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The Herero genocide of 1904: Source-critical and methodological considerations

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Abstract

The Herero-German War of 1904 has been downplayed as a "normal colonial war" by some, and emphasised as a genocide by others. While the first position is untenable, the second is reconsidered in this article through a re-evaluation of the sources and their treatment by academic historians over the last forty years. It is argued that a more rigorous, reflected and nuanced source-critique would complement the current historiography of the topic, which suffers from a questionable selection, evaluation and interpretation of textual sources.

Introduction

January 12th, 2004 saw the centennial of the beginning of the Herero-German War in Namibia, the former protectorate German South West Africa.¹ No topic from German colonial history has received as much attention or been more controversial. Over one hundred years after the event, historical evaluations could not be more antithetic: they range from terming it "a normal colonial war"² to "a genocide, which was not only the first genocide of the twentieth century, but also the first in German history".³

Exponents of the former position are a small, vociferous group of German traditionalists and activist historians who represent German colonial history uncritically and

¹ I am indebted to numerous colleagues who commented, both in publications and in personal communication, on a former version of this paper. Their critique and comments contributed substantially to strengthen and to clarify my argument, first published in Andreas 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. Cf. also my paper "The colonial war of 1904: a debate gone astray" presented at *1904 – 2004. Decontaminating the Namibian Past. A Commemorative Conference*, Windhoek, 17–21 August 2004.

² Cf. Hartmut Fröschle in a letter to the editor of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 November 2002, commenting on a contribution of Jürgen Zimmerer of 2 November 2002. The latter had summarised the results of his PhD research, published as *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia*, Hamburg, Lit, 2000. A similar point of view is presented by another activist historian, Hans-Joachim von Leesen in: "Der Herero-Aufstand von 1904. Ein Kolonialkrieg, kein Völkermord", *Deutsche Militärzeitschrift*, 40, Juli/August 2004: 30-35.

³ Jürgen Zimmerer, "Krieg, KZ und Völkermord in Südwestafrika. Der erste deutsche Genozid", in: Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Link, 2003: 45-63, (45).

sentimentally in an attempt to rescue the reputation and the honour of the German colonial army, the *Schutztruppe*. Prominent among these is Claus Nordbruch, a historian and publicist. His main claim is that, contrary to many “conformist and politically correct evaluations”, no cruelties were committed against Herero; he stresses the “general humanitarian inclination of the members of the Imperial Protection Troops”.⁴ This thinking is shared by some German-speaking Namibians, as voiced in letters to newspapers and public discussions.⁵

The most important reason for this interest in German colonial history and the colonial war among German-speaking Namibians has to be sought in the fact that though much previously Herero-owned land had already changed hands by the time the war started in 1904, it was this war and its aftermath that laid the basis for the large-scale expropriation of land, subsequently converted into farms which are still often German-owned. Whether these German-speakers are direct descendants of German colonial settlers or later immigrants does not matter, since these issues are seen to be pertaining to this community as a whole.

The counter position, which argues the events of 1904 to 1907 constituted a genocide, is prevalent among academic historians. For a long time German academic historiography paid little attention to colonial history and the colonial wars in German South West Africa. Attempts to exploit this history propagandistically during the Third Reich, to demand the return of the former German colonies and to argue a National Socialist colonial revisionist strategy are an exception and need not be challenged here.⁶

The first academic history of Germany’s colonial past in present-day Namibia focused on the colonial wars of 1904 to 1907 and was published as late as 1966 by the East German historian Horst Drechsler. Researched for a doctorate, the work was published as *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*, and subsequently translated and published as *Let us die fighting*. It has remained the single most influential text on this history, and Drechsler was the first historian to apply the term genocide to the colonial war of 1904: “The war against the Herero and Nama was the first in which German imperialism resorted to methods of genocide, thus earning unenviable notoriety in later

⁴ In a letter to the editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* of 20 August 2004, Claus Nordbruch opined that “...entgegen vielen zeitkonformen und politisch korrekten Verlautbarungen und Unterstellungen [haben] keine Greuelthaten an den Herero stattgefunden” and “... die allgemeine humanitäre Einstellung der Angehörigen der Kaiserlichen Schutztruppen”. In the letter, Nordbruch referred to his two publications where these arguments had been made: Claus Nordbruch, *Der Hereroaufstand 1904*, Stegen, Vowinkel, 2002; *Völkermord an den Herero in Deutsch-Südwestafrika? Widerlegung einer Lüge*, Tübingen, Grabert, 2004.

⁵ A different, more balanced position from a Namibian point of view is presented by Hinrich R. Schneider-Waterberg. Cf. his well researched and sometimes provocative contributions in *Der Wahrheit eine Gasse. Anmerkungen zum Kolonialkrieg in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1904*, Swakopmund, Gesellschaft für Wissenschaftliche Entwicklung, 2005.

⁶ 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 Kolonialkrieges in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Seine Rezeption in Literatur, Wissenschaft und Populärkultur (1904 – 2004)*, Iserlohn, Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft, 2005: 159-189.

years.⁷ Drechsler's classification of the war as genocide has been reiterated ever since by academic historians, but without any source-critical evaluation or other methodological consideration of this very important verdict – one on which is based many, if not all, of Namibia's assumptions about its colonial history. This paper focuses on the work of the most prominent exponents of the Drechslerian paradigm, Jan-Bart Gewald and Jürgen Zimmerer, as they are the most often quoted authors.⁸ A re-evaluation, if not the first attempt at methodologically evaluating and classifying the main sources on which the different arguments have been based, follows.

The sources – re-visited

A historiography that treats the events of 1904 as genocide – regardless of whether this classification is explicitly based on an accepted definition of genocide (Zimmerer), or implicitly by using only the terminology (Gewald) – can only be based on a thorough and critical evaluation of the sources.⁹ Such methodological necessity is indispensable, especially as sources related to the war are scarce: there are hardly any documents or accounts from the Herero's point of view, and German sources are not abundant either.¹⁰ The archives of the *Schutztruppe* were lost in the bombing of the central

⁷ Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus (1884-1915)*, Berlin (Ost), Akademie, 1966, 15. *Let us die fighting. The struggle of the Herero and Nama against German imperialism (1884-1915)*, London, Zed, 1980: 7. Since Drechsler's sources except for the *Blue Book* discussed below are entirely in German, his original German text should be consulted wherever possible instead of the English translation of 1980. Here, the original text reads: "Der Krieg gegen die Herero und Nama war der erste Krieg, in dem der deutsche Imperialismus die Methoden des Genozids, in denen er es später zu trauriger Berühmtheit brachte, praktizierte." Drechsler also uses the terms "Ausrottung" (annihilation) and "Völkermord" (genocide) (ibid.: 19; 183). The term 'genocide' was also employed by Günter Mager, another East German historian, in his PhD dissertation dating from the same year. Drechsler acted as a supervisor of Mager's dissertation. Cf. Günter Mager, *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie und die Aufstände der Herero und Nama in Südwestafrika (1904-1907)*, unpubl. PhD dissertation, Martin-Luther-Universität zu Halle-Wittenberg, 1966: 95.

⁸ Other work will only be dealt with in passing. Cf. e.g. Gesine Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewußtsein. Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkrieges in Namibia 1904 bis 1907*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999, who treats the question discussed in this paper tangentially as her work is on other aspects of the colonial wars. Where she touches on it, she refers to other authors, even though her work is repeatedly cited as authoritative elaboration. The same pertains to the work of, for instance, Helmut Bley, who treated the colonial wars only in passing. Cf. his *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1894-1914*, Hamburg, Leibniz, 1968.

⁹ While Zimmerer refers to the definition provided by the UN genocide convention of 1948 (cf. Jürgen Zimmerer, "Krieg": 52), the terms and expressions employed by Gewald remain undefined and unspecified and read e.g. "genocidal war" (Jan-Bart Gewald, "The Road of the man called love and the sack of Sero: The Herero-German war and the export of Herero labour to the South African Rand", *Journal of African History*, 40, 1999: 21-40, 21), "genocide" (Jan-Bart Gewald, "The Herero genocide: German unity, settlers, soldiers and ideas", in: Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst & Reinhard Klein-Arendt, (eds.), *Die (koloniale) Begegnung. AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland 1880-1945. Deutsche in Afrika 1880-1918*, Frankfurt (Main), Lang, 2003: 109-127, 109) or "conscious policy of genocide" (ibid.: 110).

¹⁰ It is astonishing that in chapter 15 of the *Blue Book*, "How the Hereros were exterminated" out of ten witness' accounts there are only three from Herero. These will be discussed below, cf. the chapter on "the

military archives in Berlin (*Militärzentralarchiv*) in February 1945.¹¹ Only four original files from the archives of the German *Schutztruppe* in the colony have been found in the National Archives of Namibia.¹² Given this absence of primary source-material, let us look at the sources that are being used instead: the *Generalstabswerk*, the *Blue Book* and Drechsler's *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft*. The latter is the major source for any argument made in relation to the conflict. It will be evaluated in the second part of this paper.

Generalstabswerk

One source often uncritically cited to demonstrate the genocidal intention of the German military is the *Generalstabswerk*, a publication edited and published by the Prussian General Staff (*Generalstab*) in Berlin, more precisely by its *Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung*, the section within this bureaucracy dealing with historical matters. Issued even before the wars had officially been declared concluded, it is a two-volume tome containing the most complete description of the wars.¹³ Its title reads *Die Kämpfe der*

politics of extermination". For some other, albeit rather marginal, presentations of the war from a Herero point of view, which, however, have not been considered by the historiography under review, see: Ernst Dammann & Andreas Kukuri, *Was Herero erzählten und sangen: Texte, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Berlin, Reimer, 1987; Annemarie Heywood, Brigitte Lau & Raimund Ohly, (eds.), *Warriors leaders sages and outcasts in the Namibian past. Narratives collected from Herero sources for the Michael Scott Oral Records Project (MSORP) 1985-6*, Windhoek, MSORP, 1992. While Jan-Bart Gewald includes the book by Dammann in his bibliography (the book by Heywood et. al. is not mentioned), he does not use the material it contains in his *Towards Redemption. A socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia between 1890 and 1923*, Leiden, Research School CNWS, 1996. The book has also been published as *Herero heroes. A socio-political history of the Herero of Namibia, 1890 - 1923*, Oxford, Currey, 1998.

¹¹ Cf. Brigitte Lau, "Uncertain Certainties. The Herero-German war of 1904", in: Annemarie Heywood, (ed.), *Brigitte Lau. History and Historiography. 4 Essays in reprint*, Windhoek, Discourse/MSORP, 1995: 39-52, 40f. (first published in *Mibagus*, 1989, 2: 4-8): "More importantly, the local archives of the German *Schutztruppe* have evidently also been destroyed. No evidence has been traced suggesting when, where and why the actual *Truppe* archives were disposed of, and by whom. However, there can be no doubt that when the forerunner of today's National Archives was established in 1939, these files were no longer there; nor are they in South Africa. This is even more regrettable since the duplicates of many of those records, which came to form part of the central German military archives held in Berlin, have almost certainly been destroyed in a World War II bombing in February 1945."

¹² Gewald, *Redemption*: 237, fn 216. Gewald argues that there is a possibility that the German Colonial Administration destroyed these files before surrendering to the Union Defence Force in 1915. A remark in red ink on one of the files suggests this: "Zu vernichten 1915" – to be destroyed 1915 (ibid.). Hillebrecht recently mentioned 116 bundles of the German Administration files (ZBU) in the Namibian National Archives dealing with the military (cf. Hillebrecht, "'Certain uncertainties' or Venturing progressively into colonial apologetics?", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 2007, 1: 73-95, 79). It has to be noted, however, that these are not the files of the *Schutztruppe*.

¹³ Großer Generalstab, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung I*, (ed.), *Der Feldzug gegen die Herero*, Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppe in Südwestafrika, Band 1, Berlin, Mittler & Sohn, 1906. Another contemporary source is a book by Conrad Rust, *Krieg und Frieden im Hererolande*, Leipzig, Kittler, 1906. Rust had been granted free access to all archival materials and describes the events of 1904 from a German settler's perspective. His book, however, is still much neglected by historians. Rust has been consulted e.g. by Helmut Bley for his *Kolonialherrschaft*. Yet Bley deals only marginally with the colonial wars.

deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika – the battles of the German Troops in South West Africa. The first volume on the campaign against Herero, *Der Feldzug gegen die Herero*, had already been published in 1906 as a special issue of *Vierteljahresschriften für Truppenführung und Heereskunde* – a quarterly for troop management and military science. Little is known about the background of this publication and its source material. Its subtitle – *auf Grund amtlichen Materials erarbeitet* – informs us that official documents were used, yet the kind of official material used is unclear. The text contains little cited literature and secondary source material, and the occasionally quoted informants and authorities remain hidden and unspecified, and in most cases cannot be traced. In fact, it is mostly impossible to verify any of the information in the book. This is of particular significance as evaluations, the philosophy, strategies and intentions of those at the top of the military structure and in politics, which transcend the eventual facts of the war, remain obscure.

This is a serious drawback which underlines the *raison d'être* of this work – to counter contemporary discussions in Imperial Germany about the military failure of the *Schutztruppe* in the colony; hence, the book's tendency to depict the campaign against the Herero as strategically highly successful. The foreword of volume 1 demonstrates this unequivocally. It explains that the performance of the German troops in the battles in South West Africa warrants the thanks of the whole Fatherland. The General Staff, i.e. the editor, therefore saw it as their patriotic duty to inform the public about the battles, even though the sources for a complete depiction of the war had not been available at the time of publication. Further, the aim had been to publish for the German nation a vivid popularisation of the privations imposed upon the Kaiser's courageous troops on the battlefield.¹⁴ Brigitte Lau evaluated the *Generalstabwerk* similarly:

To take this hapless attempt to justify a confused, inconsequential and costly military situation at face value – as many contemporary colonial writers also did, probably in an urge to appear as heroes of war – is historical nonsense; and making a 'genocide' of it even more so.¹⁵

Despite these shortcomings, which have to be taken very seriously because of their inherent bias and the absence of any evidence, this publication is still quoted, uncritically, as a source for the course of the war. Zimmerer, for instance, quotes from it to depict the horror of the situation of Herero on their flight through the waterless

¹⁴ Großer Generalstab, *Feldzug*, Vorwort. "Die Leistungen der deutschen Truppen in den Kämpfen in Südwestafrika haben Anspruch auf den Dank des gesamten Vaterlandes. Der Generalstab hat es deshalb als seine Pflicht angesehen, mit einer Darstellung dieser Kämpfe bereits jetzt an die Öffentlichkeit zu treten, wenn auch zur Zeit der für eine völlig erschöpfende Bearbeitung erforderliche Quellenstoff noch nicht vorliegt. Besonderer Wert wurde hierbei darauf gelegt, dem deutschen Volke in gemeinverständlicher Form ein anschauliches Bild des entbehrungsvollen Lebens der Truppen im Felde und ihres tapferen Verhaltens im Gefecht zu geben."

¹⁵ Lau, "Certainties": 47.

Omaheke desert, without considering that his argument is based only on a secondary source.¹⁶

Blue Book

Alongside the *Generalstabswerk*, historians cite the *Blue Book* to prove German colonial maladministration in South West Africa and to substantiate atrocities against the African population of the colony.¹⁷ Yet, its value as a historical source is overvalued and contestable. Some background on the *Blue Book* will underscore the argument.

During the latter half of 1917, two years after the conquest during World War I of German South West Africa by troops of the Union of South Africa, two of its officers were commissioned to collect information and material from which a "Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and their Treatment by Germany" was constructed and published in January 1918, almost a year before the armistice in Europe.¹⁸ The report came in two parts: a main part of 139 pages "Natives and German Administration" written by the military magistrate of Omaruru, Major T. O'Reilly, and a second part of 50 pages, "Natives and the Criminal Law" written by A.J. Walters, Crown Prosecutor for the Protectorate.¹⁹

The compilation and publication of the report had been a matter of urgency, as admitted by Administrator E.H.M. Gorges in his foreword: "The time available for the collection of material for incorporation into this report and for the careful collation of that material has been brief."²⁰ No reason is given for this urgency, but it can be concluded from the aims of the publication. It was meant to abnegate Germany's claims to colonial possession of South West Africa, to morally dispute its legitimation and its capability to administer its colonies after their eventual return when World War I was over. In fact, the *Blue Book's* aim was "to convince the most confirmed sceptic of the unsuitability of the Germans to control Natives, and also to show him what can be expected if the unfortunate Natives of this part of Africa are ever again handed back to the former régime."²¹ This is confirmed by article 119 of the Peace Treaty of Versailles whereby the League of Nations mandated 'His Britannic Majesty for and on behalf of the Union of

¹⁶ Cf. Zimmerer, "Krieg": footnote 12: "Kranke und hilflose Männer, Weiber und Kinder, die vor Erschöpfung zusammengebrochen waren, lagen, vor Durst schmachend, in Massen [...] im Busch, willenlos und ihr Schicksal erwartend."

¹⁷ Union of South Africa, (ed.), *Report on the Natives of South-West-Africa and their Treatment by Germany*, London, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1918. Facsimiled and edited by Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald as *Words cannot be found. German Colonial Rule in Namibia. An annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden, Brill, 2003.

¹⁸ Cf. foreword of *Blue Book*, by E.H.M. Gorges, Administrator, p. 11.

¹⁹ Union of South Africa, *Report*: 11. Waters had been stationed in South West Africa since October 1915.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*: 11, foreword by E.H.M. Gorges.

South Africa' with the administration of the territory.²² Due to the inherent bias of the *Blue Book*, in 1926 the South West Africa Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution to remove all copies from official files and libraries and destroy them. This resolution has been commented on by Tony Emmet, who also stresses the bias of the book:

With the end of the war and the international recognition of South Africa's right to govern Namibia, the German settlers could be welcomed back into the fold as fellow whites and colonial masters. There was no longer a need, as there had been in the earlier period, to depict them as brutal and vicious in their treatment of blacks.²³

For these reasons the *Blue Book* has to be treated cautiously as a source text: it is even more prejudiced than the *Generalstabswerk*.²⁴ Its inherent bias does not, however, justify its dismissal as a blatant lie, a *Lügenblaubuch* to use a German expression from the 1920s. Brigitte Lau's similar verdict on the *Blue Book* as "an English piece of war propaganda with no credibility whatsoever" does not do justice to the publication.²⁵ However, given the publication's sway, a thorough and methodologically clean source-critique is warranted, when it is used as a source.

This also applies to Silvester and Gewalt's *Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. To treat the *Blue Book* as a historical source – *sui generis* – requires profound knowledge of historical method, in particular source-critique. Hence, the failure of the re-editors to deal with the material in the publication is serious. It is important for this source-critical endeavour to have access to the sources upon which this document was based; such material is available in the National Archives and the National Library of Namibia, as is the original version of the *Blue Book*. A scientific-academic necessity for this reprint can thus be questioned.²⁶

The *Blue Book* contains two clearly distinguishable types of material. One is based on voluminous German material, both published and archival. Thus the *Blue Book* is – as a reference – valuable. However, its inherent bias should have dictated that Gewalt and

²² Cf. Israel Goldblatt, *The Mandated Territory of South West Africa in relation to the United Nations*, Cape Town, Struik, 1961.

²³ Tony Emmet, "Popular resistance in Namibia, 1920-5", in: Brian Wood, (ed.), *Namibia 1884-1984. Readings on Namibia's history and society*, London, Namibia Support Committee, Lusaka, United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1988: 224-258, (232).

²⁴ To demonstrate this point: see Union of South Africa, *Report*: 140, where the depiction of a punitive campaign against *Homba* Himarwa of Kwangali is completely skewed. Cf. Andreas Eckl, *Herrschaft, Macht und Einfluss. Koloniale Interaktionen am Kavango (Nord-Namibia) von 1891 bis 1921*, Köln, Köppe, 2004: chapter 1.1. Another example of such bias is the depiction of the so-called Cramer case, cf. Union of South Africa, *Report*: 162ff; Andreas Eckl, "'Weiß oder Schwarz?' Kolonialer Farm-Alltag in Deutsch-Südwestafrika", in: Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst & Reinhardt Klein-Arendt (eds.), *AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland und schwarze Deutsche – Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Münster, Lit, 2004: 109-124). More examples, especially dealing with the witnesses' accounts, will be discussed further down in main text.

²⁵ Lau, "Certainties": 46.

²⁶ In his review of the reprint Zollmann concludes: "Der historischen Wirklichkeit war und ist auf diesem Weg nicht beizukommen und der historischen Wissenschaft ist mit dieser Ausgabe des 'Blaubuchs' wenig geholfen." (Jakob Zollmann, "'Blaubuch': Den wissenschaftlichen Anspruch nicht erfüllt", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, 3.12.2003).

Silvester consult the original material, even if difficult to find. Important to note, however, is that the original material is in German, whereas the publication is in English – this should have made obligatory a more careful and methodologically cautious consultation of this type of source by the editors of its reprint of 2003.

More important with regard to the events of 1904 is the second type of text found in the *Blue Book*: the accounts of African eyewitnesses. Sources for colonial history in Africa are almost exclusively of European provenance and an African voice, expressing an African perspective, is rare. For this reason, the extracts of interviews conducted with Africans are significant sources for the period of German colonial rule in South West Africa. Despite this, these texts also warrant source-critical treatment. Nothing is known about the conditions under which these interviews were conducted; purportedly they were made under oath and voluntarily. It is not known how the informants were chosen, what their motivation to testify might have been, and which questions were asked and how. Further, there is no information about the language of the interviews, translations and transcriptions made, nor the criteria by which interviews were selected for publication and which parts of the interviews may have been suppressed. In short, no complete originals of the interviews' transcriptions have survived.

A thorough external source-critique to address these issues can thus not be performed on the *Blue Book*. However, internal source-critique, which asks questions about plausibility, consistency and cohesion in the interviews, is possible. Thus it might be possible to discredit some interviews and their contents, but this approach cannot prove the historicity of events and developments in any given era. The *Blue Book's* re-editors' evaluation that

... whilst this context obviously determined the particular selection of evidence and timing of the compilation of a highly critical evaluation of German colonial rule in Namibia, this does not mean nor suggest that the evidence presented in the Blue Book should be judged to be false

does little to assuage the concerns raised.²⁷ The context does not mean either that the evidence presented in the *Blue Book* should be judged to be right.

If, however, the *Blue Book*, particularly the interviews with Africans, is considered a credible historical source, the content of the interviews has to be integrated into the argument; controversial and conflicting evidence cannot be just withheld, as is done by Gewalt, as demonstrated in the further course of my argument.

Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft

Horst Drechsler's PhD dissertation published in 1966 as *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* is the most frequently cited reference for the history of the Herero-German colonial war of 1904.²⁸ Many publications after 1966 not only follow more or

²⁷ Silvester & Gewalt, *Words*: xxii.

²⁸ An abridged version has been published in 1984: Horst Drechsler, *Aufstände in Südwestafrika. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama 1904 bis 1907 gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft*, Berlin, Dietz, 1984.

less entirely the arguments of Drechsler, they even reiterate the quotations and citations he chose to underscore his discussion. Why Drechsler's work and that of those that followed him has not been critiqued by professional historians remains an urgent question.

Drechsler's work is based on the principles of Marxist historiography; as such it must be read in the context of the Cold War and understood with reference to opposing historiographical approaches and therefore evaluations of the German (colonial) past in both the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. More important than his Marxist orientation, is his quasi axiomatic premise that German colonial rule, "reflecting the extremely aggressive nature of German imperialism", had particularly disastrous consequences.²⁹ However, Drechsler does not position this proposition within a wider frame of comparative studies of imperialism; his work is only on German colonial rule in South West Africa. Thus, his conviction that German colonial rule was of a particularly aggressive nature cannot be the outcome of his research, but its starting point.

What is Drechsler's work based on? His most important sources were the archives of the Imperial Colonial Office, the *Reichskolonialamt*, which were available in the then German Democratic Republic.³⁰ Why memoirs were not considered appropriate sources he explains as follows:

Unfortunately, the quality of the books published to date is much less impressive than their quantity. Almost all of them are from the pen of colonial officials, army officers, farmers, missionaries and explorers. With a few notable exceptions, they provide subjective accounts of South West Africa that are of little value, if any, to the scholar.³¹

²⁹ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 2. The German text reads that "die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft, dem Charakter des besonders aggressiven deutschen Imperialismus entsprechend, für die Afrikaner besonders verhängnisvoll war" (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 9).

³⁰ Alongside this material he has "also relied – though to a lesser extent – on the files of the Imperial Chancellery, the Reichstag, the German Foreign Office, the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft and the Colonial Administration." (Drechsler, *Fighting*: 11). "Neben den Akten des Reichskolonialamtes wurden in geringem Umfange die Akten der Reichskanzlei, des Reichstages, des Auswärtigen Amtes, der Deutschen Kolonialgesellschaft sowie Gouvernementsakten herangezogen." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 22). Unfortunately, Drechsler had no opportunity to conduct research in Namibia. Interviews with African eyewitnesses, still possible in the late 1950s and early 1960s, would have been a very valuable source.

³¹ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 7. "Leider steht die Qualität der bisher erschienenen Bücher in einem argen Mißverhältnis zu ihrer Quantität: Nahezu alle wurden von Kolonialbeamten, Offizieren, Farmern, Missionaren und Reisenden verfaßt. In ihnen wurden, von wenigen Ausnahmen abgesehen, Erlebnisse geschildert und subjektive Eindrücke von Südwestafrika vermittelt, die wissenschaftlich kaum verwertbar sind." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 16, emphasis, AE). Interestingly, the emphasis is to be found in the original German text only and has been omitted in the English publication. Drechsler's reservation in fact means that he used or discarded this type of evidence depending on whether it suited his aprioristic contentions. Drechsler, *Fighting*: 8. "Über die großen Aufstände (1904-1907) gibt es eine große Anzahl von Büchern, in denen deutsche Kriegsteilnehmer über ihre Erlebnisse in Südwestafrika berichten. Diese Art Literatur ist wissenschaftliche völlig unergiebig." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 17).

“A publication by the General Staff sheds *some* light on the military side of the uprisings” he dismissively informs the reader and without any source-critical reflection.³² About his second important source, the *Blue Book*, he is slightly more willing to reflect. He describes it as a book that “furnishes a fairly authentic picture”, which “provided the first uncoloured account of German colonial domination in South West Africa and its consequences.”³³ Drechsler points to the genesis of the report, arguing that “[i]ts origin, however, made it easy for the German imperialists to dismiss it as a mere propaganda.”³⁴ The circumstances under which the *Blue Book* was created do not impair it as a reliable historical source:

Only now that we can check the Report for accuracy on the basis of the records of the Imperial Colonial Office, does it emerge clearly that the Blue Book is a largely reliable account that comes much closer to the real situation than all preceding German accounts put together.³⁵

This cannot be said to be a critical evaluation, as Drechsler himself argued it as “especially important”, that the authors of the *Blue Book* “interviewed numerous surviving Africans.”³⁶ This is pertinent in chapter 15, “How the Hereros were exterminated” which consists exclusively of the accounts of ten witnesses, of which only three were Herero.³⁷ The witness accounts are problematic, however, as they are unverifiable in the files of the *Reichskolonialamt*. In addition, there are some quotations from a contemporary colonial adventure novel (!), Gustav Frenssen’s *Peter Moor’s Fahrt nach Südwest*.³⁸ In this light, can Drechsler’s book still be treated as the *non plus ultra* publication and source regarding the 1904 war and its aftermath, especially as the former German Democratic Republic archives are now freely accessible after German unification? How has Drechsler’s Marxist outlook, coupled with his hypothesis of a particularly aggressive German colonialism, been formative in the selection and

³² Drechsler, *Fighting*: 8, emphasis, AE. This reservation is not to be found in the German text: “Für die militärische Seite der Aufstände kann man das sogenannte Generalstabswerk benutzen.” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 17).

³³ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 9, 10. “ein Buch, das der Wirklichkeit relativ nahe kommt” and “zum ersten Male ein ungeschminktes Bild von der deutschen Kolonialherrschaft über Südwestafrika und ihren Folgen [bietet]” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 19, 20).

³⁴ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 10. “Wegen seiner Entstehungsgeschichte wurde es den deutschen Imperialisten jedoch leicht, ihn als Propaganda abzutun.” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 20).

³⁵ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 10. “Erst heute, wo der ‘Report’ an Hand der Akten des Reichskolonialamtes überprüft werden kann, ergibt sich, daß das englische Blaubuch eine weitgehend zuverlässige Quelle bietet, der Wahrheit jedenfalls wesentlich näher kommt als die zahlreichen deutschen Darstellungen alle zusammen, die ihm vorausgingen.” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 20).

³⁶ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 10. “Besonders wichtig war, daß sie zahlreiche überlebende Afrikaner befragten.” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 19).

³⁷ Chapter XV of the *Blue Book* contains accounts of the following witnesses: Daniel Kariko (Under-Chief, Omaruru), Hosea Mungunda (Headman of the Hereros at Windhuk), Samuel Kariko (son of Daniel Kariko), Manuel Timbu (Cape Bastard), Jan Cloete (Bastard), Johannes Krüger (appointed chief of Bushmen and Berg Damaras of Grootfontein area), Hendrik Campbell (Bastard of Rehoboth), Petrus Diergaard (Bastard), Daniel Esma Dixon (European), Hendrik Fraser (Bastard).

³⁸ Gustav Frenssen, *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest. Ein Feldzugsbericht*, Berlin, Grote, 1906.

evaluation of his sources? And how has this determined the work of historians who based their research and writing uncritically on his work?

Academic historiography – re-visited

Obviously, the historiography of the 1904 war is often partial. The background of the outbreak of the war, its course and the conditions under which it was fought, are under-researched and unknown. As this provides room for different interpretations, divergent readings of the events of 1904 should be well substantiated and corroborated: contemporary historiography which follows the Drechslerian paradigm needs to be thoroughly examined; more particularly the way sources are used needs to be re-examined.

The issue is not that quoting from and citing of the *Blue Book*, or the *Generalstabswerk*, or Drechsler's book should be discounted: Drechsler himself was often much clearer in his, albeit sometimes pontificating conclusions than the sources he cited. Brigitte Lau noted this when she analysed Drechsler's work in her seminal *Uncertain Certainties*.

It must be stressed that Drechsler's account is so well-researched that his own materials actually support the challenge to his reading of the war ... his research results include many of the ambiguities which probably make up the truth about this war.³⁹

While recent historiography as presented by Gewalt and Zimmerer is more careful in its choice and treatment of source material, (but not sufficiently thorough) whole genres are ignored, particularly memoirs and other biographical material. Also, material that does not corroborate or contradicts convictions is often not considered, even if it is quoted from and cited by the same authors in the same work with respect to other aspects of the war. In other words: recent work on the topic of the 1904 war is often characterised by the selection of texts that suit one's own hypothetical predilections, whereas material that does not back one's analysis is summarily dismissed. I have chosen the treatment of the causes of the war, the atrocities committed by German soldiery and von Trotha's proclamation of 2 October 1904 to illustrate my point.

The causes of the war in 1904

Explanations of the causes of the war are divergent. Drechsler, who follows the *Blue Book*, represents these causes as straightforward:

There can be no doubt about the reasons behind the insurrection. It was the systematic expropriation of the Herero and their consequent status of rightlessness that impelled them to their national uprising against German imperialism. They neither could nor would live any longer under these conditions. They preferred to die arms in hand rather than wait in resignation until their last possessions had been taken away from them.⁴⁰

³⁹ Lau, "Certainties": 42.

⁴⁰ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 132. "Die Ursachen des Aufstandes sind eindeutig: Die systematische Expropriation und ihre völlige Rechtlosigkeit hatten die Herero zur nationalen Erhebung gegen den deutschen Imperia-

Gewald follows Drechsler closely. He assumes the colonial government's plans to establish reserves for the Herero forced them to declare war against the Germans.⁴¹ Yet in his 1996 PhD dissertation Gewalt places more emphasis on the role played by German settlers.

Once legislation was passed limiting the amount of Herero land available for sale, German settlers were cut off from land. The jingoistic attitudes of the settlers and their sympathisers that resulted from this legislation, led to the creation of a climate *wherein the outbreak of war became inevitable* ... The Herero-German war broke out as the result of settler paranoia coupled with the incompetence and panic of a German officer.⁴²

I will desist from dissecting Gewalt's hypothesis, but will draw attention to the fact that in each version the war was not started by the Hereros, but by conditions that made it inevitable, or by the Germans whose objective was to force the Herero into it.⁴³ Accordingly, Gewalt uses the term German-Herero War.⁴⁴

Two aspects of Gewalt's explanation must receive attention. The basis of his argument that the outbreak of the war was not deliberately planned but the result of a combination of settler paranoia and the panicked incompetence of the *Distriktschef* of Okahandja, Zürn, rests on different translations of Samuel Maharero's order to his subjects to start the war. According to Gewalt, this can be dated to either *before* or *after* the beginning of the fighting on 12 January 1904.⁴⁵ The original Herero version was never published.⁴⁶

lismus getrieben. Die Herero konnten und wollten so nicht länger leben. Sie zogen es vor, kämpfend zu sterben, statt widerstandslos den Abschluß ihrer Expropriation abzuwarten." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 150).

⁴¹ "In dieser gegen die Reservatspläne gerichteten Stimmungslage forderten die Siedler das Recht, weiteres Land zu besetzen – ein Krieg zwischen den Herero und den Deutschen wurde zu einer 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Der Deutsch-Herero Krieg war also nicht die Folge einer geplanten Erhebung der Herero gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft; die Vorstellung von einem 'Volksaufstand' existierte nur in den Köpfen der Deutschen. Auch Knappheit an Land auf Seiten der Herero war nicht der Kriegsgrund. [...] Das chauvinistische Auftreten der Siedler – eine Folge dieser Ansätze zu einer restriktiven Landpolitik – schuf ein Klima, das einen Kriegausbruch *fast unvermeidlich* machte." (Jan-Bart Gewalt, "Kolonisierung, Völkermord und Wiederkehr. Die Herero von Namibia 1890 – 1923", in: Jürgen Zimmerer & Joachim Zeller, (eds.), *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen*, Berlin, Links, 2003: 105-120, 112, emphasis, AE).

⁴² Gewalt, *Redemption*: 224, emphasis, AE.

⁴³ Gewalt deals in detail with the events and the situation in Okahandja on the eve of hostilities. With respect to the central question, the beginning of the shooting, however, he remains vague: "Shortly thereafter shooting started" is all he has to say (Gewald, *Redemption*: 189). It is still unclear who started to shoot at whom, and why. Presumably Gewalt omitted to mention the 123 Germans killed that marked the beginning of this war, as this would not have sat well with his interpretation of it.

⁴⁴ This terminology is not retained unchanged in other works of Gewalt. We also find "Herero-German war" (cf. e.g. Gewalt, *Redemption*: 225; or in the title of Gewalt, "Road"). Cf. also Gewalt, "Herero genocide": 121: "Following the outbreak of the Herero-German war..."

⁴⁵ Gewalt, *Redemption*: 191f. This is Drechsler's verdict on Gewalt's reasoning, a handwritten note in his personal copy of Gewalt's *Redemption* which reads: "Alles Phantasie" (All phantasy).

⁴⁶ The original letter in Otjiherero is kept in the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, I.1.19 A, 1885-1904 Briefe Maharero u.a.

There seems to be only one translation which is a German translation provided by missionaries first published in 1904 on which all subsequent versions seem to be based.⁴⁷ However, the use of different translations of the same text points to a grave problem which awaits methodological reflection. Three translations of the letter demonstrate how problematic Gewalt's approach of adding yet another translation of his own is.

The *Blue Book's* translation reads as follows:

I am the Chief leader of the Hereros, Samuel Maherero [sic]. I have proclaimed a law and a lawful order and it ordains for all my people that *they shall not* lay hands on the following: namely, Englishmen, Boers, Bastards, Berg-Damaras, Namas. We must not lay hands on any of these people. I have taken an oath that their property will not be regarded as enemy property, neither that of the missionaries. Enough!⁴⁸

Pool renders the "order to revolt" as follows:

To all the headmen in my country. I am Samuel Maharero, chief of the Hereros. I have ordered all my people *to refrain* from touching any of the following: Missionaries, English, Basters, Bergdamaras, Namas, Boers. We do not touch them. Do not do this. I have sworn an oath that this decision will not become known, not even to the missionaries. Enough.⁴⁹

Governor Leutwein's rendition of "Order of the Paramount Chief to start a Rebellion", published in his memoirs, follows closely the missionaries' version except for the addition of a single, yet crucial word "*weiter*". Hence Leutwein's is yet another version, and Maharero's call to refrain from harming the 'non-Germans' is translated here as that his subjects should *not any longer* do so, in the sense of *from now on*.⁵⁰

Gewald's translation is similar to Leutwein's:

To all the chiefs of my land. I am the paramount chief of the Herero, Samuel Maharero. I have issued an order, a straight word, meant for all my people, that

⁴⁷ The German translation was published in: *Rheinische Missions-Berichte*, 1904:148. It reads: "Ich bin der Oberhäuptling der Herero, Sam. Maharero. Ich habe ein Gesetz erlassen und ein rechtes Wort und bestimme es für alle meine Leute, daß sie nicht ihre Hände legen an folgende: nämlich Engländer, Bastard, Bergdamara, Nama, Buren. An diese alle legen wir unsere Hände nicht. Tut diese Sache nicht. Ich habe einen Eid dazu getan, daß diese Sache nicht offenbar werde, auch nicht den Missionaren. Genug."

⁴⁸ Union of South Africa, *Report*: 56, (emphasis, AE). Strange enough, this version talks about "enemy property" instead of keeping the decision secret from the missionaries.

⁴⁹ Gerhard Pool, *Samuel Maharero*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 1991: 202, emphasis, AE. It has to be noted that Pool's book was originally published in Afrikaans and has only subsequently been translated into English and German. According to the two translators, the German and English translations are based completely on the Afrikaans version, and both could not recall having been provided with the referenced material in its original language. For the English version of Pool's book one must assume it to be a complete translation of a translation, since its translator would not have been able to translate any German sources. Communicated verbally by Luise Hoffmann and Carol Kotzé to Wolfram Hartmann.

⁵⁰ "Ich bin der Oberhäuptling der Hereros, Samuel Maharero. Ich habe ein Gesetz erlassen und ein rechtes Wort, und bestimme es für alle meine Leute, daß sie nicht *weiter* ihre Hände legen an folgende: nämlich Engländer, Bastards, Bergdamaras, Namas, Buren. An diese alle legen wir unsere Hände nicht. Ich habe einen Eid dazu getan, daß diese Sache nicht offenbar werde, auch nicht den Missionaren. Genug." (Theodor Leutwein, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Mittler & Sohn, 1906: 467, emphasis, TL)

they should *no longer* lay their hands on the following: namely Englishmen, Basterds, Bergdamaras, Namas, Boers; we do not lay our hands on these. Do not do this. I have sworn an oath to this, that this case does not become open, also not to the missionaries. Enough. I am the paramount chief S. Maharero, Okahandja.⁵¹

So what is at stake is the timing of the order. Was it issued before the war, when Maharero instructed his warriors that they *should not* harm the non-Germans, or after it had started, when the instruction would be to *no longer* harm them? This latter reading suggests that the order could not have been an instruction to start the revolt, as it was issued after it had started.

The similarity between Leutwein's and Gewalt's versions is not accidental. Gewalt choose the German translation for his own translation into English.⁵² The exact wording of the instruction is central to Gewalt's argument of a spontaneous rising, unplanned and unstrategised. It is therefore surprising that he did not base his translation on the original Otjiherero document in the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia in Windhoek.⁵³ Alongside this original is filed a German translation, probably by one of the Rhenish missionaries at the time. Gewalt may have based his translation on this version, in which case, yes, indeed, he translated a translation!⁵⁴ The translation of translations, however, is a serious shortcoming which is not restricted to Gewalt's work. It also applies to the English publication of Drechsler's *Südwestafrika*, where not all citations from the *Blue Book* correspond with the original witnesses' accounts. These have been re-translated into English from his German translations. What this amounts to is that the original German material was translated into English for the *Blue Book* in 1918. Drechsler used this material, translated it for his 1966 publication into German; it was then re-translated when his book appeared as *Let us die fighting* in 1980.

Notwithstanding this problem, Gewalt also stresses the inevitability of the war. This conforms to Drechsler's representation and seems to echo, for instance, one of the witnesses, Daniel Kariko, quoted in the *Blue Book*:

Our people were shot and murdered; our women were ill-treated; and those who did this were not punished. Our chiefs consulted and we decided that war could not be worse than what we were undergoing... We all knew what risks we

⁵¹ Gewalt, *Redemption*: 192, emphasis, J-BG.

⁵² Cf. footnote 54.

⁵³ As this document was not accessible in the archives at the time that this piece was written it is cited here according to Gewalt, *Redemption*: 230, endnote 81. It is housed in the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia, Windhoek in file I.1.19 A, 1885-1904 Briefe Maharero u.a., Nr. 2. The original sentence, which according to Gewalt is crucial for the dating of the letter, is quoted by him only in an endnote and reads as follows: "Mba tuapo ejaneno hutja ape ha munika otjina hi na uina kovahonge." This sentence, however, makes little grammatical sense and remains cryptic and not easily translatable.

⁵⁴ Gewalt, *Redemption*: 230, endnote 81: "JBG's translation from the German text". This fact, though acknowledged, would have needed some critical commentary in terms of the source- critical problems of such approach. And why does he actually quote that sentence in Otjiherero, which he considers to be the most important, without rendering, at least, his own translation?

ran... yet we decided on war, as the chiefs said we would be better off even if we were all dead.⁵⁵

In the same account, however, Kariko contradicts Gewalt's argument of an 'unplanned' war:

We decided that we should wage war in a humane manner and would kill only the German men who were soldiers, or who would become soldiers. We met at secret councils and there our chiefs decided that we should spare the lives of all German women and children ... We gave the Germans and all others notice that we had declared war.⁵⁶

Why would the chiefs meet clandestinely after the war had started or decide that German women and children were to be spared before the announcement to start the war was made? This suggests that this war had been deliberately planned – *we gave the Germans and all others notice that we had declared war* – Kariko's own words.

Gewald does not theorise this blatant contradiction which contradicts evidence in the *Blue Book*. This is one of the many instances of the inconsequential and ambivalent treatment of the sources. Why has Gewalt not applied himself to this problem with more vigour? As one of the editors of the 2003 published facsimile edition of the *Blue Book* he has made a strong argument for its relevance as a source for this history. Yet, one must ask, why does he not critically evaluate and integrate evidence from the *Blue Book* in his own work?

The politics of extermination: "*Die Deutschen machen keine Gefangenen*"⁵⁷

Drechsler's verdict with respect to the politics of extermination is unambiguous: "All Herero – men, women and children alike – were killed on falling into the hands of German soldiers."⁵⁸ The sources about "one of the grimmest aspects of von Trotha's savage warfare in South West Africa", however, are far more equivocal than is often maintained.⁵⁹ This is acknowledged by Drechsler, when he admits: "Not surprisingly, it is mentioned neither in the official records nor in the extensive German literature devoted to the war in South West Africa."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Union of South Africa, *Report*: 54.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 57.

⁵⁷ Heading used by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 150. "The Germans Take No Prisoners" (Drechsler, *Fighting*: 150). The expression "extermination policy" can already be found in the *Blue Book* (Union of South Africa, *Report*: 58).

⁵⁸ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 157. "Alle Herero, gleichgültig ob Männer, Frauen oder Kinder, wurden getötet, wenn sie deutschen Soldaten in die Hände fielen." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 185).

⁵⁹ Drechsler, *Fighting*: 157.

⁶⁰ Ibid. "Damit wird eines der furchtbarsten Kapitel der an Verbrechen so reichen Geschichte der Trotha'schen Kriegsführung in Südwestafrika berührt, das freilich aus erklärlichen Gründen weder in den Akten noch in der umfangreichen deutschen Literatur über den Krieg in Südwestafrika einen Niederschlag fand." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 185). The authors of the *Blue Book* reasoned similarly: "A German author writing for a German public would naturally take care to conceal the entirely barbaric side of the affair, lest it should shock those simple-minded people who really believed in the superior 'kultur' of their race." (Union of South Africa, *Report*: 61)

Only two references that Drechsler used to establish his claim can be found in the archival sources: a letter of missionary Kuhlmann of 16 February 1905 makes such a claim.⁶¹ The other reference, taken from a report of the Chief of the General Staff, Schlieffen, in Berlin of mid-December 1904 and addressed to Imperial Chancellor von Bülow is as ambiguous. According to Drechsler, in it Schlieffen rejected the notion that Herero women and children had been killed. He admits in the report though, and this is construed by Drechsler as substantiating his argument, that should women and children have been shot occasionally, then this would have to be attributed to an understandable rage on the part of the German soldiers.⁶² All other references used by Drechsler to argue the killing of all Herero irrespective of sex and age that were apprehended by German soldiers are from the *Blue Book* – Drechsler has chosen three to make his point.⁶³

The first quotation is from Jan Cloete, who reported that “I was present at Hamakari, near Waterberg when the Hereros were defeated in a battle. After the battle, all men, women and children, wounded and unwounded, who fell into the hands of the Germans, were killed without mercy.”⁶⁴ A second piece of evidence is from Johannes Krüger: “We refused to kill Herero women and children, but the Germans spared no one. They killed thousands and thousands. I saw this bloody work for days and days and every day”.⁶⁵ A third is partly quoted and partly paraphrased by Drechsler and so is quoted here from the *Blue Book*. Hendrik Campbell, who led a contingent of Rehobothers on the German side, testified that:

At Katjura we had a fight with the Hereros, and drove them from their position. After the fight was over, we discovered eight or nine sick Herero women who had been left behind. Some of them were blind. Water and food had been left with them. The German soldiers burnt them alive in the hut in which they were lying. The Bastard soldiers intervened and tried to prevent this, but when they failed, Hendrik van Wyk reported the matter to me. I immediately went to the German commander and complained. He said to me “that does not matter, they might have infected us with some disease.”.... Afterwards at Otjimbende we (the Bastards) captured 70 Hereros. I handed them over to Ober-Leutnants Volkmann and Zelow. I then went on patrol and returned two days later, to find

⁶¹ “Im großen und ganzen sind bei der Verfolgung im Sandfelde die meisten Gefangenen, *wie man hört*, niedergeschossen”. (Cited by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 354, note 108, emphasis, AE).

⁶² “Sollten in dem einen oder anderen Ausnahmefalle Frauen erschossen sein, so ist zu bedenken, daß Frauen sich nicht nur an den Kämpfen beteiligt haben, sondern auch die hauptsächlichsten Urheber der grausamen und scheußlichen Martern waren, denen unsere Verwundeten oft unterworfen worden sind, und daß durch den Anblick der mit bestialischer Absichtlichkeit zur Schau gestellten Opfer die Kameraden zu einer verzehlichen Wut gereizt wurden.” (Cited by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 186.).

⁶³ Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 185f.; Drechsler, *Fighting*; 158. The witnesses' accounts presented in the English publication of Drechsler are obviously re-translations from the German translations, hence *Let us die fighting* should under no circumstances be consulted with respect to citations from the *Blue Book*.

⁶⁴ Union of South Africa, *Report*: 64.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 65.

the Hereros all lying dead in a kraal. My men reported to me that they had all been shot and bayoneted by the German soldiers.⁶⁶

There can be no doubt that atrocities were committed by German soldiers in the course of and during the aftermath of the war. But were these crimes systematically planned? Were they the rule or the exception? Drechsler has taken the evidence for this representation of German warfare as characterised by “merciless inhumanity and calculated ferocity” from the *Blue Book's* chapter XV, “How the Hereros were exterminated”.⁶⁷ Indeed, no other depiction of the brutality of German troopers has been as expressive as Jan Cloete's report of an event after the Battle of Ohamakari:

Some distance beyond Hamakari we camped at a water-hole. While there, a German soldier found a little Herero baby boy about nine months old lying in the bush. The child was crying. He brought it into the camp where I was. The soldiers formed a ring and started throwing the child to one another and catching it as if it were a ball. The child was terrified and hurt and was crying very much. After a time they got tired of this and one of the soldiers fixed his bayonet on his rifle and said he would catch the baby. The child was tossed into the air towards him and as it fell he caught it and transfixed the body with the bayonet. The child died in a few minutes and the incident was greeted with roars of laughter by the Germans, who seemed to think it was a great joke.⁶⁸

This depiction of German brutality is unmatched in the record. Why did Drechsler not use it, then, to back-up his argument? Did he think the language of this description too explicit and therefore untrustworthy? Did he leave it out so as not to compromise or discredit the *Blue Book* as his major source? Cloete's evidence, if evaluated as plausible and credible, would have made Drechsler's argument watertight.

Another example will demonstrate the doubtful treatment of the sources. Drechsler follows the argument in the introduction to chapter XV of the *Blue Book*, writing that some German representations of the war of 1904 seem to have been authored only to prove how ‘humanely’ this war had been conducted by the German military.⁶⁹ A closer inspection demonstrates how biased Drechsler's argument often is. Drechsler based his deliberations on two passages from Maximilian Bayer's *Mit dem Hauptquartier in Südwestafrika*. In the first Bayer tells the story of a four-year-old Herero child, found by German soldiers in the Omaheke, not only rescued from certain death by them, but also treated with compassion.⁷⁰ Some pages down, Bayer reflects on the clement kindness of the German soldiery.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid. This statement has also been corroborated by Petrus Diergaard (ibid.).

⁶⁷ Ibid.: 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 64f.

⁶⁹ “Manche deutsche Darstellung über den Krieg in SWA scheint einzig und allein zu dem Zweck geschrieben, wider besseres Wissen der Verfasser die ‘humane’ Kriegführung der Deutschen zu belegen. Vgl. z.B. Bayer, M., *Mit dem Hauptquartier in Südwestafrika*, a.a.O., S. 164 sowie S. 189 ff.” (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 354, fn 109).

⁷⁰ Maximilian Bayer, *Mit dem Hauptquartier in Südwestafrika*, Berlin, Weicher, 1909, 164: “Der Fluchtweg wurde breiter und unregelmäßiger. Immer mehr sterbendes Vieh stand in den Büschen, die Anzeichen der Panik beim Feinde wurden immer deutlicher. An einem Wasserloch saß ein etwa 4 Jahre altes Hererokind und sah uns mit weiten, erstaunten Augen an. Wir mußten hier einen Augenblick halten; unsere Schutz-

One can agree with Drechsler's scepticism regarding the historicity of these two passages – they seem fictional. However, the first is corroborated by von Trotha's diary and by a letter from a German soldier, published in a German newspaper.⁷² Drechsler had no access to von Trotha's diary, and the letter was probably not known to him. Yet, and Drechsler withholds this information, Bayer corroborated his information regarding the treatment of Herero by German soldiers after the war with material from the published memoirs of Chaplain Max Schmidt.⁷³

Why Drechsler omitted this evidence – it was expressly referenced by Bayer – cannot be answered. Drechsler himself evaluated Schmidt's recollections elsewhere as reliable and credible.⁷⁴ The same point can be made of his use of Bayer's work. He used him expediently when the evidence pointed to the missionaries' collaboration with the

truppler umstanden das Baby neugierig und überlegten, wie man es vor dem sicheren Dursttode retten könne. Schließlich meinte einer, – es war ein Badener, ein Landsmann von mir – : 'Da müsse mer dem Kindle halt e Mutter suche.' Schnell liefen ein paar Reiter in die Büsche und brachten bald triumphierend und fröhlich lachend eine alte Hererofrau an, ein verhutztes Weibchen, dem sie das Kind auf den Schoß setzten. Dann holten sie eine Milchziege herbei, und ein Sachverständiger begann sie zu melken. Das schlappe Euter gab etwa einen Viertel Becher voll; den gaben sie dem Kinde. Sie banden der Ziege einen Strick um den Hals und steckten das Ende des Strickes dem Hereroweib in die Hand. Es war ein hübscher Anblick: Die alte, über das ganze Gesicht lachende Hererofrau, das Kind und die Milchziege; davor unsere Soldaten, die sich über das friedliche Bild freuten."

⁷¹ Bayer, *Hauptquartier*, 190f: "Wer aber glaubt, daß uns Reiter der Schutztruppe, deren harter Beruf es war, die Vergeltung mit kämpfender Hand zu bringen, kein Mitleid mit dem Jammer der Unterlegenen beschlichen habe, der kennt das Gemüt des deutschen Soldaten nicht. Wer ist denn schließlich unser deutscher Soldat? Doch ein für wenige Jahre an die Waffe gerufener Sohn des Volkes; – und wer ihm Gefühllosigkeit und Grausamkeit nachsagte, der würde der Gesamtheit unserer Nation einen sehr ungerechten Vorwurf machen."

⁷² Pool, *Maharero*, 264, referring to von Trotha Archives, 315, Abschrift der Tagebücher mit Anlagen und Materialsammlung, 45 and to *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 1904, Briefe aus Südwestafrika (O. Dannhauer: Nach dem Kampf am Waterberg, 15.08.1904): "When von Trotha and his men found a baby of about six months, abandoned at a waterhole, he gave the infant into the care of a Herero woman. At another werf a little girl of about two wandered about, bewildered and alone. Her parents had simply abandoned her when they fled. She was perfectly satisfied when the troops milked one of the numerous goats in the vicinity for her. Then they took her along on one of the wagons."

⁷³ Max Schmidt, *Aus unserem Kriegsleben in Südwest-Afrika. Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen*, Berlin, Runge, 1907, 36; cf. Bayer, *Hauptquartier*, 191: "Die Gefangenen wurden vernommen, aber ihnen kein Haar gerümpelt – genau, wie ich's stets in diesen Wochen erlebt habe. Ich sah sogar, daß abgehungerte Gefangene gesättigt und wenn es Weiber oder alte Männer waren, unbehelligt entlassen, ja vor der Hinterlist unserer eingeborenen Treiber und Bambusen, die den Gefangenen solche Schonung mißgönnten, mit allem Nachruck beschützt wurden. Oftmals sah ich Hererojungen, die von ihren flüchtigen Angehörigen in der Werft zurückgelassen waren, und nun vergnügt bei der Truppe kleine Dienste taten. Sie litten keinen Hunger und unsere Ärzte nahmen sich ihrer an." There is no reason to question Schmidt's presentations at least with regard to the Herero boys who served the German soldiers as 'Bambusen'. Cf. for example the account "Meine Jugend" by Andreas Kukuri in: Dammann, *Herero-Texte*: 40ff; Gewalt, "Kolonisierung": 117; and above all Dag Henrichsen, "Ozombambuse and Ovasolondate. Everyday military life and African service personnel in German South West Africa", in: Wolfram Hartmann, (ed.), *Hues between black and white. Historical photography from colonial Namibia 1860s to 1915*, Windhoek, Out of Africa, 2004: 161-184.

⁷⁴ Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 162, where he is referring to Schmidt, *Kriegsleben*: 49 to back up his argument that the missionaries intervened in favour of the German military.

German military.⁷⁵ Drechsler's ambivalence, honouring a source when it suited his argument, discarding it when it did not, has to be seen for what it is: a questionable selection of textual sources.

Others were as ambiguous with regard to source material. Gewalt, not one to be squeamish in this respect, states that "The policy of extermination was one which had been embarked upon by Trotha for some time prior to Osombo-Windembe".⁷⁶ To prove this argument he quotes from the unpublished diary of one Stuhlmann, a participant in this war. The following entry from 11 August 1904 is quoted here with Gewalt's omissions:

... the little worm had flung his arm around the wheel of the cannon, which had possibly destroyed his other family members... we had been explicitly told before hand, that this dealt with the extermination of a whole tribe, nothing living was to be spared.⁷⁷

One is left with the impression of relentless killing and annihilation. However, the whole text without ellipsis and translated, reads as follows:

Alongside a cannon [I saw lying] man, woman and child, shot by the [Nama] Witboois. The little worm [i.e. a child] had put his arms around the cannon's wheel in its agony, the same cannon that might just [at this moment] kill its other relatives. Even while we had been told that this was about the annihilation of the whole tribe, and nobody to be spared, I am in a certain way contented [to know] that women and children were never intentionally shot by us troopers [Schutztruppler]. These corpses have left me deeply hurt.⁷⁸

Gewald omits three facts (mentioned by Stuhlmann) which contradict his hypothesis of a *Vernichtungspolitik*. Firstly, the man, woman and child had been shot by Witboois; secondly, Stuhlmann reports that German soldiers never aimed intentionally at women and children; and thirdly, the emotional reaction of Stuhlmann in the face of the corpses.⁷⁹ Still worse, he turned the evidence upside down as in its original form it would

⁷⁵ Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika* : 162, where he cites Bayer, whom he criticised as inadequate before.

⁷⁶ Gewalt, *Redemption* : 209. Osombo-Windembe is the place where von Trotha had made his announcement to the Herero people on 2 October 1904, which will be dealt with further down in main text.

⁷⁷ Stuhlmann quoted and translated by Gewalt, *Redemption* : 209.

⁷⁸ "Neben einem Geschütz liegt Mann, Frau und Kind, von den Witbois erschossen; das Würmchen legt im Todeskampf sein Ärmchen um das Rad des Geschützes, welches vielleicht seine anderen Verwandten gerade vernichtet. Wenn uns auch vorher ausdrücklich gesagt war, es handle sich um die Vernichtung des ganzen Stammes, es solle nichts Lebendes geschont werden, so ist es mir doch eine gewisse Befriedigung, daß Frauen und Kinder absichtlich nie von uns Schutztrupplern erschossen werden. Auf mich wenigstens haben diese Leichen einen bis ins Innerste verletzenden Eindruck gemacht." (Stuhlmann, *Tagebuch meiner Kriegserlebnisse in Süd-West-Afrika 1904 und 1905 als Oberleutnant der Schutztruppe*, unpubl. manuscript, National Archives Namibia, Private Accessions A.109: 49).

⁷⁹ Stuhlmann's statement is somehow conflicting. On the one hand, his avowal that they "had been told that this was about the annihilation of the whole tribe" clearly demonstrates the genocidal character of this war. On the other hand Stuhlmann also states that "women and children were never intentionally shot by us troopers". Does this mean that the soldiers did not consequently act as they have been instructed by von Trotha? In fact, this aspect has never been paid much attention to by historians. Stuhlmann's statement questions Gesine Krüger's argument that soldiers and officers did take part in the shooting of women and

not fit in with his assumptions of a genocidally inclined German soldateska. This is problematic – particularly as this is evidence that contradicts the *Blue Book*.⁸⁰

To conceal disputed information seems characteristic of a historiography which aims at depicting a particularly German colonial aggressiveness. Another illuminating example is the discussion on fatalities.⁸¹ Problems surrounding the divergent determinations of the number of Herero killed are well known as they are based on unreliable census figures which vary between 35,000 and 80,000 pre-war and between 15,000 and 20,000 post-war.⁸² Yet, this is ignored by historians, who usually state a fatality rate of 80% as fact. Only occasionally does one read that this is an estimate.⁸³

Von Trotha's proclamation – the extermination order

The repeatedly mentioned proclamation of von Trotha of 2 October 1904 is of importance in the debate over the nature of German colonialism and the intentions of the military during the closing weeks of the 1904 war. The proclamation has been evaluated, historiographically, as controversial. But this is not the point here. My argument is about the partiality with which this decree is treated. Von Trotha's order of 2 October 1904 reads as follows:

I, the great general of the German soldiers send this letter to the Herero people: the Hereros are not German subjects any longer. They have murdered, they have stolen, they have cut off the ears and noses and other body parts of wounded soldiers, and now they cowardly do not want to fight any longer. I am saying to the people [the Herero, AE]: whoever delivers one of their chiefs to any of my [military] posts as a prisoner, will receive 1000 marks, for Samuel Maharero 5000 marks. The Herero people, however, must leave the country. If the people do not follow this instruction, then I will force them with the *Groot-Rohr* [contemporary local expression for gun, AE]. Every Herero found in German territory, with or without gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will not any longer take in women and children; I will drive them back to their people

children, in raids of settlements and in the prosecution of parched fugitives without refusal to obey orders (cf. Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung*: 63).

⁸⁰ Just remember the statement made by Jan Cloete "After the battle, all men, women and children, wounded and unwounded, who fell into the hands of the Germans, were killed without mercy." (Union of South Africa, *Report*: 64).

⁸¹ Needless to say that it is irrelevant to reflect on the actual numbers of fatalities of this war, either in the context of the debate on genocide or with regard to atrocities committed by Germans against Herero, as such concern cannot, under any circumstances, relativise the event and its repercussions in any way.

⁸² For recent discussions of numbers of fatalities, cf. Maria Fisch, "Zum 'Genozid' an den Herero", *Zwischen Waterberg und Sandfeld. Befunde und Berichte zur Deutschen Kolonialgeschichte*, 2001, 1: 25-41, (25f) and Hillebrecht, "Uncertainties": 80-82.

⁸³ See for instance Gewalt: "In the following four years an estimated 80% of the Herero were killed." (Jan-Bart Gewalt, "Herero and missionaries: the making of historical sources in the 1920s", in: Wilhelm J. G. Möhlig, (ed.), *Frühe Kolonialgeschichte Namibias 1880 – 1930*, Köln, Köppe, 2000: 77-95, 78; "When the war finally ended in 1908 no less than 80% of the Herero had lost their lives." (Jan-Bart Gewalt, "Herero genocide": 110).

or have them shot at. These are my words to the Herero people. The Great General of the mighty Kaiser, von Trotha.⁸⁴

Addressing the officers, von Trotha added the following to his proclamation to the Herero:

This proclamation must be announced to the troops during roll call with the addition that whichever troop apprehends any of the chiefs will receive the reward as well. The shooting of women and children means that the shots will be directed over their heads, to force them to run away. I trust that this decree makes it very clear that no male prisoners will be taken *any longer*, [Emphasis, AE] and that there will be no atrocities committed against women and children. They will run if shot over their heads twice. The good reputation of the German soldiery should not be in question; I am sure the troops will know this.⁸⁵

The proclamation and its implementing ordinance have not survived as original documents, but the versions of them that we have are sufficient to prove their existence.⁸⁶ The evaluation of this material is problematic, however. To demonstrate my argument, one can start with Gewalt's evaluation of von Trotha's decree:

Of late a number of authors have sought to deny or at least downplay the existence and implications of Trotha's proclamation, which has become known as the *Vernichtungsbefehl*. However, Trotha's own words, in his diary and elsewhere, indicate that he knew full well what his proclamation entailed.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ "Ich, der große General der deutschen Soldaten sende diesen Brief an das Volk der Herero. Herero sind nicht mehr deutsche Untertanen. Sie haben gemordet, gestohlen, haben verwundeten Soldaten Ohren und Nasen und andere Körperteile abgeschnitten, und wollen jetzt aus Feigheit nicht mehr kämpfen. Ich sage dem Volke: Jeder, der einen der Kapitäne an einer meiner Stationen als Gefangenen abliefern, erhält 1000 Mark; wer Samuel Maharero bringt, erhält 5000 Mark. Das Volk der Herero muß jeder das Land verlassen. Wenn das Volk dies nicht tut, so werde ich es mit dem 'groot-rohr' (Geschütz) dazu zwingen. Innerhalb der deutschen Grenzen wird jeder Herero mit oder ohne Gewehr, mit oder ohne Vieh, erschossen. Ich nehme keine Weiber oder Kinder mehr auf, treibe sie zu ihrem Volke zurück oder lasse auf sie schießen. Dies sind meine Worte an das Volk der Herero. Der große General des mächtigen Kaisers, von Trotha." (Quoted by Rust, *Krieg*: 385).

⁸⁵ "Dieser Erlaß ist bei den Appells den Truppen mitzuteilen mit dem Hinzufügen, daß auch der Truppe, die einen der Kapitäne fängt, die entsprechende Belohnung zuteil wird und daß das Schießen auf Weiber und Kinder so zu verstehen ist, daß über sie hinweggeschossen wird, um sie zum Laufen zu zwingen. Ich nehme mit Bestimmtheit an, daß dieser Erlaß dazu führen wird, keine männlichen Gefangenen *mehr* zu machen, aber nicht zu Greuelthaten gegen Weiber und Kinder ausartet. Diese werden schon fortlaufen, wenn zweimal über sie hinweggeschossen wird. Die Truppe wird sich des guten Rufes des deutschen Soldaten bewußt bleiben." (Quoted by Rust, *Krieg*: 385, emphasis, AE). It might be noted that this address clearly indicates that – contrary to the presentations by Drechsler and Gewalt – until this point of time obviously Herero men were taken as prisoners.

⁸⁶ There are only two transcriptions of the original text. One is to be found in file I H52 in the Military Archives in Freiburg, the second in file ZBU. D.1 a3, vol. 1, p. 165 in the National Archives of Namibia (cf. Walter Nuhn, *Sturm über Südwest. Der Hereroaufstand von 1904. Ein düsteres Kapitel der deutschen kolonialen Vergangenheit Namibias*, Koblenz, Bernard & Graefe, 1989: 282, note 10).

⁸⁷ Gewalt, *Redemption*: 207. Gewalt (ibid., 234, note 167) uses the following four publications, which deny or downplay von Trotha's decree, however, without any details, i.e. page numbers: Brigitte Lau, "Certainties"; Karla Poewe, *The Namibian Herero: A History of their Psychosocial Disintegration and Survival*, Lewiston, Mellen 1986; Gunter Spraul, "Der 'Völkermord' an den Herero: Untersuchungen zu einer neuen Kontinuitätstheese", *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 1988, 12: 713-739; Gert Sudholt, *Die*

However, von Trotha's proclamation, also known as the *Schiessbefehl*, that is extermination order or order to shoot, is not an order or instruction to the military, but a decree to the Herero people. As such it is not the reason for the annihilation of all Herero. Yet, Gewalt creates this impression, when he argues that von Trotha "knew full well what his proclamation entailed." He omits, cavalierly, what it was that von Trotha knew: undoubtedly this is meant to point to the genocide. Further, as observed by Zimmerer, decrees and orders are not necessarily executed.⁸⁸ Yet, he is no longer cautious when he states that the direct result of von Trotha's order of 2 October 1904 was the death of thousands of Herero in the waterless Omaheke desert.⁸⁹ This causative reasoning, however, has drawn heavy flak and resulted in a controversy which calls for a thorough investigation.

Von Trotha's proclamation was issued more than six weeks after the Battle of Ohamakari of 11 August 1904 and the ensuing desperate flight of Herero through the waterless Omaheke desert where they met certain and gruesome death. Historians, however, face a dilemma when dealing with the question of flight or expulsion; did Herero flee into the Omaheke desert because they saw this as a real option or were they driven there? Zimmerer, for instance, though conscious of the problem, makes no distinction.⁹⁰ Whether they fled or were expelled matters little here, but it can be assumed that most had already perished by the time that von Trotha issued his proclamation. Additionally, it is questionable whether the Herero ever got to know the contents of the decree. After translation into Otjiherero the decree was given to a desperate group of thirty women and children refugees who were then chased back into the desert, as related by von Trotha.⁹¹ Their fate is unknown and it is doubtful if they ever managed to get back to their people.

deutsche Eingeborenenpolitik in Südwestafrika. Von den Anfängen bis 1904, Hildesheim, Olms, 1975.

Gewald does not engage in any way with the positions and arguments taken by these authors. Von Trotha's diary certainly was not accessible for Gewalt. His reference to it is most probably restricted to few excerpts provided by Pool, *Maharero*, who until today is the only historian who was given permission to study it. Recently Hinrich Schneider-Waterberg also had the opportunity to read von Trotha's diary (cf. footnote 5).

⁸⁸ Zimmerer, "Krieg": 48: "Politische und militärische Ziele sind noch nicht die Realität, und Anordnungen und Befehle dürfen nicht mit ihrer tatsächlichen Durchführung, geschweige denn ihrer Wirksamkeit verwechselt werden."

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 51: "Einziges Rückzugsgebiet war die Omaheke, wo als Folge dieses Befehls Tausende verdursteten."

⁹⁰ Ibid.: 50, emphasis, AE: "...aber der Großteil der Herero entkam aus dem Kessel und *floh* in das weitgehend wasserlose Sandfeld der Omaheke-Halbwüste im Osten des Schutzgebietes. Damit war der Krieg im Grunde militärisch entschieden, und die eigentliche genozidale Phase begann, denn die deutschen Truppen *trieben* nun die Herero zangenförmig in Richtung Omaheke vor sich her."

⁹¹ "Ich [...] habe alle zugelaufenen Weiber und Kinder wieder in das Sandfeld unter Mitgabe der in Othierero abgefaßten Proklamation an das Volk zurückgejagt." (Trotha – Chef des Generalstabes der Armee, 4.10.1904, quoted by Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 190). This passage is from a letter and not, as Gewalt alleges, from von Trotha's diary, cf. also footnote 87 (Gewald, *Redemption*: 207). Interestingly, according to von Trotha, the released Herero had not been captured, but had strayed towards the troops.

At the beginning of October 1904, von Trotha cordoned off the Omaheke desert and its water holes between Otjomanangombe/Epukiro through Otjosondjou and Osondema right up to Otjituo, a distance of roughly 250 kilometres. How efficient this measure proved is contested. Von Estorff reports that he had the thankless task to pursue the fleeing into the Sandveld (Omaheke) to prevent them from returning; an impossible task as individuals and small groups still managed to get past them.⁹² By the beginning of October only small groups of refugees were still around the cordoned area; moreover, larger groups of Herero were no longer reachable by the German troops.⁹³ The conclusion of Zimmerer and others that thousands perished of thirst in the Omaheke desert as a result of von Trotha's decree of 2 October 1904 remains without convincing evidence and has to be treated as an assumption.⁹⁴

Elsewhere Gewalt has argued again, albeit with a different angle, that von Trotha had been fully aware of the genocidal developments resulting from his decree. He based his arguments on von Trotha's letter of 4 October 1904 to the General Chief, von Schlieffen. It has already been cited by Drechsler in its German original version.⁹⁵ Gewalt quoted from it using Pool's English translation as follows.⁹⁶ Substantial sections, left out by Gewalt, have been added in italics.

Now I have to ask myself how to end the war with the Hereros. The views of the Governor and also a few old Africaners [sic!] on the one hand, and my views on

⁹² Ludwig von Estorff, *Wanderungen und Kämpfe in Südwestafrika, Ostafrika und Südafrika 1894-1910*, ed. by Christoph-Friedrich Kutscher, Wiesbaden, n.p., 1968: 117: "Ich hatte die undankbare Aufgabe, den Flüchtlingen in das Sandfeld nachzustoßen und dann ihre Rückkehr zu verhindern. Ganz konnte es nicht geschehen, denn viele stahlen sich einzeln und in kleinen Trupps an uns vorbei." See also Nuhn, *Sturm*: 287ff, Gewalt, *Redemption*: 209ff and especially Fisch, "Genozid": 30ff for fugitives breaking through the cordon.

⁹³ Cf. von Estorff, *Wanderungen*: 117, emphasis, AE: "Wir lagen an den letzten großen Wasserstellen vor dem Sandfelde, die ergiebig und schön waren und machten gelegentlich Züge in das Sandfeld. Sie waren sehr anstrengend und wenig ergiebig, denn wir *finden* nur noch *Versprengte* und wenig Vieh. Auch ein Zug, der uns südwärts führte, hatte kein anderes Ergebnis, denn inzwischen war die Regenzeit gekommen und die Regenteiche, die nun überall entstanden, ermöglichten es den geschlossenen Überbleibseln ostwärts in das englische Gebiet zu entkommen."

⁹⁴ Zimmerer's allegation that there are abundant eyewitness accounts of German soldiers showing how this annihilation in the Omaheke did take place does not challenge this position: "Über die Art und Weise, wie sich diese Vernichtung [in der Omaheke, A.E.] abspielte, gibt es reichlich Augenzeugenberichte deutscher Soldaten" (Jürgen Zimmerer, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Genozid – Überlegungen zum historischen Ort des Völkermordes an den Herero und Nama", in: Larissa Förster, Dag Henrichsen & Michael Bollig (eds.), *Namibia – Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand, Gewalt, Erinnerung*. Köln, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, 2004: 106-121, 110). To back up his argument, Zimmerer refers to Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung*, 73-103, where she analyses six war diaries. Not only do not all of them contain entries about military actions against Herero in the Omaheke, but, most notably, prosecutions into the Omaheke have mainly been undertaken prior to von Trotha's proclamation. Early in October 1904 military action against Herero had largely ceased (von Estorff, *Wanderungen*: 117, cf. footnote 93).

⁹⁵ Cf. Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 189f.

⁹⁶ This being another example of the use of a translation of a translation, since Pool's book was originally published in Afrikaans, hence the German letter had first been translated into Afrikaans, and subsequently into English. Cf. footnote 49.

the other, differ completely. The first wanted to negotiate for some time already and regard the Herero nation as necessary labour material for the future development of the country. I believe that the nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this was not possible by tactical measures, have to be expelled from the country by operative means and further detailed treatment. This will be possible if the water-holes from Grootfontein to Gobabis are occupied. The constant movement of our troops will enable us to find the small groups of the nation who have moved back westwards and destroy them gradually ... *To pursue the main section of the nation with their captains into the Sandveld Omaheke and to confront and annihilate them there is not possible at present. The question of provisioning has already surpassed the limits of what I could take responsibility for.*

Because I neither can nor want to negotiate with these people without the explicit instruction of his Majesty the Emperor and King, a certain rigorous treatment of all sections of the nation is absolutely necessary, a treatment which I have put into practice for the time being. This is on my own responsibility from which I will not deviate without direct instructions as long as I am in command. My intimate knowledge of many central African tribes (Bantu and others) has everywhere convinced me of the necessity that the Negro does not respect treaties but only brute force ... *On the other hand, to accept women and children, most of whom are ill, is a serious danger to the troops, but to feed them is an impossibility. For this reason I find it most appropriate that the nation perishes instead of infecting our soldiers and diminishing their supplies of water and food. Apart from that, mildness on my side would only be interpreted as weakness by the other side. They have to perish in the Sandveld or try to cross the Bechuanaland border.*⁹⁷

This passage has also been accorded central importance by other authors and both Drechsler and Nuhn based their reasoning on it.⁹⁸ Gewalt would have probably quoted the letter after Pool, as this was already available in English. A comparison of the version in Pool, who does not indicate omissions, with the text as quoted by Drechsler, shows that Pool has also left out sections of the original. The text as used by Drechsler follows:

On the questions of provisions I have already passed the limits of what is reasonable. Only time will show to what extent it will be possible for the Estorff unit left behind in Osombo-Ovondimbe to drive them [the Herero] back from any water-holes they may find and to force them to seek refuge in Bechuanaland. If this is impracticable, everything will depend on whether the Herero are capable of holding their own in the Omaheke sandveld until the onset of the rainy season, whether they will attempt to cross into British territory, or whether they will try to regain their traditional grazing ground through force or total submission.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Cited by Gewalt, *Redemption*: 208; text in italics cited by Pool, *Samuel Maharero*: 272-274.

⁹⁸ Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 189f; Nuhn, *Sturm*: 284.

⁹⁹ Trotha – Chef des Generalstabes der Armee, 4.10.1904, cited by Drechsler, *Fighting*: 160f. “Die Verpflegungsfrage ist schon über die Grenze der von mir zu verantwortenden Möglichkeiten hinübergangen. Inwieweit es der in Osombo-Ovondimbe zurückgebliebenen Abteilung Estorff möglich sein wird, sie immer wieder von evtl. dort gefundenen Wasserstellen zu verjagen und in das Betschuanaland zu drängen, muß die Zeit lehren. Wenn dies nicht möglich ist, wird es davon abhängen, ob die Herero vor Beginn der Regenperiode im Stande sind, sich im Sandfeld zu behaupten, oder ob sie versuchen, über die englische Grenze

This demonstrates clearly, contradicting Gewalt's choice of cited text, that von Trotha did not anticipate or intend the wholesale destruction of the Herero nation in the Omaheke desert. He mentions other options, arguing that they might be able to survive (*sich behaupten*), that they might move over to Bechuanaland or might attempt a return to their old pastures (*alte Weideplaeetze*) by force or by total submission. Von Trotha's main aim was to remove the Herero from German territory.¹⁰⁰ He did, however, condone the possibility that the Herero would perish in the waterless conditions of the Omaheke. Hence, Zimmerer is wrong when he reasons that from von Trotha's perspective, the Herero men had no chance to escape but were shot or died of thirst.¹⁰¹

Concluding Remarks

The reasons for the controversial evaluation of the Herero-German war of 1904 are manifold. In part this is because the factual history of this war – contrary to a generally held belief – is not adequately known, nor completely researched, and therefore understood; this provides the space in which widely diverging interpretations can blossom.¹⁰² The background of the controversy, however, must be sought elsewhere.

Activist historiographers and academic historians each aim at positioning the events of the colonial war of 1904 in different contexts. For Namibian German-speakers the interpretation of this history has very real and personal relevance in the post-colonial context of Namibia. Their academic counterparts live, teach and write almost exclusively in Europe. As such, their treatment of this history is devoid of any personal-biographical dimension. Their interpretation is positioned first and foremost in the contexts of German history and a European academic and intellectual framework.

Substantial and credible source material does back the genocidal nature of this war. There are, however, doubts as to the usefulness of the category genocide as an analytical concept and about its application for Namibian history. The concept of genocide is based on a definition as laid down in the Convention on Genocide of the United Nations of 9 December 1948.¹⁰³ What then is, analytically, the use of transferring this 1948-category backwards to 1904? An answer is provided by Jürgen Zimmerer,

zu gehen, oder ihre alten Weideplätze mit Gewalt oder völliger Unterwerfung wieder in Besitz zu nehmen." (Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*: 190).

¹⁰⁰ This is also corroborated by von Trotha's diary: "...to pursue and conquer (the Hereros) wherever possible or to force them into British territory and to leave strong border troops behind." (cited by Pool, *Maharero*: 269).

¹⁰¹ Zimmerer, "Deutsche Reich": 110: "Für die Herero-Männer, auf die von Trotha schießen lassen wollte, gab es also aus der Sicht des Generals kein Entrinnen. Sie wurden erschossen oder verdursteten."

¹⁰² Lau, "Certainties": 40: "This evidence is appallingly incomplete – a fact which is hardly acknowledged by today's historians."

¹⁰³ Arguably, one could raise doubt as to the usefulness of applying a juridical category formulated in 1948, to the events of 1904. The significance of this United Nations category of 1948 rests, among others, on the imperative to act internationally should genocide be found to be happening. The concept as such, and the obligation to act, was not in existence in 1904.

who argues that the genocide of 1904 contributed to making the Holocaust thinkable and possible.¹⁰⁴ No Herero-German War, therefore no Holocaust, one is inclined to ask?

Zimmerer classifies the colonial war of 1904 as a German genocide, arguing that the event must be interpreted with reference to later developments – *schon auf späteres verweisend*.¹⁰⁵ This approach clearly evaluates the events from a Eurocentric, if not Germanocentric, perspective. This is underscored by the terminology used. Both the German-Herero and the German-Nama-Wars are monopolised for German history, when, for example, they are referred to as a single war, as *the colonial war (1904-1908) in Namibia*.¹⁰⁶ From an African perspective these were *two* different wars.

The Herero-German war may be characterised as genocide, and rightly so. Even if the analytical value of the concept of (colonial) genocide in a Namibian colonial history context is not clear – for it does not aid the understanding of the tragic events of 1904 in German South West Africa – one may concede that to discuss this history from a Germanocentric perspective, or in a comparative genocide studies perspective, may be useful. Yet, the determination to demonstrate historiographically German cruelty, intentionally committed against Herero in a genocidal war, has led to paradigmatic entrapment. A scientific-methodologically correct, source-critical interpretation as well as proper citation and quotation of texts substantiate the genocidal nature of German military intervention in South West Africa in 1904.

Yet, using one-sided and biased evidence to support the genocide inevitably provokes a revisionist and colonial-apologetic historiographic reaction, against which academic historiography so passionately argues. Arguably then, a genocide-fixated historiography arrived at with questionable methods is to be held responsible for the whole spectrum of truly and literally reactionary, apologist and revisionist attempts to (re-)interpret German colonial history; exactly that kind of history against which it argues so vehemently. An early example of such a reactionist counter-representation is the official German *Weißbuch* (White Book) as an answer to the *Blue Book*, published by the Imperial

¹⁰⁴ Zimmerer, "Krieg": 62. "Er [the genocide of 1904, AE] trug dazu bei, den Holocaust denkbar und möglich zu machen." Cf. also *ibid.*: 60: "Bedeutsam ist der Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika auch als Vorgeschichte des Holocaust. Schon allein durch Begriffe wie Konzentrationslager und Völkermord deutet sich eine Verbindung zu den Massenverbrechen während des Dritten Reiches an." Birthe Kundrus has argued convincingly against this line of thinking in: "Grenzen der Gleichsetzung. Kolonialverbrechen und Vernichtungspolitik", *iz3w* 275, März 2004: 30-33; "From the Herero to the Holocaust? The current Debate", *Afrika Spectrum* 40, 2005, 2: 299-308; "Von den Herero zum Holocaust? Einige Bemerkungen zur aktuellen Debatte", *Mittelweg* 36, 2005, 4: 82-91.

¹⁰⁵ Zimmerer, "Krieg": 45.

¹⁰⁶ The Herero and Nama wars are generally referred to as one single war. Cf. the Zimmerer / Zeller volume *Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia*. Cf. also e.g. Andreas Eckert, who writes about the "Jahrestag des Ausbruches des Krieges gegen die Herero und Nama", (the anniversary of the outbreak of the war against Herero and Nama), in his contribution "Namibia – ein deutscher Sonderweg in Afrika?" in the same volume: 226-236, (230). The book has recently been translated and published as *Genocide in German South-West Africa. The Colonial War of 1904-1908 and its Aftermath*. Monmouth, Merlin 2008.

Colonial Office in 1919.¹⁰⁷ It counters the *Blue Book* with a long list of atrocities committed by the British.

Understandably, academic historiography that concentrates on the genocide of 1904 is susceptible to attempts at counter interpretation. Needless to say that in our case methodological vigour and text-critical thoroughness will neither relativise nor gloss over the barbarous and atrocious nature of the war of 1904. The biased and tendentious academic historiography of the war in no way provides the basis for questioning its genocidal nature. This holds true even though some aspects of the war which are central to its classification as genocide, such as the treatment of the Herero prisoners-of-war, have not been dealt with in this paper. However, the examples given demonstrate that a more thorough and source-critical historiography of the war in 1904 is needed. Such historiography requires academic determination, investigative enthusiasm and detached honesty without any questionable ambitions as have been presumed by Jakob Zollmann in an acerbic evaluation:

African and Namibian history is of interest to Zimmerer only due to colonialism's brute force and the genocide he has now described in a multitude of papers. This attempt at positioning this narrowed and watered-down version of Namibian (and African) colonial history within the wider historiography of 20th century German history seems, in fact, to be driven by hopes of enhancing their standing and profile within that wider and accepted field of study.¹⁰⁸

Narrowing down the discussion and analysis of German colonial history in German South West Africa to a discussion on genocide means turning a blind eye to the many other facets that could assist in analysing the phenomenon of German colonialism and how it played out in German South West Africa.¹⁰⁹ Even the most vociferous exponent of the genocide paradigm, Zimmerer, cannot but state that the readiness of von Trotha and others to condone a genocidal result in the Omaheke has to be explained. This unanswered question needs to be examined in the context of other colonial wars. With this he opens up a direction into which future investigation and writing could advance this historiography.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Reichskolonialamt, (ed.), *Die Behandlung der einheimischen Bevölkerung in den kolonialen Besitzungen Deutschlands und Englands. Eine Erwiderung auf das englische Blaubuch vom August 1918: Report on the natives of South-West Africa and their treatment by Germany*, Berlin, Engelmann, 1919. Drechsler expresses this publication's aim aptly in his *Fighting*: 10: "setting off one atrocity against the other".

¹⁰⁸ Jakob Zollmann, "Polemics and other arguments – a German debate reviewed", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 2007, 1: 109-130, (120).

¹⁰⁹ An evaluation in *The Namibian Weekender*, 20.8.2001 offered by Jeremy Silvester, Werner Hillebrecht & Casper Erichsen, under the heading "The Herero Holocaust? The Disputed History of the 1904 Genocide", for instance, reads: "The questions do not so much focus on what happened but rather on how and why it did." (cf. <http://www.namibweb.com/hererohol.htm>, accessed December 2007).

¹¹⁰ Zimmerer has to concede: "Woher die Bereitschaft zum Völkermord bei von Trotha und anderen stammt ist eine offene Frage, die noch der Klärung harret. Zu ihrer Beantwortung müßten auch eventuelle Kontinuitäten zu früheren Kolonialkriegen untersucht werden." (Jürgen Zimmerer, "Kriegsgefangene im Kolonialkrieg. Der Krieg gegen die Herero und Nama in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (1904-1907)", in: Rüdiger Overmans, (ed.), *In der Hand des Feindes. Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Köln, Böhlau, 1999: 277-294, 294).

Another important dimension can be added to our understanding of this history. The exploitation of, for instance, such sources as diaries and letters of German troopers adds new, hitherto unacknowledged perspectives, the views of the perpetrators. An investigation of the German military in the contexts under consideration has not yet been undertaken. A first step was taken by Gesine Krüger in her landmark study *Kriegsbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstsein*. She analysed six unpublished diaries of German colonial soldiers not to render psychological explanations and interpretations but to reveal the other side of the colonial experience.¹¹¹ Krüger has shown clearly that, epistemologically, it is possible to do justice to this innovative approach. She demonstrates that to deal with individual soldiers cannot relativise the genocidal destruction. Yet, the question about the 'subjective' side of the war addresses whether soldiers were conscious of the consequences of their involvement.¹¹²

Gewald takes Krüger's work into account when he hypothesises as follows:

However, not only was the country not what they had expected, but the war was not what they had anticipated either. The soldiers experienced intense disappointment, frustration and alienation with what they found. In part, these conditions led to the absence of norms, and the venting of frustration upon those deemed to be responsible for the disappointment and fear being experienced by the German soldiers.¹¹³

Although current research regarding the 1904 war is still in its infancy and therefore Gewalt's approach can only be viewed as hypothetical, this could be a way forward. An academic historiography that is conscious of its responsibility to enlighten, to explain and to be intellectually impartial should be wary of prevailing tendencies. Constant reiteration of Drechsler's sources and findings does nothing to contribute to a better understanding of what happened, or why.

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¹¹¹ Krüger, *Kriegsbewältigung*: 71. "Es geht dabei nicht um individual-psychologische Deutungen und Interpretationen, sondern um die Erschließung eines wesentlichen Bestandteils kolonialer Erfahrung auf beiden Seiten, um einen Perspektivwechsel, der Praxis, Erfahrungen und konkrete Begegnungen in den Mittelpunkt stellt."

¹¹² *Ibid.*: 70f.

¹¹³ Gewalt, "Herero genocide": 123.

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