



NAMIBIA 1904

BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

Africa is almost certainly the birthplace of the human species. From it the earliest people ventured into Asia and then across the long-vanished land bridge to the Americas, or across the Pacific island chains to Australasia. They also spread to the lands north of the Mediterranean Sea. Many thousands of years later their European descendants gained glory and wealth by rediscovering the southern hemisphere, and plundering it. They - we - have often treated it, and its inhabitants, with brutality, indifference and contempt. White Europeans forced black Africans to become slaves. White Europeans deprived black people of their homes and communities and cultures. White Europeans sent their missionaries to change black people's religion to their own. And in the 19th century white Europeans began moving into Africa to occupy the land as well. The land was desirable for itself: it provided new territory, new possessions and new trade, both for individuals and their countries. The land had other values, too: it provided bases for further take-overs and further military threats; and, above all, it contained riches.

Along the coastline of Namibia runs the Namib desert, a 1,200 mile long strip of unwelcoming sand dunes and barren rock. Behind it is the central mountain plateau, and east of that the Kalahari desert. Namibia's scarcest commodity is water: this is a country of little rainfall, and the rivers don't always run. But the very sand of the Skeleton Coast is the dust of gemstones; uranium, tin and tungsten can be mined in the central Namib, and copper in the north; and in the south there are diamonds. Namibia also has gold, silver, lithium, and natural gas. For most of the region's history, only metal was of interest to the native tribes. These tribes lived and traded together more or less peacefully, each with their own particular way of living, wherever the land was fertile enough. The San were nomads, hunters and gatherers. The Damara hunted and worked copper. The Ovambo grew crops in the north, where there was more rain, but also worked in metal. The Nama and the Herero were livestock farmers, and they were the two main tribes in the 1840s when the Germans (first missionaries, then settlers, then soldiers) began arriving in South West Africa.

Before the Germans, only a few Europeans had visited it: explorers, traders and sailors. They opened up trade outlets for ivory and cattle; they also brought in firearms, with which they traded for Namib treasures. Later, big guns and European military systems were introduced. The tribes now settled their disputes with lethal violence: corruption of a peaceful culture was under way.

In the 1880s Germany made South West Africa their own colony, and settlers moved in, followed by a military governor who knew little about running a colony and nothing at all about Africa. Major Theodor Leutwein began by playing off the Nama and Herero tribes against each other. More and more white settlers arrived, pushing tribesmen off their cattle-grazing

lands with bribes and unreliable deals. The Namib's diamonds were discovered, attracting yet more incomers with a lust for wealth.

Tribal cattle-farmers had other problems, too: a cattle-virus epidemic in the late 1890s killed much of their livestock. The colonists offered the Herero aid on credit. As a result the farmers amassed large debts, and when they couldn't pay them off the colonists simply seized what cattle were left. In January 1904, the Herero, desperate to regain their livelihoods, rebelled. Under their leader Samuel Maherero they began to attack the numerous German outposts. They killed German men, but spared women, children, missionaries, and the English or Boer farmers whose support they didn't want to lose.

At the same time, the Nama chief, Hendrik Witbooi, wrote a letter to Theodor Leutwein, telling him what the native Africans thought of their invaders, who had taken their land, deprived them of their rights to pasture their animals on it, used up the scanty water supplies, and imposed alien laws and taxes. His hope was that Leutwein would recognise the injustice and do something about it.

THE GENOCIDE

The German Emperor replaced Major Leutwein with another commander, this time a man notorious for brutality who had already fiercely suppressed African resistance to German colonisation in East Africa. Lieutenant-General Lothar von Trotha said, 'I wipe out rebellious tribes with streams of blood and streams of money. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge'. Von Trotha brought with him to German South West Africa 10,000 heavily-armed men and a plan for war.

Under his command, the German troops slowly drove the Herero warriors to a position where they could be hemmed in by attack on three sides. The fourth side offered escape; but only into the killing wastes of the Kalahari desert. The German soldiers were paid well to pursue the Herero into this treacherous wilderness. They were also ordered to poison the few water-holes there. Others set up guard posts along a 150-mile border: any Herero trying to get back was killed.

On October 2, 1904, von Trotha issued his order to exterminate the Herero from the region. 'All the Herero must leave the land. If they refuse, then I will force them to do it with the big guns. Any Herero found within German borders, with or without a gun, will be shot. No prisoners will be taken. This is my decision for the Herero people'.

After the Herero uprising had been systematically put down, by shooting or enforced slow death in the desert from starvation, thirst and disease (the fate of many women and children), those who still lived were rounded up, banned from owning land or cattle, and sent into labour camps to be the slaves of German settlers. Many more Herero died in the camps, of overwork, starvation and disease.

By 1907, in the face of criticism both at home and abroad, von Trotha's orders had been

cancelled and he himself recalled, but it was too late for the crushed Herero. Before the uprising, the tribe numbered 80,000; after it, only 15,000 remained.

During the period of colonisation and oppression, many women were used as sex slaves. (This had not been von Trotha's intention. 'To receive women and children, most of them ill, is a serious danger to the German troops. And to feed them is an impossibility. I find it appropriate that the nation perishes instead of infecting our soldiers.') In the Herero work camps there were numerous children born to these abused women, and a man called Eugen Fischer, who was interested in genetics, came to the camps to study them; he carried out medical experiments on them as well. He decided that each mixed-race child was physically and mentally inferior to its German father (a conclusion for which there was and is no respectable scientific foundation whatever) and wrote a book promoting his ideas: 'The Principles of Human Heredity and Race Hygiene'. Adolf Hitler read it while he was in prison in 1923, and cited it in his own infamous pursuit of 'racial purity'.

The Nama suffered at the hands of the colonists too. After the defeat of the Herero the Nama also rebelled, but von Trotha and his troops quickly routed them. On April 22 1905 Lothar von Trotha sent his clear message to the Nama: they should surrender. 'The Nama who chooses not to surrender and lets himself be seen in the German area will be shot, until all are exterminated. Those who, at the start of the rebellion, committed murder against whites or have commanded that whites be murdered have, by law, forfeited their lives. As for the few not defeated, it will fare with them as it fared with the Herero, who in their blindness also believed that they could make successful war against the powerful German Emperor and the great German people. I ask you, where are the Herero today?' During the Nama uprising, half the tribe (over 10,000) were killed; the 9,000 or so left were confined in concentration camps.

AFTER THE GENOCIDE

After the First World War, South West Africa was placed under the administration of South Africa. South Africa imposed its own system of apartheid (now banned in Namibia by law). In the late 1940s a guerrilla movement called SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) was founded to fight for independence. In 1968 the United Nations recognised the name Namibia, and the country's right to independence, but it was another 20 years before South Africa agreed to withdraw and full independence was gained. By then the country was ravaged by war.

Today most of Namibia's 1.7m people are poor, living in crowded tribal areas while powerful and wealthy ranchers still own millions of acres seized by their predecessors over 100 years ago.

Some of the descendants of the surviving Herero live in neighbouring Botswana, but others remained in their homeland and now make up 8% of Namibia's population. Many of them are in the political opposition party. Most Herero men work as cattle-handlers on commercial farms. Although as opposition members they don't get government support, the Herero on their own initiative recently asked Germany to give them compensation for the atrocities the tribe suffered, which the president of Germany recently acknowledged were 'a burden on the

conscience of every German'. In fact Namibia gets more aid from Germany than any other country; but most of the money goes to non-Herero majority interests: it's the governing Ovambo (not reached by early colonists, and modern Namibia's main tribe) who led the struggle for liberation and, in 1990, independence.

The 25,000 or so present-day rich German settlers are among those who deny that there was a genocide, fearing that reparation might mean losing their valuable land.

WITNESS

From Nama chief Hendrik Witbooi's letter to Major Leutwein, describing the typical colonist:

'He makes no requests according to truth and justice, and asks no permission of a chief. He introduces laws into the land, laws which are entirely impossible, untenable, unbelievable, unbearable, unmerciful and unfeeling. He punishes our people in Windhoek and has already beaten people to death for debt. It is not just and right to beat people to death for that. He stretches people on their backs and flogs them in a shameful and cruel manner, be they male or female. He thinks we are stupid and unintelligent people, but we have never yet punished people in the cruel and improper way that he does. No-one can survive such a punishment.'

'Herero women adapted their high-waisted dresses, and hats that jut out like cattle-horns, from the wives of Victorian missionaries. On holidays they wear versions of the dress in red and black, the colours of Herero nationalism - and of the 19th-century German Empire. The men wear the German volunteers' uniform. German diplomats are always invited to Herero celebrations. "We're treated like VIPs and often asked to give the keynote speech," said one diplomat, who confessed that he is baffled by the practice. The peculiar attraction between the Herero and Germans here resembles the one in the Natal region of South Africa between the Zulus and British, two other peoples who fought a brutal colonial war. "It's the respect of a soldier for a soldier," explains Kuaima Riruako, paramount chief of the Herero. "We never gave up our army, even during the German period." But the links are much closer. Because many Herero women were forced into sexual slavery, many Herero today have German ancestors, and German is widely spoken here.'

ISSUES

From the moment the first Europeans discovered the continent of Africa, they began to raid it. They also introduced the appalling, degrading and brutal practice of slavery (most captured Africans were forcibly taken - sometimes with the self-serving collusion of other Africans and Arabs - to America and the Caribbean islands). The long conflict between persecuted Blacks and prejudiced, powerful Whites had begun. (Namibia's neighbour is South Africa, which for decades brutally imposed a strict apartheid segregation system.)

After slaves, land: without any consideration for existing populations, white colonists helped themselves to vast tracts of Africa and the riches many contained. Africa's 20th century history has to be seen in the light of this cavalier treatment. When the colonies became economic burdens to the colonising countries, they were abandoned, leaving the Africans to cope as best they could. Later many African states became the site for 'proxy wars': the USA

and the former Soviet Union armed and trained Africans to fight on opposing sides in internal disputes. When the Cold War ended, the armaments remained in the hands of Africans seeking independence or power. Millions of Africans have died in war, massacres and genocide, taught to them by the West.

The impulse to enslave is one that has, too often, been observed in many small-scale human situations: marriage, the workplace, the school playground. That's where it is first experienced and encountered, and where it needs to be stopped.

Empire-building in Africa and Asia reached its peak in the 19th century, and the 20th century has seen the often violent results of empires being dismantled. Grievances, injustice, poverty are the inheritance of poor countries and peoples, and the roots of war and genocide. Empire-building of another kind continues, in the form of multinational corporations and globalisation, which themselves involve injustice, oppression and slave labour: more grievances leading to conflict.

A kind of empire-building on a small scale happens in communities, workplaces and businesses. It reinforces a grasping, ruthless attitude that fails to respect individuals who 'get in the way'. Its dangers need to be recognised.