

**Casper W. Erichsen.** *"The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently among Them";: Concentration Camps and Prisoners-of-War in Namibia, 1904-1908.* Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2005. xvi + 170 pp. EUR 10.00, paper, ISBN 978-90-5448-064-8.

**Reviewed by** Rob Gordon

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Reader be forewarned. Do not dismiss this monograph because of the sloppy typographical and editing errors that abound in this account. This study, the product of more than four years research, is based on the first Masters thesis in History presented at the University of Namibia. Its author, a Dane, is a long-time resident of the country who has been heavily involved in promoting "activist history" and this monograph reflects that concern well.

The monograph consists of four chapters of which the first two are by far the longest. The first, "Konzentrationslager," fifty-eight pages long, sets the context. It describes the War of 1904-07, the controversial Extermination Order, the war in the south against the Nama, and the sociology and economic role of prisoner of war camps—paying particular attention to the camps in Windhoek and Swakopmund. Boxes offering vignettes on diverse topics like "Bambusen" (youthful man-servants) and "Orion's warrior" provide valuable supplemental information. The second chapter, "The Island of Death," provides the major focus. In sixty-four pages it gives a detailed description of the horrifying conditions on Shark Island, the camp abutting the southern desert port of Luderitzbucht. This chapter is also supplemented with informative boxes on diverse matters. After describing the history of Luderitzbucht, Erichsen describes the make-up of the camp, which was used

to house both Herero, and increasingly, Nama prisoners. A discussion on mortality rates precedes an analysis of the "anatomy of evil." Much use is made of photographic evidence to establish the author's case. The third chapter, only around eight pages, deals with the issue of responsibility. It attempts to discuss who was to blame for setting up the camps and points out that some officials were deeply offended by the institutions. A brief four-page conclusion suggests that prisoners were kept on the island despite soaring mortality rates "because they might otherwise go and tell others of German trickery." Erichsen deduces that there is much validity in the conclusions reached in the controversial South African government's 1918 *Report on the Natives of South-West Africa and Their Treatment by Germany*.

There is much that is frustrating in this short study, especially the crying need for good copy editing, the lack of attribution of the sources of photographs, and the sometimes irritatingly naïve captions provided for the photographs. But the value of the study far outweighs these irritations. Most work on the 1904-07 War are characterized by an Herero-centric focus and this study starts to broaden the perspective. Moreover, most studies in English are based on secondary sources and a recycling of Horst Drechsler's rather dated work. Erichsen's research is based largely on primary sources found in the National Archives in Wind-

hoek. He is to be commended for bringing these documents to the attention of a wider audience by translating them into English, not his native language.

But there is yet another strength. The famous British Soviet spy, Kim Philby, once claimed that the most important activity he undertook was cruising the diplomatic cocktail, circuit because that allowed him to interpret the documents he photographed. Already in 1909, Governor Leutwein's brother, Paul Leutwein, noted that there was a world of difference between what was claimed in government documents and what was happening in the colonizer-colonized interface. By actually visiting the area--the scenes of the crimes, as it were--and critically examining what remains of photographs, newspaper reports, and other arcane, Erichsen offers a monograph with a solid sense of place and credibility.

Writing with passion but without sentimentality, Erichsen provides the reader with a renewed sense of sorrow, anger, and pity for Namibia's "forgotten" victims. With a motion dealing with German genocide in Namibia currently wending its way through the German parliament, this is a very timely contribution to the study of genocide.

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