

estimate, it must be emphasized, remains highly theoretical, even if scientifically grounded. He readily admits that there are no reliable sources from that era that can confirm his math. And, importantly, both numbers connote a catastrophic loss of human life and potential. The question becomes then, is the horror of the Congo Free State best understood through the lens of statistics? The numbers do not really change what we know already about how the Congo Free State functioned through violence. Similarly, the marked improvements in mortality and birth rates in the late Belgian colonial period do not change the fact the colonial violence continued to permeate the lives of Congolese people during that era in ways that are not necessarily signified in birth and death rates. Demographic studies, while potentially powerful, will always be limited in their scope unless tied in a meaningful way to the lived experiences of the people they represent. This book, while well-researched and important, suffers from that narrowed scope. That reality, combined with the highly technical and at times repetitive nature of the prose, suggest that it will likely find limited readership outside of the field of demography.

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## Emotion and Violence in German Colonial Southwest Africa

### *The Herero Genocide: War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia*

By Matthias Häussler. Trans. from German by Elizabeth Janik (War and Genocide, Volume 31). New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021. \$179.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781800730236); \$39.95, e-book (ISBN: 9781800730243).

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While the German government still refuses its full responsibility, the history of the first genocide of the twentieth century, committed by the German state against the Herero and Nama people, continues to receive increased scholarly attention. Between 1904 and 1908, the German colonial army waged a ruthless war of annihilation which thrust all of southwestern Africa into unprecedented suffering. About 80 per cent of the Herero and about half of the Nama population perished. Matthias Häussler's *The Herero Genocide: War, Emotion, and Extreme Violence in Colonial Namibia* is a welcome addition to this field. Rather than asking yet again whether and to what extent the mass killings that occurred in German Southwest Africa (SWA) at the beginning of the twentieth century can be considered genocide (understood mostly in legal terms), as many in the field have done before him, Häussler considers the 'how' of the violence, seeking to understand the complex dynamics that paved the 'road to catastrophe' (258). Emphasizing crucial elements in the unleashing of extreme violence that have so far been neglected — most importantly emotions and violence 'from below' — he offers a compelling complement to current narratives of genocide.

Häussler is an expert in sociological conceptualizations of violence and has published extensively on the subject (independently, as well as with his mentor Trutz von Trotha, a leading German sociologist of violence). *The Herero Genocide* is deeply informed by his discipline's theoretical reflections regarding the problem of extreme violence; for the historian, Häussler's disciplinary tendency to search for generalizable models of human behavior might take some getting used to. Disciplinary tendencies aside, his findings are both soundly linked to the historiographical debates and thoroughly grounded in the empirical material. Indeed, one of the book's great achievements is its use of an impressively broad base of sources, ranging from local German newspapers, to official records (both military and civilian), missionaries' and British officials' efforts to record Herero voices (found in Botswanan, South African, and English archives), to the numerous memoirs and private journals written by German military men. Particularly noteworthy is that Häussler had exclusive access to the handwritten diaries (not just the significantly revised typescript version) of the primary architect of the genocides, the commander in chief of the colonial troops (*Schutztruppen*), General Lothar von Trotha.

The book is organized chronologically, starting with the prewar situation, then dedicating most of its pages to the war itself, and ending with a brief account of the postwar regime of camps and colonial 'native policy'. There is an additional layer of structure as well, built around the different historical actors involved. It opens with the important role white settlers played in the unfolding of extreme violence (Chapter One); then moves on to the interactions between high colonial officials, between the colony and Berlin (Chapter Two); the two chapters that deal with the war itself concentrate first on the military leaders of the German campaign, notably the notorious von Trotha (Chapter Three) and, second, on his subalterns (Chapter Four); the book's short final chapter turns attention to the civil servants who took the reins after the war officially ended (Chapter Five).

The first chapter is particularly compelling. In it, Häussler focuses on white settlers' role in radicalizing racist ideology and in pushing for violent solutions to their conflicts with local peoples. Drawing primarily on local newspaper articles, Häussler describes the settler colonial situation as suffused with fear and mistrust in which settlers were closely overseen by an authoritarian state on whose financial support they had to regularly rely on. These economically as well as politically 'dependent masters' (a term the author borrows from Helmut Bley, whose early study of colonial Namibia figures prominently throughout the book)<sup>1</sup>, were thus situated in a 'double antagonism between indigenous people and the colonial state' (31). Häussler convincingly contends that the white settler population, especially the rabidly racist vocal part of it, needs to be factored in as 'motor of colonial expansion' (35) and 'a motor of violence' (63).

Chapter One offers also a brief account of Herero motivations, goals, and organizational challenges when, in January 1904, the Herero took arms against the untenable situation of eliminatory German settlement (50–8). As the settler colonial society immediately mobilized a brutal campaign of revenge, Häussler concludes the chapter noting that long before the German military unleashed its organized violence, 'unfettered violence was already rampant in SWA. It was often initiated from below', by settlers in particular (61).

Chapter Two shifts the focus away from the settler community to the German colonial state and its decision makers. Häussler aptly differentiates between different groups of actors situated in the colony and the 'metropole'. Drawing on cultural and intellectual military history, he discusses the ways in which debates over strategy and over the military principle of a 'war of annihilation' influenced events in the colony. In the wake of metropolitan input, the war was ideologically charged, and because every decision had to follow the primacy of Wilhelminian military culture and its annihilation doctrine 'violence took on a life of its own, and it was no longer restrained by concrete goals' (102).

<sup>1</sup>H. Bley, *Kolonialherrschaft und Sozialstruktur in Deutsch-Südwestafrika* (Hamburg: 1968), 213.

Chapter Three, entitled ‘The Campaign’, builds on extensive historical scholarship relating in detail the course of events of 1904, notably Isabel Hull’s *Absolute Destruction*.<sup>2</sup> Häussler seeks to restructure the existing narrative, however, by setting new breaks and identifying different moments of escalation: he asserts that German warfare and its goals remained ‘conventional’ for a long while, that there was no genocidal intent from the outset, even after the ‘military dictator Trotha’ (63) had taken over command. Only after repeated German military failures and defeats — and here the Herero decision to avoid a decisive battle at the Waterberg in August, as well as during the ensuing campaigns of pursuit, had a significant impact on the events — did the logic of violence turn first to terrorism and then to genocide. The author’s claim that emotions — particularly the deeply social sentiment of shame — are key in understanding the escalation of violence is especially thought-provoking. Häussler contends that violence to some extent derived directly from the military commander’s ‘fear of appearing weak’, the ‘inability to admit ... shame’, and the ‘rage that came from bypassed shame’ (158). Quoting lengthily from Trotha’s private journal, Häussler makes a compelling case for the added value of such historical sources.

Chapter Four echoes the preceding chapter and Chapter One. Here, Häussler reiterates his argument about the intrinsic logic of violence ‘from below’, focusing this time on the mindsets and emotional states of lower-ranking soldiers and subaltern officers. In addition to their rampant racism, soldiers’ lack of training and insufficient knowledge of the terrain, their physical hardships and constant disappointments, as well as what they perceived as incompetent leadership contributed to their feelings of fear and powerlessness, which resulted in frustration, embitterment, and eventually a ‘need for revenge’ (229).

Chapter Five, which deals with the postwar regime of the camps and the colonial state’s ‘native policy’, in which civil servants rise to prominence, is more an afterthought than an independent chapter. Relying on the existing historiography, notably on Jonas Kreienbaum’s *A Sad Fiasco*,<sup>3</sup> Häussler notes how violence continued, but now under the auspices of the ‘primacy of politics’ (241). The result of this continuation of the war by political means was the institutionalization of racism through ‘native policy’ (250).

Two points of criticism are in order. Häussler’s psycho-sociological take on emotions, defined as learned social behavior and motive serving, forecloses a stronger historical engagement with emotions. In his account, emotions are strangely ahistorical. He does not go into the cultural meanings the historical actors themselves might have attributed to these emotions, and thus cannot reveal the ways in which their preoccupations with affect might have guided their actions. Moreover, with the English translation, an opportunity was missed to revise a text which suffers from quite a few repetitions of the same quotes and endnotes. But more importantly, the translation unfortunately obscures the sometimes subtle ways in which the author uses historical terminologies to do analytical work, and instead just confuses the reader. Take, for example, how Häussler uses the term ‘willkür’, which should be translated as ‘arbitrariness’. It is the root of the word — free choice — that Häussler wishes to emphasize when he analyses the settlers’ aspirations to gain autonomy through violence, to ‘do as they please’ (40–1), a subtlety that is somewhat lost in translation.

These critiques need not detract from Häussler’s achievement. Whether considering Namibia or elsewhere, too many genocide studies make the perpetrators of genocide appear purposeful and goal-oriented, thus feeding into unhelpful instrumental, teleological narratives. *The Herero Genocide* restores a measure of historicity to this scholarship, by bringing contingency, racism, and emotions to the forefront when it comes to understanding dynamics that lead human beings to commit acts of extreme violence.

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<sup>2</sup>I. V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>J. Kreienbaum, *A Sad Fiasco. Colonial Concentration Camps in Southern Africa, 1900–1908* (New York, 2019).