

The Comforts of Provincialism: The History and Future of Colonial Memory in Germany

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The escalation of violence in Israel-Palestine after October 7, 2023, raised difficult questions in Germany about how the country's history of genocidal violence influences its foreign policy and official commemorative culture. Former German colonies such as Namibia, where German colonizers committed the first genocide of the twentieth century, against the Herero and Nama from 1904 to 1908, criticized Germany's support for Israel and its lack of criticism of the Israeli response in Gaza by invoking the legacy of German colonial violence. Within Germany, October 7 exposed the strictures imposed by the so-called *Staatsräson*, which since 2008 has transformed Israel's security from a foreign policy objective into a central purpose of state. As a result, calls for recognizing colonial violence in Germany's memorial culture have been dismissed as misguided, or even antisemitic, challenges to the singularity of the Holocaust. Such dismissals in the press or academic circles have all too often been accompanied by a significant lack of knowledge about the shifting place of the Holocaust in postcolonial thought, particularly in Africa.¹ Rather than revisit these gridlocked debates, this article examines one of the issues that has

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1. See, for example, Brewing and Fischer, "Einführung"; on African views of the Holocaust, see Kissi, *Africans*.

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fueled disagreement over the Holocaust's singularity, that is, the ongoing German inability to conceive of colonial history from the standpoint of the (formerly) colonized.

In what follows, I analyze the impact of October 7 on Germany's recent efforts to atone for its history of colonial mass violence and to reorient its official commemoration culture in light of the country's increasingly diverse population. In a second step, I situate these efforts in the larger historical trajectory of African demands for self-determination since 1918 and the persistent German refusal to contend with perspectives on colonization that differ from European ones. I argue that, despite an increased engagement with the colonial past over the last decades, current debates reflect long-standing continuities in how German politicians, historians, and the wider public have engaged with the history of the colonial empire. Since the loss of the colonies in 1919, Germans have framed the colonial question mainly as a German question in light of the country's shifting geopolitical role in the world. Rather than engage with the diverse perspectives on the colonial past in formerly colonized societies, assessments of Germany's colonial history remain trapped in a comfortable provincialism that fails to appreciate the lasting impact of colonization in and outside Europe.² This provincialism has reduced debates about colonial history to narrow issues such as the means of extermination, the comparative number of victims, and circular arguments over continuities between the Namibian and Nazi genocides. As a result, German observers have failed to take seriously the intellectual traditions of societies such as the Herero and Nama as well as the inextricably entangled nature of histories of genocide in the twentieth century.

Reconciliation Redux

The crisis following the terrorist attack of October 7, 2023, pushed Germany to a reckoning about its colonial memory. This reckoning had immediate causes, but it also reflected long-term trends in Germany's memorial culture and relationship with its former colonies. Throughout the crisis, Germany supported Israel, while also seeking a negotiated solution to the conflict and an end to the escalating violence against civilians in Gaza. This position contrasted with that of many countries in the global South, whose support of Palestinians reflected their shared struggle for self-determination over the course of the twentieth century. Most notably, on December 29, 2023, South Africa charged

2. In adopting the term *provincialism*, I build on Zimmerer and Rothberg, "Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!"

Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with committing genocide in Gaza. Soon after, the German government joined Israel as a third party in its defense against South Africa's charge. On January 12, 2024, it announced: "In view of Germany's history, crimes against humanity, and the Shoah, the government is particularly committed to the UN Genocide Convention" and that, as a result, it "expressly and determinatively rejects" the South African charge of genocide.³

Germany's support for Israel at the ICJ has exposed it to the criticism of some of its former colonies that suffered under German colonial violence. Two days after the German press statement, the late Namibian president Hage Geingob criticized Germany's "untimely decision to intervene as a third-party in defense" of Israel in the ICJ trial. He pointed out that Germany could not "morally express commitment to the United Nations Convention against Genocide, including atonement for the genocide in Namibia" while also supporting Israel.⁴ Geingob's critique reflected long-held tenets in Namibia's foreign policy that emerged from its twofold experience of settler colonization by Germany (1884–1915) and South Africa (1915–90). Namibia's governing party, the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO), emerged in the struggle against the South African apartheid regime after 1948, during which it developed ties of solidarity with other peoples struggling for self-determination, including the Palestinians. In 1981, for example, SWAPO's representative at the United Nations (UN), Theo-Ben Gurirab, hailed the struggle of Palestinians. He argued: "Apartheid South Africa and Zionist Israel have over a period of many years adopted criminal policies and practices based on racial supremacy, colonialism and the systematic eviction of the people from their ancestral lands, exiling hundreds of thousands of them and making them foreigners in their own land."⁵ Gurirab's speech reflected the rise of settler colonialism and apartheid as critical frameworks for characterizing Israel's occupation of the West Bank after the publication of Fayeze Sayegh's study *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* in 1965.⁶ After an initial period of outreach up to the 1960s, African countries and liberation movements severed ties with Israel following the 1968 and 1973 wars and henceforth supported the Palestinians.⁷ SWAPO maintained this support after Namibian independence in 1990, repeatedly calling for a two-state

3. Bundesregierung, "Erklärung der Bundesregierung." All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

4. Namibian Presidency, "Namibia Rejects Germany's Support."

5. United Nations General Assembly, "Statement by Theo-Ben Gurirab."

6. Fischer, "Palestinian Non-Violent Resistance."

7. For an overview of these relationships, see Gidron, *Israel in Africa*.

solution.⁸ As the current president of the Namibian National Assembly and historian Peter Katjavivi has observed: “Namibia’s foreign policy has been shaped by its liberation struggle.”⁹

This support for Palestine extends beyond the Namibian government. In January 2024 two of the main Herero and Nama chiefs’ organizations, the Ovaherero Traditional Authority and the Nama Traditional Leaders Authority, declared their solidarity with Palestinians. While emphasizing their people’s affinity with “the Jewish people as survivors of a German genocide,” they explained that their stance was based on “the colonized Palestinians experiencing ongoing settler colonial occupation, apartheid and genocide since the Nakba of 1948.”¹⁰ Rather than antisemitism or a denial of Israel’s right to exist, Namibians’ adoption of the language of settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide to criticize the situation in Israel-Palestine reflects the living memory and political legacy of their own country’s protracted colonial occupation.

At the same time, President Geingob’s insistence that Germany has “yet to fully atone for the genocide it committed on Namibian soil” reminded the international community of the two countries’ ongoing negotiations over an official German apology for the genocide of 1904–8. In 2015 both sides began government-to-government negotiations after more than two decades of concerted activism by Namibian and German civil society groups. These negotiations culminated in the Joint Declaration of May 2021, which included an envisaged official German apology for the genocide and 1.1 billion euros in development aid to the affected communities.¹¹ Although the declaration marked an accomplishment for the Namibian reparations movement—no former colonial power has even come close to being held accountable in this way—its announcement caused a storm of protest in Namibia.

While representatives of the Herero and Nama participated in the negotiations—most notably in the figure of lead negotiator and historian Zedekia Ngavirue—they were seen as too aligned with the SWAPO government and its vested interest in cordial bilateral relations with Germany. Over the past decades, the Ovaherero Traditional Authority and the Nama Traditional Leaders Authority have criticized the initial refusal and later only half-hearted embrace of the genocide issue by successive SWAPO administrations.¹² Both organizations insist that any negotiations should be based on Paramount Chief Kuaima

8. See, for example, Geingob, “Statement.”

9. Katjavivi, “Namibia’s Bilateral Relations,” 136.

10. OTA and NTLA, “Statement of Solidarity.”

11. On the negotiations, see Melber, “Germany and Namibia”; on the agreement, see Melber, “Germany and Reparations.”

12. See Melber, *Long Shadow*.

Riruako's initial motion to the Namibian Parliament in 2006, which stipulated that a dialogue on the genocide should involve "on the one hand, the German Government and on the other, the Namibian Government and representatives of the affected parties."¹³ When the details of the Joint Declaration were announced, even traditional leaders such as Chief Tjiņaani Maharero, who had supported the government until then, called for the declaration's renegotiation.¹⁴ Herero and Nama representatives rejected the agreement because of the German side's refusal to unreservedly call the events of 1904–8 a genocide, the declaration's evasion of the term *reparations*, its insufficient financial compensation offer, and the exclusion of more community representatives from the negotiations.¹⁵

Since then, pressure by Herero and Nama leaders forced both sides to resume negotiations, which were reportedly concluded in November 2024.¹⁶ However, the subsequent collapse of the German traffic light coalition and election of a new government have delayed the signing of a final agreement. The renegotiated Joint Declaration constitutes an improvement compared to the first version. It removes the initial cap on financial compensation at 1.1 billion euros, replaces the paternalizing language of "grants" with more appropriate language about "atonement," and makes members of the Herero and Nama diasporas in Botswana and South Africa eligible to receive compensation.¹⁷ As such, the declaration would undoubtedly become an important landmark in the global history of restorative justice for colonialism and slavery.

However, it remains unlikely that the renegotiated declaration will resolve the issue of colonial memory. The leading Nama and Herero chiefs' councils have already rejected the revised draft over Germany's refusal to directly negotiate with them and the German side's continued avoidance of the term *reparations*.¹⁸ In turn, the new German government of Chancellor Friedrich Merz affirmed on August 14, 2025, that it would not pay "reparations" (*Wiedergutmachung*) to former colonies because this would imply the violation of international obligations, which purportedly did not exist at the time the colonial crimes were committed.¹⁹ Moreover, Germany and Namibia will continue to find themselves on opposite sides of South Africa's ICJ case against Israel. On January 31, 2025,

13. Riruako, "Motion on Ovaherero Genocide."

14. Peterson and Ngatjiheuethe, "Chiefs Divided."

15. See, for example, *Windhoek Observer*, "Chiefs' Assembly."

16. Peterson, "Namibia-Germany."

17. Thomas, "Genocide."

18. Pelz, "Herero and Nama."

19. Deutscher Bundestag, "Antwort." For a dissenting perspective, see Goldmann, "Ambiguity."

Namibia's justice minister Yvonne Dausab announced that the country would join South Africa's charge of genocide against Israel, potentially complicating future bilateral relations with Germany.²⁰

Apart from Namibia, the impact of the situation in Israel-Palestine on memories of German colonial rule is less clear-cut. Tanzania, which in October 2023 also entered negotiations with Germany over compensation for the Maji Maji War of 1905–7, was the first African country, in 1973, to recognize Palestine.²¹ However, Tanzania has not joined the ICJ case. Rather, President Samia Hassan has condemned all forms of violence and called for a ceasefire and adherence to the two-state solution. In this respect, the country's tradition of nonalignment outweighs its commitment to solidarity with peoples struggling for self-determination.²² While it condemned the October 7 attack on Israel, Rwanda has supplied humanitarian aid to Gazans and called for the protection of civilians.²³ Burundi voted against a UN General Assembly motion that would have condemned Hamas.²⁴ On the other side of the political spectrum, Cameroon has sided firmly with Israel because President Paul Biya has based his security strategy on cooperation with the state since taking power in 1982.²⁵ Similarly, Togo abstained from voting on a nonbinding UN resolution that called for a ceasefire in Gaza and, in 2017, voted for recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.²⁶ Both cases illustrate the militarization and securitization of African nations' relationship with Israel since the 1980s.²⁷ Except for Namibia, none of the former German colonies have criticized Germany for its handling of the Gaza crisis. What distinguishes Namibia's stance on Palestine from that of other former German colonies is the combined experience of genocidal violence and the expropriation of their resulting from its long history of settler colonial occupation, the effects of which continue to this day.

The Future of Commemoration

Just as October 7 complicated Germany's attempt to conclude negotiations with Namibia over the genocide of 1904–8, its violence equally reverberated

20. De Klerk, "Namibia, Others Unite."

21. Tanzanian historians such as Musa Sadock of the University of Dar es Salaam see the negotiations as Germany's attempt to ensure the long-term prosperity of its economy and access to resources. See Msuya, "Wasomi."

22. Kibwana, "Making Sense."

23. Mugisha, "Rwanda Sends Humanitarian Aid."

24. UN News, "United States–Led Amendment."

25. Foute, "Paul Biya."

26. Avoulete, "Togo Is Walking a Tightrope."

27. Gidron, *Israel in Africa*.

in domestic debates about the memory of colonialism. The charges of genocide against Israel as well as the widespread use of the concepts of settler colonialism and apartheid by its critics have reignited debates of the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0* in 2020–22 about the commensurability of colonial violence and the Holocaust.²⁸ In February 2024 Minister of State for Cultural Affairs Claudia Roth presented draft plans for the reorganization of the country's commemoration strategy. The plans were based on the coalition agreement of Social Democrats, Liberals, and Greens concluded in December 2021. While maintaining the focus on the Nazi period and the East German Communist regime as main pillars, the draft "framework memory culture" (*Rahmenkonzept Erinnerungskultur*) advocated for the inclusion of colonialism, immigration, and the history of democracy as additional pillars into Germany's official public memory.²⁹

The document's introduction affirmed the central status of Nazi crimes to national history. It declared that, as a "breach of civilization," the "crime against humanity of the Shoah [*Menschheitsverbrechen*] and the crimes of National Socialism take up a *unique* role in German memory culture."³⁰ Roth again affirmed the singularity of the Holocaust, albeit indirectly, when explaining that her framework emerged from the desire to tackle an increase in challenges to the Holocaust's uniqueness from the Right and the Left, as well as from within migrant communities.³¹ At the same time, her framework described the commemoration of East Germany's communist dictatorship as a "principal" (*wesentlich*) part of any future government strategy.³² Although Roth proposed an ambitious expansion of Germany's public memory, the framework did not entail any federal financial commitments to the new proposed foci of colonialism, immigration, and democracy. Indeed, the draft repeatedly stressed that the federal government could ultimately play only a coordinating role, since most remembrance initiatives emerged within local municipalities or individual states anyway.³³ Finally, the framework emphasized it was a mere "starting point in a broad discussion process" and "only a beginning" to further steps that would be taken over the following year.³⁴

Despite the framework's modest ambitions, it created an intense backlash. In April 2024 the heads of commemoration sites for National Socialism

28. On these debates see Neiman and Wildt, *Historiker Streiten*.

29. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*.

30. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*, 2; emphasis added.

31. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*, 14.

32. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*, 2.

33. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*, 3, 39.

34. BKM, *Entwurf zum Rahmenkonzept*, 3.

and the East German communist regime vehemently rejected Roth's plans.³⁵ Anxiety about insufficient finances—which has become more acute in times of austerity and the effects of the country's constitutional debt brake—was one motivation behind this backlash. Yet the critique's vehemence can be understood only if it is seen in the larger context of discussions about postcolonialism's supposedly inherent antisemitism, which intensified after October 7.³⁶ Even after several rounds of debate with Roth, a head of one commemoration site complained that her framework remained "influenced by that strand of postcolonialism that denies the singularity of the Shoah."³⁷ Similarly, Josef Schuster, head of the Central Association of German Jews, also insisted that the framework risked relativizing the Holocaust by including the memory of colonialism.³⁸ After meeting with the heads of several commemoration sites in June 2024, Roth clarified once again that the Holocaust and East German dictatorship would remain the central pillars of government public memory strategy.³⁹ Roth thereby backtracked on the *Rahmenkonzept's* innovative promise to include the history of colonialism in the nation's public memory. Two points of criticism by opponents of Roth's framework are worth examining in greater detail. The first is the funding crisis affecting commemoration sites. Directors understandably fear that additional foci of national remembrance could jeopardize their already insufficient budgets at a time when many of the physical remnants of Nazi extermination policies are crumbling. Yet the fact that the Nazi camps need to maintain their infrastructure for future generations would not change, regardless of whether the new pillars would be included in a new commemoration strategy. The problem, then, is not the previous government's alleged endeavor to deprioritize the Holocaust in national history. The problem arises from the shackles of austerity that the constitutional debt brake has imposed on any future investment, whether in the form of infrastructure, research, or civil society-led remembrance.

The second major point of criticism of Roth's strategy concerns its purported attempt to impose a vague new memory culture from above. In this view, the draft hewed to *en vogue* postcolonial theories and diversity imperatives while trivializing the core of modern German national identity.⁴⁰ Proponents

35. Kilb, "Ein Lernort."

36. On the rising tendency to equate the concepts of postcolonialism and antisemitism, see Sebastian Conrad's contribution in this special issue.

37. Zeller, "Die Shoah."

38. Zeller, "Die Shoah."

39. Zeller, "Die Shoah."

40. Zeller, "Der Berliner Erinnerungseintopf."

of this view ignore that since the 1980s a lively bottom-up culture of commemorating and, more importantly, researching colonialism has emerged across the country—from efforts to decolonize street names to uncovering the history of sites associated with colonial racism, such as the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin.⁴¹ Many of these initiatives evolved from activism by Afro-Germans, particularly Afro-German women, and other communities experiencing racism.⁴² Far from dictating a new “woke” standard of commemoration, Roth’s paper merely reflected the dynamism of Germany’s commemorative social movements over the past four decades.

Most critics have been careful not to reject the commemoration of colonialism, immigration, and democracy out of hand, emphasizing that all three deserve further attention and historical research.⁴³ Yet none of the critics have answered what this could look like in practice beyond decentralized local initiatives. By the end of 2023, approximately 30 percent of Germany’s inhabitants had a history of migration.⁴⁴ In March 2025 the National Discrimination and Racism Monitor found that more than 60 percent of these communities face quotidian forms of racism.⁴⁵ The sites commemorating Nazi and communist rule have already adapted their programs to address this issue and their more diverse audience. However, it would be unfair to push the responsibility for addressing that audience’s manifold interests and the problem of racism onto the sites commemorating the Nazi and communist dictatorships. There are obvious areas where this makes sense—for example, the comparative history of racialization, the decline of Weimar democracy, and the experience of discrimination. But given that the commemoration sites have limited personnel and budgets, it would be unrealistic to expect that they could fully represent the depth of Germany’s history of immigration, democracy, and colonialism. By fostering a holistic “historical consciousness” (*Geschichtsbewusstsein*) among all citizens, additional sites on these themes could in fact strengthen the work of the existing commemoration sites of the Nazi and communist regimes by allowing them to continue to focus on their core remit.⁴⁶

41. On street names, see Schilling, “Afterlives of Colonialism”; on the institute, see Bauche et al., “Geschichte der Ihnstraße 22.” See also the project’s website <https://erinnerungsort-ihnstrasse.de/en/> (accessed September 4, 2025).

42. For a history of this activism, see Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany*.

43. See, for example, the comments of Norbert Frei in Köhler, “Claudia Roths Geschichtspolitik.”

44. Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, “Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund.”

45. Pfeifer, “Racism.”

46. *Geschichtsbewusstsein* involves critical research in and understanding of history, as opposed to mere superficial memorialization. See Norbert Frei’s comments in Köhler, “Claudia Roths Geschichtspolitik.”

A potential revision of Roth's framework, however, has been rendered moot by the Merz government. After the elections of February 2025, the coalition of Christian and Social Democrats abandoned the idea of incorporating colonialism into the nation's public memory.⁴⁷ The new minister of state for cultural affairs, Wolfram Weimer, asserted that because the colonial empire "did not unfold on German soil" and the nation still lacked a central "place of remembrance," it occupied a "different category" than the Holocaust. Whereas Weimer thereby ignored decades of research, which established that the colonies had a far-reaching impact in the metropole, he conceded that the government should continue to support a "coming to terms with the colonial past" by concluding negotiations with Namibia and Tanzania as well as by returning human remains and cultural objects.⁴⁸ Ultimately, however, he insisted that any incorporation of colonialism into the country's commemorative framework would relativize the Holocaust.⁴⁹ Weimer's declaration illustrates that expanding Germany's public memory to encompass colonialism ultimately requires more than just additional funding for infrastructure, staff, and research. It would require a fundamental shift in how all Germans approach the country's colonial past, including the ways in which migrants and their history can become an active part of public memory infrastructure.

Comforts of Provincialism

Such a shift has not yet occurred. For much of the past century, the country's colonial history has remained—methodologically and analytically—German history. This myopia resembles Germans' engagement with the destruction of European Jews after 1945. In his analysis of the 1986 *Historikerstreit*, Anson Rabinbach argued that Germans continued to interpret the question of the Holocaust and Jewish life in postwar Germany through the German question in world politics produced by defeat and the Cold War. Despite shifts in how West German historians, politicians, and the wider public saw the Nazi past, these changes remained characterized by the co-optation of Holocaust memory into the quest to normalize and expand the Federal Republic's sovereignty.⁵⁰

The memory of German colonialism has suffered a similar fate, albeit reaching back as far as the First World War. For the past century, assessments of the country's colonial history have remained circumscribed by Germany's

47. Neumann, "Sein Gedenken."

48. On the colonial empire's impact in the metropole see, for example, Zimmerer and Todzi, *Ham-burg*; Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany*; Conrad, *German Colonialism*.

49. Reinhard and Schaper, "Kulturstaatsminister im Gespräch."

50. Rabinbach, "Jewish Question."

wider political shifts and the resulting inability to consider African interpretations of colonization on their own terms. The genocide of the Herero and Nama is a case in point. To be sure, the warping of colonial memory through concerns about German sovereignty was not tantamount to a silencing of colonial history. The genocide of 1904–8 has remained a subject of public debates since the colonial period. But as Christiane Bürger has demonstrated, the resulting controversies never amounted to a cultural and epistemological decolonization of the underlying premises of German national identity.⁵¹

Superficially, Germany's colonial memory can be divided into three major periods. From the First World War to 1945, the abrupt curtailment of German overseas expansion by the Treaty of Versailles nurtured a racist conviction in the superiority of the German race that had been illegitimately deprived of its right to colonize. This conviction resulted in colonial revisionism's becoming the parliamentary consensus in the Weimar Republic, uniting radical *völkisch* nationalists with centrist social democrats.⁵² Throughout this period, the voices of the colonized remained raw material that was used to reclaim Germany's great-power status. For example, much of the German revisionist movement drew on opposition to Britain's *Report on the Natives of South West Africa* (1919), also called the *Blue Book*. Although intended to undermine German claims to its colonies at the Paris peace conference, the *Blue Book* contained testimony by survivors of the Herero and Nama genocide that has been corroborated by subsequent historical research.⁵³ Germany's official reply, the *White Book* of 1919, completely ignored this testimony, arguing that the Herero and Nama were a race of compulsive liars unable to understand the nature of their statements under oath.⁵⁴ Instead, it emphasized the positive view of German colonization held by many British colonial officials, politicians, and experts.⁵⁵ The *White Book* became foundational for the "colonial guilt lie," the purportedly unjust indictment of Germany as a failed colonial power by the Allies.⁵⁶ For the next two decades, the colonial guilt lie stood at the center of Weimar and Nazi revisionism.

51. Bürger, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte(n)*, 13. On colonial memory in general, see Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany*.

52. On the forging of this consensus during the revolution of 1918–19, see Krautwald et al., "Fighting Marginality," 19–20.

53. Gewalt and Silvester, *Words Cannot Be Found*.

54. Reichskolonialamt, *Die Behandlung*, 42–44.

55. Reichskolonialamt, *Die Behandlung*, 7–10.

56. This term was popularized by the last governor of German East Africa. See Schnee, *Die koloniale Schuldfrage*.

Germany's defeat in 1945 ushered in the second period in colonial memory, which was defined by the country's diminished status and need to navigate the Cold War. Within this context, the colonial past became a positive reference point in West Germany to a bygone era that could be used to advance the new state's global role. Successive governments presented Germany as the opposite of a colonial power and as a purported natural partner to newly decolonizing African nations.⁵⁷ Critical approaches to the country's colonial past, such as Ralph Giordano's pathbreaking TV documentary *Heia Safari* (1966–67), marked an important counterpoint.⁵⁸ However, they usually drowned in invectives by colonial nostalgics. Former members of the colonial troops criticized the documentary as “slander” and as “defamatory.”⁵⁹ And while the student movement protested or even toppled some colonial statues in the 1960s, these instances of a rejection of colonial nostalgia remained limited to erstwhile centers of the colonial enterprise such as Hamburg.⁶⁰ In East Germany, meanwhile, historians with access to the colonial records helped initiate a more critical approach to the colonial past that sought to emphasize Africans' agency in shaping their own history.⁶¹ At the same time, their studies accorded Africans little power to resist a seemingly all-powerful onslaught of European colonization and were not interested in spaces beyond its reach in the social, cultural, and intellectual realms that did not fit ideas of a teleological class struggle.⁶²

Finally, the third period in colonial memory began with German reunification and the global reordering after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1990, a sea change in the country's colonial memory has unfolded. This change has mainly come about because of pressure by Namibian activists and allied organizations in Africa, the United States, and Europe for the recognition of the 1904–8 genocide. As a result, successive governments and most political parties and public institutions began recognizing, albeit often only rhetorically, the detrimental and lasting effects of colonial rule on African societies.⁶³ Yet the tendency to treat the memory of German colonialism within the comforts of provincialism still extends to the present. Germany's newfound reckoning

57. Büschel, *Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe*.

58. Michels, “Kennwort: ‘Askarispende,’” 284–89.

59. Meyer, “Heia Safari”; *Mitteilungsblatt des Traditionsverbandes ehemaliger Schutz- und Übersee-truppen*, “Wiederschensfeier 1967 in Stuttgart,” 33.

60. Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany*, 133–54.

61. See, for example, Büttner, “Development.”

62. Encapsulated in the notion of the “silence of the graveyard” after the genocide in Namibia. See Drechsler, *Südwestafrika*, 260.

63. Krautwald, “Zeitenwende for Whom.” The far-right Alternative für Deutschland is an exception to this trend. See Hyslop, “Kaiser's Lost African Empire.”

with the colonial past forms part of the country's technocratic development strategy to secure markets in Africa.⁶⁴ The debate about Claudia Roth's framework included criticism not only from laypeople such as Wolfram Weimer but also from noted historians who questioned the rationale of commemorating colonialism in Germany when the major sites of that history occurred far from German shores, ignoring the role of institutions such as Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in colonial racial science and genocide.⁶⁵

At the same time, much of the research on German colonialism has focused on perpetrators, which has made it difficult to accord space to the perspectives of affected societies. In this respect, the historiography of German colonialism resembles the division in Holocaust historiography between histories of the Final Solution, which tend to focus on German actors, and histories of the Shoah, which balance a focus on destruction with perspectives from Jewish communities.⁶⁶ This is most pronounced in the interminable relitigation of the continuity thesis.⁶⁷ The idea of a path from Windhoek to Auschwitz was transformative because it drew attention to the Namibian genocide and the colonial dimensions of Nazi imperialism. Yet since the end of the initial debate over a decade ago, discussions about the relationship between colonial and Nazi rule have not entailed any new empirical research and have thereby occluded a deeper understanding of the impact of the genocide on affected societies. The cognitive recusal from non-Western views of history extends to the popular sphere. Recent cinematic interpretations of the 1904–8 genocide continue to be centered on German perspectives. Lars Kraume's film *Measures of Men*, a necessary attempt to reckon with the racism and inherent contradictions of the colonial project, received widespread attention after its debut in 2023.⁶⁸ Yet reviews of the Namibian film *Under the Hanging Tree* by the director and historian Perivi Katjavivi, which appeared the same year, remain rare.⁶⁹

Beyond Epistemic Recusal: Lessons from African History

What would an approach to Germany's colonial history look like that does not exhaust itself in a myopic narcissism in which remembrance of the colonial

64. Heinze, "Technocratic Reformulation."

65. Reinhard and Schaper, "Kulturstaatsminister im Gespräch"; on criticism by historians see, for example, Wagner, "Sorge um den Erhalt."

66. Pendas, "'Final Solution,' Holocaust," 34–35.

67. For a recent example, see Wagner, "Historikerstreit 2.0?" On the continuity thesis, see the foundational Zimmerer and Zeller, *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika*.

68. For an insightful analysis of the film, see Kandukira, "Being When Meant," 108–25.

69. Some reviews include Steinhof, "Jagd"; and Katjavivi, "Geschichte." On film as historical method in researching colonialism, see Katjavivi, "Hanging Tree."

past ultimately reinscribes the difference between *us* and *them*? Any such attempt must be based on a radical repositioning, in which the starting point lies in |Ai-|Gams and Otjomuise, not Berlin; in writings by African intellectuals such as Gottfried Tjiharine's *Omasanekero (Comparisons)*, not Gustav Frenssen's *Peter Mohrs Fahrt nach Südwest*; and in the acknowledgment that societies affected by mass violence remember this history differently than perpetrator societies.⁷⁰

In the case of the Herero and Nama genocide, this would first mean acknowledging how out of touch German understandings of the genocide have remained with Namibian ones. In contrast to the murder of European Jewry, Germans have not referred to the Herero and Nama genocide by the names used by the affected communities. European Jews already began using the biblical term *shoah* during the 1930s to describe the impact of German anti-Jewish campaigns.⁷¹ Although survivors also used other terms, the Israeli state by the early 1950s adopted *the Shoah* as the official term to describe the events between 1933 and 1945, which subsequently affected how outsiders, including Germans, engaged with its history.⁷² After 1960, the non-Jewish term *Holocaust* rose in use as a result of the Adolf Eichmann trial, increased research into Nazi extermination policies, and the publication of Eli Wiesel's *Night*.⁷³ Both concepts have since shaped the direction of historical research as well as how the wider German public understood Nazi extermination policies.

A commensurate epistemic shift has not occurred in the historiography of German colonialism, let alone German public memory. For most of the past century, 1904–8 has continued to be referred to as a “rebellion,” an “insurrection,” and “war” in the German historical imagination. Over the past two decades, new scholarship and public activism by Namibians have conclusively established 1904–8 as a genocide. Although this legal term has advanced the comparative study of genocidal violence and enabled descendants to demand reparations, it does not entail the same perspectival shift carried by concepts such as the Shoah.⁷⁴ One way to signal that historians and German public memory take seriously the agency of the affected communities would be to acknowledge the concepts through which they have sought to understand them. Nama communities, for example, have referred to 1904–8 as *!gamʼui*,

70. For a valuable step in this direction, see Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen Begreifen*.

71. Michman, “Why Is the Shoah,” 237.

72. Michman, “Why Is the Shoah,” 238, 240.

73. Michman, “Why Is the Shoah,” 246.

74. On the colonial turn in the history of National Socialism, see Gordon and O’Sullivan, *Colonial Paradigms of Violence*; on Namibian activism see Kössler, *Namibia and Germany*.

a composite term that has come to denote extermination.⁷⁵ Its root verb *!gam* means “to kill” or “to murder,” while the suffix *†ui* denotes “out.” A literal translation of the term thus means removing someone or something from their habitat through murder.⁷⁶ A rich area for future research concerns the *Begriffsgeschichte* of terms such as *!gam†ui*.⁷⁷

A second necessary step in ending Germans’ epistemic recusal from non-European perspectives on the colonial past would be to accept that societies in Africa and elsewhere grappled with the aftermath of colonization long before Germans even began to consider whether the colonial period might have left a lasting imprint on their own society. Beginning in the concentration camps, survivors of the Herero and Nama genocide placed their experience in biblical terms to reassure themselves of the possibility of redemption.⁷⁸ The fear of a repeat of the violence of 1904–8 was so palpable that it convinced survivors to support their new colonial power, South Africa, during the Second World War. In 1939 the Herero leader Hosea Kutako warned young recruits in the mining town of Tsumeb that “they didn’t know how bad things really were” under the Germans, and that they needed to help beat Nazi Germany to prevent Namibia from returning to German rule.⁷⁹

The legacy of the genocide, especially the complete loss of land, shaped nationalist politics, too. After its founding in 1959, the first Namibian nationalist party, the South West Africa National Union (SWANU), adopted the Otjherero slogan “*Patji ngarikotoke*,” that is, “A new dawn [has come], the land will be returned.”⁸⁰ Similar to this reference to colonial land theft, the party’s program set the independence movement in a direct genealogy with the genocide of 1904–8, describing the surrounding conflict as “the GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR against German barbarism at the turn of this century.”⁸¹ The interpretation of the genocide as part of a retroactive narrative of a struggle for self-determination provided the framework for early comparisons of 1904–8 with the Shoah. In August 1960 the SWANU president Fanuel Kozonguizi compared both events in an

75. For an early example of the meaning of the term’s constitutive parts, see Kroenlein, *Wortschatz*, 90, 321; for its more recent meaning, see Biwa, “Weaving the Past,” 61.

76. Olpp, *Nama-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 28, 35; Haacke and Eiseb, *Khoekhoegowab*, 309, 518. I am grateful to Memory Biwa, Wilfrid Haacke, and Mercia Kandukira for helping me understand this term.

77. For first steps in such a history of Herero concepts of genocide, see Krautwald, “Genocide and the Politics” as well as Krautwald, “Branches of Memory.”

78. Krautwald, “Past Will Set You Free,” 392–94.

79. Krautwald, “Genocide and the Politics,” 814.

80. SWANU, *Basic Documents*.

81. SWANU, *Basic Documents*, 16.

address on Radio Beijing, arguing that the attempted “extermination” of the Herero and Nama was of “the same savage magnitude” as “the attempt to eliminate the Jews in Germany.”⁸² Kozonguizi’s point was not to trivialize the Shoah but to emphasize that its singular impact on Jews could be likened to the disastrous impact of 1904–8 on the Herero and Nama, of whom at least one-third perished in the genocide.⁸³

Kozonguizi was not alone in drawing such comparisons. Indeed, Namibians’ struggle for self-determination encapsulates what has been called the “palimpsestic” and “multidirectional” character of remembrance.⁸⁴ Starting in 1956, exiled Namibian activists, including Kozonguizi, likened the impact of 1904–8 to the Shoah in their petitions to and speeches before the United Nations to criticize the racial discrimination and land alienation under South African apartheid. In 1965, for example, the leading petitioner Mburumba Kerina explained the genocide of 1904–8 to the General Assembly’s Fourth Committee, which was responsible for decolonization, by stating: “This German imperialist campaign to provide *lebensraum* for the so-called ‘Master Race’ in Africa was a prelude to Hitler’s Nazi campaign thirty years later in Europe and now being repeated again on the peoples of South and South-West Africa by [South African Prime Minister Hendrik] Verword’s imperialist supported, Nazi-Apartheid military machine.”⁸⁵ In addition to taking advantage of the global condemnation of Nazism after 1945, the rhetoric of the petitioners was based on an appreciation that settler colonial ideas underpinned the German-colonial, Nazi, and apartheid projects.⁸⁶ This activism—and its potential to engender solidarity—were severely circumscribed within Namibia, where German Namibians rejected analogies between 1904–8 and the Holocaust.⁸⁷ But the work of the petitioners became the seedbed for the restorative justice politics that we still see today. SWANU, for example, was the first party to pursue reparations from Germany. As early as the 1980s, party members consulted the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement about preparing a reparations case against West Germany.⁸⁸

The Namibian historian Memory Biwa has noted that “much of the debate on genocide in Namibia has been centered around figures of deaths on

82. Krautwald, “Genocide and the Politics,” 818.

83. Kuss, *German Colonial Wars*, 44.

84. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

85. Kerina, “Question of South West Africa.”

86. On petitioners’ memory politics, see Krautwald, “Genocide and the Politics.”

87. Krautwald, “Branches of Memory,” 172–77.

88. Gewalt, “Imperial Germany,” 71.

the battlefield, in the desert, the actual number of German soldiers in the country or the death toll of prisoners in concentration camps.”⁸⁹ This debate and the corresponding research constituted an indispensable step toward establishing the events of 1904–8 as a genocide. Yet the tensions revealed by October 7 suggest that the recognition of the Namibian genocide has not resulted in a broader German acknowledgment of its impact on Namibian societies and its resulting commensurability with other genocides, including the Holocaust. To move beyond polemics about postcolonialism and superficial reconciliation, official public memory and future research should draw on insights from African history and related fields to highlight the experience of affected communities.

Conclusion

When it is finally adopted, Namibia and Germany’s Joint Declaration will mark only the beginning of a more honest relationship of Germany with its colonial past. Future governments must decide how to position themselves vis-à-vis calls to renegotiate the entire agreement to include explicit references to reparations and include representatives from the affected communities. Their pending lawsuit at the Namibian High Court might undermine any agreement reached by both governments.⁹⁰ More importantly, Germany’s bilateral negotiations with Namibia and Tanzania should be an occasion not only to address the two most egregious cases of colonial mass violence, but also for a broader debate about how Germany can foster more equitable relationships between former colonized and colonizer societies. One important area of improvement is knowledge production. Pathbreaking work is being conducted by African, German, and other researchers in projects devoted to clarifying the provenance of human remains, cultural objects, and other collections in European museums.⁹¹ These initiatives, while important, run the risk of acting as a short-term shield against more fundamental criticisms of curatorial practice. They also entrench current inequalities in the global knowledge economy, temporarily inviting African researchers to Europe when much more work remains to be done within African societies. A more lasting engagement would be possible through endowed chairs for African history, European history, and related themes at universities in Namibia, Tanzania, Cameroon, Germany, and elsewhere. These should be tied to permanent scholarship programs in the humanities and social sciences at all academic levels that offer the opportunity to study

89. Biwa, ““Weaving the Past,”” 71.

90. Nadunya, “High Court.”

91. See, for example, Grimme and Förster, *Locating Namibian Cultural Heritage*.

and work in either Africa or Europe. Another vital area that requires improvement is the movement of people. As Peter Katjavivi noted more than a decade ago, the European Schengen regime has led to a lack of reciprocity, with Germany no longer granting visa rights to Namibian citizens wanting to visit the country.⁹² These rules should be amended to facilitate professional training, educational exchange, tourism, and cultural contacts between the two countries as well as between Germany and other former colonial territories. As long as German citizens face no meaningful hurdles to travel to Namibia and other African countries, citizens of those countries should be accorded the same right.

Beyond practical issues, however, the biggest challenge to according the history of colonialism its proper place within German history and public memory remains the comfortable provincialism that has allowed politicians, journalists, and even historians to trivialize the severity of colonial violence. What does it mean, after all, for one-third of a society to perish and for the survivors to lose their land and be displaced? Critics of proposals to include the history of colonialism in Germany's public memory have yet to contend with this question. The myopic treatment of the genocide of the Herero and Nama as a cudgel in simplistic debates about direct continuities with Nazism or the singularity of the Holocaust makes a mockery of the lasting impact of colonial violence on the affected communities and their descendants—whether they live in the Omaheke, Songea, or elsewhere. Any serious engagement with the history of German colonialism would need to break out of this self-righteous provincialism and the associated echo chamber of a postcolonial bogeyman. The tools for this have long existed: rigorous, multisited, and multilanguage research in religious, state, and private archives in African societies; oral history interviews and the study of oral tradition, literary genres, and performance; as well as archeology and the study of material culture.⁹³ Why is it that the idea of writing a history of the Shoah in the twenty-first century without sources in Yiddish or Polish seems preposterous, but studies of the Herero and Nama genocide that do not even engage with sources in Otjiherero, Khoekhoegowab, or Afrikaans are commonplace? Until Germans begin to listen to the multivocality of the colonial past, they will fail to recognize the colonial question in its own right without constantly subordinating it to either the *Staatsräson* or the constitutive place of the Holocaust in the nation's identity.

92. Katjavivi, "Namibia's Bilateral Relations," 155.

93. For a recent example on Tanzania, see Kirey, *Memories*; for the potential of archaeology, see Forensis and Forensic Architecture, *Shark Island*.

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