how the Germans drove the Herero's out of their homeland, and like in the times of the Germans, many did not return. In the period between 1966-1990, between 20,000 and 25,000 people would die; it took 24 years of revolution and warfare before Namibia gained its independence from South Africa in 1990. Namibia held its first elections following independence in 1994, where SWAPO won 53 out of 72 seats in the National Assembly, and the opposition party won 15 seats.¹⁶

The people of Namibia have been fighting their battle for a very long time, facing genocide committed by the Germans and an apartheid Government by the British. To the Europeans, however, these were small events; in the game for economic power and strategic punishment, the former colony was merely a chess piece. Viewing the Treaty of Versailles from a post-war perspective, it is easy to see how connections were drawn leading up to the seizing of territory; Germany began what was then known as the Great War, and there would have to be some consequence. It makes sense that one of the consequences would be to weaken Germany in order to prevent a similar situation; therefore, taking their overseas territories seems appropriate, and looking at the history of Germany's treatment of the inhabitants of their territories again makes the action seem reasonable. However, the British using the Treaty to grant themselves control of the colony was unbefitting, as they appeared to be not much better than the Germans. To answer the question of whether or not seizing Germany's territory and splitting said territories among themselves was an appropriate response by the Allies, it is not a simple yes or no answer; does it seem appropriate to want to weaken Germany after the war? Yes. Were the British any better for the people of Namibia than the Germans? No, not really. One can make comparisons

¹⁶ "The Namibian Struggle for Independence – 1966 – 1990 – a Historical Background | South African History Online,"
n.d. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/namibian-struggle-independence-1966-1990-historical-background>.

between the two for the atrocities committed in Namibia, such as the racist laws, the unjust murders, and driving the people from their homes. Therefore, while the Treaty of Versailles aimed to address the aftermath of World War 1, it is possible to view the document as an inappropriate response by the Allies due to its punitive nature as well as its failure to achieve a lasting peace.

Bibliography:

Boemeke, Manfred F, Manfred F Boemeke, Gerald D Feldman, Gläser Elisabeth, Gerald D Feldman, and Gläser Elisabeth. *The Treaty of Versailles : A Reassessment After 75 Years*. Publications of the German Historical Institute. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1998.

"Enemy Receive The Terms." *Times*, May 8, 1919, 12. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed October 23, 2023).
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS201526440/TTDA?u=fred46430&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=5d873ebc>.

Legal Information Institute. "Apartheid," n.d.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/apartheid#:~:text=Apartheid%20policies%20include%2C%20but%20are,access%20to%20certain%20public%20spaces>.

Michael Crowder. "The First World War and Its Consequences in Africa." 2018. UNESCO. November 9, 2018.
<https://en.unesco.org/courier/news-views-online/first-world-war-and-its-consequences-africa>

"'Mourning' For Treaty Of Versailles." *Times*, June 29, 1933, 13. *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed October 23, 2023).
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS219621597/TTDA?u=fred46430&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=980e525e>.

"Namibia: Apartheid's Forgotten Children." 1985. Oxfam Policy & Practice. January 1, 1985.
<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/namibia-apartheids-forgotten-children-126005/>

Neiberg, Michael S. *The Treaty of Versailles : A Concise History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Norimitsu Onishi and Melissa Eddy. "What Germany Did in Namibia, and What It's Saying Now." *The New York Times*, May 30, 2021.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/europe/germany-namibia-genocide.html>

South-West Africa. Administrator's Office, Jeremy Silvester, and Jan-Bart Gewald. *Words Cannot Be Found : German Colonial Rule in Namibia : An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Sources for African History, V. 1. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "British East Africa – Colonialism, Imperialism, Protectorates," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998

<https://www.britannica.com/place/British-East-Africa>.

"The Namibian Struggle for Independence – 1966 – 1990 – a Historical Background – South African History Online," n.d.

The Treaty of Versailles and After. London: G. Allen & Unwin, ltd, 1935

Treaty of Versailles. [Washington, Govt. print. off, 1919] Pdf.

https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/treaty_of_versailles-112018.pdf