

SOUTHWEST AFRICA: A CENTURY OF BRUTAL OCCUPATION

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho
ngier@uidaho.edu



When I arrived in Namibia last month for a two-week stay, the removal of the Reiter Memorial (above right) from the capital Windhoek dominated the news. A front page picture showed the statue, an oversized German soldier astride a horse, hanging from a crane and carefully wrapped. Authorities have assured those who prize their German heritage (32 percent still speak the language) that the statue will be stored and not destroyed. A small native kneeling at the foot of the statue had been removed long ago, but controversy still continues about the actions of Imperial Germany when it controlled the country as South West Africa from 1884-1919.

The next target of native activists may be a plaque honoring over 400 German soldiers killed in battles with the natives. It takes up an entire wall of the Lutheran Christ Church (above left) that stands in front of the Namibian Parliament. Members of the Herero and Nama tribes want to know why it took 95 years to memorialize the estimated 75,000 natives, who were killed in battle, arbitrarily executed, worked to death in labor camps, or forced into the desert to die.

The UN's Whitaker Report of 1985 concluded that German atrocities in South West Africa constituted the first act of genocide in the 20th Century.

The book *From Herero to Hitler* maintains that there is a direct connection between these African labor camps and the Nazi camps 40 years later. Not a few white racists in Africa actually believed in their own Final Solution: the total elimination of the native populations.

The Germans said that they did not have to abide by the Geneva Conventions because the natives were sub-humans. I wonder if the Bush administration's decision not to grant Muslim detainees protection under the same international law was an unconscious application of the same theory of humanity.

From a wider historical perspective one must acknowledge that African tribes warred with one another and enslaved each other. The Herero were particularly war-like and when the desperate Damara tribe resorted to cattle stealing, the Herero hunted them down without mercy and drove them into Namibia's rugged mountains.



The most distinctive part of Namibia's geography is the "Caprivi Strip," a dagger-shaped piece of land in the far Northeast where I enjoyed a three-day safari on the Kwando River (left), a tributary of mighty Zambezi River. The Germans wanted access to the east-flowing Zambezi so that they could ship goods down to German East Africa.

With the beautiful island of Zanzibar as trade, the British were very happy to grant the Germans this strip of land in 1890, but they neglected to tell them that 360- foot- high Victoria Falls broke the flow of the Zambezi and that there were horrendous rapids from there all the way to Mozambique.

In 1919 the League of Nations gave the white South African government the responsibility "to promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and social progress of the inhabitants of South West Africa." The South Africans, however, did not do any better than the Germans. After World War II the UN General Assembly reminded South Africa of its mandate of beneficent protection, but conditions worsened dramatically as the Nationalist Party extended its apartheid laws to what it now considered its own territory.

When one visits the black townships outside of Windhoek today, one can still see the letters “H,” “N”, and “O” that indicate separate housing for the Herero, Nama, and Ovambo tribes. The South African government tried to play the tribes off against one another just as it did back home. Also as in South Africa, single men were separated from their families, who remained in desolate “homelands,” sometimes hundreds of miles from Windhoek or the mines or farms where the men worked. So much for bringing Christian family values to the natives.

Under the advice of the South West African People’s Organization (SWAPO), the UN renamed the country “Namibia” in 1968, and then recognized SWAPO as the sole representative of its people in 1978. Since its inception in 1959 SWAPO had used nonviolent means to end South Africa's illegal occupation.

South Africa, however, had no interest in giving up Namibia’s vast mineral resources of diamonds, tungsten, copper, and uranium. (By 2015 Namibia will be the larger exporter of uranium.) In 1966 SWAPO, mainly with the support of Soviet Union, turned to arm struggle and finally won its independence in 1990.

For a party that said that it believed in “scientific socialism” and a “classless society,” SWAPO, just as the African National Congress in South Africa, surprised all its critics by not changing the country’s capitalist means of production. Unlike Zimbabwe, white farmers have not been forced off their lands, but some compulsory farm selling may be on the horizon.

Namibia ranks 6th out of 48 Sub-Saharan countries in the Index of African Governance and it is 25th out of 169 countries for press freedom. SWAPO still wins elections by wide margins (70 percent or more), but opposition parties are gaining some ground.

In 2008 per capita GDP was \$6,577, but this figure obscures huge disparities between the rich and the poor, the largest gap in the world. One half of Namibia's 2 million people lives on \$1.25 per day. The current unemployment rate is officially 36.7 percent, but it climbs to 60 percent if the chronically underemployed are counted.

On the Gini scale of 100, on which 0 indicates total economic equality, Namibia has a score of 70.7, while Sweden's number is 23. South Africa's score is 57.8 and the U.S. is at 45. Namibia's 125,300 whites are still very much in control of the economy, so that means that because of income disparity and separate places of residence apartheid is still alive and well.

In order to correct the severe deficiencies of black education under apartheid, the Namibian government has invested heavily in its schools, spending more as a percentage of GDP than all countries but two. All children between the ages of 6 and 16 must go to school, and Windhoek is the home of a vocational-technical school and a national university. Even though only 7 percent of Namibians speak English as their first language, it is the language of instruction.

Compared to other African countries the Namibian government offers its people good medical care. It has set up rural clinics where drugs are free, and visits are charged at the equivalent of one U.S. dollar. Medivac by ambulance to the nearest hospital is provided at no cost. Employers offer private insurance at various levels of coverage at premiums that range from \$4-13 per month.

On the negative side, life expectancy is only 49 years, mainly because the AIDS infection rate is 15.3 percent. (South Africa's is 18.1 percent and the U.S. rate of .6 percent.) Approximately 14,000 children under the age of 15 are infected with virus, and Namibia takes pride in the fact that it was one of the first African countries to develop policies for children with AIDS. One of the greatest problems is the discrimination that faces AIDS victims, child or adult, in a very conservative tribal culture.

I was not able to visit a doctor friend, who is working for Doctors Without Borders in Zimbabwe. Her assignment is to treat 800 patients suffering from tuberculosis, the most common secondary infection of AIDS patients in Africa. I visited a NGO in Windhoek, which focused on vocational training for women, but it was also having great success in making sure that their TB patients stay with their medications through the entire course of the treatment.

South Africa was able to win the support of American and European conservatives with its warning that black rule would mean the end of Christian civilization. These fears of course were baseless. Between 80-90

percent of Namibians is Christian with 50 percent professing the Lutheran faith. (Many white Lutheran ministers were instrumental in SWAPO's battle against apartheid.) I saw abundant evidence of a very vibrant religious life, especially in the townships where worship services were being held in metal and wood scrap shacks.

South African presence is still very strong with much of the food and basic equipment coming in from Namibia's huge neighbor. During my short stay, I saw dozens of South African 4x4s loaded with camping gear headed towards Namibia's famous national parks.

First time visitors are struck by the abundance of place names in Afrikaans, the language of apartheid, and even more surprised by the fact that 60 percent of Namibians still speak the "language of oppressor." It took me a while to realize that most of our native Americans no longer speak their native tongues (most Namibians still do) and converse freely and without resentment in the language of their conqueror. Before I made this observation, I received strange looks from black Namibians, who learned Afrikaans in school or at work, when I asked them if they disliked speaking the language.

My tour group visited the seaside town of Swakopmund. We stayed in a German hotel surrounded by German-speaking shops, one of which was selling a T-shirt with "Südwest Afrika" in big Gothic letters. Talk about poking the native in the eye.

In 2004 the German government formally apologized for their African holocaust and it now sends the most foreign aid of any country. The German airline Lufthansa now flies non-stop from Frankfurt, and thousands of European tourists enjoy the abundant wildlife and striking desert and mountain scenery. I was happy to find that none of them were wearing that offensive T-shirt.