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Reviewed by Henning Melber (The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden)
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The Making of a German South West African Settler Society and Its Identities

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A hundred years ago, in January 1904, despair among the colonized Herero in German South West Africa had reached such an extent that they rose in arms against the colonial power. Both the August 1904 battle at the Waterberg and the "Vernichtungsbefehl" (extermination order) issued by General von Trotha now date back almost a century. The recent debates over compensation for historical injustices have motivated a group of Herero representatives in Namibia to initiate a claim, in a private case at a U.S. court, for compensation against the German state (which has in the meantime refused to accept the claim) and several companies they accuse of having benefited, at that time, from the oppressive nature of German colonialism and its exploitative character. The case is currently in its preparatory stage but already highly publicized and of far-reaching general legal interest. Hence this is an opportune moment for Walther's book. It draws attention to the German South Western frontier identity emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century in a territory which, after a long and bitter struggle, finally achieved independence in March 1990 as a sovereign Namibian state–a state that inherited a German-speaking minority among its citizenry.

Previous to this and partiularly of late, there have been solid analytical efforts, especially by German-speaking scholars, on the role and (self-)perception of the Namibia-Germans.[1] In contrast to these other earlier approaches, the author reviewed here puts an emphasis on the formative stages of German settler identity from the early twentieth century until World War II. As interesting and promising as this is, however, the actual additional value is modest. While the introduction acknowledges the influence of such theoretical conceptualizations as Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" on the author's own approach, his presentation shows few traces of such inspiring schools of thought. It is largely a compilation of–more or less interesting–quotations from archival sources, which lack a systematic analytical rigor. By the end, the reader has learned more about the emerging mindset of the German South Westerns, but has few conclusions at hand that might allow for a theoretically based insight. Walther largely confirms the earlier findings of Klaus R=diger and Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, notwithstanding his explicit claim to provide new insights. For example, he states, "The Germans in SWA thus created a hybrid identity that combined Deutschtum with a strong dose of Southwestern conditions and life" (p. 102). But the group of "S=dwester" has always been far from rigidly homogenous: "Indeed, the various groups that constituted Southwestern society had different interests and wants. Each tried to influence colonial policy for its own benefit" (pp. 184-185).

Walther misses the opportunity to explore this important aspect further through an analysis based on property relations and the nature of social class within the German settler community. There are bits and pieces, however, which offer some useful connecting evidence to current issues. For example, although Walther is not explicit, his comments on the relationship established by the early settlers with the land allows one to draw conclusions on the impact this must have on the ongoing and yet unresolved issue of redistribution of land in the post-colonial transformation of property relations. "Indeed, the struggle with the land brought the colonists to it. Their labor, sweat, and blood had mixed with the soil. This mixing created a bond and a sense of ownership; they felt they had paid for the territory and thus it belonged to them.... Writers ... repeated the theme that only those who could overcome or endure the rigors of the new land could claim ownership to it, and only such people were 'true' Germans. This physical and almost spiritual relationship with the land undeniably played a role in the character development of the Southwestern Germans" (p. 94).

With reference to what happened in terms of the colonial genocide from 1904 onward, it is particularly regrettable that Walther does not concentrate more on the debates over "native policy," either those between the South Westerns and the German colonial authorities in Berlin, or those within each of these groups (who displayed considerable internal differences of viewpoint). Paul Rohrbach, as an influential advocate of a settler colony, is not featured as prominently as the ideas he represented merit,[2] nor is von Trotha and the impact of his "Vernichtungsbefehl" (in terms of not only warfare but the subsequent debate surrounding the aims and intentions of the German "civilizing mission"). The genocide and its ideology play hardly any role as a thematic focus, neither in the related debate on the aims and practices of the colonial war nor in the following treatment of the "natives." But the native policy certainly had a marked impact on the definition and application of "Deutschtum" in the colony. In addition to these omissions, some of the semantics are far from comforting. Walther refers to the beginning of armed resistance by the Herero as "hostilities broke out" (p. 17), while the primary phase of colonial subjugation during the early 1890s is unfortunately termed "the pacification of the Africans" (p. 14). Similarly misplaced is the reference to "mulattos" (p. 4), a term which did not appear in any local vocabulary.

This effort–as worthwhile and justified as it is, since the Southwester identity is indeed far from being a closed historical chapter–fails to add much of value to what is already known, at least for those having access to a wide range of relevant German literature. This body of work is not fully acknowledged by the author, who has made references to publications up to 1999. Omissions among earlier works include, for example, the thought-provoking analyses by Peter Schmitt-Egner who emphasized, on several occasions, the continuities between the colonial and the fascist mindset in German history through reference to the theory of Hannah Arendt on the origins of totalitarian rule in combination largely with the empirical case of German SWA.[3] Little acknowledgement is made of the historiography produced in the former German Democratic Republic, although admittedly, this is ideologically biased and, at times, poorly represented by the crude orthodoxy. Nevertheless, many scholars, especially historians, had more to offer than their reputation suggested, largely due to the benefits of having almost exclusive access to the valuable archives of the former colonial ministry, over a long period of time.[4]

More recent sources relevant to this work, but not included, are Joachim Zeller's 1999 Ph.D. thesis on German colonial monuments and the related historical mindset, which examines the situation and debates in South West Africa (Namibia) as well as German colonial reminiscences and perceptions of the country.[5] Nor does the author include J=rgen Zimmerer's 2000 Ph.D. thesis which summarizes, in detail, the arguments linking German repression at the beginning of the twentieth century, in its former colony, to genocide and what might be considered its early stages in the Nazi regime.[6] Walther also fails to explore the analytical avenues of work within the so-called post-colonial studies. Although Walther probably was not aware of the work, the value of (psycho)analysis to the study of early settler colonialism is demonstrated by Rosa Schneider's 2001 Ph.D. thesis, which examines the literature of German settler women in early South West Africa.[7]

Walther, however, did have available the earlier works of Martha Mamozai, which he acknowledges mainly in passing, but fails to utilize to their full extent, particularly concerning the role of German settler women.[8] He is aware of women's role when stating that, "although they did face many hardships, life in the region provided German women (as well as men) with opportunities and recognition not available to them in Germany. Much of this was due to the blatant racism practiced in the colony" (p. 95). Women, therefore, also had a special relevance to the process of consolidating settler colonialism with an apartheid orientation of strict racial segregation, and he treats this issue rather solidly. Although Walther has the odd pearl to offer as a result of his own archival research, he misses the chance to explore, in detail, the significance of the debates around the Cramer case, which figures prominently in Mamozai's studies but is totally ignored by Walther. It became a major local scandal when Cramer, a farmer, was brought to court for the mistreatment of "his natives." Cramer was publicly and vehemently defended by his wife. A widely discussed book claims that Cramer acted in self-defense to protect his and his wife's lives, when their "servants" attempted to poison them. Neither the source nor the case is mentioned by Walther, but they would have been relevant to his interest in German identity, since they were linked to the debate over the form(s) of native policy and the treatment of the colonized. Similarly absent from his work is the famous and controversial Blue Book of 1918. This was published by the British government and, subsequently, was accused of being systematic misinformation motivated by British political interests. But it offered a critical account of German colonial practices, and the allegations provoked much anger and dismay among the German speaking community. The British Empire ordered its destruction a decade later. [9]

Walther's style is more descriptive than analytical, which is neither misleading nor wrong. Yet, in addition to being incomplete, the work also misses an opportunity to add marked new insights. The founding of the settler society, a century ago, will be remembered and critically reflected upon during 2004, both in Namibia and Germany, with differing, or even conflicting, ideological perceptions.[10] Unfortunately, Walther has missed an excellent opportunity to offer some impact to an ongoing debate.

Notes

[1]. Klaus R=diger, *Die Namibia-Deutschen. Geschichte einer Nationalit=t im Werden* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993); Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber, *Die abh=ngigen Herren. Deutsche Identit=t in Namibia* (M=nster and Hamburg: LIT, 1993); and *Die verkehrte Hautfarbe. Ethnizit=t deutschsprachiger Namibier als Alltagspraxis* (Berlin: Reimer, 1998). Strangely enough, Walther refers only to Schmidt-Lauber's earlier graduate work, but does not acknowledge the existence of her later Ph.D.

[2]. Walther misses the important analysis by Walter Mogk and Paul Rohrbach, *Das "Gr=ssere Deutschland": Ethischer Imperialismus im Wilhelminischen Zeitalter. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Kulturprotestantismus* (M=nchen: Goldmann, 1972).

[3]. Peter Schmitt-Egner's Ph.D. thesis was published as *Kolonialismus und Faschismus. Eine Studie zur historischen und begrifflichen Genesis faschistischer Bewusstseinsformen am deutschen Beispiel* (Giessen and Lollar: Achenbach, 1975).

[4]. Among those examples, which might have benefited Walther's own aims, are the Ph.D. thesis by Gerda Weinberger, *An den Quellen der Apartheid* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1975).

[5]. Joachim Zeller, *Kolonialdenkm=ler und Geschichtsbewusstsein. Eine Untersuchung der kolonialdeutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Frankfurt/Main: IKO, 2000); as well as an important earlier article "Das Reiterdenkmal in Windhoek/Namibia," *Zeitschrift f=r Geschichtswissenschaft*, 43:9 (1995).

[6]. J=rgen Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft =ber Afrikaner. Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia* (Hamburg: LIT, 2001).

[7]. Rosa B. Schneider, *"Um Scholle und Leben". Zur Konstruktion von "Rasse" und Geschlecht in der deutschen kolonialen Afrikaliteratur um 1900* (Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel, 2003).

[8]. In particular Martha Mamozai, *Schwarze Frau, weisse Herrin: Frauenleben in den deutschen Kolonien* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989). This title was published earlier in 1982 by the same publishing house, as *Herrenmenschen–Frauen im deutschen Kolonialismus.* Mamozai later published additional references in her follow up work, *Komplizinnen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1990).

[9]. The Blue Book of 1918 was always accessible, but has been re-published with comments by Jan-Bart Gewald and Jeremy Silvester, *Words Cannot Be Found. German Colonial Rule in Namibia: An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[10]. See among the noteworthy and forthcoming publications, J=rgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, eds., *V=lkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904-1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 2003). Larissa F=rster and Dag Henrichsen are editing a publication (as yet untitled) in conjunction with the exhibition entitled "Namibia-Deutschland: eine geteilte Geschichte. Widerstand–Gewalt–Erinnerung," to be held early in 2004 at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne.

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