

Darwinism and the forgotten German holocaust

A review of
The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism
by David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen
Faber and Faber, London, 2010

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This important work documents that the Nazi racial policies which led to the concentration camps and genocide long pre-dated Hitler. Rather, they were born in the minds of German academics in the nineteenth century and executed in Africa towards the end of the 1890s. An enormous graveyard contains the bones of the dead that died in the German concentration camps in the late 1800s—it still exists on the outskirts of the Namibian seaside resort of Swakopmund. Olusoga and Erichsen explain that when Africa became the focus for new colonial conquests in the latter half of the century,

“... the destruction of indigenous peoples was increasingly explained using ideas drawn from science rather than scripture. While the advent of Darwinism represented a direct and powerful challenge to the Church, the religious scandal surrounding the publication of *On the Origin of Species* has tended to obscure the fact that, in many ways, Darwin’s ideas were perfectly in keeping with his times. While the religious establishment was rocked to its foundations, much of the Victorian scientific elite, along with various

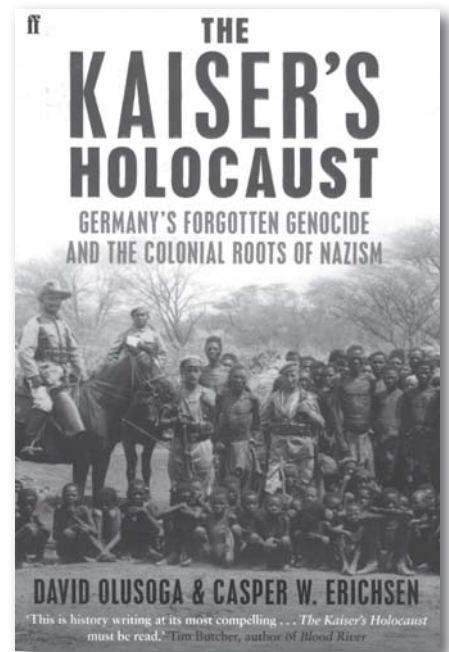
economists, philosophers and politicians, welcomed ‘Darwinism’ wholeheartedly” (p. 72).

The result was a Darwinian theory that advanced concepts which were already current, and allowed the racists to thrust wide open the doors that the German scientists had already begun to open.

The genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in what was then German South-West Africa (figure 1) was perpetrated by soldiers and bureaucrats who traveled from Kaiser Wilhelms’s Germany to Africa with the blessing of Chancellor Bismarck. After German settlers started to take over the indigenous peoples’ lands the Herero and the Nama people began to resist. The German government retaliated by launching a war of extermination in which Africans were murdered or forced to work to death (see figure 2). The problem was, although

“... Germany’s scientists stood at the forefront of the Darwinian revolution, in her African empire ... her colonialists were confronted with a situation that was at odds with the fundamental racial suppositions at the heart of imperialism. Germany’s only African colony suitable for large-scale white settlement remained dominated by tribes of Africans who had, in almost every respect, failed to accord with colonial theory. The Nama and Herero had not retreated into the hinterland in the face of the white man, nor had they fallen prey to introduced disease” (p. 75).

The end result was the 1904 uprising by the Herero tribe against the despotic rule of the local military commander, General Lothar von Trotha (figure 3). The Germans, in a bloody battle, massacred the tribe in the Battle of Waterberg and, in an act of genocide, forced the several thousand



survivors into the Omaheke Desert to die of starvation and thirst.

A few months later, a second indigenous people, the Nama, an African ethnic group living in modern South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana, suffered a similar fate. Over the following three years many Herero and Nama were interned in a concentration camp on Shark Island where conscious neglect led to a horrific death toll among the inmates. Up to 75,000 men and women, roughly half of the total Herero and Nama populations, perished in an event that some historians consider the first genocide of the 20th century.¹ The perpetrators of this genocide justified their behavior by invoking the conclusion based firmly on Darwinian science that “the fate of those other ‘savages’, the dark races of the world”, was

“... governed by the same laws of natural selection. Surely their disappearance was a result of their inability to adapt to the arrival of stronger, more capable races and the civilization they brought with them? The annihilation of the Tasmanians, the Patagonians, the Native Americans and perhaps soon the Africans all testified to their innate weakness, their unfitness for the future” (p. 72).



Figure 1. The location of German South-West Africa, now called Namibia.

The *Kaiser's Holocaust* book was labeled “an impressively researched account of the killing fields of Namibia” by *London Daily Telegraph* writer Ian Thompson. Thompson wrote that it was “the social Darwinists and eugenicists in late-19th-century Germany who helped to create new values of totalitarian dominance” in Nazi Germany. Furthermore, he added that

“Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, with its brutally materialist account of nature as bleak survivalism, was made to serve as justification for the extermination of Namibian tribes and, later, for Hitler’s biological anti-Semitism. In a racist age, nature was seen as a competitive market place, where black people were born to be mastered and the fittest survived. Armed with callipers and craniometry charts, the Kaiser’s race engineers were keen to measure the severed heads of Nama tribesmen: handle-shaped ears, prehensile feet and other ‘apish’ stigmata were considered telltale atavisms. Civilization, according to these pseudo-scientists, depended on the separation of races, not on their harmonious integration.”²

Germany was very receptive to evolution because the theory was supported by many prominent scientists. Furthermore,

“Germany was particularly receptive to Darwin, partly because his ideas attracted the support

of a number of well-respected German scientists. Chief among them was Ernst Haeckel, one of Germany’s most esteemed intellectuals. Haeckel began to explore what very quickly became known as Darwinism soon after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Over the next forty years he wrote a stream of highly influential books on evolution, some of which became among the most popular works of non-fiction published in Germany during the age of the Kaisers. A generation of German scientists and intellectuals came to know Darwin partly through the filter of Ernst Haeckel, and one of the key characteristics of Haeckel’s work was the way in which he applied Darwin’s theories to human racial difference” (p. 75).

Haeckel (figure 4) went well beyond Darwin and Darwinistic explanations to justify the subjugation of not only African races, but also the people of other nations that were made up of what the evolutionary scientists of his day regarded as evolutionarily inferior humans. The “march of German progress” necessary to further human evolution was seen as essential in colonizing those humans that they regarded as sub-human peoples.



Figure 2. Surviving Herero after the escape through the arid desert of Omaheke in German South-West Africa (modern day Namibia).

Emigration and ‘lebensraum’— excuses for genocide

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Germans experienced a baby boom that caused many German cities to become overcrowded. Emigration was one solution, as was Lebensraum, the Darwinian doctrine that justified taking land belonging to other nations to allow German Aryan populations to increase. Germany believed they had to insure that their Aryan German communities grew and prospered, justifying the racial Volkisch theory that was to be implemented in both German colonies and Germany itself. Although German

“... imperialism could be justified by a number of arguments—economic self-interest, European rivalry and the white man’s duty to spread civilization and the Gospels—the extermination of whole races was more difficult to explain. Yet Social Darwinism, along with a range of racial theories taken from the older Scientific Racism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was able to recast both historical and contemporary events, and in this capacity it took on the twisted logic of a witch trial” (p. 73).

The result was the whites “had claimed territory across the globe by right of strength and conquest.” They reasoned that they

“... had triumphed everywhere because they were the fittest; their triumphs were the proof of their fitness. Whole races, who had been annihilated long before Darwin had put pen to paper, were judged to have been unfit for life by the very fact that they had been exterminated. Living people across the world were categorized as ‘doomed races’. The only responsibility

science had to such races was to record their cultures and collect artifacts from them, before their inevitable extinction” (p. 73).

Due to Darwinism the “... spread of Europeans across the globe came to be regarded as an almost sacred enterprise, and was increasingly linked to that other holy crusade of the nineteenth century—the march of progress. Alongside the clearing of land, the coming of the railways and the settlement of white farmers, the eradication of indigenous tribes became a symbol of modernity. Social Darwinism thus cast death itself as an agent of progress. The notion that the strong were destined to overcome the weak in the struggle for life became almost a mantra, repeated thousands of times in memoirs, speeches, biographies and scientific tracts. Any last spasms of Christian morality or guilt could be allayed by the fact that all this was inevitable [as proven by Darwinism]” (p. 73).

The main person who executed the African holocaust was a ten-year veteran of the German colonial army, General Lothar von Trotha (1848–



Figure 3. General Lothar von Trotha (1848–1920) from the German colonial army.

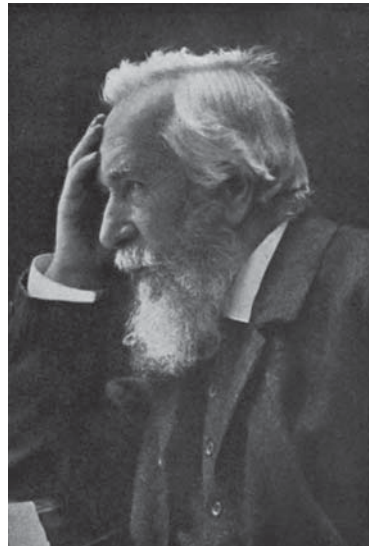


Figure 4. Ernst Haeckel, who used science to justify the subjugation of not only Africans but also people of other nations, made up of what scientists then regarded as evolutionarily inferior humans.

1920). Between 1894 and 1897 Trotha’s aides established concentration camps and executed thousands of Herero and Nama people with the goal of genocide (p. 150). He used every possible and brutal means to do so. In 1904 he published an extermination order because he concluded that all of the Negroes had the same low mentality and would yield only to force: “It was and remains my policy to apply this force by absolute terrorism and even cruelty. I shall destroy the ... tribes by shedding rivers of blood and money. Only then will it be possible to sow the seeds of something new that will endure” (p. 142). The “aim of the war was annihilation of the whole lot” of Negroes (p. 142).

The first German concentration camps

Africa’s five main German built concentration camps were in what is today a country called Namibia. In addition, thousands of Africans were literally worked to death searching for gold in the scorching sands of the desert in other cities and settlements. In one concentration camp, in order to document evolution, “female prisoners were forced to boil the

severed heads of their own people and scrape the flesh, sinews and ligaments off the skull with shards of broken glass ... The skulls were then placed into crates by the German soldiers and shipped to museums, collections and universities in Germany” (p. 224). One Berlin University scientist, ironically named Christian Fetzer, used the skulls to demonstrate the similarities between the Nama people and the anthropoid apes (p. 225).

Friedrich von Lindequist replaced General Trotha and was responsible for the South-West African genocide. He also enriched the Germans from 1908

to 1913 by 52 million marks worth of diamonds that were discovered in South-West Africa. Another famous German involved in the African holocaust was Hermann Göring’s father, Dr Heinrich Göring, who was appointed by Bismarck himself to establish the German South-West African colonies. New German towns were built, and one of them was the city of Luderitz.

The fear of degeneration as a result of racial mixture prompted the German scientific establishment to warn against interracial marriage. One of the most well-known pioneers in the racial field was Professor Eugen Fischer, whose book was on Hitler’s study table. In this book Fischer warned against intermixing with inferior people, such as the Africans and other inferior races.

Africa used to field test Darwinian Solutions to the ‘inferior race’ problem

Africa became the field-laboratory of German racial scientists to study the remaining ‘inferior races’ still living there. Although Germany became involved in the colonial movement much later than Spain, England and Portugal, German scientists had been

“... among the first to accept the logic of Social Darwinism. In 1868, while working on *The Descent of Man*, Darwin, in a letter to Wilhelm Preyer, Professor of Physiology at the University of Jena, reported that ‘The support I receive from Germany is my chief ground for hoping that our views will ultimately prevail’” (p. 74).

Many veterans who were responsible for the German atrocities in Africa later joined the Nazi party and “soldiers and scientists whose careers began on the pastoral deserts of South-West Africa or on the killing fields of East Africa, Togo and Cameroon were to play leading roles in the Nazi tragedy.” Others who supported this vision include British explorer William Winwood Reade, who captured the growing Darwinian consensus of his age. His book *Savage Africa* concluded with a prophecy of the continent’s “future founded upon his unshakeable belief that Africa belonged to the white man” and the Negroes will work as slaves converting Africa to a white paradise. Then, as an inferior race, the Negroes will be exterminated (p. 109). In Reade’s words,

“Africa shall be redeemed. Her children shall perform this mighty work. Her morasses shall be drained; her deserts shall be watered by canals; her forests shall be reduced to firewood. Her children shall do all this. They shall pour an *elixir vitae* into the veins of their mother, now withered and diseased. They shall restore her to youth and to immortal beauty. In this amenable task they may possibly become exterminated. We must learn to look on this result with composure. It illustrates the beneficent law of Nature, that the weak must be devoured by the strong.”³

Furthermore, Reade fervently believed that in the not-too-distant future Europeans would construct large estates in Africa and “young ladies on camp-stools under palm-trees will read with tears *The Last of the Negroes*, and

the Niger will become as romantic a river as the Rhine”.³

Some strongly opposed this form of colonialism but “advocates of an unbridled colonialism had learned to harness” Haeckel’s

“... version of Social Darwinism in order to dismiss the views of the humanitarians as hopelessly outdated and unscientific. After all, there was no humanitarianism, compassion or brotherhood in nature” (pp. 73–74).

German scientist Friedrich Ratzel’s early studies had been in zoology and his theories

“... were heavily influenced by concepts drawn from his zoological background and the work of his original mentor, Ernst Haeckel. Ratzel’s interest in the anatomical sciences remained strong for much of his life. One of his many friends, with whom he maintained a healthy correspondence, was the racial anthropologist Felix von Luschan” (p. 109).

In the late 1890s, “Ratzel began to fuse ideas inspired by Social Darwinism” with the

“... notion of the ‘struggle for existence’ to the study of migration, both animal and human. To Ratzel the invasion and colonization of the world outside Europe by the white race, and the displacement of indigenous peoples, was all part of the ‘struggle for existence,’ motivated above all by the search for ‘living space’. Darwin had shown that when animals moved to new environments, over time they adapted and evolved to those new conditions. From this Ratzel concluded that when human races migrated they adapted their cultures to the new environment. If a race was successful in adapting to the conditions of a different territory their culture advanced and their population increased ... Human history, in Ratzel’s view, was driven forward by a constant series of migrations, each inspiring new adaptations to new environments and each

adaptation advancing the culture and increasing the population of the migrating race. Ratzel even speculated as to whether the drive to migrate was, in itself, a feature of a virile and vigorous race” (p. 109).

After WWI, itself driven by the evolutionary philosophy in Germany,⁴ although the British exposed the German crimes in Africa, the African genocide was largely forgotten. This historical event, though, documents the fact that the roots of the most infamous Holocaust in modern history—the Jewish Holocaust—were first planted and implemented in Africa. The bestial dimensions of the human mind driven by Darwinism did not start with Hitler.

References

1. See also Ambler, M., Herero genocide, *Creation* 27(3):52–55, 2002.
2. Thompson, I., *The Kaiser’s Holocaust* by David Olusoga and Casper W Erichsen: Review, *London Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 2010, p. 1.
3. Reade, W.W., *Savage Africa*, Harper & Brothers, New York, p. 452, 1864.
4. Cosner, L., Darwinism and World War One, *Creation* 32(2):15–17, 2010.