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**“Met Duizend Groete”**  
**Jacob Marenke’s letter to Lothar von Trotha, 8 May 1905,**  
**responding to the “Proklamation an das Volk der**  
**Hottentotten”, dated 22 April 1905**

Matthias Häussler and Andreas Eckl\*

*Abstract*

*The handwritten letter, dated 8 May 1905, by Jacob Marenke, also known as Morenga or Marengo, responding to Lothar von Trotha’s “Proklamation an das Volk der Hottentotten”, dated 22 April 1905, is part of the estate of Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, who was in command of the Imperial Schutztruppe for German South West Africa from May 1904 to November 1905. Marenke’s letter, reproduced and translated here for the first time, clearly documents that he lacked belief in the honesty of the Germans and their efforts for peace. It indicates that mistrust, fuelled by the performative contradictions of the Germans, who spoke of peace on the one hand, but engaged in hostile acts on the other, may be seen as the crucial reason why no peace agreement could be achieved by both parties.*

The handwritten letter by Jacob Marenke, also known as Morenga or Marengo, reproduced and translated here, is part of the estate of Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, who was in command of the *Schutztruppe* for German South West Africa from May 1904 to November 1905.<sup>1</sup> Trotha oversaw the campaign against the OvaHerero and headed the operations against various Nama groups for over a year. The Trotha family association has left Trotha’s estate to the authors to be evaluated and edited; funding for the project has been provided by the German Research Foundation (DFG).<sup>2</sup> Included in this estate were many letters from and to Trotha, including a letter from Hendrik Witbooi; many of the original letters, however, were lost and only copies survive – not so Marenke’s letter, which is preserved in the original. It is an important document which provides insights into the diplomatic relations between central protagonists of the wars that shook today’s Namibia between 1904 and 1908 and led to the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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\* Matthias Häussler and Andreas Eckl, Institute for Diaspora and Genocide Studies, Ruhr-University Bochum, are currently engaged with a project aiming at a critical edition of Lothar von Trotha’s written and photographic estate. E-mail: matthias.haeussler@rub.de; andreas.eckl@rub.de

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The war that broke out between the Nama group of Bondelswart and the German Empire at the end of 1903 was one of those localized conflicts that had shaken German South West Africa several times in its almost twenty-year history. However, it had consequences for the entire colony, at least indirectly: When the Governor, Colonel Theodor Leutwein, ordered the bulk of his troops south to keep the Bondelswart in check, OvaHerero in central Namibia saw the opportunity to take up arms.<sup>3</sup> Leutwein strove for a quick peace with the Bondelswart, which was concluded on January 27, 1904 near Kalkfontein in order to be able to turn against the OvaHerero. Many Bondelswart, however, left the country because they were not satisfied with the terms of the settlement. Some of them joined Jacob Marenke, who probably returned to German South West Africa in June 1904 with 30 fighters and attacked the Germans from the Karras Mountains.<sup>4</sup>

Marenke was born around 1875 as son of an OvaHerero and a Nama woman in what is now Namibia. Not a chief himself, he served as a field cornet with the Bondelswart. Thanks to his extraordinary skills and charisma, he became perhaps the most serious adversary of the Germans in the OvaHerero and Nama wars against the German colonial power (1904-1908) and also gained recognition as a master of guerrilla warfare.

Marenke's first operation occurred at the time when the German campaign against the OvaHerero was entering its decisive phase while the headquarters was preoccupied with the fighting at Hamakari and the persecution in the Omaheke between August and October 1904.

In October 1904, Hendrik Witbooi declared war on the German Reich, and many Oorlam and Nama groups followed him into battle. The report from the Great General Staff speaks of the "Hottentot War" in the singular, but it was in fact a series of wars, as the groups and their leaders decided for themselves whether to enter the war, how and on whose side they fought, and also made peace on their own.

When war broke out in the south of the *Schutzgebiet* in October 1904, the commander-in-chief, Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha, was in eastern central Namibia on the edge of the Omaheke. He put Colonel Berthold Deimling in charge of operations in the south, and Deimling initially turned against the Witbooi and their allies. Trotha then planned a large-scale operation to strike a decisive blow against Marenke, and wanted to pull together the forces required for this. However, Deimling did not want to wait that long; allegedly he even had the telegraph lines cut "in order to evade orders from Windhoek that did not fit into his plans".<sup>5</sup> He ignored Trotha's orders and attacked Marenke. By European standards he achieved a military victory at Narudas on March 11, 1905, as Marenke had to withdraw with losses. His victory was, however, anything but decisive. Marenke's forces soon regrouped and the consequences were very unfavourable: "Deimling's campaign had not only not ended the revolt, it had dispersed the enemy in

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<sup>3</sup> Jon M. Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981: 64f., 69.

<sup>4</sup> John Masson, *Jakob Marengo. An Early Resistance Hero of Namibia*, Windhoek, Out of Africa, 2001: 27.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Andreas Heinrich Bühler, *Der Namaaufstand gegen die deutsche Kolonialherrschaft in Namibia von 1904–1913*, Frankfurt am Main, IKO, 2003: 241.

such a way as to increase greatly the difficulties the Germans would have in future," as historian Jon Bridgman noted.<sup>6</sup> This brought about the final breach between Deimling and Trotha, whose had lost patience with the arbitrariness of his subordinate. When Deimling was wounded in battle he used the opportunity to take his leave and Trotha went south to assume command himself.<sup>7</sup>

One of his first measures was the issue of the "Proklamation an das Volk der Hottentotten" ("Proclamation to the Hottentot People") of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1905. In it he called on the Nama to submit and threatened them with the same fate as the OvaHerero should they not do so. Unlike the OvaHerero in October 1904<sup>8</sup>, the Nama still had the option of submitting with the assurance that their lives would be spared. The Nama did not respond positively to the proclamation, on the contrary, it only aggravated the situation:

While not as bloodthirsty as the decree issues [sic!] against the Hereros, the immediate effects were negative since the only Khoikhoi response was that of the Bondelswarts. They too now joined the rebellion.<sup>9</sup>

Following the battle of Narudas, Marenke and parts of his entourage had again withdrawn to the Karras Mountains, where they could recover from the battle in relative safety; Marenke had been seriously wounded. Trotha meanwhile signalled his readiness to negotiate a peace treaty.

The General asked Father [Malinowski] to go to Marenka, and to assure the chief that if he surrendered he would not be punished but treated with dignity and generosity.<sup>10</sup>

This may be surprising at first, as Trotha had shown himself unforgiving with regard to the OvaHerero and had strictly rejected and forbidden any form of negotiation. "I do not negotiate with the mob," he wrote in his diary on December 9, 1904, when he received an order from Berlin to revoke his "Aufruf an das Volk der Herero" ("Appeal to the Herero people") dated October 3, 1904.<sup>11</sup>

Before departing to GSWA, Trotha had been instructed personally by Kaiser Wilhelm II in Strasbourg "to put down the uprising by all means" – although those means probably did not include negotiations.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Leutwein's attempts to contact Paramount Chief Samuel Maharero at the beginning of the war against OvaHerero had caused outrage in

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<sup>6</sup> Bridgman, *The Revolt*: 144.

<sup>7</sup> Bühler, *Namaaufstand*: 241ff.

<sup>8</sup> For the original text in Otjiherero, transcription of the text letter by letter and a literal translation into English, see: Andreas Eckl, Matthias Häussler and Jekura Kavari, "Oomambo wandje komuhoko wOvaHerero. Lothar von Trotha's 'Words to the OvaHerero people'. *Journal of Namibian Studies* : 23, 2918: 125-133; <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/7254>

<sup>9</sup> Schrank 178, quoted by Bühler, *Namaaufstand*: 244.

<sup>10</sup> John Marie Simon, *Bishop for the Hottentots. African Memories 1882-1909*, New York, Benziger Brothers, 1959: 190.

<sup>11</sup> "Ich verhandle nicht mit der Bande".

<sup>12</sup> Trotha to Leutwein, 5 November 1904, BArch. R1001/2089, Bl. 100-102.

both the colony and the German Empire. At an assembly in Windhoek, the settlers informed Leutwein that

on this point, the government should in no way deceive itself as to the mood of the land; the Hereros must immediately be dealt a crushing defeat, which will stave off any renewed desires for an uprising in the future. Should *the Hereros thereupon* seek negotiations, these could be introduced *only* on the basis of unconditional surrender.<sup>13</sup>

The press in the German Reich also intervened: “The entire German press concerned with this matter has explained that peace negotiations with the rebels are *impossible*,” the *Tägliche Rundschau* newspaper asserted on March 9, 1904, underscoring the position of key Berlin authorities.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Leutwein was directed “to abstain from all bilateral negotiations with Hereros, and to demand unconditional surrender”; under no circumstances could negotiations be allowed to begin without the “approval of His Majesty.”<sup>15</sup> Probably for reasons of prestige, the Great General Staff later reported that the initiative for negotiations had not come from Trotha, but from Marenke.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to the Nama, Trotha could not be bound by any such instructions because the wars only broke out long after he arrived in German South West Africa. He seems to have had greater room for manoeuvre in this setting and to have used it. This is also evident from the fact that in May 1905 Trotha sent his nephew, Lieutenant Thilo von Trotha, to the Oorlam leader Cornelius Fredericks in order to win him over to a peace treaty. The negotiations failed because they were disrupted by a German patrol; in the subsequent exchange of fire, Thilo von Trotha was killed.

Undoubtedly, both sides used the negotiations and ceasefires to gain time. However, with the press in the German Reich rejecting even sham negotiations with OvaHerero, Trotha’s efforts – regardless of what purpose they served – represented a remarkable innovation.<sup>17</sup> There is some evidence that Trotha’s negotiations with Marenke in April 1905 were actually intended to bring about a lasting peace. When the talks stalled because Marenke did not want to accept the conditions offered by the German side, which included the confiscation of all cattle, Trotha relented in order to prevent a breakdown in the

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<sup>13</sup> “Es wurde aus der Versammlung darauf hingewiesen, daß bezüglich dieses Punktes die Regierung sich über die Stimmung im Lande unmöglich einer Täuschung hingeben könne, die einmütig dahin gehe, dass den Hereros zunächst eine vernichtende Niederlage beigebracht werden müsse, welche ihnen erneute Aufstandsgelüste für alle Zukunft verleide. Sollten *die Hereros alsdann* Unterhandlungen anknüpfen wollen, so könnten dieselben *nur* auf der Grundlage einer Unterwerfung auf Gnade und Ungnade geführt werden.” (“Aus dem Schutzgebiet: Aus Windhuk”, *Deutsch-Südwestafrikanische Zeitung*, Nr. 16. 19 April 1904, p. 2, original emphasis)

<sup>14</sup> “Die ganze deutsche Presse, die sich mit der Angelegenheit beschäftigte, hat Friedensverhandlungen mit den Rebellen für *unmöglich* erklärt” (ibid., emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> “unter allen Umständen nur mit Genehmigung Seiner Majestät zu beginnen”, Großer Generalstab to Leutwein, 6 February 1904, BArch. R1001/2112, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Der Große Generalstab, *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika*, Vol. 2, Berlin, Mittler & Sohn, 1907: 136.

<sup>17</sup> “Aus den Kolonien. Friedensverhandlungen mit den Hereros”, *National-Zeitung*, 9 March 1904, see BArch. R1001/2112, Bl. 215.

negotiations. His heliogram, which would have left Marenke and his people all non-stolen cattle, either reached the local military too late or was deliberately ignored by them, so that the negotiations finally failed.<sup>18</sup> The breakdown was above all a result of an attack by a German detachment on Marenke's camp while negotiations with Father Malinowski and Captain von Kopy were in progress. The events are reminiscent of the failed negotiations between Cornelius Fredericks and Thilo von Trotha.

The background is not entirely clear. It cannot be ruled out that the military consciously created a setting that would guarantee a decision in their favour. There are examples of this. On November 2, 1904, First Lieutenant von Beesten received 70 OvaHerero for peace talks in Okombahe. He had them surrounded and finally shot when the talks threatened to break down. Even if we assume that they were not, as Horst Drechsler suspects, "sham negotiations" from the outset, it is hardly possible to speak of negotiations in the true sense because the talks were neither open nor free; Beesten's intent seems to have been to force a result that he welcomed, or not to let the OvaHerero get away.<sup>19</sup> Trotha was upset by Beesten's approach. His treachery in shooting the OvaHerero who had naively trusted him, was "a 1st-degree nasty trick".<sup>20</sup> Trotha even sought court-martial proceedings against Beesten.

It is also possible that the incident in April 1905 – as evidently the incident with Fredericks – was not a concerted action, but that Kopy was unaware of the department in question's plan to attack. However, it is hard to assume that it was a coincidence, perhaps unlike the situation with Fredericks. There may have been other officers, who opposed a peace treaty and deliberately sought to thwart the talks. In Kopy's account of his departure from Marenke's camp, he seemed to fear being shot from behind – not because he mistrusted Marenke, but because he feared that a warmonger would use the opportunity to bring about the collapse of negotiations by a single shot.<sup>21</sup>

After all, there also were warmongers among the German officers. Deimling e.g. repeatedly disregarded orders and deliberately undermined official policy on their own initiative, and hardly ever faced punishment. Indeed, hesitant, fearful behaviour on the part of officers seemed worthy of punishment, but not an over-zealous, dashing approach. The fact that the so-called 'Battle of the Waterberg' on August 11, 1904 did not proceed as planned was mainly due to Deimling's hasty advance from the west. As a result, the OvaHerero broke out to the east and overran von der Heyde's detachment, who – unsure of the objectives and apparently lost in the terrain – had not reached its planned position. Trotha

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<sup>18</sup> Große Generalstab, *Kämpfe*: 138.

<sup>19</sup> Horst Drechsler, *Südwestafrika unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft. Der Kampf der Herero und Nama gegen den deutschen Imperialismus 1884–1915*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1966: 162.

<sup>20</sup> Diary Lothar von Trotha, 122/16, 21 November 1904.

<sup>21</sup> Große Generalstab, *Kämpfe*: 138.

had Heyde court-martialled, while Deimling enjoyed his appreciation. "Doesn't matter, he is inconsiderate towards himself and others," Trotha remarked of Deimling in his diary.<sup>22</sup> This all served to intensify the mistrust between the warring parties, and well-founded mistrust deprives negotiations and contracts of their foundation. The Germans failed to do anything about that. Thus, Marenke's letter is by no means as naive and incomprehensible as Trotha might have believed. "Morenga offers his submission, but he cannot understand the proclamation", noted the General in his diary.<sup>23</sup> Rather, Marenke spelled out the conditions for achieving a peace agreement. When he repeatedly expressed the "fear" that certain circumstances and incidents aroused in him and his followers, he emphasized above all that he lacked belief in the honesty of the Germans and their efforts for peace, that is to say, the minimum of trust that allows both sides to sit down and believe each other's promises. Handing over arms and surrendering meant a leap of faith that did not seem justified by anything that had happened up until then. Although there were rumours of a readiness for peace on the part of the Germans, emissaries were murdered, the proclamation with its threats was issued, and soldiers had attacked while negotiations were being conducted with Kopyy. 'Fear' was a cipher for the distrust that was not only not diminished but was further fuelled by the performative contradictions of the Germans, who spoke of peace on the one hand, but engaged in hostile acts on the other. Marenke made this very clear – and raised the legitimate question of whether the proclamation could even constitute a basis for a peace treaty. The only concession from the German side was the assurance to him and his people that their lives would be spared, and that, understandably, was not enough for him,<sup>24</sup> especially as Marenke saw himself as being on an equal footing with Trotha at the very least.<sup>25</sup>

The Germans not only found it difficult to prove the sincerity of their peace efforts, but were also unwilling to make any real concession. Marenke understood this and pointed it out. It was Trotha who did not understand Marenke's sarcasm.

Marenke did not lay down his arms. After years of warfare, a German detachment with the help of British forces succeeded in locating and killing Marenke on British soil in 1907. The Germans had not been able to defeat him by military means.

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<sup>22</sup> "Ist egal, er ist rücksichtslos gegen sich und andere", Diary Lothar von Trotha, 122/16, 23 December 1904.

<sup>23</sup> "Morenga bietet seine Unterwerfung an, er könne aber die Proklamation nicht verstehen", Diary Lothar von Trotha, 261, 14 May 1905.

<sup>24</sup> Große Generalstab, *Kämpfe*: 136.

<sup>25</sup> In his letter, Marenke explicitly refers to the emperor as the one who has the ultimate authority to act ("Toen can ons niet verstaan, deze vrete waltemagtig Heer Kaiser voor ons gedenken had") and thus points out that Trotha is only a subordinate, while he, Marenke, is as "waltemagtig" as the German Emperor. Another point is illustrative here: According to Simon, Marenke, having been informed that the Germans had placed a price on his head, "let the captain who had set a price on his head know that he put a price on his of 250 dollars." (Simon, *Bishop*: 185).



Jacob Marenke's letter to Lothar von Trotha, 8 May 1905

8. 5. 05  
Aan Hoog geacht Heer.  
General von Trotha.  
Lieve Heer! Wij hebben uwe  
blaad ontvangen. Voor ons te  
blaad ontvangen hebben  
hebben wij op, ik u- dat-ge  
veest gehad. daar had ons  
een man aangenid genoemd,  
en daar bij deze man had  
ons gehort, dat Abraham  
Kapper gekomen had. om  
met ons vrede te spreken  
daar na hebben wij gesig  
om die vrede te luisterden  
die heeft onze handen half  
terug getrek, zoo is onze 2  
jongenje gestuur naar  
Kas. 1 ab, en die 2 jongen is  
in handen van de vrede oor  
loogs man zij handen ge  
vullen, en zij hebben hun greu  
wilyk gemord met zyne  
Meze, alzo had ons zeer vrees  
gewoonden, na deze tijd  
had Abraham Kapper ge  
Krogen komen van u- dat  
en hebben wij gehort, dat nog  
een man achter is, wat nog  
zal komen, een Romeische Pries-  
ter van die vrede praest,  
zoo had ik daert Marenke  
mondelijk de man ge  
antwoord, daarna had ons  
meeder vrees gewoord

Toen Heer Hoofman  
von Koppig gekom hadde  
had ons door vrede wilt te  
klop uit gegaan Toen kon  
ons verstaen, deze vrede  
wat te magtig Heer Kaiser  
voor ons gillenken had,  
Want wij kunnen niet, ver-  
staan van ~~de~~ deze blaad, want  
ons verstaen niet te inhout  
vandez blaad, alzo mog  
lieve Heer, voor ons houtelyk  
maken, want wij hoor niet  
dat gy vrede vermeld, gy  
wasz onze gewalpen, zoeken  
ons niet verstaen, alzo  
maak lendelyker van  
vrede.

Verder ik is door genade  
van God den Heere ~~Frans~~  
frischen gezond

Met Druizend Groete  
Verblif ik  
In  
Jou. x. Marenke  
merk  
Opper Hoofman.

## Transcription of the original text

Aan Hoog geachte Heer General von Trotha.

Lieve Heer!

Wy hebben Uwe blaas ontvangen. Voor ons te blaas ontvangen hadden hebben wij op Nu das gevech gehad. Daar had ons een man gevangen genomen, en daarby deze man had (van ?) ons gehort, dat Abraham Koffer gekomen had, om met ons vrede te spreken [,] daar na hebben wij gerig om dierrete te luister, door die heeft onze handen half teruggetrek.

Zoo is onze 2 jongenje gestuur naar Kaslab. en die 2 jongen is in hande van Deutsche oorlogsmene zij handen gevallen, en zij hebben hun greuwelijk gemord met zijne Meze, alzoohad ons zeer vres geworden,

na deze tijd had Abraham Koffer gekregen komen(.) Van Nu das en hebben wij gehoord dat nog een man achter is wat nog zal komen, een Romsche Priester van die vredepraat. Zo had ik Jacob (?) Marenka mondelijk de man geantwoord, daarna had ons weeder vrees gewoord.

Toen Heer Hoofdman von Kopy gekom hade (,) had ons doorvreze nit te klo(o)f nit gegaan (.) Toen kann ons niet verstaan, deze vrede waltemagtig Heer Kaiser voor ons gedenken had, want wij kunnen niks verstaan van deze blaas, want ons verstaan niet te inhoud van deze blaas,

alzoohad mag lieve Heer voor ons teuteljik maken, want wij hoor niet dat gij vrede vermeld, gij vraag onze gewaligen zogten ons niet verstaan, alzoohad maak teuteljiker van Vreede.

Verder ik is door genade van God den Heere Frisch en gezond.

Met Duizend Groete

Verblij ik

Uw

Marenke

Opper Hoofman.

## Translation into German

An (den) hochgeachteten General von Trotha

Lieber Herr!

Wir haben Ihre Nachricht empfangen. Ehe wir die Nachricht bekommen haben, hatten wir das Gefecht. Da haben wir einen Mann gefangen. Dieser Mann hat (von ?) uns gehört, dass Abraham Koffer gekommen war, um mit uns den Frieden zu besprechen. Wir haben dieser Rede aufmerksam zugehört. Durch sie wurden unsere Hände halb wieder zurückgezogen.

Wir haben zwei unserer Jungen nach Kaslab (?) geschickt. Diese zwei Jungen sind in die Hände von deutschen Soldaten gefallen. Und sie haben diese grausam ermordet. Das hat uns sehr aufgebracht.

Nach dieser Zeit ist Abraham Koffer gekommen, Von ihm haben wir gehört, dass noch ein Mann kommen sollte, ein Römischer Priester von den Friedensgesprächen. So hatte ich Jacob (?) Marenka dem Mann mündlich geantwortet. Danach sind wir wieder aufgebracht geworden.

Nachdem Herr Hauptmann von Kopy gekommen war, ist die Kluft zwischen uns nicht geschwunden. Nachdem können wir nicht (mehr) verstehen, was sich der allmächtige Herr Kaiser für uns ausgedacht hat, denn wir können nichts aus diesem Schreiben verstehen, denn wir verstehen den Inhalt von diesem Schreiben nicht.

Also möge der liebe Herr (es) für uns deutlich machen, denn wir hören nicht, dass Ihr Frieden ankündigt.

Ihre Frage verstehen wir (trotz) unserer gewaltigen Suche nicht. Also macht den Frieden deutlicher.

Des weiteren: ich bin durch die Gnade Gottes, dem Herrn, frisch und gesund.

Mit tausend Grüßen

verbleibe ich

Ihr

Marenke

Ober-Hauptmann.

## Translation into English

To (the) esteemed General von Trotha.

Dear Sir,

We have received your message. Before we got the message, we had the battle. We captured a man in it. This man heard (from?) us that Abraham Koffer had come to discuss peace with us. We listened attentively to this speech. Through it our hands were halfway withdrawn.

We sent two of our boys to Kaslab. These two boys fell into the hands of German soldiers. And they murdered them cruelly. That made us very upset.

After this time Abraham Koffer came. From him we heard that another man was to come, a Roman priest from the peace talks. So I Jacob (?) Marenka answered the man orally. After that we were upset again.

After Captain von Kopyy had come, the rift between us did not close. After that we cannot understand what the almighty Kaiser has devised for us, because we can understand none of the contents of this letter.

So may dear Sir make (it) clear for us, because we do not hear that you are announcing peace.

We do not understand your question (despite) our massive search. So make the peace clearer.

Furthermore: by the grace of God, the Lord, I am fresh and healthy.

With a thousand greetings

I remain

Your

Marenke

Chief Captain