



## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN AFRICA BETWEEN 1900 AND 1910

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### Abstract

Colonialism brought extensive suffering to Africans. One manifestation of this was the concentration camp systems established in German South West Africa and the British-controlled areas of Southern Africa. The British colonialists fought the mostly Dutch-born Boers, who had settled in South Africa in the 19th century, while the Germans fought the indigenous Herero and Nama. Both conflicts were motivated by a desire to secure the dominance and economic growth of the respective imperial powers. The concentration camp model, which previously had been seen in Cuba, served as a tool for this purpose. Between 1900 and 1910, approximately 28,000 Boers and 20,000 Africans died in these camps in the southern African territories, while nearly 8,000 Africans, mostly children, died in the German colony.

This paper seeks to answer, among other questions, the following: What conflicts led to establishing concentration camps in the colonies under discussion, and what purpose did they serve? The comparative analysis focuses on the conditions in the camps, the treatment of internees, and the resulting mortality figures.

### Keywords

*Colonialism, concentration camps, comparative study, crimes against humanity*

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of concentration camps is very often associated with Nazi death camps, but the Germans had already established these types of camps long before. Indeed, concentration camps were not a new phenomenon. However, Nazi Germany was not the first to use these facilities. A concentration camp is not synonymous with a death camp. In the former, people were detained and subjected to forced labour, starvation, and torture, among other things. In the latter, the aim was to exterminate detainees as quickly and efficiently as possible (Holokauszt Enciklopédia, 2024).

The first isolation camp in the United States was established in 1838 for the Cherokee Indians, but it functioned more as a reservation. The very first concentration camp (from the word ‘reconcentracio’, meaning to re-concentrate) is associated with the Second War of Independence in Cuba (1895–1898), during which Spanish colonialists confined civilians in concentration camps. The purpose and consequence were similar for the camps established then and used since isolation and surveillance, crowding people together, and poor conditions, leading to mass deaths (Papp, 2013: 235–236).

In the years following the Cuban camps, this system of segregation was also used in two colonies in Africa during the period under review. The British established such camps for the Boers and the Africans in southern Africa and the Germans in German South West Africa against the Herero and the Nama.

This paper will give a historical overview of the colonial activities of the British and Germans in the areas under study and then briefly describe how the conflict between the colonizers and the Africans escalated into the establishment of concentration camps. After that, attention will turn to a comparison of concentration camps. First, I use the individualising comparative study to highlight the specificities of the two cases, thus examining the correlation between the retributive aspects (concentration camps) of German and British colonialism. Therefore, I am mainly comparing the research results of secondary sources - for which the findings of experts on African history are indispensable - and adding my own ideas. In my work, I employ the deductive method. This involves developing a set of criteria based on the existing literature, which enables me to make comparisons. By using these criteria, I can either confirm or reject the research questions I formulate and provide answers to them.

My goal is to create a concise summary that will examine the connections between the discussed cases, thereby contributing to comparative genocide research and research in Africa.

The uniqueness of this comparison lies in its inclusion of both human factors and the impact of genocide. It emphasizes the significant losses suffered by the African population at the turn of the century. This allows us to assert that genocides and massacres occurred in Africa during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. However, these acts were primarily driven by colonisation and the actions of colonialists rather than by Africans who were deemed inferior. As I will examine both Lemkinian and the “modern” interpretation of genocide through

the concentration camps, it is essential to juxtapose the two cases, thus showing the similarities and differences.

In Lemkin's view, there is a link between genocide and colonialism: '*Genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.*' (Lemkin, 1944: 79). It also reveals what Lemkin identifies as the method of genocide: '*physical – massacre and mutilation, deprivation of livelihood (starvation, exposure, etc. often by deportation); slavery – exposure to death; biological – separation of families (...); cultural – (...) destruction of cultural leadership (...)*' (McDonnell – Moses, 2005: 504–505).

In contrast, the current definition of genocide – in force since 1948 – is: '*genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*' (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948: Article II).

On this basis, therefore, we have two slightly different definitions of colonial massacres and concentration camps.

The comparative analysis will be carried out by asking the following research questions: (1) Who were the victims, and approximately how many Africans were interned by the colonialists? (2) How long were they in operation, and what were the reasons and objectives of the concentration camps? (3) What were the conditions, how many people died, and how were these 'facilities' liquidated? Finally, a consideration of whether genocide was committed or not in the concentration camps will be examined. I examine the comparison from four perspectives: human factors, political and economic influences, the infrastructures built in the concentration camp system, and genocide.

## **2. Historical background**

In the 17th century, the Dutch settlers, the Boers, founded the first trading settlement in South Africa under the name of Cape Town (Nagyné, 2010: 115). However, the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) awarded Cape Town, acquired from the Netherlands, to the British (Papp, 2013: 237). The British expansion and the arrival of British settlers marked the beginning of the conflict, as the newcomers could not

assimilate and were therefore called *uitlanders* or foreigners. (Rosta, 2012: 95). On the other hand, the British posed a threat to the Boer way of life, which revolved around farming and herding (Papp, 2013: 237). The situation was exacerbated by the slave emancipation in 1833 in the British Empire and its colonies. This was to the disadvantage of the Boers; on the one hand, they lost the local labour force that the Africans represented (as they lived as slaves under the control of the Dutch settlers). However, emancipation also had a financial disadvantage for the Boers, as the compensation for the freed slaves was found to be insufficient. The British annexation, which prevented the expansion of the Boers, was the final ‘blow.’ In the wake of these events, the Boers emigrated between 1835 and 1837 in the so-called ‘great trek.’ Some five thousand Boers and an equal number of servants left Cape Town, and a republic was established in the Port Natal area. In 1843, the British also annexed this area, and some of the Boers founded two more states, the Transvaal Republic and the Oranje Free State (Rosta, 2012: 95–97). The British also recognised these as independent states in the first half of the 1850s (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 302).

In 1867, diamonds were found in Grikva, on the border of Cape Colony, Transvaal, and Oranje, and all three states, wanted to claim it. In 1871, Cape Colony succeeded. In 1886, a gold field was discovered in the Transvaal, which the Boers hoped to use to gain independence from the British economy. The Anglo-Boer conflict was further deepened because the Boers were convinced that the British wanted to destroy them. This belief was reinforced by the efforts of Cecil Rhodes – British businessman and Prime Minister of Cape Town (1890–1896) – to unite the British and Boers throughout South Africa. The Transvaal rejected this due to growing Afrikaner nationalism and the need to protect its sovereignty (Fage – Tordoff, 2004: 321–326).

The wealth of the Southern African region, the struggles for prestige and power between the colonisers, and the economic interests of the Europeans eventually led to the Second Boer War<sup>1</sup> between 1899 and 1902.

The first German in German South West Africa was Adolf Lüderitz, a Bremen merchant who bought land around Angra Pequena Bay from the local chiefs in 1883 and later founded a town there under the name Lüderitz (Pálfi, 2019: 164). In 1884, Lüderitz had obtained more land, but due to concerns about British involvement, the German Reich took over the previously acquired ‘private colony’ as a protected territory, establishing it as a German protectorate (Molnár, 2013: 213).

In 1887, Heinrich Ernst Göring, the first German head of government in South West Africa, passed a law granting different rights to Europeans and Africans. By 1890, the bankruptcy of German companies in South West Africa led German Chancellor Bismarck to decide in favour of state intervention, and the protectorate status was replaced by the Crown Colony status, where a direct territorial rule was implemented. With the signing of the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty in 1890, German South West Africa reached its final extent (Németh – Juhász, 2012: 38; Molnár, 2013: 213–214).

In the territory colonised by the Germans, the Africans, including the Herero and the Nama, were incessantly at war with each other, and the colonisers took advantage of this. In 1893, however, Hendrik Witbooi, the chief of a Nama tribe, abandoned

tribal warfare and rebelled against the Germans because of the arbitrary nature of German rule, which led to the murder of many Africans (Pálfi, 2019: 164). By 1894, the new governor of the colony, Theodor Leutwein, and the troops of the colonial protection force, the Schutztruppe, which had

been established in 1888 and increased by several hundred, had successfully put down this rebellion (Németh – Juhász, 2012: 26; Leanza, 2020: 381).

The Herero and Nama peoples traditionally engaged in animal husbandry (Németh – Juhász, 2012: 28). However, the arrival of settlers and missionaries in the colony led to the occupation of African lands. Additionally, the construction of a railway line further exacerbated the land disruptions for the local population (Molnár, 2013: 215). In 1897, a cattle plague and locust epidemic swept through the region, resulting in mass cattle deaths and driving up meat prices. German settlers exploited this situation by raising cattle on the pastures of the Africans, who were forced to sell their land due to their impoverished circumstances. The traders' less-than-honest dealings and the usury interest charged on loans to Hereros and Namas, often collected by force, created an additional economic problem. The Germans also set up reservations to which they tried to force the Africans. This led to a military confrontation between the Herero and the Germans in January 1904, followed by the Nama uprising in July 1904 (Németh – Juhász, 2012: 28–35). However, the literature has no consensus on when the Nama uprising can be dated. Some authors place the uprising after the publication of the extermination order<sup>2</sup> of German commander Lothar von Trotha (October 1904), which coincides with the official report of the German army general staff (Bachmann, 2018: 78).

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### **3. Comparison of concentration camps**

The comparison of the two sets of camps shows that they were operational for about the same length of time. The British operated camps from September 1900 to the summer of 1902, while the Germans held Africans between 1905 and 1907–1908. This means that the camps were primarily in operation during the war. A December 21, 1900 British memorandum officially sanctioned the Boer camps. However, in reality, refugee camps were established earlier, in the summer of 1900, and were replaced by concentration camps in September of the same year (Kotek – Rigoutot, 2005: 53–54). Meanwhile, for the Germans, the term *Konzentrationslagern* first appeared in a telegram on January 14, 1905 (Gewald, 1999: 186).

The number of camps set up for Boers and Africans is slightly different; 116,000 Boers were crammed into 40–58 camps, while 115,700 Africans were interned in

60–66 camps (Warwick, 1983: 145; Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 52–54; Papp, 2013: 240). For the Herero and Nama, the Germans established larger camps at five locations: Okahandja, Windhoek, Karibib, Swakopmund, and Lüderitzbucht. Still, the 1906 Schutztruppe record suggests that there may have been several smaller camps where Africans lived. According to records in the Namibian National Archives, 17,018 people were held in these camps. The Germans probably had to set up additional camps because some of the Herero and Nama surrendered only later, in 1906, when the Germans released some prisoners to inform their fellow fugitives (for example, about the revocation of the extermination order) (Bachmann, 2018: 106–108).

The concentration camps established by the British and the Germans show many similarities in their operation and aims, mainly because the Germans took their cues from the Spanish and the British and adopted, among other things, the term concentration camp and the use of barbed wire (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 69). The Germans, however, took this system further, and it was the Herero and the Nama who were the first to be subjected to forced labour in such camps (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 65). It was in German South West Africa that the unity of labour and concentration camps was first achieved (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 69).

The Boer camps were set up for the purpose of isolation, partly because guerrilla tactics characterised the Boer warfare, and the British feared that they would gain support from the civilian population (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 51–52). On the other hand, the systematic destruction of Boer homes by the British in their scorched earth tactics led to their being rounded up and forcibly confined in concentration camps (Ribeiro, 2020: 2). The camps were not established in the same way, and conditions varied depending on the attitude and behaviour of the British supervisors (Dampier, 2005: 203).

Reports by Emily Hobhouse, the wife of a British MP, after she visited the Boer camps, paint a clearer picture of how the camps operated. Hobhouse visited some camps in the Cape Colony in late December 1900. She intended to repeat the visit shortly afterwards, but the authorities no longer allowed her to go ashore. After the failure, she wrote a book based on the testimonies of those in the camps and letters from interned women. These revealed that daily life in the camps included the fact that the prisoners received very little food, not enough even to survive when the camps began operating (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 55–56). She describes the conditions in the camps as follows: people lived in tents – or, according to other sources, in tin and sod houses (Dampier, 2005: 203) – where dozens of people were crammed together. Hygiene conditions were poor, with a lack of soap available. In some camps, latrine receptacles were set up in the hot sun, which resulted in a strong, unpleasant odour. Water and fuel shortages also posed significant challenges due to extreme weather conditions. Winters were harsh and cold, while summers were hot. Hobhouse's work also shows, however, that Boer women often complained that they could not bring their African servants with them, so they had to do the 'household chores' of cooking and washing themselves (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 55). Other sources, however, suggest that the Boers could keep servants, but they



did not benefit from food rations, so their numbers were minimal. In addition, the camps had hospitals, shops, and schools, and the Boers were allowed to visit the town, where they could buy food and other items and receive visitors and food parcels. The Boers also had the opportunity to earn money, as some internees found work with the camp authorities while the wealthier Boers employed others. The employment opportunities included gardening, carpentry, shoemaking, clothes washing, sewing, and caring for the elderly or working as a nurse. (Dampier, 2005: 203). All this confirms that the British camps were much more permissive than the camps for Herero and Nama, but especially more so than the Soviet gulags and Nazi concentration camps, with which no parallels can be drawn. In the Soviet and German camps, the aim was work or extermination.

As a result of the reports, the book by Emily Hobhouse, and several international organisations (such as the *Women's League for International Disarmament* and the *Swiss Evangelical Alliance*), international public opinion increasingly condemned this method of isolation by the British. The Boers received food aid, political support and international press coverage. This led, for example, to changes in food rations (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 56).

During the war, some Africans supported the British colonial army in their rapid advance. They contributed by actions such as destroying Boer-owned farms and crops. Additionally, they played an active role in the internment of Boer civilians in concentration camps (Warwick, 1983: 22). However, these operations severely disrupted the livelihoods of the Africans. In response to their assistance to the British, Boer commandos carried out punitive raids, making the local population feel threatened. As a result, in July 1900, many Africans fled to the British lines and garrison towns in search of protection. Initially, they settled in or near the Boer camps, but eventually, separate camps were established for them (Warwick, 1983: 146–149). Much less information has survived about the camps for Africans, as most of the records have been destroyed (van Heyningen, 2010: 2). The Africans camps were more lethal than those for the Boers, as they served a different purpose, namely to enforce labour. For this reason, the camps were established along railway lines, which meant easier access to centres requiring labour. Once in the camps, the ‘refugees’ were segregated by ethnicity and separated into distinct camps by the British soldiers, with the Africans camps often located a mile and a half from the Boer camps. According to one source, the British were trying to cut costs at the expense of the Africans, as the war against the Boers was financially burdensome. As a result, the Africans camps were denied the most basic services, which the Boers were provided with, so they were officially denied food, medical care, and the materials needed to build shelters. This was in line with colonial policies that forced Africans to work in exchange for food. Under the policy of *no work, no food*, if they did not work, they were subject to starvation (Benneyworth, 2020: 74–78). This was borne out by the British expectation that the camps should be as self-sustaining as possible (Warwick, 1983: 149).

According to another source, the Africans, similar to the Boers, either worked for the British armed forces or served as administrators in the Boer camps. Africans were adaptable, taking on various roles, from cleaning latrines to working in mines during the final hours of operation. Their wages were deducted from the amount needed to support their families in the latter case. However, some Africans were allowed to keep their cattle, thus leading a self-sustaining life (Benneyworth, 2020: 78–79).

The comparison shows that the most inhuman and cruel conditions of all the concentration camps discussed were those for Herero and Nama; with the primary purpose of these facilities being punishment (Nielsen, 2022: 31).

Following the revocation of the extermination order, German colonial policy changed. Those Herero, and the Nama who later rebelled, who surrendered were imprisoned in concentration camps and sentenced to forced labour (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 68). The Africans interned in the camps were tattooed with the inscription ‘GH’ *Gefangene Herero*, or imprisoned Herero (Stone, 2001: 34). The German soldiers initially kept the locals for their own benefit, and from 1905 onwards made a certain number of prisoners available to civilian companies operating in the colony as labour. Unlike the Boers and the Africans in the British colonies, the Herero and the Nama were not paid (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 69).

According to one source, after the concentration camps were set up and before the extermination order was revoked, the Germans separated the Herero and the Nama. The Nama were to be punished, while the Herero were to be exterminated. This remained in place until 1907<sup>3</sup> when the extermination order was revoked, and the colonial policy changed. After this point, prisoners were only used as labourers (Pálfi, 2019: 172).

According to another source, however, the Germans made no distinction between the two ethnic groups during the internment. Prisoners were only provided for after the needs of the soldiers or troops had been met, including, for example, food and medical care. This resulted in low rations for the Africans and the fact that they could not maintain the dietary habits they had previously acquired from herding, led to diseases. They were also unable to adequately protect themselves against weather conditions such as sea winds and damp winters, as soldiers were also given priority for clothing and blankets (Kuss, 2017: 53–54).

One of the most notorious camps was Shark Island, off the coast of Lüderitz,<sup>4</sup> which was characterized by substandard living conditions and a high mortality rate (Kuss, 2017: 54). Here, prisoners were guarded behind barbed wire with machine guns; beatings and sexual violence were also common. On the island, prisoners were involved in construction projects such as building railways and breakwaters. The construction of the breakwater required the blasting of rocks, which the Germans did without regard for the safety of the Africans. This is shown by the fact that many people died during such occasions, but the Germans were only concerned about the issue of maintaining their workforce (Nielsen, 2022: 31–32). During the construction of the railway line from Lüderitz, a British eyewitness reported that



prisoners were in a terrible state, with many trying to escape by swimming away. They were barely able to walk due to weakness and malnutrition, and cruel treatment was commonplace (Bridgman – Worley, 2004: 49–50). In addition to Shark Island, two other camps were known for their inhumane conditions: the camps at Swakopmund and the camps at Karibib. When comparing the accounts of eyewitnesses who visited the camps, it is clear that the atrocities committed against the Africans are unanimously highlighted (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 70).

The primary purpose of the camps was thus to gather the colonizers' 'enemies,' to prevent resupply or assistance, and, in the case of the Herero and Boer, to hasten the abandonment of the fighting (for example, to force Boer men to surrender by interning their family members) (Papp, 2013: 239; Kuss, 2017: 53; Bachmann, 2018: 98). However, the British made a distinction between the Boers and the Africans, categorising them as an 'inferior race' and exploiting the camps to force Africans into forced labour. Forced labour was also a significant factor in the detention of Herero and Nama, and the British and German camps can be seen as an attempt to reduce labour shortages. In the case of the Germans, however, forced labour was seen as a means, an opportunity, through which the Germans were 'empowered' to punish the Africans and to retaliate against the uprising. A comparison of the death rates of the prisoners and the treatment meted out also shows that for the British, it was an unintended consequence. At the same time, for the Germans, it was a partially intended result of the reduction in the number of Africans, their 'extermination' (Nielsen, 2022: 31–32).

Comparing the mortality figures, all three camp systems resulted in tremendous loss of lives, but in terms of size, the German camps were the deadliest. Approximately 28,000 of the 116,000 Boers interned died, while 14,154 of the 115,700 Africans perished (Warwick, 1983: 145; Hall, 1999: 119). Of the 17,000 Africans – 15,000 Herero and 2,000 Nama – detained by the Germans, 7,682 died (Bachmann, 2018: 107). However, these figures become telling when looking at the proportions: 24% of the Boers interned died, while 17% of the Africans perished. In the case of the former, it is estimated that 10% of the Boer population of Transvaal died in the camps, and therefore, the British were right to think that they were being exterminated (Papp, 2013: 242). The Germans detained far fewer Herero and Nama, but they still had the highest mortality rate, with 45% of the camp 'inhabitants' dying.

In all three camp systems, the majority of the population were women and children (Surányi, 2000: 44; Leanza, 2020: 383; Benneyworth, 2020: 87). The high mortality rate is attributed to the fact that children's bodies are less resistant than those of adults. Additionally, the terrible conditions in the camps favoured the development

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and spread of diseases, with children being the most exposed and the most affected. Overall, infectious diseases were widespread among the internees. In the case of Boers, deaths were mainly due to dysentery, pneumonia, diarrhoea, measles, and enteritis. (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 57). Conditions were even worse in the African camps, where not only did internees have to contend with diseases such as dysentery, chickenpox, measles, and pneumonia, but malnutrition and exposure further weakened the bodies of the natives, making them less resistant to disease (Warwick, 1983: 152; Benneyworth, 2020: 80). The situation was most unfavourable for the Herero and the Nama, as the location of the camps was a factor that exacerbated conditions. In general, scurvy, bronchitis, chickenpox and pneumonia decimated the Africans. The weather conditions on Shark Island, including strong, stormy winds and temperatures around 12 degrees Celsius in winter, have caused deaths from hypothermia (Kuss, 2017: 54; Bachmann, 101–102). Female prisoners on Shark Island, suffered disproportionately more, as they were often raped and thus also exposed to sexually transmitted diseases (Kuss, 2017: 54).

As we have seen, one of the German objectives was to punish the Herero and the Nama, so it is not surprising that physical violence was used on several occasions. In this case, too, Shark Island should be singled out, as it was the place where beatings were most common (Nielsen, 2022: 32). A British citizen who arrived in Lüderitzbucht reported: *‘Every morning and towards evening four women carried a stretcher containing about four or five corpses (...) I discovered bodies of native women lying between stones and devoured by birds of prey. Some bore signs of having been beaten to death ... If a prisoner were found outside the Herero prisoners’ camp, he would be brought before the Lieutenant and flogged with a sjambok. Fifty lashes were generally imposed. The manner in which the flogging was carried out was the most cruel imaginable ... pieces of flesh would fly from the victim’s body into the air ... My observations during my stay in the country [in the German time] gave me the opinion that the Germans are absolutely unfit to colonise, as their atrocious crimes and cold-blooded murders were committed with one object — to extinguish the native race.’* (Bridgman – Worley, 2004: 46).

Comparing mortality rates for adults and children, although the information on the number of deaths varies almost from source to source, it can be concluded that about 80% of those who died in Boer camps were children (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 58). For the Africans, this figure was 81% (Warwick, 1983: 152). For the Herero and the Nama, no precise data are available, but the number of children who died in the camps was probably about twice as high as the number of adults (Kuss, 2017: 54–55).

Emily Hobhouse wrote of child deaths in a letter dated 29 September 1901: *‘In the past month of August, 1,878 deaths occurred among the whites, of which, 1,545 were children. The total number of deaths for the three months for which we have returns is 4,067, of which 3,245 were children.’* (Hobhouse, 1902: 137)

The camps holding the Boers were permanently dismantled after the end of the fighting in 1902 (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 60). For the Africans, also after the end of the fighting, the British dismantled the camp system and the people were released

(Mongalo – du Pisani, 1999: 169). However, as a result of the scorched earth policy, the lands of the Boers were devastated during the war and their property was destroyed or stolen (Sík, 1964a: 404). For this reason, after the Treaty of Vereeniging, the British provided financial support for the return of Boer farmers to their former estates (Sík, 1964b: 35). In addition to the Boers, the Africans were also assisted; the British spent a total of £16.5 million on post-war reconstruction and compensation for the colonies and Africans. In addition to financial support, landowners were provided with the tools and seeds needed to cultivate the land (Gillings, 2008).

The camps set up by the Germans were demolished in 1908, partly due to political pressure, as the parliamentary opposition did not support their operation (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 71). Not all camps were dismantled at this time, for example, the camp on Shark Island was ‘already’ dismantled in 1907 (Pálfi, 2019: 171). However, the survivors were not allowed to return to where they had lived before the war, so they settled on farms (Kotek – Rigoulot, 2005: 71). Despite regaining their freedom in the areas under German control, all Africans over the age of eight were required to wear a metal badge around their necks embossed with the imperial crown, administrative district, and work number. In addition, the Herero’s life, which had hitherto been based on animal husbandry and agriculture, was rendered untenable by the Germans’ prohibition on Herero ownership of land and cattle (Gewald, 2004: 61).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The definition of genocide remains challenging today due, in part, to the difficulty of establishing genocidal intent and the lack of action from the international community. Determining whether certain atrocities from the early 20th century constitute genocide is even more problematic as the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention) was only ratified in 1948 (United Nations, 2024). For this reason, the convention is not retroactive at the international level, but state practice does not limit its retroactive effect, thus giving national courts jurisdiction over past genocides (Schabas, 2012:65).

The Second Boer War and the concentration camps were not recognized as genocide, based on the Genocide Convention, but the atrocities committed against the Herero and the Nama between 1904 and 1907 are considered the first genocide of the 20th century and the precursor to the 20th-century genocides (Molnár, 2013: 220).

If we look at the cases according to the Lemkinian interpretation, we get a slightly more nuanced picture. In the case of the Herero and the Nama, it can also be said that genocide was committed since the aim was extermination. In the case of the British, however, the aim was not total annihilation, but with the operation of the concentration camps, certain genocidal elements and methods were introduced, such as deportation, separation of families, deprivation of livelihoods and exposure to death.

The Boer population in the colony, estimated at 200,000, was reduced to around 180–172,000. In 1900, an estimated 3–4 million Africans lived in South Africa, a decrease of about 20,000, but since the first census was taken in 1911, the exact extent

of the population decline cannot be accurately determined. These figures reflect the number of people who died in concentration camps (Búr, 2002: 95; Andrew, 2000: 636; Statista, 2024). Following the suppression of the Herero and the Nama uprisings and the dismantling of the concentration camps, the number of Herero in German South West Africa fell from 80,000 to around 15,130, and that of the Nama from 20,000 to 9,781. (This is around 73 African deaths per day over three years, compared to 33 per day in the British colony.) This represented a population decrease of more than 80 percent for the Herero and more than 50 percent for the Nama (Rubinstein, 2014: 108). As a consequence, the Herero as a political community ceased to exist (Bachmann, 2018: 89).

Events in German South West Africa (now Namibia) between 1904 and 1907 redrew the ethnic map of the country. At the beginning of the 20th century, Herero comprised about 40 percent of the population and Nama 10 percent (Som, 2013: 167). Today, Herero comprise about seven percent of the population, and Nama around five percent (The World Factbook, 2024). By contrast, a minority of Ovambos exceeded 50 percent during colonialism (Boer, 2011: 218).

In 2001, the political leaders of the Herero family filed a \$4 million lawsuit against the Federal Republic of Germany (successor to the German Empire). However, the issue of compensation was dismissed by the then-German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Búr, 2011: 219). The first official apology was made in 2004 on the occasion of the centenary of the rebellion, and in 2021, the German government declared the events a genocide and provided the Namibian government with over a billion dollars in reconstruction and development aid (Jantsek, 2015; Onishi – Eddy, 2021). ☀

## Notes

- 1 The first Boer or Transvaal War took place between 1880 and 1881. The reasons for the war were, on the one hand, the British desire to unify the southern African territories. On the other hand, the Boers opposed the increasing immigration of the British, and in the Transvaal and Oranje they resented the fact that Cape Colony had been given the diamond fields, which made it impossible, for example, to replenish the Transvaal treasury. The British saw an opportunity to occupy the Transvaal, which was waging a costly war against the Africans, and in 1877 a British contingent invaded the country, thus losing its independence. However, the British had to pay the price for this land grab by launching a campaign against the Zulu people in neighbouring areas in 1879. The Boers took advantage of this to launch a war against the British in 1880, which they won, giving Transvaal partial independence and the right to manage its own internal affairs.
- 2 *'I, the great general of the German soldiers, send this letter to the Herero people. The Herero are no longer German subjects. They have murdered and robbed, cut off the ears and noses and other parts of the bodies of wounded soldiers, and now they cowardly refuse to continue the fight. I say to the people: whoever brings a captain to one of my stations as a prisoner will get a thousand marks, and whoever brings Samuel Maharer will get five thousand marks. But the Herero people must leave the country. If the people will not do so, I will force them to do so with the butt of my rifle. Every Herero within the German frontiers, with or without arms, with or without animals, will be shot to death, and no woman or child will be admitted any longer, but will be driven back to her people or shot to death. These are my words to the herero people. Great general of the mighty German emperor.'*

*'I believe that the nation, as such, must be destroyed [...] The racial struggle that has broken out can only end with the destruction of one of the parties.'*

- 3 Lothar von Trotha's extermination order was lifted by Emperor Wilhelm II in November 1905, at the intervention of Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow. In reality, however, it took until December for the news of the revocation to reach all offices and positions.
- 4 The town is named after Adolf Lüderitz.

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