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The Genocidal Gaze

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Published by Wayne State University Press

Baer, R..

The Genocidal Gaze: From German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich.

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017.

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Afterword

At the core of the genocide of the Herero and Nama, and of the Nazi Holocaust, was the acceptance, indeed the fervent embrace, of the concept of racist/ racial hierarchies. In his sober and sobering book, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Mahmood Mamdani notes: “The horror of colonialism led to two types of genocidal impulses. The first was the genocide of the native by the settler. . . . Faced with the violent denial of his humanity by the settler, the native’s violence began as a counter to violence [the second impulse]. . . . The genocide of the Herero was the first genocide of the twentieth century. The links between it and the Holocaust go beyond the building of concentration camps and the execution of an annihilation policy and are worth exploring.” Mamdani notes other links, such as the influence of Social Darwinism on the “cleansing” of the African tribes, the critique by von Trotha of the missionaries for “inciting the Herero with images ‘of the bloodcurdling Jewish history of the Old Testament,’” and the medical experiments of Eugen Fischer, who returns to Germany to become Josef Mengele’s teacher. However, the link Mamdani emphasizes most strongly “is *race branding*, whereby it became possible not only to set a group apart as an enemy, but also to exterminate it with an easy conscience” (emphasis in the original, 9–13). The construction of the target of genocides as subhuman, as vermin, as cockroaches, as barbarians lacking in civilization, religion, and history crosses the boundaries of centuries and continents.

The Genocidal Gaze strives to demonstrate these deadly linkages between imperialism and genocide, between the genocide of the Herero and Nama people and that of the victims of the Holocaust, and between German colonialism in Africa and that in eastern Europe during the Third Reich. It endeavors to do so by careful reading of texts written both during colonialism and in the post-Holocaust era, with an emphasis on the idea of *race branding*, or racist hierar-

chies, which give rise to the genocidal gaze. It traces the impetus that enables the imperial, or colonial, gaze to evolve into the genocidal gaze. These linkages, which have been termed “the continuity thesis” by historians such as Jürgen Zimmerer, Joachim Zeller, Jan-Bart Gewald, Casper Erichsen, and others, are explored here beyond the realm of the discipline of history.

Such a tracing of the continuity thesis—into letters, fiction, memoir, and art installation—functions to further validate the idea of connections across decades among genocides. This extension also demonstrates the potential, and real, impact of literary and artistic texts to serve as both a goad to the acceptance of racist hierarchies as the norm (with all the horrifying consequences of that acceptance) and a critique of such acceptance. By its location at the intersection of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Postcolonial Studies, this book seeks to find connections among various transnational oppressions, methodologies of persecution and extermination, and ideologies of perpetrators.

As this book was going to press, in March 2017, I traveled to Europe to see two exhibits on the Herero and Nama genocide. These exhibits were remarkable in many ways, not the least in that they, too, sit at the crossroads of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Postcolonial Studies. The first exhibit, at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, was titled *Le Premier Génocide du XXe Siècle: Herero and Nama dans le Sud-Ouest africain allemande 1904–1908*. A modest catalogue was produced in connection with the exhibit. The images and text of the exhibit are notable for several reasons. First, this genocide is clearly named as the first of the twentieth century; until recently, this designation was almost always given to the Armenian genocide, which took place a decade later. Second, von Trotha’s extermination order is quoted in full. Third, the exhibit takes a gendered approach, discussing and demonstrating the Schutztruppe proclivity for photographing women’s exposed breasts. In addition, an offensive German cartoon from the period, titled “Die Macht der Gewohnheit” (The Force of Habit) and originally published in *Simplicissimus* in 1904, is displayed. The cartoon shows a soldier being intimate with an indigenous woman, a whip at his side; arriving home to his white wife; painting her with stove blacking until she resembles the indigenous woman; and then proceeding to whip her with distinct relish. Such a cartoon calls to mind topics discussed in *The Genocidal Gaze*, including the permission for “paternal chastisement” (see the introduction) and the sexual violence against Herero and Nama women. It also starkly demonstrates the manner in which colonial violence travels back to the Fatherland, changing perceptions and behaviors.

Hendrik Witbooi plays an important role in the exhibit. His photo is centrally displayed, as is a model of his distinguishing mark: his hat and white scarf.

Quotations from his letters (the subject of chapter 1) are frequently incorporated into the curatorial information in order to provide history and context. I was particularly pleased to see that the bookstore in the museum carried a new edition of his letters, translated into French, with an introduction by novelist J. M. Coetzee, a Nobel Prize winner from South Africa. A similar edition, translated from Witbooi's original Cape Dutch, or a reprint of Brigitte Lau's translation, is urgently needed in English to make more widely available Witbooi's wise and poignant archive.

Other items in the exhibit include an example of a "Gibeon Pass," the oval metal tag with a personal number that the indigenous people were required to wear in the aftermath of the genocide; the cover of the British "Blue Book," which was quoted in chapter 1, is there, too. A considerable examination of the concentration camps and Shark Island, including several photos, is a centerpiece of the exhibit. The museumgoer can see a chilling German document that lists inmates in each of the camps: "Männer, Weiber, Kinder" (men, women, children); this document closely resembles the lists of prisoners arriving at Nazi concentration and death camps. While no specific reference is made to the continuity thesis—the drawing of connections between this first genocide of the twentieth century and that of the Holocaust—a Nazi poster is prominently displayed toward the end of the exhibit. A huge flag with swastika flies over a map of Africa, on which the German colonies are outlined in red. The motto says: "Auch hier liegth unser Lebensraum!" (Also here lies our living space). As I have discussed, the Nazis hoped to regain control of the colonies they lost at the end of World War I, and to that end, maintained a presence in the country we now call Namibia.

The final image in the exhibit is a photograph of a memorial stone erected in Swakopmund in 2007, which reads: "In memory of the thousands of heroic Ovaherero/OvaMbanderu who perished under mysterious circumstances at the realm of their German colonial masters in concentration camps in Swakopmund/Otjozondjii during 1904–1908. Rest in peace. Suvee Mohange Kavitondema. 31 March 2007. Swakopmund–Namibia." In this way, the Paris exhibit serves not only to teach museum audiences about the genocide but also as a fitting memorial to the victims of the genocide.

When I began work on *The Genocidal Gaze* in 2008, such an exhibit was almost unimaginable. The genocide of the Herero and Nama had been forgotten: colonial amnesia in Germany, certainly, and complete lack of awareness in other European countries and in the United States. The spirit of the Parisian exhibit was imbued with a certain French satisfaction at pointing out the genocidal

behavior of its twentieth-century enemy, Allemagne/Germany. By contrast, the spirit of the second exhibit I saw, this one in Berlin at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, was one of guilt and apology.

That exhibit, titled *Deutscher Kolonialismus: Fragmente seiner Geschichte und Gegenwart* (German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present), was spectacular, both as an exhibit and as an admission of guilt for the genocide in Africa. Boldly printed in white on a blood-red column near the entrance was the title of one section of the exhibit: “Der Genozid an Den Herero und Nama.” No double-talk, no colonial amnesia. All the signage appears in both English and German. A certain metalevel to the exhibit makes it clear that the curators were cognizant not only of the historical events themselves, and the history of the objects, but also of their representation in Germany during the last century. Material from all Germany’s colonies is included.

A beautifully produced catalogue, carrying the same title as the exhibit, runs to 335 pages and costs only 25 euros, a price made possible by state subsidy. It is laden with color photographs and a clear-eyed text. In addition to recapitulating the eight sections of the exhibit and their highlights, the catalogue contains sixteen essays by major scholars. These extend the meaning and value of the exhibit itself. For example, Jürgen Zimmerer, an early advocate of the continuity thesis, presents an essay that traces the torturous history of German colonial amnesia, repression, and denial of the genocide. He recounts the negotiations that have occurred between the German state and Namibia. He notes that as recently as “March 2016, the Bundestag rejected a motion from the Left Party, DIE LINKE, which called for recognition of the genocide of the Herero and Nama and for apology and compensations” (143). So the Deutsches Historisches Museum bravely acknowledged the genocide while the lawmakers were still stalled.

The number and the range of artifacts are staggering: the catalogue lists eighty-three institutions that loaned objects for the exhibit. One can view the original Treaty of Berlin with the signatures of Bismarck and other European leaders, as well as the extermination order issued by Lothar von Trotha in October 1904. The latter is typed, reminding me of the opening of Kentridge’s *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, in which a typewriter types an excerpt from this order. Kentridge came to mind again when I spotted a small metal figure of a German soldier whipping an indigenous man, bent backward under the beating. The curatorial label reads: “With the acquisition of colonial territories, toys specifically related to the colonies became popular in Germany. They served as a *medium for subtly disseminating stereotypes and as an indirect way of creating acceptance for the disparity between the colonized and the colonizers*—including the normality of violence

against Africans” (emphasis mine). That is exactly the “race branding” of which Mamdani writes and it is inscribed in a toy. Nearby is an actual sjambok from the period, a whip made from hippopotamus hide, and Hendrik Witbooi’s personal Bible, captured by the Schutztruppe.

Many, many photographs of the colonial era are available for the viewer. One of the photos in *The Genocidal Gaze* (identified as #3, “Surviving Herero”) is on display, described as “a matchless icon of the German genocide against the Herero and Nama,” which “is rightly criticized as an example of the photography of unwilling subjects, reproducing the power relations between the subjects and the photographer and exposing the people yet again to a *degrading gaze* onto their desperation” (emphasis mine). Fascinating photographs from the Colonial School for Women, located in Germany, reveal how women were trained as helpmeets for their spouses when sent out to settle in Africa.

The contents of the entire study of one Heinrich Schnee are behind a glass partition. His collection of ethnographic artifacts and objects from nature are described on the accompanying label as “the heedless appropriation of other cultures and the idea of conquering the wildness of nature . . . allowing the colonizer to reassure himself of his own superiority while putting the colonized on the lowest rung of the ladder of civilization.” Race branding again. Clothing, posters, a colonial clock, hand-carved *colon* figures, and so many other items prompt the onlooker to wonder at the project of amassing and storing such a quantity of objects. To what end? The catalogue entry for this section of the exhibit suggests: “Many museum collections are closely entangled with colonial power relations. . . . The collection stocks grew rapidly, guided by ideas of completeness and the prevalent impetus among ethnologists to pre-empt an anticipated extinction of ‘primitive peoples’” (219). “An anticipated extinction”—and one that was indeed carried out.

Near the end of the exhibit, displays deal frankly with issues of language and the presence of Africans in Germany as a result of colonization and the world wars. Another section looks at attitudes toward Africa in the German Democratic Republic, and yet another traces the Namibian fight for independence from South Africa, finally successful in 1990. Having spent several hours in the exhibit, I came away sensing that Germany is moving toward a new *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: this one a coming to terms with their colonial history. Other colonial powers—England, France, and the United States—would do well to follow this example. I hope that *The Genocidal Gaze* will contribute to such a project.

