



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Syla Foundation.

The times we are living in are rough and the ongoing refugee crisis shows us that history tends to repeat itself again and again.

War and destruction, followed by rebuilding and peacekeeping, followed by war and destruction again.

In a plethora of literature about Namibia and its colonial history, one book and film project stands out for its new approach to understanding how war and destruction did not only relate to the crimes of colonialism but also had an ongoing effect in history.

Namibia gained full independence from South Africa in 1994 and since then the former German colony has moved back into the vision of modern-day Germany again – not only as a destination for tourists but also as a place closely related to the ugly aspects of German history and a place where descendants of the former colonialists still live.

It was only after independence that the descendants of the victims of this first genocide of the 20th century were able to articulate freely and self-determine their view on the cruel past and therewith start the important process of historical revision. This also implies the demand of restorative justice, which encompasses both a symbolical and a material compensation.

It is common belief that reconciliation requires sincere apologies and compensation and both are of crucial significance in Namibia today. On the one hand, it is important for the process of reconciliation between the different groups of people, including the descendants of Germans and other white settlers. On the other hand, this topic is very much related to the still-pending land reform in Namibia. Many of the descendants of the victims of the genocide still live in bitter poverty because land and

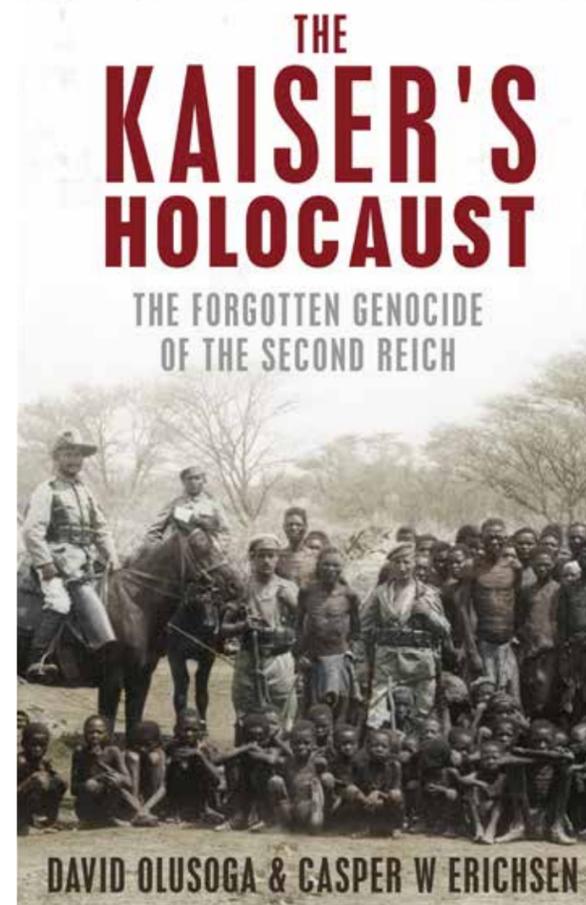
The book *The Kaiser's Holocaust* by Danish writer Casper Erichsen and Nigerian filmmaker David Olusoga about the German war crimes in colonial South West Africa has definitely changed our perceptions.

It was on 12 May 1883 that the German flag was raised on the coast of South-West Africa, which is now Namibia, and marked the beginnings of Germany's African Empire. As colonial forces moved in, their ruthless punitive raids became an open war of extermination between 1904 and 1908. Thousands of the indigenous people were killed or driven out into the desert to die. By 1905, the survivors were interned in concentration camps and systematically starved and worked to death. Years later, the people and ideas that drove the ethnic cleansing of German South West Africa would influence the formation of the Nazi party. An aspect that many Germans (especially those still living in Namibia) tend to forget.

cattle were stolen and given to white settlers during the colonial times.

The Federal Government, as the legal successor of the German *Kaiserreich*, needed until July 2015, which marked the 100th anniversary of the end of the colonial German South West, to finally agree to call the war a genocide and the guiding principle became: 'The war of extermination in Namibia from 1904 to 1908 was a war crime and a genocide.'

However, this is only the beginning and it is not yet clear how seriously the German government is about reparations, not just apologies and how to involve the local population. The German historian Jürgen Zimmerer wrote: 'Talks between the German and the Namibian government



are insufficient. The entire society and especially all parties concerned must be included. Now it is crucial to aim for a broad civic implementation. It is crucial to anchor this process in the culture of memory.'

As so often is the case, there are writers to offer an important contribution to change our understanding of historical and social parameters. The book *The Kaiser's Holocaust* by Danish writer Casper Erichsen and Nigerian filmmaker David Olusoga about the German war crimes in colonial South West Africa has definitely changed our perceptions.

The two authors did such vast research and also focused greatly on exploring the narratives of the victims, to search for sources that were not part of the historical concept told

for so many decades by the colonial victors. A Herculean task as a lot of knowledge has been communicated only orally over generations; the victims of history seldom have a voice. This book is an eye-opener when it comes to understanding what the victims and their descendants have suffered and how it still influences Namibian society today.

A very important point is the other major angle the book takes: to compare both the genocide of the Kaiser and the Holocaust of Nazi Germany. *The Kaiser's Holocaust* uncovers extraordinary links between the two regimes: their ideologies, personnel, even symbols and uniform.

The *Schutztruppe* confiscated Herero and Nama tribal lands and Berlin sanctioned the use of concentration camps. The most notorious of these, set up in 1905, was situated on Shark Island near the town of Lüderitz. By the time the *Konzentrationslager* was closed in 1907, thousands had died there due to beatings and forced labour.

Today, as the graves of the victims are uncovered, its re-emergence challenges the belief that Nazism was an aberration in European history. According to the authors, the 'killing fields' of Namibia presaged not only Hitler's genocidal madness, but served as inspiration for the dictator's hoped-for empire in the European east, where Jews and Slavs were seen as 'subhuman'.

The Kaiser's racial policies in Africa, motivated chiefly by a desire to rival Britain as an imperial power, were horrific, but they were not the assembly-line gassing of human beings. There was an unprecedented moral horror to what the Nazis did.

Hitler's murder of Jews and Slavs was, the authors concede, 'unique' in its scale and industry, yet they manage to find many connections between the Nazis' murderous Social Darwinism and the Kaiser's barbarism in Namibia.

Impressively researched, *The Kaiser's Holocaust* unflinchingly catalogues the abuse of human life in a continent the Kaiser never even visited. Olusoga and Erichsen, with their novelist's flair for narrative, provide a grimly readable history. It tells a bitter story about how history repeats itself and also offers a new angle of the history of colonialism and exploitation and its continuation in the 20th and 21st centuries. **CF**