The First Genocide of the 20th Century

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Herero and Nama

German South West Africa: A Colony Built on Dispossession

German South West Africa — the territory that is today the nation of Namibia — was colonised by Germany in the 1880s as part of the Scramble for Africa. The Herero people, a cattle-herding people of the central highlands, and the Nama people of the south, were the two largest African groups in the territory. Both had sophisticated political organisations, extensive cattle herds, and strong traditions of resistance to external domination.

From the beginning, German colonialism in South West Africa was characterised by extreme violence and systematic land and cattle theft. German settlers — encouraged by a colonial administration determined to create a European settler colony — seized Herero and Nama grazing land, stole their cattle, and subjected them to a regime of racial contempt and violence that was, if anything, more openly brutal than most British or French colonial administrations of the era. African women were subjected to systematic sexual violence by German settlers and soldiers. African men were flogged, imprisoned, and killed for infractions of colonial regulations. The cattle that were the economic and cultural foundation of Herero and Nama life were seized by settlers and the colonial administration.

The Rebellion and the Genocide Order

In January 1904, the Herero people, under their paramount chief Samuel Maharero, rose in armed revolt against German colonial rule. The immediate trigger was the continued theft of land and cattle and the violence of German settlers, but the uprising reflected decades of accumulated grievance. The Herero initially achieved several military successes, surprising and defeating German garrisons.

The German response was to send General Lothar von Trotha — an officer with experience of colonial violence in East Africa and China — with a force of 14,000 German troops and orders to suppress the uprising. Von Trotha's approach went far beyond military suppression. In October 1904, he issued the Vernichtungsbefehl — the

Extermination Order — perhaps the most explicit genocide order in modern history prior to the Holocaust.

> *"I, the great general of the German soldiers, send this letter to the Herero people. The Herero are no longer German subjects. They must leave the land. If they refuse, I will force them with the great gun. Any Herero found inside the German frontier, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I will no longer receive women and children. I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at."*
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> **— General Lothar von Trotha, Vernichtungsbefehl (Extermination Order), 2 October 1904**

The Extermination Order was implemented with systematic thoroughness. Herero men, women, and children were driven into the Omaheke Desert — the western extension of the Kalahari — where they died of thirst and starvation. Wells were poisoned or guarded by German soldiers to prevent the Herero from drinking. Those who tried to return were shot. Those who survived the desert were captured and sent to concentration camps — the first use of that term in its modern sense — where they died of disease, overwork, and deliberate starvation. The skulls of dead Herero were sent to German universities for 'scientific' racial research.

The Nama people, who had initially remained neutral, rose in their own revolt in 1904-05 under Hendrik Witbooi. They too were subjected to extermination, their leader dying in battle in 1905, their survivors sent to the same concentration camps. By 1908, approximately 80 percent of the Herero population — estimated at 60,000 to 80,000 people before the genocide — and approximately 50 percent of the Nama population had been killed. It was the first genocide of the twentieth century, preceding the Armenian genocide by a decade and the Holocaust by three decades.

Germany did not formally acknowledge the Herero and Nama genocide until 2021 — 117 years after the Extermination Order. Even then, the acknowledgment fell short of the full reparations that Herero and Nama communities demanded. The bones and skulls sent to German universities for racial research are still being returned, a process that continues today. The land stolen from the Herero and Nama was redistributed to white Namibian farmers after independence and has never been fully returned — a source of ongoing political tension in Namibia.

The Herero and Nama Genocide: Key Facts
Period: 1904-1908, German South West Africa (today Namibia).
Perpetrator: German colonial forces under General Lothar von Trotha.
Herero population before genocide: estimated 60,000-80,000 people.
Herero killed: approximately 80% — between 24,000 and 65,000 people.
Nama population killed: approximately 50% — between 10,000 and 20,000 people.
Method: military campaign, Extermination Order, driving into desert, concentration camps, deliberate starvation.
Historical significance: the first genocide of the 20th century — a direct precursor to the Holocaust in its racial logic and administrative methods.
German acknowledgment: formal recognition as genocide came only in 2021 — 117 years after the Extermination Order.

Key Takeaways

The Herero and Nama genocide of 1904-1908 was the first genocide of the twentieth century, killing approximately 80 percent of the Herero and 50 percent of the Nama through a military campaign of deliberate extermination, forced desert flight, and concentration camps. Germany did not acknowledge it as genocide until 2021, and full reparations remain unresolved. The next lesson turns to atrocities committed under British colonial rule — proof that the pattern of extreme colonial violence was not confined to a single European power.