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## One: The African Gaze of Resistance in Hendrik Witbooi and Others

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## ONE



# The African Gaze of Resistance in Hendrik Witbooi and Others



I know enough tribes in Africa. They all have the same mentality insofar as they yield only to force. It was and remains my policy to apply this force by unmitigated terrorism and even cruelty.

GERMAN GENERAL LOTHAR VON TROTHA

. . . all I see in your peace is the extermination of all of us and our people.

NAMA REVOLUTIONARY HENDRIK WITBOOI | 1905

Words cannot be found to relate what happened; it was too terrible.

JAN KUBAS | witness to the Herero genocide

*The Genocidal Gaze: From German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich* opens with *African voices*, with the perceptions and reactions of those *gazed upon* by the German colonizers and military, with a description of the gaze they returned upon their colonizers: “African voices [in German Southwest Africa] were forgotten and their witness statements actively erased” (Silvester and Gewalt, xiv). It is crucial that these voices, these subjectivities be restored, that we acknowledge the humanity and dignity of the Herero and Nama in the face of the imperial and then genocidal gaze of the Germans. Hendrik Witbooi is one such voice; he was a leader of the Nama people who fought and died in 1905 in the war with the Germans and has been called “a hero” in a recent book on Namibian resistance.<sup>1</sup> Another African voice introduced in this chapter is that of Jan Kubas, an indigenous witness to the German genocide, whose testimony was subsequently published in the British Blue Book of 1918. Affirming these African voices is that of a British prospector who, shortly after the genocide, described

what he found in the landscape of GSWA and provided eyewitness information on Shark Island, the death camp the Germans constructed on the coast of their colony. The chapter concludes with excerpts from recent oral histories, conveying stories of German colonization passed down through generations of Namibians.

Hendrik Witbooi comes of age against what George Steinmetz has called the “vast and repugnant repertoire of European, and particularly German, images” of the indigenous people in German Southwest Africa (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 75). This “repugnant repertoire” initially constituted the German imperial gaze, which destabilized the identities of the colonized while contributing “to any subject’s interpellation (in Louis Althusser’s sense of a subject being called into being)” (Kaplan, xix).<sup>2</sup> The Germans denied the humanity and cultural identity of the Africans through a sordid ideology that imagined them as subhuman. German missionaries, from the 1840s onward, had referred to the Nama as “Hottentots” (a term now viewed as derogatory and inaccurate),<sup>3</sup> and their reports back to Germany contained the entire panoply of racist stereotypes, resulting in a portrait of “abject and ignoble savagery.” These characterizations include: “barbarian,” “wild and raw,” and “laziness and filthiness,” and that “civilization seems to have no attraction at all for them.”<sup>4</sup> One German Rhenish missionary opined: “The Hottentots . . . are nomads, but they are not even competent herdsmen. . . . Their *instability* [*Unbeständigkeit*] . . . is due especially to the fact that the Namaquas don’t know how to make anything orderly out of their country” (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 116). As we will see in chapter 2, the “failure” of the indigenous people to dig wells and build homes prompted harsh condemnation by the German military and ultimately served as a justification for genocide. These racist characterizations, the perception of these “failures” to create civilization (as the Germans defined it), and the belief that the Herero and Nama lacked history and religion constituted the imperial gaze; in turn, this gaze underwent a transformation into the genocidal gaze that became deadly. With the genocidal gaze, the Herero and Nama are cast into the category of the expendable; their extermination is justified in the eyes of the imperialists who believe they need and deserve the land (*Lebensraum*), which they will put to “good use” after it is cleansed of its original inhabitants.

As to Hendrik Witbooi himself, some missionaries saw him as the “great exception” to the Hottentot race’s shortcomings, while others deplored his “ever greater regression into Jewishness, superstition, delusion, fanaticism, and reverie” (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 120). The linkage here between indigenous people and Jews is telling in terms of the continuity thesis, described in the introduction, which *The Genocidal Gaze* traces. In 1886, the Cape Colony *Blue-Book*

on *Native Affairs* summed up the prevailing attitude toward Hendrik Witbooi as behaving “in a way which with any other human being but a Hottentot would be a manifestation of complete insanity” (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 121). These quotations from German missionaries and others provide a concise definition of aspects of the genocidal gaze.

In the aftermath of the German genocide of the Herero and Nama, the genocidal gaze is also reflected in the views of other Western observers. For example, in 1914, Herman Babson, a professor of German at Purdue University, published an abridged version of Gustav Frenssen’s colonial novel *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest*. In his introduction, Babson characterizes Witbooi as “an energetic leader, one destined to make all sorts of trouble for the Germans. With the assuming of power he became an unprincipled robber and plunderer and for many years was a terror to the entire country.”<sup>5</sup> Eliminating any mention of the many depredations visited by the Germans upon the Nama people, Babson then declares, “Immediately upon the heels of this revolt of the Herero in the central part of the colony came the uprising of the Hottentots in the south, led by the notorious Hendrik Witbooi. Apparently without any immediate cause, he suddenly declared war against the Germans and with allied Hottentot ‘captains’ started a new reign of terror in his district” (xxviii). Babson acknowledges neither humanity nor sovereignty on the part of Hendrik Witbooi but rather depicts him as an inconvenient upstart deserving of elimination.

## Hendrik Witbooi: “Unrevisable Subalternity” or Nama Revolutionary?

I begin by exploring the astute observations and writings of Hendrik Witbooi, a Nama chief, born circa 1830 into a long line of Nama chiefs and described as “one of the most powerful African leaders at the time when European imperialism began to carve Africa up into colonies.”<sup>6</sup> Witbooi’s writing (*The Henrik Witbooi Papers*, ed. Brigitte Lau) allows us to trace the transition from imperial to genocidal gaze on the part of the German Schutztruppe, to see Witbooi’s increasing awareness of this shift, and to recognize his gaze—fiercely resisting German hegemony.

“Unrevisable subalternity” is Steinmetz’s term (*The Devil’s Handwriting*, 143) for the permanent status to which the Germans relegated the indigenous people of Southwest Africa. The initial goal of the Schutztruppe and settlers was to wrest the land from the Herero, the Nama, and other Southwest African peo-

ples, and to compel them to labor/forced labor/enslavement. Colonial policy to achieve these ends differed with each newly appointed colonial administrator. Theodor Leutwein, the third such administrator in GSWA, “differed from his predecessors by the methods he employed” (Drechsler, 75). Whereas the first administrator, Heinrich Göring (1884–89), had no military troops and tried to proceed by diplomacy, Curt von François (1889–94) readily took up arms. But von François’s lack of success at subduing the indigenous people led the chancellor of the Reich to replace von François with Theodor Leutwein in 1894. Leutwein adopted what came to be called the “Leutwein system,” which combined diplomacy and military force. “He was a past master of the policy of divide and rule which he readily admitted he had learned from the British” (Drechsler, 75). Leutwein proceeded toward the goal of “unrevisable subalternity” by exacting treaties from individual chiefs. These treaties were presented to the Herero and Nama as “Protection Treaties,” that is, the Germans offered to protect one ethnic group from another. Hendrik Witbooi came to be seen by the Germans as the most stubborn obstacle to their successful colonization of Southwest Africa and to their establishment of orderly control over the inhabitants and their land.

Witbooi’s Nama name was !Nanseb Gábemab; he was the third son of Moses and Lena Witbooi. Scholars have proposed various explanations for the designation of “Witbooi.” Most agree that the term derives from the white headscarf that the Witbooi (literally, “white boy”) troops fashioned on their hats, with a corner creating a peak that may imitate the comb of a fighting cock (Lau, viii, n22). Hendrik Witbooi was educated at missionary schools in Southwest Africa and South Africa. He married !Nanses (Katharina), and the couple had at least a dozen children over two decades, from roughly 1858 to 1879; some of Hendrik’s sons subsequently took up arms with him. Witbooi was baptized, with his wife, as a Lutheran in 1868 and remained devoted to his religious beliefs while using them adroitly to both chastise the Germans and explain his motivations. He served as an elder in his congregation, beginning in 1875, and learned various skills from the German missionary Johannes Olpp. Witbooi’s early years were occasionally spent in intertribal warfare, primarily against the Herero with the object of the wars being to capture cattle rather than land. Cattle were the primary form of cash and were used as a source of food and drink, as well as to pay off traders for goods, including guns and ammunition.<sup>7</sup> During this period, Witbooi’s following increased to the thousands. But Witbooi had the foresight to see that such internal struggles among indigenous people distracted them from the larger struggle, that against encroaching German imperialism.

Witbooi also had the foresight to create an archive, and so we have the enor-

mous benefit of his perceptions about the German invaders. Using a large red leather notebook, Witbooi kept a voluminous archive of his correspondence with missionaries, other African leaders, and the Germans. Both the letters from these correspondents and Witbooi's responses were included in the archive, as well as his journal, minutes of meetings with German officials, and miscellaneous other documents. He wrote in the colonial Cape Dutch language. There is some evidence that he had sustained a battle wound that resulted in the loss of his right thumb; this perhaps explains his frequent use of secretaries to maintain his collected papers (Lau, vi; Hillebrecht, 39).

So valuable is this archive that UNESCO deemed it a Memory of the World object in 2005 and describes it thus: "Witbooi's insights into the nature of colonialism, about the fundamental difference between conflict with African competitors and with European invaders, his attempts at formulating African legal concepts, and the visionary and poetic power of some of his texts are the qualities that set his letters apart and above the bulk of contemporary and earlier African texts of the same genre. The texts include probably the first written formulation of the concept of Pan-Africanism."<sup>8</sup> This red leather notebook was captured in April 1893 by German commissioner Curt von François during an unprovoked German raid on Witbooi's encampment at Hoornkrans; von François carried the leather notebook to Germany but it was subsequently returned to Namibia. Today, Witbooi's personal archive is kept in the National Archives of Namibia in Windhoek. Two other journals belonging to Witbooi, kept between 1893 and 1903, were recently unearthed in a museum in Bremen, Germany.<sup>9</sup>

This extraordinary document, or collection of documents, provides the reader with a clear idea of Nama resistance to the imperial gaze, and finally to the genocidal gaze, in the gaze they returned to the Germans: "The papers of Hendrik Witbooi are the only archival documents to have been published that present an African perspective on the German colonial period" (Silvester and Gewalt, xiv). The significance of this archive, both for the history it provides and for its symbolic value, cannot be overestimated. If the genocidal gaze normalizes genocide, making it acceptable for the "civilized races" to visit violence upon those perceived as racially inferior, then the task of the African gaze upon the colonizers is to contradict that very normalization. The African must unsettle or deny racial hierarchies; his/her gaze must be a gaze of resistance to the racist stereotypes with which the imperial gaze and genocidal gaze are imbued. Hendrik Witbooi achieves just such resistance by demonstrating skills Germans denied that Africans could do/have: by the very act of writing, which is an accomplishment of the educated; by speaking in terms of Christian religious beliefs when

the genocidal gaze assigns barbarity; and by the act of creating an archive that proves Witbooi has and recognizes a history, understands historical concepts, and values the creation of records for future generations. “White subjectivities . . . can also be destabilized when exposed to the gaze of the Other, since this is a gaze to which such subjects have not been traditionally subjected” (Kaplan, xix). Witbooi’s gaze endeavors to do just that.

The first item in the original red notebook, a “Diary entry” dated 18 June 1884, the year the Germans began colonizing Namibia, opens “Yesterday, 17 June, we spotted Herero in Oub. They were spies, and we chased them like game” (quoted in Lau, 1). These two sentences are characteristic of much of the archive: through both letters and such diary entries, Witbooi maintains a running account of his conflicts with both other indigenous people/groups and the Germans. He is also given to poetic language. Here he uses a simile; metaphors are also common in his prose as are frequent references to scriptural verses, traditional Nama stories, and lengthy quotations from the Bible. This first entry, which runs to five pages, recounts a series of skirmishes with the Herero from 17–27 June 1884. The pronouns are variously “we,” “he” (referring to Witbooi), and “I,” Witbooi’s first-person voice. This variation suggests his use of scribes, as mentioned earlier. The entry concludes with a copy of a letter penned by Witbooi on 27 June 1884, addressed to Captain Maharero (Kamaherero, paramount chief of the Herero from 1870s to his death on 7 October 1890). In the letter, Witbooi sets out his conditions for creating a lasting peace between the Nama, who were Witbooi followers, and the Herero. A year elapses before subsequent entries in late 1885: two letters from Witbooi addressed to Kamaherero, the first on 13 October, agreeing to a meeting with Kamaherero to reach a peace agreement, and the second on 19 October, in which Witbooi accuses Kamaherero of deceit because he launched an attack against Witbooi as the latter arrived at the place they had agreed upon to discuss a peace treaty. This second letter contains a warning as well as a powerful metaphor with biblical resonance: “With your talk of truce you had bound my hands; now your treachery has loosened the bonds. As before, I have cast open the gates of war. You shall get war from all sides” (7).

Subsequent early entries include correspondence between Witbooi and Heinrich Göring, the father of the Nazi henchman Hermann Göring. Göring’s letters are condescending and reveal his adherence to the racial hierarchies of the imperial gaze; in an effort to get Witbooi to capitulate to a so-called German Protection Treaty, Göring denigrates Witbooi, telling him in a letter dated 21 November 1885: “In *civilized countries* you would be regarded as a rebel and dealt with accordingly.” Göring concludes his letter with a threat: “To recapitulate: The

German government cannot permit chieftains who have placed themselves under German protection, to support your enterprise of plunging a protected chiefdom into war for no better reason than its inhabitants belong to another tribe, and that they have at some time in the past perpetrated injustices—which must have happened when you were hated. I trust you will attend to my words” (emphasis mine, quoted in Lau, 11–12). Göring here refers to the fact that Kamaherero had indeed signed a “Protection Treaty” in October 1885 with the Germans. Yet Witbooi and his thousand followers, called a “Namaland Commando Group” by Lau, were feared by the Germans who realized “that no colonization of the country could be effected unless Witbooi was conquered” (Lau, xix). In turn, Witbooi “clearly perceived from the outset [that] the treaties were aimed at creating dependency and subordination to the German empire of independent rulers” (Lau, xviii).

Almost a year later, in September 1886, Witbooi writes a letter to Göring’s secretary, Louis Nels, appealing for a supply of ammunition. By this time, the Germans had promulgated a regulation forbidding the importation of ammunition; the regulation was intended to cripple Witbooi’s ability to fight. In one of many instances in which he deftly deploys his knowledge of Christianity to achieve his ends, Witbooi says: “You have made noises of peace with your mouth, but that will not bring peace to this country because it does not strike a chord deep in the heart of the people. So let me tell all of you who are in possession of ammunition: supply this freely, for ammunition alone can bring peace to the very heart. Weapons are ordained God’s rod of judgement between warring tribes” (quoted in Lau, 15). Witbooi has invoked God’s name to persuade Göring’s secretary of the counterintuitive claim that supplying bullets will bring about peace! With this move, he alerts Göring to the fact that he is a clever force to be reckoned with, not a subhuman. He shares with Göring Western religious beliefs and has no hesitation in using this knowledge against the German imperialists.

In subsequent letters during 1888–89, Witbooi appeals in an increasingly desperate manner to several individuals for ammunition and guns. In a March 1889 letter to Jan Jonker Afrikaner, the chief of another branch of Nama, Witbooi reveals his keen reliance on the written word: “You ask me why I have sent you copies of my own and your letters. I will tell Your Honour why I did this. I did it to let you judge for yourself how I dealt with Paul [Visser] concerning the [breaking of the] peace. And I sent you your letter so that you may realise that the uprising of the other nations was brought about by you. Because you invited them to crush me. You sowed this seed in their hearts, the fruit of which is that they have risen against me. You touched the spring of the Lord’s decree that all men should rise against me” (quoted in Lau, 28). He uses his carefully



kept archive to defend himself and, adopting biblical references and metaphors again, to accuse and persuade others. Jan Jonker Afrikaner replies, stating that Witbooi has made false accusations and offering to serve as mediator. Witbooi's reply of 22 March 1889 again reveals his reliance on, and trust of, the written word: "of all the accusations against me you simply state that 'people say.' You cannot bring written proof" (30).<sup>10</sup> Afrikaner is rebuffed. At this time, Witbooi resumes his correspondence with Göring, boasting of his recent exploits and taunting Göring by asking: "I must inform you that at Achenib I captured the [German] flag that you had presented to Manasse [another Nama chief]. It is now in my keeping . . . I should like to know what to do with this flag; I ask because it is an alien thing to me" (33). Witbooi's resisting gaze can be cast in sarcasm as well as terms of Christianity.

In May 1890, Göring resumes his pressure on Witbooi to cease fighting against the Herero; his letter again contains threats. Witbooi astutely replies, deploying biblical language: "I am astonished by this letter in which Your Honour raises great, weighty topics. . . . But you have not left me room and scope to *ponder all in my heart*, so that I might answer you from my own good judgement and free choice. You have not approached me as an impartial peacemaker, but uttered abrupt orders as to what I should do. Consequently, Your Honour cannot expect a satisfactory answer from me now" (emphasis mine, quoted in Lau, 48–49). The following day, Witbooi dispatches a long epistle to Kamaherero, chastising him for renewing his "Protection Treaty" with the Germans: "You will eternally regret that you have given your land and your right to rule into the hands of White men" (51). Using a Nama folktale, Witbooi predicts that surrendering to government by another "will become to you like carrying the sun on your back" (52). Lau's footnote explains: "In the Nama cautionary tale, the jackal accepts the sun as a rider and barely survives with a permanently scorched back" (52). Witbooi continues chastising, appropriating a biblical example: "You are already completely in his [Göring's] power. I am aware that you and Dr. Göring are of different nationalities, and that you have never been good friends, and that you formed this friendship solely in order to crush me. So did Herod and Pilate, in order to get rid of the Lord Jesus, suspend and postpone their hostility and their true interests" (52).

In 1890, Kamaherero dies and Samuel Maherero, his son, assumes the role of chief. This occasions an exchange of several long and thoughtful letters between Maherero and Witbooi. They are warily testing each other in regard to the possibility of pursuing peace between the Herero and Nama. In June 1892, Witbooi takes up his red notebook to write minutes of an important meeting he had with

Curt von François, who has replaced Göring as the imperial German commissioner in the country. Von François urges Witbooi once again to “yield to German Protection” (quoted in Lau, 84) to which the ever alert Witbooi philosophically replies: “What is ‘protection’? What are we being protected against? From what danger, or difficulty, or suffering can one chief be protected by another?” (85). After a hypocritical response from von François to the effect that Witbooi’s rights will not be abrogated, Witbooi replies that it makes no sense to him that a chief who has surrendered to the Germans will keep his autonomy. He further asserts his hegemony and his pan-African sensibility: “This part of Africa is the realm of us Red chiefs. If danger threatens one of us which he feels he cannot meet on his own, then he can call on a brother or brothers among the Red chiefs, saying, ‘Come, brothers, let us together oppose this danger which threatens to invade our Africa, for we are one in colour and custom, and this Africa is ours.’ For the fact that we various Red chiefs occupy our various realms and home grounds is but a lesser division of the one Africa” (86). Such a union of the various ethnic groups in GSWA against the Germans is exactly what the imperialists fear. In this one passage, Witbooi has simultaneously issued a threat and signaled his resistance to the German gaze that denigrates him and the other Red chiefs.

Von François replies that he will stop the Herero should they attack again, and anyway, no need to worry: “no one in the territory will be allowed a gun . . . in the past men managed quite well with bows and arrows and assegais” (!) (quoted in Lau, 88). Witbooi promptly rebuts this idea: “We cannot deprive our men of their guns. Those people you mentioned who lived by the bow and arrow and assegai, had no guns in their day: that is why they lived as they did. *We are men of today, and live in the age of the firearm*” (emphasis mine, 88). Witbooi insists that he and the Nama inhabit the present; he will not be cast into a stereotyped primitive past by this German officer.

A few weeks later, Witbooi corresponds with a Nama chief who has already signed a “Protection Treaty” with the Germans. Witbooi scolds him, declaring: “*I see the Germans quite differently. They claim that they want to protect you against other mighty nations, but it seems to me that they themselves are the mighty nation seeking to occupy our country by force . . . I see nothing good in the coming of the Germans: they boast of their power and they use it*” (emphasis mine, quoted in Lau, 90). Here, Witbooi characterizes the Germans’ hypocrisy, and his own gaze of astute perception and defiance, differentiating his gaze from that of some of his countrymen who appear to have deferred to the German vision of the indigenous people. A similar definition of the Germans as cruel and deceitful appears in a letter Witbooi wrote to John Cleverly, a British official,

in August 1892. Invoking the terms of the Treaty of Berlin, Witbooi accuses the Germans of being in violation:

The Germans told [African leaders] that they would protect them against the mighty invaders threatening to take our land by force. . . . But from what I hear and see of the man, it now appears the *German himself is that man who he said was of another nation*, and is doing exactly what he said we would be protected from . . . German officials told my officials how they had beaten the men in a disgraceful and brutal manner, as the *dumb and ignorant creatures they think us*. . . . They stretch people on their backs and hit them across the belly, and even between the legs, be they men or women. (emphasis mine, 98)<sup>11</sup>

Here Witbooi succeeds in *othering* the Germans by calling them out as “that man who he said was of another nation,” that is, the German is actually the “other” against whom the Herero and Nama need protection. Witbooi accurately sees the flogging of his people as an indication of the German belief that their victims are subhuman. Again and again in these passages from his archive, Witbooi demonstrates his insightful analysis of the German imperial gaze, their strategy in endeavoring to dominate GSWA, and the increasingly terrifying implications for the indigenous people.

“Go back, get away from me. That is my earnest demand.”

HENDRIK WITBOOI | to Theodor Leutwein, 17 August 1894

By 1893, the Germans were beginning to lose patience with the slow progress against the Herero and Nama, who together had reached a peace agreement in November 1892,<sup>12</sup> furthering German frustration. Chancellor Count Leo von Caprivi, in Berlin, declared: “South West Africa is ours . . . and it must remain so.” To assure that that happened, he sent 214 soldiers and two officers to GSWA as reinforcements (Drechsler, 69). Witbooi, by this point, was increasingly convinced of the true aim of German imperialism—destruction of the indigenous people—despite the hypocritical appeals made to him by a series of German leaders. His intuition is confirmed when on 12 April 1893 he and his community, lodged at his Hoornkrans stronghold, suffer a surprise nighttime attack by von François and two hundred German troops. The attack was completely unprovoked. “Von François’s *new orders were to ‘destroy the tribe.’* . . . The ferocity of the attack is suggested by the fact that the German troops, armed with two hundred rifles, used sixteen thousand rounds of ammunition in thirty minutes” (emphasis mine, Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 151). According to Witbooi, ten

men and seventy-five women and children were killed; Witbooi escaped (Lau, 129). The Germans proceeded to loot the camp; it is in this attack that the red notebook archive is taken by the soldiers. They also captured one of Witbooi's daughters and his wife, taking them as prisoners along with seventy-nine other women and children (Drechsler, 70). On the following day, the Germans razed the entire village and the surrounding defense walls. This attack was a major turning point in both the colonial policy of the Germans and the understanding of that policy that Hendrik Witbooi confides in his correspondence. The evolution from imperial gaze, with the intent to enslave the indigenous people, to genocidal gaze, with the intent to exterminate them, had begun.

In October 1893, half a year after the Hoornkrans raid, Witbooi writes to a Herero leader, Zacharias Zeraua, urging that they declare peace between their groups and join forces against the Germans. His letter is prescient: “[The recent German raid at Hoornkrans] is a portent of the purpose, hidden behind it, of subjugating the nations of this country and *reducing us to slavery*, and of appropriating our African land . . . the land will be completely occupied by white people, and *whites will govern and develop this land* . . . the Germans are determined to cut me down by force, and *to deport me*. . . . Afterwards, they will turn on you Herero” (emphasis mine, quoted in Lau, 140–41). Here, Witbooi aptly characterizes the German imperial gaze as an apprehension of the indigenous people slated for a condition of slavery. He understands that he may be deported but he has not yet fully grasped the exterminationist colonial policy that was gradually developing in Berlin. How could he imagine such a thing? Even after this genocide, the true aim of the Holocaust to annihilate the Jews and the Roma and Sinti was unimaginable to many.

Hendrik Witbooi's dire predictions are largely realized a decade later, when, after the genocide of the Nama and Herero, the Germans deport Witbooi's followers in three directions: 80 men to Togo in 1905; about 1,600 to the death camp at Shark Island in early 1906; and a tiny remnant of the Witbooi people, about 96, including one of Hendrik Witbooi's sons, to Cameroon in 1910 (Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, 172–75). Both Togo and Cameroon were German colonies. All the land and cattle of the Nama and Herero in GSWA were expropriated for German use, and thousands of the best acreage of the country *still* remain in the hands of the settlers' descendants. And both indigenous groups were indeed turned into slaves, or perhaps more appropriately, forced laborers, the distinction being that they were not “owned” by their masters (Drechsler, 231).

By 1894, German presence had increased in GSWA from the initial three officials a decade earlier to hundreds of military troops. Witbooi reveals his

powerful ability to use language against the Germans as effectively as they have deployed it against him. In a letter to the recently appointed German commissioner, Theodor Leutwein, he blames the previous German leader von François for his unreasonable behavior: “Von François demanded from me what is mine, and I refused: for I alone have the right to dispose of what is mine. Such conduct by von François I never expected, *because you White people are the most educated and civilized, and you teach us truth and justice*” (emphasis mine, quoted in Lau, 151). Here Witbooi turns the German imperial gaze back upon itself, using it as an accusation thrust in Leutwein’s face.

The attack at Hoornkrans was properly understood by Witbooi as an act of war and he moves into action, demonstrating his skills as a guerilla fighter as well as a writer. He and his followers, who grew from 250 at Hoornkrans to 600 within six months, embarked on daring raids to capture German horses, thus unseating the German cavalry, and to successfully block German traders from travel. In August 1893, he “pulled off a great coup,” attacking and destroying a train of twenty wagons pulled by oxen and loaded with supplies needed inland; the following month, he seized 2,350 Merino sheep, 125 oxen, and 28 horses from a German farm (Drechsler, 71–73).

The Witbooi troops, having lost their Hoornkrans stronghold, entrenched themselves in the Naukluft Mountains. Correspondence back and forth between Leutwein and Witbooi continues with increasing threats from Leutwein, who is still insisting on a “Protection Treaty”; eventually he presents Witbooi with an ultimatum on 9 May 1894: “I shall give you one more day; and if I still have no answer, launch a final attack” (quoted in Lau, 156). Throughout the summer of 1894, as Leutwein awaits reinforcements, they continue sparring. Witbooi matches Leutwein verbal blow for verbal blow, phrase by phrase, in a frantic exchange of letters, sometimes several in one day; Witbooi cleverly delays the threatened German attack by parsing each letter from Leutwein, calling him to account for his new demands, for new conditions needed for peace, and for the use of German cannons against the Nama during a period of truce. Again and again, Witbooi strategically foils Leutwein’s timetable, while he awaits response to his own calls for reinforcements and the always much-needed, scarce ammunition (Lau, 162n198).

On 21 August 1894, Leutwein drops all pretense and starkly makes his final demand: “You *must* subject yourself, or I *must* fight you until you do” (emphasis in the original, quoted in Lau, 177). The Germans attack. Witbooi, outgunned, conducts a guerilla war; eventually, with enormous regret, he agrees to a ceasefire. He addresses Leutwein plaintively: “Now I ask: If I do according to your wish

and word, shall my life, my land and all my possessions remain safely mine: and will my chieftaincy be safe?" (quoted in Lau, 180). He succumbs to the so-called Protection Treaty; the prose in his subsequent letters is poignant and dignified. The terms of an 1895 amendment to the treaty required that Witbooi troops fight *with the Germans against other indigenous groups*, and Witbooi, in his upright manner, abiding by the rules of war as he saw them, complies with this requirement. Leutwein described him in a report to Berlin as "the kind of man who . . . has a certain pride in keeping his word" (Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, 159). The Witbooi served as trail guides and sharpshooters for the German military; Hendrik Witbooi recognized that he no longer had the power or weaponry to remain independent. For the next decade, from 1894 to 1904, Witbooi and his troops were accorded special privileges in return for his agreement to the "protection" of the Germans; Leutwein created a reservation for the Witbooi in 1898, allowed them to keep their weapons, and began to view them as "noble savages" rather than "barbaric" ones.<sup>13</sup>

But Berlin was again impatient with its leadership in GSWA by the early twentieth century. Rather than regulating the Herero, the Schutztruppe were engaged in a war with them, beginning 11 January 1904. The war dragged on without any significant German successes in the field; the Herero valiantly conducted a guerilla war against the Germans, who had superior weaponry but were less familiar with the geography and climate and had inefficient ox wagons delivering supplies: "The Herero, at first severely underrated by the Germans, turned out to be a formidable adversary" (Drechsler, 150). Leutwein continued his strategy of regular communication with the Herero, under the leadership of Samuel Maherero, in the hopes of a diplomatic settlement of the conflict. Despite his efforts to reassure Berlin, troop reinforcements were sent out from Hamburg.<sup>14</sup>

After five discouraging months, Emperor Wilhelm II appointed Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha as supreme commander of the military forces in GSWA. Von Trotha was an experienced leader of colonial wars, having ruthlessly suppressed rebellions in German East Africa and China prior to his deployment to Southwest Africa. He had a reputation as a brutal and racist soldier. Arriving in GSWA in June 1904, von Trotha met with Leutwein, who pleaded for a military approach that would spare the Herero to serve as a labor force after the war. Unlike Leutwein, von Trotha had no patience for diplomacy and treaties. He was determined, from the outset, to exterminate the indigenous people in the service of making GSWA a permanent space for German settlement. His gaze upon the Herero and Nama was a genocidal, not an imperial, gaze; "noble savage" was not a concept that he entertained. "I know enough tribes in Africa.

They all have the same mentality insofar as they yield only to force. *It was and remains my policy to apply this force by unmitigated terrorism and even cruelty. I shall destroy the rebellious tribes by shedding rivers of blood and money.* Only thus will it be possible to sow the seeds of something new that will endure,” declared von Trotha (emphasis mine, Drechsler, 154).

Because of his treaty with the Germans, Witbooi sends his own men into battle as allies of the Germans in the early days of the 1904 war with the Herero. The decisive Battle of Waterberg took place on 11 August 1904, in which the Germans, under the leadership of Lothar von Trotha, soundly defeat the Herero, killing many and driving the remaining men, women, and children into the Omaheke Desert to die of thirst or starvation. “The decision . . . to continue pushing [the Herero] further into the Omaheke marked a shift toward an explicitly genocidal strategy, since ‘death from thirst did not distinguish between men, women and children’” (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 193). Not satisfied with this “victory,” as some heroic Herero managed to survive in the implacable desert and some even began to trickle back to their homelands, von Trotha issues his infamous order of annihilation—*Vernichtungsbefehl*—on 2 October 1904, making it absolutely clear that the Herero were targeted for extinction. “Although von Trotha arrived at this exterminationist policy independently after the Waterberg battle, it was approved at the highest levels” (Steinmetz, *The Devil’s Handwriting*, 195). Though von Trotha was forced by the Berlin government to withdraw this order in December 1904, by then it was too late. Thousands of survivors had been imprisoned in camps where the death tolls were enormous—from starvation, forced labor, disease, and murder.

Hendrik Witbooi, just the day before the order of annihilation, writes wrenching letters to Hermanus van Wyk and other Nama chiefs, informing them of his intent to wage war against the Germans. Here is the full text, dated 1 October 1904:

I send this letter to inform you of the following. As you are aware I have for a long time now been abiding under the law and in the law, following it, as have we all, in obedience—but also in the hope and in the faith that God our Father would in the fullness of time deliver us from the wretchedness of this world. So far I have borne the burden peacefully and meekly; whatever wrenched my heart, I have let pass, trusting in the Lord.

I shall not write at length—merely this. My arms and shoulders have grown weary, and I perceive and believe that the time is now at hand when God the Father shall deliver the world by His grace.

When you read this letter, know that you shall appear as you must appear. I trust you understand this message well.

I tell you that I have given up my position. That is the main point: I have come to the end. I shall also write to the Major [Leutwein], to tell him what I have done: I have also written to all the other chiefs that the time has come. (quoted in Lau, 189–90)

Though his language here is somewhat coded, Witbooi makes it clear that he has chafed under German domination, that he has relied on his religion as a source of comfort, but that his patience has come to an end. He will no longer abide German law but will follow the Herero in rebelling. With the Herero defeated, as he had predicted a decade earlier, Witbooi breaks his treaty with the Germans and initiates a guerilla war against them that lasts until 1907. The eighty Nama men still serving with the German military at the time Witbooi declared war were imprisoned and eventually deported to Togo.

The final letter we have from Witbooi was penned in July 1905, in response to one from a German customs officer well known to him, urging Witbooi to make peace for the sake of his people and warning him that “you simply cannot prevail against the German nation” (quoted in Lau, 194). Ever the shrewd and honorable man, Witbooi responds: “To your remarks on peace I reply, don’t lecture me like a schoolchild on your peace. You know very well that I was right there with you many times during your peace, and have come to see in it nothing but the *destruction of all our people*. For you have got to know me, and I have got to know you, through the hard experiences of my life. Here I conclude” (emphasis mine, 95). In this final salvo, he recognizes and refuses the racist trope of infantilization as well as the genocidal gaze that promises destruction of the Nama. With bravado, he declares his intent to fight on, recognizing that the Germans never meant “peace” in the way he and the world understand it. In the end, Witbooi is true to himself and the prerogatives of the Nama people. On 29 October 1905, at the age of seventy-five, he dies on the battlefield from a German bullet to his thigh.<sup>15</sup> “Because I did not create men, nor did you, but God alone. Thus I now sit in your hand, and peace will be at one and the same time my death and the death of my nation. For I know there is no refuge in you,” he had written in that final letter. And his predictions, again, were realized: the Germans subjugated the Nama people; those they did not kill in battle were sent to labor camps and Shark Island. The figure often supplied for the number of Nama who perished at the hands of the Germans is 50 percent of the original 20,000. A genocide had destroyed the Witbooi people, who are one ethnicity within the Nama. Steinmetz writes



that 1,600 had survived by the time of the signing of the peace treaty with the Germans in November 1905; as a result of imprisonment and exile to Cameroon, by 1912 only 38 Witbooi remained (Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting*, 173–75).

After Witbooi's death, Theodor Leutwein, the German commander who had been at varying times both Witbooi's enemy and ally, wrote a tribute for him. While it is an unabashed statement of admiration, it also contains hints of the genocidal gaze, denigrating Africans, making the genocide seem inevitable:

I still him see before me, the little Captain, ten years my faithful brother-in-arms.<sup>16</sup> Modest yet self-possessed, loyal yet not without political cunning, never deviating from what he considered his duty or his right, fully understanding the superior culture of the Whites, yet by no means always in love with those who purveyed it—a born leader and ruler: this was Witbooi, who would undoubtedly become an immortal in world history had not the fates decided him to be born to an insignificant African throne. He was the last national hero of a raced [*sic*] doomed to destruction. (quoted in Lau, 224)

## Jan Kubas, Witness to the Genocidal Gaze

Jan Kubas was an indigenous African man of a racially mixed group known as the Griqua. The Griqua are descendants of unions between early Dutch settlers and southern African women, and they have lived for centuries in both South Africa and Namibia. In the nineteenth century, they spoke Dutch, were trained in military tactics, and provided with weapons in order to participate in skirmishes between the Dutch and British colonizers in southern Africa. Such training explains Jan Kubas's presence with German troops in GSWA; he describes here, in an interview done thirteen years later, the aftermath of the 1904 Battle of Hamakari (called Waterberg by the Germans) and the German treatment of Herero fleeing into the Omaheke Desert.

I went with the German troops to Hamakari and beyond. . . . The Germans took no prisoners. They killed thousands and thousands of women and children along the roadsides. They bayoneted them and hit them to death with the butt ends of their guns. *Words cannot be found* to relate what happened; it was too terrible. They were lying exhausted and harmless along the roads and as the soldiers passed they simply slaughtered them in cold blood. Mothers holding babies at their breasts, little boys and little girls; old people too old to fight and old grandmothers, none received mercy; they were killed, all of them, and left to lie and rot on the veld for the vultures and wild animals to eat. They slaughtered until there were no more

Hereros left to kill. I saw this every day; I was with them. A few Hereros managed to escape in the bush and wandered about, living on roots and wild fruits. Von Trotha was the German General in charge. (emphasis mine, Silvester and Gewalt, 117)

“Words cannot be found” calls to mind phrases so often uttered in Holocaust memoirs and histories. The experience of such unimaginable slaughter, whether on roadsides in Namibia or in the Auschwitz gas chambers, was, literally, that: unimaginable, let alone unspeakable. Kubas allows readers today to viscerally see the horrifying results of the genocidal gaze and von Trotha’s implementation of it.

Jan Kubas’s words were so evocative that they were adopted to serve as the title of a book: *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia*.<sup>17</sup> The British and the Germans had alternately collaborated in their efforts to suppress indigenous people in southern Africa and sparred with each other over land. In the early years of World War I, the British invaded GSWA and took control of the colony. As the war continued, and an Allied victory became more likely, the British began to take steps to prevent Germany from repossessing its colonies after the war concluded. Toward this end, the Brits put together almost fifty African eyewitness reports, including that of Kubas, as well as other key information condemning German rule in GSWA, and published them as the Blue Book. Some scholars, notably Brigitte Lau, have dismissed these eyewitness reports as “war propaganda,” but editors Silvester and Gewalt argue that “whilst this [political] context obviously determined the particular selection of evidence and timing of the compilation of a highly critical evaluation of German colonial rule in Namibia, this does not mean nor suggest that the evidence presented in the Blue Book should be judged to be false. The evidence should, instead, be judged on its own merits” (xxii).

Subsequently, due to persistent German complaints about the British depiction of their behavior as imperialists, the Blue Book was suppressed in 1926 and orders issued for all copies within the British Empire to be destroyed. “The dead of the Herero genocide and other atrocities were dismissed and forgotten in the interests of white settler reconciliation” (Silvester and Gewalt, xxxii).<sup>18</sup> Its recent republication, in time for the centenary anniversary in 2004 of the Herero genocide, marks a crucial moment when African perspectives on the German colonial endeavor have been once again made available to scholars. As the editors remark in their introduction: “These statements form a rare documentation of African voices describing the encounter of African communities with a colonial power” (Silvester and Gewalt, xiii). This text is also an invaluable resource for contemporary scholars seeking to understand the

African perspective/gaze on the German imperialists and *genocidaires* as well as the genocidal gaze itself.

African accounts of treatment after the 1904–7 war are equally shocking. Quoted in the Blue Book of 1918 is this testimony from Edward Fredericks, identified as the “son of the old Chief Joseph Fredericks and at present headman of the Bethany Hottentots,” who stated on oath:

In 1906, the Germans took me a prisoner after we had made peace and sent me with about a thousand other Hottentots to Aus, thence to Lüderitzbucht, and finally to Shark Island [described by historians today as a death camp (rather than a concentration camp) and thus a prototype for Auschwitz]. We were placed on the island, men, women, and children. We were beaten daily by the Germans, who used sjamboks. They were most cruel to us. We lived in tents on the island . . . lashes were given to us in plenty, and the young girls were violated at night by the guards. Six months later we went by boat to Swakopmund, and thence by train to Karibib.

Lots of my people died on Shark Island. I put in a list of those who died. (*Note:* this list comprises 168 males, including the Chief, Cornelius Fredericks, 97 females, 66 children and also 18 Bushwomen and children) . . . but it is not complete. I gave up compiling it, as I was afraid we were all going to die. (Silvester and Gewald, 172, note in the original)

The consistency of German sexual violence against the indigenous people is confirmed by many accounts in the Blue Book as is the high death toll at Shark Island from starvation, the harsh weather conditions, disease, and severe overwork of the prisoners. Fritz Isaac, identified in the Blue Book as “son of the Under-Chief to the Witboois, Samuel Isaac,” stated under oath: “After the war, I was sent to Shark Island by the Germans. We remained on the island one year. 3,500 Hottentots and Kaffirs were sent to the island and 193 returned. 3,307 died on the island” (Silvester and Gewald, 173).

### *The Glamour of Prospecting:*

#### A Sidelong Glance at the Genocidal Gaze

*The Glamour of Prospecting* is clearly meant as a tongue-in-cheek title by its author, Lt. Fred C. Cornell, O. B. E., for there is very little glamour in what he recounts.<sup>19</sup> This memoir, published in 1920, describes Cornell’s adventures in German Southwest Africa, as well as in what was then known as the Cape Colony, and the Bechuanaland Protectorate (British territory); a helpful foldout

map is tucked in at the back of the book. Cornell was in search of gold, copper, diamonds, and other precious gems. The time frame of his prospecting is 1907–14; the memoir concludes with an account of the opening volleys of World War I. The bulk of his account is devoted to tales of adventure in harsh landscapes—huge sand dunes, deep crevices, steep mountains, the Kalahari Desert—inhabited by a sparse indigenous population as well as leopards, gemsbok, and scorpions. Thirst and hunger are frequent companions. Cornell, by his own admission, was largely unsuccessful in his prospecting: “The fruitless searches have been many, and I have often been called upon to make long and arduous trips where the quest of precious stones has proved nothing but a wild-goose chase” (1).

But the book, for twenty-first-century readers, provides brief glimpses<sup>20</sup> of the Germans, their colony, and the treatment of Herero and Nama in the immediate aftermath of the 1904–7 war and the genocide; given the rarity of the text, I have quoted extensively from it in the following pages. Cornell was British and thus a certain national antipathy existed between him and the Germans he encountered. Yet the purpose of his memoir, unlike the British Blue Book, is certainly not political; it is almost completely a wry account of his hardships during challenging and largely unsuccessful treks to find diamonds. Nonetheless, his depictions of Shark Island and of the cruelties and drunkenness of the German military are persuasive and revealing, describing men who embraced racial hierarchies as their worldview and accepted the “necessity” of exterminating those deemed barbaric and useless.

Cornell opens with a four-page summary of early twentieth-century South-west Africa: “As German South-West Africa, now a Mandate of the Union of South Africa, will figure prominently in these pages, it may be as well to give a brief account of that extensive country” (5). He proceeds to describe the British decision, prior to the Treaty of Berlin, to claim Walfish Bay; the ongoing struggles prior to the arrival of the Germans between “the Damaras (also known as Hereros), a people of Bantu descent who came from the north, and the Namaquas, a Hottentot race who had gradually spread from the south” (6); the arrival of the Rhenish Missionary Society; and the German land grab beginning in 1885. The final three paragraphs of this background information are worth quoting in full for what they indicate about Cornell’s attitudes and knowledge, and for their surprising conclusion:

The Germans . . . set about making the most they could of Damaraland. But red tape, officialism, and their harsh and overbearing methods, hampered them in their attempt at colonization; moreover, much of the land was practically desert and up

to the time of the discovery of diamonds at Lüderitzbucht the country had been run at a loss, and there had been a determined attempt by the Socialists in the Reichstag to force its abandonment.

The Herero and Hottentot rebellion in 1903 [*sic*] dragged on for years, and cost the Germans much blood and treasure, for they found themselves utterly unable to cope with the extraordinary mobility of the native commandos. These, excelling in guerilla warfare, harassed them incessantly, and, although in vastly inferior numbers, gave the raw German troops—fresh to the country—endless trouble before they were subdued or captured.

Towards the end of this costly campaign the warfare was waged with extreme bitterness, and indeed *it ended in the virtual extermination of the Herero race.* (emphasis mine, 8)

Well before the word “genocide” came into existence, Cornell recognized what the Germans had done to the Herero: extermination. Here is a bald statement of the German intent to annihilate, of the genocidal gaze, published just thirteen years after the conclusion of that genocide. It is astonishing that *the Germans themselves would not admit this for almost a century to follow.* Cornell makes a further reference to genocide when describing the enormous German accumulation of weapons and supplies in the latter part of the war with the Herero and the Nama, and observes: “Considering that the two races were practically wiped out at the time peace was declared, it is difficult to understand what all these stores and munitions of war are needed for” (36).

Additional insights can be gleaned from Cornell’s memoir regarding the animosity between the Boers and the Germans: “These Germans profess to despise the Boers, and many of the latter who fled into German territory rather than accept British rule after the Boer War had been very glad to return to the protection of the Union Jack” (38). Later, Cornell cites the example of a Boer man he met en route who, “having fought to the last in the Boer War, had refused to live under British rule, and had trekked to German West and there taken up land and settled down. And now, after years of galling and irksome submission to the German régime of red tape and officialism, he had been exasperated beyond all endurance by some sample of German ‘justice,’ and was trekking back” (81). Further elucidation from Cornell reveals the cause of such German attitudes: “Yet these men [the Boers] are looked down upon as an inferior race by the Germans” (42). Racial hierarchies, specking out not only indigenous Africans but white Africans, informed German minds. These passages are also of significant help when reading Gustav Frenssen’s *Peter Moor*, which contains

a passage involving Boers that is often misread by scholars. I will revisit this issue in chapter 2.

In his encounters with indigenous people in southern Africa, Cornell saw strong evidence of the memory they held of German treatment during the war. Prospecting in Bechuanaland, Cornell “found a few Hottentots, who made a beeline for the hills the moment they saw us. . . . They had taken us for Germans, and their actions spoke volumes as to how they fear the white man on the other side of the border. They were all refugees from Damaraland, who had fled after the brave fight put up by Marengo<sup>21</sup> against the Germans had finally ended in their defeat. In this remote spot . . . they had existed unmolested, seeing scarcely a white man a year, yet always in fear lest their old taskmasters should appear on the scene” (194–95). After further trekking in this area, which Cornell describes as “a fastness for the guerilla bands of Hottentots that put up such a game fight against the overwhelming odds of the Germans in the ‘Hottentot Rebellion’ of 1903–1906” (202), he happens upon a horrific sight:

On one of the flat-topped mountains well within German territory we came upon the remains of a Hottentot bivouac, evidently dating from the time when Marengo and Simon Cooper fought the Germans here. Scattered about among the bushes were odds and ends of clothing, German ration—tins, etc., and in one heap I found the gilt hilt of a German sword, and a pair of binoculars. . . . In one of the ravines where a thick bush known as *baak dorn* (hook thorn) abounded we found more gruesome relics in the shape of skeletons, firmly entangled in the thickest part of the bush, where they had apparently been thrown as living men.

The Hottentots claim that in this unhappy war of reprisals the Germans, exasperated by the protracted resistance of the natives, used to treat all wounded men who fell into their hands with horrible severity; breaking their bones, and throwing them bodily into these thorn bushes, from which a sound man could scarcely escape, being a favorite method of disposing of them.

I have had this told me by numbers of Hottentots who fought in this war, and have seen the skeletons in several places where fighting took place. The Germans claim that German wounded were thus treated by the Hottentots, but the rags of clothing clinging to the bones I saw were not part of a German uniform. (203–4)

Here Cornell’s witness testimony confirms the increasing German frustration with both the harsh geography and the guerilla style of warfare that combined to prevent a nimble German victory. It is such frustration that contributes to the evolution of the imperial gaze into the genocidal gaze.

Cornell also saw German treatment of the Herero in the aftermath of the war. He visited a German police station on the border of the Orange River and was impressed with the “extremely comfortable” quarters (220), the “queer pets” such as baboons, monkeys, and wildcats, and the “experimental garden” including an apiary created there by the Germans.

But any admiration I felt for them and their work died a sudden death when I walked through that same garden and found that the work was being done by Herero prisoners working in chains. Not light chains, but heavy manacles on legs and arms, and neck and waist, manacles that were never taken off till they knocked them off when they died. These men, as far as I could gather, were “prisoners of war” only—not criminals in any sense of the word as we understand it. I am no negrophile, but German methods of treating natives are far too heartless for “the likes of me.” (220)

German contempt, not reserved for the indigenous Africans and the Boers, extended to a Jewish storekeeper in Ukamas, a German township that Cornell visited. Forced to remain there for several days while his horse underwent medical tests, Cornell observed the behavior of German military in the bar and their unceasing harassment of the Jewish man: “the officers . . . drank to excess in front of their men, and [their] intolerable treatment of the Englishman [the Jewish storekeeper] behind the bar used to compel me to get out. . . . Their crowning witticism would come when he dived down beneath the counter for more beer for them, when at a signal all four of them would bring their riding-whips down on the rickety counter with a crash close to his head . . . in any other army in the world they would have been cashiered, for never a day passed but that they were vilely and blatantly drunk in full sight of their men” (315–16).

The final passage I wish to quote is arguably the most devastating, as it describes Shark Island, the death camp established by the Germans on the coast of their colony after the war. There are very few contemporaneous eyewitness descriptions of the camp,<sup>22</sup> and as it is seen now by many historians as a precursor of Nazi death camps, I quote the passage in full:

Stuurmann also gave me much interesting detail as to the terrible treatment meted out to the unfortunate natives, both Herero and Hottentot, who were unlucky enough to fall into the hands of the Germans.

I had seen something of this myself, and had heard more from ex-German soldiers themselves, who with extraordinary callousness used to show whole se-

ries of illustrated postcards, depicting wholesale executions and similar gruesome doings to death of these poor natives. One of these, that enjoyed great vogue at the time, showed a line of ten Hottentots dangling from a single gallows, some still standing on the packing cases with a noose round their necks, waiting for the soldiers to kick their last standing place away; some kicking and writhing in the death struggle, for the short drop did not break their necks, but only strangled them slowly, and one having a German soldier hanging on to his legs to finish the work more quickly. And each and every German soldier in the photo was striking an attitude and smirking towards the camera in pleasurable anticipation of the fine figure he would cut when the photo was published. [It might be noted here that very similar photos of Nazi soldiers, pleased with their grisly work, are common in German family albums; see mention of this by German novelist W. G. Sebald as a critical moment in his awareness of the Holocaust.]<sup>23</sup> This, I repeat, was only one of the many that enjoyed a big sale in German South-West for the delectation of admiring friends in the Fatherland. Absolutely no mercy was shown to these unfortunate creatures: they were made to dig big graves and were shot down by the hundreds beside them [this is reminiscent of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen squads] whilst the whole remnant of both races who escaped this fate were exterminated in the detention-camps at Lüderitzbucht and Swakopmund. Towards the end of the long, dragging war, the Germans conceived the plan of sending Herero prisoners captured in the north for internment to Lüderitzbucht, where they were strangers to the country and where escape was hopeless, whilst the Hottentots captured in the south were sent north to Swakopmund.

There is a small low-lying promontory in Lüderitz Bay known as Shark Island, and here the Herero prisoners were crowded in thousands, shelterless, with no proper supply of food or water: and here, huddled together like penguins, they died like flies.

Often on a blazing day, such as is common in Lüderitzbucht, they received no water whatever, either having been forgotten, or the supply having failed; the food (?) supplied them was never sufficient for the tithe of them, and they often fought like wild animals and killed each other to obtain it. There were also a large number caged in a wire enclosure on the beach; these were slightly better off, as, although they received no rations from the military in charge of them, a few of their number were let out each morning and went ravenously foraging in the refuse-buckets, bringing what offal they could back to their starving fellow-prisoners. Cold—for the nights are often bitterly cold there—hunger, thirst, exposure, disease, and madness claimed scores of victims every day, and cartloads of their bodies were every day carted over to the back beach, buried in a few inches of sand at low tide, and as the tide came in the bodies went out, for the sharks.



Now Stuurmann and the other men who told me these things were no negro-philés (a Boer as a rule has an excellent idea as to how to keep a native in his place as the white man's inferior), but so terrible had been the treatment of these natives by the Germans that even these case-hardened transport drivers spoke of what they had seen with the utmost horror and abhorrence. Yet these men are looked down upon as an inferior race by the Germans, who themselves, as far as the troops and officials in German South-West are concerned, are utterly devoid of all humanity when dealing with natives. I saw much of the trait myself later; it is unpleasant and distasteful, and bodes but ill for the future relations of white and black in the German colonies.

I was by no means sorry to leave Lüderitzbucht, for during the whole of this brief stay it blew incessantly and the air was a sort of semi-solid mixture of whirling sand, that cut and stung, and choked and blinded, and permeated every orifice and crevice, and generally made life utterly unbearable. When this prevailing wind reaches a certain violence, the whole country practically gets up and walks, big sand-dunes shift along and others come after them, like the waves of a slowly moving sea; wide stretches of hard land are denuded of every grain of sand, and others buried deep in it, and it is a curious fact that these storms actually blow diamonds! (40-43)

Until 2005, no significant account of Shark Island and other German camps had been published; short references such as those I have quoted here were all scholars had. In that year, however, a book with the chilling title *"The Angel of Death Has Descended Violently among Them": Concentration Camps and Prisoners of War in Namibia, 1904-1908* appeared, providing at last a detailed and shocking account of these camps. Casper Erichsen, the author, recounts the origin of the study in his preface: as a student, he had toured Shark Island in 1998 as part of field trip that he and other history students took with Jeremy Silvester and Robert Gordon. Upon his return to Windhoek, he "was still haunted by what I had seen in Lüderitz. I therefore decided to read up on the history of Shark Island, only to find out that there was none" (xv-xvi). He chose the topic for his master's thesis, and this book is the end product of his research, which was conducted largely in the Namibian archives. That was no simple task, as "in 1915, the German Colonial Administration had these files [of the camps] destroyed to avoid them falling in the hands of the rapidly approaching Union troops" (xvi). The Germans took a similar approach with concentration and death camp files during the Third Reich: as the Soviet Army approached Auschwitz, for example, as many files as possible were hastily burned to destroy evidence. Erichsen notes

with particular bitterness that “the history of Namibia’s concentration camps has long been overlooked and largely forgotten in the existing historiography about the 1904–1908 anti-colonial wars” (3); such “oblivion” has been termed “colonial amnesia” or “colonial aphasia” by scholars.<sup>24</sup>

Erichsen opens his account of the camps by supplying necessary background to the 1904–7 war and evidence for what I have termed “the genocidal gaze” of the Germans. He quotes, for example, the pronouncement of von Trotha that I have used as an epigraph to this chapter, in which the German commander makes clear his intention to exterminate the indigenous people (7). “German sentiments towards their adversaries were characterized by a general belief that the enemy was inhuman and savage” (14). Erichsen delineates the routine killing of noncombatants, that is, women and children, by the Germans, a practice that *precedes* the infamous extermination order of von Trotha of 2 October 1904. This underscores the gaze of the military as genocidal: *all* indigenous people were considered subhuman. Thus, such slaughter was not a military tactic but a belief, an ideology, that these “subhumans” must be cleansed from the land. It should be noted that, in sharp contrast, even after such killing by the Germans, the Nama troops were instructed by Hendrik Witbooi that only the fighting soldiers were to be killed; women and children were to be spared (18). The Herero, too, specifically spared women and children.

Erichsen provides grisly statistics about postconflict deaths of the Herero and Nama. Though von Trotha had his wrist slapped by the German government and was made to rescind the extermination order in December 1904, mortality rates in the camps were so high that, essentially, the order was still in effect (26). With the assistance of many missionaries, von Trotha’s troops began a campaign to round up surviving Herero from the bush; this campaign was carried out with brutality (and sometimes with false promises) and succeeded in bringing in and imprisoning in concentration camps in Windhoek, Okahandja, Karibib, Swakopmund, and the death camp at Lüderitz “at least 13,000 Hereros in a period of ten months” in 1905 (27). The two camps in Windhoek held a total of 7,000 prisoners, when the town itself housed only 2,500. Thus, providing sufficient food and facilities presented a serious challenge; indeed, the camps had no sanitation or medical facilities. Sick prisoners, deemed unfit for labor, were simply allowed to die.

Imprisoned women were often forcibly taken to town to serve as laundry women, domestic helpers, and general laborers. There, they were raped by soldiers and settlers. “The casual use of prisoners for purposes of sex was so rife that the

official medical report of the war . . . described sexually transmitted diseases as a major threat to Windhoek's white population"; of course, the report blamed such diseases on "the natives" (47).

The lasciviousness of German soldiers is indicated by a photograph Erichsen includes of two bare-breasted women and four children. The caption reads: "Children and young women captured by the *Schutztruppe*. The girls' dresses have been ripped off to expose their breasts. In the background is a burning wagon" (62). Another such photo of a bare-breasted woman appears on page 85, with the caption "German hand-colored postcard, satisfying male desires." As evidence that the genocidal gaze objectifies women as sexual objects, to be used and then used up, Erichsen elucidates: "German male fantasies of submissive black women were celebrated in numerous publications including a series of semi-pornographic images of black women in GSWA sent as postcards to Germany and otherwise distributed in the colony. Apart from their sexual purposes, such images were symbols and affirmations of colonial power exerted over African women who would physically have been unable to control their own representation" (86). Further instances of such photos, where it is clearly visible that the women have been forced to pose after having their blouses removed, can be seen on pages 91 and 92. As these images demonstrate, the genocidal gaze is captured *in* (when soldiers are present) *the photograph itself and by the act of the photographer* gazing upon, undressing, and virtually raping his subjects; these women have been granted no humanity. Paradoxically, while their sexuality is hyperemphasized, they have disappeared as women, as people. Rather, they exist in the black-and-white image only to "prove" the power and racial superiority of the photographer who has used his camera to render them painfully conscious of their captivity.<sup>25</sup>

As would be the situation in the Nazi ghettos and *lagers*, the provision of food to the prisoners was intentionally insufficient for them to maintain health and, ultimately, life. The per diem included: ½ kilogram of canned meat (twice a week only) or flour; ½ kilogram of rice or flour (and Erichsen notes that rice was a completely unknown foodstuff to the Africans, who most often had no pot in which to cook it) and .030 kilograms of salt (50). Scurvy, pneumonia, influenza, and sexually transmitted diseases were the most common illnesses. Like prisoners in Nazi camps, Shark Island prisoners who were deemed capable of labor were set to work building a railroad, shoring up an embankment for the tracks, pulling heavy wagons, carrying heavy rail ties, doing laundry. Women, too, were expected to undertake hard labor, for example, carrying sacks of grain weighing 100–160 pounds, despite their debilitated condition (58). Many accounts tell of

women staggering and falling under such loads, only to be whipped by the guards. Mortality rates were roughly equivalent for male and female prisoners. Erichsen concludes, “The POWs were not afforded any means of improving their own respective situations and they were therefore totally at the mercy of the Colonial Government, which must subsequently be singled out as the responsible party in the mass dying of African prisoners between 1904–1908” (64).

Erichsen provides a detailed description of Shark Island, its geographic features and the climate conditions there. He includes rare, recently discovered photographs of the camp and its inmates. He delineates the medical experiments that took place there and the fact that heads were taken from dead prisoners to be shipped to Germany for study, the aim of which was to “prove” that Africans were on a lower evolutionary level than whites, a central tenet of the genocidal gaze. In some instances, the skin was scraped from the heads prior to shipping; this agonizing work was done by female prisoners who “were forced to boil the severed heads of concentration camp inmates and then scrape them to the bone with shards of glass” (142–43).<sup>26</sup> Steinmetz concludes that at Shark Island, “there is a systematic pattern of abuse that is suggestive of a desire to kill or cause ‘serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group’—criteria for genocide according to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” (*The Devil’s Handwriting*, 174).

The final African voice presented for the reader’s consideration is drawn from a book called *Warriors, Leaders, Sages, and Outcasts in the Namibian Past* (1992).<sup>27</sup> A dozen oral histories of the events in precolonial Southwest Africa, as well as in GSWA from 1904 to 1907, were gathered in the 1980s by the Michael Scott Oral Records Project; all of the speakers are indigenous Namibians. They recount the stories that have been passed down from generations, and a good deal of emphasis is placed on the tradition of naming these generations and offering praise of them. In the interstices, African observations of the German Schutztruppe can be gleaned.

One chapter, narrated by Willy Njanekua and Kasisanda Muuondjo in 1986, includes an account of a series of what the Herero viewed as “clever tricks” the Germans played on them (161). These included sending the able-bodied men to Johannesburg and Cape Town to work in the mines; the expectation of the Herero was that these men would return with significant cash. Instead, most of them died. Then the Germans approached “the old men asking for their children to be sent to school. The aim of sending the children to school was to teach them to abandon their national culture and to forsake their customs. . . . They were dressed in European clothes and told not to eat or drink whatever is eaten

or drunk by the Hereros at the holy fires” (161). The children never returned to their tribal cultures.

In order to confiscate the guns of the Hereros, the Germans told them that the guns must be immunized, just like the Herero cattle had been against rinderpest. “Do you hear? That was how our land was taken from us. . . . When the Germans saw that all the guns of the Hereros had been confiscated, they began to harass the Hereros. They saw a Herero woman collecting wood and shot her, declaring they had mistaken her for a baboon” (162). Perceiving the Herero as subhuman, as the equivalent of animals to be eradicated, was a central tenet of the genocidal gaze. Also recounted was another German method for acquiring land: “They gave Samuel strong drink and when they saw that he was drunk, they asked for land to live on. . . . They offered him money and boxes of brandy and bags of sugar, mealie meal, rice and coffee” (162). A footnote to this chapter tells the reader: “Interestingly Governor Leutwein himself exposed these manipulative attempts to disarm the Hereros by administrative measures rather than direct force” (172). The footnote includes a lengthy quotation from Leutwein’s memoir, *Elf Jahre Gouverneur in DSWA*.

The impact of African voices in this chapter provides evidence of both the German imperial and then genocidal gaze in GSWA and the African awareness of, and resistance to, such gazes. Hendrik Witbooi’s archive is a rich source for understanding his mind-set, his determination, and his verbal acuity in sparring with German officials. His decision to include various texts from those officials in his archive provides the reader with examples of the demeaning and deceitful language directed toward him and other indigenous people in GSWA. Corroboration of the treatment of the Herero and Nama is supplied by both Fred Cornell’s memoir and the later scholarship of Casper Erichsen. As we turn now to a German colonial novel, focalized through a fictional soldier fighting in the 1904 battles against the Herero, the background provided here on the genocidal gaze and African resistance will serve as a counterpoint to Gustav Frenssen’s novel.