

Oomambo wandje komuhoko wOvaherero Lothar von Trotha' s 'Words to the Ovaherero people'

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Abstract

Lothar von Trothas 'Words to the Ovaherero people' – or, as he himself referred to these words, the "Proklamation" or "Erlaß" (edict) – is often referred to as 'extermination order' (Vernichtungsbefehl), 'firing order' (Schießbefehl) or 'genocide order' (Genozidbefehl). The proclamation is crucial in the documentation of the Herero genocide. A copy of the proclamation written in Otjijherero is kept in the National Archives of Botswana. Given the significance of the document, it is appropriate to re-publish the handwritten document and to provide a transcription of the text letter by letter which is hard to decipher. As the original text contains many spelling and grammatical mistakes, a version in proper Otjijherero is also presented. Finally, a literal translation into English is provided.

Introduction

Lothar von Trothas 'Words to the Ovaherero people' – or, as he himself referred to these words, the "Proklamation" or "Erlaß" (edict) – is often referred to as *Vernichtungsbefehl* ('extermination order') *Schießbefehl* ('firing order') or *Genozidbefehl* ('genocide order').¹ The proclamation is crucial in the documentation of the Herero genocide. It is often regarded as the climax and fulfillment of a strategy which was genocidal from early on. According to some authors, the aim of German counter-insurgency was to eradicate the Ovaherero; according to others, the campaign took on a genocidal character as soon as General Lothar von Trotha assumed command, while more recent contributions tend to assume that von Trotha's original strategy was conventional and only became genocidal over time. In substance, the latter argue that the violence escalated gradually, beginning during the battle of Waterberg on August 11, 1904, intensifying during the ensuing pursuit and eventually turning into full-blown genocide.

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¹ A copy of the proclamation written in Otjijherero is kept in the National Archives and Records Services of Botswana, (GNARS), Gaborone, R C 11.1.

Given the significance of the document, it is appropriate to re-publish the handwritten document and to provide a transcription of the text letter by letter which is hard to decipher. As the original text contains many spelling and grammatical mistakes, a version in proper Otjherero will also be presented. Finally, a literal translation into English is provided. The latter two have been secured by Jekura Kavari, associate professor in the Otjherero Section of the Department of Language and Literature Studies at the University of Namibia (UNAM).

A few remarks aim to contextualize the proclamation:

* The Proclamation was formulated by General Lothar von Trotha with the support of two Ovaherero named Kean and Philippus on October 1, 1904. On that day, von Trotha noted in his diary: "In the morning [I] tried to shoot birds, nothing found. In the afternoon [I] fabricated Proclamation to the Hereros with the support of Kean and Philippus."²

* The proclamation does not mark the beginning of a completely new military strategy towards the Ovaherero. It rather confirms a directive and praxis which had been operative before the Proclamation was read. On September 18, 1904, Viktor von Frankenberg und Proschlitz recorded in his diary an order which he received from von Trotha by telegram at Otjosongombe – Waterberg, saying:

Surrendering rabble must be turned away for lack of provisions, the men are to be disarmed, interrogated and then treated according to martial law.³

* The proclamation, issued more than 6 weeks after the battle at Waterberg, marks the end of the pursuit of the Ovaherero into the Omaheke Sandveld. After reading the proclamation on 2 October 1904 and dispatching the written text a day later, Lothar von Trotha gave up the pursuit and left Osombo-Windembe.⁴ The proclamation constitutes von Trotha's reaction to a series of what he conceived as setbacks. Not only did he fail to attain the glorious and – above all – ultimate victory he had been hoping for at Waterberg, but he also had to abort the ensuing pursuit due to heavy losses and the

² Tagebuch Lothar von Trotha, No. 122/17, "Vormittags versucht einige Vögel zu schießen nichts gefunden. Nachmittags Proklamation an die Hereros fabriziert mit Hilfe von Kean und Philippus."

³ Tagebuch von Frankenberg und Proschlitz, Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle, Windhoek, Accessions AACRLS.070, p. 116, "Überlaufendes Gesindel ist des mangelnden Proviantes wegen zurückzuweisen, Männer sind zu entwaffnen, zu verhören und dann nach Kriegsrecht zu behandeln."

⁴ Major von Mühlenfels who was tasked with closing off the Omaheke stayed behind. On November 16 Mühlenfels sent a message complaining that he was without provisions and that everybody was tired of war ("keine Verpflegung", "[a]lles [...] kriegsmüde"; Tagebuch von Trotha, 122/16). Another entry in von Trotha's diary dated 7 December 1904 indicates that von Mühlenfels had requested that he be replaced, "because he could no longer take responsibility for the troop due to food and sickness. Scurvy has taken a heavy toll and typhoid fever shows no signs of stopping" ("weil er die Verantwortung für die Truppe der Verpflegung und Krankheit wegen nicht mehr übernehmen könne. Scorbut griffe stark um sich und Typhus höre nicht auf" (ibid.). Mühlenfels withdrew his transfer request when the proclamation had been withdrawn.

factual inability of his troops to move any further. Max Schmidt, a priest at the headquarters, who had also been present in Osombo writes:

Sunday, October 2nd. 5 R. [Regiment]. Service (Headquarters, Dept. von Mühlenfels, Dept. of Estorff) on Psalm 2. At the end of the celebration, Exz. v. Trotha addressed the assembled troop, ending these joint advances and at the same time the Herero campaign with a hurra for the Emperor.⁵

* References to the proclamation in primary contemporary sources such as soldiers' diaries and letters are rare. Apart from von Trotha's diary entry quoted above, there are only three known sources on the reading of the proclamation.⁶

The first one is from Conrad Rust, a contemporary settler in German South West Africa, who had been entrusted by military authorities with writing a history of the war and who to that end had been granted access to all relevant materials.⁷ He was, however, not personally present in Osombo. Rust writes:

After this [after the unsuccessful pursuit of the Ovaherero], the detachments began to march back to Osombo. There was a field service on October 2 in the afternoon. General v. Trotha made a speech to the officers, in which he said that the war against the Herero would be continued with all severity. He read out a proclamation addressed to the "Herero People", which reads as follows: [...]. In the morning of October 3, at 5 ¼ o'clock, some Herero who had been sentenced to death by field military court were hanged in the presence of other prisoners. After the execution, the declaration to the Herero people was read out to the Herero in their language. They were handed various copies, were set free and went away.⁸

The second source is a passage from the diary of Franz Ritter von Epp who witnessed the reading of the proclamation. The passage makes clear that two prisoners were

⁵ Max Schmidt, *Aus unserem Kriegsleben in Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Runge, 1907: 56.), "Sonntag, den 2. Oktober. 5 R. [Regiment]. Gottesdienst (Hauptquartier, Abtl. v. Mühlenfels, Abt. von Estorff) über Psalm 2. Am Schluß der Feier nahm Exz. v. Trotha das Wort zur Ansprache an die versammelte Truppe, diese gemeinsamen Vorstöße und zugleich den Herero-Feldzug mit einem Hurra auf den Kaiser schließend."

⁶ References to the proclamation are rare not only in primary sources but also in the rich colonial literature which emerged in the first half of the 20th century. Literary texts from that period do not downplay the genocidal character of the warfare at all – of course without having the concept of genocide in mind. Nevertheless, there is no reference to the proclamation in this literature (cf. Andreas Eckl, "Zu leben, nur um da zu sein, hat niemand ein Recht". Der Kolonialkrieg mit dem Volk der Herero 1904 im Spiegel kolonialpropagandistischer Literatur der NS-Zeit", in: Christof Hamann, (ed.), *Afrika, Kultur und Gewalt: Hintergründe und Aktualität des Kolonialkriegs in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Seine Rezeption in Literatur, Wissenschaft und Populärkultur (1904-2004)*, Iserlohn, Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft, 2005: 159-190.

⁷ Cf. Conrad Rust, *Krieg und Frieden im Hererolande. Aufzeichnungen aus dem Kriegsjahre 1904*, Kittler, Leipzig, 1905: V.

⁸ Ibid.: 384; 386. "Hierauf traten die Abteilungen den Rückmarsch nach Osombo an. Dort fand am 2. Oktober nachmittags ein Feldgottesdienst statt. General v. Trotha heilt eine Ansprache an die Offiziere, worin er sagte, daß der Krieg gegen die Herero mit aller Strenge weitergeführt würde. Er verlas eine an das „Volk der Herero“ gerichtete Proklamation, die folgenden Wortlaut hat: [...] Am 3. Oktober morgens 5 ¼ Uhr, wurden feldgerichtlich zum Tode verurteilte Herero in Gegenwart von Gefangenen gehängt. Nach der Hinrichtung wurde den anwesenden Herero der Erlaß an das Volk der Herero in ihrer Sprache vorgelesen. Sie erhielten verschiedene Exemplare eingehändig und gingen, in Freiheit gesetzt, von dannen."

hanged and it also specifies to whom the Proclamation text was given. Von Epp's note says:

3. Oct. Theatrical Hanging of 2 captured Herero. Distribution of an unprinted ordinance to 30 captured old men, women and children, that for the Herero there is no place any more in German lands, dispatching of the 30 in all winds – for the rest cf. newspapers.⁹

A third primary source referring to the proclamation is from a letter of Werner Freiherr Schenk von Stauffenberg who was stationed in Osombo-Windembe since 1 October. In a letter to his mother dated 8 and 10 of October, he writes:

Patrols occasionally search the bush and bring in prisoners almost on a regularly basis (as I did recently) and the Hereros' terrible fears are regularly talked of, of treks and treks and tears and thirst without end, until notwithstanding a proclamation announcing the extermination of every Herero, over and over again despair drives individuals to approach the camp. Of course, only small, poor, relatively innocent ones.¹⁰

* Copies of the proclamation were given to 30 'old men, women and children' who without any doubt were in a desperate condition – various sources quoted here report of Ovaherero who surrendered to the Germans in Osombo and nearby water places hoping to escape dying of hunger or thirst. It is hard to imagine that these desperate and old men, women and children would have been able to do what the mounted *Schutztruppe* had tried in vain for many weeks i.e. catch up with the fleeing Herero people.

⁹ Andreas E. Eckl, „S'ist ein übles Land hier“. *Zur Historiographie eines umstrittenen Kolonialkrieges. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen aus dem Herero-Krieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904 von Georg Hillebrecht und Franz Ritter von Epp*, Köln, Köppe, 2005: 284. “3. Okt. Theatralische Erhängung v. 2 gefangenen Herero. Vertheilung eines ungedruckten Ukas an 30 gefangene alte Männer, Weiber u. Kinder, daß für die Herero kein Platz mehr in deutschen Landen, Entsendung der 30 in alle Winde – Im übrig. vergl. Zeitungen.” Another eyewitness, Maximilian Bayer, does not mention the proclamation (nor did other eyewitnesses e.g. Max Schmidt (cf. note 5) or Ludwig von Estorff). Bayer, however, is writing of surrendering Ovaherero: “We stayed for one more day in Osombo-Windembe. More and more captives came towards us” (“Noch einen Tag blieben wir in Osombo-Windimbe. Es liefen immer mehr Gefangene zu.” (Maximilian Bayer, *Mit dem Hauptquartier in Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Weicher, 1909: 201). And he writes at length of the hanging of the two Herero (cf. pp. 202f) who, according to Helmut Bley, were „Großleute“ (Helmut Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894 – 1914*, Hamburg, Leibniz, 1968: 357, note 45). The surrender of the Ovaherero as presented by Bayer corresponds with the account given by the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung*. The newspaper further states that the two Ovaherero hanged had been “captured with weapons” (cf. note 11).

¹⁰ Gertrud Marchand-Volz, *Werner Freiherr Schenk von Stauffenberg, Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904*, Windhoek, Namibia Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 1994: 136. “Patrouillen suchen ab und zu den Busch ab und bringen fast regelmäßig einige Gefangene mit (so ich neulich) und regelmäßig heißt's von toller Angst der Hereros, von Trecken und Trecken und Durst ohne Ende, bis trotz einer Proklamation, die jedem Herero Vernichtung ankündigt, immer und immer wieder die Verzweiflung einzelne in die Nähe des Lagers treibt. Natürlich nur kleine, arme, relativ unschuldige.” It is worth noting that – given that he is honest with his mother and is not concealing the truth, Werner Freiherr Schenk von Stauffenberg and his soldier comrades seemingly acted against the words of the proclamation by continuing to take prisoners on a regular basis (“regelmäßig einige Gefangene”).

* We do not know if or how the proclamation was received by Ovaherero either by word of mouth or on paper – at least one copy later found its way into the Botswana National Archives. Given the circumstances of the transmission of the proclamation, however, it would have been unrealistic of Lothar von Trotha to expect the released Ovaherero to deliver the proclamation to their people. Hence it is safe to assume that the Ovaherero people were not the only addressee Lothar von Trotha had in mind when composing his text.

* The proclamation was not made public in the *Schutzgebiet*. It was not printed, mentioned or referred to in the newspapers in South West Africa in 1904 (and not in the *Kaiserreich* either where it became known to the public only much later).¹¹ Nor was it referred to or criticized in public by Governor Theodor Leutwein, not even during his farewell speeches on his way to Swakopmund and back to the German Reich as reported on by the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung*.¹² Lothar von Trotha easily could have forwarded a copy of his proclamation to one of the newspapers in GSWA if he had wished to do so. But he did not. The proclamation was obviously not composed for the public either, be it in the *Schutzgebiet* or in the *Kaiserreich*.

* It is therefore safe to reason that the main addressee for von Trotha's 'Words to the Ovaherero people' was not the public, nor primarily the Ovaherero people. It seems as if the proclamation was addressed to the *Schutztruppe* to whom it was read by von Trotha on October 2¹³ and above all to his superiors at the Staff Headquarters in Berlin and of course to "Seine Majestät den Kaiser und König".

* Von Trotha expected his proclamation to be received with much reservation and disapproval. In a letter to Governor Leutwein, dated 5 November 1904, quoted in abundance for a subsequent passage in it, von Trotha wrote:

My proclamation from Osombo Owindimbe, which should be no secret at all for I sent it at once to His Majesty the Emperor and King, and to Your Excellency – will be spoken about and printed enough at home, and it will provoke the same disapproval as it did with Your Excellency [...].¹⁴

¹¹ For Example, this is what the *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung* reported on the events in the edition of November 9, 1904: "On the morning of the 30th, the two Herero captured with weapons were tried and hanged according to martial law. The unarmed were sent away again to return to their people. Hereros, men, women and children came to various watering places and tried to stay in the German camp in the hope of getting food there. They were immediately turned away, however, to prevent the introduction of disease." ("Am 30 morgens wurden die beiden mit Waffen gefangenen Hereros kriegsrechtlich abgeurteilt und gehängt. Die unbewaffnet eingebrachten wurden wieder weggeschickt, um zu ihren Leuten zurückzukehren. An verschiedenen Wasserstellen kamen Hereros, Männer, Frauen und Kinder und versuchten, im deutschen Lager zu bleiben in der Hoffnung, hier Kost zu erhalten. Sie wurden aber sofort wieder weggewiesen, um die Einschleppung von Krankheiten zu vermeiden.")

¹² "Gouverneur Leutwein", *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanisch Zeitung*, 7 December, 1904.

¹³ In an order accompanying the proclamation von Trotha explicitly ruled: "This edict must be communicated to the troops a roll-call" ("Dieser Erlaß ist bei den Appells den Truppen mitzuteilen"), Bundesarchiv Berlin (BAB), R 1001, Nr. 2089, p. 23.

¹⁴ Von Trotha an Leutwein, 5.11.1904, BAB, R 1001/2089, p. 101. "Es wird über meine Proklamation von Osombo Owindimbe, die durchaus kein Geheimnis bleiben sollte – denn ich habe sie ja sofort an Seine

* Lothar von Trotha was right. As soon as his proclamation was brought to attention of General Count Alfred von Schlieffen at the Army Chief of the Staff Headquarters in Berlin, and of Chancellor Prince Bernhard von Bülow, they sought to intervene. Eventually, Bülow persuaded Emperor William II. to instruct Trotha to revoke the Proclamation on 8 December 1904.¹⁵ Von Trotha executed these orders grudgingly but promptly.¹⁶ From there on, surrendering Ovaherero were again to be given quarter and to be confined to “concentration camps”.¹⁷ Camps, intended to be Berlin’s alternative to Trotha’s genocidal strategy, which were to claim countless victims...

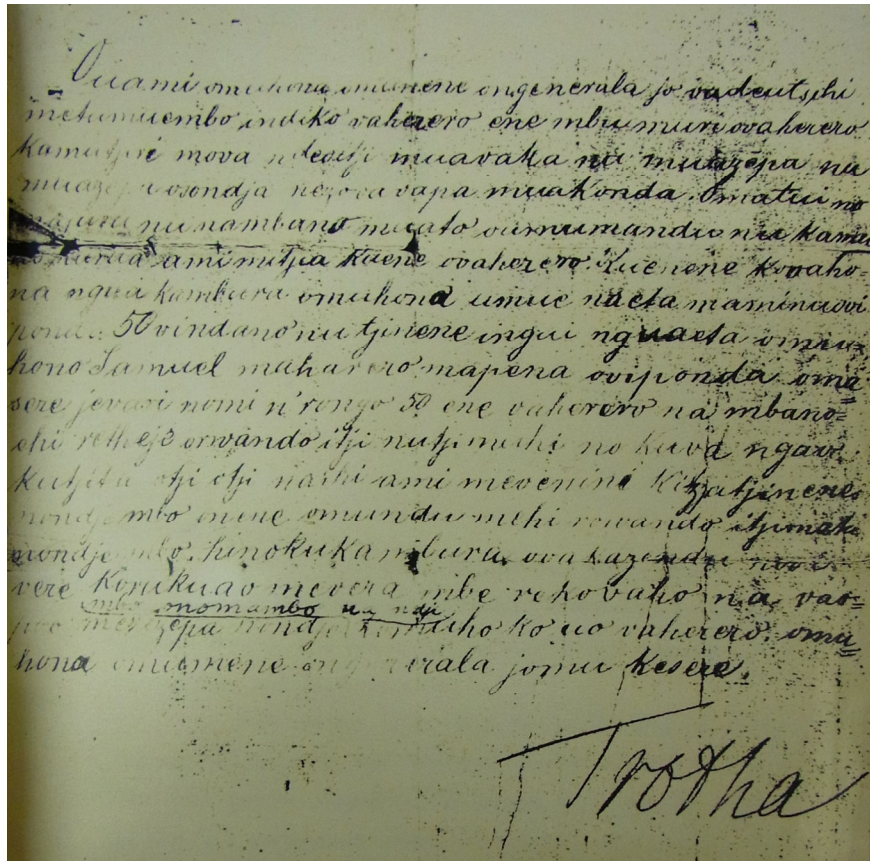
Majestät den Kaiser und König und an Euer Hochwohlgeboren gesandt, auch zu Hause genug geredet und gedruckt werden, und dasselbe Mißfallen erzeugen wie bei Euer Hochwohlgeboren”. The passage we are referring to is the infamous “Ich vernichte die aufständischen Stämme mit Strömen von Blut und Strömen von Geld”.

¹⁵ Telegram General Staff to Trotha, 8 December 1904, BAB, R 1001/2089, p. 52.

¹⁶ There are no entries in the otherwise extensive diaries of Viktor von Frankenberg und Proschlitz between September 20 and November 30, 1904. A note dated December 10 says: “Heliogramme: Kaiser schenkt Herero das Leben, nicht den Führern; Verhandlungen sollen nicht aufgenommen werden, Abgabe der Gewehre erste Bedingung. Über die beiden Heliogramme natürlich große Freude. Fiedler spendiert 2 Flaschen Rotwein [...]” (“Heliograms: Emperor spares lives of Herero, not of the leaders; Negotiations should not be opened, delivery of rifles first condition. Great joy over the two heliograms, of course. Fiedler donates 2 bottles of red wine [...]”), (Tagebuch von Frankenberg und Proschlitz, Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle, Windhoek, Accessions AACRLS.070, p. 123).

¹⁷ Telegram Bülow to Trotha, 11 December 1904, BAB, R 1001/2089, pp. 54f.

Lothar von Trotha' s 'Words to the Ovaherero people'



Ouami omuhona omunene onugenerala jo vadeutsch
metumuembo indiko vaherero ene mbumuri ovaherero
kamutjiri mova ndeutji muavaka na muazepa nu
muazepa osondja nezovavapa muakonda. Omatui no
majuru nunambano muato oumumandu nu kamu
nokurua amimitjia kuene ovaherero. Kuene kovaho=
na ngua kambura omuhona umue na eta maminuovi
pona. 50 vinda no nu tji sere ingui ngua eta vima
hono Samuel naharuo mapera oviponda vima
sore jerawi nomi u'ronjo 50 ene vaherero na mbano
chi retheje ovando tji nupimiki no hava ngua
kufeta tji tji naiti ami mevenina kufijene
nunda mto mine omunda mti ovando tji mta
vondje mto. hinokuka mbura ova bazende no
vire konkua o meera mbe reho vaho na vat
no mezepe ninda kufaho ko no vaherero omu
hona omunene onugenerala jo nu kesere.

Trotha

Source: Botswana National Archives and Records Services (GNARS), Gaborone, R C 11.1

Transcription letter by letter

Ouami omuhona omunene onugenerala jo vadeutsch
metumuembo indiko vaherero ene mbumuri ovaherero
kamutjiri mova ndeutji muavaka na muazepa nu
muazepa osondja nezovavapa muakonda. Omatui no
majuru nunambano muato oumumandu nu kamu
nokurua amimitjia kuene ovaherero. Kuene kovaho=
na ngua kambura omuhona umue na eta maminuovi

ponda 50 vindano nu tjinene ingui nguaeta omiu=
hono Samuel maharero mapena oviponda oma=
sere jevari nomi n'rongo 50 ene vaherero na mbano
ehi retheje orvando itji nutjimuhi no kuva ngao
kutjita otji otji naihi amimevenini Kizatjinene
nondjembo onene omundu mehi rovando itjimat
nondjembo. hinoku kambura ovakazendu no va
vere korukua meverambere kovaho na vao=
poo mezezepa nondjembo onomambo na ndji komuhoko uovaherero. omu=
hona omunene ongenerala jomu kesere.
Trotha

Proper Otjherero

Owami omuhona omunene ongenerara yOvandoitji
me tumu embo ndi kOvaherero. Ene mbu mu ri Ovaherero
kamu tji ri mOvandoitji mwa vaka nu mwa zepa nu
mwa zepa osondjane [?] zovavapa mwa konda omatwi no-
mayuru nu nambano mwa toumumandu nu kamu
nokurwa. Ami me tja ku ene Ovaherero. Ku ene: KOvaho-
na, ngwa kambura omuhona umwe na eta mamu nu ovi-
pondo 50 [omirongo] vitano nu tjinene ingwi ngwa eta Omu-
hona Samuel Maharero ma pewa ovipondo oma-
sere yevari nomirongo 50. Ene Vaherero nambano
ehi re seye orOvandoitji nu tji mu hi nokuvanga
okutjita otjina hi, ami me ve ninikiza tjinene
nondjembo onene. Omundu mehi rOvandoitji ma tu
onedjembo. Hi nokukambura ovakazendu nova-
vere ko rukwao me ve rambere kovahona vavo
poo me ve zepa nondjembo. Oomambo wandje komuhoko wOvaherero. Omu-
hona omunene ongenerara yomukesare.
Trotha

Literal translation

I am the great chief general of the Germans, I send this word to Ovaherero.

You who are Ovaherero you are no longer in the Germans, you stole and you killed and you killed of the whites you cut ears and noses and now you are caught by cowardice and you do not fight.

I say to you Ovaherero.

To you: As far as Chiefs are concerned, one who captured a chief and bring him will get 50 pounds and especially the one who captured Samuel Maharero will be given 250 pounds.

You Ovaherero now you leave the country, it is now German's and if you do not want to do this, I will force them with the big gun. A person in the German country will be killed with the gun. I will not take women and the sick anymore, I will chase them to their chiefs or I will kill them with the gun. These are my words to the Ovaherero people.

The Great chief general of Kaiser

Trotha