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NEAR DEATH IN THE STREETS OF KARIBIB: FAMINE, MIGRANT LABOUR AND THE COMING OF OVAMBO TO CENTRAL NAMIBIA*

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ABSTRACT: Namibian politics and society are today dominated by people who trace their descent from the settlements and homesteads of Ovamboland in southern Angola and northern Namibia. Yet, prior to 1915, and the defeat by South Africa of the German colonial army in German South-West Africa, very few Ovambo had settled in areas to the south of the Etosha Pan. In 1915, a Portuguese expeditionary army defeated Kwanyama forces in southern Angola, and unleashed a flood of refugees into northern Namibia. These refugees entered an area that was already overstretched. Since 1912 the rains had failed and, on account of the First World War, trade and migration had come to a standstill. As a result the area was experiencing its most devastating famine ever. Unable to find sanctuary in Ovamboland, thousands of people trekked southwards into central Namibia, an area which had only just come under the control of South Africa. The famine allowed for the easy entrance of South African military administrators and labour recruiters into Ovamboland and heralded the demise of Ovambo independence. By focusing on developments in the central Namibian town of Karibib between 1915 to 1916, the article explores the move of the Ovambo into central and southern Namibia. It traces the impact of war and drought on Ovambo societies, and follows Ovambo famine migrants on their route south into areas administered by the South African military administration. Discussion also concentrates on the reception and treatment of Ovambo famine migrants in the Karibib settlement, and argues that the refugee crisis heralded the establishment of Ovambo in modern central and southern Namibia.

KEY WORDS: Angola, famine, colonial, labour, migration.

DURING the course of the twentieth century, Ovambo migrant workers have not only built and developed Namibia, they have also, in large measure due to their experiences of migrant labour, fought for, attained, determined and dominated Namibia's political independence.[1] Yet, prior to 1915, Ovambo speakers were virtually non-existent in central and southern Namibia. Ovambo migrants only started moving into these areas following the labour shortage engendered by the genocide perpetrated by the German

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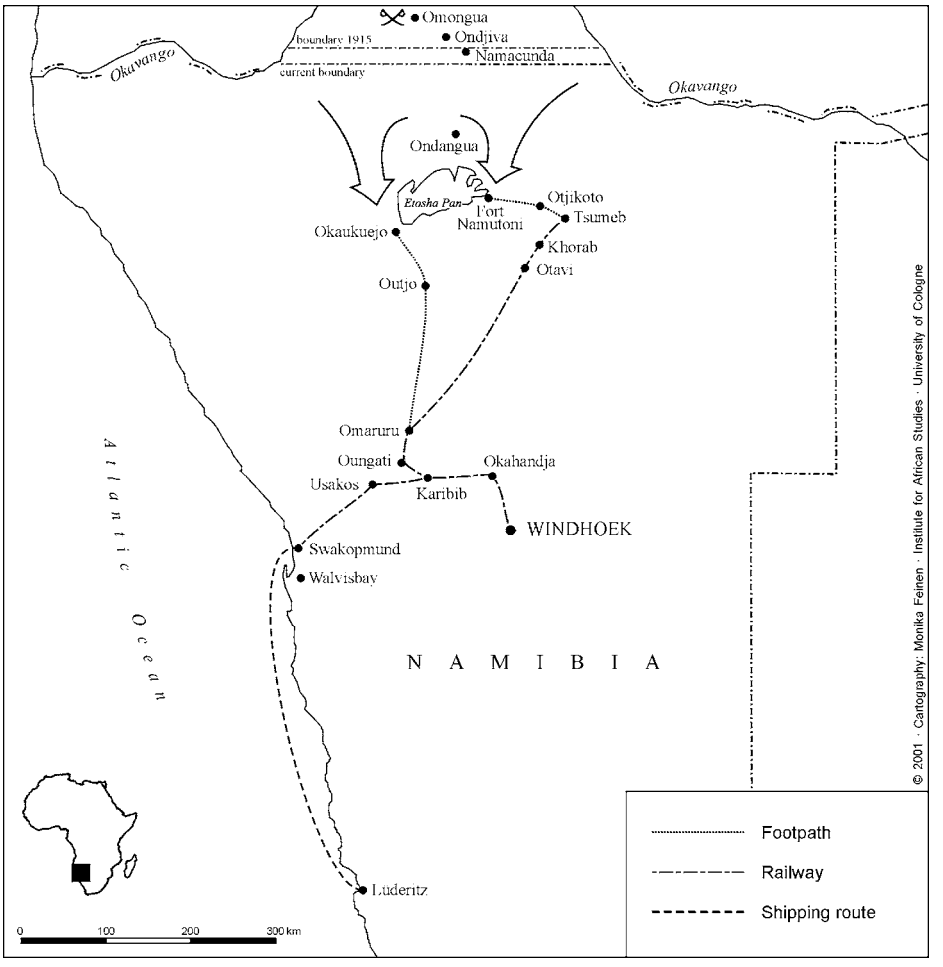
[1] Tony Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915–1966* (Basel, 1999).



Map 1. Movement of Ovambo famine migrants into central Namibia *c.* 1915.

military on the Nama and Herero populations of central and southern Namibia. Even so, given the extreme nature of lengthy migrant labour – absences from home, brutal abuse and abominable living conditions – one wonders why people first started moving south in search of employment. Here, Richard Moorsom has detailed the role of Ovambo chiefs, intent on self-improvement through the remittances of migrants, as the push factor in driving migrants south.[2] Yet, of greater importance was the collapse of sustainable living conditions in Ovamboland as a whole. The onslaught of Portuguese colonial rule coupled with environmental disaster created a famine of such devastating proportions that henceforth Ovambo would have to move elsewhere to make a living. This famine, which was known as the

[2] Richard Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment and class formation: the birth of the contract labour system in Namibia', *Collected Papers*, v (Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York) (York, 1980).

'famine that swept', took place in 1915 and changed the face of Namibian history forever.

In the run up to and following the independence of Namibia, a number of new studies have been written on Namibian history. However, with few exceptions, these histories have essentially been ethnic histories set within given geographical boundaries. For example, my own work, though it mentions the 1915 famine in the context of its impact on Herero history, largely ignored the history of those living within central Namibia whom I considered not to be Herero.[3] In the course of earlier research I came across the famine, and mention of the Karibib camp, but because it was a topic that dealt with Ovambo, I let it be. This, with hindsight, is rather embarrassing, but indicative of the historiography at the time. Similarly, historians dealing with the Ovambo kingdoms have largely ignored the history of Ovambo in central Namibia in the period under discussion. This paper, as its title indicates, concentrates on events in the settlement of Karibib in central Namibia. It was in this town that the majority of Ovambo famine victims came to be concentrated and processed before they were sent on to their future sites of employment. In so doing, the paper describes and details the famine as it affected central Namibia. It also details the coming of the Ovambo to central Namibia; an aspect of Namibian history that has hitherto been overlooked.[4]

OVAMBO SOCIETIES PRIOR TO 1915

The delineation of a colonial border between Namibia and Angola cut through Ovambo-speaking societies.[5] Historians and social commentators have tended to lump Owambo-speakers into a single homogeneous whole. But, as 'these societies were by no means identical', it could be argued that there were more differences between eastern and western Ovambo societies than similarities.[6] Nevertheless, apart from language, these societies shared a number of similarities, of which the most fundamental was that they were all dependent on seasonal rain-fed agriculture, supplemented by pastoralism, and seasonal fishing, hunting and foraging.

Ovambo societies were settled on the vast and sandy floodplain of a number of perennial rivers that drained the southern Angolan highlands and flowed into the Etosha Pan. These rivers flowed southwards through a

[3] Jan-Bart Gewald, *Herero Heroes: A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia, 1890–1923* (Oxford, 1999), 233–6.

[4] To be sure, there have been a number of books, articles and academic theses dealing with all manner of aspects relating to the history of Ovambo people and societies. However, even those which deal specifically with Ovambo migrant labour have failed to detail the impact of the 1915 famine on the coming of Ovambo migrants to central and southern Namibia.

[5] For an overview of the history of the boundary delineation see Randolph Vigne, with '*Onhaululi*' by Petrus Ndongo, 'The moveable frontier: the Namibia–Angola boundary demarcation 1926–1928', in Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Wolfram Hartmann (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule: Mobility & Containment, 1915–46* (Oxford, 1998), 289–304.

[6] Meredith McKittrick, 'Generational struggles & social mobility in western Ovambo communities', in Hayes *et al*. (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule*, 241–62.

myriad of ever-changing shallow depressions known as *iishana* (sing. *oshana*). Settlements and fields were established on the higher ground between *iishana*. In the rainy season, which lasted from November to March, the countryside received an annual average of between 400 and 500 mm of rain. At the same time floodwaters, known as the *efundja*, began to flow with water from the Angolan highlands. After the rains, the *iishana* ceased flowing and formed pools that dried up by July, after which the dry winter began. However, the variability in rainfall was high, with variations of 80 per cent in either direction. In addition, periods of flood and drought could occur many years in succession.[7]

Crops such as millet, sorghum, maize, beans, groundnuts and pumpkins were sown prior to the onset of the first rains. There was a strict gender division in labour, with women and girls being primarily responsible for agricultural production, whilst men and boys were engaged in pastoralism. However, the labour of servants and captives, irrespective of gender, was used in agriculture. During the rainy season, when grazing was plentiful, cattle and small stock were herded in the immediate vicinity of the settlements. And, in the dry season, when there was a shortage of adequate grazing, cattle posts were established at some remove from settlements. Here servants, young men and boys would care for stock.[8]

Ovambo societies were engaged in extensive regional as well as external trade.[9] Writing in the early 1900s, missionary Tönjes remarked that in the absence of money, 'all kinds of movable property are used as barter articles: large and small stock, crops – grain and beans – iron and wooden artefacts, basketwork, pottery, as well as all types of weapons, items of clothing and adornments'.[10] Other notable commodities included salt, fish, tobacco and slaves. In exchange with communities beyond Ovamboland, 'firearms were the primary objective of trade with outsiders, but kings purchased a number of other products as well, including clothing, ox-wagons, horses and liquor'.[11]

In the period under discussion, Ovambo societies were matrilineal.[12] However, as McKittrick and Hayes have indicated, public life in Ovambo societies was dominated by men, a trend that came to be reinforced in the

[7] Martti Eirola, *The Ovambogefahr: The Ovamboland Reservation in the Making* (Rovaniemi, 1992), 29–32; Frieda-Nela Williams, *Precolonial Communities of South-Western Africa: A History of Owambo Kingdoms 1600–1920* (Windhoek, 1991), 36–40.

[8] Hermann Tönjes, *Ovamboland, Country People Mission*, trans. Peter Reiner (Windhoek, 1996), 59–67; Eirola, *Ovambogefahr*, 32–45; Williams, *Precolonial Communities*, 39–46; J. S. Malan, *Peoples of Namibia* (Pretoria, 1995), 24–8.

[9] Harri Siiskonen, *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland, 1850–1906* (Helsinki, 1990); W. G. Clarence-Smith, *Slaves, Peasants and Capitalists in Southern Angola, 1840–1926* (Cambridge, 1979); Eirola, *Ovambogefahr*, 43–5.

[10] Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 84–5.

[11] McKittrick, 'Generational struggles', 247. It has been argued that the increasing involvement of Ovambo societies in mercantilist trade led to further social stratification and the increasing underdevelopment of these societies. Gervase Clarence-Smith and Richard Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment and class formation in Ovamboland, 1844–1917', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), 96–112.

[12] For an overview of pre-colonial Ovambo political structure see Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 105–26; Williams, *Precolonial Communities*, 105–16; Eirola, *Ovambogefahr*, 45–51.

colonial era.[13] The majority of these societies were ultimately subject to a king (*ohamba*) assisted by his councillors (*omalenga*, sing. *elenga*). A king was succeeded by his next oldest brother, or by the oldest nephew (sister's son). All matters concerning the kingdom were discussed by the king and his councillors. Within court, at the royal settlement, people were appointed to political and judicial functions, though their judgements could be overturned by the king and his councillors. The area that owed allegiance to a king was sub-divided into districts headed by headmen. Headmen could, but need not, be *omalenga*. District sizes varied, but missionary Tönjes, writing in the early 1900s, suggested that the 'most common are those comprising about 15–20 homesteads and gardens'.[14] District headmen were responsible for the allocation of lands for agriculture, while the king determined when harvesting and planting should begin.

The sons of prominent and wealthy inhabitants of the kingdom sought the generosity of the king and his councillors through providing all manner of services. Those young men who had distinguished themselves could be chosen by the king, rewarded with a rifle and assigned special tasks. A contemporary observer remarked that very few men advanced beyond this level, but:

> If they succeed in increasingly gaining the trust of their master …, there will come a day at the end of this prolonged trial period on which the one or other is elevated to the rank of *elenga* of the king. He is given a horse by the king, and the Martini-Henry rifle he has carried until then is replaced by the latest breech-loader.[15]

The *omalenga* had to ensure that the king's wishes and commands were carried out. In the 1890s, as Ovambo royalty became increasingly dependent on the products of mercantilist trade, many of these wishes and commands related to cattle and slave raiding, as well as taxation. It was a period in which 'the traditional seizure of cattle for the king's court (*okasava*) slowly developed into a regular form of taxation'.[16] Expeditions specifically kitted out for the purposes of war were led by an *ondjai* (war-leader), selected from amongst the *omalenga*. The work of Hayes and others indicates that by the early 1900s the *omalenga* in the Ovambo kingdom of Kwanyama had acquired such power that they were virtually beyond the effective control of the king. In addition, these men enjoyed little support from their subjects.[17]

As mercantilist trade depleted resources within eastern Ovambo societies, they increasingly resorted to raiding western Ovambo societies. It has been emphasized that the strong political centralism found in eastern Ovambo societies was not characteristic of western Ovamboland. Marginal to the trade routes, western Ovambo societies were comparatively cut off from

[13] Patricia Hayes, '"Cocky" Hahn and the "Black Venus": the making of a native commissioner in South West Africa, 1915–1946', *Gender and History*, 8 (1996), 364–92; Meredith McKittrick, 'Faithful daughter, murdering mother: transgression and social control in Colonial Namibia', *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), 265–83.

[14] Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 116. [15] *Ibid*. 108.

[16] Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment', 102.

[17] Patricia Hayes, 'Order out of chaos: Mandume ya Ndemufayo and oral history', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19 (1993), 89–113; Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 108–10.

trade in firearms which 'left them vulnerable to attacks from the well-armed east, which was carried out with increasing frequency as cattle replaced ivory as the chief means of exchange with outside traders'.[18] In 1897, when rinderpest reached Ovamboland, an estimated 90 per cent of cattle herds were destroyed within a few months.[19] Anxious to recoup their losses and maintain access to imported trade goods, Ovambo chiefs sanctioned ever greater taxation and raiding. As Clarence-Smith and Moorsom note:

> The increase in raiding had led to the formation at court of a permanent group of war-leaders, the *lenga*, each of whom received a horse and a number of rifles from the king and led a body of about a hundred men on raiding expeditions. The *lenga* now become tax collectors, and the traditional seizure of cattle for the king's court, *okasava*, became a harsh and arbitrary tax, which fell mainly on the most vulnerable members of society.[20]

Within Ovambo societies a new social stratum developed, bereft of cattle, continuously harried by raids and without the means to constitute a living, let alone produce a surplus.[21] These were the people who, in the words of Ovambo oral historian Vilho Kaulinge, 'started to go south in search of jobs'.[22]

FAMINE AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL EVENT

Describing the run-up to the 'famine of the dams', that struck Ovamboland in 1929–30, Hayes conceptualized famine as a set of dynamic interconnected processes.[23] The famine that struck Ovamboland in 1915 was similar. It, too, had a long pre-history, in which a series of sociological and political developments in combination with an ecological catastrophe served to create a famine. Prior to the 1915 famine, Ovambo societies were in turmoil. Ever-increasing raiding and taxation in response to the demands of external trade had led to a profound weakening of the capacity of Ovambo societies to deal with drought. Apart from depriving societies of foodstuffs, cattle, labour and goods, which could be used to buffer society against the effects of drought, the excessive taxation and raiding had also weakened societal ties, obligations and support for authority.[24]

Though cattle stocks appear to have recovered fairly substantially after the rinderpest epidemic of 1897, ownership of cattle was no longer as widespread as it had been in the past, and tended to be concentrated amongst an ever-decreasing number of people. Cattle tended to be concentrated with

[18] McKittrick, 'Generational struggles', 241.
[19] Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment', 103.
[20] *Ibid*. 104.
[21] Siiskonen, *Trade*, 229–36, 243.
[22] Patricia Hayes and Dan Haipinge, '*Healing the Land*': *Kaulinge's History of Kwanyama* (Cologne, 1997), 74.
[23] Patricia Hayes, 'The "famine of the dams": gender, labour & politics in colonial Ovamboland 1929–1930', in Hayes *et al*. (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule*, 117–46.
[24] Hayes and Haipinge, *Healing the Land*, 39–61; Meredith McKittrick, 'To dwell secure: generation and Christianity in Owamboland, northern Namibia, 1855–1955' (Unpublished manuscript), 159–79.

people linked to the *omalenga* exempt from taxation and raiding.[25] The concentration of cattle ownership within a select portion of society meant that the deployment of cattle as a buffer against drought was limited. An ever-smaller group of people were in a position to sell off cattle in exchange for grain during periods of shortage. Those still in possession of their cattle were wont to graze them in the immediate vicinity of their homesteads, and not, as had been the case in the past, to send them off to cattle posts established at some distance from homesteads in the vicinity of seasonal grazing.[26] The extensive utilization of grazing in the vicinity of settlements led to a decline in the quality and carrying capacity of pasturage. This resulted in a further decline in the condition and quality of cattle still owned, further reducing their capacity to insulate society from drought.

Apart from cattle, people were also raided to be sold off as slaves. The raiding of the late 1800s and early 1900s led to the ever-increasing concentration of people on ever-smaller and over-utilized tracts of land. The loss of people decreased the labour available to herd and guard cattle, work the land and protect homesteads and grain stores. In effect, raiding established a vicious circle in which an increasingly impoverished section of society was subject to taxation and yet further deprivation. As McKittrick succinctly states:

> An underproducing population was paired with a non-producing one of refugees. Grain reserves shrank when those who ran out of food sought the help of relatives. They shrank when labor was lost to slave traders. And they shrank in the face of plunder by elites.[27]

The famine of 1915 was preceded by a series of droughts and famines from which Ovambo societies were unable fully to recover. In 1907 locusts destroyed much of the harvest in southern Ovamboland. In addition, the 1907–8 rainy season failed to materialize, and by March of 1908 people were dying of hunger. The famine spread ever further, as people began leaving their settlements in search of food in other areas. The famine peaked in early 1909, only to be followed by extensive flooding which damaged the harvest of 1909.[28] Between 1910 and 1912 another drought developed, and by late 1911 people were again dying of hunger. As people desperately sought food, levels of violence increased and communities came to be broken up:

> Within Ovambo communities, wives and husbands separated and returned to their respective kin. People left their farms and sought the charity of others; in some cases entire sections of kingdoms were abandoned. The short-term benefits of population mobility exacted long-term costs in productivity, since so many farms were abandoned or under-utilized.[29]

In late 1914 the rains failed to develop, for the third year in succession. This drought in conjunction with the outbreak of the First World War,

[25] Tönjes, *Ovamboland*, 109–10.

[26] On the importance of cattle posts and seasonal grazing grounds see, Emmanuel Krieke, 'On the Oshimolo trail: seasonal cattle migrations as a response to environmental stress' (Paper presented at the ASA, Toronto, 1994).

[27] McKittrick, 'To dwell secure', 159–60. [28] Eirola, *Ovambogefahr*, 240–1.

[29] McKittrick, 'To dwell secure', 161–2.

which curtailed trade even further and heralded the coming of a Portuguese expeditionary force, served to bring events to a head. Thus, the great famine that developed in 1915 built forth, not only upon the lack of rains, but more specifically on years of social upheaval which had slowly but surely eroded the capacity of societies in Ovamboland to overcome drought.

THE 'FAMINE THAT SWEPT'

In late August 1915, Chief Iipumbu of the Kwambi wrote a letter of appeal to the newly victorious South African forces in Namibia:[30]

> My country is under starvation, my people are dying of hunger, and I beg the Government for help. I, myself, have got nothing. Through the war every road of buying food have been stopped, and I ask for some Flour, rice, coffee and sugar.[31]

At the time that Iipumbu was writing, the forces of the Kwanyama chief Mandume were about to be defeated in battle by Portuguese colonial forces at Omongua in southern Angola.[32] Major Pritchard of the South African forces, who travelled northwards to Namakunde to meet with Mandume, reported on the widespread famine existent in all of Ovamboland, even before the Kwanyama had begun moving southwards following their defeat at the hands of the Portuguese.[33] Chief Martin of the Ndonga, whom Pritchard met whilst en route to Mandume, expressed the fear that:

> the Portuguese would drive the Ovakuanyama far south into Ovamboland and that the whole country would be thrown into a state of turmoil and confusion, the consequences of which would be disastrous as the people of Ondonga had not sufficient food for themselves, and certainly could not give any help in this respect to the Ovakuanyama who might take refuge in their country.[34]

In a battle that lasted all day, Mandume's forces were pounded by artillery as they desperately sought to break through the line of Portuguese entrenchments.[35] Portuguese forces, some 10,000 strong and originally despatched to engage German forces in the struggle for Namibia, decimated Mandume's army. Following his defeat, Mandume sought and received safe

[30] Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, troops from the Union of South Africa invaded German South-West Africa. After a short campaign, German forces surrendered in July 1915. Henceforth, until independence in 1990, Namibia came to be administered by South Africa. For the military campaign in the First World War see Gerald L'Ange, *Urgent Imperial Service: South African Forces in German South West Africa, 1914–1915* (Johannesburg, 1991).

[31] National Archives Namibia (NAN), archives of the secretary for the Protectorate (ADM) 17, Nukuambi, 26 Aug. 1915, Iipumbu, king of Nukuambi, to the union government of Damaraland. This letter was written for Iipumbu by the Norwegian trader and hunter Brodtkorb.

[32] NAN, South-West Africa administration: secretariat, A-series (SWAA) 1496, 'Report on the tour of Ovamboland by Major Pritchard, 1915'.

[33] NAN, SWAA 1496, 10. [34] NAN, SWAA 1496, 11.

[35] NAN, SWAA 1496, 21. Portuguese Artillery officers stated that in the course of this action, which lasted from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. they fired no less than 2,000 rounds of French '75' shell. The Portuguese admitted 100 casualties, and estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 'Natives' had been killed.

passage from Major Pritchard in Namakunde for his followers to Namibia. After this, Mandume abandoned his capital at Ondjiva in southern Angola and had the royal grain stores burnt:

> As Mandume left the burning *embala* [residence] at Ondjiva and headed south before the Portuguese advance, the 'whole land was thrown into fearful agitation … with a shocking famine and terrible robbing and stealing'. People were dying 'in droves'. Starving children, clamouring for food, besieged the mission in Omupanda.[36]

Masses of people, fleeing the horrors of war, moved south into areas populated by communities already over-stretched on account of successive years of drought. Rules of hospitality and compassion broke down, 'mothers heard their children cry for food but thought only of their own hunger'.[37] Famine victims died on the thorn bush barriers erected around homesteads with food, and strangers turned away carried on to the south or became raiders.[38] People died of famine-related diseases and hunger, and corpses littered the countryside and the routes south.[39] The superintendent of the Finnish Mission Society in Ovamboland, Rev. Rautanen, who had been in the territory since 1870, described the famine as the worst that he had experienced in his 45 years of service in Ovamboland:

> The present famine is simply indescribable as far back as August … one saw living skeletons from other tribes wandering down to Ondonga. A great number of such men, women and children died in the forests, being unable to reach Ondonga. Those who still had some strength left robbed the weaker of what little they had and left them lying to die of hunger and thirst. Mothers with their sucking babes were found lying dead together; in other cases the mothers threw their living babies into the bush, being unable to carry them further. In other cases children a little older after their parents had died on the road wandered on alone to Ondonga. Of these children of misfortune I adopted more than 30 but in spite of attention several have died. Thousands of such unfortunates have come to Ondonga and distributed themselves more over the whole tribe. The first refuges were naturally the mission stations and hundreds of people beleaguered our houses begging for food … Thousands of people have died so that it has become a problem how to get them buried, the more so as the people are too weak to dig graves in the hard ground.[40]

Fellow Finnish missionary, Dr. Rainio, described how due to 'lack of proper strengthening food' beri beri and diarrhoea took their toll, and corpses littered the grounds of the hospital compound.[41] The lack of seed

[36] Patricia Hayes, 'A history of the Ovambo of Namibia, *c.* 1880–1935' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1992), 199, citing Archiv Vereinte Evangelische Mission (AVEM) c/k 22 No. 7, Wulfhorst, Erlebnisse, *c.* 1910–33.

[37] Hayes, 'Ovambo history', 202. Citing interview with Sandell Michael, Omaalala, 2 Nov. 1989.

[38] Hayes, 'Ovambo history', 207.

[39] *Ibid.* 201–7; McKittrick, 'To dwell secure', 159–82.

[40] NAN, resident commissioner Ovamboland (RCO) 9, 'Report furnished by the Rev. Mr. Rautanen on famine matters, supt. of the Finnish Mission Society Ovamboland, Olukonda 26 Dec. 1915'.

[41] NAN, RCO 9, 'Report on health conditions furnished by Miss S. Rainio, Dr. Med, Finnish Mission hospital Onipa, Ondonga 31 Dec. 1915'.

and labour also meant that recovery would take time. As Rautanen commented when he concluded his report:

> Many gardens will stand idle on account of their owners having died, or emigrated to Hereroland to escape death by famine here. Many hundreds – perhaps one may say thousands – have failed to reach Hereroland and have died on the road.[42]

The incoming South African forces were aware of the immensity of the famine. As early as September 1915, General Smuts had ordered the establishment of relief programmes and distribution of mealie-meal (maize-meal) and rice.[43] Motor Transport Officers in central Namibia were ordered to develop contingency plans for the provision of foodstuffs by motor-lorry to Ovamboland.[44] At the same time, South African forces stationed at Tsumeb reported depleting their own food stocks to support the incoming famine victims. In addition, it was noted that in 'patrols on the roads from Ovamboland, dead Natives [are] in rare cases being found on the road, and on two occasions Natives have died on arrival at Tsumeb'.[45] Two months later, as Ovamboland struggled to absorb thousands of war refugees from southern Angola, conditions became worse. Colonel Pritchard reported from Namakunde: 'Famine and starvation now much worse than previously reported. Considerable numbers dead bodies seen along road and Natives dying here daily also at other centres. Instances occurring in which natives resorting to consumption Human flesh'.[46]

LACK OF LABOUR

Following the surrender of German forces at Khorab in July 1915, the new South African military administration immediately sought to get the settler economy back into operation, in particular the highly profitable, but labour-intensive, diamond mines of southern Namibia.[47] Diamonds had been discovered in southern Namibia in 1908, and by 1913 they had come to form 66 per cent of GDP.[48] From at least 1891 onwards, labour migrants had started trekking southwards from beyond the Etosha Pan, initially at the behest of Ovambo kings and chiefs seeking to enrich themselves, and then increasingly out of economic necessity. Before the discovery of diamonds in southern Namibia in 1908, the recorded numbers of migrants to the south never exceeded 2,000, but between 1910 and 1914 the average number was

[42] NAN, RCO 9, 'Rautanen report'.

[43] NAN, ADM 17, telegram 29 Sept. 1915 General Smuts to chief sec. Wdh.

[44] NAN, ADM 17, chief secretary for the Protectorate to military governor Windhuk, 15 Oct. 1915.

[45] NAN, ADM 17, Capt. B. C. Judd, Tsumeb 15 Sept. 1915 to the adjudant, 1st Regiment, South African Mounted Rifles (SAMR), Grootfontein.

[46] NAN, ADM 18, telegram 27 Nov. 1915 Namutoni, Colonel Pritchard at Namakunde to administrator Windhoek.

[47] Initially the diamond mines around Lüderitz were dependent on scores of men literally combing the soil for surface diamonds.

[48] Klaus Dierks, *Chronology of Namibian History: From Pre-colonial Times to Independent Namibia* (Windhoek, 1999), 79.

up to 10,000 per year.[49] Extensive railroad building, the diamond industry after 1908 and the development of the Tsumeb copper mine in 1910 ensured that there was a strong demand for labour. However, primarily on account of the genocide committed by German Imperial forces in central and southern Namibia, there was an acute shortage of labour. In the first years after the Herero and Nama war, German authorities sought to alleviate the labour shortage through all manner of programs that included the registration of all Africans over the age of eight, the compulsory wearing of metal tags with labour allocation numbers, pass book schemes and forced labour schemes.[50] Even before the diamond boom, the German authorities had found it necessary to import labour from the eastern Cape of South Africa.[51] Once the diamond boom started, labour shortages became so acute that active German labour recruitment began in earnest in Ovamboland.[52] German settlers continued to complain of the shortage of labour and, at one stage, actually petitioned the legislative council to prevent the mines from employing any labour other than Ovambo labour.[53] In desperation the colonial state even sought to recruit labour in Italy.[54] Between 1906 and 1908, the German colonial government passed ordinances and came to a series of agreements with the Ovambo rulers designed to facilitate the recruitment

[49] For an overview of the development of Ovambo migrant labour in the past 150 years see Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment', 96–112; Patricia Hayes, 'The failure to realise ''human capital'': Ovambo migrant labour and the early South-West African state, 1915–1930', in *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Institute of Commonwealth Studies University of London, Collected Seminar Papers No. 45, Vol. 19) (London, 1993); Ndeutala Hishongwa, *The Contract Labour System and its Effects on Family and Social Life in Namibia : A Historical Perspective* (Windhoek, 1992); Allan D. Cooper, 'The institutionalization of contract labour in Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25 (1999), 121–38; Richard Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment, contract labour and worker consciousness in Namibia, 1915–1972', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4 (1977); Robert Gordon, 'Variations in migration rates: the Ovambo case', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 3 (1978), 261–94.

[50] Helmut Bley, *South-West Africa under German Rule, 1894–1914* (London, 1971); Horst Drechsler, *Let Us Die Fighting* (London, 1980); Gewald, *Herero Heroes*; Philipp Prein, 'Guns and top hats: African resistance in German South West Africa, 1907–1915', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (1994).

[51] William Beinart, '''Jamani'': Cape workers in German South-West Africa, 1904–1912', in Beinart and Colin Bundy (eds.), *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (London, 1987).

[52] NAN, Bezirksamt Swakopmund (BSW) 48. SAWxvii h Band ii Eingeborenen Ausfuhr deals with the export of Ovambo labour to the diamond fields. Ovambo labourers were placed on ships of the Woermann shipping company in Swakopmund and then transported to Lüderitz from where they were allocated to the various diamond companies in the area.

[53] NAN, BSW 74, Kaiserlicher Gouverneur, Windhuk, 13 juni 1911, an das Kaiserliche Bezirksamt Swakopmund.

[54] William Beinart, 'Cape workers in German South-West Africa, 1904–1912: patterns of migrancy and the closing of options on the southern African labour market', in *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Institute of Commonwealth Studies University of London, Collected Seminar Papers No. 27, Vol. 11) (London, 1981), 48–65.

of labour from Ovamboland. Labour recruiters were posted to stations between Ovamboland and the Police Zone through which all migrant labourers were required to pass.[55] On recruitment in Ovamboland, Robert Gordon, has noted:

> The influence of the [Ovambo] kings in ensuring the labour supply during the German era cannot be underestimated and is obvious. The remarkable increase in Ovambo migrant workers between 1910–1914 was a result of labour treaties made by the Germans with the kings.[56]

In other words, but for the active intervention of the chiefs, very few migrants were willing to travel to the south. Ovambo chiefs were anxious to gain maximum profit from the migrant labour system:

> Workers left in structured groups, under a leader, and remained together during the period of employment, thus maintaining cohesion and discipline on line reminiscent of raiding parties. 'Gifts' had to be made to the kings on return, a system reminiscent in form and intention to earlier taxation of long-distance traders and of raiding parties.[57]

Even so, royal control of the migrants was by no means absolute. German records indicate that there were consistently more Ovambo moving south than there were returning to Ovamboland. This difference may in part be attributable to the death of migrants in the south, but was also caused by the failure of migrants to return to Ovamboland and to the establishment of permanent Ovambo settlements in central and southern Namibia.[58]

A significant aspect of the First World War here was that as the war moved into Namibia, and German settlers were mobilized or withdrew to the towns and cities of the territory, Herero and Nama workers abandoned their places of employment. In the case of the Herero, a large proportion of those who had been employed on German settler farms throughout central Namibia absconded with the stock of their former employees. Although German settlers soon returned to their farms following their defeat, their Herero farm workers did not return. Instead, they sought to re-establish themselves independently of German settler supervision and farm employment. The establishment of Herero grazing reserves, and later permanent reserves, by the new South African administration ensured that to a large extent the Herero were able to continue living beyond the reach of settler farmers.[59] In other words, following the South African takeover, German settler farmers throughout southern and central Namibia became desperately short of labour.

Little more than a month after the end of hostilities, Colonel Pritchard travelled north into Ovamboland to meet with local leaders and chiefs to discuss and arrange for the supply of labour to the south. Pritchard's credentials were impeccable. He was far more than a mere military man, and was well equipped for the job on hand. Before the war he had been a labour recruiter in the eastern Cape who had risen to the position of chief inspector

[55] Gordon, 'Migration rates', 263. [56] *Ibid*. 273.
[57] Clarence-Smith and Moorsom, 'Underdevelopment', 107. [58] *Ibid*.
[59] Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 231–85; Wolfgang Werner, '*No One Will Become Rich*': *Economy and Society in the Herero Reserves in Namibia, 1915–1946* (Basel, 1998), 55–83.

of the Native Affairs Department (NAD) in the Transvaal.[60] In his report of his mission to Ovamboland, Pritchard noted:

> In order to safeguard the interests of the various classes of employers in the distribution of Native labour we must look to Ovamboland to supply a sufficient quota to enable us to do so. I think we are justified in doing so as, apart from the willingness of the Chiefs and Missionaries to do their share in encouraging the Natives to come out to work, economic pressure, at the present time particularly, will assuredly result in large numbers leaving the country in search of employment.[61]

THE ROAD SOUTH

In the absence of a railhead in Ovamboland, migrant Ovambo workers tramped down from the north, skirting the Etosha Pan and entering the Police Zone at Fort Namutoni in the east or Okaukuejo in the west.[62] From Fort Namutoni it was a further three to four day walk via Otjikoto to the railhead in the mining town of Tsumeb. Prior to 1914, a sizeable community of Ovambo had developed in Tsumeb, where many were employed in the copper mine. Those not employed in Tsumeb were generally contracted by German recruiting companies for employment in the diamond mines, whereafter they were put on trains to Swakopmund for transport by sea to the diamond fields of the south. As the famine extended its reach in Ovamboland, famine victims and refugees followed the routes to the south that had been pioneered by the migrants.

In early November 1915, officials in Tsumeb reported that 'the road between Numutoni and Otjicotto is, so to speak, lined with dead bodies'.[63] It was suggested that providing Ovambo refugees with food at Namutoni could alleviate the situation. The NAD agreed to the provision of rations, but noted, 'The grant of rations in these circumstances is liable to grave abuse by Natives who are not bona fide seekers of work'.[64] Thus, in the eyes of officials in Windhoek, only those actively seeking work, namely young men, were entitled to food.[65]

[60] After the war he became director of the Government Native Labour Bureau in South Africa. Sean Moroney, 'Mine married quarters: the differential stabilisation of the Witwatersrand workforce, 1900–1920', in Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870–1930* (London, 1982), 261–2, 267–8; Philip Bonner, 'The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917–1920: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand', in Marks and Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialisation and Social Change*, 303.

[61] NAN, SWAA 1496, 34.

[62] Plans were mooted for the establishment of a railway that would traverse Ovamboland from Tsumeb to link up with the port of Mossamedes in southern Angola: Brenda Bravenboer and Walter Rusch, *The First 100 Years of State Railways in Namibia* (Windhoek, 1997), 135.

[63] NAN, ADM 18, T. G. Bell, Native Affairs Department (NAD), Tsumeb, 13 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner, Windhuk.

[64] NAN, ADM 18, NAD, Windhuk, 24 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate, Windhuk.

[65] This was emphasized once again in NAN, ADM 18, Admin Office, Windhuk, 27 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner.

Even with the distribution of foodstuffs (crushed mealies,[66] 'which is all the foodstuff at present in the vicinity of Tsumeb') at Namutoni, the situation in Tsumeb continued to deteriorate.[67] Ovambo famine victims, desperate for food and shelter, roamed the settlement. Several developed dysentery and some actually died in the streets. A visiting magistrate reported that, 'there is no shelter for them in any shape or form and ... at night they sleep on the hill sides'.[68] T. G. Bell, an NAD official stationed in Tsumeb, reported that most of the Ovambo arriving in the settlement were already suffering from 'stomach complaint'.[69] A medical doctor employed at the mine in Tsumeb noted that 'to give these Natives mealie-meal is useless, as their stomachs are in such a weak condition that dysentery is started'.[70] Bell graphically described the desperate nature of the refugees, 'I have seen Ovambo take the raw meal and mix it with cold water and eat it. They are so hungry that they have not got time to cook the food'.[71] It was in response to the extreme nature of conditions in northern Namibia, as described by the colonial officials, that a change in policy was proposed. Henceforth, in the interests of a healthy labour supply, it was decided to set up feeding and holding camps along the route from the north.[72]

Conditions in Omaruru, further down the line, were little better than in Tsumeb or Outjo. Ovambo refugees often detrained or halted in Omaruru in an effort to recuperate before carrying on their journeys to the south. Though there was comparatively more food available, for many the intended short rest became a permanent one. Here the authorities distributed crushed mealies. Though a mill was available to grind the maize to meal, the Ovambo were generally so hungry that, as with their compatriots in Tsumeb, they ate the maize raw.[73]

KARIBIB

In May 1900 the *Staatsbahn* (German Government railroad), which was being built from the coast at Swakopmund, reached Karibib, a farm that the German missionary trader family Halbich had purchased in 1895.[74] A station and railway workshop were built, and before long a bustling

[66] Mealies is a southern African term for maize.

[67] NAN, ADM 18, Admin Office, Windhuk, 27 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner.

[68] NAN, ADM 18, secretary for the Protectorate, Administrator's Office, 9 Dec. 1915, to assistant director of medical services, Windhuk.

[69] NAN, ADM 18, T. G. Bell, NAD, Tsumeb, 13 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner, Windhuk.

[70] NAN, ADM 18, T. G. Bell, NAD, Tsumeb, 13 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner, Windhuk.

[71] NAN, ADM 18, T. G. Bell, NAD, Tsumeb, 13 Nov. 1915, to native commissioner, Windhuk.

[72] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the Administrator (ADMS), South-West Africa (SWA) Protectorate, Windhuk, 17 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

[73] NAN, ADM 18, military magistrate Omaruru, 19 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate, and ADM 18, Omaruru, 1 Dec. 1915. As Capt. D. Drew of the South African Medical Corps noted, 'such food I consider entirely unsuitable for people in the starving condition in which these natives were, and I attribute the intestinal complaints ... largely to eating crushed mealies in an uncooked state'.

[74] Bravenboer and Rusch, *State Railways in Namibia*, 35–9, 48.

settlement linking Swakopmund to Windhoek in the interior and Omaruru in the north developed.[75] Karibib was ideally situated, halfway between Swakopmund and Windhoek, and well placed on the trade and travel routes that led northwards to Omaruru and beyond. In 1915, when forces of the South African Union Defence Force advanced inland from the coast, they followed and used the *Staatsbahn*. In May 1915 South African forces occupied Karibib, and the town, with its comparatively well-developed infrastructure, became the staging post for operations in the advance northwards.

Following the hostilities, Karibib continued in its role as a supply depot in central Namibia, although it was now used by the new military administration to distribute Ovambo migrants as labourers in the settler economy. From Karibib Ovambo migrants were either sent west to Swakopmund, the sea and the diamond mines to the south, or east towards Windhoek, the interior and the farms of central and southern Namibia. Equally, as soon as peace returned to the territory, Karibib became the settlement into which Ovambo famine victims staggered following their long tramp southwards. In September 1915 a growing camp for indigent Ovambo migrants was established in the settlement.[76] In November 1915, at least 300 of over 2,000 migrants were deemed to be in need of hospitalization on account of starvation and famine-related diseases.[77]

Initially, the Ovambo migrants in need of hospitalization were housed in requisitioned warehouses and sheds scattered about the town. As the number increased, the need for housing became ever more acute, and led to orders being issued:

> Every assistance is to be given by you to give Medical department all possible accommodation. It is understood that you have one building, occupied with a large amount of stores, which the Medical personnel are asking for.[78]

Nevertheless, initially, no form of shelter was provided for any refugees who were not in need of hospitalization.

The new military administration sought every means to try to reduce the congestion in Karibib camp. The numbers of refugees reaching Karibib daily were such that there was, quite simply, a temporary glut of labour. In November 1915, the acting native commissioner in Karibib complained that though he had been able to have more than 700 refugees placed in employment elsewhere, there were still slightly over 2,000 Ovambo in Karibib camp.[79]

[75] The development of Karibib lead to the economic decline of Otjibingwe, the home town of Chief Zacharias Zeraua, which had previously flourished as a trading centre and wagon train terminus.

[76] NAN, ADM 18, telegram acting native commissioner to Colonel Pritchard, 10 Nov. 1915; ADM 77, NAD in Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[77] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the Administrator, Windhuk, 17 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[78] NAN, ADM 77, Captain, 6th (SAMR) Mtd Bde, Windhuk, 20 Nov. 1915, to officer commanding SAMR, Karibib.

[79] NAN, ADM 18, telegram acting native commissioner to Colonel Pritchard, 10 Nov. 1915.

In an effort to reduce the oversupply of Ovambo labour, all those employed in government services from beyond the territory, in particular those from the eastern Cape in South Africa, were to be replaced by cheaper Ovambo indigents. At the highest levels of the administration, attempts were made to have Ovambo employed. The secretary for the Protectorate put it quite plainly when he addressed the director of Public Works in Windhuk:

> I am directed to inform you that at present there are about two thousand natives at Karibib who can start work at once and who are at present simply sitting still being fed. Mr. Gorges will be glad if you can see your way to employ as many as possible of these natives at a low rate of wages as a relief measure and to make arrangements to get them on to work without delay so that the accommodation at Karibib may be available for the large numbers of Ovambos who are steadily coming down from the northern territories in an emaciated condition.[80]

In the short term these measures did not have much success. Even as the secretary was writing his letter in December 1915, numbers in the Ovambo camp had increased to over 4,000 people.[81]

Conditions within the camp were far from satisfactory. Without any form of shelter, weakened from their ordeal and often without adequate clothing, inhabitants were susceptible to all manner of disease. An inspecting medical officer in December 1915 reported finding 'extensive traces of diarrhoea and even dysentery stools' in addition to an inadequate supply of disinfectants, 'no supervision [and] no proper trenching'.[82] Even though drums of disinfectant were dispatched, the scale of the problem was such that conditions continued to degenerate. By January 1916 there were over 645 Ovambos hospitalized in sheds scattered around Karibib, and more housing was urgently required.[83] Inter-departmental rivalry prevented stables and workshops from being handed over.[84] Only after the direct intervention of the secretary for the Protectorate could the Public Works Department in Karibib be convinced to vacate part of their workshops, and even then it was with the following tart comment: 'This is the third time this dept has moved quarters so hope new arrangement will be permanent as this constant moving about interferes greatly with satisfactory working of dept'.[85] Conditions in the various hospital sheds and buildings were dreadful.

[80] NAN, ADM 18, secretary for the Protectorate, Collie, 24 Dec. 1915, to director of Public Works Windhuk.

[81] NAN, ADM 77, telegram medical officer in Karibib, 24 Dec. 1915, to administration in Windhuk.

[82] NAN, ADM 77, telegram medical officer in Karibib, 24 Dec. 1915, to administration in Windhuk.

[83] NAN, ADM 77, administration, SWA Protectorate Windhuk, 4 Jan. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk.

[84] NAN, ADM 77, administration, SWA Protectorate Windhuk, 4 Jan. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk; telegram director of Works Windhuk, 4 Jan. 1916, to director of Works Karabib; telegram 4 Jan. 1916, Solomon in Karabib to director of Works in Windhoek; telegram 4 Jan. 1916, director of Works Windhuk to director of Works Karabib; and telegram 7 Jan. 1916, director of Works Karabib to director of Works Windhuk.

[85] NAN, ADM 77, telegram 8 Jan. 1916, director of Works Karibib to director of Works Windhuk.

Captain Harland Bell, the acting native commissioner, visited Karibib in November 1915, and reported:

I visited the sick and was horrified to find some 250 to 300 patients suffering from various diseases – no doubt due to starvation and the long journey to the south. They were accommodated in a wood and iron building with an earthen floor (approximately 40 by 20 feet) and barely large enough to accommodate 75 patients. There appeared to be little or no system in dealing with the sick Natives. They were sitting and lying about the floor, but a few of the worst cases were on beds irregularly placed in a corner of the building. The stench as I entered was appalling. This arose from a number of large uncovered buckets arranged down the centre of the room. I would explain that the greater percentage of illnesses in the depot are diarrhoeal.[86]

Until January 1916, official policy towards the Ovambo famine victims in Karibib was governed by an *ad hoc* management style. However, during December 1915, as the magnitude of the issue became apparent, a co-ordinated response started being developed. There were calls for the appointment of sanitary inspectors, compound managers and medical officers, and ideas as to what needed to be done started to crystallize into a definite plan. A telegram between Public Works employees in Karibib and their superiors in Windhoek, illustrates this:

There are close on 4000 ovambos here. Will require an enclosure at least 150 yards square. Have little barbed wire here but will see what I can get elsewhere. One thing that is badly required is a compound manager to supervise Ovambos as at present they are under no direct supervision. If they had roll calls meals at certain times & instructions given them, I think that complaint would be reduced to a minimum.[87]

The sheer number of refugees, coupled to local inhabitants' resentment of the presence of hundreds of starving people in their midst, led to a decision to develop a camp beyond the outskirts of the town.

KARIBIB CAMP

In early February 1916 a decision was taken to establish a camp for Ovambo famine victims and migrants in the vicinity of Karibib.[88] The camp came to be constructed at the fountain on the farm Halbichs Brün (Halbich's fountain). Maps of the time indicate that the fountain, and thus the camp, was situated approximately seven kilometres from the railway station and the town centre.[89]

The Public Works Department in Karibib was ordered to establish an enclosed camp, and erect a number of storage buildings. The Department

[86] NAN, ADM 77, Harland S. Bell, acting native commissioner, 17 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

[87] NAN, ADM 77, telegram 17 Jan. 1916 director of Works Karibib to director of Works Windhuk.

[88] NAN, ADM 77, secretary for the Protectorate to assistant director of medical services Windhoek 15 Feb. 1916.

[89] NAN, MAP 789, Sheet 15, fo. 3, Pretoria 1914, and Sheet 2114 Omaruru 1: 250 000, Surveyor General second edition 1978.

of Railways was ordered to provide the camp with 'whatever old material … suitable for fencing', whilst wood and iron for the construction of buildings were to be taken 'from the same source or from other buildings belonging to the Government'.[90] An attempt was made to enclose the camp with scrounged barbed wire.[91] When sufficient wire could not be found, it was decided that, 'owing to the quantity of thorn bush, a Zareba be run about the camp'.[92] Outside the camp enclosure proper a number of buildings were erected. Measures were taken to ensure a constant supply of fresh water, while sanitation, one of the major problems in Karibib, was provided for by digging a series of trenches beyond the confines of the enclosure.[93]

Though the camp was established at some distance from Karibib itself, it lay no more than two kilometres from the railway line that led to Windhoek. The Railways were ordered to construct a siding, and to provide a 'sufficient number of lengths of light rail to permit of a line being laid down from the camp to the siding'.[94] The indigent Ovambo migrants already in Karibib constructed a trolley line linking the camp to the siding.[95]

Within a month a camp with capacity for 3,000 migrants had been established.[96] Inmates lived within the thorn bush enclosure without any form of shelter. However, as winter approached, the officer in charge informed his superiors that he intended 'to build a stone kraal for winter quarters for Avambos'.[97]

Far from providing sustenance, the first under-cooked meals literally scoured intestines and drained migrants of nourishment.[98] Anxious to cut costs, and to ensure the rationalization of care, a substantial kitchen came to be erected at Halbichs Brün.[99] Commenting on this, an NAD official from Windhoek reported:

A cook-house has been made and rations are now issued to the Compound Manager in bulk, and cooked under his control, and in turn issued to the Natives for

[90] NAN, ADM 77, secretary for the Protectorate to director of Works Windhuk, 15 Feb. 1916.

[91] Even prior to the building of the camp outside of Karibib there was a shortage of barbed wire: NAN, ADM 77, telegram 15 Jan. 1916, director of Works Windhoek to director of Works Karibib.

[92] NAN, ADM 77, Public Works Department Karibib, 21 Feb. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk. In this aspect the camp established by the South Africans mirrored conditions established by the Imperial German army during the Herero war. These enclosures were also surrounded by chopped thornbushes that had been stacked together to form an impenetrable barrier.

[93] NAN, ADM 77, Public Works Department Karibib, 21 Feb. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk.

[94] NAN, ADM 77, secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk, 15 Feb. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk.

[95] NAN, ADM 77, Office of the Military Magistrate Karibib, 18 Mar. 1916, to Major Herbst.

[96] NAN, ADM 77, NAD, Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[97] NAN, ADM 77, Hart, Public Works Department Karibib, 6 Apr. 1916, to director of Works Windhuk.

[98] NAN, ADM 18, L. G. Haydon, lieutenant colonel, ADMS, SWA Protectorate, Windhuk, 20 Nov. 1915 to secretary for the Protectorate.

[99] NAN, ADM 77, Andrew M. Neethling OC SAMC, medical officer Karibib, to ADMS Windhuk (undated).

consumption. The Ovambo is rather primitive in his mode of preparing food. The new arrangement will ensure him receiving it properly cooked, and ready for consumption; it will also set at liberty larger numbers for fatigue duties.[100]

CLOTHING

The Ovambo migrants who staggered into the Police Zone in 1915 were naked in the eyes of the colonial officials. Dressed in no more than loin clothes and beaded leather aprons, the records make numerous remarks regarding what was considered to be their undressed state. Subsequently, all Ovambo, upon being contracted to the mines, were issued with a blanket, an absolute essential if they were to survive the harsh climate of the coast. However, in 1915 the shocked hypocrisy of Karibib's worthy citizens led to the following comments from the native commissioner:

> Some weeks ago it was represented to me that Ovambo women should be clothed before leaving the compound at Karibib: the necessity for this was also evident from the state of a number of those sent to Windhuk for distribution. I therefore arranged for a quantity of sheeting to be supplied to Karibib by the local Ordinance Officer. The Officer in charge at Karibib now reports that he has made arrangements for the sheeting to be converted into suitable one-piece garments by Native women in the local compound at the rate of 4d. per garment. I am satisfied that this expenditure is reasonable and necessary and should be glad to receive your approval of the steps taken by the Officer in charge of Native Affairs at Karibib.[101]

In later years the establishment of the camp at Halbichs Brün was justified on the grounds that it kept Ovambo migrants, in their various stages of dress, out of the town.[102]

Ovambo migrants who were placed in the camp did not immediately receive any form of clothing. However, clothing was given to migrants 'a few hours before they depart on engagements'.[103] Thus, the issue of clothing was made provisional on the acceptance of contract labour.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Amongst the famine victims who made it to Karibib were a number of women and children. Not many, but, as we have seen with the issue of clothing, enough to ensure the ire of Karibib's townsfolk. The available literature indicates that due to social and gender inequalities women, children and the elderly bear the brunt of famines and wars.[104] As a result, men are more

[100] NAN, ADM 77, NAD, Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[101] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the Native Commissioner, Windhoek, Harland Bell, 25 Jan. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[102] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the Military Magistrate Karibib, 7 Sept. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

[103] NAN, ADM 18, NAD, Karibib, 6 Apr. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

[104] There is a substantial amount of specialized literature available that deals specifically with the impact of famines on gender. See, for example, Michael Bratton, 'Drought, food and the social organisation of small farmers in Zimbabwe', in M. Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa: Denying Famine a Future* (Cambridge, 1987);

Table 1. *Indigent Ovambo in Karibib between September 1915 and March 1916*

	Men	Women	Children
Total arrivals	6,354	328	143
Total distributions	4,178	233	76
On hand in camp	1,484	60	47

Source: NAN, ADM 77, NAD, Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate, Annexure A, 'Ovambo Labour Depot'.

Table 2. *Black population of Karibib March 1916*

	Men	Women	Children
Approximate total	600	757	495

Source: NAN, ADM 77, NAD, Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.

likely to survive famines. The situation in Ovamboland was no different. A glance at Table 1 above will indicate that the number of Ovambo men exceeded the number of women and children who arrived in Karibib between September 1915 and March 1916.

In this aspect, the Ovambo migrants who moved into central Namibia differed substantially from the Herero communities already living there. Due to the genocide perpetrated by German forces, Herero society was almost entirely bereft of men. As a result, the permanent black urban populations of central Namibia between 1908 and 1940 tended to have a majority of women.[105]

A glance at the black population of Karibib for the period under discussion clearly indicates this imbalance (Table 2). Its extent becomes even more apparent when one considers that the undifferentiated male population figure of 600 would also have included substantial numbers of West Africans, South Africans and others drawn to work on the railways and in other government departments. Unfortunately, we know extremely little about the women and children who staggered to the south. It would appear that most of the women and girls were assigned to employers as domestic workers. Boys were often assigned to farmers as shepherds.[106] Hayes has argued that 'Women made continued attempts after the 1915 famine to move from the region and settle further south, intent on pursuing their own

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Stephen Devereux and Trine Naeraa, 'Drought and survival in rural Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22 (1996), 421–40.

[105] For a discussion on the impact of this imbalance see J. B. Gewald, '*We Thought We Would Be Free': Socio-Cultural Aspects of Herero History in Namibia 1915–1940* (Cologne, 2000).

[106] For an overview of their dreadful life, see Jeremy Silvester, 'Black pastoralists, white farmers: the dynamics of land dispossession and labour recruitment in southern Namibia' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1994).

independent economic activities'.[107] Unfortunately, she does not provide further information, although these women undoubtedly provided a substantial source of information regarding conditions in the south for those intending to migrate. Settlers, for their part, were not particularly impressed with the working skills of Ovambo women. In referring to them in southern Namibia in late 1916, the following was noted: 'There are about a dozen females in the location who have been unable to obtain employment locally, but they are hopeless as domestic servants, and employers in this district will not have them at any price'.[108] True, in later years Ovambo women were prevented from travelling to central and southern Namibia. However, many of them did manage to enter into and remain in the Police Zone, but exactly how Ovambo women came to be integrated there is in need of further research.[109]

ATTEMPTS TO DIRECT LABOUR

Structural changes to labour recruitment in Namibia only came about with the granting of mandate to South Africa in 1921:

> The first six years of South African rule under martial law, from 1915 to 1921, held little scope for consistent or coherent policies. It was a holding job; in Ovamboland, a matter of 'sitting tight' … South Africa still had to build her case for a mandatory award which would establish her legal hold on SWA.[110]

Efforts were directed at attempting to show the international community that South African rule was more enlightened than that of Germany, and any administrative initiative displayed was geared towards keeping the peace with a view towards a decision favourable to South Africa in the anticipated negotiations.

In the first years after the famine the South African administrators sought to develop a modus vivendi which would ensure the supply of labour and not jeopardize their claims to the territory. In practice this meant that the South Africans cobbled together aspects of Transvaal and Cape law regarding Native Labour, but essentially built up on the foundation of German legislation.[111] The new Masters and Servants Act, drafted in November 1915, and signed into law in January 1916, sought to centralize and structure labour relations in the territory. Issues relating to African labour were to be moved away from local authorities and concentrated with the NAD.[112] The most fundamental difference between German legislation and that of

[107] Hayes, 'The "famine of the dams"', 125.

[108] NAN, ADM 87, Office of the Assistant Military Magistrate, Bethany 29 Nov. 1916 to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

[109] While there are references to Ovambo women in Windhoek involved in the illegal brewing of alcohol, there has been no systematic research into this topic.

[110] Hayes, 'A history of the Ovambo', 237.

[111] As the administrator, E. H. L. Gorges, noted, 'Subject to a few necessary alterations in the interests of servants, the German laws relating to natives are being applied so far as circumstances permit. On paper these are not unfavourable to the native'. Cited in Silvester, 'Black pastoralists', 30.

[112] NAN, ADM 43, Administrator Edmond Howard Lacam Gorges, Masters and Servants Act, Proclamation No. 2 of 1916 published in the official gazette of 13 Jan. 1916.

the new military administration related to the carrying of passes and corporal punishment.[113] German legislation demanded the registration of every African over the age of eight, and made the wearing of a brass badge listing magisterial district and registration number obligatory. In terms of the South African law, the age of those required to carry passes was raised to fourteen and the brass badge was abolished and replaced by pass books. Under German law, employers had the right of 'parental chastisement' (*Väterliches Züchtungsrecht*). In practice, this meant that German employers could flog their employees for alleged transgressions and errors. In terms of the new legislation this was strictly prohibited, and: 'It should be widely made known to the natives that masters and policemen have no power to flog, and any complaints of flogging must be carefully investigated and the offender prosecuted without respect of person'.[114]

Writing in 1918, J. F. Herbst, secretary for the Protectorate, acknowledged that 'on account of the number of Ovambos' the Germans had been unable to enforce their laws in Ovamboland.[115] Nevertheless, in 1906 the German administration had established laws regarding access to, and recruitment in, Ovamboland. In addition, once Ovambo arrived within the 'Police Zone' they too were subject to the pass laws.[116] Six month contracts were agreed upon between Ovambo leaders and German administrators in 1908. This allowed for the return of men at times of peak labour needs in the pastoral cycle.[117] The majority of people who trekked south to work as migrant labourers did so in small groups that refused to be broken up. Resident Commissioner Manning, writing in 1918, indicated the severity of the 1915 famine when he noted:

> During the 1915 Famine the large number of natives – mostly physically unfit – who managed to reach European centres, naturally went anywhere they could, including farms, simply for the sake of food but under normal conditions they are better kept together.[118]

The extreme famine conditions of 1915 meant that Ovambo took service wherever and with whomever they could. In 1918 this was no longer the case, and 'the members of this tribe accept work only on the railways or on the mines where they can labour together in small companies', furthermore 'they are averse from accepting engagements with the farming community'.[119] The true import of the impact of migrant labour on Ovambo men and women can be deduced in part from some of the texts collected amongst the Ovambo in the mid-1900s. It was noted that the phrase *okwa*

[113] Regarding German legislation with regard to Africans see Jürgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im Kolonialen Namibia* (Hamburg, 2001).

[114] Cited in Tony Emmett, *Popular Resistance and the Roots of Nationalism in Namibia, 1915–1966* (Basel, 1999), 77.

[115] NAN, ADM 43, secretary for the Protectorate, J. F. Herbst, Windhoek 1918, to secretary to the prime minister, Pretoria.

[116] Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft*, 212–13. [117] Hayes, 'Order out of chaos', 104–5.

[118] NAN, ADM 87, Major Manning, resident commisioner Ondonga, 2 Jan. 1918, to secretary for the Protectorate, Windhuk.

[119] NAN, ADM 43, secretary for the Protectorate, J. F. Herbst, Windhoek 1918, to secretary to the prime minister, Pretoria.

liwa kethithi (he has been eaten by a white person) served as a metaphor for having taken service as a migrant labourer. The phrase used to refer to the return of a labourer to Ovamboland was even more enlightening, namely *nani, u nomwenyo natango* (I see that you are alive once again).[120] At the best of times entering into migrant labour was a process that approached death.

In 1915 Pritchard had been sent to Ovamboland to 'get into contact with the chiefs ... and to invite their co-operation with the Government in encouraging their people to come out for employment on its railways, with Military Departments, and elsewhere as their services might be required':[121] In negotiating for labour with the Ovambo kings of Ondonga and Okwanyama, Pritchard

> undertook to arrange that the bulk of their [labourers'] wages should be deferred in order that, on completing their contracts of service, they might return home with as much money as possible, and that depots would be established at Namutoni, and later probably at Okakweyo.[122]

Drawing on experience gained in the Transvaal, labourers would only be paid upon completion of their contracts. In addition, Pritchard recommended, in keeping with already existent German legislation, that at the 'outset the Government should refuse to recognise unofficial recruiters of Native Labour'.[123]

In exchange for a recruiting fee, the military administration undertook to supply employers with labourers. The wages to be paid were to be transferred to the NAD, which would administer and pay the migrants upon completion of their contracts. The system of deferred payments was initially arranged through Karibib, but not without major obstacles and problems. The first problem related to the quality of the administrators made available to the administration. In Karibib, the deferred payments were processed by two administrators, 'Old Miller' and Jorissen. Described as 'capable and honest men', the military magistrate of Karibib nevertheless felt it necessary to 'point out that the one is old and slow, and the other little more than a boy' and to 'strongly urge that [the secretary for the Protectorate] send a trustworthy and efficient man to assist them'.[124] Seeking to explain the drunken condition of 'Old Miller', the military magistrate stated:

> They have to work day and night, and at the same time, be responsible for the correct paying out of some thousands of pounds to Ovambos. I don't wonder that old Miller is feeling the strain and that he is occasionally tempted to take a little drink – and very little knocks him over.[125]

Clearly, in the early years labour arrangements were more than a little chaotic. The secretary for the Protectorate, Herbst, indicated the limitations placed

[120] Ernst Dammann and Toivo E. Tirronen, *Ndonga Anthologie* (Berlin, 1975), 29. See also Hayes and Haipinge, *Healing the Land*, 74. [121] NAN, SWAA 1496, 1.
[122] NAN, SWAA 1496, 10. [123] NAN, SWAA 1496, 35.
[124] NAN, ADM 77, Capt. R. H. Gage, Office of the Military Magistrate, Karibib, 7 Nov. 1916, to Maj. Herbst, Windhuk.
[125] NAN, ADM 77, Capt. R. H. Gage, Office of the Military Magistrate, Karibib, 7 Nov. 1916, to Maj. Herbst, Windhuk.

upon the administration on account of the staff shortages when he wrote, 'As we are so short of staff, I am not yet able to go to Karibib'.[126] In addition, due to the shortage of staff, situations developed in which different departments worked in isolation and without knowing of the labour needs of others: 'I cannot understand your allusion to men at Karibib and Usakos being unable to find employment, in view of the shortage in the Railway service'.[127] Solutions to these administrative mishaps tended to be *ad hoc* and interpersonal, as opposed to structural. As such, a situation could develop in which the secretary for the Protectorate (strictly speaking not responsible) took it upon himself to approach the Railway Department, asking them to get into contact with the military magistrate in Karibib to 'absorb these persons'.[128] Furthermore, even after decisions had been taken to transfer the administrative responsibility for payment to Windhoek, labour and pay still tended to be concentrated and dealt with in Karibib.[129]

CAMP CLOSURE

During the course of 1916, as conditions improved in Ovamboland and fewer and fewer Ovambo trekked south, the camp at Halbichs Brün became more and more of a labour depot as opposed to a refugee centre. In effect, the camp became a depot to which weakened labourers, particularly railway workers, were returned and replaced by others who had recovered their strength.[130] Whenever the need arose, various government departments drew batches of labourers from the camp, whilst NAD officials sought to have Ovambo still within the camp permanently assigned to various employers. As conditions improved in Ovamboland so too did the settler economy in the Police Zone. By late 1916 labour shortages had once again become the norm. When the military magistrate in Karibib suggested that a labour bureau be set up to assist in the distribution of Ovambo labour, the secretary for the Protectorate rebuked him in the following manner:

You nearly knocked me off my perch when you suggested the establishment of a labour bureau. Seeing that the Railway Department is about 1100 short of their complement of Natives, and that the Mines require at least another 1000, the work of a bureau would seem to be superfluous.[131]

[126] NAN, ADM 77, Maj. J. F. Herbst, Windhuk, 14 Nov. 1916, to Capt. R. H. Gage, Karibib.

[127] NAN, ADM 77, Maj. J. F. Herbst, Windhuk, 14 Nov. 1916, to Capt. R. H. Gage, Karibib.

[128] NAN, ADM 77, Maj. J. F. Herbst, Windhuk, 14 Nov. 1916, to Capt. R. H. Gage, Karibib.

[129] NAN, ADM 87, NAD, Windhuk, 26 Aug. 1916, to officer in charge Native Affairs, Karibib.

[130] NAN, ADM 77, memo, Military Hospital Karibib, 21 Aug. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk; secretary for the Protectorate, 21 Aug. 1916, to officer in charge Military Hospital Karibib; secretary for the Protectorate, 21 Aug. 1916, to assistant director railways Windhoek; and director of railways, 22 Aug. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate, Windhuk.

[131] NAN, ADM 77, Herbst in Windhuk, 14 Nov. 1916, to Gage, Karibib.

In September 1916, it was suggested that the camp be closed and all Ovambo migrants be sent on directly to Windhoek.[132] The camp was allowed to fall into administrative disuse. Apart from a single reference in early 1917, to the camp being used to hold approximately 150 men 'seeking work or for back pay', there is no further mention of it until July 1918 when orders were issued for it to be dismantled.[133]

SUPPORT AT A COST

As much of the material has indicated, the intervention of the South African military administration saved the lives of many thousands of Ovambo famine victims. Nonetheless, this support came at a cost. In exchange for food, the Ovambo were expected to work. Though some colonial officials were clearly horrified by what they saw, the bottom line remained that support could only be given in exchange for labour. Haydon, the officer in command of those medical officers who sought to deal with the mass of incoming refugees, blamed the administration for encouraging Ovambo to enter into the Police Zone without making adequate arrangements for their subsequent support:

> The policy of encouraging the native to come south … and there seems no doubt whatever that the Native Affairs Department have distinctly encouraged the influx of natives from the North. I venture to suggest that in view of the shortage of good food in the Protectorate generally, that the advisability of making some change in the policy might be considered, especially in view of the fact that long journeys and subsequent 'compounding' of natives suffering from severe privation is liable to do more harm than good.[134]

In calling for a change in policy, Haydon does not appear to have grasped the seriousness of the famine in Ovamboland. Earlier he had suggested that it might have been better for inhabitants to have remained in Ovamboland:

> It might even be worth while considering the point whether the congregation of these natives at depots where diarrhoea and similar diseases are likely to spread from one to another, in their present half-starved condition, is not even worse than leaving them to face a certain amount of privation in their isolated kraals.[135]

Haydon believed that the prime reason for the Ovambo trekking south lay in their responding to the military administration's call for labour. What such views failed to take into account was the extent to which war, compounded with famine, had made it impossible for large numbers of Ovambo to survive in Ovamboland. People did not travel down to the Police Zone merely because they were looking for work, but because they had no other option.

[132] NAN, ADM 77, telegram, Herbst Protectorate secretary to natives Karibib, 2 Sept. 1916.

[133] NAN, ADM 77, telegram, magistrate Karibib to Herbst secretary for the Protectorate, 12 Jan. 1917; Office of the Military Magistrate, Karibib, 23 July 1918, to director of Works Windhuk.

[134] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the ADMS, SWA Protectorate Windhuk, 11 Dec. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

[135] NAN, ADM 18, Office of the ADMS, SWA Protectorate, Windhuk, 17 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate Windhuk.

In the Police Zone contracted migrant workers from the eastern Cape and elsewhere were laid off and replaced by cheaper Ovambo labourers. In some instances, Ovambo labourers contracted prior to the influx of refugees were laid off and replaced by cheaper Ovambo famine victims. In those instances where Ovambo labourers and famine victims worked together, their supervisors were expressly instructed not to divulge the earnings of the contracted labourers to the famine victims.[136] Officials in charge of the camp in Karibib compiled extensive lists and tables which broke down the individual costs of labourers from the eastern Cape and Ovamboland.[137] Not surprisingly, the cost per labourer from Ovamboland was considerably lower than that for the eastern Cape. Undoubtedly the most extreme extent to which the administration went in its effort to cut costs was to be found in Usakos where it is evident that horse fodder was given to incoming Ovambo famine victims.[138]

MIGRANT LABOUR FIGURES

The introduction to *Namibia under South African Rule: Mobility & Containment, 1915–46* notes that 'most migrant Labour came from Ovamboland in northern Namibia and southern Angola. These migrants were more numerous prior to 1915 than at any time over the next thirty years'.[139] By far the most comprehensive set of figures dealing with Ovambo migrant labour to the south for the period under discussion are those compiled by Tony Emmett.[140] A cursory glance at Emmett's figures would appear to substantiate the claim that there were more migrants from the north to the south prior to 1915 than at any time over the next thirty years. However, a closer look reveals that for a substantial number of years prior to 1920, when civilian administration was reintroduced to the territory, there are simply no figures available. An overview of the German colonial archives in Namibia confirms that German record keeping was extensive and meticulous.[141] The coming of South African forces to Namibia substantially disrupted this activity, and there are numerous reports of South African soldiers shredding German records. Similarly, in the first few years of South African administration, record keeping was haphazard at best. It must not be forgotten that the mass migration being described here took place in a time of war. Famine started affecting the Ovambo kingdoms at precisely the same time that German forces were being beaten into retreat. If during war and

[136] NAN, ADM 18, NAD, Windhuk, 2 Dec. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate.
[137] NAN, ADM 77, NAD, Windhuk, 11 Mar. 1916, to secretary for the Protectorate.
[138] NAN, ADM 18, Lnt. Col. L. G. Haydon, ADMS, SWA Protectorate, Windhuk, 20 Nov. 1915, to secretary for the Protectorate.
[139] Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace and Patricia Hayes, '"Trees never meet", mobility & containment: an overview 1915–1946', in Hayes *et al.* (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule*, 32.
[140] Emmett, *Popular Resistance*, 173. Interested readers are also referred to the table compiled by Emmanuel Kreike, 'Recreating Eden: agro-ecological change, food security and environmental diversity in southern Angola and northern Namibia, 1890–1960' (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1996), 193.
[141] NAN ZBU 2064–72, deal specifically with the recruitment of Ovambo labourers.

Table 3. *Rainfall, famine and labour migration rates in Ovamboland, 1907–1926*

Year	Annual recruitment of Ovambo labourers	Rainfall[a] and other factors affecting production
1907	1,700	1906–7: 103 (locusts)
1908	*c.* 4,000	1907–8: 68 (late rains)
1909	—	1908–9: 160 (famine floods)
1910	9,100	1909–10: 122
1911	9,300	1910–11: 42 (famine)
1912	6,100	1911–12: 122
1913	11,600	1912–13: 54 (famine)
1914	11,100	1913–14: 82
1915	(war)	1914–15: 81 (famine)
1916	—[b]	1915–16: 51 (famine)
1917	3,500	1916–17: 139
1918	—	1917–18: 106
1919	—	1918–19: 56 (drought)
1920	7,000	1919–20: 91
1921	4,000	1920–1: 123 (depression and drought)
1922	3,000	1921–2: 43 (depression and drought)
1923	—	1922–3: 133
1924	3,300	1923–4: 71
1925	4,000	1924–5: 164
1926	4,000	1925–6: 74

Source: Emmett, *Popular Resistance*, Table 8.1, 173.

[a] The table as published does not refer to any specific unit of measurement. It is most likely that the unit being used is the inch.

[b] Emmett included no number here. The South African military administration records indicate that an estimated 7,247 Ovambo were registered in Karibib, Tsumeb and Outjo between late 1915 and 31 Mar. 1916. NAN 137-6, Report 9 Feb. 1915–31 Mar. 1916, 1 Apr. 1916.

administrative upheaval there is little or no accurate record keeping, this need not mean that there was nothing to record. Far from it, for as the reports of German missionaries and South African administrators indicate, there were literally thousands of Ovambo staggering southward in 1915.

In effect, following the demise of the German colonial administration in Namibia in 1915, it would be at least another ten years before of recording of Ovambo migrants resumed on an equal scale. As Silvester, Wallace and Hayes have noted, 'the movement of males was sought by colonialism, but so was its utter control. The rigid institutionalised channels of the migrant labour system attempted to integrate male labour from the north into the larger economy'.[142] Yet, this control, so desperately sought by the colonial state, actually only appeared with regard to migrant labour, and thus enumeration picked up in the second half of the 1920s with the establishment of the Northern Labour Organization (NLO) and Southern

[142] Silvester, Wallace and Hayes, '"Trees never meet"', 33.

Labour Organization (SLO) in 1926.[143] Up until 1925, all labour recruitment was done by the resident commissioner.[144] It is important to note that the native commissioner Ovamboland (NAO) files in the National Archives of Namibia only start from 1919 onwards, before which one is reliant on the resident commissioner Ovamboland (RCO) files, which run from 1916 to 1927, and do not provide information for the crucial year 1915.[145] As the authors of the introduction to *Namibia under South African Rule* have noted in reference to Siiskonen's[146] use of parish records compiled by Finnish missionaries for demographic purposes in the 1920s and 1930s, 'South Africa in this period had no means of enumerating its colonial population, and any attempt to produce a ''secular'' demographic history suffers accordingly'.[147] This perspective is substantially reinforced by Rob Gordon, who argues convincingly that the South African colonial administration did not have the effective control which it may have wished for.[148]

Naturally, the figures presented in this article deal solely with Ovambo migrants who made it to Karibib and were registered there between September 1915 and March 1916. It does not include the unknown thousands who did not make it, nor those who came to be employed independently of the colonial administration, for example, by settler farmers and businessmen or even Herero cattle keepers.[149] However, what is essential in the argument being presented here is that the famine broke the Ovambo kingdoms. The number of migrants may not match later numbers, but the famine did allow for the peaceful move into Ovamboland of the South Africans, and heralded the final defeat of the Ovambo kingdoms by South Africa.[150]

CONCLUSION

The 1915 famine is one of the most fundamental events in twentieth-century Namibian history, marking a major turning point in Namibian history and society in the last 200 years. But for the famine, it is unlikely that twentieth-century Namibian society, history and politics would have come to be dominated by Ovambo-speaking people in the way that it has. Without the destructive presence of the Portuguese expeditionary force in southern Angola, the defeat of the Kwanyama kingdom, the absence of rains, the failure of harvests and the subsequent development of widespread famine in northern Namibia, it is highly unlikely that Ovambo would have entered into the Police Zone in substantial numbers. Instead, the effective destruction of resources in Ovamboland ensured that literally thousands of

[143] Cooper, 'Contract labour', 121–38. [144] Gordon, 'Variation in migration', 265.

[145] NAN, RCO 11, Ovamboland: recruitment of Ovambos for diamond fields, etc., contains partial figures for 1916 (specifically the months of October to December), as well as more comprehensive figures for the years up to 1920.

[146] Harri Siiskonen, 'Migration in Ovamboland: the Oshigambo & Elim parishes', in Hayes *et al*. (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule*, 219–40.

[147] Silvester, Wallace and Hayes, '''Trees never meet''', 33.

[148] Robert J. Gordon, 'Vagrancy, law & ''shadow knowledge'': internal pacification, 1915–1939', in Hayes *et al*. (eds.), *Namibia under South African Rule*, 51–76.

[149] Gewald, *Herero Heroes*, 233–6.

[150] Silvester, Wallace and Hayes, '''Trees never meet''', 17.

Ovambo had to seek to establish a new life in southern and central Namibia. In so doing, they changed the course of history.

The famine that raged in Ovamboland, coupled with the presence of the Portuguese expeditionary force in southern Angola, allowed for the peaceful introduction and movement of colonial forces into southern Ovamboland for the first time in history. Though the work of Alex de Waal has tended to concentrate on north-eastern Africa, his words could equally well have been written with the development of the famine in Ovamboland in mind:

> War creates famine in many ways: the destruction caused by battle and scorched earth tactics, the requisition of food by armies, blockade of food and people in sieges, the imposition of restrictions on movement and trade, forcible relocation of the civilian population and enforced rationing of food … They undermined the rural economy, not merely by the destruction of harvests and assets such as oxen, but by making impossible the trading and migration that sustained a peasantry already on the edge of survival.[151]

The Ovambo famine not only killed people. It also allowed the incoming South African military administration immediate and easy access into Ovamboland and spelled the end of the independence of the Ovambo chiefs and their polities. It is likely that, but for the famine and Portuguese forces, the South African colonial incursion would have been met with the same opposition and hostility experienced by German forces which had sought to enter into Ovamboland. In other words, to all intents and purposes, the 'famine that swept' destroyed the autonomy of the Ovamboland kingdoms and allowed for the establishment of a South African colonial presence in the area.

The subsequent mass movement of Ovambo migrants into central and southern Namibia forever changed the social, cultural and political landscape of Namibia. Yet, underlying all this, it is important to remember that the Ovambo presence in central and southern Namibia could only become permanent due to the insatiable demand for cheap labour on the part of the settler economy. Throughout the last century, hundreds of thousands of Ovambo migrants have followed in the footsteps of the famine victims of 1915. They, too, worked in the mines, towns, farms, industries and businesses of Namibia, and in so doing they developed and came to determine the shape of Namibian society.

[151] Alexander de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry* (Oxford, 1997), 117.