

Die Zeit, 09 July 2015

Germans Show No Mercy

Those who speak of an Armenian Genocide must not be silent about the German Genocide against the Herero and Nama

By Norbert Lammert

Exactly 100 years ago, colonial rule ended in Deutsch-Südwestafrika – an important but largely forgotten chapter of German history. The victory of anti-colonial resistance was an almost unnoticed result of WWI: On 09 July 1915, the Imperial “Schutztruppe” capitulated before the South African Union army, which was fighting on the side of the British Empire.

This memory plays a much bigger role present-day Namibia than in Germany. At the same time, there is a startling contrast between the lack of commemorating one’s own colonial past in this country, and the passionate debate in April on the occasion of the centenary of genocide against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. This is particularly remarkable, as indeed, the German Empire shared responsibility for the massacres and deportations in East-Anatolia, by failing to make use of its influential position in saving human lives, but compared to the colonies, it was directly involved in the atrocities. [Literal translation: Germany’s guilt for the atrocities in the colonies is direct = die deutsche Schuld an den Kolonien demgegenüber aber ganz unmittelbar ist.”]

Indeed, Germany was not the leading colonial power amongst the European forces. Its short colonial past, however, is linked to shameful crimes – especially the merciless suppression of the Herero and Nama uprising between 1904 and 1908. And yet, at the beginning there was no talk of colonies but only of “Schutzgebiete” (protectorates), in order to secure Germany’s international influence and economic interests. However, de facto and in terms of international law they were ruled as colonies. The “Schutztruppe” in Deutsch-Südwest was an occupying force subjugating the people. [literal translation: in a subjugated country]

Even though, Otto von Bismarck was no stated supporter of the colonial idea. Under his reign the Empire acquired most of its colonies in Africa, but also in parts of Asia. Bismarck had his focus mainly on economic activities of private companies. He was not so much driven by imperial prestige. Nevertheless, it is one of the major oversights of his Chancellorship not to have decisively opposed

the influential colonial lobby, young Wilhelm II's imperial strive, and the dream of a German "place in the sun".

The economic returns were rather meagre. Yet, the local population severely suffered humiliation through racist feudal force of the colonial masters. After years of resistance against foreign rule, conflicts with German settlers escalated in a merciless war in 1904 in the south-west of Africa. The Germans waged that war as a "race war". "Within German borders, each Herero, with or without rifle, with or without cattle, will be shot. I no longer take neither women nor children, chase them back to their people, or will have them shot." These are the words of Lieutenant General von Trotha, the German commander-in-chief, who uttered the infamous order to shoot by. That time, "No Pardon", was the general rallying cry.

Ten thousands of Herero and Nama became victims not only of combat operations, but also of diseases and targeted killings such as exposing people to dying of thirst and hunger; others died in concentration camps or under forced labour. The survivors were faced with total expropriation. They lost their land and their cattle / herds, thus losing their livelihoods.

According to present day international law, the suppression of the Herero uprising was genocide. International law stipulates that if acts are committed with intent "to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such" the criminal act of genocide is incurred. Such is the interpretation of many, also, German historians.

Irrespective of the question whether the UN-Convention on Genocide is applicable in this case, the Bundestag, and the German government emphasised the historical and moral responsibility on several occasions. Already in 2004, a parliament resolution called on Germany to face its colonial past as clearly as possible, at the same time expressing deep regret and sadness. In the same year, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, then Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, apologized in Namibia for the crimes committed by Germans. The descendants of the victims still have high expectations that we in Germany confront this history of violence.

In the parliamentary debate about the massacres of the Armenians, I said, the present-day Turkish government is not responsible for what happened 100 years ago. This is also true for Germany. However, just like the Turks, **we have a responsibility for how we deal with this history.**

Letters I received from citizens after the Armenia debate, show an increased awareness of the fate of the Herero and Nama. Petitions reflect the wish for a clear position of the State. That is why, for one year now, the Federal government is involved in a dialogue with the Namibian government, in order to find a common

position and common language in dealing with the cruel colonial war of 1904 to 1908.

One cannot reduce the debate to a single term of genocide, and then declare the issue a closed chapter, neither in this nor in the case of the massacres of the Armenians. Articulating what happened can only be the start for a reconciliation process, which is only possible when an exchange and dialogue exists. Already today, many projects, which Germany has been supporting in Namibia for years, serve this purpose: e.g., contributing to the establishment of a documentation centre for research into the history of Namibian resistance and the liberation struggle; or the restoration of Memorial Park Cemetery in Swakopmund/Kramersdorf.

Germany's special responsibility for its former colony in South-West Africa is also reflected in the amount of German development assistance for the independent state of Namibia: they are the highest per capita in Africa. In a special initiative additional 30 million Euros for local/communal development were allocated over the past years to the especially affected settlement areas.

The colonial history of our country ended in 1919, when WWI allies took away Germany's colonies on the basis of the Treaty of Versailles. However, it still has an effect until present-day in the formerly controlled territories, where today independent states have evolved. Especially this year, when we observe the 25th anniversary of German unity, we should not overlook that 1990 was a historic year also for Namibia. After WWI, Südwestafrika became a League of Nations mandated territory. Decades of a bloody liberation struggle against the South African mandatory power followed. Just 25 years ago, Namibia became an independent state. History binds our two countries in a painful way. However, since 1990, also close and friendly relations developed. We can and should build on that.