The Long Shadow of German Colonialism

Thomas Rogers

The people of what was once German-occupied Africa are demanding reparations for the colonial violence that shapes the region to this day.

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Christian Ender/Getty Images

Members of the Herero and Nama communities taking part in the annual Reparation Walk, starting at the Swakopmund Concentration Camp Memorial, to honor victims of German colonial violence, Swakopmund, Namibia, March 2019

On May 28, 2021, Germany's foreign minister,

Heiko Maas, held a press conference in Berlin to announce what was meant to be a momentous breakthrough in the country's attempts to address its colonial past. Maas said that he was "happy and thankful" that after five years of talks, German

and
Namibian
negotiators
had
approved
a
“reconciliation
agreement”
over
atrocities
committed
by
Germans
during
the
colonial
period.
“In
light
of
Germany’s
historic
and
moral
responsibility,”
he
said,
“we
will
ask
Namibia
and
the
descendants
of
the
victims
for
forgiveness.”

From the 1880s to 1919, Germany controlled what are now Togo, Burundi, Cameroon, Namibia, and Rwanda, among other African territories, as well as part of what is now Papua New Guinea and several islands in the western Pacific. Even by the standards

of
European
colonialism,
Germany's
actions
in
Namibia
—
then
known
as
German
Southwest
Africa
—
stand
out
for
their
brutality.
Between
1904
and
1908
German
officials
and
soldiers
killed
tens
of
thousands
of
Herero
(now
often
known
as
the
Ovaherero)
and
thousands

of
Nama
people
in
a
campaign
of
extermination
widely
acknowledged
as
the
first
genocide
of
the
twentieth
century.

Germany
has
long
skirted
accountability
for
its
actions
in
Namibia.
When
Chancellor
Helmut
Kohl
visited
the
country
in
1995,
he
refused
to
meet

with Herero representatives, and when President Roman Herzog visited in 1998, he denied that there were judicial grounds for reparations. The Bundestag has never formally recognized the killings as a genocide. But Maas's announcement was meant to signal that Germany was finally

living
up
to
its
historical
responsibilities
and
included
a
promise
that
it
would,
“in
a
gesture
of
recognition
of
the
immeasurable
suffering
exacted
on
the
victims,”
pay
€1.1
billion
($1.2
billion)
in
aid
allocated
for
reconstruction
and
development
over
the

next thirty years.

In the weeks that followed, however, any goodwill resulting from the announcement crumbled. The main groups representing the descendants of the victims argued that they had been unfairly left out of the negotiations, partly because of Germany's refusal

to include anyone outside the government. Many also denounced the payment as inadequate compensation for such a horrific injustice, given that the amount was merely equivalent to the foreign aid Germany has given Namibia since 1989, and expressed outrage that the agreement

omitted
the
word
“reparations.”
Plans
by
German
president
Frank-
Walter
Steinmeier
to
travel
to
Windhoek,
the
Namibian
capital,
and
officially
ask
for
forgiveness
were
called
off
after
Herero
and
Nama
groups
threatened
to
stage
a
protest.

Henny
Seibeb,
the
deputy
leader

of
Namibia's
Landless
People's
Movement,
an
opposition
party
representing
groups
that
lost
land
under
colonialism,
told
me
by
phone
last
year
that
he
saw
the
proposed
size
of
the
payment
as
a
"mere
joke"
that
did
not
reflect
the
depth
of
the

injustice. Paul Thomas, one of the leaders of the Nama Genocide Technical Committee, told me that

t o t h i s d a y , w e a r e s t i l l l a n d l e s s

s a n d i n p o v e r t y b e c a u s e o f w h a t h a p p e n e d 1 1 5 y e a r s a g o

. My great - grandfather was beheaded , so one of his people

all were reputing concentration camps and worked to death

. T h e r e i s n o t h i n g f o r u s i n t h i s d e a l . I t i s e m p t y .

Others have pointed to a contrast that has loomed over the negotiations: although Germany has refused to hold direct talks with representatives of the Herero and Nama, since 1952 it has paid more than $90 billion in compensation to the victims of

the
Holocaust,
partly
through
an
agreement
negotiated
with
the
Claims
Conference,
an
NGO
representing
Jews
around
the
world.
In
June
2021
the
Ovaherero
paramount
chief
Vekuii
Rukoro
claimed
in
a
TV
interview
that
Germany
was
willing
to
negotiate
with
the
Claims
Conference

but
not
the
Herero
and
Nama
“because
they
were
white
Europeans,
and
we
are
Black
Africans.”

Germans
first
arrived
in
what
became
German
Southwest
Africa
in
1883
with
the
intention
of
establishing
a
trading
post.
A
year
later
the
traders
helped

convince Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to turn the territory into a German protectorate. Bismarck had long resisted calls by the public and political rivals to establish an overseas empire. The reasons for his change of mind are still debated, but he was

partly swayed by reports of potential diamond deposits in the region and the ultimately false hope that private merchants would carry much of the financial burden.

At the time the territory was home to between 200,000 and 250,000 people, including approximately

80,000 members of the Herero ethnic group, who lived with large herds of cattle. Other groups included the Nama, Ovambo, Damara, San, and Baster. The territory's fertile area was bordered on the west by the Namib Desert and the Atlantic Ocean, and

on
the
northeast
by
the
Omaheke,
a
nearly
waterless
expanse
of
desert
that
stretches
into
Botswana.

When
German
settlers
and
administrators
arrived
in
the
region,
they
deceived
Africans
into
selling
them
large
parcels
of
land,
mistreated
them,
and
humiliated
their
leaders.

In some cases they also encouraged animosity among local groups. When the Africans fought back, Berlin sent more troops. In January 1904 a conflict between Herero and Germans escalated, leading the Herero to launch an offensive to retake their territory. More than

a hundred Germans were killed; in response, Berlin dispatched General Lothar von Trotha, a veteran of the Boxer Rebellion obsessed with the idea of “race war,” to take over leadership of the colony.

The conflict, known as the Herero and Nama

War,
became
a
pretext
for
widespread
atrocities.
In
August
1904
Trotha
attacked
approximately
50,000
Herero
men,
women,
and
children
at
a
mesa
called
the
Waterberg
in
the
north
of
the
territory.
When
the
survivors
tried
to
escape
into
the
Omaheke
desert,
the

Germans set up a perimeter to enclose them, occupied water wells, and ordered all those fleeing from the desert to be killed. In October Trotha issued a now notorious proclamation calling for the Hereros' extermination:

The Hereros have vecease d to be Germans subjects ... The Her

We refer to people must quit this country. If they do not, I w

will compel them to do so with the Great Canadian Union. With this in

that the border orders of Germanian territory, and Germany Herero, with the or

it without a fire arm, with or without a full live stock, will be

though not; nor will I give offence to women or children or any man or

e . I w i l l d r i v e t h e m b a c k t o t h e i r p e o p l e o r h a v e t h e m f i

reduupon.

A German officer, Ludwig von Estorff, described in his diaries “terrible scenes” as the Hereros fled from one watering hole “to the next, losing almost all their cattle and very many people.” Some

Hereros
slit
the
throats
of
their
animals
and
drank
their
blood
to
keep
from
dying
of
thirst.

During
the
war
the
Germans
established
concentration
camps
meant
to
provide
labor
for
German
businesses,
but
conditions
there
were
so
horrific
that
few
prisoners

were
able
to
work.
Numerous
Nama,
who
had
launched
a
guerrilla
war
against
the
Germans,
were
also
confined
to
the
camps.

At
a
camp
on
Shark
Island,
a
rocky,
exposed
outcropping
on
the
Atlantic
coast,
prisoners
were
given
barely
any
clothing,

food,
or
shelter.
Berthold
von
Deimling,
the
commander
of
the
Southern
Region
of
the
protectorate,
said
that
as
long
as
he
was
in
charge,
“no
Hottentot”
—
a
pejorative
term
for
the
Nama
—
“would
be
allowed
to
leave
Shark
Island
alive.”

Between
September
1906
and
March
1907,
1,032
of
the
camp's
1,795
prisoners
died.
The
exact
number
of
victims
of
the
genocide
remains
uncertain,
but
by
the
time
the
prisoners
were
allowed
out
of
the
camps
in
1908
up
to
100,000
Herero
and

approximately
10,000
Nama
had
perished.

Following
the
genocide,
the
German
authorities
expropriated
nearly
all
the
Africans’
territory
and
forced
them
to
join
a
“semifree”
labor
market
in
which
they
had
little
choice
but
to
work
for
German
landowners.
Those
who
refused

were forcibly allocated to an employer, and every African over the age of seven was required to carry “a metal disc to be worn visibly” at all times and produce it on demand to the police or “any white person.” Marriages between

Africans
and
Germans
were
prohibited.
Africans
were
also
banned
from
walking
on
sidewalks
and
riding
horses,
and
all
Africans
were
required
to
greet
passing
Germans.
In
1921
the
Treaty
of
Versailles
transferred
the
colony
to
South
Africa,
which
later
imposed
the
apartheid

system on the territory.

Although the publication of *Morenga* (1978), a best-selling anticolonial novel by Uwe Timm that was later adapted into a popular three-part miniseries, briefly pushed Southwest Africa into West German awareness, it remained overshadowed by the

crimes of the Nazis and the postwar trauma of national division. Even after German reunification and Namibian independence from South Africa in 1990, many Germans remained only vaguely aware of the atrocities carried out in Southwest Africa, or they imagined that the

German
colonial
project
was
more
enlightened
than
those
of
Great
Britain,
France,
and
Belgium.

That
began
to
change
in
the
early
Aughts,
largely
thanks
to
pressure
from
Herero
and
Nama
groups.
Both
peoples
have
little
representation
in
Namibia's
postindependence
government.
The

South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) has dominated every election since 1990, largely thanks to support from the Ovambo. (In the most recent election, in 2019, the party won sixty-three of the ninety-six seats in Parliament.) And despite Namibia's redistribution

programs,
a
disproportionate
amount
of
the
land
still
belongs
to
a
small
white
minority.
In
2003
the
Herero
People’s
Reparations
Corporation
filed
a
suit
in
the
District
Court
for
the
District
of
Columbia
demanding
reparations
from
Germany
—
a
proceeding
made
possible

by
the
US's
Alien
Tort
Statute,
which
allows
foreigners
to
seek
compensation
for
international
human
rights
violations.
The
German
government
has
claimed
it
is
immune
from
such
claims
because
the
UN's
1948
Genocide
Convention
could
not
be
applied
retroactively.
Although
the
suit

was eventually dismissed, it helped open the door to negotiations.

Meanwhile several academics — including Joachim Zeller, Henning Melber, Isabel Hull, and most prominently Jürgen Zimmerer, a professor of history at the University of Hamburg — began drawing attention to Germany’s

colonial crimes. In 2001 Zimmerer published *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner* (*German Rule, African Subjects*), seemingly the first in-depth book about the policies of German Southwest Africa.

[1] It focuses on the attempts by German authorities to create a utopian “racial state” in the colony. Although the book is perhaps too detailed for a general readership, it was decisive in dispelling what Zimmerer describes as the “mist” of amnesia around German colonialism.

That mist has lifted further in the past decade. In

2016
the
German
Historical
Museum
in
Berlin,
the
largest
and
most
important
museum
of
German
history,
hosted
the
country’s
first
major
exhibition
about
its
colonial
period.
The
repeatedly
delayed
completion
of
the
Humboldt
Forum
—
a
museum
housing
ethnological
artifacts
in
a

reconstruction of the Hohenzollerns' Berlin palace — has also focused attention on German colonial history. While protests against racial inequality grew abroad and in Germany, activists and scholars argued that the forum's leaders had not done enough to investigate the provenance of

many
of
its
artifacts.
As
a
result
there
have
been
genuine
shifts
in
cultural
policy.
Last
summer
Germany
signed
a
groundbreaking
agreement
with
Nigeria
to
repatriate
all
its
Benin
Bronzes,
sculptures
looted
by
British
troops
in
1897
that
were
later
sold
or

donated to a number of European and American museums. The state minister for culture, Claudia Roth, announced in early 2022 that she was exploring more widespread restitutions, adding that the crimes of the colonial era were “a blank spot in

the
memory
culture."

Efforts
to
find
understanding
with
the
Herero
and
Nama
remain
more
fraught.
In
late
2021
the
new
German
government
led
by
Olaf
Scholz
of
the
center-
left
Social
Democrats
presented
a
coalition
agreement
with
the
Greens
and
the

probusiness Free Democrats, in which it made vague promises to commission independent studies about German colonialism and to begin developing a “learning and remembrance site for colonialism.” It also promised to “drive forward the investigation of colonial history” and to push for

“reconciliation”
with
Namibia.

That
will
not
be
easy.
Namibia’s
government
has
now
backtracked
on
its
plans
to
ratify
the
reconciliation
agreement
and
has
called
for
it
to
be
renegotiated,
and
the
German
government
has
thus
far
rejected
calls
to
reopen
discussions.

Such talks would be a test for Germany's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock of the Greens, who has promised to pursue a foreign policy in keeping with her party's progressive, environmentalist, and feminist principles.

New talks would presumably need to directly involve

the Herero and Nama and their diasporas, who are likely to demand that any payment be officially recognized as reparations. Such a concession, however, would probably be rejected by German negotiators, since it could open Germany to similar claims from Greece and

Italy, which are requesting compensation for crimes committed during World War II. It would also bolster the legal cases of other former colonies against European powers and potentially usher in a new wave of lawsuits.

The discussion of reconciliation has been

complicated by other events. In the spring of 2020 a bizarre conflict erupted over the decision by the Ruhr Triennale, an arts festival in western Germany, to invite the Cameroonian academic Achille Mbembe to give a talk. After a local politician quoted

passages
from
Mbembe's
work
out
of
context
—
they
drew
parallels
between
the
Holocaust
and
South
African
apartheid
and
criticized
Israel's
actions
in
Palestine
—
Germany's
federal
commissioner
on
anti-
Semitism,
Felix
Klein,
said
such
comparisons
between
the
Shoah
and
other
historical

events
represented
a
“recognizable
anti-
Semitic
pattern”
and
called
for
Mbembe
to
be
disinvited.

Although
the
festival
was
ultimately
canceled
because
of
Covid-
19,
Klein’s
intervention
outraged

many
on
the
left
who
believed
that
Mbembe
and
others
should
be
allowed
to

suggest
links
between
colonial
crimes
and
the
Holocaust.
The
leaders
of
more
than
thirty
cultural
institutions,
including
the
Deutsches
Theater
in
Berlin
and
the
Moses
Mendelssohn
Center
for
European-
Jewish
Studies
in
Potsdam,
signed
a
letter
arguing
that
“Germany’s
historical
responsibility
should

not lead to a blanket moral or political delegitimization of other historical experiences of violence and oppression."

Journalists and historians have been arguing about this in the German media ever since. The debate is reminiscent of the *Historikerstreit*, or "historians' dispute,"

of
the
1980s,
which
erupted
after
the
historian
Ernst
Nolte
argued
that
Germany
did
not
bear
an
exceptional
burden
of
guilt
for
the
Holocaust,
since
mass
killing
had
occurred
before
—
particularly
in
the
Soviet
Union
—
and
was
not
historically
unique.

Numerous scholars disagreed: Jürgen Habermas argued that such comparisons downplayed German responsibility and that the Holocaust should be seen as a singular historical event. Habermas's view ultimately became a cornerstone of the German approach to memory culture.

In what has become

known as the *Historikerstreit 2.0*, Zimmerer — who is the most widely known scholar to probe the connections between German Southwest Africa and the Third Reich — has been one of several historians arguing in favor of a comparative view. He makes

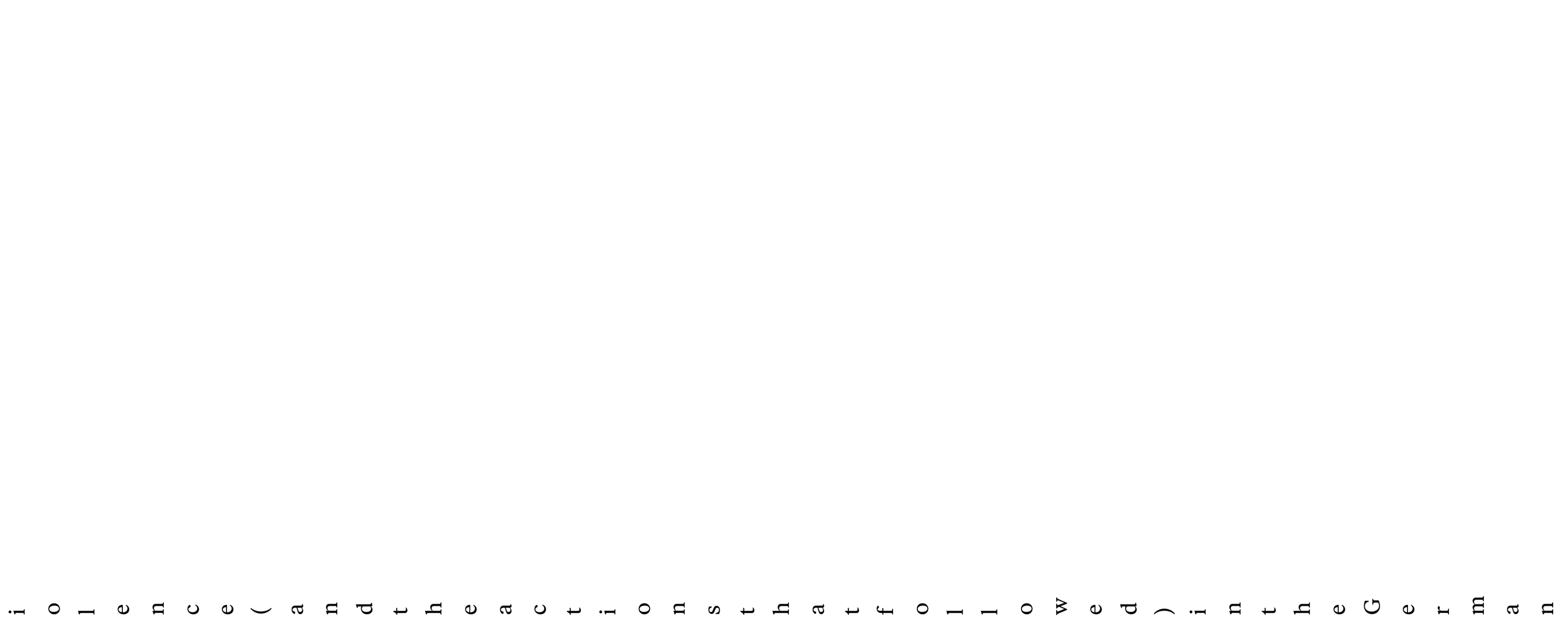
clear
that
he
does
not
believe
that
the
genocide
of
the
Herero
and
Nama
was
a
rehearsal
for
the
Holocaust
or
that
the
two
are
equivalent
in
scale
or
motivation.
But
he
argues
that
by
examining
parallels
between
them,
one
can
arrive

at
a
more
accurate
view
of
the
forces
driving
German
and
global
history:

For German history, the genocidein

South West African Campaigning full in two ways. One on each han

d , i t s h o w e d t h e e x i s t e n c e o f g e n o c i d a l f a n t a s i e s o f v



Mimilitary and Germany and Germany and Mimilitary is strategic location as seen early as the

a r t o f t h e t w e n t i e t h c e n t u r y , a n d o n t h e o t h e r , i t p o p u

l a r i z e d t h i s v i o l e n c e , t h e r e b y c o n t r i b u t i n g t o i t s l

egitimization.

[2]

Zimmerer writes that “the colonial experiences represent a cultural reservoir of cultural practices from which those serving the National Socialists could avail themselves.” In the

1920s
and
1930s
German
Southwest
Africa
was
romanticized
in
public
memorials,
school
curricula,
films,
and
books,
including
a
popular
genre
known
as
“colonial
literature.”
Until
1945
the
best-
selling
book
for
young
readers
in
Germany
was
*Peter
Moor’s
Journey
to
Southwest
Africa*,

about
a
young
man
who
volunteers
as
a
soldier
in
the
German
colony
and
heroically
takes
part
in
the
campaign
against
the
Herero
and
Nama.
Zimmerer
argues
that
these
cultural
influences
helped
build
support
for
Nazi
policies
based
on
racial
difference

and
anti-
Semitism.

He
notes
that
geographers
affiliated
with
Berlin's
Friedrich
Wilhelm
University
(now
Humboldt
University)
had
been
involved
in
conceiving
colonial
policy
in
the
late
nineteenth
and
early
twentieth
centuries,
and
pushed
for
the
expansionary
policies
that
led
to
the

occupation of Eastern Europe during the Third Reich. Anthropologists who later became leading proponents of “race biology” in Nazi Germany were influenced by research carried out in German colonies in Africa. Some of the regulations imposed during the Nazi occupation of Poland

—
a
ban
on
Poles
riding
bicycles
and
entering
movie
theaters,
a
requirement
for
all
Poles
to
greet
passing
Germans
—
echoed
policies
previously
instituted
in
Southwest
Africa.

Zimmerer
also
argues
that
the
“biological
interpretation
of
world
history
—
the
conviction

that
a
Volk
needs
to
secure
space
in
order
to
survive
—
is
one
of
the
fundamental
parallels
between
colonialism
and
Nazi
expansion
policy”
in
Eastern
Europe.
Hitler’s
Generalplan
Ost
called
for
much
of
Central
and
Eastern
Europe
as
well
as
the

Soviet Union to be emptied of inhabitants and resettled by German farmers. A special effort was to be made to recruit settlers who had previously lived in African colonies. In 1941 Hitler said about Ukraine, “The Russian territory is our India, and

like the English rule it with a handful of people, we will rule our colonial territory."

In 2021 in *Die Zeit*, Zimmerer and the American scholar Michael Rothberg emphasized that "a ban on any comparison and contextualization leads to the Shoah

being
excised
from
history."

[3] Such a ban would undermine attempts to learn from history: if a singular event can occur only once, there's no need to worry about it happening again.

Some
have
argued
that
proponents
of
the
comparative
view
misrepresent
the
ideological
nature
of
the
Holocaust
and
ignore
the
particular
history
of
anti-
Semitism
in
Europe.
The
historian
Saul
Friedländer
writes:

It is not a question of belief as to whether the Holocaust

s t s h o u l d b e s e e n a s s i n g u l a r o r n o t , b e c a u s e i t i s d i f f

Generated not only in individual aspects from the other

h i s t o r i c a l c r i m e s , b u t o n a f u n d a m e n t a l l e v e l … . N a z i

a n t i - S e m i t i s m d i d n , t j u s t a i m t o e r a d i c a t e t h e J e w s a

s i n d i v i d u a l s (a t f i r s t t h r o u g h e x p u l s i o n , t h e n t h r o

u g h e x t e r m i n a t i o n) b u t a l s o b y e r a s i n g a n y t r a c e o f “ t

h
e
J
e
w
.
”

At
other
times
the
debate
has
invoked
straw
man
arguments,
with
some
commentators
falsely
claiming
that
postcolonial
scholars
want
to
equate
the
Holocaust
with
colonial
crimes.
Occasionally
it
has
become
a
proxy
for
a

battle over the adoption of progressive American views about racial justice. The editor and journalist Thomas Schmid accused Zimmerer of being part of a “trendy” US-imported attempt to “position the Holocaust behind colonialism,” which “fits with the contemporary culture of general

suspicion against the white man (and white woman)."

The new *Historikerstreit* has emerged out of a confluence of factors — the debate over reparations, the pushback against the Humboldt Forum, and, more broadly, the rise in Germany of a globalized sense

of
history,
in
which
debates
about
slavery
in
the
US
and
colonialism
in
the
UK,
for
instance,
are
often
transposed
onto
local
experiences.
But
it
has
also
coincided
with
a
debate
about
German
identity
and
how
to
reconcile
Germany’s
postwar
self-
image,

largely centered on atonement and guilt for the Holocaust, with its modern status as a country defined by immigration.

In the past ten years the proportion of German residents who are immigrants or have immigrant parents has risen from approximately 19

percent to 27 percent. Many of these new arrivals come from countries that were previously colonized by European powers. Activists have pushed for German identity to be broadened to accommodate immigrants from Africa or the Middle East, for instance, arguing that their

greatest
historical
trauma
is
colonialism,
not
World
War
II.

In
a
comment
on
the
*Historikerstreit
2.0*
in
the
*Neue
Zürcher
Zeitung*,
the
journalist
Thomas
Ribi
said
that
German
memory
culture
should
not
change
to
accommodate
these
new
arrivals,
because
immigrants
have

been
the
source
of
a
new
wave
of
violence
against
Jews:
“Immigration
in
recent
years
‘enriched’
Germany
with
a
new
form
of
anti-
Semitism,
derived
from
Islam.”
It
is
true
that
anti-
Semitism
is
a
problem
among
some
immigrant
communities,
in
particular

those from the Middle East, but official statistics suggest that most anti-Semitic attacks in Germany are carried out by members of the far right. Clearly the existing approach to German memory culture — and its resistance to drawing connections between the

Holocaust and colonialism — hasn't been infallible either.

In the fall of 2021 Habermas joined the debate. In *Philosophie Magazin* he insisted that the singularity of the Holocaust did not mean "that the political self-understanding of a nation's citizens can

be
frozen”
and
argued
that
the
country’s
transformation
in
the
past
decade
called
for
a
reassessment
of
its
self-
image.
When
an
immigrant
arrives
in
Germany,
he
wrote,
he
or
she
“acquires
at
the
same
time
the
voice
of
a
fellow
citizen,

which
from
now
on
counts
in
the
public
sphere
and
can
change
and
expand
our
political
culture.”
Germany’s
political
imagination
must
“expand
in
such
a
way
that
members
of
other
cultural
ways
of
life
can
recognize
themselves
in
it
with
their
heritage

and,
if
necessary,
also
with
their
history
of
suffering.”

The
debate
has
often
operated
under
the
assumption
that
memory
is
zero-
sum
and
that
a
greater
acknowledgment
of
colonial
crimes
will
devalue
the
historical
importance
of
the
Holocaust.
Rothberg
offers
an

alternate view in *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), which sharpened this debate when it was published in Germany in 2021. He argues that "the Holocaust is frequently set against global histories of racism, slavery, and colonialism in an ugly contest of comparative victimization," but

that one should "consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative."

In 2021 Zimmerer and Rothberg argued in *Die Zeit* that

p e r h a p s t h

The solution is not realized remembered and invoked at

It is indeed easy to see that the explosion of the Hollow Cathode, which is to ionize the metal plasma

Being in global history and questions about the way in which

which its memory is now interwined with the post war global

v
e
n
t
s
.

If
that
was
the
historical
approach
to
the
Shoah,
they
write,
“the
end
result
is
not
less
German
responsibility,
but
more,
not
less,
but
more
struggle
against
anti-
Semitism
and
racism.
Shouldn’t
that
be
the

goal
of
any
discussion
of
the
Holocaust
and
the
crimes
of
National
Socialism?”

Such
an
approach
also
allows
for
a
more
coherent
narrative
of
German
history
—
one
in
which
the
Third
Reich
is
viewed
not
as
an
anomalous
malignancy
but

rather as a convergence of events that include colonialism. To reexamine the connections among the Third Reich, the genocide of the Herero and Nama, and other colonial crimes is to throw a more critical light on a broader arc of German history,

including the Wilhelmine period. It means understanding that colonialism had long-term consequences not only for the colonized but also for the colonizers.

In a 2017 essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the German novelist Navid Kermani, born to Iranian parents,

movingly
wrote
about
the
importance
of
shame
to
the
development
of
his
sense
of
national
belonging.
The
first
time
he
felt
like
a
German,
he
wrote,
was
during
a
visit
to
Auschwitz:
“Anyone
who
is
naturalized
in
Germany
will
also
need
to

bear
the
burden
of
being
German.”
He
then
summarized
German
identity
by
paraphrasing
a
Polish
rabbi,
Nachman
of
Breslov:
“There
is
nothing
more
whole
than
a
broken
heart.”
The
path
to
self-
knowledge
and
harmony,
in
other
words,
must
lead
through
a

shared
sense
of
shame.

Berlin's
only
memorial
to
the
victims
of
the
Herero
and
Nama
genocide
is
located
in
a
cemetery
near
Tempelhof,
an
airport
turned
park
at
the
southeast
edge
of
the
city
center,
and
remains
unknown
to
most
Berliners.

In an overgrown corner of the site, visitors can find a granite stone from 1907 with an inscription commemorating seven German soldiers who “voluntarily fought in the campaigns of Southwest Africa and died heroes’ deaths.” In 2009, thanks to pressure from activists,

a
black
plaque
was
installed
below
that
inscription
to
honor
the
“victims
of
German
colonial
rule
in
Namibia.”
It
does
not
include
the
word
“genocide,”
but
at
the
bottom
it
bears
a
quote
from
Wilhelm
von
Humboldt,
the
Prussian
philosopher
and
educational

reformer: “Only a person who knows the past has a future.”

●

Thomas Rogers

Thomas Rogers is a writer based in Berlin. His reporting about Germany has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek*. (March 2023)

1. Translated by Anthony Mellor-Stapelberg (Berghahn, 2021). ↩

2. Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach*

Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust (From Windhoek to Auschwitz?: On the Relationship Between Colonialism and the Holocaust; Münster: LIT, 2011). ↩

3. Jürgen Zimmerer and Michael Rothberg, “Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!,” *Die Ziet*, April 4, 2021. ↩