

Germany's Role in Africa

Behind the Possible Apology for German Genocide in Namibia: Three Decades Before the Rise of Fascism in Europe, Africans were Displaced and Exterminated

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There are numerous efforts taking place internationally aimed at strengthening economic and political links with African nation-states.

From the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation to Turkey, Iran and Japan, many governments are seeking to form partnerships in order to share in the vast mineral resources and consumer market that Africa represents. Although these various Western, Middle Eastern and Asian states have different backgrounds and therefore distinct economic trajectories and consequently motivations differ, the fact of the engagements are profoundly significant.

Germany, which in the 19th century had established colonies in Southwest Africa, Tanganyika, Rwanda, Burundi, Cameroon and Togo, was in late 2016 designated the leader of the G20 Summit. The government of Chancellor Angela Merkel announced initiatives for enhanced relationships between the continent, Berlin and other industrialized and emerging economies.

Nonetheless, there is at least one major impediment to this apparent emphasis on the part of Germany to exert a more proactive role in African affairs. Germany not only hosted the historic West Africa Conference of 1884-1885 where the stage was set for the colonization of the continent, it also under Otto von Bismarck during the Empire period after 1870, sought to realize its imperial ambitions which dated back to at least the Confederation era extending from 1815 to 1866.

During this period in the mid-19th century, Germany advanced its world influence through industrial production, scientific application, railway expansion and military prowess where it became a key competitor with Britain for the domination of Europe. These ambitions led to the acquisition of colonies in both Africa and Asia where their interests collided with other European imperialist powers such as Britain, France, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain.

Historical Background on the Role of Germany in World Imperialism

On November 15, 1884, the Berlin West Africa Conference was convened in an effort to carve up spheres of influence and cooperation among various European states in relationship to their political and economic dominance over the continent.

The Atlantic Slave Trade had been ostensibly outlawed in the first decade of the 19th century although the involuntary servitude was expanding inside the Caribbean, South

America and North America. In Britain and the United States in 1807-1808, laws were passed outlawing the importation of Africans.

Nonetheless, the trade continued “illegally” from outside the U.S. and “legally” inside of the country. The number of enslaved Africans grew rapidly so by the time of the Civil War (1861-1865) approximately 4.5 million people were said to have been residents of the U.S. In other states such as Brazil and Cuba, slavery was not abolished until the 1880s. Britain had passed the Prohibition of Slavery Act in 1833 covering its colonies within the Western Hemisphere including Canada.

Although slavery had been abolished in many areas by 1884, the continuation of colonialism which was born in the system of human bondage made tremendous profits through the exploitation of land and labor. In Africa, a source of vast natural and human resources, the European colonial powers were in a monumental struggle for control of the territories. This level of competition would erupt full blown in 1914 with the advent of the First World War which was not concluded until 1918.

This Berlin West Africa Conference deliberated until February 26, 1885. By the time it had ended the continent had been divided among the-then leading imperialist states.

According to brittanica.com,

“The conference, proposed by Portugal in pursuance of its special claim to control of the Congo estuary, was necessitated by the jealousy and suspicion with which the great European powers viewed one another’s attempts at colonial expansion in Africa. The general act of the Conference of Berlin declared the Congo River basin to be neutral (a fact that in no way deterred the Allies from extending the war into that area in World War I); guaranteed freedom for trade and shipping for all states in the basin; forbade slave trading; and rejected Portugal’s claims to the Congo River estuary—thereby making possible the founding of the independent Congo Free State, to which Great Britain, France, and Germany had already agreed in principle.” (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-West-Africa-Conference>)

German Colonization of Namibia (Southwest Africa)

Beginning in 1884, Germany had established a colony in what was called South West Africa which bordered South Africa, Angola, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia) and Botswana (Bechuanaland). This vast area was both heavily arid with two deserts, the Namib and the Kalahari, as well as being rich in natural resources such as copper, gold, diamonds, uranium and lead.

Due to its dry conditions Namibia’s population was forced to adapt to its environmental situation. A number of nationalities existed in the territory including the San, Damaras, Ovambos, Namas, Hereros, Oorlams, Kavangos, East Caprivians, Rehoboth Basters, Kaokovelders, Tswanas and eventually, a growing number of German European settlers.

A South African historical source describes the intervention of German settlers as a violent process of colonization and repression of the indigenous people, noting that:

“In 1886 the border between Angola and what would become German South West Africa was negotiated between the German and Portuguese nations. In 1890 the first German military fort was built at Windhoek and, in July of the

same year, the British government also apportioned the Caprivi Strip to the Germans. This would give Germany access to the Zambezi River and its other East African territories, and it would give up its claims on Zanzibar.”

(<http://www.sahistory.org.za/places/namibia>)

This same report goes on emphasizing:

“The reason Germany selected Namibia as its ‘protectorate’ was influenced by the fact that a tobacco merchant from Bremen, Franz Luderitz, bought up coastal land in the area in 1882. This resulted in Germany actively establishing itself in the African country by 1884. They occupied Herero lands. Initially the Herero accepted the ‘treaties of protection’, but the Nama people resisted. In 1888 the Germans confiscated Herero lands and large numbers of their cattle. The aim was to turn South West Africa into a settler colony. In 1890 German soldiers attacked the Nama and by 1892, despite efforts by the Nama and Herero to put up a united front, they were crushed.”

However, the encroaching colonial ambitions of the Germans sparked resistance among the Herero and Nama peoples of Southwest Africa. Beginning in January 1904, Samuel Maherero led the Herero military forces into a war against German imperialism. The war raged for seven months as the Germans deployed thousands of its troops into the country.

Eventually, the Germans prevailed militarily forcing the Herero into concentration camps where 80 percent of their people perished. The Germans then faced a similar uprising among the Nama. Chief Hendrik Witbooi of the Nama people led a war of resistance against colonization until 1908. Both the Herero and Nama people were subjected to the German extermination order of General Luther von Trotha who stated that:

“Within the German borders every Herero, whether armed or unarmed, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall not accept any more women or children. I shall drive them back to their people – otherwise I shall order shots to be fired at them”.

Later the German imperialist forces poisoned the water resources of the Herero and killed thousands of their women and children. Both the Herero and Nama became dispossessed people forced to work in the labor camps of the Germans and later British colonialists after the conclusion of World War I. Britain maintained dominance in South Africa and its neighboring colony of Namibia after World War I. In 1948, the Boer-based Nationalist Party won control of the government in South Africa continuing the settler-colonial occupation of Namibia until 1989 when a United Nations monitored referendum was held on national independence.

The Southwest Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) led the armed and mass struggle of the Namibian people between 1959 and 1989 when the party won the first non-racial elections. These developments followed the tremendous war for the total independence of neighboring Angola, a former Portuguese colony, where Cuban Internationalists forces in the hundreds of thousands assisted the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) secure sovereignty after a protracted struggle which lasted from 1975 to 1988.

Germany Still Harbors Imperialist Aims in Africa

It is within this historical context that the current diplomatic efforts by Germany should be viewed. The negotiation process with descendants of the Herero and Nama people in Namibia has been marred in difficulties.

The government of Chancellor Merkel does not want to pay compensation for the genocide which destroyed the traditional African societies that lived in the region for centuries. At the same time Germany is attempting to reassert its political and economic influence on the continent amid burgeoning relations between African Union (AU) member-states and China.

An article published by Deutsch Welle (DW) on this issue noted:

“Recent efforts at dialogue between self-styled representatives of the victims of German colonialism and (Ruprecht) Polenz (the German envoy for negotiations with the indigenous people of Namibia) ended badly. The representatives hurled insults at the German commissioner in interviews in local newspapers. Namibia’s government has refrained from intervening but in the past it has expressed muted criticism of Germany’s negotiating position. Berlin refuses to budge on one particular point. ‘The mere use of the term genocide does not mean any additional legal obligations for Germany. Germany has political and moral obligations to heal the wounds of the past, but is not legally obliged to pay reparations,’” Polenz was quoted by DW. (Dec. 29, 2016)

Today Germany has reemerged as the leading economy on the European continent. After its losses in the First and Second World Wars where its infrastructure and political influence was destroyed, with the advent of the European Union (EU) the country is now serving as a source of financial influence and industrial might hovering over smaller economies in Europe.

The approach of the Conservative government under Chancellor Merkel in regard to the migrant crisis has placed it at variance with neighboring former socialist states such as Hungary as well as creating internal political problems from the populist right, which could pose a serious electoral challenge in the upcoming national elections. German military involvement under the banner of the UN in Mali is yet another indication of its imperialist ambitions.

Africa must reexamine the colonial period of its history when Europeans were not always trustworthy in their diplomatic overtures. Offers of assistance often conceal underlying objectives of exploitation and national oppression.

Ultimately, the AU member-states are required to work for continental unification and economic independence. It is through this political model that genuine growth and development can be achieved.

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