

GERMANY CONFRONTS THE FORGOTTEN STORY OF ITS OTHER GENOCIDE - WALL STREET JOURNAL - 28.07.2017

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Just over a century ago, Germany built one of its first concentration camps on a narrow peninsula jutting into the Atlantic.

A 1904 uprising in what was then called German South-West Africa turned into a war of annihilation against the Herero and Nama peoples. At least 60,000 are believed to have died, including some 2,000 in the Shark Island camp, where inmates were starved, beaten and worked to death.

That episode of colonial brutality, considered by many historians to be the first genocide of the 20th century, is now testing the limits of historical apologies.

Namibia says it wants Germany to officially recognize that its actions constituted genocide, to issue a formal apology and to pay reparations. Berlin says it is willing to meet the first two demands and to pay some form of compensation. The two countries have been negotiating for more than a year.

Other governments have expressed regret or sorrow for past atrocities. What makes the current situation novel is that most have stopped short of any official apology, and financial payments have been rare.

The talks are being watched very closely by other countries, says Germanys ambassador to Namibia, Christian Schlaga.

Debate has surged in recent years about whether and how nations should take responsibility and make amends for horrors inflicted generations ago.

Belgium apologized for its role in the 1961 assassination of Congos first post-independence prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, but not for its colonial abuses in that country. In 2006, then-U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed deep sorrow for Britains role in the slave trade, but did not apologize.

Former French President Francois Hollande recognized the suffering of Algerians under Frances brutal and unfair colonial rule, but again there was no official apology. Last year, U.S. President Barack Obama paid homage to the victims of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, but did not apologize.

Japan has come the closest to what Germany is trying to do now. In 2015, it settled a long-running dispute with South Korea by agreeing to pay about $9 million in support funds for surviving Korean comfort women used as sex slaves by the Japanese military in the 1930s and 1940s. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe extended an apology.

The question has exquisite historical resonance for Germany in particular. Countless museums and memorials throughout the country act as reminders of Germanybs genocidal slaughter during World War II. Because most Germans accept their history has dark chapters, and are proud of how they have been handled, they might find it easier to face colonial atrocities than citizens of other European powers, says JC.

Following World War II, Germany acknowledged its responsibility for the Holocaust and agreed to pay damages to survivors, but not to the families of those who were killed.

A successful conclusion to the negotiations between Germany and Namibia would be a signal, and an invitation, to other former colonial powers to deal with their past, says Medardus Brehl, a historian at the Institute for Diaspora and Genocide Studies at the Ruhr-University Bochum in Germany.

At the same time, a growing number of Germans are beginning to bristle at constantly carrying their historical guilt. Right-wing parties have recently called for the country to move beyond its past and develop a new sense of patriotism.

Complicating the talks are a multitude of constituencies with their own agendas. In addition to the two governments, there are tribal chiefs angry about being excluded from the talks, German-Namibians nervous about their standing in modern-day Namibia and citizens in both countries who want to leave the past in the past.

David Frederick is an 84-year-old local Nama chief who lives in Bethanie, a small desert town three hours by car from Shark Island. In a recent interview, he said German negotiators should visit his home so they could hear about the genocide from members of his family and the community. They must hear it straight from someone who was affected, said Mr. Frederick. The Nama people, from generation to generation, told the story, and that is the story they need to hear.

About a year and a half into the talks between the two governments, the chief said he and his people feel sidelined.

In January, Mr. Frederick joined a class-action lawsuit against Germany filed on behalf of the Herero and Nama peoples in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. (The Alien Tort Claims Act allows foreigners to seek remedies in U.S. courts for human-rights violations outside of the U.S.) They are seeking unspecified reparations, arguing their exclusion from the negotiations between the two governments b□is yet another btakingb or attempt to strip [them] of their property rights.

German officials declined to comment on the suit, and the Namibian government says it is committed to the negotiations with Germany. A previous attempt by members of the Herero community to seek reparations from Germany in a U.S. court failed.

Germanybs effort to put down the Herero and Nama uprisings, sparked by expropriation of land and cattle, was waged by soldiers using artillery and machine guns against the rifles, clubs and knives of tribal warriors. Within five years, an estimated 80% of the Herero and 50% of the Nama, herdsmen who populated much of central and southern Namibia, were dead or had fled the country.

A disastrous Herero defeat at the Waterberg, a mountainous plateau on the edge of the Kalahari, pushed tens of thousands of men, women and children deep into the desert. On Oct. 4, 1904, German Gen. Lothar von Trotha declared: The people of the Herero have to leave the country within German borders, every Herero, with or without a rifle, with or without cattle, will be shot. Six months later, a similar order was issued for the Nama.

Those who survived and did not escape into modern-day Botswana were herded into concentration camps, of which Shark Island, off the colonial town of LC.

In letters and newspaper articles, visitors to the camp told of guards taking random shots at undernourished inmates and beating them with leather whips. Photos show makeshift tents and huts, and men, women and children in ragtag clothing that barely shielded them from the scorching daytime sun and cold nighttime winds.

Living on uncooked rice and flour, prisoners were forced to drag rocks across the island to help in the construction of LC.

The authorities used [the camp] to get rid of a troublesome and, in their eyes, not-fit-for-labor population, says Casper Erichsen, who chronicled the genocide in his 2010 book, The Kaisers Holocaust.

Mr. Fredericks great-uncle, a legendary Nama fighter named Cornelius Fredericks who helped lead the rebellion against the Germans, died in the Shark Island camp in 1907. His head was sliced off and, along with hundreds of others, shipped to Germany for research meant to attest to white superiority.

There is no exact count of the people who perished on Shark Island. One contemporary estimate listed in Mr. Erichsens book puts the number of Nama dead at 1,900, a toll that

doesnt include Herero prisoners.

Today, the peninsula is home to a government-run campsite. A marble block in the shape of a tombstone is all that marks the suffering. Erected by Mr. Fredericks community in Bethanie, it commemorates their late chief and 330 other Bethanie Nama who died with him. Opposite it is a larger memorial to German soldiers, settlers and nurses who died during the war, many due to illness.

Jochen Vosseberg, a German tourist cooking out there one recent evening with his wife and children, said he was unaware of the bloody history of the site. He expressed skepticism about the talks his government is holding with Namibia. Not a single person from back then is still alive, he said. Why should the new generations now pay for the mistakes of past generations?

Germany has acknowledged that its war against the Herero and Nama constituted genocide, but rejects legal responsibility, arguing that at the time there was nothing in international law that banned such killing.

The German government uses this term [of genocide] in a historical-political sense, not in a legal sense, says Mr. Schlaga, the ambassador.

In the current negotiations, that means Germany is opposed to any payments to descendants that are classified as reparations, which it says is a legal term that implies liability.

German officials have been vague on what they are willing to offer instead, saying compensation will be determined by the talks. Ruprecht Polenz, Germanys chief negotiator, has mentioned the possibility of a trust that could help commemorate the genocide in both countries, as well as funds to support education and purchases of land from German-Namibian farmers to return to the Herero and Nama.

Many of the 20,000 or so Namibians of German descent werent happy with Berlins recognition of the genocide. b There are still some that say that wasnt genocide but just a regular war, says Anton von Wietersheim, a former agriculture minister whose grandfather arrived in Namibia to help fight the Herero uprising in 1904.

Mr. von Wietersheim says an apology and compensation from Berlin could ease demands that German speakers, one of the richest groups in Namibia, surrender some of their land. b When you look at it from this perspective, then all German-Namibians should have an interest in seeing this process concluded successfully, he says.

The U.K. faced the question of how to deal with its colonial legacy when it was sued by survivors of its bloody suppression of the 1950s Mau Mau uprising that preceded Kenyas independence from the British Empire.

In 2013, the U.K. settled the case by agreeing to pay 19.9 million ($25.6 million) in compensation to more than 5,000 survivors. Then-Foreign Secretary William Hague expressed regret for abuses by British soldiers, including torture, but said todays government wasnt responsible for the actions of the colonial administration. The British

government is contesting a follow-up lawsuit by more than 40,000 other Mau Mau survivors.

The U.K. also has rebuffed demands from India for an apology and reparations for acts committed during British colonial rule.

A government spokeswoman said the U.K. was following the discussions between Germany and Namibia.

During this years French election, now-President Emmanuel Macron backed away from a campaign comment that his countrys unsuccessful campaign to crush Algerias independence struggle, in which some 1.5 million Algerians died, had been a b□crime against humanity. Under pressure from far-right opponents, he apologized to French nationals forced out of Algeria after independence, while insisting that both countries had to face their common past.

Before Germany began negotiations with Namibia, it was accused of hypocrisy for pressuring Turkey to recognize the 1915-16 Armenian genocide that claimed more than a million lives. For now it hasnt acceded to demands from lawmakers in Tanzania, a former German colony, for talks about the killing there by German soldiers of at least 75,000 around the same time as the Namibian genocide.

We are seeing this as a special case and a unique case, and because of that we are negotiating with Namibia and with no one else, says Mr. Schlaga.

Germany got out of Namibia after surrendering to British and South African forces during World War I. It became a British protectorate, then was administered by apartheid South Africa. It achieved independence in 1990.

Nearly destroyed by the genocide and bereft of their land, the Herero and Nama peoples play a limited role in modern Namibian politics, which has been dominated by the South West Africa Peoples Organization, or Swapo.

Zed Ngavirue, a Herero who is Namibias chief negotiator with Germany, says the Namibian government has invited community leaders to join the talks, an offer several accepted. It will be up to the government, he says, to reach a deal with the Germans and oversee distribution of compensation. That will enable Namibia to ensure any agreement is properly implemented and that projects can be integrated into the Namibian national budget once German funding runs out.

You cannot have an agreement between the federal government of the Republic of Germany and the Herero community, he says. An agreement is signed between states.

In May, Namibian President Hage Geingob promised to open his negotiating team to more members of the Herero and Nama peoples.

Dr. Ngavirue concedes divisions within Namibia have complicated the talks. We have got to sort ourselves out, he says.

Mr. Frederick, the Nama chief, says the need for reparations is urgent. The 2,000 inhabitants of Bethanie struggle with poverty, unemployment and alcoholism. Over the past century, they have lost the knowledge of how to raise livestock in the arid climate, he says.

Meanwhile, Mr. Frederick is chronicling the genocide by recording the stories of his community. I want to make sure everyone knows, he says.

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