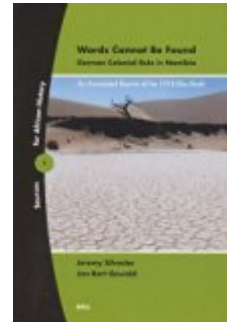


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeremy Silvester, Jan-Bart Gewald, eds. *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*. Leiden: Brill, 2003. xxxvii + 366 pp. \$49.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-12981-8.

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This famous report was republished in honor of the 2004 centenary of the 1904-08 Namibian War—in which Herero and Nama fought, and were defeated by, German colonial occupiers at a horrific cost. The editors, Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, intend it as “a memorial to those who died” (p. xxxvi). They have added to the original Blue Book a substantial and informative introduction that places the document in its historical context, exploring its creation, its near-destruction, its importance to Namibian history, and its significance to a larger history of colonialism and genocide. They also include a thorough bibliography and an index, helpful to readers overwhelmed by the report’s 356 pages.

The republication of this important source—and its placement within a broader historical framework—is most welcome. It is useful not only for scholars of Namibia, but also for those interested in comparative colonialism or genocide studies. Indeed, I have even used the Blue Book in undergraduate classes as a primary source for discussing topics as diverse as colonial discourse and African resistance. This edition, with its careful introduction, will make it both more accessible and more valuable.

The Blue Book’s origins lie in the First World War, when South African forces under British command invaded German-controlled Namibia. After defeating the German army, the colony was governed under a South African military administration. British and South African officials were aware that a case would have to be made for retaining control of Germany’s colonies. When the British government requested “a statement suitable for publication” that “natives” of these colonies were anxious to live under British rule, officials in South West

Africa were already prepared, having translated German documents and collected additional information on “the treatment received by native races” under German rule. The resulting document, according to Silvester and Gewald, “served to scuttle any attempt by Germany to retain control over Namibia” (p. xix).

The 1918 Blue Book offers a history of German occupation and rule of Namibia; ethnographic information on the colony’s various “tribes”; narratives of various examples of African resistance; long descriptions (textual and photographic) of German atrocities toward Africans, committed by both settlers and military men; and an explanation of the German legal code for Africans. It makes for grim reading even for someone familiar with descriptions of colonial violence.

The report’s primary creator—a military magistrate stationed in a small town—was also critical of British actions in Namibia after the war, to the point that it ended his government career. But among higher authorities, there were obvious ulterior motives for creating the Blue Book. These motives have often led to a dismissal of the entire product as (according to the German Namibian historian, Brigitte Lau) “an English piece of war propaganda with no credibility whatsoever” (quoted, p. xxi). The editors’ introduction makes clear what historians of Namibia already know: whatever the motives of its authors, the Blue Book’s information is corroborated extensively by other archival evidence. Their careful research on the report’s construction allows them to refute definitively various charges as to its inaccuracy.

The construction of the Blue Book was unusual in that it relied so heavily on the accounts of the defeated. German authorities had left a detailed archive of their time in

Namibia, complete with the use of “concentration camps” after the 1904-08 uprising, and photographs of hanging and flogging victims. These were featured prominently in the Blue Book. So were African voices. A major feature of the report is statements by Africans complaining of mistreatment by German employers and officials. The editors note that the events of 1904-08 are largely absent in Herero and Nama orature. To some extent, the experiences and perspectives of those who lived through German colonial rule and the repressions that followed the Herero-Nama uprising against the Germans survive within the so-called Blue Book. The editors could have done a bit more to explain how these perspectives are necessarily filtered by the medium of a British government report (written by the same government that was, in fact, turning a blind eye to or committing acts of violence itself). But the information is nonetheless very valuable given the lack of African sources on the period of German rule.

The editors argue that this African testimony constitutes a valuable source on “the particular features of colonial genocide,” and they are right. The Blue Book is also “a key text in the production of colonial discourse” (p. xxxiii) in which “German” vs. “British” identities were constructed alongside a white supremacist, paternalist ideology (in the form of derogatory terms for Africans, among other things).

But the German-British opposition was to some extent a temporary one, a product of a particular historical moment. Britain never investigated any of the Blue Book’s allegations. Once South Africa was awarded

Namibia as a mandated territory in 1920, a new agenda came to the fore: unifying the divided white settler community of Germans and recent, mostly Afrikaner, immigrants from South Africa. The Blue Book very nearly did not survive this process of reconciliation. In 1926, orders were given for its destruction. All known copies of the Blue Book in Namibia were destroyed by 1935; the circulation of those copies that remained in British hands was tightly controlled.

The editors persuasively argue for the urgency of making information on the nature of German colonial rule in Africa more widely available. Namibia is now a tourist destination and “the majority of tourists will be impressed with the legacy of German imperialism” in the form of the country’s food, drink, architecture, and religion, among other things. They will be unaware that, for example, that “in the coastal resort of Swakopmund, tourists gamble money in a converted railway station built by slave labor, drink coffee overlooking the site of a concentration camp, and ride dune buggies over the mass graves of Herero P.O.W.s” (p. xxxv).

Nor is this just a problem for foreigners. The “absence of marked heritage sites” across the country, Silvester and Gewalt argue, “transforms Namibians into tourists in their own historical landscape. Indeed, Namibians currently walk through a colonial German reading of their own history” (p. xxxvi). One hopes that this book will be available in Namibia, despite the absence of an Africa-based publishing partner, as another step toward offering alternative readings of Namibian history.

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