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THE GREY ZONE: SITUATING THE RHENISH MISSION IN THE HERERO-NAMA GENOCIDE 1904-1908

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ABSTRACT

German South West Africa, now called Namibia, was a German colony from 1814 until 1918. In 1904, the Herero tribe, which was joined by the Nama tribe in early 1905, rose against the German colonists. Following the uprising, the German army drove all members of the tribes into the desert and later forced them into concentration camps and labour on railroads. The Herero-Nama genocide (1904-08) is often described as 'forgotten'. In the recent years, Herero and Nama activists in Namibia have tried to raise awareness for their plight and start a conversation with Germany to redress its past wrongs. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted into the roles that institutions and individuals played within the genocide. Whilst this case specifically concerns a German colonial atrocity and the role of the Rhenish Mission within it, the moral questions of responsibility that it raises are applicable to any colonial context. The theoretical framework established for this research draws on genocide, perpetrator, and colonial studies to comprehend the contradictory actions of the Rhenish Mission during the genocide. Drawing on the Rhenish Mission's reports from 1904-08, their actions and the subsequent consequences are classed into three categories. Firstly, the missionaries saw themselves and therefore acted primarily as missionaries. Therefore, their actions perpetuated the genocide by gathering the fleeing Herero and Nama in collection centres. Lastly, individual missionaries acted to alleviate the suffering of the prisoners in concentration camps. This ambiguity should encourage us to consider both our historic responsibility and our current role within violent contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The Rhenish Mission had been active in the territory of German South West Africa since 1864, with the aim to convert the local population to Christianity. During the 19th century, many countries were seeking to gain influence and prestige in the world by taking colonies. This led to what has subsequently been called 'the scramble for Africa', in which many European countries fought to gain territories in Africa (Gewald, 1999). In 1884, the Berlin Conference divided up the African colonies in an attempt to stop in-fighting between European powers (de Vries, 1980). Thus, as of 1884, Germany officially ruled over what became German South West Africa, now called Namibia. Before the rebellion, the Herero were the largest tribe in the territory, and the Nama were the second most influential tribe.

The genocidal events began on 12 January 1904 with a Herero rebellion against their German colonisers. The rebellion was sparked by the colonial government's removal of peoples from their ancestral lands and the obliteration of the Herero's traditionally pastoral way of life based on cattle farming (Gewald 1999, pp. 10-28). Initially, the governor, Leutwein, attempted to use negotiating tactics to settle the dispute. However, by February 1904, in the face of large Herero successes, the German government bowed to pressure from the settlers and handed military authority to the notorious general Lothar von Trotha. Trotha was renowned for the ruthless tactics which he employed in German East-Africa (1894-1897) and China against the Boxer Rebellion (1900) (Zimmerer, 2003, p.49). The Battle at the Waterberg on 11 August 1904 marked a turning point and the policy turned to outright genocide after the German army failed to kill all Herero fighters. Instead, the majority of the gathered Herero children, women, and fighters managed to escape into the Omaheke desert (Zimmerer, 2003, pp.45-57).

Following the battle, the German army drove the Herero further into the desert, poisoning wells and shooting those who refused to continue walking. With these actions, the German government put an official end to the first extermination phase. However, this did not mark the end of violence as the military campaign against the Herero and Nama, who joined the war in 1905, was replaced by creation of concentration camps and sending people to forced labour. The abysmal conditions and harsh environments of these camps is exemplified by the spread of diseases, such as typhoid, syphilis, and scurvy. Moreover, starvation, abuse, rape, and unfamiliarly cold surroundings of the *Haifischinsel* concentration camp led to many more deaths (Erichsen, 2005, p.134; Zeller, 2003, pp.66-68).

The Rhenish Mission was one of the largest missionary societies in Germany at the time. It also had the strongest presence in German South-West Africa, working to Christianise the territory since the 1840s (De Vries, 1980, p.44). At this stage of the genocide, the Rhenish Mission established government-ordered gathering centres, in which the fleeing Herero and Nama were collected. As the Rhenish Mission had been active in the territory since 1864 and had a long-established relationship with the local population, many came to the missionaries trusting in their promise of peace and food (de Vries, 1980, p.130). Instead, the military sent the gathered indigenous communities to concentration camps or uncompromising work on railway lines (Erichsen, 2005, pp.32-35). In both situations, conditions were designed to kill the tribes as sexual abuse, deadly diseases, and lack of food were common within the camps (Erichsen, 2005). They were only closed in 1908 by which time 50-80% of the pre-war Herero and Nama populations had perished (Madley, 2005).

Currently, Herero and Nama activists are attempting to raise awareness of the long-term impacts of the genocide. Their efforts have led to symbolic steps, such as the return of 20 skulls to Namibia in 2011 (Muinjangue, 2010; Hoffmann, 2013;

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Burke, 2016). Within historical research, the Herero-Nama genocide has been overlooked or considered 'merely' as a case study to discuss larger theoretical frameworks, notably the definition of genocide (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990). By focusing solely on the contradictory roles of missionaries within the genocide, this analysis seeks to give the events in Namibia the centrality they require as well as to draw attention to the moral responsibility of German figures throughout the genocide. This article aims to rectify what has been called Germany's 'colonial amnesia' (Burke, 2016) through an analysis of the contradictory roles played by the Rhenish Mission throughout the genocide in German South-West Africa.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the pertinent literature on colonial, genocide, and perpetrator studies that underpin the analysis of the Rhenish Mission. Subsequently, the methodology used for this analysis is outlined and a brief analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the main sources is provided. The third section discusses the research findings, focusing on three main roles played by the mission: the continued Christianisation of the indigenous communities; the establishment of collection centres; and, contrastingly, their attempts to alleviate perilous camp conditions. Finally, the conclusion places these contradictory actions side by side to shed light on the role of bystanders during genocides.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section begins by defining the loaded term genocide and demonstrating its applicability to the events of 1904-1908 in German South-West Africa. Consequently, an outline of literature pertaining to the role of missionaries within colonial contexts is provided. Finally, literature from within perpetrator studies is discussed to show the analytical approaches to the role of bystanders within genocidal studies.

Defining Genocide

The most common definition of genocide stems from the 1948 UN Convention that codified the crime of genocide for the first time. Article II of the Convention states that 'genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group'. Despite frequent use, this definition is widely critiqued for requiring proof of intent, which is often difficult to provide (Stone, 2008). In the case of Herero-Nama genocide, intent of genocide can be proven using general von Trotha's infamous extermination order from 2 October 1904 that stated that 'within the German border every Herero, with or without gun, with or without cattle, will be shot' (Zimmerer and Zeller, 2003, pp.115-116).

The application of the term genocide has generated controversy, ranging from its legal applicability to the events, to its actual occurrence (Bachmann, 2017; Stone, 2008). When considering the events occurring in years 1904 to 1908 in German Southwest-Africa, the evidence for genocide is overwhelming and, aside from widely criticised scholars like Brigitte Lau (1989), most agree that they constituted a genocide (Gewald, 1999, p.2). The cultural and economic bases for survival of both the Herero and Nama groups were destroyed through the continued loss of cattle and tribal lands, scattering of populations and communities, and sexual violations that led to long-term decline in fertility and birth rates (Gewald, 1999). By 1908, roughly half of the 12,000 to 15,000 Nama died and between 60,000 and 100,000 (50-80%) of the pre-war Herero population were killed (Madley, 2005). Moreover, tribal structures were ruptured, as their leaders were killed or sent into exile. Many of the surviving members were geographically scattered, tribal land and property had been expropriated, and many had abandoned their religions to convert to Christianity (Bachmann, 2017, pp.342-346). Thus, the disastrous long-term impact of the genocide on the Herero and Nama tribes must not be ignored. In addition, an understanding of the weight of the events is crucial in comprehending the consequences of the missionaries' actions throughout the genocide.

Missionaries in the Colonial Context

When analysing the missionaries' choices, it is important to consider colonial studies, which provide a contextual understanding of how missionaries engaged with the empire. Post-colonial historians, such as Said (1978), criticise the portrayal of missionaries as 'benign imperialists', instead focusing on their governmental collaboration (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997, p.7). Recent scholars such as Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) highlight the conflicting roles and pressures missionaries faced. Similarly, Cox (2002) provides an insightful analysis of the difficulty in acting according to Christian values in a colonial environment of obsession with power. These concepts highlight the danger of homogenous portrayals of missionaries and inform an analysis of the ambiguous actions undertaken by the Rhenish Mission. Cox (2002) maintains that missionaries were predominantly 'institution-builders', thus revealing that missionaries were not primarily focused on expanding the empire. In a similar spirit, Etherington (2005, p.4), claims that 'missions and the official Empire were quite different operations' by showing how the missionaries' main aim to continue Christianising local populations was distinct from the governmental agendas.

Analysing Bystanders

Lemkin (1943) inherently linked colonialism and genocide in terms of both the physical and cultural destruction (Docker, 2004), describing a two-step process of obliteration followed by imposition (Rashed and Short, 2012). Hence, it is logical that similar approaches arise when comparing colonial and perpetrator studies. Etherington (2005) highlights the importance of context in understanding missionary actions while Doná (2018) emphasises the need to consider specific experience of individuals. Therefore, Doná (2018) conceived the term 'situated bystandership', which argues that one must place each bystander into their individual context before assessing and judging their actions. This notion motivates this analysis of the Rhenish Mission as she challenges the homogenous portrayal of bystander groups and encourages the notion of fluidity, as individuals move between the categorisations of perpetrator, victim and bystander. Both genocide and colonial studies point to the need to admit uncertainties and ambiguities into an analysis of institutional and individual actions. A similar trend can also be found in literature surrounding the role of bystanders.

Levi (1989) writing specifically about the Holocaust outlined the term 'Grey Zone' concerning the victims who collaborated with the Nazi system, such as *Sonderkommandos* who worked in the crematoria of the extermination camps. Yet Levi's conception of the Grey Zone outlines ambiguity within genocide, defining it as a zone 'with ill-defined outlines which both separate and conjoin the two camps of masters and servants' (p.27).

Traditional approaches to the notion of perpetrator, victim, and bystander are important when considering the role of missionaries during the Herero-Nama genocide. Staub (1992,

p.87) delineates the choice of bystanders as either promoting caring for others or accepting the perpetrators through their own passivity. In consequence, Vetlesen (2000), when analysing a case study of Bosnia, argued that bystanders have a responsibility to become actively involved in stopping genocide and he forces us to consider: 'Does failure to prevent genocide […] amount to complicity?' (p.21). This challenging moral question is crucial to consider when assessing the silence and passivity of the Rhenish Mission, especially when considering the potential power of bystanders to prevent the atrocities simply by speaking out about them.

Nevertheless, micro studies reveal that most individuals fall somewhere in between the broad categories of bystander and perpetrator (Williams, 2018, p.21). Thus, Williams conceived a typology that focuses on actions and evaluates their impact on, and proximity to, events. He analyses 'the consequences that an individual's actions have on the actually realised genocidal outcome' (p.25) by focusing on direct and indirect consequences of the actions, regardless of the intentions. Each exploit and its impact can be analysed separately and then set beside the other actions to depict individual's varied behaviour. This approach is particularly useful when considering the contradictory actions of the Rhenish Mission as it aids an analysis of their ambiguous impact on the genocide.

As discussed, the analysis of the role of the Rhenish Mission throughout the Herero-Nama genocide must be influenced by several theoretical fields. Colonial studies provide an explanation of the complex pressures faced by missions within empires whilst highlighting their single-minded purpose to Christianise. This insight underpins the first role played by the Rhenish Mission, outlined in this article, which was to continue acting as missionaries by seeking to convert and preach to indigenous communities. The other two roles, helping either the victims or the perpetrators of the Rhenish Mission, are based more clearly on their reactions to the genocidal circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the contradictory roles taken on by the Rhenish Mission, primary sources were sought out from its former headquarters at the Vereinte Evangelische Mission (United Protestant Mission) in Barmen-Wuppertal.

Following the initial review of the archives, the reports of the Mission were identified as the most useful and informative. They became the primary documents used in this study as they provided the most in-depth overview of the mission and actions of all the individual missionaries involved in the Herero-Nama genocide. This approach was informed by Lorimer (2009), who outlined an approach to archival research called the 'make-do method' which says that during research decisions must be made 'on-the-hoof, […] improvised according to circumstances' (p.258). Reports on the missionary activity in German South West Africa were published monthly since the mission's first activity in the territory in 1864 and made available to both mission members and supporters to inform them of the work carried out by the missionaries. As such, these reports provided important information on the motivations, actions, justifications, and self-perceptions of the Rhenish Mission.

THE CONTRADICTORY ROLES OF THE RHENISH MISSION

This section explores three main roles of the Rhenish Mission as missionaries, government collaborators, and bystanders to demonstrate the contradictory nature of their actions. To provide a more nuanced analysis, the missionaries' aims and motivations are also considered whilst maintaining a clear focus on the impact of their actions.

Missionaries

Throughout all stages of the genocide, the missionaries viewed themselves as people spreading Christianity and therefore focused on converting 'unenlightened' Herero, Nama, and Bergdamara. In order to Christianise the locals, their work included holding Sunday masses, teaching in schools, and performing baptismal instruction. The precedence taken by Christianising is reflected throughout the reports in the genocidal years. Hence, in 1908 in Windhuk, missionary Wandres reported 255 adults and 70 children of the Nama-speaking community being baptised within 14 days, with 'hundreds waiting for baptismal instruction' (BRMG, 1908, p.186).

The continuation of missionary success is demonstrated through the fact that even though the genocide led to an overall decrease of 50-80% in the Herero and Nama population (Bachmann, 2017, pp.342-346), the congregation had 10,763 members in 1907 compared to the 13,909 in 1903 (BRMG, 1904, p.109; BRMG, 1907, p.111). More tellingly, the number of people being baptised rose from 1,316 to 2,333 in the same years, thereby implying that the overall interest in Christianity was rising dramatically. Missionaries explained this phenomenon by claiming that the Gospel had a special 'attraction for the souls of the broken and poor here' (BRMG, 1909, p.164).

However, the mission's reports show that the rising interest only began in 1905, the same year when collection centres started to be established. Therefore, it seems that the power balance between the missionaries and the Herero and Nama was an important factor that coincided with a rising interest in Christianity. For example, missionaries controlled the distribution of food, clothes, and shelter, as well as running sickbays in the concentration camps. Clearly, contact with the missionaries became a central factor for the survival and health of the prisoners. The exploitation of this power was at times explicit; children were only provided with rations of flour or rice if they attended the missionaries' school (BRMG, 1907: 176-7). Evidently, the missionaries established a coercive relationship with these indigenous communities in which they used their power to improve the prisoners' conditions to encourage them to convert to Christianity.

The missionaries also took a systematic approach to continue their Christianising work throughout the genocide. As Cox (2008) outlines for missionaries in India, the Rhenish Mission sought to solidify and demonstrate its sphere of influence through building institutions. Beginning in 1905, population movements were assessed for regions where missionaries were likely to most effectively reach indigenous communities. Subsequently, the mission established stations and gathering centres in these regions (BRMG, 1908, p.16-19; p.272). However, the Rhenish Mission was very aware of the fact that their presence in the territory relied solely on the goodwill of the government in allowing them access to the land and its people.

Colonial Agents

The Rhenish Mission's overt collaboration with the state began when the German government was at war with the Herero. It might have been motivated by their rivalry with the Catholic mission as well as the distrust of the settlers who claimed that the missionaries were disloyal to Germany (BRMG, 1904, p.428). De Vries (1980) points out that the missionaries also relied on the state to fulfil their aim of missionizing, therefore

underlining the importance of good relations with the government. However, most of the Rhenish Mission's actions were clearly self-motivated even though they needed the approval from the government before putting their plans into action.

The collaboration between the mission and the government came into fruition in 1905 when the mission was officially made responsible for the gathering the Herero and Nama hiding in the field. The initial methods were rudimentary and unsustainable since there were few missionaries. They also did not possess the necessary tracking skills, and many Herero and Nama distrusted them following the Waterberg Battle (De Vries, 1980, p.187). Therefore, the missionaries established large prison camps under their supervision to which the surrendering Herero and Nama would be brought (BRMG, 1906, p.10). Implementing an offensive, person-oriented strategy, the missionaries analysed population movements to establish gathering centres which would reach more people, such as Ombakaha and Otjosongombe (BRMG, 1906, p.249). They also paid loyal people from various indigenous communities to work for them. They were chosen due to their knowledge of the land and ability to effectively find and convince Herero and Nama to surrender (BRMG, 1906, pp.89-91). This strategy worked, as indicated by the collection centres in Omburo and Otjihaënena, which gathered approximately 8700 Herero and Nama and were then closed on 1 September 1906 (BRMG, 1906, p.249).

The direct consequences of the mission's gathering centres were detrimental to the indigenous communities. Once the mission had gathered the prisoners, they were either sent to the concentration camps or to work on railway lines. The Rhenish Mission called these actions 'peace work', claiming that they were saving people from death in the desert (BRMG, 1906: 89). However, without the Rhenish Mission's initiative to gather the indigenous communities, the second genocidal stage would not have been possible on such scale. Nonetheless, their self-perception demonstrates the ambiguity of the missionaries' actions, as they clearly felt goodwill towards the indigenous communities. This ambiguity becomes particularly evident when considering their choice to remain silent and attempts to alleviate the conditions in the concentration camps as discussed in the following section.

Bystanders

The actions of individual missionaries position them in the 'Grey Zone' (Levi, 1989) since, although they were guilty through collaboration, some attempted to improve the prisoners' circumstances. For example, Kuhlmann argued in a letter posted to Trotha on 9 February 1905 for more lenient terms of surrender for the Herero (Kuhlmann, 1905, p.295). Notably, he seems to have acted outside of the wishes of the Rhenish Mission, which distanced itself from his actions by merely reporting a 'lively letter exchange' about which 'no particulars can here be stated' (BRMG, 1905, p.131). Crucially, this reveals that the missionaries had the capacity to act as individuals outside of their institution; arguably, this can be interpreted as individual agency and ultimately responsibility. However, this is not necessarily the way missionaries viewed themselves; Kuhlmann himself wrote 'Yet we little people have nothing to say in this and must quietly watch' (Kuhlmann, 1905, p.257).

Indeed, the mission maintained a strict policy of silence towards the public about the atrocities they witnessed. In one instance, they even supported the government's false portrayal of the genocide. Following the government's request, they did not publish a letter given to them by Samuel Maherero (leader of the Herero uprising) in which he laid out their reasons for rebellion. Instead, they reprinted a ministerial publication in which the original document was altered (De Vries, 1980, p.182). Williams' (2018) action-driven approach applied to these circumstances emphasizes the negative impact the missionaries' inaction ultimately had, as it reinforced a false public perception which facilitated the genocide.

However, Williams' (2018) typology instructively points out that various actions can be assessed together to demonstrate the multiplicity of actions by a single person or institution. The missionaries also acted to alleviate the deadly circumstances of the concentration camps. For example, Vedder writes of the immediate and methodical approach of missionaries toward the prisoners in Swakopmund concentration camp, known for its cold and windy climate. He arranged for a clothing donation call to be made in Barmen, Germany through the monthly reports and very soon 'crates upon crates' of clothing arrived (Vedder, 1953, p.139). Vedder's own account, which might be criticised for bias, can be corroborated by photos and missionary reports (Zeller, 2003, p.69). Similarly, missionaries arranged for sickbays to be built by the military, which they then singlehandedly ran. The reports indicate the ability of the missionaries to alleviate the deadly illnesses in the camps; for instance, missionary Elger in Karibib treated 150 patients in the first three quarters of 1905 of which only 20 died (BRMG, 1906, p.11). It demonstrates that missionaries' silence, inactivity, or even support of the government co-existed with their actions to limit and inhibit the genocidal circumstances in the camps. Therefore, it is important to consider all of their actions in order to comprehend the moral ambiguity of the Rhenish Mission during the genocide.

DISCUSSION

In any archival research there are certain limitations, and as the reports were written and published by the Rhenish Mission itself, they clearly provide only a biased and limited perspective. The most obvious example is that the point of view of the victims is missing from the reports and subsequently from this analysis. The voices of the victims are difficult to recover as there are no living survivors. As it is important to analyse the experiences of the survivors, future research might be focused in this direction. For example, recovering the original research of the British government's Blue Book (1918), based on oral testimonies of survivors, might be a useful approach. Additionally, as these documents were originally published in German, and part of the research process included translating these documents into English, it is possible that some of the original content has effectively been 'lost in translation'. Although every effort has been made to translate the sources with accuracy, there is a possibility that language differences have introduced subtle changes in the content.

From a critical standpoint, the reports themselves also provide a limited perspective on the work of the Rhenish Mission. For example, the documents sometimes included individuals' letters, yet in many cases the reports merely reprinted extracts, therefore presenting an edited version of the originals. In the context of Northern Ireland, Dawson (2013, p.271) has outlined how personal stories are subsumed into a 'collective voice and agency' displayed to the public sphere. This concept can be applied to the missionary reports, which functioned to unite the voices of all missionaries in one report. They likely aimed to depict a unified mission to present a cohesive institution to its members and contributors in Germany on whom they relied upon for funding. Hence, there are numerous texts in the reports

on the financially dire situation of the Rhenish Mission due to an increased expenditure in German South-West Africa followed by calls for more donations (BRMG, 1908, p.57). Therefore, the reports of the Rhenish Mission corroborate Johnston's (2003) claim that published missionary texts are 'fundamentally and frankly propagandist in nature' (6). Cases of individual actions, memoirs, and letters of missionaries were chosen to gain insight into the individual voices of the missionaries and their unique perspective on the events.

CONCLUSION

When considering the role of the Rhenish Mission and its missionaries in German South-West Africa from 1904 to 1908, the most outstanding element is their multiplicity. This study has shown how the missionaries focused on Christianising while simultaneously engaging in the genocide. Whilst the Rhenish Mission clearly facilitated the genocide through their silence and their initiative to establish gathering centres, they also alleviated the deadly circumstances in the concentration camps.

Various motivations driving these contradictory actions that led to positive and negative impacts on the survivors of the genocide illustrate the complexity of two scholarly positions. Firstly, this case study reinforces the consensus on the ambiguity of missionaries within the imperial context, as they acted in tandem but also apart from colonial governments. Secondly, this study demonstrates the contradictory nature of individual and institutional actions during a genocide. The latter element focuses specifically on the contradictory actions of bystanders in violent circumstances, thereby highlighting the problems with using rigid categories like perpetrator, victim, and bystander. Situating the bystanders highlights the difficult circumstances of the missionaries (Doná, 2018). Most importantly, acknowledging the various influences that impacted the missionaries helps explain why they perceived themselves as powerless. This latter element forces one to ask questions regarding one's own responsibility and choices in the face of violence and the impact that every individual can have.

This study has demonstrated that missionaries viewed themselves first and foremost as missionaries, with the aim to spread the word of God. They therefore sought to overcome the obstacle posed by the genocide by analysing population movements to adjust the focus of their missionary work and institutions. Aided by the desperation of the Herero and Nama, their methodical approach worked, as they maintained a similar congregation size and a rising number of baptismal candidates despite a large loss of life in this period. Little research has been done on the indigenous individuals during the genocide who helped the missionaries in their work, whether as teachers, evangelists, or those gathering people in the collection centres. This might be an interesting point of further research as it could examine the extent of indigenous agency during the genocide, as these roles often afforded privileges and could instructively be tied to Primo Levi's definition of the grey zone.

Finally, this study aids the campaign of the descendants of the Herero and Nama by continuing a conversation on the impact of German actions on the territory now called Namibia, with the ultimate aim for Germany to take responsibility for its past actions.

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